

THE ORIGINALITY OF DON BOSCO'S PATAGONIAN MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE

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0. Introduction

This paper is concerned with Don Bosco's work for the missions. It has been said that *in ordine intentionalitatis* his vocation and even his missionary strategy were born with him, as was his calling as the future apostle of youth. In order of time, however, his missionary enterprises were part of the final stage of his «oratorian» labours,¹ and reached fruition with the Salesian missions in Patagonia. These constituted Don Bosco's only missionary experience, an experience that was not personal but enjoyed vicariously through his sons who were sent into those mission lands. The enthusiasm which this experience aroused in him prompted him to write as follows to the Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide a few months after his Salesians had arrived in Argentina: «Having thus explained my humble project [for the evangelization of Patagonia], my one desire is to devote the last days of my life to this mission», which is «the main target of our Salesian missionary effort», «the greatest work undertaken by our Congregation».²

The first Salesian missionary priority was laid down in Don Bosco's «spiritual testament»: «The world will always welcome us as long as all our concern is for the uncivilized, for poor children, for those members of society most in danger». He saw mission lands as «a privileged place for the

¹ Cf. *Annali* I 245; *Summarium... beatificationis et canonizationis Servi Dei Joannis Bosco... Positio super introductione causae*, pp. 254, 306, 319, 401, 527, etc.; MB II 20; R. CASTILLO LARA, *Il piccolo seme è diventato albero gigante*, in: *Centenario delle missioni Salesiane 1875-1975*. Commemorative papers, Roma, LAS 1980, p. 83; A. FAVALE, *Il progetto missionario di Don Bosco*, in «Quaderni di Salesianum», Roma, LAS 1976, pp. 4-10.

² E III 61 (*letter* to Cardinal Franchi, 10 May, 1876); III 34 (*petition* from Don Bosco to Pius IX on behalf of Don Pietro Ceccarelli, parish priest of St. Nicolas de los Arroyos, 9 April, 1876); IV 14 (*letter* to Don Fagnano, rector of Carmen de Patagones, 31 January, 1881).

carrying out of this task [...], a kind of "work of synthesis" that sums up our entire missionary purpose».³

This initiative of Don Bosco was conceived and put into effect as an essentially educative project and so, as Alberto Caviglia pointed out, «the whole missionary idea derived its characteristics and its efficacy from the fact that it was a development and extension of the seminal concept which was at the basis of his multi-faceted apostolate. That concept was the saving of souls through the Christian education of youth, particularly the poor, by adopting the style and the means which Don Bosco had elaborated in his educational approach».⁴ This would be his specific contribution within the «plan of action» which was to determine Salesian «mission strategy».⁵

1. Patagonia, an original project?

Right from the start of his plans for a missionary venture, which always had Patagonia in view, Don Bosco spoke of a «new project», of «a series of projects which appear to the world like fairy-tales or the dreams of a madman, but which God blesses as soon as they are undertaken». He thus makes it clear that he conceived the undertaking not as a structured project, worked out in every detail, but as a series of evolving initiatives that would expand and develop steadily as part of the daily life of those who were working with him in unity of spirit and approach.⁶

His plans for the so-called «Patagonian project» were conceived between 1876 and 1879 and were based on what he had learnt as a boy and on «what had been learnt from history and from the words and deeds of others»; they also took into account the supernatural guidance that had been granted him.⁷

³ G. BOSCO, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-5-6 pel Sac. Gio. Bosco a' suoi figli salesiani* (Spiritual Testament), in RSS 4 (1985) 127; MB XVII 273; L. RICCI, *Le missioni, strada al rinnovamento*, in ACS 267 (1962) 20. Regarding the word «savage» Don Ceria wrote: «When Don Bosco was writing, the word "savages" was used as a comprehensive term to indicate the inhabitants of the territory of Patagonia; it did not apply to all the Indians living in the wild, which explains how he was able to hope that some sons of the Indians would be willing to be trained for the priesthood» (E III 95).

⁴ A. CAVIGLIA, *La concezione missionaria di Don Bosco e le sue attuazioni salesiane*, in «Omnis terra adoret Te» 24 (1932) 5.

⁵ P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 174; P. PAESA, *Planes y métodos en la evangelización de la Patagonia después de 1879*, in: J. BELZA - R. ENTRAIGAS - C. BRUNO - P. PAESA, *La expedición al Desierto y los salesianos, 1879*, Buenos Aires, Ed. Don Bosco Argentina 1979, pp. 206-240; P. BRAIDO, *Il progetto operativo di Don Bosco e l'utopia della società cristiana*, in «Quaderni di Salesianum», Roma, LAS 1982, pp. 24-28; J. BORREGO, *Estrategia misionera de Don Bosco*, in: P. BRAIDO, *Don Bosco nella Chiesa* 143-202.

⁶ E III 52, 72 (letters to Don Cagliero, 27 April and 3 July, 1876); P. BRAIDO, *Il progetto operativo* 5.

⁷ E III 275 (*Memorandum* to Cardinal Franchi, 31 December, 1877); A. FAVALE, *Il progetto*

Initially the only thing that was clear was the twin objective: evangelization and the *plantatio ecclesiae* in the land of the Pampas and of Patagonia, and the provision of help, especially spiritual, for Italian emigrants. This second objective, as well as providing a kind of springboard for the missionary expeditions into Patagonia, would serve to give the Salesians a foothold amongst the population of Argentina, as would later be the case also in Uruguay and Brasil. This combined effort on behalf of the native and immigrant population would provide one of the richest chapters in Salesian missionary activity.⁸

The originality of the scheme was limited by his own scant experience of the missions. He therefore drew on the experience of others. He himself admitted that, during Vatican I, various bishops begged «most insistently for the opening of a house in Asia, in Africa and in America»; other bishops visited him at Turin, like the bishops of Santiago and Concepción, «the most southerly diocese in the republic of Chile». Don Bosco was already writing to this bishop in the July of 1876 to ask his permission to «*experimentum facere ad Evangelium inter Patagonos et Barbaros sive Pampas annuntiandum*».⁹ He was in epistolary and personal contact with great missionaries like Massaia, Lavigerie and, in particular, Mons. Comboni, who was frequently a guest at the Turin Oratory, and who put in Don Bosco's hands his «Plan for the blacks of Central Africa, as presented to the Vatican Council I», and who brought to Don Bosco's attention his fundamental work entitled: *Plan for the regeneration of Africa*. This aimed at creating (throughout Africa) a chain of educational institutions for young people of both sexes, in which European and native missionaries could live and work together. Groups of young blacks, male and female, would be formed in these institutions as religious, catechists and teachers and would be despatched to the African inte-

missionario 4-14; MB I 328, 415; P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 168 et s.

