

Snubbed

Pope Benedict XV and Cardinal James Gibbons

by Mike Griffin

On August 1, 1917, in the midst of World War I, Pope Benedict XV issued a note to all nations involved in the conflict. The note was a call for peace and a plan on which it could be made. Though the missive—and Benedict’s plan for peace—failed to sway the belligerents, it may be significant for another reason and because of another letter. On August 15, a less well-known note was sent from Benedict’s Apostolic Delegate to the U.S., Archbishop Giovanni Bonzano, to Cardinal James Gibbons. Gibbons, Archbishop of Baltimore and the voice of the Catholic Church in U.S. politics, was asked by Bonzano to “exert his influence” in the attempt to have President Woodrow Wilson endorse the papal peace plan.¹ On August 17, Gibbons wrote back to Bonzano. John Tracy Ellis describes clearly Gibbons’ reply:

he assured Bonzano that he would do everything in his power to further the wishes of the Holy See in the matter, and he would use to the utmost

¹ John Tracy Ellis, *The Life of James Cardinal Gibbons, Volume II* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1987), 244.

whatever influence he might possess to induce the government and the public toward a favorable consideration of the Pope's note.²

He never contacted the president. And so, when Wilson sent word to Benedict on August 27 that he was rejecting the peace note, there was no need to say no personally to the cardinal. It should be said that Gibbons did make a statement to the press; and Ellis makes full use of this to claim at least an attempt at "indirect influence" on Gibbons' part.³ Yet a question, as seen below, remains.

The dominant narrative of U.S. Catholic history has either ignored this anecdote or crafted it in such a way as to reduce its significance. Gerald Fogarty gives a brief treatment of this episode (or, as it were, non-episode) in painting Gibbons as an obedient emissary for the pope:

Even after American entry into the war, Gibbons continued to act as intermediary between the Vatican and the United States government. In August, 1917, he sought to use his influence indirectly to have the president cooperate with Benedict's new peace initiative to have the belligerents return to the *status quo ante bellum*; yet, there is no evidence that he saw Wilson personally.⁴

Such an account would not seem to be an attempt to understate some shunning of the pope on Gibbons' part. Yet Fogarty's source here is Ellis; and in pointing out only that Gibbons made no *personal* visit, he misses something. Indeed, Ellis too

² Ibid

³ Ibid., 246

⁴ Gerald P. Fogarty, S.J., *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy from 1870 to 1965* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1985), 210.

misses this ‘something.’” That is, despite their efforts to be rather un-shocked by Gibbons’ inaction, there is still no answer to why no contact seems to have occurred. The gap exists. And in the gap between Gibbons’ strong assurance that he would lobby for the pope and his failure to do so may just lie the symbol for a much larger reality.

Cardinal James Gibbons was so immersed in patriotic zeal and a desire to aid Wilson that he *could not* deem as important the goals of Pope Benedict XV. And despite their efforts to minimize the peace note issue, both Ellis and Fogarty reveal Gibbons’ Americanist snub of the pope. Ellis notes that “Gibbons failure to win more favorable consideration for the papal peace note in no way deterred him [Gibbons] from continuing his war efforts.”⁵

Fogarty also praises Gibbons’ unstated preference for American war efforts over Roman peace projects. Using the rationale that greater lobbying efforts by Gibbons would have tainted him with the same charge leveled at Benedict—that he was on the side of the Central Powers—he writes:

The war was a test of American Catholic loyalty... In this context, Gibbons followed the best strategy possible in faithfully presenting papal views while encouraging Catholic loyalty to the nation. In the final analysis, the Vatican had little influence on American Catholic participation in the war, but the war influenced Catholic participation in American society.⁶

⁵ Ellis, 246.

⁶ Fogarty, 210.

Fogarty points to a larger question here: the extent to which Gibbons was *compromised* as the U.S. voice of the Roman Catholic church during the First World War. Indeed, as will be treated below, Gibbons could hardly live up to Fogarty's description of "faithfully presenting" Benedict's view. The fact is, the cardinal could not have been much further afield from the pope's views of the Great War, let alone faithfully present them. Much evidence—far beyond a representative anecdote depicting the "peace note snub" by Gibbons—exists that warrants this conclusion. And so even if Gibbons had been true to his promise to contact the president, and even if he spoke well of the proposal, the fact remains that in the larger context Cardinal Gibbons was *not* faithful to Pope Benedict XV and the spirit of his efforts to bring about peace. It is to this larger context, and into the lives of Benedict and Gibbons, that the present treatment now turns.

Benedict XV, The Peace Pope

On every side the dread phantom of war holds sway: there is scarce room for another thought in the minds of men. The combatants are the greatest and wealthiest nations of the earth; what wonder, then, if, well provided with the most awful weapons modern military science has devised, they strive to destroy one another with refinements of horror. There is no limit to the measure of ruin and of slaughter; day by day the earth is drenched with newly-shed blood, and is covered with the bodies of the wounded and of the slain. Who would imagine as we see them thus filled with hatred of one another, that they are all of one common stock, all of the same nature, all members of the same human society?... We implore those in whose hands are placed the fortunes of nations to hearken to Our voice. Surely there are

other ways and means whereby violated rights can be rectified. Let them be tried honestly and with good will, and let arms meanwhile be laid aside.

