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A Light in the Darkness:
The Interaction between Catholicism and World War I

Maggie Brennan

World War I was a horrifying period in human history. Some, though, looked past the brutality of the weaponry, the squalid conditions of the trenches, and the excessive amount of casualties on both sides and instead, saw God. In the early years of the twentieth century, Catholicism had, for decades, been losing congregants throughout Europe and North America, and it looked as if that process was set to continue. World War I, however, led to a resurgence in the number of the faithful, and increased the public expression of faith, particularly in France. These both came about largely as a result of the efforts of the papacy and the interactions between French and German citizens, soldiers, and clergy in Northern France during the war. The Pope served as the model of the Church's message of universality and loving one's neighbor, and despite the fact that during the war the French and Germans were enemies, for Catholics, on both sides, faith overcame national differences and at times cooperation arose between the two, which helped to revitalize Catholicism.

Church and State

In the decades prior to World War I, the role of the Catholic Church in the governments of Europe changed significantly. In the first decade of the twentieth century, France proposed legislation that legally forbade the Vatican from having any power over or within the French government and placed restrictions on clergy members. The Vatican refused to agree to the terms of the legislation, and it suffered a “diplomatic rupture with France in the midst of the bitter conflict over the Separations Laws in 1904.”¹ This change resulted in “relations between religion and society [that] presented the most varied examples; from the closest symbiosis in

¹ Peter C. Kent and John F. Pollard, eds., *Papal Diplomacy in the Modern Age* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 16.

Holy Russia, to the most radical separation in Republican France.”² Aside from Russia, the majority of the European nations were following France’s example and dissolving their relationships with the Vatican. “Many thought the twentieth century would see the accomplishments of the...complete separation between religion and society...with the Catholic Church.”³ Anti-clerical movements gained support and momentum throughout Europe, and both laity and priests called for reform to Church teachings and practices that would make the Church better suited for the twentieth century, as had been done with the majority of the protestant denominations, particularly the state-run Anglican Church of England. If that didn’t work, there were parishes that wanted to maintain the faith, but separate themselves from the rule of the Vatican. That would have allowed them to incorporate more modern teachings into their faith practice. “With the Catholic Church, it seemed unthinkable; given the stand taken by the Roman pontiff against the expression of modernity, the break could not take place except at the expense of the Church, as had been seen in France.”⁴ France’s break from the Church negatively affected not only the Vatican’s status as a ruling power, but also the legitimacy of Catholicism as a whole.

With modernity came the rise of secularism and an increase in dissension between national governments and the Church. At the start of the war, modernity had already swept through Western Europe leaving an impact on the arts, technology, and the culture of both the aristocracy and the working class. “In 1914 the majority of states had already ceased to impose unity of faith by law; freedom of conscience was recognized; freedom of kinds of worship [was]

² Rene Remond, *Religion and Society in Modern Europe*, trans. Antonia Nevill (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 155.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 155-156

accepted or beginning to be tolerated.”⁵ The divide between national governments and the Catholic Church continued to grow. Despite the weakened state of the Church, Annette Becker highlights the efforts of the anti-clericals to scapegoat the Church with causing the war. They circulated through Western Europe a “‘wicked rumour’ that the Catholics were supposedly behind the war, and that in the war they hoped for the defeat of France, to bring her fiercer punishment.”⁶ Becker argues, though, that this rumor, and others like it, had little effect on the general population’s impression of the Catholic Church and its beliefs about the cause of the war. Despite the rise in secular beliefs, the Church was still viewed as an official institution, and the civilian population saw these rumors as the propaganda they were. Patrick Houlihan contributes the fact that during the war, or at least in the beginning, neither side claimed allegiance with the Vatican. “Both the Central Powers and the Triple Entente held the belief that the Holy See was partial to the interests of the other side, which ironically helped to reaffirm the Church’s neutrality.”⁷ That perceived neutrality allowed the Church to not only counsel to all of its members, but also to act as a mediating force between the two sides.