⁸ Cf. G. ROSOLI, *Impegno missionario e assistenza religiosa agli emigrati nella visione e nell'opera di Don Bosco e dei Salesiani*, in: F. TRANIello (edit.), *Don Bosco nella storia della cultura popolare*, Torino, SEI 1987, pp. 289-329. At the death of Don Bosco the Salesians, apart from their centres in Patagonia, had 19 houses in Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Chile and Ecuador, including schools for students and artisans, boarding schools, printing houses and bookshops (cf. P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 182 et s.).

⁹ The unexpected suspension of the First Vatican Council prevented the approval of the constitution on the missions: *Schema Constitutionis super missionibus apostolicis* (MANSI I.III, col. 45-53), and of the numerous proposals submitted to the council fathers. These latter included varied suggestions for schools and for the increase of their number; for seminaries, houses of formation for native clergy, educational work in the geographical area between Australia and India and from the coast of Algeria to Abyssinia. The council was also exhorted to approve and recommend to the Catholic world the spread of the Work for Christian Schools in the East (MANSI I.III, col. 152 et s., 349, 571-574). There were also requests for foundations: cf. MB IX 891 et s.; X 546, 626, 658, 732, 739, 769-771, 1270-1272, 1358-1375; E III 79 et s. (*letter* of Don Bosco to the bishop of Concepción, Mons. José Hipólito Salas, 29 July, 1876).

rior in order to set up centres (family groups, missionary colonies, communities) which would spread Christianity, and have a civilizing influence.¹⁰ Don Bosco adopted the «Comboni plan» as his own, admitting in August, 1876 that his method of evangelization in the land of the Patagonia was the same as that «Mons. Comboni is seeking to operate in the heart of Africa».¹¹

Here is a long extract composed of complementary texts that give first-hand evidence that his sympathy for the Comboni plan grew out of his own personal experience and his understanding of institutions.

«The strategy which we have adopted [...] is to establish houses near the limits of civilization and try to help the local clergy. [...] Within 7 years we shall almost certainly have indigenous missionary priests. [...] We can be confident that our work in these missions will succeed because we are working for poor boys [...] and for the mass of the population by educating the youth [...]».¹²

«It seems that the only effective action is to adopt a system of colonization, establishing a series of little villages and stockades on the fringes of civilization, where we can begin to open boarding schools, teaching centres, hostels and hospices and orphanages for the children of the savages, who are largely abandoned; then through these children we shall seek, in time, to evangelise the Patagonians through the Patagonians themselves. If we can attract the young, it should be possible to educate the children and through them spread the Christian religion amongst their parents».¹³

As soon as the Salesians arrived in Patagonia, their first concern «was to erect churches, dwelling places and schools for the boys and girls. While some busied themselves teaching crafts and trades and farming to the small colonies they had established, others pushed on amongst the savages in order to catechise them and, if possible, set up colonies in the more remote regions of the Pampas. [...] *Things to be done*: 1. Establish a prefecture or Vicariate Apostolic [...]. 3. Work out a system according to which, with the

¹⁰ For contacts with Cardinal Lavigerie cf. MB IX 472, 734, 769-771, 940; MB IX 888 et s., a letter written from Rome on 30 July, 1870, in which Don Comboni informed him of the despatch of his *Postulatum* (MANSI I.III, col. 633 et s.). Cf. also P. CHIOCCHETTA, *Daniele Comboni: carte per L'Evangelizzazione dell'Africa*, Bologna, EMI 1978, pp. 215-233 (*Piano...*) 235-247 (*Postulatum...*).

¹¹ ASC 110, 1 - quaderno 8 *Cronichetta - Barberis*, p. 87.

¹² It is taken from a long conversation that he had with Don Barberis on 12 August, 1876, in which he described the essence of his plan for the missions (cf. ASC 110, 1 - quaderno 8 *Cronichetta - Barberis*, pp. 75 et s., 87. See summary in MB XII 279 et s.).

¹³ G. BARBERIS, *La Repubblica Argentina e la Patagonia*, in LC 291-292 (1877) 93-94. This reflects Don Bosco's words to the Salesians on 6 June, 1876 (cf. MB XII 221-223) and to Cardinal Franchi on 10 May, 1876 (cf. E III 58-60) and on 31 December, 1877 (cf. *ibid.*, 257, 261) See also the information given in BS 2 (1878) 11, pp. 1 et s., recorded by Don Barberis in his *Resoconto delle Missioni Salesiane*, Acts of the First International Congress of Salesian Cooperators, held in Bologna from 23-25 April, 1895, Torino, Tip. Salesiana 1895, pp. 196 et s.

approval of the Argentinian government [April, 1880], the religious and civil status of the converted Indians can be guaranteed».¹⁴

These tactics were shrewd and were similar to those which, as an educator and rector of educational establishments, he had from long experience found to be effective. Taken as a whole the plan may reflect his somewhat utopian optimism, but it still serves to give some idea of his missionary strategy.

2. Argentina-Patagonia, a land of promise

Pietro Stella has pointed out the fundamental features of Don Bosco's approach. It is obvious that for him the command *Euntes in mundum universum docete omnes gentes* «was not just [a mandate to the apostles], something to be accepted as part of our faith, but involved also a juridical mission; in other words, a mandate sought and obtained from the Pope, the father of the family of believers». This provided the «motivation for transplanting [the Salesians] to Argentina». Don Bosco was sure that, having once begun missionary work, his society would become «something ever greater [...], as it measured up to the missionary apostolate entrusted by the Church to the Salesian Congregation» in Argentina.¹⁵

Faced with the offers made by the bishops at the Vatican Council and by Comboni's request for help in Africa, Don Bosco, after weighing up his resources, opted for Argentina, chiefly because of «the fact that there his men would not feel isolated but rather amongst friends and compatriots, with whom they could create relationships that resembled those they had left behind in Italy».¹⁶ In other words, in addition to such considerations as locality, nationality and friendly support, he was moved by a deeper reason: the chance to evangelize people of the same culture, with whom there was a strong bond of solidarity.