Ad beatissimi apostolorum, November 1, 1914
encyclical of Benedict XV⁷

Moved to the very depths of our hearts by the stirring appeal of the President of the United States, and by the action of our national Congress, we accept whole-heartedly and unreservedly the decree of that legislative authority proclaiming this country to be in a state of war.. Inspired neither by hate nor fear, but by the holy sentiments of truest patriotic fervor and zeal, we stand ready, we and all the flock committed to our keeping, to cooperate in every way possible with our President and our national government, to the end that the great and holy cause of liberty may triumph and that our beloved country may emerge from this hour of test stronger and nobler than ever. Our people, as ever, will rise as one man to serve the nation

Pledge of U.S. Catholic Archbishops, April 18,
1917; sent to President Wilson by Cardinal Gibbons⁸

Historian J. Derek Holmes describes Pope Benedict XV as ‘one of the first victims of war.’⁹ Indeed, his legacy seems to have been swept away with the tide of the Great War. It was clear, from the outset of his pontificate, that Benedict XV would not align himself with the war but rather with its condemnation and with the human rights of its victims. Even upon his September 6, 1914 coronation, which was private and subdued in light of the bloodshed, Benedict XV was preparing to

⁷ Pope Benedict XV, *Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum*, November 1, 1914, Sections 3-4. From *The Papal Encyclicals 1903-1939*, ed. by Claudia Carlen, IHM (McGrath, 1981), 144.

⁸ Michael Williams, *American Catholics in the War* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 5.

⁹ J. Derek Holmes, *The Papacy in the Modern World* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 1.

work for peace. Because he refused to support any belligerent, Benedict formally adopted a policy of neutrality. This was misunderstood, though. Richard McBrien notes that all sides in the war took Benedict as an opponent. The allies suspected a German leaning and called him *lepape boche*, ‘the kraut pope;’ the Central Powers, on the other hand, called him *derfranzoesiche Papst*, ‘the French Pope.’¹⁰

The truth, however, was that

[t]he Pope himself subordinated everything to the moral and evangelical condemnation of war and, in an effort to stop the bloodshed, consistently tried to contain the conflict, to prevent its further escalation and to end the war.”¹¹

In his first message to the world on September 8, 1914—even before *Ad beatissimi—Benedict* named war “the scourge and wrath of God.”¹² This, along with the fact that he never made the traditional distinction between just and unjust wars, suggests a total rejection of war by Benedict.

On this point, Ronald Musto makes an unambiguous claim about the pope’s principles of war and peace.

Benedict truly earned his title ‘Pontiff of peace’.. .As close to an absolute pacifist as any pope since Benedict XII during the Hundred Years War, Benedict set out to reconcile the major conflicts of the day.. .A former papal

¹⁰ Richard McBrien, *Lives of the Popes* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 356

¹¹ Holmes, 3

¹² *Ibid*

diplomat, Benedict opposed war in any form and rejected the theory of the just war as historically outmoded and theologically inadequate. Echoing Erasmus, he saw the theory as only a lame excuse designed to prolong wars.¹³

Benedict pursued his lofty aims with a practical plan to alleviate the suffering of the war. He worked for the release of countless prisoners of war. He refused to accept confiscation of church property for military use, but offered church hospitals and schools for the works of mercy. He asked Catholics—in some cases despite a ban—to recite a prayer he composed for peace which began, “Dismayed by the horrors of a war which is bringing ruin to peoples and nations, we turn, O Jesus...”¹⁴ Musto describes some other of the pope’s efforts:

During the war years, Benedict issued over one hundred encyclicals and letters of instruction and exhortation to bishops, Catholic leaders, and laity on the rights of prisoners, the wounded, and noncombatants, on organizing relief work, on arranging truces, on reducing unnecessary violence. He protested conditions in Poland and Belgium, warned against U.S. and Italian entry into the war, condemned aerial bombing, the sinking of the *Lusitania*, attacks upon any civilian targets, forced deportation of civilians, and the taking of hostages. He personally rebuked Kaiser Wilhelm II for the use of poison gas and pressed for a nonviolent solution to the Irish rebellion. He diverted huge amounts of church funds for the relief of war victims both during and after the war, emptying the Vatican treasury so that on his death

¹³ Ronald G. Musto, *The Catholic Peace Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986), 171

¹⁴ Holmes, 4-5.

there was barely enough money left to hold the conclave that elected his successor.¹⁵

The list of Benedict's interventions on behalf of peace is too long for full mention. Still, reference to his anti-war record is significant in that it sets the stage for a clear contrast with Gibbons, who shared neither the refusal to take sides nor the condemnation of the war by Benedict.

