

A Historiographical Reading of the Pontificate of Benedict XV (1914-1922) in the Last Decade

Tragic indeed were the times during which Giacomo della Chiesa is called to the Papacy. His pontificate takes its cue from the tragic moment of a Great War that Europe found itself immersed in, and that would, in many ways, change its face. Although one of the shortest pontificates of the twentieth century, the role of the Holy See at this key moment in history is determinative in forming a Church that is ready to courageously take its place in a world in transformation; an age marked by fluidity, a time of crisis that truly ushers in the contemporary age with its totalitarian claims. Benedict XV died an untimely death on the 22nd January 1922. Aided by his closest collaborators, through his efforts for peace, he regained a respectable place for the Holy See on the international scene, now recognized by many as that moral authority it is called to be, in consonance with its vocation.

The aim of this historiographical review continues to be that of bringing together a survey of the way in which different historians have approached the pontificate, life and action, of Benedict XV. Therefore, it remains largely limited to those themes that the authors have presented as being determinative to the Holy See's political, diplomatic and ecclesial action in this period which sees its re-emergence as an international key player from a situation of dire isolation.

* Nicholas Joseph Doublet is a lecturer in Church History at the Faculty of Theology, and also lectures in Palaeography and Diplomatics in the Department of Library information and Archive Sciences, at the University of Malta. He is the director of Diocesan Archives of the Archdiocese of Malta. He obtained a Doctorate in Church History at the Pontifical Gregorian University and a Licentiate in Sacred Theology from the University of Malta. His main research interest is in Vatican diplomacy in the contemporary period.

Even though the themes remain largely the same, with the passing of time and the greater availability of archival sources, one clearly notices a qualitative leap in their interpretation. Such is the voluminous work by Antonio Scottà, *Papa Benedetto XV. La Chiesa, la Grande Guerra, la Pace (1914-1922)*,¹ in which, this now established authority² in the field attempts a detailed evaluation of this pontificate, an interpretation which is solidly founded on the wealth of documentation available, ranging from the *Diario* of Carlo Monti, the family archives of Della Chiesa, and the documentation available in different Vatican Archives. Such research allows the author to carve out more detailed related accounts which make possible the emergence of a more holistic picture of Benedict XV, where the pronouncements in the public sphere are balanced by the information pertaining to the inner workings of the Curia, on the diplomatic, political and ecclesial level.

As Andrea Riccardi notes, in the preface to this work, Scottà allows the truly “prophetic”³ dimension of Benedict XV to shine out, especially in that patient realism which allows him never to give up on the cause of peace, in his commitment to a “conciliazione officiosa” with Italy and the manner in which he uses his friendship with Monti to bear fruit in this regard, in his humanitarian work after the war, as well as in his struggle with the victors in promoting justice towards the defeated. These are the “revolutions” of Della Chiesa. In the cataclysm of war, he developed a doctrine of peace and an understanding of charity, to which the Catholic Church continues to return as the basis of her work in this realm. He was the pontiff who, notwithstanding his and Gasparri’s belief in the need to save the fragile empires that the war would wipe away, fully understood that the future lay in the hands of independent nations. If he is most

¹ Antonio Scottà, *Papa Benedetto XV. La Chiesa, la Grande Guerra, la pace (1914-1922)* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2009).

² See Antonio Scottà, “Introduzione,” in *La Conciliazione Ufficiosa. Diario del barone Carlo Monti “incaricato d'affari” del governo italiano presso la Santa Sede (1914-1922)*, I (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997); Antonio Scottà, *Giacomo della Chiesa arcivescovo di Bologna (1908-1914)* (Catanzaro: Rubbettino, 2002); Antonio Scottà, *I territori del confine orientale italiano nelle lettere dei vescovi veneti 1918-1922* (Vicenza-Trieste: Lint Editoriale Associati, 1994); Antonio Scottà, *I vescovi veneti e la Santa Sede nella guerra 1915-1918* (Roma: 1991); Antonio Scottà, *La Santa Sede, i vescovi veneti e l'autonomia politica dei cattolici 1918-1922* (Vicenza-Trieste: 1994); Antonio Scottà, “Lo stato liberale ed il progetto di infeudazione della Chiesa di Roma. Missione esplorativa fra i metropolitani d’Italia di Mons. Giacomo della Chiesa,” in *Benedetto XV: Profeta di Pace in un mondo in crisi*, ed., Letterio Mauro (Bologna: Minerva Edizioni, 2008).