In the south of Argentina, moreover, there lived the «savages» that he spoke of, the inhabitants of the Pampas and of Patagonia. After years of «serious and diligent» study, having received information as well as signs from heaven, he seemed to discern in these «savages» the faces he had seen in a dream, between 1870 and 1871, faces of a tribe which he had considered, as far back as 1848, as amongst «the most abandoned» people on

¹⁴ E III 569, 573 et s.: *Memoriale intorno alle Missioni Salesiane* to Leo XIII, on 13 April, 1881. At the end of March, 1882, he sent another *Memorandum* to the «Work for the Propagation of the Faith at Lyons»: *Relazione completa sulle Missioni patagoniche*, in which he expounded his strategy. Cf. E IV 123-127.

¹⁵ MB XII 14; P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 169 et s.; A. FAVALE, *Il progetto missionario* 21-29.

¹⁶ MB XI 384; G. BARBERIS, *La Repubblica Argentina* 182; P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 171.

earth,¹⁷ because, as he wrote in 1875, «the religion of Jesus Christ has not yet reached them, nor have they been touched by civilization or trade. No European has as yet set foot amongst them» and «if there was any government there, it counted for little».¹⁸

After having narrated with considerable euphoria the dream I have mentioned (July-August, 1876), Don Bosco made this more sober comment to Don Barberis: «I have reached the age of 60 without having ever heard mention of Patagonia; who would have thought that I should reach a point where I should have to study it in such circumstantial detail».¹⁹

In the May of that year he had submitted to Propaganda Fide his project for Patagonia which included «the creation of a Prefecture Apostolic». By way of reply the Congregation of Propaganda, which «had the vaguest of notions about those regions»,²⁰ asked him for a detailed account of that area. The exposition which Don Bosco produced, entitled *La Patagonia e le Terre Australi del Continente Americano*, was discovered in 1983. According to the document itself, this account was based on information provided «by the most weighty authors who have dealt with this subject», and he quotes D'Orbigny, Lacroix, Guinnard, Dally, V. Quesada, Ferrario, as well as «Edifying Letters», the review «Museo delle Missioni Cattoliche» and «details contained in letters which our missionaries have already written to us from that region». The document gives detailed historical, anthropological and religious information about Patagonia and points out how little has been done there from a missionary point of view. In conclusion it offers a description of «its present condition», with reliable details about the appalling social and religious situation. The document then presents the «new project» that Don Bosco is proposing in order to initiate the work of evangelization.²¹

¹⁷ In his dream he found himself in a completely unknown land (later in his «serious» study of the available information he knew he was dealing with Patagonia: cf. MB X 1267-1273), in which fierce savages slaughtered the missionaries of various religious orders, quartering them and fixing pieces of their flesh on their spears. Salesian missionaries then appeared and approached «the savages with smiling faces, preceded by a line of young boys» and with their rosaries in their hands. They were well received and were listened to (MB X 53-55). Concerning the issue of these boys being the «most destitute», cf. MB III 363. Cf. also J. BORREGO, *Primer proyecto patagónico de Don Bosco*, in RSS 5 (1986) 43-47.

¹⁸ MB XI 385 et s.

¹⁹ ACS 110, 1, quaderno 7 *Cronichetta-Barberis*, 17 May, 1876, pp. 55 et s.

²⁰ E III 58-60 (*Memorandum* to Cardinal Franchi, 10 May, 1876). Barberis noted in his *Cronichetta* for 15 May, 1876: «According to the explanations that were later given me in conversation, this work is to be sent to Rome to the Congregation of Propaganda, since the Holy Father has entrusted to Don Bosco, that is to the Salesians, the spiritual care of those regions, not yet run by any mission. The Congregation of Propaganda has no knowledge (in the E III 58, this is softened to "very vague ideas") about the area. Efforts are now being made to set up there a Prefecture Apostolic» (ASC 110, 1, quaderno 7, 49).

²¹ Cf. G. BOSCO, *La Patagonia e le Terre Australi del Continente Americano*, Torino 1876. This is a manuscript of 164 pages, dated and signed by Don Bosco himself. It was discovered in 1983 in the library of the Pontifical Urban University of Rome by the Salesian Don E.

This is the most lengthy document extant relating to Don Bosco's ideas about missionary work. It doubtless reflects the state of knowledge of Patagonia that was current in Europe in 1876.

Don Bosco was quite tireless in his pursuit of information about Patagonia. This is evidenced in the details contained in his letters to the Holy See and Propaganda,²² as well as in articles in the «Salesian Bulletin», which between 1881 and 1884 describes the first parts of the quoted plan as already a «fait accompli». The articles give the results of recent explorations by Luis Piedra Bueno (1859), Ernest Rouquard (1872), Francisco Moreno (1878) and Giacomo Bove (1883).²³ Don Bosco referred to this in the talk which he gave on 14 April, 1883, to the Geographical Society of Lyons, which conferred on him «the silver medal for merit in the field of geographical knowledge; in the sense in which we understand it today, namely, as a contribution to the study and progress of men and conditions in foreign lands». Some geographers and scientists have considered Don Bosco's research about Patagonia to have been the first scientific contribution to geographical studies by the Salesian missions.²⁴

3. «There were no Salesian missions in the South [of Argentina and Chile], but rather colleges, agricultural schools and churches...»

These words were uttered as a criticism of Don Bosco and of his missionary strategy soon after his death, whereas they actually indicate the origi-

Szanto, who published it in facsimile with a Spanish translation: E. SZANTO, *La Patagonia y las Tierras Australes del Continente Americano*. Presentación, traducción y notas del «Proyecto Patagonia Don Bosco», Bahía Blanca, Archivo Histórico Salesiano de la Patagonia Norte 1986. There is a critical edition edited by J. Borrego in RSS 7 (1988) 255-418.

²² Cf. E III 58-60 (*Memorandum* to Propaganda Fide, 10 May, 1876); III 275 (*Memorandum* of 31 December, 1877); III 569-574 (*Report* to Leo XIII of 13 April, 1881). Of considerable significance are the letters written in the August and September of 1885: cf. E IV 313, 328 (to Mons. Cagliari, 10 February, and 6 August); IV 333 (to Don Costamagna, 10 August); IV 334 (to Don Fagnano, 10 August); IV 336 (to Don Tomatis, 14 August); IV 339 (to Don G. Battista Allavena, 24 Sept. 1885); IV 341 (to Don Luigi Lasagna, 30 Sept. 1885).

