

Book Review:

A Politics of Peace: The Congregation
for Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs
During the Pontificate of Benedict XV
(1914-1922)

Volume 168 of Cultura Studium,

ISSN 2612-2774

Benedict XV's Politics of Peace,
International Diplomacy and Malta

When my friend and colleague, Rev. Dr Nicholas Doublet, asked me to review his book, *A Politics of Peace*, I accepted immediately. Three reasons motivated my acceptance. First, I am interested in ecclesiastical history. Secondly, this book is also a history of Church governance. It recounts in detail the history of one of the past Vatican's institutions that dealt with the foreign affairs of the Roman Catholic Church called, *The Congregation of Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs*. Thirdly, this is a book about the international affairs of a small state. I use the term small state on purpose. During Benedict XV's pontificate (1914-1922), the Holy See had no fixed territory yet. After the Papal States were suppressed in 1870, the Papacy continued to function as a state. A number of Catholic European countries, such as Austria, Hungary and Bavaria, continued to recognize the Pope as head of state and kept a diplomatic relationship with the papacy. In other words, the Holy See had statehood but no sovereignty. This created what came to be known, in history, as the *Questione Romana*.

Politics of Peace and Malta

On a personal note, the first time that I heard Benedict XV's name was when, as a child, I frequented the M.U.S.E.U.M. classes in Paola. These are run by celibate lay individuals, who voluntarily instruct youngsters in Catholic Christian Doctrine. Abel Giglio, who in the early 1980s held the position of inspector within this organization, came to the Paola division to address the young children in the private chapel within the Museum building. I still remember one of his talks about Benedict XV. Benedict became pope a few weeks after the outbreak of the First World War, when Italy was not yet at war. Hence, Catholic Austria, one of the belligerent countries, wanted to send troops to Rome to be blessed by the pope. On being informed, Benedict XV refused, stating that he blessed peace not war.

Abel Giglio was born much later, in 1931, and therefore must have heard or read about this in order to pass it on. This goes to show the impact that Benedict XV had on tiny Malta. His actions were still being recounted approximately 60 years after his death. Benedict turned around the entire foreign policy into a politics of peace. His legacy transcended Maltese politics. Dominic Mintoff was definitely influenced by this doctrine that he must have heard in class during his childhood days, through Monsignor Spiridione Penza, a keen supporter of Giacomo Della Chiesa's vision. Benedict XV's vision was avant-garde for his time. It represents the first international attempt in what would later be termed 'humanitarian diplomacy'. This aspect of Benedict XV's mission had not yet been studied sufficiently. Nicholas Doublet's work fills such an academic void.

In his analysis of the Church's foreign policy during the times of Benedict XV, Doublet restricts his discussion to *The Congregation of Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs* and exposes the impact that this institution had on international affairs. Incidentally, this institution no longer exists. It was suppressed in 1988. It was an institution that was responsible for the Vatican's international relations with sovereign states. For this reason, it was presided over by the Secretary of State. It advised the pope and any advice was taken very seriously by the pontiff.

The Structure of the Book

The book is split into five chapters. The first deals with the study of the Congregation of Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs as an institution, whereby a short history is given together with a study of its structure and its personnel. Doublet also explores how this congregation communicated with the rest of the Roman Curia.

Chapter 2 goes into another aspect of this congregation: the way it conducted its diplomacy and how it undertook conventions and concordats with foreign states. In these first two chapters, we come across how this institution was subjected to continuous reforms.

Chapter 3 is entitled 'Reclaiming the *'Libertas Ecclesiae'*. It discusses the Roman Curia's ever-growing challenges caused by modernity. The right of the Church to act in freedom within the boundaries of the modern state is thoroughly investigated. Doublet goes into great detail into the regional processes and political transfers that took place, in Latin America and parts of Europe, during and after the First World War. It is in this chapter that the diffidence existing within the Roman Curia towards the involvement of the laity is discussed. The fear was not linked to theology but to the fact that the laity could take advantage of the property of the Church.

Chapter 4 is about the position of the Holy See during the Great War. The book discusses at length the neutral stand taken by the Holy See towards the belligerent parties in this war. In his analysis, the author goes beyond the history of regional processes and transfers taking place in Europe and Latin America at the time. He also delves into the internal discussions that took place within this Congregation over the role of the church and the pope in this war.