Cardinal Gibbons, The Patriot Prelate

Cardinal Gibbons never made it for the papal conclave in which Giacomo della Chiesa became Pope Benedict XV. Arriving just hours late, he did become the first to have an audience with the new pope.¹⁶ Yet on his return from the trip, he began immediately a course of politics that, while publicly deferential to Benedict, was in opposition to the pope. As noted, Benedict condemned the war from the first moments of his pontificate. When Gibbons was asked by the American press why the pope was so staunch in opposing military solutions to the conflict, he responded that this was necessary because so many Catholics were on opposing sides.¹⁷

Gibbons' response allowed reports to continue that the pope had ulterior motives. (Some thought he may have sided with the Central Powers so that a victorious Germany would return the papal states or so that the Russians, with their Orthodox legions, would not spread into Europe.) In all of this, Gibbons seemed largely

¹⁵ Musto, 172

¹⁶ Ellis, 221

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 223

unaware of the Christian pacifism that so pervaded Benedict's stand. It should be noted, too, that in the same interview Gibbons was sure to express full confidence in the U.S. leaders to maintain a sensible approach to the war in Europe. As Ellis notes, he had "words of praise" for President Wilson and Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan, the latter of whom was soon to send him a gift for his "devotion to the cause of international peace."¹⁸

In the summer of 1915—still two years prior to American entry into the war—an incident occurred that shed light on Gibbons' politics vis-a-vis the peace position of the pope. After a London paper reported that Gibbons and other cardinals were launching an international effort for peace, Gibbons denied any involvement in such an effort. It does appear that the report was a rumor; however, the attention given to the incident by Ellis is telling:

Gibbons and his co-religionists in the United States were generally speaking careful not to embarrass the administration by proposals of this nature...In this connection one who investigated the opinions of ministers of religion in the United States at the time stated, "The Catholics before the days of April, 1917, were, in their pulpit utterances, loyal to the President."¹⁹

The "proposals of this nature" which might "embarrass the administration" actually would have squared with similar proposals made by Pope Benedict. Yet Gibbons, and other Catholic leaders in the U.S., stayed far from these, prompting one commentator to note that "Catholics, with a discipline of obedience, give no

¹⁸ Ibid., 222

¹⁹ Ibid., 230

room for non-conformity.”²⁰ Such an observation, of course, fails to note the ways in which Gibbons’ Americanist politics *were* in non-conformity *with Rome*. Ellis acknowledges the large gap between Benedict and Gibbons: “although the cardinal was certainly desirous of his country remaining clear of the war, it was not at the cost of adopting the principles of pacifism.”

As April of 1917 and the U.S. entrance into the war drew near, Gibbons stepped up his campaign to be a public voice on behalf of President Wilson. Despite criticism, he endorsed a plan for universal military service.²¹ (It is significant here that in September of 1917 Benedict lobbied for a “general boycott in sanction against any nation that might attempt to reestablish obligatory military service.”)²² Gibbons also publicly backed, in the *New York Times*, Wilson’s “preparedness campaign” of military build-up.²³ And so, even a day before the formal declaration of war on Germany came, Gibbons was ready with a prepared statement. The statement, of course, made no mention of Benedict’s condemnation of the proliferation of the war. Yet he didn’t need to make mention of this; it was clear how Gibbons expected Catholics of American stripe to proceed during this time of national crisis. Far from obedience to the words of the pontiff, who had taught in *Ad beatissimi* that “[t]here is no need of adding any qualifying terms to the profession of Catholicism,”²⁴ Gibbons had other instructions for *US*. Catholics. “The primary duty of a citizen,” Gibbons taught, “is loyalty to country. It is exhibited by an absolute and unreserved obedience to his country’s call.”²⁵

²⁰ This is from an Abrams survey made on pacifist ministers of religion in the United States during 1917-1918 (op. cit., p. 197). Cf. Ellis, 233.

²¹ Ellis, 237

²² Musto, 173

²³ Ellis, 237-238

²⁴ *Ad beatissimi*, 24

²⁵ Gibbons’ statement on the outbreak of war, April 5, 1917. Cf. Ellis, 229.

Concerning the fateful “peace note snub” that would come later in August of 1917, any questions that Gibbons would have been of a mind to give less heed to Benedict than to Wilson were answered with Gibbons’ role later that year in the formal establishment of the National Catholic War Council. Along with the thirteen other Archbishops and an Administrative Committee of four bishops, Gibbons spearheaded the drive to further Wilson’s goals and the war effort. Thus, even as Benedict’s peace note was being drawn up, plans were being made for the birth of the NCWC. That Gibbons and the other fathers of the NCWC were working with an agenda at odds with Rome is clear. As Michael Williams observes in his hagiography of Gibbons and the Council,

The problem of the war work of the Catholic Church in the United States, then, was precisely the same problem that confronted the government it had promised to help; it was a problem of management, of organization; a question of the best practical methods for concentrating and applying swiftly and effectively the mighty resources which it possessed.²⁶

The Council would strive to serve, as Gibbons described it in a letter to the other U.S. bishops, “the mental and moral preparation of our people for the war.”²⁷ That the peace note of Benedict would then come at this time, when the bishops were embarking on a project that could once and for all prove their patriotism, is not insignificant. The question thus becomes, was Gibbons perhaps more consumed with creating the war agenda of the NCWC than he was with lobbying for the peace agenda of Benedict XV?