²³ Cf. BS 4 (February, April, May, June, September, November, 1880); 5 (April, July, October, 1881); 6 (April, 1882); 7 (February, April, September, 1883); 8 (January, April, July, October, 1884). Regarding G. Bove cf. MB XVII 454, 644. Cf. also J. BORREGO, *Primer proyecto patagónico* 32-35. Regarding this whole question cf. J. BELZA, *Sueños patagónicos*, Buenos Aires, Instituto de Investigación Histórica Tierra del Fuego 1982.

²⁴ MB XVI 69; XVIII 31 et s., 637. It was considered «scientific» by A. DE AGOSTINI, *Don Bosco geógrafo*, in BS 84 (1960) 6-8; D. GRIBAUDI, in «Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana», Roma 1961, p. 312; P. SCOTIL, *Missioni Salesiane: contributi geografici*, in: *Missioni Salesiane 1875-1975*, Studies for the first centenary, Roma, LAS 1977, p. 267. One should not overlook the talks given to mark the founding of the city of Brasília («Agenzia Missionaria Salesiana», 1960/61) and its 25th Anniversary, 12-14 December, 1985, in Rome.

nality of his approach.²⁵ As Cardinal Baggio declared: «In reviewing the original aspects of the Salesian work, I should say that the most significant feature is "the class of people they chose" to work for, the two parallel groups of the young and the poor [...]. This choice is as clear as the sun in their missionary territories». Don Bosco was faithful to this choice of his from the fifth item of advice given to the first Salesian missionaries to his «spiritual testament». «In due time our missionaries will reach China. [...] But let it never be forgotten that our work is for poor and abandoned children before all else, and through them for the entire population». Salesian experience in the field proved that there was no better method for creating a *plebs Christiana*.²⁶

Evangelization and the *plantatio Ecclesiae* are the specific aims of all missionary activity, and they were Don Bosco's aims too. Genuine evangelization became the dominant spiritual motif in his farewell talks to departing missionaries and in his letters to them. His Salesians (priests, brothers and nuns) were sent to «announce the word of God», to «spread the faith» «to carry [...] proclaim [and] diffuse the light of the Gospel amongst the inhabitants of the Pampas and Patagonia». They will feel pain at not being able to offer the gospel message in its fulness and at having «to limit themselves to the essentials of the catechism».²⁷

«The fulcrum of Salesian activity and the vital principle of Salesian missionary approach», wrote Alberto Caviglia, «is therefore [...] the conversion of unbelievers by ministering to the educational needs of youth and little children. [...] Wherever there is a Salesian mission, alongside the priestly task [of directly proclaiming the gospel message] there must always be the

²⁵ *Las Misiones Salesianas de la Patagonia*. Su labor durante los primeros cincuenta años, Bahía Blanca 1930, pp. 54-56. G.B. FRANCESIA, *Francesco Ramello, chierico Salesiano, Missionario nell'America del Sud*, San Benigno Canavese. Tip. e Libr. Salesiana 1888, p. 117: «Some people comment that Don Bosco's missions in America consist only in opening colleges and hostels...». One who made such comments was the Scalabrini father, P. Colbachini, who wrote to a priest friend in Vicenza on 28 February, 1887: «The Salesians in Rio, S. Paolo, Montevideo, Buenos Aires, together with other Salesians throughout the world are not concerned with the missions, apart from a few in Patagonia. [...] They are only concerned with being teachers and headmasters in colleges of arts and trades which they run in this part of the world: it is a fine work, but it is very different from what most people think...» (M. FRANCESCONI, *Inizi della Congregazione Scalabriniana (1886-1888)*, Roma, CSE 1969, p. 104).

²⁶ MB XI 381; XVII 273; *Annali* I 243; S. BAGGIO, *La formula missionaria salesiana*, in: *Centenario delle Missioni Salesiane*. Discorsi, p. 43; L. RICCERI, *Il progetto missionario di Don Bosco*, *ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁷ MB XI 390. One need only recall the discourses to the first missionary expedition (cf. MB XI 383, 387) and to the third expedition (cf. MB XIII 375), Don Bosco's letters (cf. E III 261, 331, 572-574, 606 note 22), the articles in the BS 4 (November, 1880), 5 (June, 1881), 7 (July, 1883), 10 (July, August, 1886), 12 (January, 1888); cf. also L. CARBAJAL, *La Patagonia*. Studi generali, Serie Quarta, vol. IV, San Benigno Canavese, Scuola Tip. Salesiana 1900, pp. 150 et s.

ministry of the school. [...] All Salesian houses [parishes, festive oratories, schools for reading, writing and arithmetic, for trades, agriculture, drawing, music and the rest] form *one great school*, no matter what their field of action, and this is the specific Salesian method of Christian penetration». ²⁸

The schools, whatever form they took, were never extraneous to missionary activity. Don Bosco would state in the «Letture Cattoliche» that the work of evangelization in Latin America placed great emphasis upon the education of youth – at least that sector proper to the Salesians – and that as many schools as possible were opened in order to instruct the young. He also pointed out that «in every [Jesuit] *Reduction* there were two schools: one to teach the rudiments of reading and writing, the other for physical education and music». ²⁹ But with Don Bosco the school was novel not because it was a useful factor in spreading the gospel but because education was «an organic constituent» of missionary activity. «Once one has begun a foreign mission», Don Bosco wrote in his «spiritual testament», «every effort should be made to establish schools», ³⁰ as well as the other familiar activities (churches, dispensaries, hostels, reception centres), so that «the Indians are simultaneously taught the theory and the practice of crafts and trades, agriculture and commerce», of «science, moral behaviour and civilization». The proposal of classical models was not without its problems, especially in missionary territories, imposing as it did a kind of global Christian humanism which was characteristic of Don Bosco's entire enterprise. In actual fact he believed that the best guarantee of civilizing and Christianizing Patagonia lay in turning the youths of Argentina, as those of Europe, into «honest citizens and good Christians». Such was his message to the past pupils at their annual meeting in 1884. «When thousands of children come together in our colleges, they will learn the same principles that you learned at the Oratory. [...] In a century which is so careless regarding religion they will show the world that it is possible to love God and still be honestly happy, to be a good Christian and, at the same time, an upright, hard-working citizen». ³¹

This combination of «honest citizens and good Christians» became his missionary objective at both an individual and collective level and was reflected in the formulae repeated throughout the 1880's: «Evangelization and

²⁸ A. CAVIGLIA, *La concezione missionaria* 8-10, 12, 20, 24-26.

