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The Social Teaching of the Church and the Social Problems of Africa: A Historical Overview

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Chapter Sixteen

The Social Teaching of the Church and the Social Problems of Africa: A Historical Overview ¹

I. The Suffering and the Hopes of the African Continent

At the beginning, the speaker gave an overview of the suffering that afflicts Africa, before turning to the signs of hope on the continent.

I.1 The social context of the African continent

There is an atmosphere of dramatic urgency concerning the continent which presents Africa as a land with a 'wounded face', 'a tragic historical past' and a 'bleak future'. The mass media, whether local or international, generally display no good news from Africa on matters of politics, the economy, culture or social life, except perhaps on items such as sports and music. The general picture worldwide is that of a 'continent of misery', the reality of which is trumpeted by all forms of statistical data whether 'fake or real', exaggerated or correct.

Many Africans have actually started to doubt themselves, their ability and their hope for a better future and society. Some have given up. Some tell their own stories in a pessimistic, horrendous language. The intellectual and the elite, whose responsibility it is to build up their nations, are fleeing abroad, where possible, for any available jobs and, when still at home, are participating in the downgrading, oppression and marginalization of their own peoples whether in military uniform, in civilian political offices or even in the private sector. One would notice a climate of worry in many quarters!

Gradually, the Western controlled mass media have succeeded in virtually writing off Africa as the continent synonymous with ecological disasters, hunger, drought, warring factions, economic depression, unemployment,

¹ IKE, O.F.; paper presented at the symposium on "The Social Thought and Action of the Church in English and Portuguese-Speaking Africa" in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1996.

dictatorships, civil wars, primitive cultural practices against men, women and children, the plague of AIDS (which is said to affect one out of every forty Africans - true or false).

Malaria still remains the greatest killer, and infant mortality is high. Comparatively, Africa has the largest number of refugees (in fact, 50 percent of the world population of refugees), not to talk of millions of displaced persons. In over 20 countries of Africa (out of fifty—five) guns were still heard in 1996 and, in many cases, carried by under-aged children, and freely used in the barbaric massacre of hundreds of thousands of people (...).

The facts on ground show that many regions of the continent do not enjoy good governance, and the issues of legitimacy, responsibility, accountability and the distribution of national wealth to reach all on a fair and free level are simply non-existent. Africa's history is beset with betrayals, setbacks and stormy waters, and the land described as the 'cradle of civilisation' and 'the origin of mankind' is treated without respect or dignity in international matters.

Others 'speak for' Africa and 'stand in for' Africa in their own affairs. The background of the slave trade and its attendant colonial and neo—colonial vestiges still overshadow the continent's 'present tense'. The burden of external debt, the arms trade, the violation of human rights and the requirement by Western Governments to link development aid with policies of demographic control: all these are issues which afflict the African nations.

There is value disorientation and large—spread illiteracy leading to mental retardation for some and a spread of injustice for many, whichever way one tries to look at it. Apathy has set in, and social imbalances lead to increasing crime. Urbanisation, rural flight, break-down of law and order, corruption in high and low places, especially an embarrassing by agents of law enforcement, is not uncommon.

On the other hand, there is the impact of wicked Structural Adjustment Policies which have unleashed more misery and suffering on the people, especially the poor, through imposed foreign economic reform programmes

teleguided by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and such economic wizards as the Clubs of London, Paris, Rome, etc. in the name of the “free market”. Is the human person not more important than the economy? The suffering poor are dying, and a country like Nigeria, which in 1970 had a per capita income of 173 USD, and which rose in 1981 to 1000 USD, declined in 1990 sharply to 230 USD.

