

WAR PRISONERS' RELEASE

EFFORT OF BENEDICT XV. IN BEHALF OF PRISONERS OF WAR SHOWS THE PONTIFF'S GREAT CHARITY

The writer, Rev. W. Demony, in the Denver Catholic Register, is indebted to the Civiltà Cattolica, Rome, for the data contained in the following article.

Our Holy Father and gloriously reigning Pope, Benedict XV., has merited, from all right-minded and impartial people, the title "Pontiff of Peace," "Pontiff of Charity." As the representative upon earth of Christ, who was the Prince of Peace, and as the universal father of all the faithful, it is natural that the Pope bear such a title; but Benedict XV. has well merited it for other reasons. He has risen above the burning atmosphere of passion which has surrounded the nations, and he has embraced all people with equal love. In times of such stress as we have witnessed for the past four years, a figure such as our Holy Father is necessary in the world. Under the worst influence of his personality, borne up by the confidence he inspires, and yielding to the authority that is his, men have found a ruler and a helper magnanimous, impartial, and imbued with the spirit of the commandment to "love God above all things and other men as thyself."

PROGRAM OF THE POPE

Our Holy Father's special program which has won for him the name of "Pope of Charity," is that of influencing the nations at war to exchange the prisoners incapacitated and incapable of further fighting, whether from wounds, disease, or any other cause. The world at large—though slightly informed of this—has never known it sufficiently well, owing to the silence and the one-sided workings of the secular press. Even Catholic papers and periodicals, while they frequently have made reference to this charitable and wonderful work, have not cited the lengthy and delicate negotiations which preceded the successful accomplishment of this task.

SUMMARY OF NEGOTIATIONS

A brief enumeration of the negotiations between the Holy See and the different nations, perhaps will be well received in this country, since the kith and kin of all are engaged in the conflict beyond the seas; and fathers and mothers, relatives and friends, will feel a debt of gratitude towards Benedict XV., whose efforts have made it possible for infirm, incapacitated and severely wounded soldier-prisoners not to be compelled to spend their days—even for the duration of the war—amid the horrors of an enemy prison camp. Undoubtedly this country also will readily enter into such agreements, when the good of boys demands it.

It was on the occasion of the Christmas greetings (December 24, 1914) presented by the Sacred College of Cardinals to His Holiness Benedict XV., that we obtain the first inkling of this great enterprise in war relief work. In response to the good wishes of the members of this noble court, the Holy Father referred to the war and to the peace which he had, by all means within his power, both publicly and in private, endeavored to preserve. Now he wished to pour some balm, if possible, over the numerous terrible wounds of the conflict; and to this end he had proposed a Christmas truce to the belligerent nations. This was refused by some—nevertheless, the beautiful spirit which inspired it was neither lost nor overlooked.

ONE OF THE FIRST DOCUMENTS

Benedict XV. then made allusion to the initiative he had taken in the work of mutual "exchange of prisoners who were unable for further military service;" and thus the Holy Father publicly and solemnly gave out the contents of the program he had mapped out to ascertain the feelings of the various governments in this regard. Hence, one will see that as early as December of 1914, Pope Benedict began to exchange views with the different powers as to this relief work.

One of the first documents in this matter dates back to December 12, 1914. It contains only general terms, but the tone clearly shows its intent and purpose. A letter was addressed by Prince Schonburg, ambassador to the Holy See from Austria-Hungary, to the Cardinal Secretary of State, in which was communicated to him a despatch from the minister of foreign affairs, expressing the deepest gratitude to His Holiness. Reference was made to the work undertaken by the Holy Father to better the lot of the prisoners of war of Austria-Hungary, and the fatherly kindness contained therein was recognized and highly praised. Besides, it had excited throughout the entire empire the deepest admiration for his work.

AUSTRIA-HUNGARY REPLIES

It is true that nothing definite was promised in the above communication; but on December 29 another was received, which read partly as follows:

"This foreign office awaits a reply from the government. It believes there will be no difficulty, and is willing to do everything possible to have the noble undertaking of the Holy See issue successfully. The decision of the government will be immediately communicated to the Secretary of State."