There is some scholarly disagreement as to the influence the Vatican had during World War I. Houlihan addresses the difficulty the Church had due to its international ministry; “Vatican attempts to coordinate religious duties in wartime proved of limited value, as the decrees of the Holy See had to be filtered through imperial, national, and federal contexts.”⁸ The

⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁶ Annette Becker, *War and Faith: The Religious Imagination of France, 1914-1930*. trans. Helen McPhail (New York: Berg, 1998), 29.

⁷ Patrick J Houlihan, “Local Catholicism as Transnational War Experience: Everyday Religious Practice in Occupied Northern France, 1914-1918,” *Central European History* 45, no. 2 (2012): 233-67, doi: 10.1017/S0008938912000040.248.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

Vatican could not choose, or in any way show preference, for a side, and the need for impartiality greatly restricted what the Church, and the Pope in particular, could say or do.

Houlihan, creating his own opposing argument, also addresses the role that Pope Benedict XV, who served as Pontiff from September 3, 1914 until his death on January 22, 1922, played during the war and how he was able to restore, at least some of, the political power and influence that the Church lost in the pre-war era. “It was clear, from the outset of his pontificate, that Benedict XV would not align himself with the war but rather with its condemnation and with the human rights of its victims...because he refused to support any belligerent, Benedict formally adopted a policy of neutrality.”⁹ Benedict viewed neutrality as being an essential element of his ministry because he believed it emulated the work of Jesus. “It is, for every thinking man, abundantly clear that in this frightful conflict the Holy See, whilst unceasingly watching it with the closest attention, must preserve the most absolute neutrality. The Roman Pontiff as, on the one hand, the Vicar of JESUS CHRIST...must embrace all the combatants in the same sentiment of charity.”¹⁰ Unfortunately, his neutral stance led both the Triple Entente and the Central Powers to view him as working with the opposition, a view that he worked very hard to overcome.

“In his first encyclical, he wrote, ‘we beseech the princes and rulers that they not delay to bring back to their people the life-giving blessings of peace. If their rights have been violated, they can certainly find other ways and means of obtaining a remedy.’”¹¹ Throughout the course

⁹Mike Griffin, “Snubbed: Pope Benedict XV and Cardinal James Gibbons,” Catholic Peace Fellowship.org
http://www.catholicpeacefellowship.org/downloads/BenedictXV_Gibbons.pdf.

¹⁰ Pope Benedict XV, *His Holiness Pope Benedict XV On the Great War: A Collection of the Holy Father’s Utterances in the Cause of Peace; With an Original Portrait Study of His Holiness by Gabriel Martyn* (London; Burns and Oates, 1916), 11. [emphasis in original].

¹¹ Kent and Pollard, *Papal Diplomacy*, 76.

of the war, Benedict XV published many decrees for the entire Church and several specifically for the belligerent nations. One of the most important was the “Papal Peace Note of 1917.” In it, Benedict preached peace and offered suggestions for ending the war. All of the belligerent nations rejected his proposals.

In the 1917 Papal Peace Note...the Pontiff made suggestions about arms reduction, an international court, economic co-operation, freedom of the seas, and arbitration treaties...the reaction to the Vatican’s first major venture into twentieth century diplomacy was not favorable, for the Allies viewed the proposals as enemy inspired, while the Germans...believed the Note was prompted by military exhaustion in the West.¹²

Both sides had their reasons not to accept Benedict’s terms, almost all of which would later be included in President Woodrow Wilson’s proposed League of Nations, and as a result, the war continued.

Despite his difficulties with bringing an end to the war, Benedict, through his neutral, humanitarian work, was able to reestablish the Catholic Church as an international power. “The Pope devoted massive amounts of energy and resources to the pursuit of vigorous, humanitarian initiatives, especially caring for prisoners of war and displaced persons. In the long term, such measures helped to acclimate foreign powers to the idea that the Holy See was a more impartial advocate of humanitarian interests.”¹³ Becker also notes “the Churches [Catholic and Protestant] made enormous efforts to share in the financial burden of the war.”¹⁴ This removed some of the strain on the national governments, and was meant to help them focus on resolving the

¹² Ibid., 16.

¹³ Houlihan, “Local Catholicism,” 248.