In 1994, it was down to mere 100 USD, showing clearly that the standard of living has not only declined but has stagnated, thereby adding to the level of poverty generally.² It is in this setting that the question by Africa’s most respected Cardinal Hyacinth Thiandoum of Dakar, at the opening of the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, holds:

In a continent full of bad news. how is the Christian message ‘Good News’ for our people? In the midst of an all—pervading despair, where lies the hope and optimism which the Gospel brings? ³

Is this a pessimistic assessment which leaves no other chances open? It is this concrete socio—historical and realistic acceptance of the facts on the ground which led all the participants at the African Synod to agree that:

One common situation, without any doubt is that Africa is full of problems. In almost all our nations, there is abject poverty, tragic mismanagement of available scarce resources, political instability and social disorientation. The results stare us in the face: misery, wars, despair. In a world controlled by rich and powerful nations, Africa has practically become an irrelevant appendix, often forgotten and neglected by all. The Church is part of this society in distress.⁴

² Nosa Igiebor, Tell Magazine, Editorial Report, Lagos, February 20, 1995, p. 3.

³ Relatio ante disceptationem, 2.

⁴ Relatio ante disceptationem, 4.

His Holiness Pope John Paul II agrees with this evaluation of the social context and reality of people in Africa, for in his Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, he observes that:

*Africa is a continent where countless human beings - men and women, children and young people — are lying, as it were, on the edge of the road, sick, injured, disabled, marginalized and abandoned. They are in dire need of Good Samaritans who will come to their aid.*⁵

1.2 The signs of hope

The bishops of Africa described the Synod as a “providential event of grace” for it took place at a time when the continent of Africa was — and still is - at a major critical crossroad in social-political and economic development. We are now meeting within the context of a world in desperate search of a “New World Order”, a World Order that should not only be new, but also more just and human. There is hope, even in the present African situation. The Pope insists that the continent of Africa, in spite of its problems, contains a wealth of hope and a priceless cultural heritage which cannot be overlooked. Africa is basically a very rich continent in both human and natural resources, well endowed by the Creator. It has human qualities which it can offer to the churches and to humanity as a whole.

It is a matter of joy to record the outstanding achievements, by any standards, of the situation of the Catholic Church in Africa:

In particular, the building up of the Church on the Continent is confirmed by facts such as the noteworthy and rapid increase in the number of ecclesiastical circumscriptions, the growth of a native clergy, of seminarians and candidates for Institutes of Consecrated Life, and the steady increase in the network of catechists, whose contribution to the spread of the Gospel among the African peoples is well known. Finally, of fundamental importance is the high percentage of indigenous bishops who now make up the Hierarchy on the Continent. The Synod Fathers

⁵ *Ecclesia in Africa*, 41.

*identified many very significant accomplishments of the Church in Africa in the areas of enculturation and ecumenical dialogue. The outstanding and meritorious achievements in the field of education are universally acknowledged. Although Catholics constitute only fourteen per cent of the population of Africa, Catholic health facilities make up seventeen per cent of the health-care institutions of the entire Continent.*⁶

Pope Paul VI had, in 1964, called Africa “a new homeland for Christ”.⁷ And Pope John Paul II in his desire to give hope, against every apathy, lethargy, and hopelessness in the light of the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* says:

*It seems that the ‘hour of Africa’ has come, a favourable time which urgently invites Christ’s messengers to launch out into the deep and to cast their nets for the catch (cf. Lk 5:4).*⁸

In the words of Cardinal Thiandoum,

*In these tragic conditions, she [the Church] must carry out her mission to offer our peoples the Good News of Christ’s redemption, and be the sacrament, sign and instrument of God’s Kingdom within our continent. In order to be able to carry out this mission effectively, she must be in constant dialogue and loving solidarity with the society in which she finds herself.*⁹

II. Social thought and action

⁶ *Ecclesia in Africa*, 38.

⁷ Homily at the Canonization of Blessed Charles Lwanga, Matthias Mulumba Kalembe and Twenty Companion Martyrs (18 October 1964); cf. also John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 6.

⁸ *Ecclesia in Africa*, 6.

⁹ *Relatio ante disceptationem*. 4.

2.1. Based on the eighth Plenary Assembly of SECAM (Lagos, 1987), which considered with remarkable clarity the question of the Credibility and relevance of the Church's message in Africa, and following the Synod on Africa, the author raises the question: "Church of Africa, what must you now become so that your message may be relevant and credible?"¹⁰

The answer certainly is to be found in the great wisdom embedded in Catholic Social Teaching (Doctrine), a great source of light and of faith, capable of transforming the evil intentions of man, and of retranslating the 'structural' and 'personal' evil abilities of mankind through the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ into an '*adumbratio*' (a foreshadow of the 'already' but 'not yet' understanding of the Kingdom of God).

