

SOCIAL JUSTICE REFLECTIONS

REFLECTION 2: CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING TO 1959



PRIMARY SOURCES FOR THE PERIOD 1891 - 1959

In this reflection, we return to primary sources for the period 1891-1959.

Does Pope Benedict XV's peace advocacy in World War 1 influence the advocacy of Pope Francis today as he prays and works for peace between Russia and Ukraine, and within countries such as Myanmar and South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo?

The Code of Canon Law in 1917 lacked so much in the way of understanding social justice and its application.

Yet Pope Benedict XV who promulgated the Code, advocated repeatedly for peace during the First World War.

At the conclusion of this reflection, we will return to the present day, and ponder the words of Pope Francis to the Leaders of Russia and Ukraine and to the world on October 2nd, 2022.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

In modern Catholic Social Teaching, there has been *a widening of the intended recipients*

- from Catholic Church leaders and the universal Catholic Church
 - to the Church and all people of good will.
- and a growth and development
- from a focus about injustices faced by Catholics alone
 - to a focus about injustices faced by the whole human family.

We have been moving

- from a focus on some particular issues of justice and peace,
- to a focus on justice, ecology and peace, within an understanding of integral human development.

In recent decades, there have been more recognition and acknowledgement of the contributions from ecumenical traditions, interfaith traditions and the wider human family.

Yet there continue to be glaring examples of injustice within the church in some areas.

In 1933, Pope Pius XI explained the Church's stance of impartiality in his Encyclical [*Dilectissima Nobis*](#) on Oppression of the Church of Spain.

"... Universally known is the fact that the Catholic Church is never bound to one form of government more than to another, provided the Divine rights of God and of Christian consciences are safe."

Within [Reflection 2: Catholic Social Teaching to 1959](#), there are two parts.

[Part One](#) provides links to some of the church documents of the period on work, religious persecution, the Great Depression, Fascism, Communism and Nazism.

[Part Two](#) reflects on the peace advocacy of Pope Benedict XV 1914-1922

[PART ONE – SOME DOCUMENTS OF THE PERIOD](#)

1) Work

Modern Catholic Social Teaching began in 1891 with **Pope Leo XIII's social encyclical '[Rerum Novarum](#)'** on the rights and duties of capital and labour.

Forty years later, **Pope Pius XI** issued his social encyclical on the 40th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. There is now a church tradition of issuing statements on work and social justice issues most decades on the anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*.

In '[Quadragesimo Anno](#)' #80, it spoke about the principle of "*subsidiary function*" or *subsidiarity*, and in #85 and #96 it referred to "*the common good*."

My interest in the early development of Catholic Social Teaching was influenced by a family story.

My maternal grandfather Martin, was one with his group of workers, in advocating for better conditions in an industry in Brisbane. My mother, as a young student at All Hallows School, was able to give her father hope, as she explained what she was learning about [Quadragesimo Anno](#) and working conditions.

Better working conditions and hours were achieved eventually at the plant, though the leaders among the workers all lost their jobs.

My Grandfather found another job elsewhere, and he gained an inner strength from the Catholic social justice teaching on work.

Major anniversary church teachings in the second half of the 20th century included Pope John XXIII in 1961, Pope Paul VI in 1971, and Pope John Paul II in 1981 and 1991.

2) An Example of Statements on Religious Persecution - Mexico

There are many accounts of religious persecution in history.

For example, some members of our parish community have many stories of persecution in Iraq and Syria.

Let us turn back to an example in the first half of the 20th Century.

What can we learn from the statements of Pope Pius XI on Mexico that may help us today?

In 1926, **Pope Pius XI** issued his Encyclical [*Iniquis Afflictisque*](#) on the persecution of the Church in Mexico.

He listed many of the ways in which the church was persecuted, and spoke of the Mexican government laws of 1917 and 1926 against the church.

In 1932, Pope Pius XI again spoke about Mexico in his Encyclical [*Acerba Animi*](#) on Persecution of the Church in Mexico. 29 September 1932.