¹⁴ Becker, *War and Faith*, 33.

diplomatic issues behind the war. By truly adhering to the foundational teachings of the Catholic faith, such as working for peace and helping those in need, for example, the P.O.W.s and the displaced, Benedict XV was able to restore the Vatican's legitimacy, which had been tarnished after centuries of political power grabbing and increased secularization. "As a result of the war, the Vatican was once more becoming not only a pastoral institution dealing with Catholic concerns but an international one dealing with the problems of nations and individuals alike."¹⁵ The Church used the war as a way to preach peace, mediate international conflict, and commit humanitarian works.

The greatest opposition to the Vatican's influence was the nationalism that pervaded the war era. Houlihan argues "despite Catholic claims to internationalism and universalism, the overwhelming majority of Catholic bishops devoted themselves to national causes."¹⁶ The Pope remained neutral throughout the war, but the lower levels of the clergy fully committed themselves to the national fervor at the start of the war. Becker's research also supports these nationalistic leanings of "patriotic Catholicism, which is also Catholic patriotism."¹⁷ For many Catholics, their beliefs mixed with the duty and love they felt toward their countries, which created a symbiotic relationship between the two. As one grew, so did the other; "the love of our country and the love of God so long separated were now as one."¹⁸ The uniting of the two helped lead to a resurgence of Catholicism amongst both troops and civilians, particularly in France and Germany. Becker quotes a priest who wrote of the fighting and the Triple Entente's soldiers, "It is primarily a religious war. This can be felt everywhere. And the Allies' armies are

¹⁵ Kent and Pollard, *Papal Diplomacy*, 77.

¹⁶ Houlihan, "Local Catholicism," 233.

¹⁷ Becker, *War and Faith*, 10.

¹⁸ René Gaëll, *Priests in the Firing Line* (London: Longmans and Green, 1916), 3.

religious armies, for the men are there in order to make the world a better place.”¹⁹ Despite its universality, Catholicism, at times was unable to overcome national tensions, particularly in the early years of the war. “The first Christmas services under occupation also showed some of the limits of transnational Catholicism during wartime: in the end it was the German authorities who were setting the limits.”²⁰ In occupied France, German military power outweighed the power of the Church, and as a result the French citizens under occupation were dependent on the opposition to maintain the continued practice of their faith “The communal French-German Catholicism was based on the asymmetrical power relationship fundamental to the dynamic of occupation in which German military power was sovereign.”²¹ French Catholics living under German military occupation had to adhere to the rule of the German military leaders in regard to both politics and religion. Despite the initial tensions, by the end of World War I, the “occupied territories were a shared space of transnational cooperation under the burdens of military administration.”²² This cooperation, however, was not achieved quickly or easily.

World War I was largely fought between France and Germany. Centuries of being neighbors, and the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine by the German Empire in 1871, had created bitter hatred between the two, which came to a head during the war. Despite the fact that both countries had large Catholic populations, the views that each country held about the state of religion in Germany were drastically different. René Gaëll was a French chaplain who served in a military hospital during the war. In his account of the first year of the war, he included many quotes from his correspondence with his comrade, the Abbé Duroy. Duroy, who was stationed on the front lines, refers to the opposing nations as “sacrilegious Germany who profanes

¹⁹ Becker, *War and Faith*, 7.

²⁰ Houlihan, “Local Catholicism,” 258.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 236.

²² *Ibid.*, 241.

weakness and fires on Christian churches.”²³ Becker acknowledges the French opinion that Germany was not a Catholic nation, nor was it believed to be in good standing with the Church. “Germany as a national entity was thus at one and the same time a rebel against Catholicism via the monk Wittenberg, and the champion of a liberal Protestant theology which places interior conscience before dogma.”²⁴ The belief that Germany was an amoral nation unified not only French Catholics, but also the nation as a whole, and it gave the country a moral obligation to win the war. Modris Eksteins wrote “[French] clergymen dressed Jesus in khaki and had him firing machine guns. The war became one not of justice but of righteousness. To kill Germans was to purge the world of the Antichrist...and to herald the new Jerusalem.”²⁵

