



## Benedict XV (1914-1922)



His Holiness Benedict XV (3 Sept. 1914-22 Jan. 1922) was born in Genoa on 21 November 1854, of an old patrician family. Giacomo Della Chiesa graduated as a doctor of civil law at Genoa University in 1875, and then studied at the Capranica College and the Gregorian University, Rome. After ordination on 21 December 1878, he trained (1878-82) for the papal diplomatic service at the Academy of Noble Ecclesiastics. From 1883 to 1887 he was secretary to Mariano Rampolla, then Nuncio to Spain. When Rampolla became Secretary of State and Cardinal in 1887, Della Chiesa remained with him, being promoted Under-Secretary of State in 1901 and continuing in this office when Rampolla was succeeded by Rafael Merry del Val in 1903. Pius X appointed him Archbishop of Bologna in 1907. Only in May 1914 did Pius name him Cardinal, and three months later he was elected Pope, at a time when Europe was plunging into armed conflict. Benedict XV's reign was inevitably overshadowed by the war and its consequences. While protesting against inhuman methods of warfare and the unethical application of science to the practice of war, he maintained strict neutrality and abstained from condemning any of the belligerents. In the early years of the conflict he concentrated on alleviating suffering, opening a bureau at the Vatican for reuniting prisoners-of-war with their families and persuading Switzerland to receive soldiers of any country who were suffering from tuberculosis. On 1 August 1917, however, he dispatched to the Allies and the Central Powers a seven-point plan proposing a peace based on justice rather than military triumph, but it failed to be implemented. His long diplomatic training thus failed to bear fruit. In addition he was allowed no part in the peace settlement of 1919, the Allies having secretly (Treaty of London: Apr. 1915) agreed with Italy that the Vatican should be excluded. He himself believed that the settlement was seriously flawed.

After the war, Benedict XV pleaded for international reconciliation (*Pacem Pulcherrimum Dei Munus*; 23 May 1920) and although critical of some of its aspects gave general support to the League of Nations. He worked to reconstruct Church-State relations in the new States which had emerged, and sent Achille Ratti (later Pius XI) as Apostolic Visitor to Poland and Lithuania in 1919; in 1920 he also sent Eugenio Pacelli (later Pius XII) as Nuncio to Germany. Benedict XV was concerned about the new concordats which the freshly drawn map of Europe made desirable and devoted his last consistorial allocution (21 Nov. 1921) to this problem. His reign also saw a notable rise, from fourteen in 1914 to twenty-seven in 1922, in the number of countries which were diplomatically represented at the Holy See – they included Great Britain, which in 1915 sent a chargé d'affaires to the Vatican, the first since the seventeenth century. Relations with France, breached since 1905, were resumed and an ambassador extraordinary was appointed in 1921. Although Benedict XV himself found no solution to the Roman question, he prepared the ground for its later development. He put out feelers, through Secretary of State Pietro Gasparri on 28 June 1915 and Cardinal Bonaventura Cerretti in Paris in June 1919, which signaled the Vatican's readiness for a honourable settlement, gave his blessing to the Popular Party founded by Don Luigi Sturzo in January 1919, thereby effectively abolishing the *Non Expedit*, and lifted (May 1920) the Vatican's ban on official visits to the Quirinal (once the summer residence of the Pope, but since 1870 the official residence of the King of Italy) by heads of Catholic States.

On 28 June 1917, Benedict XV promulgated the new code of canon law which was in large part completed by Pius X and in September he appointed a commission to interpret it. Starting with his first Encyclical *Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum* (1 Nov. 1914), he also successfully called a halt to the bitter animosity between traditionalists and modernists. Like other Popes, he dreamed of reunion with the separated Churches of the East and the outbreak of the Russian Revolution made him think that the moment for this had arrived. To assist the process he established (1 May 1917) the Congregation for the Oriental Church and set up (15 Oct. 1917) the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome; on 5 October 1920 he also declared St. Ephraem, the Syrian exegete and theologian (c. 306-73), a Doctor of the Church. The war created a host of problems in the mission field and Benedict came to be called 'the Pope of missions', partly because of his constructive interest in them but also because of his letter *Maximum Illud* (30 Nov. 1919), in which he urged missionary bishops to push forward with the formation of a native clergy and to seek the welfare of the people among whom they worked rather than the imperialist interest of their own country of origin. Benedict XV died unexpectedly early, at the age of 67. Two years before, the Turks had erected a statue of him (by Canarica) in Istanbul which saluted him as 'the great pope of the world tragedy ... the benefactor of all people, irrespective of nationality or religion'.

According to testimony left by Padre Giuseppe Gianfranceschi, the subsequent President of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences and the New Lynxes, Benedict XV was convinced after the war that science could play a vital role in world reconstruction, the achievement of peace, and the advance of civilisation. He believed that the Pontifical Academy could be an important instrument in this initiative, not least because of its international and interdisciplinary character. He agreed with Gianfranceschi's view that it should be renewed and enlarged, and made him President in 1921 with this project in mind. Benedict XV also thought that the Academy could prove useful in restoring international scientific relations after the severe disruptions of the Great War. His project to provide new material and economic support was frustrated by his early death, and it fell to his successor, Pius XI, to realise his ideas and plans.