²⁹ G.B. LEMOYNE, *Fernando Cortez e la Nuova Spagna*, in LC 279-280 (1876) 37-44; C. CHIALA, *Da Torino alla Repubblica Argentina*. Letters of Salesian Missionaries, in LC 286-287 (1876) 208.

³⁰ MB XVII 273.

³¹ *Festa di Famiglia*, in BS 8 (August, 1884) 113 et s.; BS 5 (October, 1881), 7 (May, 1883), 8 (April, 1884), 9 (January, November, 1885), 11 (February, 1887). Cf. E III 572, 577, 606, 615; IV 129, 238 et s., 289; L. CARBAJAL, *Le Missioni Salesiane nella Patagonia e regioni magellaniche*. Studio storico-statistico, San Benigno Canavese, Scuola Tip. Salesiana 1900, pp. 53-54, 71 et s., 166.

civilization»; «the good of humanity and of religion»; «religion and true civilization». He was, obviously, concerned with Christian civilization, because he was convinced that «there is no true civilization outside Catholicism, the one true religion, which sanctifies, unites and civilizes nations». He therefore gave prominence to the idea then in vogue that society was civilized in so far as it was Christian (in the case of Patagonia, it would be civilized in so far as it was evangelized): in other words, civil society was «civilized» when it assimilated the culture of the civilized nations, and in western Europe to be civilized meant, in practice, to be Christian.³²

In order to accomplish this missionary enterprise Don Bosco, as always, drew on all the vital resources of his religious family. The *cooperators*, whom he described as «co-apostles of Patagonia», in the new world as in the old, were an external army of men and women providing moral, spiritual and material support for this great undertaking.³³ He in fact declared: «All of you here present, priests, students, artisans and coadjutors, all of you, I say all of you, can be true missionary workers».³⁴ Every missionary expedition, right from the very first, included Salesian *coadjutors*, to whom Don Bosco gave the significant title of «catechists». Amongst the eight pioneers of the Patagonian mission (in January 1880) there were four Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, and four Salesians, one of them being a coadjutor, without whom it would have been impossible to do so much at a social level, such as «teach farming, together with the more common crafts and trades»;³⁵ and all this quite apart from catechetical and educational work.

³² E III 331 (audience with Leo XIII, 23 March, 1878); III 576 et s. (*letter* to Don F. Bor drato, provincial in America, 15 April, 1880); IV 364 (*letter* to a cooperator, 1 November, 1886); BS 5 (February, 1881) 3 (*conference* to the Turin cooperators, 20 January, 1881): R. ENTRAIGAS, *Los Salesianos en la Argentina*, III, Buenos Aires, Editorial Plus Ultra 1969, pp. 84 et s.; P. BRAIDO, *Il progetto operativo* 24-26.

³³ The *Epistolario* is a rich source of material, particularly IV 360-363, *Circolare ai Cooperatori Salesiani*, Torino 15 October 1886; BS 10 (March, 1886) 32 (*Tre pensieri di Don Bosco ai Cooperatori*, 21 January, 1886), 4 (January, 1880), 10 (October, 1886). This is the practice followed in America: «Mons. Cagliari's mission in Concepción, Chile, had finished: he had founded the Taller de S. José, together with a group of Cooperators, which is almost essential for a Salesian house, if it is to survive and make progress». See *Mons. Cagliari in Chile*, in: BS 11 (September, 1887) 111.

³⁴ MB XII 141, 626 (*conference* to Salesians of Valdocco, 19 March, 1876).

³⁵ C. CHIALA, *Da Torino alla Repubblica Argentina* 28, 30, 36 et s.: «Don Bosco gave them the official title of "catechists"»; BS 9 (November, 1885) 165; CARBAJAL, *Le Missioni Salesiane* 39 et s. In view of the Patagonian project, Don Bosco actually promised the archbishop of Buenos Aires «that in a short time both centres on both sides of the Rio Negro will have their own priest and teacher; at Carmen de Patagones a hostel will be set up for the Indians, and another one for girls under the care of our nuns, the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians. Later on coadjutor brothers will sail for Patagones to teach agriculture and the more common crafts and trades» (*letter* to Mons. Aneiros on 13 September, 1879: cf. ENTRAIGAS, *Los Salesianos en la Argentina* III 85). Up to the death of Don Bosco 19 Salesian coadjutor brothers worked in Patagonia: cf. CARBAJAL, *Le Missioni Salesiane* 41, 61, 71 et s.

A characteristic feature of Don Bosco's missionary strategy was the timely participation of numerous *Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians*. This fact seemed very unusual in the Church in those days and respectable people were amazed, because it was the first time «that nuns had been seen in those remote southern climes». Very soon, however, their presence was judged «truly providential», because without their help «it would have been impossible to do so much for the women and girls» of Patagonia. This warm exhortation of 1885 underlined a new feature in his overall strategy: «The Salesians and Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, should direct all their efforts towards the promoting of priestly and religious vocations» in their mission territories.³⁶

This brings us to one of Don Bosco's fundamental insights: «In an era when missions, and not just those of the Catholic Church, were often the outposts of European colonialism, he saw that the Church would never put down permanent roots in mission lands unless it encouraged the creation of a stable indigenous clergy». As a result of his long experience as a Christian educator, Don Bosco was convinced that, even in the missions, young people who had received «a scientific and Christian education» would be «the most suitable instruments for attracting adults to the faith, thus giving Patagonia a new Christian and civilized aspect» and ensuring that «Patagonians should be evangelized by Patagonians».³⁷

As early as 1876 he hazards this prognostication: «It seems that the plan to form indigenous missionaries is blessed by the Lord»; therefore «we shall certainly have indigenous missionaries within 7 years from now». His letters of this period reveal the same fatherly concern that he expressed in his «spiritual testament»: «Once one has begun a foreign mission [...] any effort should be made to foster a vocation to the priesthood, or to encourage one of the girls to become a sister». Don Bosco never lived to see fulfilled his