He recognized the pastoral actions of the bishops and consoled them on their banishment by the government.

He recognized the struggles and martyrdom of priests and members of the Catholic communities.

He wished to draw the world's attention to their suffering.

3) The Great Depression

Pope Pius XI issued his Encyclical [*Caritate Christi Compulsi*](#), "On The Sacred Heart" on the 3rd May, 1932.

This letter addressed the Church about the Great Depression and the need for charity.

4) Fascism

Pope Pius XI issued [*Non Abbiamo Bisogno*](#) in 1931 on Catholic Action in Italy (Against Facism). Originally, he had thought the persecution was sporadic, but he eventually realized that the Fascists had a deliberate program of intimidation and violence against the Catholic Action movement.

5) Communism

Pope Pius XI issued [*Divini Redemptoris*](#) (Against Atheistic Communism) in 1937.

Previous papal protests against communism in Russia, Mexico and Spain were included in the encyclicals *Miserentissimus Redemptor*, *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Caritate Christi*, *Acerba Animi*, and *Dilectissima Nobis*.

6) Nazism

Pope Pius XI issued [*Mit Brennender Sorge*](#) (On the Church and the German Reich). Passion Sunday, March 14, 1937.

In the [**Pastoral letter of the Dutch Bishops**](#) July 20, 1942, they repeated the wording of the telegram by the Catholic and Protestant churches on July 11th to the *"the authorities of the occupying forces."*

"The undersigned Dutch churches, already deeply shocked by the actions taken against the Jews in the Netherlands that have excluded them from participating in the normal life of society, have learned with horror of the new measures by which men, women, children, and whole families will be deported to the German territory and its dependencies.

"The suffering that this measure will bring upon tens of thousands of people, the knowledge that these measures are contrary to the deepest moral sense of the Dutch people, and, above all, the hostility of these measures against the divine norms of justice and mercy urge the churches to direct to you the urgent petition not to execute these measures.

"Our urgent petition to you is also motivated by the consideration that, for the Christian Jews, these measures would make it impossible for them to participate in the life of the Church."

The Pastoral Letter raised the issue of the joint failure of Christians.

The Letter was to be read six days later at all Masses on Sunday 26 July.

*"let us first examine ourselves with a deep sense of repentance and humility.
Are we not, after all, partly responsible for the disasters that affect us?
Have we always fulfilled the duties of justice and charity toward our neighbor?
Have we not sometimes entertained feelings of unholy hatred and bitterness?
Have we always sought our refuge in God, our Heavenly Father?
When we turn to ourselves, we will have to confess that we have all failed."*

The Pastoral Letter is a challenge for any time of injustice.

Am I partly responsible by being silent and/or by my feelings, thoughts and actions?

[PART TWO - FIRST WORLD WAR – PEACE ADVOCACY BY POPE BENEDICT XV](#)

Sometimes we see the results of peacemaking in our lifetime, and sometimes we do not.

Pope John Paul II was able to add his strong voice to efforts for genuine peace in the 1980s and lived to see independence for many Soviet occupied nations.

Yet his efforts to advocate for peace in 2003 could not prevent the United States invasion of Iraq.

One of the historical cases studied by the Church, in its desire for peace around the world, is the advocacy of Pope Benedict XV during the First World War.

During times in solidarity with people suffering from long term injustice,

I return to reading about Pope Benedict XV and his words.

Pope Pius X died in August 1914, and Benedict became Pope in September.

He died in 1922 from pneumonia.

He strived to find ways for warring parties in the World War to work for an end to the war.

He experienced the frustrations many peace advocates experience when they think that no one is listening to them.

As well as a world at war, he inherited additional problems such as

- the unresolved 'Roman question' between the Holy See and the Italian Government,
- and many years of strained relationships with France.

Let us explore some of the peace issues through the writings of Pope Benedict XV.

