

The Old Pope and Papal Prestige

By ANNE O'HARE McCORMICK

PIUS XI. now reigns in his stead. But Benedict XV., the fourth Pope since the Kingdom of Italy took possession of Rome, was the first for whose death the Italian Government lowered its flags to half-mast in token of mourning.

That gesture of Italy is significant. It draws attention to qualities in the dead Pontiff that were not generally recognized during his life. Benedict was little known and little considered until he died. Now a curiously clouded personality and a singularly overshadowed career suddenly emerge into the light of appraisal and take on new dimensions. His separately small and quiet achievements all at once add up to such a sum of accomplishment that one begins to wonder if in the insignificant figure of the late Pope the world may not have lost a great man.

We are accustomed to the sight of Popes moving across the stage of history. They are the only leading characters always in the picture. Like the ancient Chair of the Fisherman hidden under Bernini's tortured bronze in the overpowering tribune of St. Peter's, they are among the few historic legends that survive as facts. It is inevitable that the occupant of that Chair should often be lost in it. Only a very great Pope can escape extinction in an office constrained to majesty by its power in the past and its unabated claim in the present to spiritual sovereignty.

Benedict XV. seemed one of the negative Popes, dwarfed by his position and overpowered by the events of his time. One saw him at public functions in the Vatican, drooping under his tiara, dwindling within his embroidered state, plainly bored and burdened by his augustness. He appeared to the casual eye as one merely carrying on the papal tradition dutifully, resignedly, even competently, but certainly not animating or decorating it. He made no appeal to the imagination—a little man, awkward, tired, sallow, one shoulder slightly higher than the other, with no eloquence, no radiance, no personal charm. His reign saw the world torn by war and unplacated by peace. During the conflict he pleased no one, and all his efforts to end it resulted in failure. He was as one talking against tempests, a futile preacher of dead and powerless platitudes. He managed to achieve neither the picturesqueness of the pastoral simplicity of Pius X. nor the impressiveness of the brilliant old age of Leo XIII.

Yet now that he is dead he begins to grow larger and more definite. His accomplishment looks greater than that of either of his predecessors. After his seven years of apparent impotence he is suddenly discovered to have left the Papacy with more prestige than it has enjoyed for a hundred years. While war raged he succeeded in reconciling the old political enemies of the Holy See and in drawing envoys from most of the Courts of the earth to seek his counsel. The Italy that in the secret pact of London excluded him from the Peace Conference came home from Paris chastened and disillusioned to seek the friendship of the Vatican. "It is a pity we could not have sent the Pope to Paris," said one embittered Italian statesman. "He is turning out to be the only diplomat we have."

"Italy needs the Church more than the Church needs Italy," remarked the late Pope himself more than a year ago in an interview with two Americans who ventured to bring up the subject of the rumored rapprochement between the Italian Government and the Holy See.

They were told afterward that they had trodden on forbidden ground, and that only an American and an outsider would have had the temerity to broach a topic so delicate in the presence of the Pope. It was well known that there had been conversations between Cardinal Gasparri and Premiers Nitti and Giolitti, and that various understandings had been reached in regard to Government restrictions that had hampered the Vatican in the transaction of ecclesiastical business. Benedict, on his side, had lifted the ban against the visits of Catholic Sovereigns to the Quirinal, and had

in Italy by permitting Catholics to take part in the general elections. It was evident that unofficial relations between the Vatican and the Quirinal were better than they had ever been before. But officially there was no rapprochement at all, and it is a faux pas to mention anything but the obvious to the rulers of even spiritual States.

His Holiness treated the lapse gently, however. He did not give the impression of being a man of humor, but his keen eyes twinkled, and if he did not commit himself beyond a carefully phrased suggestion that it was the province of the usurper to find a solution of the Roman question that would be acceptable to the

To observe him at large audiences or at public functions after having engaged him in private conversation was like looking at a lamp quenched or a window heavily shuttered. The impassivity he assumed on such occasions, like the lack of expression in all his photographs, belied alike the vigor of his short frame and the robustness of his personality.

I remember his quick, staccato stride as he crossed his library to meet us on the morning of our reception; the swift glance with which he greeted and took us in; his curt gesture to the attendant to close the door and leave us alone. I do not remember the room at all. In the presence of Benedict XV. the eye and

his defeat by the Senate. He expressed concern over Mr. Wilson's health, and knew the names and the politics of the candidates in the electoral campaign then in progress. Altogether, in spite of his ignorance of English, he showed a knowledge of American politics very unusual in a foreigner, and exceeding that of any one I met in Italy except ex-Premier Orlando. He said that he was struck by the diminishing political strength of socialism in the United States at a time when it was almost overpowering the Governments of Europe. He prophesied that the force of circumstances would prevent America from escaping her destiny.

He wanted to hear our impression

common sense of his second thoughts. He was a native of the industrial north, a member of an old and noble family, it is true, but saved by his episcopal experience and his searching intelligence from taking the upper or outer view of the social problems of his time.

It was evident from his interest that these problems were what chiefly attracted and engrossed him. The late Pope was undoubtedly possessed by the belief that the thing he was ordained to do in a world of war was to make peace. He had carefully refrained during the war from any action that might weaken his claim to be the arbitrator of conflicts. He passed no judgments on the belligerents except those protests against incontrovertible outrages like the sinking of the Lusitania, the bombing of churches, the slaughter of noncombatants. But he realized that the consequences of the war were more devastating than the war itself, and that a military peace was a kind of cosmic sarcasm so long as there was neither economic nor social peace.

