

Doctrine and Devotion

Our Catholic Heritage

The Church at the Dawn of the 20th Century

By MSGR. JAMES F. CONNELLY

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Pope St. Pius X (1903-1914) was precisely the type of leader the Church needed at the beginning of the 20th century. His spirituality, his tenacious orthodoxy, his simplicity and his pastoral experience combined to make him the greatest reform pope since the Council of Trent.

Theologians remember Pope St. Pius X for his condemnation of Modernism, an insidious religious attitude prevalent in the Church at the beginning of his pontificate. St. Pius X called this modernist theology the "synthesis of all heresies."

The Modernists, led by Abbe Alfred Loisy in France and Father George Tyrrell, S.J., in England, tried to adapt the popular scientific and historical methods of the age to religious belief, in order to make

the Catholic faith more attractive to intellectuals. With great enthusiasm and little prudence, many of these Modernists ended up by eliminating dogmas or essential formula of belief from the Catholic Church and substituting for them pious religious sentiments. They unfortunately forged a dichotomy between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Eternity, and they concluded that Jesus Christ did not establish His Church.

For the Modernist dogma was unimportant, if not impossible to formulate. The essence of the faith for them was personal religious experience. They had no "creed" until Pope St. Pius X summed up their various errors in his decree "Lamentabili" (1907), which was a syllabus of condemned modernist teachings, and in his encyclical "Pascendi Dominici Gregis" (1907) which condemned the system of the Modernists as akin to agnosticism and atheism.

It was the sacred duty of the Holy Father to condemn and to halt such teachings which struck at the core of the Christian faith. He did so with severe measures which saved the Church from heresies like Gnosticism and Jansenism. Unfortunately, the suspicion of Modernism and the hunt for Modernists — sometimes resembling a witch hunt on the part of enthusiastic champions of orthodoxy — restrained the progress of Catholic scriptural and theological research. Today, many Catholic scholars employ the scientific, historical, and critical methods of the Modernists without reaching their conclusions or intending to change the objective dogmas of the faith.

Pope St. Pius X being a most charitable man, did not enjoy his battle with the Modernists. He was much happier when he could be a positive pastor to the faithful. In 1905, he decreed that "frequent and daily communion should be open to

all the faithful of whatever rank or condition of life, so that no one who is in the state of grace and who approaches the Sacred Table with a right and devout heart can lawfully be hindered therefrom." The Holy Father taught that the reception of Holy Communion was not a reward for the perfect but rather a help for the faithful to live virtuously.

Five years later the Holy Father decreed that children should receive their first Holy Communion as soon as possible after reaching the age of discretion, usually about the age of seven. This age of reason is reached "when a child knows the difference between Bread which is the Eucharist and ordinary material bread — not full reason, of course, but incipient reason suffices."

Liberal scholars denounced St. Pius X for his condemnation of Modernism. His teachings on the reception of Holy Communion earned him the title "The Pope of the Eucharist."

The Pope Who Restored All Things in Christ

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The noted Church historian, Ludwig von Pastor, has described Pope St. Pius X as "... one of those chosen few men whose personality is irresistible. Everyone was moved by his simplicity and his angelic kindness. Yet it was something more that carried him into all hearts: and that 'something' is best defined by saying that all who were ever admitted to his presence had a deep conviction of being face to face with a saint."

Giuseppe Sarto, the second of 10 children of a postman, was born on June 2, 1835 in Riese, Italy. At 15, he entered the seminary at Padua, and eight years later was ordained a priest. For the next 17 years, he worked in various parochial, teaching and administrative assignments in the Diocese of Treviso. In 1884, the Holy Father named him Bishop of Mantua, a distressed diocese. Nine years later he became Cardinal-Patriarch of Venice, and ten years later he was elected pope. He took the name Pius X and the motto: "To Restore All Things in Christ."

Although Pope Pius X is commonly associated with the purging of Modernism from the Church, and for his renewal of Eucharistic participation, he is less known for his other initiatives:

Immediately after his papal election, he revoked the jus exclusionis (the right of exclusion) that is, the long standing custom which some European

Catholic nations had of vetoing candidates for the papacy. He relaxed the Vatican's ban on the partic-



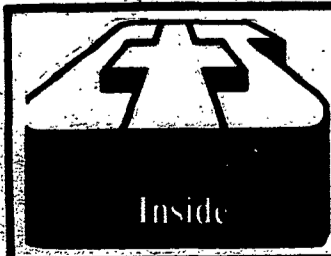
ipation of the Catholics of Italy in their political system. In 1905, he broke off diplomatic relations with the French government when that country renounced the Concordat of 1801. This resulted in the French appropriating church property, but it freed the French Church from its slavery to that anticlerical government.

Pope St. Pius X reformed the Roman Curia. He began the codifying of the Canon Law of the Church. He set up a commission for the revision of the Vulgate text of the Bible and, in 1909, he founded the Biblical Institute. He also began a liturgical renewal by revising The Office of the Hours, and by giving new impetus to liturgical music and plain chant.

Dismayed by the poor teaching of Catholic doctrine, he ordered that the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine be established in every parish with the hope that competently trained laity could assist the priests in catechizing the young.

Pope St. Pius X accomplished all these things and much more in a rather brief pontificate. To his sorrow, though, he could not prevent the outbreak of World War I on Aug. 4, 1914, the 11th anniversary of his papal election. Sixteen days later he was dead, the first great victim of the great war.

His crypt in St. Peter's Basilica instantly became a place of pilgrimage. People knew that Pius X was a saint, and the Church confirmed their feelings in 1954 when Pope Pius XII canonized the pope who had only wanted to be a parish priest.



Calendar 14
Child 6
Classified 15
Cuddy 4
Editorial 13
Gabriel 13
Hohman 7
Liturgy 14
Opinion 13
Parish News 12
People and Events ... 7
Pope 12
RapAround 10
Shamon 5
Sisters Reflect 15

Nuestra Vida Looks At Permanent Diaconate 11

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