As we reflect on them, we ask ourselves about the issues of peace advocacy today.

What has changed? What have we learnt?

The exclusive use of 'man' or 'men' instead of 'person' or 'people' in the official English texts is an example of injustice itself.

In 1914, Benedict XV issued his encyclical [Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum](#) (*A Plea for Peace*).

He named what was happening.

"... On every side the dread phantom of war holds sway: there is scarce room for another thought in the minds of men. The combatants are the greatest and wealthiest nations of the earth; what wonder, then, if, well provided with the most awful weapons modern military science has devised, they strive to destroy one another with refinements of horror. There is no limit to the measure of ruin and of slaughter; day by day the earth is drenched with newly-shed blood, and is covered with the bodies of the wounded and of the slain. Who would imagine as we see them thus filled with hatred of one another, that they are all of one common stock, all of the same nature, all members of the same human society?"

Moved by the plight of the world, he saw it as his duty to advocate for peace.

"Moved by these great evils, we thought it our duty... we implored Kings and rulers to consider the floods of tears and of blood already poured out, and to hasten to restore to the nations the blessings of peace... We implore those in whose hands are placed the fortunes of nations to hearken to Our voice. Surely there are other ways and means whereby violated rights can be rectified. Let them be tried honestly and with good will, and let arms meanwhile be laid aside. It is impelled with love of them and of all mankind, without any personal interest whatever, that We utter these words. Let them not allow these words of a friend and of a father to be uttered in vain."

He continued his efforts in 1915, including the release of his Apostolic Exhortation [Allorché fummo chiamati](#) on July 28, 1915 to the Peoples Now at War and to their Rulers.

The Church also established an **Opera dei Prigionieri** (Prisoners' Works Office),

In 1917, as the Vatican continued to lobby Government leaders for peace, he released a peace proposal "[Peace Note](#)" for consideration. He released it after his envoys had consulted with various world leaders.

Let us read from sections of his Peace Note. He explained his **threefold response to the war**.

- *"to preserve complete impartiality in relation to all the belligerents, as is appropriate to he who is the common father and who loves all his children with equal affection;"*
- *"to endeavour constantly to do all the most possible good, without personal exceptions and without national or religious distinctions, a duty which the universal law of charity, as well as the supreme spiritual office entrusted to us by Christ, dictates to us; "*

- *“and lastly, to engage in an assiduous commitment, as our peacemaking mission equally demands, to leave nothing undone within our power which could assist in hastening the end of this calamity by trying to lead the peoples and their heads to more moderate forms of counsel, to the calm deliberations of peace, of a ‘just and lasting peace’.”*

He reminded the warring parties of **his consistent efforts for peace.**

“Whoever has followed our work during the three unhappy years which have just elapsed has been able to recognise that we have always remained faithful to the intention of absolute impartiality and to doing good, and thus we have never ceased to exhort the belligerent peoples and governments to become brothers once again, even though all that we have done to attain this most noble end has not always been made public.”

He introduced his invitation to act on concrete **proposals for peace.**

“... we want now to descend to more concrete and practical proposals, and to invite the governments of the belligerent peoples to agree upon the following points, which appear to be the bases of a just and lasting peace, leaving to the same governments to apply them at a specific level and to complete them.”

He listed the **details of his proposal.**

“First of all, the fundamental point must be that for the material force of arms should be substituted the moral force of law; hence a just agreement by all for the simultaneous and reciprocal reduction of armaments, according to rules and guarantees to be established to the degree that is necessary and sufficient for the maintenance of public order in each State; then, instead of arms, the institution of arbitration, with its lofty peacemaking function, according to standards to be agreed upon, with sanctions to be decided against a State which refuses either to submit international questions to arbitration or to accept the decisions of such arbitration.

Once the supremacy of law has been established, let every obstacle to the ways of communication between peoples be removed through the true freedom and common use of the seas. This would, on the one hand, remove very many reasons for conflict, and, on the other, open up new sources of prosperity and progress for all.