³ See Andrea Riccardi, “Prefazione,” in Antonio Scottà, *Papa Benedetto XV: la Chiesa, la Grande Guerra, la pace (1914-1922)* (Roma: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2009).

famous for denouncing the “inutile strage,” so must he also be for his assertion that “le nazioni non muoiono,” for history continues to prove him right, over and over again. Beyond the war and its aftermath, Scottà also explores the attempt at resolving the Roman Question, the founding of the *Partito Popolare Italiano*, the relaunching of Catholic action, the concern for Catholic missions, as well as the saints and blessed proclaimed by this pope. His study serves to show the richness of this pontificate, and how much work still needs to be done to go beyond superficial aspects, towards a true appreciation of the legacy of this pontificate.

An established authority in the field, Giovanni Sale, approaches, in an objective manner, delicate themes relative to the period under study, such as the development of the Holy See’s position as regards the *Partito Popolare Italiano*, and subsequently its responsibility in front of the rise and affirmation of fascism. The greatest merit of the numerous works, books as well as articles, such as *Popolari e Destra Cattolica al tempo di Benedetto XV (1919-1922)*,⁴ *Fascismo e Vaticano prima della Conciliazione*⁵ and *La Chiesa di Mussolini*⁶ lies in the use the author makes of the *Archivio della Civiltà Cattolica* (at the time truly the authoritative mouthpiece through which the Holy See formed and intervened in public opinion), while taking into account other material found in the Vatican archives. The author examines the events in the light of the ecclesiastical culture prevalent at the time. As such, steering away from an easier judgmental attitude, the author tries to interpret the possible positions the Holy See could adopt in front of the Italian political situation of the time, given the prevalent ecclesiology and the responsibility it carried. First considering what role the Holy See did in fact play, the position adopted by Gasparri and Benedict XV in front of the formation of the ‘*Partito Popolare Italiano*,’ these publications consider why it then distances itself from this party, abandoning it to its own fate as an anti-government and a party of the opposition, as well as examining the prudent strategy of Pius XI and Gasparri in front of the affirmation of Mussolini and fascism. With the ascent of Achille Ratti, himself unfavourable to Sturzo’s idea

⁴ See also Giovanni Sale, “I cattolici popolari e l’Avventino,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* no.3734 (2006/1): 136-147; Giovanni Sale, “Fine del ‘Non expedit’ e partecipazione dei cattolici italiani alla vita politica,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* no. 3736 (2006/1): 365-373; Giovanni Sale, “La progettata riforma della legislazione ecclesiastica al tempo di Mussolini,” *La Civiltà Cattolica* no. 3747-48 (2006/3): 218-231; Giovanni Sale (1958-) is professor of Contemporary Church History at the Pontifical Gregorian University, and a member of the editorial committee of *La Civiltà Cattolica*.

⁵ See Giovanni Sale, *Fascismo e Vaticano prima della Conciliazione: Popolari, Chierici e Camerati*, 2 (Milano-Roma: Jaca Book-La Civiltà Cattolica, 2007).

⁶ See Giovanni Sale, *La Chiesa di Mussolini: I rapporti tra fascismo e religione* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2011).

of a lay and a-confessional party, autonomous from the Church, coupled with Sturzo's progressive political programme as well as the ousting of the rightist elements in the party, meant that the *Partito Popolare Italiano's* fate was sealed as the Holy See distanced itself from it, no longer considering it, as defined by Benedict XV, the "partito dei cattolici italiani."⁷

The volume edited by Letterio Mauro, *Benedetto XV: Profeta di pace in un mondo in crisi*,⁸ sought to evaluate the various facets of this figure in order to highlight the true concept of peace that Benedict XV promoted. Mauro argues that this was not simply a response to a pressing need to bring the tragedy of the raging war to an end, but one that went well beyond that, born, as it was out of the desire for the promotion of a true culture of peace. Benedict XV understood well that the true causes of the war (the absence of mutual love among peoples, the contempt of authority, the injustices perpetuated by the inequalities between the different social classes, and widespread practical materialism), could only be overcome by a true and lasting peace built on the Christian principle of fraternal charity. It was necessary to return to those principles promoted by Christian wisdom and set as the basis of the civil consortium; essentially a return through the Catholic Church to Christ, the only redeemer of humanity. Set as it is on such a theological premise, the volume sets out to study, through the contributions of various authors, a holistic consideration of this pontiff, including Marco Doldi's study of the Genovese context⁹ in which Della Chiesa was born and the ties he maintained with it; Scottà's study of his service at the Secretariat of State¹⁰ and particularly the investigation carried out among the Italian Metropolitan bishops as regards their views as to the resolution of the Roman Question; Venturi, Goriup and Macciantelli's consideration of his years as Archbishop of Bologna,¹¹