Germany, however, viewed itself as not only a religious nation with a large Catholic population but also due the respect of the Vatican. Germany, although it was not as obvious, also felt called to fight in the name of the motherland and the Holy Father. A. J. Hoover in his book on the relationship between religion and nationalism reiterates this belief. “Did the Germans then believe they were the only true Christians on Earth? No, but they spoke as if they were the best Christian nation, the spiritual model for the world.”²⁶ Despite the fact that both sides saw religion and morality as the motivation for their fighting, it did not temper the hatred the two sides felt toward each other. “Evidence of regret of this hatred in the name of Christian love or universal brotherhood is very rare.”²⁷ Catholicism was a powerful force when combined

²³ Gaëll, *Priests in the Firing Line*, 50.

²⁴ Becker, *War and Faith*, 12.

²⁵ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 236.

²⁶ A. J. Hoover, *God, Germany, and Britain in the Great War: A Study in Clerical Nationalism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1989), 94.

²⁷ Becker, *War and Faith*, 13.

with nationalism, but in the beginning of the war it very rarely managed to adhere to its universal message.

The Impact of the Clergy

Priests and military chaplains played a large part in the war. “A total of 32,699 priests, monks, and seminarians were mobilized with only 1,500 military chaplains among them. France...had no exemption from military service for its priests.”²⁸ As a result of the lack of exemption for all French religious leaders, “3,101 [French] priests and seminarians, as well as 1,517 members of religious orders died in the conflict...of the almost 79,000 clergy who were mobilized worldwide, France alone provided nearly 45,000.”²⁹ In his account, Gaëll wrote of the large number of priests and military chaplains drafted. “They have scattered priests in all regiments; it is God’s revenge.”³⁰ Some priests viewed World War I as God’s way of punishing Europe for the rise of secularism and also as a way for priests to bring young men back to the Church. Conscription of French religious leaders came about through the ratification of The Laws of Separation, which removed from the clergy their protected status. Many members of the clergy had been swept up in the national fervor at the start of the war, and as a result, they felt great pride in being part of the war effort. It was considered a great honor to serve in the war, but as with any job, there were varying levels of pride based on different positions. “About half of the Catholics priests served in the medical services, the others fought like all citizens...some being commissioned or noncommissioned officers.”³¹ Gaëll recalls the pride and envy he felt for Abbé Duroy who was ministering on the frontlines, and, as with any other priest or chaplain in the trenches, was constantly in the face of danger. Before being deployed, the

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 33

²⁹ Houlihan, “Local Catholicism,” 249.

³⁰ Gaëll, *Priests in the Firing Line*, 2-3.

³¹ Becker, *War and Faith*, 33.

spiritual leaders, who largely worked with the medics, were warned that the enemy would regard them no differently than soldiers. “You will be just as exposed as those who are fighting. The enemy will fire on ambulances, and the red cross on your armbands and the buildings will not protect you from German bullets.”³² Sacrificing their own safety to minister to the soldiers on the front lines showed the great devotion they had for God and also helped to endear them to the men they served.

Gaëll also recounts the embarrassment and guilt he initially felt over being stationed in a war hospital. He felt shame for not being with his brothers on the frontlines and for working within the safety of the hospital’s walls. As time passed, and he was able to minister to more soldiers, he came to see the way in which God was using him, and the possibility of the wounded soldiers being returned to the faith. “In the hospital perhaps they would come face to face with God, forgotten, misunderstood, abandoned-God who is so good to those who fall in battle.”³³ Gaëll was not the only Catholic religious leader to keep an account of his experiences during the war, and the accounts of other clergy members support his claims that, despite the horror of the war, it brought the faithful back to God. Becker sums it up perfectly; “it would be wrong to believe that propaganda issued from above-in this case from Church authorities by way of military chaplains and various publications aimed at the faithful, both adults and children-could have had such an impact on the Great War Generation if it did not also answer their expectations.”³⁴

For members of the clergy, World War I was a brutal, horrific, and, at times, senseless experience. Thousands of French clergy members were killed as combatants or prisoners of war

³² Gaëll, *Priests in the Firing Line*, 5.