With regard to the damage and costs of war, we do not see any other path than that of the general rule of an entire and mutual remission, justified, for that matter, by the immense benefits of disarmament; and this is even more the case because one cannot understand the continuance of so much slaughter solely for reasons of an economic character.

If in some cases special reasons are in opposition to this, these should be considered with justice and fairness.

But these peaceful agreements, with the immense advantages that flow from them, are not possible without the mutual return of territories which are presently occupied. Therefore, with regard to Germany, there should be a total evacuation both of Belgium, with the

guarantee of her full political, military and economic independence in relation to any power, and also of French territory; from the party on the other side there should be equal return of the German colonies.

With regard to territorial questions, such as those, for example, which cause strife between Italy and Austria, and between Germany and France, there is ground for hope that in consideration of the immense advantages of a lasting peace with disarmament, the conflicting parties will examine such territorial questions in a conciliatory frame of mind, taking into account, so far as this is just and practicable, as we have said on other occasions, the aspirations of peoples, and co-ordinating, where this is possible, their own interests with those shared by the great human community.

The same spirit of equity and justice should guide the examination of all other territorial and political questions, specifically those relating to Armenia, the Balkan States, and the countries which make up the ancient Kingdom of Poland, whose noble historical traditions and the sufferings it has undergone in particular during the present war ought rightly to enlist the sympathies of the nations.

Such are the principal foundations upon which we believe the future reorganisation of peoples should rest. They are of a kind which would make impossible the recurrence of such conflicts and would pave the way for a solution to the economic question, which is so important for the future and the material welfare of all the belligerent States... ”

His proposal was not accepted by the warring nations and the devastating war continued. One of the diplomatic difficulties was in trying to convince the German military to forfeit any territory that they had conquered during the war to that moment.

His plea to each of them for a *“conciliatory frame of mind”* bore little fruit in 1917. Some of his points were later incorporated in the 14 Points that USA President Wilson proposed.

During the War, he lobbied also

- for better conditions for prisoners
- for temporary ceasefires
- for prisoner exchanges
- for the release of interned civilians

The Holy See raised funds for assistance to civilians in occupied territories and worked with Switzerland on assistance for prisoners and civilians in care.

In 1914, the annual church tradition of a World Day of Migrants and Refugees commenced.

One of the criticisms of his efforts during the war was that of his interpretation of neutrality. He believed that if he commented on a specific atrocity by one side, then in fairness, he would have to comment on atrocities by the other side as well. Instead, he concentrated on lobbying for an end to the war.

In working for peace in the world today, one of the challenges is to be aware of secret deals by the combatants.

One of the factors that hampered Pope Benedict's peace efforts was the secret deal in the [Treaty of London](#) in 1915.

The United Kingdom, France and Russia had been lobbying neutral Italy to enter the war on their side. As well as seeking extra territory and financial benefit, Italy insisted on Article 15.

ARTICLE 15

France, Great Britain and Russia shall support such opposition as Italy may make to any proposal in the direction of introducing a representative of the Holy See in any peace negotiations or negotiations for the settlement of questions raised by the present war.

The secret treaty was signed in London on April 26th 1915, the day after the Gallipoli landing in Turkey.

Pope Benedict continued his advocacy for justice and peace in his Encyclical [Quod iam Diu](#) (December 1, 1918) on the Future Peace Conference. He stressed the constant prayer for peace during the war.

He stated that now, with the cessation of fighting due to the Armistice, the ensuring peace conference needed to secure for the world *"a just and lasting peace"*, with *"true peace founded on the Christian principles of justice"*.

He told the Bishops of the world that it was to be their care

"to order public prayers in each parish of your dioceses in the way you may think most convenient."

He assured them that he would exert all his influence

"that the decisions which are to be taken to ensure forever in the world the tranquility of order and concord be willingly accepted and faithfully carried out by Catholics everywhere."