²⁶ Williams, 89.

²⁷ Williams, 145

“August, 1917”

Only in the context of the previous discussion of both Benedict and Cardinal Gibbons—and their approaches to the war and to war itself—can a judgment on the peace note issue be made. When the note itself was drafted and released on the first of August, there was reason to be optimistic about its potential to effect peace. For the Vatican, strong antiwar sentiments and the military situation “seemed favorable to the initiation of peace discussions.”²⁸ And the terms of the peace plan itself seemed realistic;

it contained five basic points considered essential to just and lasting peace. It included (1) the simultaneous and reciprocal reduction of armaments; (2) the machinery for arbitration of international disputes; (3) freedom of the seas; (4) renunciation of reparations, restitution of occupied territories, and specific guarantees of the ‘political, military and economic independence’ of Belgium; and (5) determination of the future of border areas to be made in accord with the ‘aspirations of the population’ and the ‘general good of the great human society.’²⁹

Realistic though it may have seemed to the Vatican, Wilson was skeptical. Primary among his concerns was his refusal to negotiate peace with “the autocratic regime

²⁸ Dragan R. Zivojnovic, *The United States and the Vatican Policies, 1914-1918* (Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1978), 75

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 80

still dominant in Germany.”³⁰ Wilson did hear a different voice, though, from Colonel Edward M. House. House counseled Wilson at least to “leave the door open” to the peace plan.³¹ House’s advice is relevant in that it affirms the basic merit of Benedict’s attempt and calls into question why a military advisor gave more support to the pope’s plea than the leading voice of the U.S. Catholic hierarchy. Still, most in the administration concurred not with House but with the president. In fact, Secretary of State Robert Lansing wrote to Wilson that the pope “has become an agent for Germany in this matter.”³² Ultimately, on August 27, Wilson rejected the pope’s plan. It is interesting to note that despite the administration’s clamor against the plan, House was not convinced; he said, “I am sure I have a more complete picture of the situation than either the President or Lansing.”³³

House was in the minority in more than the administration. The August 15 edition of the *New York Times* ran the pope’s proposal as the lead headline, but with the banner “Belief that Vienna Inspired Papal Proposals as Remedy for Desperate Straits.”³⁴ Indeed, much of U.S. popular opinion took the pope to be doing the bidding of the Austro-German alliance. This thinking neglected the fact that Germany’s promise to return the papal states to the pope after the war was actually made in an attempt to keep Italy out of the war. In any case, the public reception to the peace note was not warm: the *Times* reported, “It is prophesied in Washington that President Wilson, in rejecting the plea of the pope, will take the occasion to

³⁰ Charles Seymour, *American Diplomacy During the World War* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), 276

³¹ Zivojnovic, 82

³² Edward B. Parsons, *Wilsonian Diplomacy. Allied-American Rivalries in War and Peace* (St Louis: Fortress, 1978), 68

³³ Diary of House, August 15, 1917; in Zivojnovic, 83

³⁴ *New York Times*, August 15, 1917, 1

restate the war aims of the United States...”³⁵ In light of this public cynicism and even misperception about the Vatican’s motives, Gibbons’ efforts—or lack thereof—to aid Benedict’s plan seem all the more significant.

One further political factor also makes Gibbons’ inaction relevant. Some among the Allied nations did believe that American assent to the peace note was a possibility. According to Charles Seymour, some nations feared “a conciliatory reply from Wilson (that) would weaken the war spirit in Allied countries.”³⁶ That the peace note was, in some sense, a viable and live proposal calls into further question the lack of a lobbying effort by Gibbons, especially given the explicit request and consequent affirmation to do just that. In fact, on both August 18 and August 20, the Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano* published long editorials on the peace note, explaining how it corresponded to “a dream dear to President Wilson.”³⁷ Yet—because of Gibbons’ inaction—no such case was made directly to the president. Thus, the political plausibility, as well as many the erroneous claims about the pope’s aim, would seem to have warranted the efforts of Gibbons to clarify the issue for President Wilson.