³³ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁴ Becker, *War and Faith*, 8.

within the first year of fighting; “the German authorities often suspected the French priests of fomenting trouble and shot French clerics by firing squad on vague pretensions of espionage.”³⁵ German chaplains were hindered in their mission by national and Vatican-imposed restraints; “Institutional chaos reigned regarding German chaplains’ identities, rights, and duties. Even such a basic task as a common Catholic field manual proved troublesome, as everything had to be filtered through the authority of the individual German states from which each priest hailed.”³⁶ The war greatly deprived the religious of many of the ritual and ceremonial elements that had been a part of the Catholic tradition for centuries, but it did not prevent the celebration of the faith, particularly the Mass and the Eucharist, which is the most fundamental element of the Catholic tradition. In fact, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest who served as a stretcher-bearer during the war, credits World War I with deepening and solidifying his faith. “I’ve been really beginning to understand what it is to have ‘a faith’ ... the effect of the war on my personal fortunes will have been to give me a faith.”³⁷ For nearly four years, priests and military chaplains along with soldiers, on the frontlines had to forego sacred spaces and hold Mass in the trenches, and at times in the craters created by artillery fire, often while under fire from the opposition. Abbé Duroy wrote of the dangers of conducting Mass in an abandoned church located right behind the frontlines. “It is a fine and striking sight to see this regiment, which has received its baptism of blood, singing out its faith, beneath the vaults of this church...outside there is the uproar of shells falling in the dawn and hurling themselves in rage on an enemy who has for an instant laid down his arms, and made a truce.”³⁸ Moments after Duroy concluded the

³⁵ Houlihan, “Local Catholicism,” 250.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.

³⁷ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Making of a Mind: Letters from a Soldier Priest, 1914-1919*, trans. Rene Hague (New York: Harper&Row, 1965), 245.

³⁸ Gaëll, *Priests in the Firing Line*, 50.

Mass with the final blessing, shellfire demolished the church, proving that during the war, not even a house of God could offer sanctuary from the fighting.³⁹

Throughout the war, priests, military chaplains, and other religious leaders were also often required to put their religious message aside and instead focus solely on boosting morale; Eksteins recounts that “in April of that year [1916] Catholic religious authorities in Bavaria were told by their Bishop that countering disaffection with the war was their most important duty.”⁴⁰ The limited number of priests and chaplains was also an issue for both the soldiers and the civilians back home. Catholic soldiers, who did not have a member of the clergy in their units, were forced to find spiritual guidance through other means. “The young wrote to their familiar priests as they would to a friend and complained occasionally about the lack of chaplains.”⁴¹ Shortages of priests were a problem for the entire war, as soldiers and civilians used their faith as a means to cope with the war.

For French Catholics in the occupied region, it was the Germans who helped them maintain their faith. “The German occupation on the Western front involved all of Belgium’s sole Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels plus eleven Catholic dioceses in Northern France.”⁴² It was with greatest irony, though, that the “savage” German occupiers brought about a revitalization of the Catholic faith in the occupied regions. The secularization of France had not only removed privileges, such as military exemption for the religious, but it also made it more difficult to practice religion and educate the youth. Germany, however, had no such laws, and for the German priests, their call to propagate and maintain the faith helped them to overcome national animosity in order to minister to French citizens.

³⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁰ Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 206.

⁴¹ Becker, *War and Faith*, 32.

⁴² Houlihan, “Local Catholicism,” 245.

