

The War Policy of the Pope

JAMES CARDINAL GIBBONS

I N my experience of many years with my countrymen I have always found them fair-minded and just. They have that decent regard for the opinion of others and that sense of tolerance and fair play which are rightly looked upon as the distinctive mark of a great democratic people. They willingly listen to both sides of a question and judge it on its merits. They are generous and sincere. In the trying times through which they are now passing and which are testing their mettle, they have given a noble example of fidelity to duty and of the spirit of self-sacrifice. Ready and armed in the cause of justice they are prepared for a long and cruel war and are willing to give their treasures and their lives to bring it to a successful end. But they would not prolong it one single moment beyond that term when it would become either useless or unjust. They are enlisted heart and soul for a just war. But they long intensely for a lasting and durable peace.

The world today is full of peace-terms and rumors of peace. When we consider the sorrows and the tragedies which the war has caused, and try to take measure of all the financial and industrial losses it has entailed both here and abroad, and look forward into the future in an endeavor to compute the misery and the ruin it will surely entail if prolonged, we cannot but yearn for the day when that just, honorable and durable peace is given to the world.

My heart goes out to all the sufferers of the war, to my own countrymen first of all, who, though alert and ready for every sacrifice in the cause of justice, are nevertheless suffering for no fault of their own, to the widows and the orphans it has left in its cruel passage, to the halt and the blind whom it has returned to their sorrowing homes. I mourn over the countless dead. But one lone and majestic figure calls for all my sympathy and love. More perhaps than any other single individual our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XV, has suffered in this tragedy. Others have but their own individual sorrows. He bears the sorrows of all. Wherever he turns his eyes from the Vatican he sees his children locked in deadly strife. He counts them by the thousands among our own countrymen who have generously answered their country's call, and among the Allies too, just as he does among the enemies whom they are facing on the field of battle. And though the triumph of justice always consoles him, yet he cannot but mourn over the slaughter of his spiritual children.

It is not astonishing then that the Holy Father, lifted above the noise and the strife of world-policies has constantly and consistently worked for a just and enduring

peace. Reasonable men expect that from him. He is a priest. To millions of Catholics throughout the world he is the Supreme Pontiff commissioned by Christ to rule and guide His flock. Like his Master he rules not by the sword, but by love. He is the universal Pastor. As such he cannot become a participant in the strife. And though he should condemn and has actually condemned all violations of the laws of war, yet as far as is consistent with morality and religion, he must hold the balance of an equal judgment between the contending parties. Those who wish that he had done more, misunderstand the nature of his office. He is not an ordinary neutral. His position has peculiar features that make it altogether unique. He is a co-sufferer with all the nations in the conflict. Except in rare cases where it was his duty to act, he was bound to look upon all alike, and by counsel and warning endeavor to bring the combatants to a mutual understanding, and in this he has not been entirely unsuccessful.

It must not be thought that his silence, when he thought it necessary, came from cowardice, worldly prudence or political and selfish motives. From the first letter which the Holy Father addressed to the world on September 8, two days after he had been crowned, in which he expressed his horror at the awful catastrophe into which the war had plunged the nations, down to the eloquent protest of a few weeks since, in which he solemnly condemned the useless and cruel air-raids on the beautiful city of Padua, as contrary to the law of nations, he has not been afraid to speak out in favor of peace and against cruelty. Two months after his election, in his Encyclical "*Ad Beatissimi*," he made an earnest appeal to the nations to put an end to the war. He spent the following weeks of that year in a generous and truly Christian endeavor, unfortunately not crowned with success, to obtain a cessation of hostilities during those hallowed days when the world celebrated the coming of the Prince of Peace.

Scarcely a month of his Pontificate passed without some word of warning from him, some appeal for the prisoner, the war sufferer, some protest against the horrors and injustices of the fratricidal struggle. On January 22, 1915, he again earnestly pleaded for the cessation of armed strife. He appointed February 7 for Europe and March 21 for the rest of the world as a day of public prayer for peace, by the millions of his children throughout the world. In the month of May of that same year he asked his subjects, wherever found, to turn to the Immaculate Heart of the Mother of God and to pray to her that order, peace and love might soon be