The Social Teaching of the Church is a heritage which must be known, developed and preserved with fidelity by responding gradually to the new and emerging needs of human co—existence. Africa is in dire need of this Social Teaching.

2.2 *After having indicated the reasons – religious and moral as well as historical – why the Church intervenes in the social field, Obiora Ike gives a historical overview of the Social Teaching of the Church, emphasizing its dynamic character.*

Three Pillars have, over the years, formed the foundation upon which contemporary social teachings are based, namely:

- the teachings of the Fathers in the early Church;
- the teachings of the great medieval scholastics and theologians;
- the teachings of the Popes since the last century, particularly since May 1891 with the epoch-making Encyclical *Reram Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII which marked a spectacular era in the history of the Church's Social Teaching.

It is important, therefore, right at the outset of this reflection, to establish that the social content of the Christian Message has been developed from the very first centuries and that the Social Teaching of the Catholic Church is the fruit of two thousand years of Christian reflection, action. and spirituality in

¹⁰ Relatio ante discepmntionem. 34.

the light of the Gospel. The contemporary formulation of this message, which continues to enrich itself from new experiences, cannot be understood if its ancient roots are ignored. One might even add, taking into consideration the rich ideas in the Bible (Old and New Testament), that Social Teaching is as old as mankind itself. Already at Creation, God made man “in His own image and likeness”; thereby founding the dignity of every human person (*Gen 1:26*).

The creation story states that God made Adam a helpmate, Eve (*Gen 2:20—24*): “It is not good that man be alone. I shall make him a helpmate (partner)”. Even when Cain, one of the two sons of Adam, killed his brother Abel, God did not allow that Cain should be killed in revenge. Rather the Bible records: “If anyone kills Cain vengeance shall be taken on him seven—fold” (*Gen 4:15*). Such action portrays the dignity of human life which the Creator ordered should be preserved, not destroyed, even in the face of the deeds of Cain. Already in the Old Testament. Abraham pleaded for Sodom and Gomorrah not to be destroyed because of their sins (*Gen 18:19*) and on Mount Sinai, God Himself gave Moses the tablets of stone, upon which was written the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) which guaranteed the basic law for the preservation of life, of property, of freedom of speech and movement, of integrity and above all the foundational belief in one supreme God to whom belongs all respect and reverence.

Society, moreover, is not static but dynamic. Various historical, philosophical and theological developments of thought served to clarify to the Church herself the role and thinking of the Church in the evolution of societies. With the development of modern times, each successive Pope has marked his tenure by developing a teaching which coincided with the needs of the people as a Gospel response. John XXIII’s *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963) responded with confidence and clarity to the spirit of the times. This trend has continued to date.

That the Church should have a social teaching is nowadays taken for granted. The entire Christian history, in some way, always did have one. In Romans 13:1—7. St. Paul reflected upon the relationship between Christians and the

State. St. Augustine, far back in the 4th Century, considered the Just War Theory. The ownership of property always held the attention of the early Church Fathers.¹¹ J. T. Noonan¹² has discussed in detail the medieval school men and their views on the propriety of charging interest on loans.

Further instances abound. In the sixteenth century, Bartolomé de Las Casas and Francisco de Vitoria, both of them Spanish Dominicans, wrote vigorously about the problems of colonisation and the treatment given to indigenous people in territories newly conquered by Spain. The entire Old Testament, the New Testament, the early Church, even up to our day, has always had reason to reflect on social realities in the light of faith. In 1864, Wilhelm Von Ketteler; Bishop of Mainz, Germany, produced a book *The Worker Question and Christianity* and called for a just solution to the problems of society.