⁷ See Pietro Scoppola, "Prefazione," in Sale, *Fascismo e Vaticano prima della Conciliazione: 2*: xxiii; Pietro Scoppola (1926-2007) was an Italian historian, politician, and leading exponent of the Italian Catholic Democratic Movement.

⁸ See Mauro Letterio, "Introduzione," in *Benedetto XV: Profeta di Pace in un mondo in crisi*, ed., Letterio Mauro (Bologna: Minerva Edizioni, 2008), 11-14; Mauro Letterio is associate professor at the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy at the University of Genova.

⁹ Marco Doldi, "Figlio di Genova. Gli anni giovanili di Giacomo della Chiesa," in *Benedetto XV: Profeta di Pace in un mondo in crisi*, 17-30; Marco Doldi (1965-) lectures in dogmatic and moral theology. He is also member of the International Theological Commission of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith.

¹⁰ Antonio Scottà, "Lo Stato Liberale ed il progetto di infeudazione della chiesa di Roma: Missione esplorativa fra i Metropoliti d'Italia di Mons. Giacomo della Chiesa," in *Benedetto XV: Profeta di Pace in un mondo in crisi*, 31-80.

¹¹ Giampaolo Venturi, *Giacomo della Chiesa a Bologna*, in *Benedetto XV: Profeta di Pace in un mondo in crisi*, 81-104; Lino Goriup-Roberto Macciantelli, "Mons. Giacomo della Chiesa e la

the latter delving particularly in his role in the founding of the Regional Pontifical Seminary. The volume also covers various aspects of his pontificate as for example his ecclesial action with Zanotti's contribution regarding the publication of the *Codex Iuris Canonici*.¹²

Of particular interest is Butturini's essay, *Benedetto XV e la questione missionaria*, in which he examines the various factors that led to the publication of *Maximum Illud*; the European context (the scarcity of human and financial resources as a result of the war) as well as to avoid British machinations to instrumentalise the missions for political reasons turning Cardinal Bourne's Curia into a second *Propaganda*,¹³ the extra-European context, namely, Benedict's resoluteness in doing away completely with the *Patronato* to avoid the nationalization of the missions: the only way to save them was to "romanize" them. Finally, the author also considers whether Benedict's mark in the publication of *Maximum Illud* can be ascertained. He concludes that the pope was fully informed as to the political and ecclesiastical situation of the missions, through the close relationship between *Propaganda Fide* and the Secretariat of State, especially after the appointment of Van Rossum as prefect of *Propaganda*. Butturini asserts that the three traits that historiography traditionally applies to this pontiff are present in his determination in publishing it; namely his humanitarian concern - a Church now present on the international plane, no longer through the Roman question, but through its social action in defence of the rights of nations and in actively reducing human suffering, his political ability, as well as his preference favouring the strengthening of the local indigenous churches.¹⁴

The volume also includes a study of the Armenian question¹⁵ by Zanna, and other issues tied to the Catholic culture, such as Guasco's consideration of whether this pontificate marks the end of the anti-modernist movement,¹⁶

nascita del Pontificio Seminario Regionale Benedetto XV di Bologna," in *Benedetto XV: Profeta di Pace in un mondo in crisi*, 105-124.

¹² Andrea Zanotti, "Benedetto XV e il Codex Iuris Canonici," in *Benedetto XV: Profeta di Pace in un mondo in crisi*, 167-180; Andrea Zanotti (1957-) is professor of Canon Law at the University of Bologna.

¹³ Giuseppe Butturini, "Benedetto XV e la Questione Missionaria," in Letterio Mauro ed., *Benedetto XV. Profeta di Pace in un mondo in crisi* (Bologna: Minerva Edizioni, 2008), 183-186; Giuseppe Butturini teaches on the History of the Missions at the University of Padova.