Chapter 5 discusses the challenges that the nationalist concepts started to offer the Church, in particular during and after the war, with special emphasis given to Belgium, where there was, and there still is, the issue of the Walloons and the Flemish. With the same academic rigour, Doublet discusses the relationship of the Holy See with Catholics in Poland and Lithuania. In this situation, the Church had to juggle between Germans, Lithuanians and Poles. Then there was the Irish question, where the Church came between Irish and English Catholics regarding the Catholics in Ireland participating with the British in the First World War. Last but not least, there was the issue of Czechoslovakia. In this case, the issue was between Christians in Hungary and those in this newly formed country.

The Maltese Question

Malta does not feature much in Benedict XV's policies but when the name of Malta appears, it appears with a bang. In Maltese historiography, the fact that the papacy had discussed the possibility of transferring its seat to Malta is known. This was in connection with the suppression of the Papal States in 1870. Thanks to Doublet's work, there is more information about this episode. His research reveals that it was this institution that took into consideration this possibility and discussed it twice. Before this research, the perception was that this option

was only discussed once. Doublet shows that it was first discussed in 1881. The second time was a few months later in 1882. Back then, the possibilities discussed were that Leo XIII transfer his seat either to Malta, Spain, Austria or Monaco.

Yet Doublet's research reveals more. There was another instance when the papacy considered Malta as an option where to retire. Again, this consideration was linked to the internal problems Italy was facing. There was fear of revolution. This episode is not known in Maltese history and its discovery should be credited to Nicholas Doublet's work. The congregation discussed Malta as an option for the pope's retirement in 1915. The other places considered were Switzerland and the United States.

The result of this historical narrative is that from a diplomatic point of view, the Holy See continuously sought to compromise on various points of contention. At least, the cardinals were united in finding a middle way whenever an issue cropped up between the Holy See and foreign countries. This, in part, is the result of the Catholic Church's concern with issues of revolutions and the rise of the nation state.

The Rise of Nationalism

What is interesting in this book is that the study starts before the Russian revolution or better still with the Bolshevik takeover of Russia. Therefore, at first, the cardinals' major fear was nationalism. They sought to defend the Holy See from the excesses of unbridled nationalism and misguided patriotism. Next came the fear of Liberal governments. This went hand in hand with the fear of Nationalism. Throughout the Pontificate of Benedict XV, these fears were continuously discussed by the members of this congregation. Nationalism became synonymous with totalitarian worship of the state.

Faced with this political conundrum, the cardinals' first reaction was to seek to maintain the political order according to the Versailles Settlement of 1815 and the Treaty of Paris also of 1815. Clearly, what happened after 1914 was Metternich's political order being overturned. During negotiations of the Versailles Treaty of 1815, the papacy took a leading role and Metternich's order guaranteed a peace in Europe that would last one hundred years. This explains the interest of Vatican Diplomacy being actively involved in the peace settlement at the end of World War I. However, the end of the war left much to be desired for Vatican diplomacy. As the war progressed, all the cardinals of this congregation realized the challenges ahead. They were not only snubbed by the major victorious powers but had to face great difficulties to uphold the art of compromise between states in the face of a rising nationalism.

Thanks to Benedict XV's strong personality, the Roman Catholic Church kept its impartiality throughout the First World War. As the war ended, the Church realized that the Versailles Settlement of 1919 was not going to bring an everlasting peace. The Church's historical judgement was proven to be correct. Giacomo della Chiesa could achieve such a correct analysis thanks to the feedback that he was receiving from this congregation. The Versailles Settlement was not a peace treaty at all. It was a humiliating diplomatic exercise that was destined to failure. What these cardinals had at heart, in particular after the end of World War I, was the defence of the defeated Catholics living in central Europe. It is within this context, that one comes across the name of Eugenio Pacelli (later Pius XII). Pacelli expresses particular support for the defence of Germany after its defeat in the First World War.

Internal Workings

The history of this institution is one of high drama and strong personalities. Some of the protagonists were present even during the reign of the previous pontiffs. The author goes on to explain that these cardinals were not all of noble origins. Some were of a peasant stock. But one cannot deny the fact that the way cardinals were viewed at the time was that they represented the elite body of the government of the Church. Promotion was not based on merit but on seniority.

