

## FROM VATICAN COUNCIL I TO VATICAN COUNCIL II 1878 - 1922AD

### Part One: The Pontificates of Leo XIII, Pius X and Benedict XV

In this Article, we will look at:

- **How the Church confronts the modern world, Industrial Revolution, Marxism, and Capitalism**
- **Pope Leo XIII and the emergence of Catholic Social Teaching**
- **Pius X and Modernism**
- **Benedict XV and World War I**

#### The Church confronts a changing world

Pius IX dies in February 1878 after being pope for 32 years, the longest papacy in Church history. During his papacy, the world and the Church's situation change dramatically. The new pope will not inherit the Papal States and will minister to a church suffering persecution and marginalization in many European countries—in a world that witnesses the explosive social changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, the rise of capitalism, socialism, communism, and Darwinism. Modes of travel and communication are greatly enhanced by railroads and electric telegraph.

**Industrial Revolution.** The creation of machines leads to the so-called Industrial Revolution, causing an influx of people to crowded cities from the countryside. In his book, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, Thomas Bokenkotter describes the conditions in the early factories as follows:

*Conditions in the new factories and slums were abominable. Men as well as women and children (boys and girls under eighteen regularly made up half of the labor force) were forced to work twelve to fifteen hours a day at wages kept to a minimum. They could be laid off at any time without warning. They were obliged to spend 60 to 80 per cent of their income on their diet, which consisted of only bread and potatoes and an occasional cabbage. Their bare subsistence wages allowed them no margin for savings, and when they were laid off they would be in immediate danger of starving. They lived with their whole family in a single room in a dirty tenement and were lucky if they didn't have to share it with other families. The squalid streets around them were littered with garbage, and*

*being without adequate answers, they reeked with the smell of excrement (p.334).*

**Karl Marx and Communism.** As a reaction to the abuses of unbridled capitalism, many workers turn to socialism and communism. In his *Communist Manifesto (1848)* and *Das Kapital (1867)*, Karl Marx analyzed economics as a class struggle. The protagonists were the capitalists, who controlled the means of production, and the workers (or proletariat) whom the rich exploited. Marx believed that revolution between the capitalists and the proletariat was inevitable and that the workers would eventually triumph and create a classless society. Marx was both an atheist and a materialist, holding that the only reality is what can be sensed. His brand of atheism was especially hostile to organized religion. He saw the Church as a negative force in society which taught people to be content with their lot in life (This is Our Church, p.205).

**Social Darwinism.** In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, capitalists are more interested in profit than in the quality of their workers' lives. Many capitalists use the ideas of Social Darwinism to further their cause. Social Darwinism holds that the concept of the survival of the fittest works in economics, as evidenced by the economic jungle and so-called *laissez-faire* (hands-off) or "liberal" capitalism.

#### Pope Leo XIII and the emergence of Catholic social teaching

The excesses of the nineteenth century liberal reformers give rise to attacks on the Church and formal religion. But church leadership is slow in opening itself up to the many changes happening in the world. As a consequence, most of the Catholic leaders in France leave the Church, and by 1888, it is pretty clear that the working class in that country is already lost to the Church.

But some Catholic leaders do understand the forces of economic change and are able to chart a middle course between socialism and unbridled capitalism. One such person is William Ketteler, Bishop of Mainz, Germany. He sketches out a Catholic solution that

points out the dangers in both the unlimited competition of capitalism and the exaggerated state control of the Socialists. He defends the right of state intervention against the liberal capitalists and the right of private property against the totalitarian tendencies of the socialists. Above all, he insists on the right of workers to form their own associations, and he calls for a whole series of reforms, including profit-sharing, reasonable working hours, sufficient rest days, factory inspection, and the regulation of female and child labor. In 1869, he tells the German bishops at Fulda that the social question is more acute and serious than any other, and he gives a powerful exposition of what has to be done to deal with it effectively.

In England, workers find a friend in Henry Edward Manning, a convert to Catholicism and a cardinal in London. When it is unpopular to do so, he rallies for the rights of workers. He fights for laws prohibiting children labor under a certain age, and for regulation on housing. In the United States, Cardinal Gibbons (Baltimore) in 1887 successfully defends the Knights of Labor, the most important labor union of the time.