¹⁴ Butturini, *Benedetto XV e la Questione Missionaria*, 201-205.

¹⁵ Giorgio Del Zanna, "Benedetto XV e la Questione Armena," in *Benedetto XV: Profeta di Pace in un mondo in crisi*, 125-138.

¹⁶ Maurilio Guasco, "Fine dell'Antimodernismo?," in *Benedetto XV: Profeta di Pace in un mondo in crisi*, 229-238; Maurilio Guasco (1939-) has lectured on the History of contemporary

and Mauro's presentation of the encyclical on Dante Alighieri.¹⁷ In conclusion, Danilo Veneruso traces the reasons for which the memory of Benedict XV has been voluntarily relegated to oblivion; in life, by those who failed to understand him, and thus sought to block his promotion to the college of cardinals, for they understood well that such a promotion opened up the probability of his election to the papacy, which would in turn bring about a break with the Pian pontificate, and a reaffirmation of the Leonine school promoted by Rampolla's disciples; in death by those who failed to comprehend the prophetic nature of his theological vision and politics of peace.¹⁸

Fundamental work has been done by Olivier Sibre, in his thesis *Le Saint-Siège et l'Extrême-Orient*,¹⁹ in confronting a wide variety of sources and thus clarifying the Holy See's diplomatic and missionary strategy in China, Korea and Japan, a strategy advanced through the formation of both apostolic delegations as well as a local elite, during a time of great geo-political changes in this area. Interesting to our study is how Benedict XV responded to China's need for international recognition in this period, by seeking the foundation of an apostolic delegation in this country.

Keeping to the diplomatic realm, Americo Miranda in *Santa Sede e Società delle Nazioni. Benedetto XV, Pio XI e il nuovo internazionalismo cattolico*, explores what he calls the "conversione diplomatica"²⁰ of the Holy See, borne out of the desire for true and lasting peace of which Benedict XV had been the very incarnation during the war; a desire that mandated the Holy See's need to participate actively in true dialogue at an international level. The author highlights what he calls the "vocazione internazionalista"²¹ of Benedict XV's pontificate, to whose efforts he traces the very inspiration of an international

political thought.

¹⁷ Letterio Mauro, "L'enciclica di Benedetto XV su Dante Alighieri," in *Benedetto XV: Profeta di Pace in un mondo in crisi*, 289-314.

Butturini, *Benedetto XV e la Questione Missionaria*, 201-205

¹⁸ See Danilo Veneruso, "La contrastata ascesa di Giacomo della Chiesa verso il pontificato tra oblio di memoria e incomprensione," in Letterio Mauro ed., *Benedetto XV. Profeta di Pace in un mondo in crisi* (Bologna: Minerva Edizioni, 2008), 345-362.

¹⁹ See Olivier Sibre, *Le Saint-Siège et l'Extrême-Orient (Chine, Corée, Japon): De Leon XIII à Pie XII (1880-1952)* (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 2012); Olivier Sibre is a member of the research institute on 19th century history at the University of Paris I and Paris IV.

²⁰ Americo Miranda, *Santa Sede e Società delle Nazioni. Benedetto XV, Pio XI e il nuovo internazionalismo cattolico* (Roma: Studium, 2013), 12; Americo Miranda is a Research Fellow at the Tilburg School of Theology and lecturer at the *École européenne* in Luxembourg.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

organisation for the promotion of greater cooperation between peoples, ultimately the fruit of a long Catholic tradition, expressed by the magisterium in the concept of the “societas populorum.”²² Miranda explores the differences in intent, between what Catholic internationalism and Benedict XV desired, as he himself explained in *Pacem Dei Munus*,²³ and what in effect were the limited aims of the nascent League of Nations, already weakened by the stepping out of the United States, and the defeat of Wilson.

