

***Summary: “Pius XI and American Pragmatism”***

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The very first month of Pius XI’s pontificate provides a great deal of material exemplifying the relationship his pontificate would have with America. There were two central events: a Vatican Decree disbanding the American Bishops’ organization, the National Catholic Welfare Council (NCWC), and the Vatican’s selection of Father Edmund A. Walsh S.J. to head the Papal Relief Mission to Russia. My paper discusses both noting their tight interconnection.

I will begin this summary of my paper by quoting from a letter written by the Vatican Substitute Secretary of State Giuseppe Pizzardo to the representative of the Soviet government in Rome, Nicholas Jordanski, on October 1, 1923. This quote will give a quick impression of both the central point of my research and the cultural climate in which that took place. The letter was written a day following a stormy session between a representative of the Vatican (Cavalier Giovanni Belardo) and of the Soviet government (Mr. Straoujan, Chief Secretary of the Russian Delegation to Rome) in which the Soviet representative had demanded in no uncertain terms that the Vatican of Pius XI recall Edmund A. Walsh, SJ, from his post in Moscow as Director of the *Papal Relief Mission to Russia*.

*Excellency, ...*

*First, with regard to Prof. Walsh, I can tell you confidentially that I have just written him to recommend that he moderate his behavior in his relationship with Soviet authorities.*

*Permit me to say that this somewhat rude way of acting can be explained by the fact that Prof. Walsh is American, having very progressive ideas regarding religious liberty, and being accustomed to seeing the American Bishops perfectly free in the exercise of their sacred ministry and concluding agreements with the civil power with little difficulty. It could be that he is not taking into account the tradition of civil power in Russia nor the difficulties of the present regime. ...*

This letter is seemingly concerned only with Fr. Edmund Walsh, the Director of the Papal Relief Mission to Russia. Reading it closely, however, gives us a good idea of the general European opinion of Americans and - particularly in Pizzardo’s description of American bishops’ behavior - of the reservations the Vatican had with regard to “Americanism” within the American Catholic hierarchy. These reservations, in fact, were instrumental in bringing the Vatican to issue the decree

disbanding the American Bishops organization, the National Catholic Welfare Council, on February 23, 1922, only a few days after the election of Pius XI.

This difference in mentality characterized the American and the Vatican approach in practically everything. Traditionally Americans had frequently felt somewhat uncomfortable around Europeans – because of the European’s sense of history, manners and culture – while, on the other hand, the Europeans have often felt disturbed by Americans – because of the American’s impatience with tradition and formality, dislike of constraint and, yes, their democratic attitude.

This mutual discomfort came to the surface time and time again in American-European relations. The letter we have just read provides us with a clear example, in fact. Here, an official spokesman for the Roman Catholic Church while addressing an official spokesman for the Bolshevik government, notwithstanding their diametrically opposed views (this exchange occurred only a few months after the Soviet government had put the Russian Catholic hierarchy on trial, condemned them and executed one of them in prison!!), nonetheless makes appeal to a community of shared values, to a common sensibility, saying, essentially: “We are Europeans and he is American. What can you expect?”

The Vatican Decree, emitted on February 25, 1922, and rescinded 4 months later on June 22, 1922, then, was one of the very first acts of internal politics, but with a character of international significance, approved by Pope Pius XI shortly after his election to the throne of Saint Peter. The text made direct reference to several grievances, which had been raised against the NCWC and brought to the attention of the Vatican: perplexities as to both the enormous size of the organization and, above all, as to a presumed tendency toward “*Gallicanism*” [*the notion that national customs might trump Roman (Catholic Church) regulations*]. It was objected that, given the renewed cultural climate following World War I, the presence of such a large, complex organization, originally formed to give visibility to the Catholic Americans’ contribution to World War I and subsequently transformed by the American Bishops into a permanent assembly of a supra-diocesan nature, was neither necessary or advisable.

The subsequent history of the American Bishops’ fight to retain their national organization and of the Vatican’s reassertion of the primacy of Rome provide further colorful illustrations of this fundamental difference in mentality. My paper outlines this contrast in detail using the original documents to substantiate the account. Briefly put the accusing protagonists were two American Cardinals, William Henry O’Connell from Boston, and Dennis Joseph Dougherty from Philadelphia (the American expression of the Vatican’s authority), who were concerned that the post World War I

development of the NCWC's organization had become an expression of "Americanism" which was making inroads on the authority of the Catholic hierarchy in the United States and, therefore, on the balance of power between America and the Vatican. Their complaints to the Vatican did not go unheeded thanks, also, to Cardinal O'Connell's close friendship with members of the Roman Curia. The NCWC, on the other hand, unanimously defended itself from such accusations. These Bishops spoke out, wrote letters and petitions, went to Rome to speak their piece and organized a vote which canvassed all 107 Episcopal seats in the United States. The results of this vote gave an overwhelming majority to the NCWC and, of course, were submitted to Rome as proof of the "grass roots" support for the organization i.e. a "democratic" confirmation which was in direct contrast with the Roman Curia's decision. For the Americans such a vote of confidence seemed like a conclusive argument, but for the Vatican hierarchy (whom O'Connell had advised not to be intimidated) there was still hesitation. Since when did a majority vote have more importance than the views of the hierarchy? of the Princes of the Church? Is this, in itself, not further proof of "Americanism"? Eventually, of course, the action was rescinded, but under a set of terms dictated by the Vatican which reasserted the primacy of Rome and of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy.

This first action of Pius XI towards America, however, was accompanied by a second action which was inseparably intertwined with the first and, again, occurred during the first weeks of Pius XI's pontificate – Father Walsh was called to Rome (he was in France at the time) by the Jesuit Superior General Ledochowski and by the Vatican's Substitute Secretary of State Pizzardo to take charge of the NCWC's participation in the *American Relief Administration's* famine aid program in Russia and, simultaneously, to direct the *Papal Relief Mission to Russia*. This program to aid Russia was of particular interest to the Vatican. In fact, in addition to feeding the famished, the Vatican had visions that such a display of Catholic charity and concern might well serve to win Russia back to the Roman Catholic fold. The American Relief Administration (ARA) had already been active in Russia for 6 months when Pius XI was elected. The American Catholic portion of this Mission, however, had been compromised by the fact that the NCWC, which was the official American Catholic representative on the ARA board, had been unable or unwilling to designate a Director. This meant, therefore, that even after 6 months of ARA's operation in Russia, there was still no sign to be seen of Catholic support in Russia. It is no surprise, then, that the decree dissolving the NCWC (and therefore the control over their funds) was accompanied by an immediate invitation by the Secretary of State Gasparri to Fr. Walsh, who had been personally selected by the head of the ARA Colonel William Haskell, to take charge of administering the NCWC funds in Russia. It also will come as no surprise

that it was Boston's own Cardinal O'Connell who had advised the Vatican that Fr. Walsh was the right man for the Job. Which is to say, the interconnection between these two actions was not simply happenstance!

As far as the Vatican's relationship with America was concerned, then, Pius XI had achieved several goals in the opening months of his pontificate. He had redimensioned the American NCWC by reaffirming the primacy of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy, and, in so doing, he had also liberated the considerable American economic resources of the NCWC for use in support of the Papal Relief Mission to Russia as directed by Fr. Edmund Aloysius Walsh – the American who, for the next 10 years, was to become Pius XI's highly trusted collaborator.

In closing may I say that this was only a brief summation of my paper, but I hope it will have given you some idea of the contrasting American forces which faced Pius XI at the beginning of his pontificate and the way in which he dealt with them.

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