³⁶ «At the beginning of the 19th century it was still almost inconceivable that nuns should work alongside missionaries; their share in this work caused amazement. [...] The first Italian nuns to participate were the Franciscan Missionaries of Egypt in 1859» (M. LUDOVICI, *Il movimento missionario in Italia nel secolo XIX*, Milano 1952, pp. 315-334). «The Salesian missionaries are joined by the worthy daughters of Don Bosco, the sisters of the charitable institute of Mary, Help of Christians. [...] This is the first time that nuns are to be seen in those remote regions, and their gentleness of manner and their proverbial kindness will undoubtedly contribute a great deal towards the conversion of the Indians to the Catholic faith, the only true religion»: *Los verdaderos héroes del desierto*, in the Buenos Aires newspaper, «La America del Sur» 4 (1880), no. 1152 (cf. C. BRUNO, *Los Salesianos y las Hijas de María Auxiliadora en la Argentina*, vol. 1, Buenos Aires, Inst. Salesiano de Artes Gráficas 1981, pp. 201 et s.): BS 3 (November, 1879); 5 (1881), 7 (February, 1883), 8 (April, 1884) 59; MB XVII 305. When Don Bosco died more than 6,000 girls had been given religious instruction: cf. CARRAJAL, *Le Missioni Salesiane* 63 et s.

³⁷ P. SCOPPOLA, *Commemorazione civile di Don Giovanni Bosco nel centenario della sua morte*, Torino, 30 January, 1988, Roma, Tip. Don Bosco 1988, p. 22; MB XII 659; XVII 299-305; E III 59, 90, 257, 320, 456, 569; IV 124; BS 9 (January, 1885) 3.

dream of numbering native vocations amongst his Salesians, but, as he himself used to say, «whoever lives long enough will be able to say that this is an historic stage, a great stage in the history of the missions».³⁸

4. The Salesians «did not form "reductions" like those of the Jesuits in Paraguay»

This was another criticism levelled at Salesian strategy in Patagonia. It is not that Don Bosco did not form such a plan and, in a certain sense, attempt to carry out. In trying to achieve the acculturation of the natives of the Patagonian Pampas Don Bosco was enthusiastic about the method of evangelization adopted by the Jesuits in Paraguay, as he was well-informed on the work of the Spaniards in colonizing and evangelizing the Americas.

In Don Bosco's view this reminded him of «the missionary method adopted during the middle ages in the conversion of the Germanic peoples, combining the conversion of a savage people with political development and the cultivation of the land [the ancient ideal followed by the Jesuits in Paraguay, of *reductio ad Ecclesiam et ad politicam et humanam vitam*], so that as "reductions" or Christian parishes were established a kind of independent state was created, which was appropriately called *Repubblica Cristiana*».³⁹ Adapting this model to the circumstances in Patagonia, Don Bosco produced an interesting project of his own.

In the April of 1876 he presented his plan to the Italian minister for foreign affairs, in order to obtain approval for the setting up of a colony that was completely «Italian in language, customs and government» on the Atlantic coast between Rio Negro and the Straits of Magellan. The project was based on his conviction, which was created by quite erroneous information, that in the region in question there were «no hotels, no ports and no estab-

³⁸ E III 90 (*Appeal* for the second missionary expedition, 25 August, 1876); III 95 (*letter* to Don Cagliero, 12 September, 1876); ASC 110, 1, quaderno 8 *Cronichetta-Barberis*, 12 August, 1876, p. 75; MB XVII 273, note 22. Don Bosco never saw the realization of his dream, but in 1900 in the aspirantate of Bernal (Buenos Aires) there were «twelve novices from the Rio Negro area [...] two of whom were the sons of Indian fathers». At Viedma and Patagonas the Salesian Sisters also had a number of professed Indian girls. A number of girls from Patagonia were teachers and missionaries in other places far from where they had been born» (cf. CARBAJAL, *Le Missioni Salesiane* 63 et s., 104). Nor should one forget that the cause of beatification of Zefirino, youngest son of the chief Manuel Namuncurá, has been introduced: R. ENTRAIGAS, *El mancebo de la Tierra. Cefirino Namuncurá*, Buenos Aires, Instituto Salesiano de Artes Gráficas 1974.

³⁹ CHIALA, *Da Torino alla Repubblica Argentina* 207. He describes the «reductions» in Paraguay, and concludes: «Muratori described this Christian republic in one word, giving it the title of *happy Christianity* [...]. Alas for the malice of mankind! Why could they not have left in peace an institution that would have brought peace to the whole of South America?» (p. 215).

lished government». A month later he proposed to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide «that a Prefecture Apostolic should be established to exercise ecclesiastical authority over the inhabitants of the Pampas and Patagonia». He justified the suggestion by pointing out that «no civil or ecclesiastical authority had any influence or power [...] over that vast region», since it did not fall «as yet within any diocese or any civil administration».⁴⁰

Once he had been informed by his missionary sons that this project, «though good, was inopportune and impracticable» and that prudence suggested «that it should be postponed to some more suitable date», Don Bosco acknowledged his mistake, while continuing to maintain that «a system of colonization» was «the most suitable means for turning [Patagonia] into a Christian, civilized people». He never gave up his plan for the canonical establishment of one or more vicariates, since he considered them essential in order to consolidate the work of «spreading the gospel», culminating in the *plantatio Ecclesiae* and in «the creation of a stable form of civilization amongst these peoples». A Vicariate Apostolic would form «the centre of the colonies that had been established and of those which, with the Lord's help, it was hoped to create».⁴¹

With the erection of the Vicariate of northern and central Patagonia in 1883 and of the Prefecture Apostolic of southern Patagonia (the Malvinas, or Falkland Islands, and Tierra del Fuego), Don Bosco at last saw emerging his plan to offer to God, the Church and society, «a Christian and civilized Patagonia», whose social organization would be accomplished in the following stages: to start with there would be a «reduction» of the Indians into basic communities, villages and colonies; then they would be provided with their own native personnel – «a great number of priests, catechists and sisters»; they would be equipped with the material means that were indispensable for communal life and divine worship, and would be able to rely on numerous «stations» or «fixed missionary residences», without which «the complete evangelization and civilization of the scattered tribes would be almost impossible».⁴²

⁴⁰ E III 44 et s. (*Memorandum* to Melegari, 16 April, 1876); III 60 (*Memorandum* to Card. Franchi, 10 May, 1876); J. BORREGO, *Primer proyecto patagónico* 24-39.