restored to a suffering world. Towards the end of that year, in the Consistorial Allocution of December 6, he made one of his memorable statements, one that may be considered as the seed of every legitimate movement for peace undertaken since, when he declared that a way to a just and durable peace consisted in a clear and straightforward formulation by the respective parties of their aims and purposes, to be followed by a conference in which, all injustice being laid aside, mutual concessions and compensations should be made in the spirit of equity. In 1916 he urged the practice of the spirit of penance in the families of the belligerents and appointed a general Communion day for the children, for the return of peace. A few months later he protested against the malicious charges made against his impartiality and solemnly affirmed that no selfish interest guided his acts, but that he was working for the cause of suffering and bleeding humanity. The following year witnessed again his untiring efforts in the cause of order and civilization. His work culminated in his peace note of August 1 to the heads of the many nations at war, a document which, in spite of its critics, is a monument to the universal affection, the prudent diplomacy and the strict impartiality of the Vicar of Christ. That document has been misunderstood by some, by others wilfully misinterpreted. It was not meant to be a final award. It purported to be but an effort to bring the nations together, in the persons of their representatives and delegates for the purpose of beginning a discussion of peace. It was not a judicial decision. It was a diplomatic effort. It contained the broad outlines of a plan of settlement. Unless I am much mistaken, when the peace congress assembles the final verdict of the nations will be based on the general principles pointed out by the Holy Father.

It has been said again and again that Benedict XV has forgotten Belgium, that he did not speak up for her in her hour of betrayal by the superior forces of her invaders. When Benedict XV came to the throne, Belgium had already been invaded by the German armies and a considerable part of her territory overrun. The flagrant injustice had already been committed. When the invasion took place the saintly Pius was already in the shadow of death. On coming to the throne the new Pope did not wait long to let the world know of his sentiments with regard to the violation of Belgian territory. He spoke at first with prudent circumspection, for not all the facts were in his possession. But he soon learned the truth and acted conformably to it. According to the letter written by the Papal Secretary of State, Cardinal Gasparri, to M. Van der Heuvel, Belgian Minister to the Vatican, "The violation of the neutrality of Belgium, carried out by Germany, on the admission of her own Chancellor, contrary to international law, was one of those injustices which the Holy Father in his Consistorial Allocution of January 22 strongly reprobated." And the Hamburger *Fremdenblatt* (January 29, 1917),

in allusion to this, complains that "The one belligerent power against which the Vatican has spoken is Germany." Writing to M. Laudet, editor of the *Revue Hebdomadaire*, in July, 1915, the Pope also protested against "the martyrdom of the poor Belgian priests and so many other horrors on which light has been cast." He protested also against the Belgian deportations and had hundreds of victims of these cruel measures returned to their homes. Such has been his solicitude for the martyred nation that it has called for the most profuse thanks from the two great heroes of the war, King Albert and Cardinal Mercier. His Holiness also protested to Russia against the violence to persons and to conscience displayed during the early occupation of East Prussia and Galicia, and against the harsh treatment of Mgr. Szeptycki, the venerable Archbishop of Lemberg. He has labored for the prisoners of war, for the crippled and the blind of the war's countless battlefields. Not once has he forgotten that he is the Father of the Faithful. His conduct towards the Italian Government has been marked by such a spirit of conciliation, justice and absolute impartiality that high government officials have praised him and those under his jurisdiction. The silly and cowardly slanders recently brought against his patriotism by radicals are so gross as not to deserve a refutation.

The Holy Father has faced a terrible ordeal. He is facing it still. On all sides he is surrounded by pitfalls. Every act of his is watched, scrutinized by jealous, critical, hostile eyes, only too ready to find fault and to register blame. More than ever he needs the support of his loyal children. The Roman Pontiffs of the past have ever found in American Catholics a whole-hearted devotion. We are not going to fail our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XV, in this supreme hour. For all that he has done so nobly and so unselfishly for the cause of peace and humanity his faithful children here in the United States, for whose people he has more than once expressed his admiration and love, are profoundly grateful. Though at war in order that all the peoples of the earth may be really free, we wish with him that a just peace may be soon regained. For that peace he has nobly and generously striven. Men may not now realize the extent and the nobility of his efforts, but when the voices of passion are stilled, history will finally do him full justice.

As a last word I beg to congratulate my countrymen on the generous ardor with which they have rallied to the support of our beloved President in his dark hour of trial. He has striven for high ideals and has found a reward in an enthusiastic response from his fellow-citizens. They have not failed him and will not do so in the future but will continue to give him and his colleagues that loyal support which is an earnest of complete victory and of a return of the happy peace for which he and the Holy Father are earnestly laboring, each in his own sphere.