The following year in his Encyclical [Paterno iam Diu](#) (November 24, 1919) on the Children of Central Europe, he addressed the **post-war plight of "regions desolated by famine and misery, especially in Central Europe"**

"those populous regions are deprived of food and clothing to a degree beyond all imagination, so that a most lamentable decay of health is the result among the less hardy, and especially among the children..." "

After giving the example of how **church humanitarian assistance** had already made such a difference to many of the children in **Belgium**, he gave this **direction to the Bishops of the world for December 28th**.

"With the approach of the season of Christmas, commemorating the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ, our thoughts spontaneously fly to the poor little children, especially in Central Europe, who are most cruelly feeling the wants of the necessities of life... We direct that on next December 28, the feast of the Holy Innocents, you should order public prayers and gather the alms of the faithful. In order to help on a larger scale so many poor children in this-most noble competition of charity, in addition to money it will be necessary to gather food, medicines and clothing, all of which are so greatly wanting in these regions. We need not

delay in explaining how such offerings may be conveniently divided and forwarded to their destination. This task may be confided to the committees which have been formed for this object, and may provide for it in any manner whatsoever... Moreover, in order to afford an example to others, notwithstanding the continual requests for help which reach Us from all sides, We have determined, to the extent of Our means, to contribute to the relief of these poor children the sum of 100,000 lire."

Though the war had ended in 1918, Pope Benedict XV **recognized the bitterness that remained in the hearts of many people**. In his Encyclical [*Pacem, Dei Munus Pulcherrimum*](#) (May 23, 1920) on Peace and Christian Reconciliation, he highlighted:

- **the continuing poverty**

"For if we look around where the fury of the war has been let loose we see immense regions utterly desolate, uncultivated and abandoned; multitudes reduced to want of food, clothing and shelter; innumerable widows and orphans reft of everything, and an incredible number of enfeebled beings, particularly children and young people, who carry on their bodies the ravages of this atrocious war."

- **his concerns about latent hostility and enmity**

"There is no need from us of long proof to show that society would incur the risk of great loss if, while peace is signed, latent hostility and enmity were to continue among the nations..."

- **the need to forgive**

- **his exhortation to the bishops of the world**

"We pray you and exhort you in the mercy and charity of Jesus Christ, strive with all zeal and diligence not only to urge the faithful entrusted to your care to abandon hatred and to pardon offences; but, and what is more immediately practical, to promote all those works of Christian benevolence which bring aid to the needy, comfort to the afflicted and protection to the weak, and to give opportune and appropriate assistance of every kind to all who have suffered from the war."

- **his wish that the bishops exhort their priests, as the ministers of peace**

"to be assiduous in urging this love of one's neighbour and even of enemies which is the essence of the Christian life, and by "being all things to all men" and giving an example to others, wage war everywhere on enmity and hatred, thus doing a thing most agreeable to the loving Heart of Jesus and to him who, however unworthy, holds His place on earth."

- **His plea to Catholic writers and journalists to be charitable in their writings**

"by abstaining not only from false and groundless accusations but also from all intemperance and bitterness of language, all of which is contrary to the law of Christ and does but reopen sores as yet unhealed, seeing that the slightest touch is a serious irritant to a heart whose wounds are recent."

He stressed that peace is more than a cessation of war. He pointed to unresolved issues that could lead to further conflict.

His untiring work for peace inspired two Popes several decades later.

It was **Pope John XIII** in the early 1960s who provided a human rights basis to church advocacy and solidarity for peace.

He was a priest during the horrors of WW1 and a bishop during WW11 and was a personal friend of two of the drafters of the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, while he was Nuncio in Paris. He used a diplomatic path to communicate with the United States and Soviet Presidents during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Pope Paul VI founded the **Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace** in 1967, and instituted an **annual World Day of Prayer for Peace** in 1968. Each year, there is a church teaching on peace, from a different perspective. Reference to the 1960s and 1970s is in Reflection Three.