As part of the nineteenth-century culture wars, the French Republic had striven to keep clerics out of the classroom. Hence, during the Great War, some French priests, even those who strongly resisted the German occupation from the outset, found satisfaction in noting that it was the German enemy who allowed French believers a measure of religious freedom by reintroducing religious instructions and prayer in school.⁴³

Gaëll, though reluctant, was also willing to admit the positive impact the German invasion and occupation had on the faith community. “In striking at France, in dealing her their formidable blows, in bruising her, the Prussian cannons have caused to gush forth, dazzling and dominating, the diving slumbering idea [i.e. Catholicism].”⁴⁴

The forced conscription of all religious leaders had left France with a severe priest shortage. This devastated the Catholic population because the Sacraments, including the Eucharist, cannot be performed without a priest. The faithful were forced to either rely on the few priests who were still on the home front, due to old age or inability to serve in the war, or to go without. This led to even greater desertion of the faith, particularly in the unoccupied region of France. If it had not been for the work of German chaplains in the occupied region of France, Catholicism might have become nonexistent in the entire country. “German chaplains were ordained priests designated as noncombatants, a separate liminal caste.”⁴⁵ If they had been combatants, the French civilians would have had a much more difficult time, and might have even refused to accept Germans as their priests. As time passed, the French Catholics realized their only choices were to either accept the German Chaplains or be unable to receive the Eucharist until the French priests returned at the end of the war. Their choice was made for

⁴³ Ibid., 254-255.

⁴⁴ Gaëll, *Priests in the Firing Line*, 69.

⁴⁵ Houlihan, “Local Catholicism,” 238.

them. The German priests were now responsible to two different groups within the faith, the German soldiers with whom they had entered the country and the French citizens now under German control, and “together with the remaining French clergy, the German chaplains coordinated Catholic services for both the French civilians and the German soldiers.”⁴⁶ Masses were often divided between the citizens and soldiers, but as time passed, it was more a result of language barriers than actual enmity between the two groups. The larger Masses, such as Ash Wednesday, Easter, and Christmas, were eventually given as joint Masses with the priests transitioning between German and French.

Some historians say there was no interaction between the French and Belgian citizens and the German soldiers in the occupied region, and when there was, it was in the relationship of oppressed and oppressor. Houlihan, however, argues that shared faith overcame patriotic divisions. “Interaction between the German, French, and Belgian Catholics was of a much more fluid, impromptu nature that blurred national boundaries,”⁴⁷ and “German Catholic soldiers participated in communal religious life with their enemy more than they did with fellow German soldiers who were Protestant or Jewish.”⁴⁸ One of the central tenets of Catholicism is the desire to be universal, which means that Catholics are not only to evangelize the faith, but more importantly, they are also supposed to participate in the worldwide Church. By connecting through their faith, the occupied region moved away from the divisiveness of nationalism and lived that dogma.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 239.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 257.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 240.

The Effect of Soldiers

For many Catholic soldiers, the war actually served as an impetus to return to their faith, because it served as a source of comfort and a way to cope with the terror and brutality they were experiencing. Eksteins wrote, “some turned to religion for sustenance,”⁴⁹ and he quoted the wartime diary of a soldier who said, “I’m convinced that God will save France once again...but He’ll never get involved directly.”⁵⁰ Before the start of the war, many civilians had allowed their faith to lapse or had outright rejected it. On the frontlines, however, those practices vanished. “Jeerers and scoffers in civil life, these children of a race, whose virtue has not yet diminished, go of themselves to those who baptized them, when the troubling hour of danger has rung. They go to confession, to Holy Communion, then they don’t hide their faith under a bushel.”⁵¹ Gaëll noted that soldiers were often self-motivated to participate in their faith, if there was not someone in their unit to guide them. “If prayer does not occupy an official place and a preponderating one in military regulations, it is certain that each soldier makes up for this sad omission by a personal effort and by alacrity of his own initiative.”⁵² Working with injured soldiers, he witnessed the faith that had supported the soldiers in the trenches and that was often one of the only things keeping them going while they lay mangled and broken in the war hospital, where it was the priest’s primary job to offer spiritual healing and guidance. The soldiers did, for the majority, gratefully receive the support they were offered. Gaëll included a portion of a conversation held by one of the young soldiers under his care; “I am saved my dear

⁴⁹ Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 236.

⁵⁰ Fayolle, “Diary Entry for February 27, 1918,” *Carnets*, 257. quoted in Eksteins, *Rites of Spring*, 232.