⁴¹ ASC 126, 2, *letters* to Don Bosco from Fagnano, 2 March, 1876; of Don Cagliari, 5-6 March, 1876, and of Malvano, Melegari's secretary, 18 August, 1876: «[...] As regards the project for the colonization of Patagonia, the Minister reserves the right to think things over. [...] In view of the recent exacerbation of the ancient dispute between Chile and Argentina over the division of those regions, it would seem more prudent to defer any action until a more suitable occasion [...]».

⁴² BS 10 (October, 1886) 113; 8 (July, 1884) 94; 11 (February, 1887) 15; 12 (October, 1888) 123. He clearly pointed out the requirements for the setting up of a stable «Christian people» amongst the converted native population when he revealed the going of Mons. Cagliari: «Mons. Cagliari will not find in Patagonia any of the things that he will need for his pastoral ministry and the christianization of the people. [...] He will, therefore, have to build, if not churches, at least chapels at appropriate points in his Vicariate and equip them

«With a good dose of imagination», Don Braido has commented, «one can see Don Bosco's utopian hope of a new "Christian society" emerging from the "evangelized nation of Patagonia", a vision certainly more credible than that of a "Christian Society" transplanted from Italy, such as he had dreamed of in 1876. But this remained mere phantasy. To the north and south of the tropic of Capricorn there persisted historical, political and cultural claims, and on both sides of the Atlantic there existed preconceptions which would render any such scheme quite absurd».⁴³

One need only think of the fact that meanwhile, without any reference to the government of Argentina, the Vicariate was created in 1883 and the Vicar Apostolic took possession of it in 1885; at that moment on 1 January, 1885, the natives of southern Argentina submitted totally to the government. From that date onwards the groups of natives that managed to survive, decimated through lack of sustenance and through forced and voluntary migration (they were traditionally nomads), were deprived of any military strength and were considered an obstacle to the progress of colonization. This was being actively pursued by a mixture of nationalities, Americans, Italians, Spaniards, Germans, Frenchmen and Russians, all living side by side. The president at that time, Sarmiento, invited them all to feel that they were «not foreigners but inhabitants» of the country. Meanwhile the Salesians, who were confronted by, and formed part of this state of affairs, carried on their beneficent work among both the immigrants and the aborigines.

President Roca promised Don Bosco that the Patagonian missions would always be protected and that they could always continue their civilizing work; but the new policy of colonization, which all the Latin-American states adopted towards their native populations, compelled the Indians to be «civilized» by being integrated into the national (European-style) culture. Don Milanesio, a Salesian working on the Patagonian mission, noted that «neither Roca nor the Chamber of Deputies would have agreed to – or, if already established, gone along with – the system adopted by the Jesuit fathers in Paraguay of independent "reductions" governed completely by the missionaries».⁴⁴

Only in two instances were the Salesians partially able to apply the sys-

for services; in the more central and populous regions he will have to build hostels for young people, so that they can be more easily instructed and civilized, and then they will form a solid foundation for creating a Christian nation [...]. He will need a seminary for the formation of an indigenous clergy, which will, in time, take over the running of new parishes. [...] In fine, he will have to organise his Vicariate in a way which ensures the salvation of souls»: BS 9 (January, 1885) 3 et s.

⁴³ P. BRAIDO, *Il progetto operativo* 28.

⁴⁴ E III 572, 634 (*letter* of President Roca to Don Bosco, 10 December, 1880); IV, 238 et s. (*letter* of Don Bosco to Pres. Roca, 31 October, 1885); MB XVI 379; D. MILANESIO, *Notas históricas*, XII (arch. Bahía Blanca, R. 1 [12] M, pp. 11-13): cf. C. BRUNO, *Los Salesianos* I 191 et s.; CARBAJAL, *Le Missioni Salesiane* 16 et ss.; R. ROJAS, *El profeta de la Pampa. Vida de Sarmiento*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Losada, 21948, pp. 637 et s.

tem of these «reductions»: this was with groups of the Onas tribe on Dawson Island (in the mission of St. Raphael) and on the Rio Grande, both of which formed part of Tierra del Fuego. Don Milaneseo insisted that in all the other missions «if one wishes to do something positive for the Indians, the only way is to visit them in their huts and in the groups amongst which they happen to be living», to multiply the «travelling missions», increasing the number of fixed residences and opening houses in colonies or centres of population where one can devote oneself to the natives. «It is not possible to gather them together into "reductions" or even into their own schools».

And so in Patagonia the *plantatio Ecclesiae* carried out by the Salesians was not just part of the history of the Church but became also a fundamental element in the civil history and in the cultural and social development of the nation.⁴⁵

5. Prospects for the future

When Don Bosco died his work was already established in Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Chile and Ecuador. His overall concept of how his missionary work would develop was somewhat utopian, but the future history of the Salesians was to prove the validity of various aspects of his dream. These indicate fields for further research.

1. The Salesian Congregation always, considered, and still considers, missionary work within the framework of its mission to youth and to the common people. The «foreign missions» in fact appear in article 7 of the Constitutions, right up until 1966, as one of the apostolic works «on behalf of the young, especially the poor and destitute». The renewed Constitutions of 1972, when speaking of the missions (art. 24), emphasise «the formation of the young». The Special General Chapter (1971-72) picked out, as the special characteristic of such work, to «help them [the young]... to free themselves from every form of slavery». Article 30 of the present Constitutions (1984) recalls that this is «an essential feature of our Congregation», which «mobilizes all the educational and pastoral means proper to our charism».⁴⁶

2. The application on the missions of all aspects of this educational system was warmly recommended by Pius XI to the Rector Major, Don Filippo Rinaldi. Such application of Don Bosco's «plans, means and spirit» would make his institution according to Jesuit J. Grisar, «play an appreciable part in