All through 2000 years of Christendom, the Church gained experience of society and was constantly developing a social conscience a social teaching and moral criteria. It should have come as no surprise, therefore, when the Catholic Church, in the person of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, began to speak out on social issues. Yet it did. *Rerum Novarum* produced shock waves throughout Europe, and became a landmark in the history of Christian social principles. Not only has it proved to be the first in a long series, many later documents were composed explicitly to commemorate its publication, as some of their titles bear witness. The Catholic Social Teaching constitutes a 'rich heritage' which the Church has progressively drawn from biblical insights, the tradition of the early Fathers, scholastic philosophy, theological reflection, and the contemporary experience of the People of God struggling to live of faith in justice.

2.3. *Throughout this historical evolution, the unity of the doctrine taught by the Church is striking.*

The documents are systematic and contain reference form that only could be specific to the unity and continuity of the tradition known to be Catholic,

¹¹ Charles Avila, *Ownership: Early Christian Teaching*, London, Sheed and Ward, New York, Orbis Books, 1983.

¹² *The Scholastic Analysis of Usury*, Cambridge Mass, 1957.

Universal, Apostolic and Holy. The Popes hardly contradict one another. One truth is extended into other. One would be struck also, going through the various Social Encyclicals, to discover the tone, unity and variety of subject matter discussed as an organic whole. The Fathers of the Church maintain a common anthropological, ethical, theological, and contextual View of the human person

Whether the topic of the Social Question be the family, property economics, politics, culture, ecology, technology, capital, labour, armament, peace, justice, women, international trade, aid, development, the Third World, communism, poverty, war or other global issues, the Popes always had reason to have recourse to earlier documents and to expand upon them. If there are changes in tone, this applies more or less to the distinctive character and personality of the Pope who is writing. Emphasis on a topic depends on the contextual historical reality of the place and time. Generally, however, attempt has been made to look at the Social Question from a global perspective.

The aim of the teaching of the Church, as the Congregation for Catholic Education rightly reminded us is to promote social progress.

Today social doctrine is called upon with increasingly greater urgency to make its own specific contribution to evangelization, to dialogue with the world, to the Christian interpretation of reality, and to guidelines for pastoral action in order to enlighten the various initiatives on the temporal plan with sound principles. Indeed, economic, social, political and cultural structures are experiencing profound and rapid transformations which put the very future of human society at stake and thus they need a sure orientation. It is a matter of promoting real social progress which, in order to effectively ensure the common good of all men, requires a just organisation of these structures. If this is not done, there will be a return of great multitudes toward that situation of a 'quasi-servile yoke' which Leo XIII spoke about in *Rerum Novarum*.¹³

¹³ Congregation for Catholic Education, Guidelines for the Study and Teaching of the Church's Social Doctrine in the Formation of Priests, Rome 1988, 2.

What is clearly at stake is the continuity of the social doctrine?

The term ‘continuity’ is used to express the relationship between the documents, even if each one responds in a specific way to the problems of its times. In spite of differences in formulation, ‘methodological procedure and styles, the documents “do not compromise the substantial identity and unity of the Social Doctrine of the Church”.¹⁴

Due to its character of mediation between the Gospel and concrete social and human realities, the need for a responsive updating to new world situations is accepted.¹⁵ The initial object of this doctrine was the so-called ‘Social Question’, or the whole series of socio-economic problems which arose in certain areas of the European and American world subsequent to the ‘Industrial Revolution’. Today, the ‘Social Question’ ‘is no longer limited to particular geographic areas. It has a world-wide dimension and includes many aspects. In any case, ‘Social Question’ and ‘Social Doctrine’ are co-related terms. Thus, its continuity and development from Leo XIII in 1891 to John Paul II in 1996 shows that the Social Doctrine preserves a substantial identity as a doctrinal ‘corpus’ with great coherency, attentive to evolving situations. It cannot be reduced to a closed system.

As an example, the ‘poor’ which we refer to frequently are not the ‘proletarians’ of Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*, nor the unemployed in Pius XI’s *Quadragesima Anna*. Today, the poor have emerged as an international, intercultural and inter—religious ‘club’, found everywhere. They are in those rich Western and American Societies which, until now, were exclusively enjoying the goods of the earth with political freedom, societal liberalism and economic security.