**Social Justice.** Beginning with Leo XIII (pope 1878-1903), social justice has become a major theme of Church teaching. Leo is considered to be the first pope who sought to bring the Church into a dialogue with the modern world and, at the same time, challenge the modern world to live up to the standards of the Gospel in terms of social justice.

**Rerum Novarum** (“of new things”), Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical, is considered one of the most important papal pronouncements in history. The encyclical affirms the right to private property and defends the right of workers to a living wage and to unionize. It teaches that the state can at times intervene in the economic sphere to defend the rights of workers.

*Rerum Novarum* has been rightly called the Magna Carta of social Catholicism as it summarizes the best thinking on social issues. It challenges Catholics to get involved in the struggle for social justice and reform of the social order.

Leo XIII is 68 years old when elected pope. Because of his frail health, it is generally believed that he would be a transitional pope after the lengthy papacy of his predecessor. But God has other plans—Leo reigns as pope for 25 years, the second longest papacy in the Church’s history. He lives to the age of 93.

Leo does much to end Germany’s anti-Catholic policies. He restores diplomatic relations with Brazil, Colombia and Russia, and is successful in getting anti-clerical legislation removed in Chile, Mexico and Spain. With his diplomatic skills, he does a much better job than his predecessor at bringing the Church into dialogue with the modern world. He is much more open than both his predecessor and successor to scholarship and the intellectual life. He encourages the study of St. Thomas Aquinas and the natural sciences. He opens up the Vatican archives to scholars of all backgrounds. He lays down guidelines for the scientific study of Scripture. He establishes 248 new dioceses outside of Europe (28 of them in the United States). He is the first pope to refer to non-Catholic Christians as “separated brethren.”

### **Pope Pius X (1903-1914) and Modernism**

Giuseppe Sarto is the first pope to be declared a saint since St. Pius V (pope 1566-1572). He is also the first pope of peasant origins in several hundred years. His only desire is to be a parish priest, which he has been for most of his life. As a pastor, bishop and Cardinal, he shows himself to be a hardworking and caring shepherd of his people. As pope, he brought simplicity to the papacy. He opens up the Vatican to victims of an earthquake.

The papal conclave of 1903 witnesses the final intervention of political leaders in the election of a pope. The Austrian government opposes the election of Cardinal Rampolla, who is seen as too partial towards France, so the Cardinals choose a pastor, Cardinal Sarto. Shortly after his election, Pius X ends the practice of government intervention in papal elections.

Pius X’s papacy is mainly remembered for two things: his pastoral renewal of the Church and, more especially, his condemnation of Modernism.

### **Renewal of the Church**

Pius’s motto is: “*To restore all things in Christ.*” He encourages frequent, even daily, communion something totally unheard of since the days of Jansenism (doctrine that holds that people are unworthy to receive the Eucharist). Pius also lowers the age for the reception of First Communion to seven years old (previously from around twelve to the ‘age of reason’). He promotes the Gregorian chants and simple liturgical music that the faithful can participate

in. As a result of these changes, he is popularly known as the “**Pope of the Eucharist.**” His changes in the Eucharist pave the way for the Liturgical Movement, which will reach its full flowering in Vatican Council II. He reforms the Curia and revises the Code of Canon Law, a task only completed after his death. He promotes **Catholic Action** groups which encourage the lay faithful to get involved in works of charity, combating anti-Christian elements in society. Pius X places a lot of emphasis on the faith formation of children and adults. He issues a New Catechism done in a question-and-answer format. He teaches a weekly catechism lesson to local children. These efforts led to a new **Catechetical Movement** in the Church.

**Condemnation of modernism.** Generally speaking, a modernist is one who believes that the Church should adapt herself and her beliefs to the changing mindset of each generation. There is, of course, *some* truth to this belief. Over the course of the centuries, the Church has in some ways changed and adapted itself to various periods in her history. As we have seen above, Pius X tries to change Catholics’ attitude toward the Eucharist, encouraging the faithful to come to the Eucharist more often, as well as lowering the age for the reception of First Communion. Pius relaxes laws that forbid Catholics in Italy from participating in political elections. Because his two predecessors were so upset with the Italian politicians for taking over the Papal States, they forbid Catholics from voting.