In the course of the talk, when he was referring to the activities of American welfare agencies, he jumped up from his chair to fetch from the other side of the room some photographs of himself taken with a group of members of the Knights of Columbus, who had made a pilgrimage to Rome during the preceding Summer. "That's an unusual picture of a Pope, isn't it?" he asked with a smile. "I think it is the first time the Holy Father has ever been photographed with a company of laymen—and, of course, they were Americans!"

The Pope introduced many other topics in the course of the audience, but since it is impossible to report him literally I can only present a few odd scraps from the lively patchwork of his talk, with the hope of conveying at least a suggestion of how different he was from what he appeared or was supposed to be. It is presumptuous with such slight materials to attempt to revise a general impression, but there are so few "close-up" views of Benedict XV., he was so obscured behind clouds of war on the one hand and clouds of incense on the other, that any passing glimpse behind the screen has a certain power of illumination. As his death discloses that a Pontiff who in a great time seemed to be doing little in reality accomplished much, so any one who met him face to face felt the dynamic force and purpose burning under his immobile public manner.

Benedict was less understood but better liked than Pius X. in a Roman society, both ecclesiastical and secular, that loves a diplomat better than anything on earth, and an aristocrat next to a diplomat. The combination of the two is irresistible! Yet Rome, outside of the officials of his household, knew no more of the Pope than New York knew of him. He was more retiring than Popes must be by the restrictions of circumstance, but he went about his business—his business of knowing this rent and ragged world, of patching it up and drawing the seams together by small stitches wherever he could, of strengthening always the power of that spiritual kingdom which he ruled—with a still and imperturbable concentration.

Benedict may or may not have been a great Pope. He had two qualities in a great degree—prudence and patience. These are not the qualities of genius; but in times like these they are perhaps more mollifying to the world's angers—and to the wrath of God which Pontiffs as profoundly faithful as he was must first fear—than more brilliant and subjugating gifts.

Before another election, if the new Pope is as skillful as the last, the "Roman question," which at present seems to bar non-Italians from the supreme office in the Catholic Church, may be as dead as the Austrian veto. Meantime Cardinal Maffi, known as "the Liberal," the great social reformer, whose influence has already outgrown the moribund old town of Pisa, is the outstanding churchman in Italy. The singular thing is that in the event the statesmanship of the Pope of Rome seems to matter more to the world than to the Church. The Papacy is apparently impregnable, time-proof and Pope-proof. But the world gropes for wisdom in some high place.



"Drooping under his tiara."

usurped, he did encourage the expression of an American opinion on a very controversial subject.

In fact, Benedict encouraged his visitors to the expression of views on all subjects, controversial or otherwise. And it is proof of his simplicity—or yours!—that you found yourself telling him quite freely what you thought. No Pope, of course, ever receives correspondents as such or gives interviews to the newspapers. But it was no use trying to interview the late Pontiff in one's most private capacity. He always interviewed his interviewers. He darted from point to point, probing the mind of his visitor. When he first assumed office he instructed his Secretary that he did not wish to read clippings, as had been the custom of his predecessors; he wished to read newspapers. The same desire to savor for himself all sorts of divergent and uncensored views and all varieties of information was typical of his conversation.

As I look back upon that audience and recall the number of unrelated subjects he was able to touch upon in less than half an hour, how frankly he talked and questioned, how open and fluid was his mind and how eager his intellectual curiosity, I regain the impression so strong at the time—that Benedict was astonishingly unknown to the outside world. No one who saw him only in public got any idea of his vivacity, his roving intelligence, his vivid penetration.

the mind had no chance to wander. He had the man of the world's ease with strangers that puts them at their ease, and at once drew us into two armchairs facing his with a manner that suggested the friendly host and not at all the Sovereign Pontiff.

I imagine that no recent Pope took his office more seriously or himself more simply than Benedict XV. When I saw Pius X. he seemed oppressed by his pontificate, overcome by mighty powers and mighty responsibilities. Benedict XV. was less conscious of himself as Pope in his unofficial moments. Pius was paternal, touching, himself moved by great spiritual passions and pities. Benedict had none of the pontifical manner. He was natural, responsive, of a business-like directness. His steady seriousness was unlightened by any of the famous wit of Leo XIII. or the soft laughter of so many old Bishops. He had none of the marks of mellowing age. He looked hardy, young, vigilant.

The Pope went on to question us about America. He was curious as to the real causes of what seemed to him the reversal of public sentiment in regard to the League of Nations, which, perhaps because he felt himself to be not without a part in its formulation, he called "a great conception." I was told by a Vatican official that no one in Europe had more faith in President Wilson than the Pope, or more deeply regretted

of the observance of the fiftieth anniversary of the union of Italy, which we had witnessed a short time before, and when we replied with truth that it seemed a very perfunctory and unpopular festival, the Pope expressed more anxiety than gratification. He had no reason to regret a celebration that had been frowned upon by the King and ignored by most of the people for fear of offending the Pope. But he recognized, as he said, that it was not a happy time in Italy for festivals. He mentioned the occupation of the factories by the workers of Milan and the continual procession of strikes and street fights that made travel in Italy at that time something of an adventure.

"But Italy is not and never will be Bolshevik," he declared with energy. "What you see is a flame that will go out. There is no intellectual foundation for Bolshevism here. The people are deeply conservative."

The Pope based his conviction on considerable knowledge of the Italian industrial classes. Bologna has been for years a storm centre of anarchy, the scene of more organized revolt than any place in Italy. As Archbishop of that turbulent see, Benedict XV. devoted most of his time and attention to the welfare of the workers. He knew the Italian workman, his real grievances against an almost feudal society, his dangerous impulsiveness and the saving