They are also found in unquantifiable numbers in those parts of the Southern globe now labelled as the Third World. In such areas, poverty has become systemic and almost institutionalised. They are also found in the new emerging ex-communist countries where freedom, dignity and humanity were until now ‘foreign’ concepts.

¹⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹⁵ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 29.

Furthermore, the problems of the 'poor' no longer concern only the unjust differences between classes, but today encompass enormous imbalances between the so-called 'rich and poor nations.'¹⁶

2.4. Permanent principles and fundamental values

These principles have not been formulated by the Church organically in one single document, but are found throughout the entire historical evolution of her social doctrine.

The principles mentioned are not complete, but simply indicative of the important ones, such as the dignity of the human person, human rights, the person—society relationship, the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity, human structures and community of persons, the universal purpose of created things.

2.5. The Church is aware, particularly in this sphere, of her limits: she does not presume to be able to solve all the dramatic Situations of the modern world.

In fact, the Church proposes no alternative ideology, no social, political or economic system. This is not the level of its action nor of its competence.

On the other hand, the Church can and must, in "the light of the Gospel", provide the principles and necessary guidelines for the correct organization of social life for the dignity of the human person and for the common good.

Its proper role is to interpret the moral value of social activities and to offer social guidelines which are in conformity with the Gospel's view of human dignity.¹⁷

During the 1960s and 1970s, a debate took place in some Catholic circles about the Social—Doctrine of the Church, its meaning, its present relevance and even its existence. This 'doctrine', for some critics, represented nothing more than an ideological option in face of more operational ideologies such as socialism and communism. Others viewed the Social Teaching of the Church as a compendium of Papal Encyclicals, whose literal quotation appeared to be of little help for understanding the role of the Church in modern societies.

Pope John Paul II had reason to take these criticisms seriously for he wrote:

¹⁶ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 3.

¹⁷ Carrier, Herve, *The Social Doctrine of the Church Revisited, A Guide for Study*, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Vatican City. 1990. p. 12.

The Church's social doctrine is not a 'third way' between *liberal capitalism* and *Marxist collectivism*, nor even a possible alternative to other solutions less radically opposed to one another: rather, it constitutes a category of its own. Nor is it an *ideology*, but rather the *accurate formulation* of the results of careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence, in society and in the international order, in the light of faith and of the Church's tradition. Its main aim is to *interpret* these realities, determining their conformity with or divergent from the lines of the Gospel teaching on man and his vocation, a vocation which is at once earthly and transcendent; Its aim is thus to *guide* Christian behaviour. It therefore belongs to the field, not of *ideology*, but of *theology* and particularly of moral theology.¹⁸

III. Conclusion: Application to Africa

3.1. Actually, in x-raying a historical overview of the Social Teaching of the Church as we have done, we both directly and indirectly touched on its relevance and applicability to the corresponding social problems of various African countries. A few events on the continent of Africa seem to draw attention to the need for a concerted effort of the relevant church authorities for the gradual development of a continental approach to promote the knowledge, spread and practice of the demands of Catholic Social Teaching.

3.2. Following the 1988 Pan-African Seminar on Justice and Peace organized by SECAM in Rome, Lesotho; the consultation process of SECAM with the various Bishops' Conferences and Regional groups; the meeting of representatives of the French-speaking African Bishops' Conferences in Yaoundé, July 1993; the African Synod of 1994 with the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*; and the current meeting in Harare for representatives of the English and Portuguese-speaking countries of Africa on Social Thought and Social Action. It does seem to me that the time is ripe for the formation of a permanent SECAM continental body to define, promote and initiate activities which relate to the Social Teaching of the Church.

¹⁸ John Paul II, Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 41.

3.3. Secondly, practical encouragement should be given to various individual groups, institutional, local, national and regional initiatives which work for the articulation of these teachings. It is not enough merely to formulate a social doctrine. It must be translated into reality. The several areas of application of these teachings in Africa include: democracy, economy, lay participation in politics, education, agricultural resources, social and development projects, work, industrialization, Church and culture, liberation, refugees, wars, the burden of the international debt which has led to currency devaluation in many countries, to mention but a few.