Gibbons did respond to a certain extent, though, six months later. In a widely referenced *America* article of February 23, 1918 entitled “The War Policy of the Pope,” Gibbons came to the defense of the maligned, ignored and unsuccessful peace pope. Gibbons employed high praise, observing of the pope, “Like his Master he rules not by the sword, but by love.”³⁸ After referencing many of

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Seymour, 274

³⁷ in Zivojnovic, 89

³⁸ James Cardinal Gibbons, “The War Policy of the Pope,” in *America* (Feb. 23, 1918), 487-488

Benedict's peace efforts, such as *Ad beatissimi*, as well as his 1914 attempt to have a cessation of war during Christmas and his May 1915 call for all to turn to the Immaculate Heart of Mary for peace, Gibbons addresses the peace note:

His work culminated in his peace note of August 1 to the heads of 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.³⁹

After an explanation of the real aims of the note and a hope that it still can help facilitate peace, Gibbons promises:

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 unselfishly for the cause of peace and humanity his faithful children here in the United States.. .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 soon be regained.⁴⁰

In concluding the article, Gibbons includes a note of praise for all those who have supported "our beloved President."⁴¹ Indeed, he believes, such support should continue alongside hopes for the 'happy peace for which he and the Holy Father

³⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

are laboring, each in his own sphere.”⁴²

Gibbons, in the *America* article, subtly points to the heart of the peace note issue. It would be foolish to conclude that beneath all the lofty rhetoric is a cardinal looking to foil the plans of a pontiff. Rather, the truth is more subtle: Gibbons clearly *did not see* that the pledge not to “fail our Holy Father.. in this supreme hour” required something other than his endorsement of a nation actively engaged in the war. On one level, Gibbons did not take seriously enough that when Benedict condemned the war, he wasn’t merely lamenting it or feeling bad about it: he was asking for nations to stop it, immediately withdraw from it. Yet aside from using this claim to allege that Gibbons sabotaged the peace note effort, it seems there is another option which is more plausible...

The Politics of Faith

Cardinal Gibbons crafted a division of the world into a temporal and spiritual realm such that the pope—for all of the cardinal’s affection and praise—simply had no claim on him politically. In this sense, Gibbons prefigured the work of John Courtney Murray, Ellis, and even proponents today of a sort of “public Catholicism.” More than a generation before the war, Gibbons had made his claim about the divine foundation of the state, a claim that during the time of the war would be the guiding principle of the church in the U.S.:

⁴² Ibid.

Next to love for God should be our love for our country. *The Author of our being* has stamped in the human breast a love for one's country, and therefore patriotism is a sentiment commended by Almighty God Himself. . . . Let us glory in the title of American citizen. We owe our allegiance to one country, and that country is America. *We must be in harmony with our political institutions.*⁴³ (emphasis mine)

Many (though not all) historians acknowledges Gibbons' Americanist leaning in explaining his absolute fervor for the war effort. Yet this does not go far enough; Gibbons' position actually *leaves no room* for anything of the sort Benedict XV was proposing. That U.S. Catholics "must be" in harmony with their government rules out discord over policy priorities, let alone over war and peace. Such a reading is not overstating the case. Indeed, on the subject of the war—a subject on which Gibbons and Wilson had much interaction—there seems to be no instance in which Gibbons disagrees with Wilson.

If the words of Gibbons, or his lack of discord with the president, were not clear enough, then a look at their tandem activities reveals the way in which Wilson—far more than Benedict—set the moral agenda of Gibbons' politics. Sunday, October 28, 1917 was declared by Wilson a day of prayer for U.S. military success. Gibbons used the occasion to preach on behalf of the war effort, pointing out (for any who might have been following too closely the words of the pope) that '[c]hurch and state move amicably in parallel lines, helping one another in their respective field of labor.'⁴⁴ As a result, according to this reasoning, Catholics are to defer to the political process and thus give assent, not questioning,

⁴³ From a speech by Gibbons, August 20, 1891 in Milwaukee; in Williams, 80.

⁴⁴ Ellis, 247

to their government's policies. Yet what Gibbons never saw were the ways that Benedict himself was modeling the questioning of U.S., and all the belligerents', policies.

What might be called the separatist argument was certainly crucial to Gibbon's approach. If the worlds of politics and religion are discrete, then each can have its own answers without worry of contradiction. This approach was what allowed Gibbons to make the aforementioned reference to Benedict in the *America* piece, "Like his Master, he rules not by the sword, but by love" while backing the president's plan for universal military service. And it was what allowed him to praise Benedict for his peace note without feeling compelled to lobby for its political adoption. He simply had no capacity to be critical of the war or the government. After all, he had affirmed after the declaration of war that "The members of both Houses of Congress are the instruments of God in guiding us in our civic duty."⁴⁵ Even Fogarty, largely sympathetic in his telling of the Gibbons war narrative, notes this "neglect of the question of justice."⁴⁶ And, in light of this approach, it is not surprising that few Catholics took up Benedict's call to reject war: of the 3,989 conscientious objectors during World War I in the U.S., four were Catholic.⁴⁷

Ultimately, the peace note issue is a symbol of the deep differences between Benedict and Gibbons. While Gibbons placed religion and politics in their respective fields, Benedict sought to bring a religious voice into the world of politics. Contrast Gibbons' sense that his president and his pope each had "his own

⁴⁵ Cf. Gerald P. Fogarty, SI. "Public Patriotism and Private Politics: The Tradition of American Catholicism" (*US. Catholic Historian*, Vol. 4, Num. 1, 1984), 28