⁵¹ Gaëll, *Priests in the Firing Line*, 76.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 90.

mother, thanks to the surgeon who looked after me. Besides, you know, even at that terrible hour, I wasn't afraid-the priests were there.”⁵³

For many Catholic soldiers, faith helped them to endure the brutal conditions of trench warfare and being away from the comforts of home. Becker wrote, “the greater the suffering, the greater the conviction that the kingdom of God was near. Not only was the Christian without fear of suffering and death, he longed for them as signs of his election.”⁵⁴ For Catholic soldiers, to die in battle was the greatest honor because it showed he had given his life in the direct service of God and country.

World War I also gave Catholic soldiers a greater understanding of Jesus' suffering, and as a result, soldiers would often alter their prayers so that they either included a soldier in the place of Jesus, or they presented Jesus, himself, as a soldier. One of the most common methods of doing this was altering The Ways of the Cross, which is a set of fourteen or fifteen, depending on whether or not the Resurrection is included, reflections said in accordance with artistic depictions of Jesus' Passion. As many soldiers and priests felt that their experiences in war paralleled Jesus' suffering and death, they created many different interpretations of the prayer. J. Bellouard, a stretcher-bearer during the war, was among the many who felt compelled to make the comparison between the soldier and The Divine. “Twelfth station: Lord, the slopes of Golgotha are peopled once again. There are numberless crosses in the shadow of your cross... Fourteenth station: For once, Lord, you are better off than your loved ones. You have a tomb... and our war dead: The shells have toppled everything... the graves have disappeared.”⁵⁵

⁵³ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁴ Becker, *War and Faith*, 32.

⁵⁵ J. Bellouard, “Le Chemin de croix de ceuz qui sont restes,” *Niort, 1916* quoted in Becker, *War and Faith*, 28.

Through these prayers, soldiers were able to view Jesus as a model for not just the path to Heaven, but also the way to endure the pain and trials to which they were subjected.

The Aftermath

Of all the belligerent nations, France was the most affected, both physically and spiritually, by the war. World War I led France to the realization that it needed the papacy on its side, so after the conclusion of the war, France resumed relations with the Church.

The outbreak of the world conflagration has lighted up only more vividly the disadvantages of our absence from the Holy See. At the moment when our vital interests bade us group the moral forces of the world against the onslaught of the new barbarians, we had nobody to set the truth before the Holy See, to defend ourselves against lies and to struggle against powerful Germanic influences in the Holy College.⁵⁶

World War I did not stop the spread of secularization, but it did cause government leaders to reevaluate their relationships with the papacy, and in the case of France, it meant restoring a bond that had been summarily broken. Pope Benedict XV, through his humanitarian work, particularly “his great positive service, which he rendered to prisoners of all the warring nations,”⁵⁷ was able to restore honor and legitimacy to the papacy, and thus the Church as a whole. He also reestablished the Church as an international power and moderator by forging stronger relationships with the majority of belligerents. The day after his death, The Times credited his work with the French government for the restoration of relations between the Vatican and France. “The restoration of diplomatic relations after seventeen years between France and the Vatican was the result of the same all-compelling force [Benedict XV]; Benedict

⁵⁶ “France and The Vatican: Reasons for Resuming Relations,” *The Times*, March 13, 1920, The Times Digital Archive 1785-1985 (Issue 42358; pg. 15; col B).

⁵⁷ “Pope Benedict XV,” *The Times*, January 23, 1922, The Times Digital Archive 1785-1985 (Issue 42936; pg. 11; col C).

worked to undo the effects of the French law of 1904 ‘because he wished himself to take an active part in the desired fraternization of nations.’⁵⁸ Benedict worked for the unity of all Catholics, and his efforts helped the Church continue to be an international power in the decades to come. The war devastated the priest population, particularly in France, but that did not diminish the impact they had on those that served. They brought many back to the faith, and helped those who already had faith to maintain it. Not every Catholic soldier or civilian was brought into a deeper faith by the war, but there is no doubting that many were. For many Catholic soldiers, their guns kept them alive, but their faith sustained them. For civilians and soldiers alike, faith helped them bear the agony of loss through the belief in a better reward for one’s service. More than anything, World War I reaffirmed the universality of Catholicism and showed that citizens of opposing nations could be united through faith.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

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