In the decades prior to Pius X’s papacy, Catholic scholars started to embrace some of the new popular approaches to the study of Scripture and Church doctrine. Some of the new approaches will only be embraced by the Church several decades after Pius’ death. Even Leo XIII seems somewhat open to new approaches to Scripture, setting up a biblical commission and opening up the Vatican Library for historical research. But some of the new approaches to Scripture are too human. Some scholars view the Bible not as the divine Word of God, but merely human work inspired by human ingenuity.

Pius X believes that such new theories would be harmful to Catholic biblical studies and to the faith of the people. As a result, he comes down very heavy on Catholic scholars who embrace or seem to embrace new approaches to Catholic doctrine and biblical studies. He issues the decree *Lamentabili Sane* (“A Lamentable Departure”) and the encyclical

*Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (“Feeding the Lord’s Flock”). In the first decree, Pius names 65 propositions which are unacceptable to the Catholic Church. The latter papal document characterizes modernism as the “synthesis of all heresies.” Shortly after, Pius issues a decree demanding that all clerics take an oath rejecting modernism. In addition, he sets up a group of theological watchdogs whose job is to spy on any theologian seen in anyway as unfaithful to the Church’s hard line stance against modernism. As a result of this rather ruthless policy, many theologians are dismissed from their teaching positions; priests are suspended from the priesthood and/or excommunicated from the Church. Even wonderful Cardinals, like the well-loved Cardinal Mercier, find themselves on the Vatican’s blacklist. Pius’ hard line policy towards modernism severely curtails Catholic scholarship. Reputable scholars live under constant threat of being labeled heretics. Nearly every historian today would say that Pius overreacted to what was indeed a real threat to Catholic belief and practice.

In 1913, Pius suffers a heart attack. Many believe the thought of Catholic nations fighting each other in World War I hastened his death. He dies three months after the outbreak of the war. In 1954, Pius XII canonizes Pius X. His canonization reminds us that true holiness does not mean that saints get everything right in their lives. (In April 2014, Pope John Paul II was canonized a saint even though during his papacy, one of the worst scandals in the Church’s history occurred—the sexual abuse of minors by priests and the cover-up by bishops and even by the Vatican.)

### **Pope Benedict XV and World War I**

Benedict XV (pope 1914-1922) is a surprise choice to succeed Pius X. He is a physically frail man with a congenital condition that causes him to stoop. He has only been a Cardinal for a few months when he is elected Pope. But Benedict turns out to be a moral giant during World War I “that was supposed to end all wars.” One of Benedict’s first decisions is to stop the excessive measures taken by his predecessor to root out modernism.

Benedict devotes most of his papacy to aiding the victims of the war and he seeks to be a peacemaker. He deplores the war and refuses to take sides, with the result that both sides accuse him of partiality. He seeks to alleviate the suffering caused by the war, for example, by attempting to reunite prisoners of war with their families and by persuading Switzerland to

accept soldiers afflicted with tuberculosis. Benedict gives away vast sums of Vatican money to help the thousands of people left homeless and wounded during the war. In fact, when Benedict dies, the Vatican bank is so depleted that it cannot cover the expenses of the conclave gathered to elect his successor.

In 1917 as the war was coming to an end, Benedict offers visionary peace proposals and he volunteers to mediate the conflict. The warring nations reject Benedict's proposals for a peaceful and just settlement, accepting nothing less than unconditional surrender. In 1919, the *Treaty of Versailles* is drawn up as a peace settlement, but some of its terms are based on revengeful motives, which will be responsible for crippling Germany's economy in the 1920's. With the devastation of the Great Depression, the Germans will turn to the Nazi party to restore their pride as a nation.

Finally, when Benedict was elected, only 14 countries had diplomatic relations with the Holy See. By 1922, this number will increase to 27 nations.

### **Reflection questions**

1. What spoke to you most in this Article?
2. What did you learn? What, if anything, surprised you or shocked you?
3. How do you feel about the rights of workers to unionize?
4. Do you have any questions about this period in Church history?