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 28

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

sphere” with Benedict’s claim in his encyclical *Pacem Dei munus pulcherrimum* that “the Gospel has not one law of charity for individuals and another for states and nations, for these are but collections of individuals.”⁴⁸ Musto notes that in framing the religious question and political question as the same question, Benedict “rejected the Machiavellian distinction between private and public morality.”⁴⁹

Further historical inquiry into the roles of each of these two men at *the very time the peace note issue occurred* also reveals a contrast between Gibbons and Benedict even beyond the public-private sphere relationship. While Benedict displayed the desire to pursue a religious agenda which was in practical effect politically subversive, Gibbons chose the opposite: a politics which was subversive of religious identity. On July 23, 1917—just one week before Benedict’s note was issued—Gibbons addressed a group of new military recruits. He made his familiar point: “Be Americans always. Remember that you owe all to America and be prepared, if your country demands it, to give all in return.”⁵⁰ Then, in a sermon at the Baltimore Cathedral, Gibbons clarified the religious-political separatist position, warning Catholics,

Be slow to criticize. Remember that you view the subject from one angle. Your rulers contemplate it from various angles. They have lights and sources of information *which are closed to you.*⁵¹ (emphasis mine)

⁴⁸ Benedict XV, *Pacem Dei munus pulcherrimum*, May 23, 1920; in Musto, 227.

⁴⁹ Musto, 171

⁵⁰ Arline Boucher and John Tehan, *Prince of Democracy: James Cardinal Gibbons* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 283

⁵¹ In Boucher, 283

It is interesting to view this statement from Benedict's perspective: ought *the pope* have been slower to criticize, mindful of the lights and sources of information "closed" to him? Are there any lights and sources of information concerning the war issue closed to *Wilson* and the belligerent leaders? Apparently not.

In all of this, Gibbons did not simply separate faith and politics. Nor did he simply reiterate a standard assent to the divine foundation of the state. Rather, he domesticates faith, making it wholly subordinate to politics, without an equally strong account of how politics is at the service of faith. Even to talk of how faith might dictate politics is to deal in a language that Gibbons did not speak. But Benedict did; he knew well the language that put politics—and all matters—at the service of faith. Compare the foundational implications of Gibbons' belief in the divine mandate to domesticate faith when it seems to challenge policy—remember, "obey, be *always* Americans—with Benedict's approach. In *Ad beatissimi*, while exhorting governments to seek peace and "let arms meanwhile be laid aside," Benedict is far from deferring to the judgments of political rulers. Rather, as quoted earlier, "We implore those in whose hands are placed the fortunes of nations to hearken to *Our* voice..."⁵² (emphasis mine) Further, Benedict seems to expressly condemn the idea that politics is *best* placed—let alone, as Gibbons has it, *divinely placed*—in the hands of secular rulers. He writes,

For ever since the precepts and practices of Christian wisdom ceased to be observed in the ruling of states, it followed that, as they contained the peace and stability of institutions, the very foundations of states necessarily began to be shaken. Such, moreover, has been the change in the ideas and morals

⁵² *Ad beatissimi*, 4; in Carlen, 145

of men, that unless God comes soon to our help, the end of civilization would seem to be at hand. All then must combine to get rid of [the causes of the serious unrest] by again bringing Christian principles into honour, if We have any real desire for the peace and harmony of human society.⁵³

This passage is very significant in understanding the politics of Benedict and making sense of his efforts to stop the war. If read simply as a general exhortation for peace and morality, it might not seem so different from something Gibbons could have wrote. But it is vastly different. The pope's politics is not only unsegregated from faith; *it is faith*. And Benedict gave life to this politics. He really did believe that it was only Christian wisdom that could lead nations to let arms...be laid aside;" secular statecraft could never achieve such an ideal. indeed, if it were as easy as God guiding the hands of leaders in divinely inspired nation-states, Benedict would not have sensed "the end of civilization."

To be sure, the suggestion here is not that Benedict rejected the traditional view of the state. He most certainly would have adopted the language, rooted in the New Testament as well as St. Thomas, which points to a divine foundation to the state and thus a role for politics *qua politics*.⁵⁴ However, Benedict simply did not, as Gibbons did, make such a separation of politics and faith. Unable to divorce politics from the life of faith, then, the pope sought not to defer to others action in the political sphere. He wanted to be a part of it, even if his activity in this sphere brought charges that he had secular aims. It would have been easier to take the route of Gibbons—the domesticated vocation to “pray and obey”—yet such a path

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ The New Testament reference here is, in particular, to Romans 13: 1-7, often the basis for the argument for divine foundations of the state.

would have compromised his commitment to actively pursue an end to the war. That the desire for an integration of faith and politics was central to Benedict is clear from his moral, political and spiritual investment in the peace note of August, 1917. Indeed, Claudia Carlen has called the failure of Benedict's peace note "probably the greatest disappointment of his pontificate."⁵⁵