⁴⁵ *Annali* I 415; BS 11 (January, 1887) 3 et s.; PAESA, *Planes y métodos* 214-236; C. BRUNO, *Los Salesianos* I 488-493, E. SZANTO, *Solidaridad de la Iglesia con los indígenas*. Documentario patagónico 1, Bahía Blanca, Archivo Histórico de la Patagonia Norte 1988, pp. 30-44.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Special General Chapter XX*, Rome, 10 June 1971 - 5 January 1972, Rome 1972, nos. 472, 476.

the great work of the Catholic missions».⁴⁷ If we review the content and style of Salesian missionary endeavour, one must say that, with considerable emphasis on the promotion of the whole human being, they reflect what Don Bosco achieved in all his educational and pastoral work on behalf of the Christian civilization of Europe, given that in his eyes «Christian Europe is the great mistress of civilization and Catholicism». At the same time one should point out that his insistence on the need for indigenous priests, in order to guarantee the stability of the *plantatio Ecclesiae*, «would contribute», in the words of Prof. Scoppola, «to a change in missionary thinking, which would in more recent years concentrate increasingly on the process of decolonisation, and on the need for a new attitude within our European culture when faced with the cultures of the Third World».⁴⁸

3. It is obvious that Don Bosco's missionary strategy did not consider the serious problems concerned with the relationship between evangelization, inculturation and acculturation. Missionary work for him meant spreading the kingdom of God «in the regions of the Pampas and of Patagonia, where great numbers of people await [...] both civilization and their eternal salvation». But the consequences of the predominance of colonial culture and political interests were tempered, in Don Bosco's case, by a gentler view of civilization and Christian society, of culture and «the state of savagery»; he would never have accepted the formula proposed by the Argentinian executive to Congress in the annual message of 1876: the need for «a crusade against the barbarians which will achieve the objective of compelling the inhabitants, whether by force, or more moderate means, to accept the benefits which civilization offers them».⁴⁹

Without waiting for the major advances of the 20th century based on the «incarnation» of the gospel within native cultures, the Salesians demonstrated, right from their first encounters with the Indians and with peoples of other cultures, that «they were possessed of unusual gifts of insight and adaptability». They had made real attempts at inculturation and manifested «that humility and respect for other peoples' ways of life which is basic to the Salesian system of education based on reason, religion and kindness». This is not to deny that there were some exceptions, which were largely attributable to individual and arbitrary initiatives. «It is important, therefore», Don Bosco said in 1885, «to treat [these people] with kindness, to be genuinely concerned about their well-being and, above all, to take great care of

⁴⁷ ACS 19 (1923) 77; J. GRISAR, *Die Missionen der Salesianer Don Boscos*, Wien, Verlag der Salesianer Don Boscos, III, 1924; cf. BS 49 (1925) 300 et s.

⁴⁸ MB XVI 385; P. SCOPPOLA, *Commemorazione 22*.

⁴⁹ BS 1 (April, 1877) 1; P. BRAIDO, *Il progetto operativo 24-26*; A. PADILLA, *Presidencia Avelaneda - Vicepresidencia Mariano Acosta (1874-1880)*, in: P. LIVILLIER, *Historia Argentina*, vol. IV, Buenos Aires, Plaza y Janés de Argentina 1968, p. 2957.

their children [...]. With the sweetness of St. Francis de Sales the Salesians will be able to attract the population of the Americas to Jesus Christ».⁵⁰

4. It is also clear that the different mentality of those days, together with problems associated with the military conquest of some of those regions then taking place, forced the Salesians, while Don Bosco was still alive, to suffer *volens nolens*, situations which would now be judged wholly unacceptable.⁵¹ Despite this they were never lacking in the humanity and respect which are fundamental to any culture or science worthy of the name. Initially the cultural concern of the Salesian missionaries was «not to study the Indians but to transform them and the regions in which they lived, to learn their languages, to explore unknown territories and, at times, to describe their customs and traditions». Later on considerable «contributions to science were made through the Salesian missions».⁵²

5. Finally, there was certainly more talk about saving souls or individuals than about people, with their history, culture and right to living space. Today, on the other hand, ever since «project Africa» right up to the Suhar confederation, Salesian missionary methodology takes into account the cultural context of each people and is happy to put on record its educational and pastoral programme amongst the Yanomanis, which «aims at establishing a dialogue between the Yanomani culture and various forms of [Christian] culture, so that [the people] may be able to work out their own synthesis and [...] assume responsibility for their own development».⁵³

Such was Don Bosco's confidence in his project that he did not hesitate to predict in 1876 that his method was assured of a wonderful future: «With time this method will be adopted in all the other missions. Why should there be a different method for Africa or Oceania?». The Salesians and Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians, who today work in America, Asia, Africa and Oceania strive, like their brothers and sisters in Europe, to offer to the Church «the spirit, the mission, the educational method and preferential options of their Congregation; and this is done, above all, for the education of

⁵⁰ MB XVI 394; BS 8 (January, 1884) 17; (July, 1884) 101; P. STELLA, *Don Bosco* I 185.

⁵¹ ASC 273, letters of Don Costamagna to Don Bosco, 27 April, 1879; of Don Fagnano to Don Lasagna, 3 March, 1887; BS 3 (May, 1879) 5; 5 (October, 1881) 8; 6 (April, 1882) 67; 8 (January, 1884) 8. *Missionari Salesiani in partenza*: «In expeditions undertaken by governments, even when their aim is civilization, they prepare with guns, swords and cannons; but on religious expeditions you will not see a single death-dealing weapon, but only spiritual weapons that bring life! It is the cross that conquers nations for God and for civilization»: BS 9 (March, 1885) 36.

⁵² R. FARINA, *Contributi scientifici delle Missioni Salesiane*, in: *Centenario delle Missioni Salesiane*. Discorsi 97-141. This provides a wonderful summary, with an abundant bibliography right down to 1979.

⁵³ *Pastoral Amazónica*. Semana de estudios misionarios, Campo Grande, 5-10 September, 1988, Roma, Dicastero per le Missioni Salesiane 1988; *Veinte años con los yanomanis*, interview with Sister Isabel Equillor, DMHC, in BS (Spanish) 101 (June, 1988) 6, 28.

the rising generations and to contribute to the solution of the many problems that concern youth».⁵⁴

⁵⁴ ASC 110, 1 quaderno 8 *Cronichetta-Barberis*, 12 August, 1876, 87; MB XII 280; *Il progetto di vita dei Salesiani di Don Bosco*, Roma, Editrice SDB 1986, p. 280.