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A MESSAGE TO THE NINTH NATIONAL CONGRESS OF  
THE CONFRATERNITY OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE  
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

NOVEMBER 7-11, 1951

CCD-112

*Order from*

CONFRATERNITY PUBLICATIONS

508 Marshall St., Paterson 3, N. J.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

**Deacidified**

## BLESSED PIUS X AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

MOST REVEREND MOSES E. KILEY, S. T. D.

**I**N THE *midst of the Church she shall open his mouth, and shall fill him with the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and shall clothe him with a robe of glory.*"

— ECCLESIASTICUS 15:5

These words of the author of the Book of Ecclesiasticus find their fulfillment in the life and person of Pius X.

In the many important ecclesiastical positions he fulfilled, Pius X revealed talents that are rare in themselves, and rarer still in combination. To a broad background of experience he added an essential sanity of outlook, a poise and balance of mind, a delicacy and keenness of judgment which gave to his every pronouncement distinction, character and weight. To a depth of intellect, he added a deftness of touch which imparted to his utterances a charm peculiarly their own.

It was his gift as a preacher that brought about his first advancement. He was invited to preach a sermon on St. Anthony of Padua in the Cathedral of Treviso, an occasion which proved to be a revelation! As a result he became the most sought-after preacher in that part of Italy.

What held and charmed in his eloquence was his wonderful clarity of diction and demonstration, allied to a sweetness and warmth that gushed forth as a flame of light. His soul was rich in all those qualities so absolutely indispensable if sermons are to bear fruit.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, so also did the great Leo XIII approach his end; his life had spanned most of that century. He had imprinted upon his pontificate the length of his days, the majesty of his knowledge, the might of his diplomacy. Not long before his death, in the last audience he gave to the Patriarch of Venice, whom he held in great esteem — and whom, when Bishop of Mantua, he made a cardinal, in order to show that esteem — he spoke mysterious and prophetic words: "We feel that soon we must submit to the call of God. It may be you that will succeed us."

A Pontiff whose reign had conquered the world and made it bow before the majesty of the papacy, was now succeeded by the humble and gentle Pope who, caring chiefly for the inner flowering of the Church, was to be a real father and shepherd of Christ's flock. The needs of the clergy and the people were such that no one could better fulfill than the humble child of Riese, who had step by step ascended the grades of the hierarchy, leaving everywhere behind him the perfume of good and saintly works. He had been an assistant pastor, pastor, spiritual director of a seminary, chancellor, administrator of a diocese, Bishop of Mantua, and Patriarch of Venice. This most apostolic of men was indeed to impress upon the universal Church, by him reformed and conformed to Christ, a mark that all future centuries will proclaim wise and holy.

Having ascended the chair of Peter, from the humblest duties of parish priest, Pius X dedicated himself to the correction of the evils of the times and the urgent need of souls. With the ready intuition and sound practical sense with which he was so singularly gifted, he began immediately to carry out the apostolic program: "To restore all things in Christ." This was the indispensable condition for bringing peace to his times, which are also our own.

The past half century, eleven years of which were filled with his pontificate, has experienced, at tragic cost, the truth that there is no other spiritual family and social program outside that which he offered to all humanity. The more this invitation was neglected, the more human society fell into the abyss of misery and dissolution; today the whole world trembles at the thought of the unpredictable end toward which a world without God is drifting. However, Pius X did not waste time in futile recriminations; he at once set forth to plough the field of God and sow it with the seeds of wise reform, which in due season and with heaven's blessing would give the desired harvest.

He sowed his reforms in labor and tears, but so successful was he that today we are able to gather the fruits of his work.

If we pause to consider the shortness of time and the poverty of the means at his disposal, and the many difficulties he had to contend with, his accomplishments appear to border on the miraculous. Those who opposed him were many; his close collaborators were few and, moreover, they were often unjustly accused of being the advisers of an old and weak sovereign, when in reality they were the faithful executors of a man of iron will, who took his orders from God alone. For this reason history has already declared Pius X a great Pope and a true spiritual benefactor of mankind.

He was *pious* both in name and spirit. He prayed and conversed with his Lord with the faith of Peter and the simple trust of John. He told Jesus of his sorrows, laid before Him his doubts and problems, asked for His Divine Light; all his decisions, the most difficult and brave, were taken at the foot of the crucifix, which he called his Counselor. He loved Our Lady with a most tender devotion, born in his heart in the days of his childhood at her sanctuary near his home. She was to be the star of his sorrowful and glorious journey through life, the heavenly inspirer of his actions, the immaculate flower that was to shed its perfume over him as priest, Bishop, Pontiff. He strove with all his heart to represent Jesus Christ worthily: first, to make Him live in himself and then in the souls entrusted to his care.