3.4. It is relevant at this point to indicate some of the difficulties related to the knowledge and spreading of the Social Teaching of the Church in Africa:

3.4.1. One must address the lack of adequate knowledge of these teachings. This problem needs deeper study and evaluation for a proper contextual adaptation of the teachings.

3.4.2. The documents are not available in simplified texts, nor in local languages for the several rural populations in African Societies. In fact, many of the documents are written in professional language and “jargon”, a point which needs some form of consideration. Perhaps local theologians could be challenged to translate the documents into simple language for the lay faithful.

3.4.3. In many African countries like Nigeria, the documents of Catholic Social Teaching are not easily available in bookshops or libraries. Where can you easily obtain an Encyclical?

3.4.4. Knowledge of the contents is not clear to the priests, who could use them in sermons. let alone to the faithful. If the priests do not know or preach on these doctrines, how can the faithful know of these teachings and live them out in daily life? The blind cannot lead the blind.

3.4.5. In the training of future priests, adequate place is not give during formation for a proper knowledge of and education in the Catholic Social Teaching. This matter also needs to be addressed.

3.5. *What must the African Church do?*

3.5.1. *Self-reliance*: African Nations must learn gradually to depend on their own capacities in every field. This corresponds to subsidiarity thinking. No outside assistance can take the place of self-effort. Social and economic action, that is the increase of one's own productive capacities, certainly takes on a particular importance in this sense.

3.5.2. *Education and formation*: Of primary importance, in the responsibility of developing nations, are the tasks of formation an education (both have an economic dimension as well) which are one of the most important requisites for the success of the development of the whole person.

In the words of Pope John Paul II:

Has the Church in Africa sufficiently formed the lay faithful enabling them to assume competently their civic responsibilities and to consider social—political problems in the light of the Gospel and of faith in God? This is certainly a task belonging to Christians: to bring to bear upon the social fabric an influence aimed at changing not only ways of thinking but also the very structures of society.¹⁹

3.5.3. *Witness of action*: On the matter of relevance and credibility, the Holy Father, with reference to the Church's evangelizing mission in the field of justice and peace, says:

Today more than ever, the Church is aware that her social doctrine will gain credibility more immediately from witness of action than as a result of its internal logic and consistency.²⁰

Christians must be formed to live the social implications of the Gospel in such a way that their witness will become a prophetic challenge to whatever hinders the true good of the men and women of Africa and of every other continent.²¹

3.5.4. *Integral evangelization*: When understood as human promotion, the defence of human rights, the protection of a lifetime guarantees of jobs, etc.:

¹⁹ *Ecclesia in Africa*, 54.

²⁰ Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 57; cf. also *Ecclesia in Africa*, 21.

²¹ *Ecclesia in Africa*, 54.

Evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new.²²

3.5.5. Overcoming divisions: The Church is challenged by this specific responsibility to heal divisions of all sorts: ethnic, tribal, religious, etc.

Tribal oppositions at times endanger if not peace, at least the pursuit of the common good of the society as a whole. They also create difficulties for the life of the Churches and the acceptance of Pastors from other ethnic groups.²³

At this stage in Africa, we need more unity, not division.

3.5.6. *Solidarity expected from industrialised nations*: The Church in Africa requests, in the language of the Vatican Council II, that the industrialised nations undertake “spiritual and material adjustments”²⁴ within their own confines in order to help build a more just and more humane society. We all live in a ‘global village’ and the danger of collective selfishness must be clearly averted.

The present times are no luxury for many African peoples. The Church experiences martyrdom daily. We must make haste: too many people are suffering, and the distance is growing that separates the progress of some and the stagnation, not to say the regression, of others.²⁵

Finally, it is our considered View that resignation and hopelessness lead to futility, not to life. The urgent requirement today consists in overcoming resignation and in finding the courage to take the initiative. Catholic Social Teaching is a sure path to this renewal of faith and of life.

²² *Evangelii Nuntium* 18; cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, 54.

²³ Pontifical Commission “*Iustitia et Pax*”, *The Church and Racism. Towards a More Fraternal Society*. Vatican City 1988, 12.

²⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*. 86.

²⁵ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 29.