Even though the Holy See was in effect excluded from the workings of the League of Nations, and as such adopted a cautious attitude towards it, yet Miranda shows that Benedict XV did not in fact distance himself from this international organization, but rather desired its constitution on a different basis, which would make possible the coming together of a true “society or better family of nations.”²⁴ Miranda shows how the interventions of Benedict XV between 1920-21 in effect marked:

Le prese di posizioni di Benedetto XV negli anni 1920-21 rappresentarono una svolta epocale nell'atteggiamento della Santa Sede, non più osservatrice spesso dissenziente, ma partecipe, seppure a distanza, di ogni iniziativa per la pacificazione e la convivenza tra gli Stati.²⁵

Benedict XV was conscious of the mediatory role that was opening up for the Holy See, especially in favour of the defeated nations and for a more active presence in humanitarian initiatives. Through an evaluation of papal pronouncements in this period, Miranda allows the realism of both Benedict XV and Gasparri to once again shine out.

Conclusion

This article has sought to shed light on the themes that the historiographical tradition surrounding the figure of Benedict XV has preferred so far. In contrast

²² Ibid., 23-25; 40: “Benedetto era consapevole della continuità tra la propria visione e quella di Wilson” quoted in *La Conciliazione Ufficiosa. Diario del barone Carlo Monti “incaricato d'affari” del governo italiano presso la Santa Sede (1914-1922)*, ed., Antonio Scottà (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), 45f.

²³ “Ristabilite così le cose, secondo l'ordine voluto della giustizia e dalla carità, e riconciliati tra di loro le genti, sarebbe veramente desiderabile, o Venerabili Fratelli, che tutti gli Stati, rimossi i vicendevoli sospetti, si riunissero in una sola società o meglio famiglia dei popoli, sia per garantire la propria indipendenza, sia per tutelare l'ordine del civile consorzio.” Benedict XV, *Pacem Dei Munus*, no.10.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Miranda, *Santa Sede e Società delle Nazioni*, 90.

with previous pontiffs, especially Pius IX and Pius X, and those who succeeded him like Pius XI and Pius XII, the historical evaluation of Benedict XV has generally remained free from the spirit of controversy and certain polemical readings that still weigh-down the study of these other pontiffs. However, his historical evaluation has suffered from a greater threat, one that is the fruit of a culpable misunderstanding by those who failed to comprehend him and his vision in life, and preferred him to be forgotten in death. Such was the motivated silence that enveloped his memory in the decades following his death, as the world found itself carried once again into the throngs of yet another World War.

Interest in this pontificate has remained, in certain respects, an Italian concern, not only because the language most works published so far have been written in Italian, but also because of their themes. However, the fact that the principal critical biographies dedicated to him have been published in English proves a major exception that cannot be ignored. Other serious works, especially related to Belgium and China, have also been published in French. As regards Italy, beyond studies related to the war, and a certain interest in the Cerretti-Orlando efforts towards the resolution of the Roman Question, interest has also been shown in the emergence of Italian Catholics as players in the political arena of the period.

Thus, in the treatment of Benedict XV's life and action, a certain preference for the diplomatic and political aspects can be clearly ascertained, and again a certain deficit remains in the study of his ecclesial vision and the action motivating it. Studies have remained tied by certain geographical limits, determined largely by European countries and their interests on the continent and beyond. In this regard one must note the interest shown in the United States of America, which in those years entered the world stage as a key player, and, more concretely, the interest shown in ascertaining the points of convergence and divergence between Benedict XV's peace efforts and Wilson's proposals. This interest is also accompanied by a certain opening up to Russia and the study of the Holy See's reaction to the revolution and the rise of Bolshevism. But other parts of the world remain completely neglected. The absence of Latin American countries, and the challenges which the Holy See faced in this region, becomes conspicuous.

In these last four years, the first centenary of the First World War has brought about, as indeed expected, a certain renewed interest in this pontificate especially on themes of war and the peace efforts undertaken by the Holy See, among which the "Peace Note" of August 1917²⁶ often stands as its defining moment.

²⁶ Benedict XV, *Exhortation to the Leaders of the Belligerent Peoples*, *Dès le début*, 1 August

Such studies continue to be published demanding a separate historiographical reflection in the near future.

Rev. Dr Nicholas Joseph Doublet,
Faculty of Theology
University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080
Malta

nicholas.doublet@um.edu.mt

1917. Cfr *AAS* 9 (1917): 417-420. For an English translation see John Eppstein, *The Catholic Tradition of the Law of Nations* (Washington: C.A.I.P., 1935), 215-218. See also, *Tutte le encicliche e i principali documenti pontifici emanati dal 1740. Benedetto XV (1914-1922)*, v. VIII, ed., Ugo Bellocchi (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), 182-184.