

## THE EMIGRANT

**Jaïr Santos** – In just three decades centered on the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more than a million Italians who came mostly from the north of the peninsula set up residence in Brasil. Now Brasil at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was still an immense desert! A vast territory to conquer, not by imperialism but quite simply by bringing people in because it was still a country with a fairly diminished population where there weren't enough workers! Because this coincided also with the end of slavery and so there was also a need to replace the slaves by new workers who came notably from Europe. These Italians moved to the hinterlands where there weren't any communities, there weren't any parishes, there weren't any villages and it was up to them to construct all that. What has always struck me is to see these poor peasants who barely knew how to write yet when they needed something, when they were desperate, they wrote to the Pope! They saw in the Church a point of contact with their country and with the life that they had left behind. Often the Vatican would reply in the guise of the Apostolic Nuncio by sending missionaries or quite simply by sending money...

The catholic church being what it is, that is to say an immense international organisation avant la lettre with missionaries everywhere and correspondents and diplomats, they amass a quantity of documents concerning just about every country in the world. So I delved for three years into sources from the Apostolic Nuncio, that is to say on the diplomatic mission of the Pope to Brasil and I worked also on the archives of certain religious congregations like the congregation founded by Mgr Giovanni Battista Scalabrini at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was a bishop from the north of Italy who knew very well the reality of these poor peasants from the north of Italy. They were obliged to leave because the conditions in their part of the country were not fit for survival and he was the one who decided to create an environment that would help these emigrants right from their departure, so that's assistance not only in situ but also asking how they might better prepare for emigration. This is particularly because at the start it wasn't clear if emigration was a good or an ill. So there was a big debate right at the heart of the Church to decide whether emigration should be encouraged, yes or no? And bit by bit, Mgr Scalabrini tried to convince the Holy See that it was important to intervene because this was really about a movement that was changing the social and religious panorama of Italy. He therefore created a congregation intended to assist emigrants and he made interventions also with the Curia. The encyclical *Quam Ærumnosa* was written by Mgr Scalabrini and while of course it was published by Léon XIII it was Mgr Scalabrini who wrote it and it was at his suggestion that the Pope decided to intervene to say that emigrants must not be abandoned, that their choice should

be respected and emigration from this moment forward was seen as a natural right. If men and women cannot find a way to survive in their own country, they have the right to leave.

As we move forward in time, for example when we get to the thirties and the emergence of racial laws in Italy and in Germany, there were many Jews who tried to leave for Brasil. We therefore see the appearance of a new type of migrant, that is to say a refugee, someone who leaves not because he wants to leave but who leaves because he has to as a result of racial and political persecution. In 1939 during the pontificate of Pius XII, there was a treaty between the Brazilian government and the Holy See which was aimed in particular at granting visas to Jewish refugees but with the condition that these Jews convert to Catholicism. It was a condition set by the Brazilian government that went on to be implemented by the Holy See. And we then see a letter from a religious, Odon von Württemberg, who replies to a request by a certain Mark Blumenthal and his wife Edith Blumenthal, these being Jews who have converted to Catholicism and they write to the Holy See to try to take advantage of this agreement with the Brazilian government in order to leave for Brasil. Similarly, here is a letter dated the 23rd May 1940 where a jurist by the name of Rudolf Alt also asks to leave for Brasil because he was Jewish and could not work.

For the Holy See, those who leave the country, whether because of a racial law or because of poverty, such people are emigrants.

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