His Eminence, Cardinal Berchtold, on January 1, 1915, sent the following communication to the Secretary of State, through the ambassador from Austria-Hungary:

"We hail with joy and gratitude the undertaking, inspired by a deep feeling of love for fellowman, of His Holiness to have exchanged the prisoners of War unable for military service. We fully accede to the humanitarian idea, and as soon as we shall have received the official proposals of the Holy See, we shall place ourselves in relation with the enemy belligerent governments, in order to put in force its practical execution."

Negotiations were carried on with England, through Cardinal Gasquet. It was found that exactly ten days before the British ambassador to the Quirinal, Sir Rennel Rodd, received the communication of His Eminence, Cardinal Gasquet—namely, December 12, 1914—the British government had proposed to Germany an exchange of disabled and incapacitated prisoners of war, but no reply had yet come. In the meantime England was fully in accord with the benevolent proposal of the Holy See.

The Serbian government was sounded through L. Michailovitch, minister of Serbia to Cetigne, and by letter dated December 24, 1914, the Cardinal Secretary of State was assured that the royal Serbian government had received most favorably the proposal of the Holy See, and awaited only the reply of its allies.

On the very same day Christmas eve—favorable news came from Turkey, through Mgr. Dolci, Apostolic Delegate to Constantinople, who conferred with the heads of the government immediately upon receipt of the despatch from the Cardinal Secretary of State. Admiration was expressed for the Holy Father in his efforts to bring about an armistice at Christmas, and mention was made of the kindly feelings towards His Holiness, aroused by his endeavors, throughout the Ottoman Empire. Final decision was left to the military authority.

GERMANY

All intercourse with Germany in this connection had a happy issue; and, on December 29, 1914, a despatch was sent by the Secretary of State to the Prussian government, in which the Holy Father thanked the emperor for the kind acceptance of his proposal regarding the prisoners of war.

France at first appeared to frown upon the plans of the Pope. Through a high French ecclesiastical prelate, communication was established with President Poincaré on December 27, 1914. An unfavorable reply reached the Vatican—two reasons for which were thus assigned, one, political; the other, military. The first was that Switzerland had made similar proposals to France a short time previously, and had been refused. The second reason, because it was believed that Germany was willing to consent to the exchange as she was more deficient of officials than France, and by this means she could fill in the gaps. The matter rested thus for a while, though some of the higher officials were favorably disposed.

By the end of December, 1914, the preliminary negotiations had been completed, England, Germany, Serbia and Turkey had welcomed the proposals; Austria and Belgium, it was felt, would also receive them favorably; France and Russia alone held off. On December 29, 1914, the Holy Father thanked the British government for the willingness to accede to his request, and besought it to seek for, and even insist upon, a favorable and prompt reply also from France and Russia.

Now assured of the will of the nations, Pope Benedict commenced official negotiations with them; and, on December 31, 1914, His Holiness sent to their majesties, the sovereigns of Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Germany, England, Russia and Serbia, each the following telegram:

"Trusting in the sentiments of Christian charity with which your majesty is animated, we beseech you to have the good will to close this present year well, and to inaugurate the new one by an act of supreme generosity, accepting our proposal that the belligerent nations exchange the prisoners rendered for the future unfit for military service."

"BENEDICT XV. POPE."

A telegram also was sent to Mohammed V. Emperor of Turkey, in which an appeal was made to his humanitarian sentiments.

SOVEREIGNS REPLY

In reply the King of England offered his thanks to the Holy Father for his telegram, and assured him that the British government had welcomed his proposal, and hoped that early in the new year the plan would become effective.

The Emperor of Germany likewise thanked His Holiness for his telegram, and gave him the assurance that he was totally in sympathy with his proposals.