Doublet exposes the issue of power within this institution giving the reader details on how the cardinals dealt with issues of power. There is the figure of the Spaniard Rafael Merry del Val y Zulueta. He was a powerful cardinal who served as Secretary of State during Pius X's reign. His successor as secretary of state and head of this congregation was Cardinal Pietro Gasparri.

As expected of such institutions, there are the hawks and the doves. Doublet prefers to speak about ultra-conservative cardinals and those with a more amiable approach. The famous Secretary of State, Pietro Gasparri, comes across as the one most ready to dialogue and reach accommodating solutions with the opposing party. He is a *realpolitik* cardinal. In other words, he was always ready for a reconciliatory approach, including with states that were not so open towards the Holy See and the Church.

Thus, Gasparri appears as the person who had diametrical opposing views to those of the previous Secretary of State del Val. Doublet observes that Gasparri's diplomatic stand was the one to win in the end because he was the most flexible and ready to adjust his thinking. Therefore, it is no surprise that after Benedict XV's death, he continued to hold office, becoming famous for the Lateran Pact with Mussolini sealed in 1929. Already Gasparri was thinking on these lines but,

unfortunately, the Liberal Democrats were myopic with tragic consequences for the rest of the world.

What results from the discussions held within the congregation is the fact that the protagonists were not after the unscrupulous use of power. This is what distinguished this institution from similar ones – called foreign offices or foreign ministries – of the emerging nation states. Doublet rightly notes that what brought these cardinals together was their genuine interest in the good of the Church. This interest was stronger than any ideal that divided them. Hence, certain cardinals moved from one faction to the other with ease within the congregation.

Thus, internal discussions represented both disunity and collusion as members did not fear to express dissent. Doublet discloses these issues of internal conflict. In some issues, the cardinals were bitterly divided, but this book brings to the fore the members' willingness to compromise on strategic matters. At the end, consensus was always the winner.

Nicholas Doublet based his archival research mainly on Vatican Documents. This book is highly objective as it analyses these documents thoroughly and presents all the viewpoints of the cardinals to the reader. Therefore, there is no attempt at censorship or the presentation of partial facts. Doublet recounts how Vatican diplomacy stood behind monarchs who were losing their thrones at the end of the First World War. He discloses the Jewish lobby's interference in Catholic affairs or the approval for the Revolution in Russia, at first, by the cardinals of this congregation. Doublet states that this was a short-sighted vision on their part.

The author discusses the issue of land ownership by the Church. The right of the Church to own property came under attack in France during the Revolution and despite that over a century had lapsed, it continued to condition members of this congregation. Then there was the German Kulturkampf. Like the French Enlightenment, this too was at the back of the cardinals' mind when taking decisions regarding sovereign states. But these events became even more real as the right of the Church to own property was, at this particular moment in time, being questioned and challenged by a number of Latin American countries.

Democracy and Land Ownership

The Catholic Church was correct in its stand over the issue of land ownership. While Latin American countries advocated democracy in the name of Communism or Liberalism, they sought to forbid the Church from owning land. I will not go into the merit of whether ownership of land or property is

part of the mission of the Church. As Doublet observes, property was needed at the time to finance the mission of the Church. But even this is not the point here. Land ownership cannot be taken out of the equation of democracy. When a self-proclaimed democratic country passes laws that, in one way or another, attack or hinder free ownership of property, then that country or institution is no longer a democracy. It starts attacking one of the very basic principles on which democracy is built. Democratic erosion starts with the introduction of such principles.

But as Doublet rightly comments, after this revolutionary period, the Catholic Church sought to find new grounds in the moral sphere. The judicial personality of the Church remained the same but the moral question became the central message of the Church supported by a diplomatic mission aimed at fostering peace between nations. The foundations placed in this distant past have remained the authoritative force of the Church today. Whilst the temporal power of the Church was restored in 1929, its restoration was only done to guarantee the independence of the papacy and the Holy Father. The fact that the Vatican's diplomatic entourage comprises individuals coming from different countries and nationalities means that it has a diplomatic elite that cannot be rivalled by any other state. Thus, even if the Congregation of Extraordinary Ecclesiastical Affairs no longer exists, the Church is still bearing the fruits sown over a hundred years ago and thanks to Nicholas Doublet's work, the Church's endeavours - during one of the most dramatic periods of Europe's history - has been told without censorship and according to the correct metric of history.

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