If the failed attempt at peace—which would mean another 15 months of war— was a blow to Benedict, so was his exclusion from the postwar peace conference. And the series of incidents surrounding this also impact the question of a "peace note snub." Put simply, on *this* issue of lobbying Wilson on Benedict's behalf, Gibbons' refusal is plain and clear. The exclusion of the Vatican had come "under terms of the Treaty of London which included a secret agreement between Italy and her allies barring the Vatican from the negotiations or the settlement."⁵⁶ The agreement had intended to ensure that the Roman Question—the aforementioned return of Rome to the political control of the Vatican—was not a subject of the settlement. When this agreement, known as Article 15 of the treaty, was first made public in November of 1917, Gibbons "joined in the clamor" opposing such discrimination against the pope.⁵⁷ Then, just as with the peace note, Cardinal Gasparri suggested that Gibbons' influence on the president might be effective in ameliorating the situation.⁵⁸

The story from here is significant, and Ellis' rendering of the scenario needs to be

⁵⁵ Carlen, 141

⁵⁶ Holmes, 12

⁵⁷ Ellis, *The Life of James Cardinal Gibbons: Popular Edition* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1963), 192. n.b. :This is only reference from popular edition.

⁵⁸ Ellis, 266-67

included at length:

At this point there occurred an incident which, perhaps, revealed the strain under which Cardinal Gibbons was then laboring.. .Maria Longworth Storer, wife of the former American ambassador to Vienna, approached Bishop Shahan with the suggestion that the entire American hierarchy appeal in a body to President Wilson to provide a representative of the Pope at the peace conference.. .Gibbons strongly reprobated the suggestion as most impolitic and one that would result in a serious blow to the prestige of the hierarchy.⁵⁹

As the issue of papal representation at the peace conference continued to be debated, it became increasingly clear that the only person who could effectively remedy the situation—due to his ability to get Italy’s consent—was Wilson. And so, via Gasparri,

it was now stated that when Gibbons should next see Wilson it was the wish of the Pontiff that he should speak to him about Article 15 and tell him that it was insulting not only to the Holy See but to the Catholic hierarchy and people as well.⁶⁰

At this point, Ellis’ indicates a shift:

In reply (to Gasparri) Gibbons promised to take the first opportunity to explain Gasparri’s ideas on the elimination of the treaty clause to President Wilson. However, it should be not be forgotten, said Gibbons, that a danger

⁵⁹ Ibid., 273

⁶⁰ Ibid., 274

existed in Wilson speaking out at that moment on a matter relating to the internal affairs of an allied power, and just at present the President was very preoccupied with serious problems of the war and with major domestic issues.⁶¹

In late July of 1918, eight months after Article 15 had been made public, Gasparri sensed Gibbons' reluctance. He made yet another appeal to Gibbons.

Once more he thought a word from Wilson to the Italian government would accomplish the end desired, and *he begged* Gibbons to ask the President to speak it, to which the cardinal again promised that he would grasp the first opportunity to lay the matter before Wilson.⁶² (emphasis mine)

Remarkably, about this incident—so similar to the previous August when the peace note needed Gibbons' aid—Ellis is guarded in the inference that Gibbons, again, did not contact Wilson.

At this point the evidence is not clear. Whether the cardinal saw Wilson or not is impossible to say but, at any rate, ten days after his reply to Gasparri he wrote him again and outlined why he thought it would be impossible for the President to follow the suggestion offered by the Vatican.⁶³

Ellis then goes on to report that this same letter to Gasparri indicates that “it seemed better to Gibbons for the time being to trust to the future and if a favorable

⁶¹ Ibid., 275

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 275-276

opportunity presented itself he would not fail to advance the wishes of the Holy See.”⁶⁴ Perhaps unaware that this would seem to indicate that the scenario he had deemed “not clear” was actually quite clear, Ellis now confirms Gibbons’ failure as probable. What was before “impossible to say” is here less ambiguous to Ellis:

Although between mid-August and the close of the war the cardinal had occasion to approach Wilson several times on the question of an armistice, he apparently made no move to urge upon the President any action in regard to admitting a representative of the Pope to the peace conference.⁶⁵

While it would be well beyond the scope of this treatment to enter into speculation as to why Gibbons did not make contact with Wilson (and, perhaps, why Ellis attempts to obscure this), nonetheless an important point can be made that is relevant to the peace note issue.

Even in the initial reply to the request to see Wilson, which is judged “most impolitic” and “a serious blow to the prestige of the hierarchy,” Gibbons is merely giving public witness to his aforementioned separatist philosophy of politics and faith. That is, given that this matter is political, the claims that the pope, or religion or faith, have on Gibbons are minimal. Rather, the judgment that the president was “preoccupied with serious problems of the war” is critical. Gibbons, then, was only acting as a loyal American in not disrupting the politics of the president. This episode reveals the extent to which Gibbons and the Vatican were on very different pages politically. And it offers at least some measure more of plausibility to the claim about the peace note. That is, perhaps it is not so far fetched to suggest that

⁶⁴ Ibid., 276

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Gibbons *made a deliberate decision not to contact the president* concerning Benedict's peace plan. Indeed, as seems to be the case here, Gibbons was not opposed to refraining from contention with the political leader of the United States.