His private life as Pontiff remained the same as through all the other phases of his career, from seminary days till the time when he ascended the Chair of Peter. He continued to live as simply as possible, always reminding those about him that he had been born poor, had lived poor and had no other desire than to die in poverty.

His first act as Pontiff was to suppress forever the right of veto, such as the Austro-Hungarian Cardinal presented at the conclave in which he was elected. The Pope himself, having made public by his Decree what took place in the conclave of the cardinals, felt that the participants were no longer held to the secret of the conclave in regard to this episode.



A certain Cardinal, who had sincere regard for Cardinal Rampolla and who had been his faithful supporter, stated that this imperial veto in no way affected the result of the ballot, contrary to the common belief that without this veto the Church would have had another Pope.

According to this Cardinal, himself a faithful friend of the great Rampolla, after several ballots the latter had received twenty-nine votes, the maximum number upon which he could rely, while during the same ballots, Cardinal Sarto had risen gradually from five to twenty-four votes.

Without doubt, Pius X is one of the most stirring figures in the history of the Church and the world. Inspired by an ardent faith ("*Ignis ardens*"\*) which made him, as it were, a perpetual miracle of energy and clear-sightedness and placed him above ephemeral disturbances, he radiated goodness to an extent that made him the veritable father of his flock; and the measure of his love was love without measure. It is likely that this smiling, overflowing goodness has deceived some superficial observers, and made them think that the supreme apostle, worthy successor of the first of the apostles, was merely a good-natured country priest. Perhaps he was. There is nothing surprising in the word if by it is meant that in his inexhaustible charity he was like those obscure and saintly consolers of the village, passing their lives in unstinted devotion to their little flock, dying poor and worn out, and leaving upon those who mourn them the tangible impression of holiness.

The force of charity and the power of sympathy that the country priest lavishes in his little moral domain, Pius X infinitely multiplied and spread throughout the earth. His soul vibrated in response to the breath of suffering humanity. He was without doubt one of the Popes who, in courage, in robust goodness, and in sweep of soul most nearly approached the Fisherman of Galilee. Every time we saw his pale, virile,

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\*"*Ignis ardens*" ("Burning fire") is the prophetic mystical title given by the monk Malachy to Pius X, just as "*Pastor angelicus*" is, according to tradition, the title given to Pius XII. In the twelfth century Malachy foretold the general character of various Popes from his time to the end of the world.



yet gentle face, his deep tender eyes, and his smile tempered with pity, we were moved as before some being of a higher order. By we, I mean His Eminence and the other Bishops here present who were students in Rome during his pontificate. A saint he indeed was in all the dynamic force of the word, and with all the love toward men and sympathy with their sorrow that it implies.

I leave it to you to picture the feelings of this great-hearted father when the ominous shadows told him of the imminence of a great war. It was at the end of July, 1914. Austria's ultimatum to Serbia, and Germany's obvious support of her ally, left no doubt as to the bellicose intentions of the Central Powers. Pius X, apart from being well informed by his nuncios, possessed too much intuition not to foresee what a calamity was about to strike the world. Those who lived near him at the time knew that he was moved to tears, and spent whole hours praying for poor, menaced Europe. It was when asked to bless the enterprise of the Central Powers that he indignantly replied: "I bless peace, not war."

Seeing that all efforts to arrest the march of events willed by the two emperors were now in vain, he felt his already tottering health weaken under the anxiety and pain of it all. But a more poignant grief awaited him. Immediately after the declaration of war, the seminarians of the belligerent nations who were studying in Rome had to leave the city to join the forces of their respective countries. These young men, ready, in obedience to the law, to exchange the cassock for a uniform, asked to kiss the Pope's ring before setting out on their adventure. The physicians, foreseeing that such an audience would be dangerous for the august invalid, attempted to oppose it. But, Pius was not the man to shirk his mission, even in the face of death. He decided to receive personally all the ecclesiastics in Rome, secular and regular, who were to go to the front. On the same day he saw in the morning those of the one side, and in the evening those of the other. He received them standing, outwardly calm; and, though he felt

his heart sink and tears rise to his eyes, he fortified his audience by his own courage. What a terrible symbol of war and what an ordeal for an ardent and sympathetic soul like this sainted Pope, to see these young disciples of the God of Love, condemned by fate to fight one against the other in order to further the ambition of the Caesars!