Francis Joseph, the Emperor of Austria, expressed himself as profoundly moved by the sentiments of Christian charity displayed by His Holiness, and stated that his government was ready to open negotiations with the inimical nations, in order to come to a practical carrying out of the proposals.

Baron Hertling of Bavaria telegraphed to the minister of that country to the Holy See that the royal government had received in the most sympathetic manner the

proposal of the sovereign Pontiff. Peter the First of Serbia sent New Year greetings to the Holy Father, and assured him that the Serbian government would not fail to associate itself with any plan the other belligerents would agree to, in the question of exchange of prisoners.

Undoubtedly, the first days of the New Year 1915 brought much satisfaction to Benedict XV., for from the above one can readily perceive how willingly many of the warring powers received his proposals, and what assurance was given him, as a consequence, that thousands of families and prisoners would be relieved of much anxiety and sufferings, by the exchange the nations were disposed to effect.

On January 6 the Czar of Russia telegraphed His Holiness, congratulating him on his voluntary initiative which would mean so much to humanity, and promising his adhesion to the plan. Several days previously the Secretary of State had been informed by H. E. Nelidow that the emperor had desired to consent to an exchange of prisoners judged unfit for further military service.

On January 5 the final answer came from Turkey, Mgr. Dolci, the delegate to Constantinople, telegraphed the following words to the Cardinal Secretary of State:

"I confirm that the government accepts the proposals of the Holy Father relative to an exchange of prisoners."

Mohamet V., the Sultan of Turkey, sent his reply on January 9, fully accepting the proposals of His Holiness.

The answer from Nicholas I., King of Montenegro, reached the Vatican on January 13. He stated that the proposals of His Holiness, animated by sentiments of Christian charity, met with his approval and were satisfactory to Montenegro.

Now that satisfactory replies had been received from all the other nations, on January 4 the Pope telegraphed His Excellency, Raymond Poincaré, President of the French republic, asking him to follow the example of the other belligerents all of whom had accepted the proposals of the Holy See. On the following day a reply came to the effect that France had always treated her prisoners of war kindly, and now is studying means for a complete exchange of those incapacitated for military service.

Even Japan was consulted by telegram on January 9, relative to the exchange, and the Emperor Yoshihito replied from Tokio on the 12th of January. He stated he was in full accord with the Holy Father's efforts to relieve as much as possible the horrors of war and that no Japanese soldiers were in the hands of the enemy, and the prisoners in Japan were treated with the greatest kindness.

The above brief account of the negotiations between the Holy See and the belligerent nations is sufficient to show the world the generous Christian efforts of Benedict XV. to alleviate the sufferings and horrors of war. The result was happy, and thousands who enjoy liberty today— even though they are inmates and enfeebled by ill health—never will cease to thank the Holy Father for his work. The whole world as well should admire the charity and good will and fatherly kindness of Benedict XV.

TRUE CIVILIZATION

What is true civilization? By its fruits you shall know it. It is not dominion, wealth, material luxury; may, not even a great literature and education wide-spread, good though these may be. Civilization is not a veneer; it must penetrate to the very heart and core of the societies of men. Its true signs are thought for the poor and suffering, chivalrous regard and respect for woman, the frank recognition of human brotherhood, irrespect of race or color or nation or religion; the crowning of the domain of mere force as a governing factor in the world, abhorrence of what is mean and cruel and vile, ceaseless devotion to the claims of justice.—Truth.

LETTERED IN GLORY

Rev. Joseph Husslein, in Our Sunday Visitor

In the midst of the world war comes the news of the death in battle of the best beloved of our American Catholic poets, Joyce Kilmer. His stainless life was all devoted to Country, Church and God. In his heart there burned the keen flame of a consuming love for his fellow-men, a great and Christly love that would not let him rest, that drew him forth from home and peace and fame to offer up his life.

Through the red gap of death he has now leaped to answer, with pure soul, to the summons of his King. In his eyes shone the vision of a new world, a holier Europe, a consecrated America, for which he had been willing to sacrifice a thousand lives, if Christ had so wished to accept them.

