

Pope Benedict XV: pontiff of happy memory

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

Seventy-five years ago this month Giacomo Della Chiesa, cardinal-archbishop of Bologna, was elected Bishop of Rome and took the name Benedict XV.

In a century of celebrated popes — including St. Pius X, Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II — the figure of Benedict XV has been somewhat dwarfed. That's unfortunate because there is much of value to be learned from his life and ser-

vice in the papacy.

From 1883 to 1887, Father Della Chiesa served as secretary to Archbishop Mariano Rampolla, then nuncio (papal ambassador) to Spain.

Rampolla became secretary of state and a cardinal in 1887 under Pope Leo XIII. Della Chiesa remained in the service of the new cardinal, and was himself promoted to undersecretary of state in 1901, during the waning years of Leo XIII's lengthy pontificate.

Cardinal Rampolla went into the conclave of 1903 as the leading candidate to succeed Leo XIII. He had been the dead pope's leading supporter in trying to bring the Catholic Church into the modern world of the late 19th century, so full of economic, social, and political changes.

But 42 votes were needed for election, and Rampolla never got above 30. His defeat has been attributed to a veto exercised by the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz-Joseph, conveyed through the car-



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dinal-archbishop of Krakow. He was also opposed by a conservative faction within the Roman Curia.

Giuseppe Sarto was elected on the sixth ballot and took the name Pius X — an ominous gesture in light of the previous Pius' vehement rejection of modern developments.

Not surprisingly, Cardinal Rampolla was replaced as secretary of state by the rigidly conservative Cardinal Merry del Val.

Della Chiesa was kept on as undersecretary until 1907, that momentous year during which Pius X issued his dual denunciations of Modernism in the decree *Lamentabili*, containing 65 condemned propositions, and in the encyclical *Pascendi*.

Della Chiesa had hoped to be appointed nuncio to Spain, but because of his long association with the progressive-minded Cardinal Rampolla, he was appointed instead to the archbishopric of Bologna.

There followed a widespread and distressing harassment of scholars, which expanded the breach between the church and the educated classes.

One of the most distinguished church historians in the United States, Father James Hennessey, SJ, has observed that the "post-*Pascendi* years in American Catholicism were marked by intellectual retreat and theological sterility. Cultivation of the life of the mind became suspect."

The repressive forces unleashed by the action of Pope Pius X "effectively put an end for the next 50 years to further development of Catholic thought in authentic American dress" *American Catholics*, Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 217.

Not until seven years after his appointment to Bologna was Archbishop Della Chiesa named a cardinal. Three months later Pius X died and, ironically, Della Chiesa was elected to succeed him.

Benedict XV's seven-and-a-half-year pontificate was overshadowed by World War I and its immediate aftermath. It is significant, however, that within two months of his election to the papacy, he issued an encyclical calling a halt to the bitter animosities that had erupted following his predecessor's condemnation of Modernism.

The Catholic Church was divided as it is today between self-styled defenders of the faith and those who were faithful to Leo XIII's project of bringing the church abreast of modern developments.

These were days, it must be remembered, when the atmosphere was poisoned by the existence of spy networks established by right-wing Catholics to report fellow Catholics to Rome for alleged infidelity to pure, "integral" Catholicism (thus the term "integralism").

And so Pope Benedict XV, whose patron Cardinal Rampolla had been rejected by the integralist faction, did indeed call a halt to this self-righteous and un-Christian viciousness.

In his encyclical, *Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum*, he insisted that Catholics be allowed to defend their opinions without being stigmatized as disloyal to faith or to discipline.

"It is, moreover, Our will," he continued, "that Catholics should abstain from certain appellations" (such as integral, true or traditional) "which have recently been brought into use to distinguish one group of Catholics from another."

He said such terms are not only out of harmony with truth and justice, but "give rise to great trouble and confusion among Catholics."

Wise words. And they are as applicable today as they were in 1914.

Benedict XV — a pope "of happy memory."

Prince Absalom schemes to overthrow his father

By Cindy Bassett
Courier columnist

"Sir, where are you going in such great distress?" the handsome young man asked.

"I must see King David at once!" the citizen told the man standing by the gate to the city of Jerusalem. "I want to receive justice in a case against my neighbor."

"What has your neighbor done?" the young man asked.

"First he built a fence on my land right in the middle of where my sheep come to graze," the citizen began.

"That seems like a pretty clear-cut case in your favor," the young man replied. "Your neighbor has broken the law."

"But that was just the beginning of my troubles," the citizen continued. "When my sheep went to graze on the stolen land, my neighbor decided to steal them, too!"

"What a terrible thing for you to bear," the young man said. "King David is busy with many things. But if I were a judge, I

would make certain you received justice against this neighbor."

"You have been very kind," the citizen said as he left. "Who are you?"

"I am Prince Absalom," the young man replied.

"The king's own son! Your Majesty, I did not know," the citizen said, bowing.

"There's no need for that," Prince Absalom said as he pulled the surprised man to his feet. "I'm sorry about your trouble, and I wish you good luck in your case."

And thus did the crafty Absalom set himself about winning the loyalty of all of the king's citizens. Every morning, he paraded himself around Jerusalem in a chariot followed by an entourage of 50 men. Then he posted himself at the city gates and pretended to be sympathetic to all who came seeking King David's ruling on a case.

Four years passed, and King David never suspected that his own son was plotting to overthrow him. He was stunned on



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the day that a messenger arrived at the palace with his chief general, Joab.

"Your Majesty, it is with great sadness that I must inform you that Absalom has gone to Hebron and declared himself king," the messenger told him.

"That is not the worst part of the news we have received," Joab continued.

"Your own chief counsel, Ahithophel, has joined many others who have gone to Hebron and declared their loyalty to Absalom. Together they are forming an army to come and attack Jerusalem."

"It is my life that they seek," David said. "I do not want innocent people to be killed. There is nothing to be done now but to leave the city."

It was a sad procession that retreated from Jerusalem. And those who remained behind lined the streets and wept as they watched the king leave.

David was surprised to see Hushai, one of his most trusted friends at court, waiting for them as they reached a place near the top of the Mount of Olives. "Why haven't you joined the others?" David asked him.

"I will be loyal to you even if it means my own death," Hushai replied.

"Well if you really want to help me, return to Jerusalem and pretend to be loyal to Absalom," David suggested. "Try and find out what their plans are. I'll send spies to carry the information back to us."

Hushai agreed. He arrived at the palace just as Absalom and his army rode into Jerusalem.

To be continued.
Scripture reference: 2 Samuel, Chapter 15.

Meditation: "Even if I go through the deepest darkness, I will not be afraid, Lord, for you are with me. (Psalm 23:4).



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