As with anxious heart and far-seeing eyes he watched the cruel scourge advance and spread, he kept repeating: "My poor children! I would willingly give my life to prevent the slaughter of all this youth. I suffer for all who die upon the battlefields, for their souls, for their families! Ah, this war. . . . It appears like a fearful dream. . . . I feel it will be my death."

His heart being unable to endure its anguish, he fell ill and never recovered. With heavenly tranquillity he received the last sacraments. He took farewell of his weeping sisters with a look of pitying love. He clasped the hand of his most dear and faithful Cardinal Merry del Val. His last words were: "I offer up my life for that of my children." In the early hours of the twentieth of August, 1914, his elect spirit was reunited to God for all eternity. The dawn of that day was a dawn of sorrow for the whole world, but a dawn of glory in heaven.

In view of the active part Cardinal Merry del Val took in the pontificate of Pius X, it may be of passing interest to note that the first meeting between Cardinal Sarto and Monsignor Merry del Val took place on the eve of the election. The young secretary of the conclave approached him sympathetically with the whispered words: "Si faccia coraggio, Eminenza!" ("Courage, your Eminence!") The sorrowful resignation of the one and the compassionate attitude of the other immediately established a bond of reciprocal affection and esteem that even death did not sever.

In their complete dedication to the tremendous responsibilities that had been laid upon them, they were of one heart and soul. The Pope's deep esteem for his secretary was that of a sovereign for a minister who promptly executes his orders and even anticipates his thoughts and desires. The secretary

returned the devotion with all the strength of his noble and virtuous soul and loved his father and lord as one loves a saint.

From the eve of the election until the Pope's death, Cardinal Merry del Val was ever steadfastly beside him in all hours of joy and of sorrow, and immediately after his death set in motion the process for his beatification.

The many works of Christian reform which Pius X accomplished — all proofs and memorials of his wonderful sagacity — are well known to all. Suffice it to mention but one, which is the paramount reason for our gathering here during these days. He energetically encouraged the teaching of Christian Doctrine, because in his time and our time there is ever and ever more need of food for the soul than for the body.

To implement the encyclical letters of Pius X, the late Holy Father, Pius XI, of happy memory, instituted within the Sacred Congregation of the Council a catechetical commission to guide and promote the catechetical movement everywhere in the Church.

The Bishops here present who were Ordinaries in 1925 will recall that they received a questionnaire regarding the teaching of catechism in their respective dioceses. When the replies of the Ordinaries of the world to these questionnaires were returned, the Sacred Congregation assigned them to various consultors for study, evaluation and comment. Being a consultor of the Sacred Congregation at the time, for this purpose, I was given the replies from the Ordinaries of the United States.

The study revealed that there was need of greater effort in behalf of those receiving little or no instruction in our holy religion. After a thorough study had been made of what was being done in this field in the various dioceses, as set forth in the replies to the questionnaires for the Sacred Congregation, a summary was prepared with whatever comment the replies seemed to warrant.

This study and the conferences entailed continued over a period of years, during which the reports from the different

countries were again and again discussed and compared. The obstacles which hindered the effective teaching of Christian Doctrine were carefully considered, and an effort made to discover or devise a way to overcome these difficulties. In some places the civil authorities arranged athletic programs on Sundays and feast days which kept the children away from Mass and catechism classes. Carelessness of parents who count the religious education of their children of little or no worth, immoral shows, obscene literature, mixed marriages, pagan environment, and so forth, were the evils the Decree on the subject of catechetical instruction aimed to remedy as far as humanly possible.

This study and these conferences continued for ten years from the date of sending the questionnaires to the Ordinaries, before the Sacred Congregation issued the Decree "On the Better Care and Promotion of Catechetical Education." This Decree, then, is the result of many years of comprehensive, intensive study on this subject, which is so vitally important in our day; and it is not a pronouncement issued without mature deliberation.

As we reflect on the life and labors of Pius X we come to realize what splendid historical poetry there is in the life of this successor of Peter, one of the finest of them all, who died of the immense grief caused by the greatest war ever provoked in the world until that time—a war that was the result of the ambition of the Caesars. We know today the fate of the Caesars and empires which thirty-seven years ago covered two-thirds of Europe; while this year the Church has placed upon her altars the name and image of a great Pope, like unto those of the early centuries, whose prevision of his people's misfortune killed him.

Of another great man a writer of verse has given us these few lines, which are far more true of Pius X:

*Great men grow greater. Lesser men decline;  
More feebly still their little glories shine,  
While all the greater grows the lambent flame  
That shows from death's dark vault the great one's name.*