In November 2018, on the centenary of the end of World War 1, Pope Benedict was remembered by the Pontifical Committee for Historical Sciences as it hosted an International Study Convention on the theme, *[“The Holy See and Catholics in the post-war world \(1918-1922\)”](#)*.

In the [press release](#) Father Bernard Ardura, O. Praem explained that, *“the war claimed 9 million victims, leaving 6 million disabled, 4 million widows and 8 million orphans. In the new situation that was created, new challenges were presented to the Holy See and the Catholic Church – a Holy See, it must be recalled, that was prevented from participating in the peace negotiations by the unresolved “Roman Question”, and posed in view of issues born of changes of borders, of nationalities of the German African colonies, and exacerbated nationalities. The aim of the convention is for the study of the consequences of this first world conflict to open new paths of reflection not only to nurture our knowledge of a now century-long past, but also to offer new stimuli for reflection useful for building today a world of peace, of serenity and of harmonious human co-existence.”*

In 2019, the Pontifical Lateran University signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the United Nation’s own University for Peace, to develop a *[“joint curriculum to train future leaders for peace”](#)*.

Three entities of the Church, the Lateran University, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the Congregation for Catholic Education hosted the conference *[“Education, Human Rights and Peace: Instruments of International Action and the Role of Religion.”](#)*

We conclude this reflection with the message of [Pope Francis at the Angelus on Sunday 2nd October 2022](#).

Once more, he called for a ceasefire and a way forward with peace negotiations. He revealed publicly, his messages to the Russian Federation President, and to the President of Ukraine.

“The course of the war in Ukraine has become so serious, devastating and threatening, as to cause great concern. Therefore, today I would like to devote the entire reflection before

the Angelus to this. Indeed, this terrible and inconceivable wound to humanity, instead of healing, continues to shed even more blood, risking to spread further.

I am saddened by the rivers of blood and tears spilled in these months.

I am saddened by the thousands of victims, especially children, and the destruction which has left many people and families homeless and threaten vast territories with cold and hunger.

Certain actions can never be justified, never! It is disturbing that the world is learning the geography of Ukraine through names such as Bucha, Irpin, Mariupol, Izium, Zaporizhzhia and other areas, which have become places of indescribable suffering and fear. And what about the fact that humanity is once again faced with the atomic threat? It is absurd. What is to happen next? How much blood must still flow for us to realize that war is never a solution, only destruction?

In the name of God and in the name of the sense of humanity that dwells in every heart, I renew my call for an immediate ceasefire. Let there be a halt to arms, and let us seek the conditions for negotiations that will lead to solutions that are not imposed by force, but consensual, just and stable. And they will be so if they are based on respect for the sacrosanct value of human life, as well as the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each country, and the rights of minorities and legitimate concerns.

I deeply deplore the grave situation that has arisen in recent days, with further actions contrary to the principles of international law. It increases the risk of nuclear escalation, giving rise to fears of uncontrollable and catastrophic consequences worldwide.

My appeal is addressed first and foremost to the President of the Russian Federation, imploring him to stop this spiral of violence and death, also for the sake of his own people.

On the other hand, saddened by the immense suffering of the Ukrainian people as a result of the aggression they have suffered, I address an equally confident appeal to the President of Ukraine to be open to serious proposals for peace.

I urge all the protagonists of international life and the political leaders of nations to do everything possible to bring an end to the war, without allowing themselves to be drawn into dangerous escalations, and to promote and support initiatives for dialogue.

Please let the younger generations breathe the salutary air of peace, not the polluted air of war, which is madness!

After seven months of hostilities, let us use all diplomatic means, even those that may not have been used so far, to bring an end to this terrible tragedy.

War in itself is an error and a horror!

Let us trust in the mercy of God, who can change hearts, and in the maternal intercession of the Queen of Peace, as we raise our Supplication to Our Lady of the Rosary of Pompei, spiritually united with the faithful gathered at her Shrine and in so many parts of the world.”

Father Gerry Hefferan

3 October 2022