In his great, loyal, Catholic heart there was malice for none and love for all. His view of the soldier's life was one of high obligation, of bearing anew the Cross of Christ, and of suffering in union with Him, in love and gratitude. So might he too help in bringing about the world's salvation through the precious Blood of Christ.

"That is the thought of his 'Prayer of a Soldier' which will remain classical in American Catholic literature. He is the cross-bearer who,

like Simon of Cyrene, would ease the Saviour's burden. He is the victim who unites himself at every step and in every pain and smart with that Greater Victim whose sacrifice was consummated upon Calvary. It is the most significant and perhaps racial spiritual of all Kilmer's poems. First appearing in the magazine "Good Housekeeping," it was reprinted countless times in the short space that intervened between its publication and the announcement of the poet's death. Yet who would not gladly read it once again:

"My shoulders ache beneath my pack,
(Lie easier, Cross upon His back)
I march with feet that burn and smart,
(Tread, Holy Feet, upon my heart,
Men shout at me who may not speak,
(They scourged Thy back and smote Thy cheek.)
I may not lift a hand to clear
My eyes of salty drops that sear,
(Then shall not Babel's soul forget
Thy agony of Bloody Sweat.)
My rifle hand is stiff and numb,
(From Thy pierced palm red rivers come.)
Lord, Thou didst suffer more for me,
Than all the hosts of land and sea,
So let me render back again
This millionth of Thy gift. Amen."

Fully and entirely has that "millionth" now been rendered back. In his own blood has the poet added the concluding couplet to the beautiful series of comparisons that humbly contrast his own slight sufferings with the great passion of Christ, his Saviour. He too has now met that death which his reverend pen might best have compared with the sublime sacrifice on Calvary. But his mortal hand had stayed at the description of the Crucifixion: "From Thy pierced palm red rivers come."

Not "writ in water," as the poet Keats believed his name would be, but writ in the blood of the world's

great tragedy and lettered in glory is the far fairer name of Sergeant Joyce Kilmer.

A FRIEND IN NEED

The Abbe Klein, widely known in America, relates a touching instance of the devotion of a dog to his wounded master. The young soldier was wounded by the bursting of a shell near Arras. His comrades were killed, and he was so imbedded in debris and so weak from loss of blood that he was yielding to despondency when his dog arrived on the scene. Instantly the animal set to work to release his master, who was heartened by the dog's efforts and made attempts to disengage his arms. After a time he crawled out. Then his friend gave him first aid, licking his wounds and attending to him until a relief party arrived. At the station, the soldier's foot was amputated and the surgeon ordered removal to the hospital in Paris.

The order did not include the dog, but the woman in charge of the canteen promised to care for him. For days he refused food and showed such distress that it was thought he would die of grief. At last a kind-hearted official offered to take him to Paris, permission was granted; the dog, washed and combed, was brought into the ward, and speedily discovered his friend. His joy moved the wounded soldiers to tears.

Every morning, at a stated hour, he scratches for admission to the ward and there takes up his post at the foot of his master's bed. Just to look at his comrade satisfies him, and, no doubt, the wounded man is pleased to have so faithful a friend to help beguile the weariness of slow recovery.

When we read instances like this of the affection and fidelity of the dog, we wonder why men can propose laws to practically kill off those devoted animals.—Sacred Heart Review.

Striving to better, oft we mar what's well—Shakespeare.

SEEKERS OF TRUTH

Always there are a few seekers who want Truth's self and not her gifts, says Philip G. Hamerton. Once scholars they are scholars always. They really put their lives into the structure of the world's advancing knowledge. Then those lives always remain, like solid stones, for the scholarship of the years to come and build upon.

Where there is a calm inward shining of the love of God there is contentment and a submissive will and a glad content in our present lot, says Cardinal Manning.

There is no happiness like peace with God, no joy like the joy of feeling that Jesus loves you, says Father Faber.

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