Whose History?

It is quite instructive to survey the way in which the preceding story is crafted by historians. Take Fogarty, for instance. Though his bias is clearly with Gibbons, he does confirm that the issue at work in this (and the peace note) incident is a clash of ideas about the role of faith and politics, church and state. About Gibbons' non-cooperation with Vatican requests, he writes,

He refused to allow himself and the American church to be dragged into a situation which would increase American anti-Catholic prejudice. He was faced with the familiar dilemma of American Catholicism—to display loyalty to Rome and to the United States. He still believed that Rome misunderstood the American Church.. He also quietly refused to comply with Gasparri's request in October, 1918 to see Wilson personally about accepting a separate Austro-Hungarian armistice.⁶⁶

Though Fogarty may not intend it, his analysis makes the words of Gibbons himself ring hollow: [c]hurch and state move amicably in parallel lines."⁶⁷

Without question, such amicability may have *seemed to be* the case. As Ellis is sure to point out, many kind words were exchanged between the trio of Benedict,

⁶⁶ Fogarty, *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy*, 210

⁶⁷ Ellis, 247

Gibbons, and Wilson. In the press, Gibbons used only the highest praise for the pope.⁶⁸ Ellis reports also that the pope, upon formally meeting Wilson in January, 1919, “paid a high tribute to the American chief executive.”⁶⁹ And warm words were extended to Gibbons from the pope, usually coming via Gasparri on occasions such as Gibbons’ laudatory article in *America*.⁷⁰ Thus, even if many historians suspect some anti-Catholic views on the part of Wilson,⁷¹ there was on the surface a good measure of amicability among the three. Yet, especially in the case of Gibbons’ praise for the pope, the warm wishes simply never materialized into significant action.

The hollowness of the relationship between Gibbons and Benedict is revealed even in the aforementioned encomiums of Gibbons for Benedict. For example, in his first public statement on the peace note, Gibbons stresses the high motives of the pope and the certainty that reasonable governments, such as the US, would give their respectful attention to it.⁷² The tone used here is striking when compared to Gibbons’ rhetoric concerning the U.S. war effort. In speaking of the peace plan, he simply lacks the ideological zeal—not to mention the concrete and practical commitment—that emerges, for example, in his statement of April 5, 1917, after the declaration of war. Further, Ellis also notes that Gibbons’ fullest statement to the press concerning the peace note includes a disclaimer: “He granted that the

⁶⁸ Cf Gibbons, “The War Policy of the Pope,” 487-488; Ellis, 244-245

⁶⁹ Ellis, 282-283

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 251, 282

⁷¹ This claim, unable to be unfolded here, is common. Fogarty, for example, points to the disparaging remarks of Wilson about immigrants from Italy and Eastern Europe; Wilson also was unmoved by the persecution of the church in Mexico during the Revolution in 1915. Cf. Fogarty, *The Vatican and the American Hierarchy*, 209.

⁷² Unable to obtain the original document here, I rely on Ellis, 244

Pope's effort might be called noble idealism which might or might not be realizable in fact.⁷³ This, it seems, strikes at the heart of the issue. Moral exhortations and prescriptions rooted in religion had to pass through a political funnel for Gibbons; this funnel discounted not only that which was explicitly theological but that which was politically improbable. That is, part of why Gibbons may have shied away from efforts to advance the pope's plan is simply that he thought it would fail. Indeed, when he writes his article in *America*, he deems the note "a monument to the universal affection, the prudent diplomacy and the strict impartiality of the Vicar of Christ."⁷⁴ But remember, he writes the article six months after the peace note failed; during its consideration, his own "prudent diplomacy" meant keeping a safe distance from it.

Ultimately, the attempt to *prove* the failure of Gibbons to lobby for Benedict's peace note is strained at best. Yet, in light of their deep philosophical differences, it is a fitting symbol. The pope, engaged in an all-out effort to bring the voice of the Church to bear on politics, unleashes an ambitious yell across the seas to end the war. The cardinal, engaged in an all-out effort to fit his religion into the American political system, utters cautious niceties to pursue the goal of non-offense. Even if the reason Gibbons made no contact with the President concerning the peace note was that he had the flu; even if a secretary forgot to mail the letter; even if he *did* lobby the president and the record of it eluded Ellis; the fact remains that Cardinal Gibbons was not faithful to Pope Benedict XV and his efforts to bring about peace. And so this anecdote strikes at truth even if it is not incontrovertible history. But then again, Ellis *was* a thorough researcher; then again, Gibbons freely contacted the president on a number of *other* occasions; then again, Gibbons was in the midst

⁷³ Ellis, 245

⁷⁴ Gibbons, 488

of *using* the war to pioneer a movement of Catholic ascendancy. Perhaps Cardinal James Gibbons *did* neglect to contact the president, intentionally. And perhaps some U.S. Catholic historians have attempted to gloss over this fact, intentionally.

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