Pope Benedict XV and Peace

Pope Benedict XVI, elected in April, 2005 as the head of the world-wide Catholic Church, has declared that he choose his papal name partly in respect for Pope Benedict XV’s (1903-1914) dedication to peace. In his first general audience, Pope Benedict XVI placed himself at the service of peace among all peoples. To fully understand the new Pope’s respect for Benedict XV, a knowledge of papal history is important. The following is a description of Pope Benedict XV’s involvement with promoting peace in the first decades of the 20th century.

Pope Benedict XV truly earned the title “Pontiff of Peace.” Elected as Europe plunged into the First World War, he was admirably suited to meet drastic new conditions with a clear vision of the role of the Christian peacemaker. As close to an absolute pacifist as any pope since Benedict XII during the Hundred Years War, Benedict set out to reconcile the major conflicts of the day.

A former papal diplomat, Benedict opposed war in all forms and believed the theory of the just war as historically outmoded and theologically inadequate. In the best tradition of Catholic peacemaking, he rejected the Machiavellian distinction between private and public morality, arguing that “the Gospel has not one law of charity for individuals and another for states and nations, for these are but collections of individuals.”

Benedict’s debt to the Humanist peace tradition is clear. His encyclical *Ad Beatissimum*, issued at the outbreak of World War I (Nov. 1, 1914), outlines the causes of war and the methods for attaining peace:

*The dread image of war overshadows the world, and absorbs nearly every thought. The strongest and wealthiest nations are in conflict. What wonder, then, that, furnished as they are with the latest weapons devised by military science, their struggle is causing enormous slaughter. . . . Who would think that the nations, thus armed against each other, are all descended from one ancestor, share the same nature, belong to the same human family? Who would realize that they are brethren, children of the same Father in heaven? And while the mighty hosts are contending in the fury of combat, cities, families, individuals are being oppressed by those evils and miseries which follow at the heels of war; day by day the numbers increase of widows and orphans; the paths of commerce are blocked; the fields are left untilled; the arts are at a standstill; the rich are made poor, the poor are made destitute, all are made to mourn.*

In *Ad Beatissimum*, Benedict then proceeds to list the causes of war: lack of mutual love, disregard for authority, class war, gross materialism and he outlined the path to peace: the Beatitudes and Christ’s command that “you love one another as I have loved you.”

Throughout World War I, Pope Benedict XV condemned its barbarities and futility, calling for a peace without victory, offering peace plans to both sides. During the war years, Benedict XV issued over one hundred encyclicals and letters of instruction and exhortation to bishops, Catholic leaders, and laity on the rights of prisoners, the wounded, and noncombatants, on organizing relief work, on arranging truces, and on reducing unnecessary violence.

Pope Benedict XV protested conditions in Poland and Belgium, warned against U.S. and Italian entry into the war, condemned aerial bombing, the sinking of the Lusitania, attacks upon any civilian targets, forced deportation of civilians, and the taking of hostages. He personally rebuked Kaiser Wilhelm II for the use of poison gas and pressed for a nonviolent solution to the Irish rebellion.

He diverted huge amounts of church funds for the relief of war victims both during and after the war, emptying the Vatican treasury so that on his death there was barely enough money left to hold the conclave that elected his successor. He spent much of his personal family fortune in this work.

Working with the Red Cross, he made the Vatican a clearinghouse for missing persons, the exchange of prisoners, the reunion of families, and the rescue of children and refugees, and he prevented the execution of many prisoners of war. At the height of the war Benedict appealed directly to all the belligerent peoples and their leaders, calling for an end to hostilities and prophetically reminding them that nations do not die if defeated but only harbor revenge and hatred for their conquerors.
True Christians, he declared, must make the first offer of peace. True peace, he stressed, depends upon “mutual benevolence and respect for the rights and dignities of others, much more than upon hosts of armed men and a ring of formidable fortresses.” Benedict called on all Catholics, on both sides of the conflict, to do all they could for the restoration of peace.

At the end of World War I, Benedict XV pressed for an equitable and just peace treaty that would not be in the spirit of revenge but would promote active reconciliation and forgiveness. He called on all Catholics to lay aside nationalist enmities, to lend their support to international organizations, and to aid the victims of famine in Central Europe and Russia, as the Vatican itself was doing.

The pope’s peacemaking efforts and his aid to the conquered Central Powers were resented by the Allies, especially by France, which felt betrayed by his pacifism. He was specifically excluded from the Versailles Peace Conference by France, Great Britain, Russia, and Italy.

Before Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, which became the focus of peace negotiations after World War I, Benedict had proposed his own series of points, which he believed offered the basis for a just and lasting peace. Among these were the principles that moral force must always be preferred to the force of arms, that disarmament must proceed reciprocally and with guarantees and rules, that arbitration is always preferable to armies, that international law must safeguard commerce and the rights of all peoples, and that the belligerent nations and peoples must extend total pardon to each other.

A letter (Sept. 28, 1917) from Cardinal Gaspari, the papal Secretary of State, to British Prime Minister Lloyd George, explains Benedict’s ideas on disarmament proposals, including the Pope’s desire for the “simultaneous and reciprocal suppression of all compulsory military service,” and “imposition of a general boycott in sanction against any nation that might attempt to reestablish obligatory military service.”

Reflection Questions
What did Pope Benedict XV see as a primary role of the Church in the world of the 20th century?

What were Benedict XV’s views on peace and nonviolence? In what specific ways did Pope Benedict XV work for peace?

What is needed in the world of the 21st century to bring peace to a suffering world? Why is the preaching of peace difficult in 2005?

How can all Catholics promote peace and nonviolence, both at home and throughout the world?

Prayer For Peace In the World

Christ, Prince of Peace, we thank you for the example of Pope Benedict XV and for the desire of our new pontiff, Benedict XVI, to follow in his predecessor’s path. The world longs for peace and for the end to violence. May our new Pope be inspired to spread the message of peace throughout the world, speaking the truth of Scripture to all nations: only if we love another as brothers and sisters will we be able to live in dignity, without fear and without hatred. This is a difficult and challenging truth, but it is at the heart of our belief. Bless our Pope, bless all nations and people, and bring them all to a true and lasting peace. In your name, Christ, Prince of Peace, we pray. Amen.