

Benedict XV and the Rethinking of Catholic Missionary Strategy

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Introduction

Many Council Fathers at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) made proposals asking for the *internationalization of the Roman Curia*. The Belgian prelate, Leo Joseph Cardinal Suenens (d. 1996), one of the major architects of twentieth-century Catholicism, led other bishops in demanding that a Roman Curia be created which would truly reflect the global face of the Roman Catholic Church.

If the chronology of such a request is shifted backwards from the time of Vatican II to the time of Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922), as Dragan R. Živojinović once did, one finds that the Vatican (centre of the Roman Curia and its ecclesiastical operations) was first and foremost an Italian institution. It was so by virtue of its history and geography, and overwhelming domination by Italian churchmen. Besides being the hegemony of Italian ecclesiastics, it was equally a European force in which its presence, influence and even its interests were most evident. From Europe too, particularly, through missionaries, the Vatican extended its presence and influence to other continents: Africa, Asia, America and Oceania.¹

The initial efforts towards the internationalization of the Church began back in 1919, when Pope Benedict XV issued his

¹ D. R. Živojinović, *The United States and the Vatican Policies 1914-1918* (Colorado, 1978), 3. A few studies have been done recently on Benedict XV. For example, J. F. Pollard, *The Unknown Pope: Benedict XV (1914-1922) and the Pursuit of Peace*, [London – New York, 2002]; L. Mauro, ed., *Benedetto XV - Profeta di Pace in un Mondo in Crisi* (Bologna, 2008); G. RUMI, ed. *Benedetto XV e la pace – 1918* (Brescia, 1990). Still relevant are two earlier works on him, confer W. H. Peters, *The Life of Benedict XV* (Milwaukee, 1959); F. Vistalli, *Benedetto XV* (Roma, 1928).

missionary apostolic letter, *Maximum Illud*, on November 30, 1919. Until Benedict XV, as George Goyau rightly pointed out, no other pope had been as clear as he was in his insistence on the supra-national character of the Church's missionary apostolate.²

A Pope in the midst of fire

In his first message, on September 8, 1914, Pope Benedict XV described World War I, which was then in its initial stages, in the gloomiest of terms: “a monstrous spectacle” and “the scourge of the ire of God.” He used similar terms again in his first encyclical, *Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum* of November 1, 1914, where without any ambiguity and without reference to the classical doctrine of a just war and the legitimate bearing of arms, he denounced the war as “an atrocious and sorrowful spectacle” and “a dreadful phantom.”

Pope Benedict in his strict neutrality towards the warring factions—the Allied countries: Britain, France, Russia, Italy and much later the United States of America on the one hand; and the Central Powers: Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire on the other hand—became the victim of miscomprehension. He was written off quite early in his pontificate by some hostile contemporaries, especially those from the Allied countries.

With hindsight today, after the passage of a century, the personality of Benedict XV is being rehabilitated from the distortions imputed to him by some of his contemporaries, who were either prejudiced in their assessment of him or were not on the same wavelength as the Pope. It is now common place to see Benedict XV as a man who had a solid knowledge of the politics and diplomacy of his time, and not just a parochial Italian ecclesiastic.

² G. Goyau, *Missions et Missionnaires* (Paris, 1931), 177. A similar view was held by Romain Rainero who maintained that Pope Benedict XV in his missionary apostolic letter, demonstrated with compelling precision the universal character of the Church's missionary outreach and also treated the missionary problems of the time in their global complexity. Cf. R. Rainero, “Attualité del Pensiero Missionologico di Benedetto XV” in G. Rossini, ed., *Benedetto XV, i Cattolici e La Prima Guerra Mondiale (Atti del Convegno d Studio tenuto a Spoleto nei giorni 7-8-9 settembre 1962)*, [Roma, 1963], 416-417.

In consistency with that great quality of his, Benedict XV knew how to choose his collaborators well. For example, he appointed the following personnel to curial offices or as nuncios to foreign countries: Mgr. Eugenio Pacelli (later Pope Pius XII), Achille Ratti (later Pope Pius XI), Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli (later John XXIII),³ as well as the Dutch Cardinal Willem van Rossum as the Prefect of Propaganda Fide (now called the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples). Cardinal von Rossum held this post for fourteen years, until his death in 1932. The appointment of Van Rossum proved opportune for the implementation of Catholic missionary policies as envisaged by Benedict XV. Those policies and strategies in the course of the twentieth century helped to assure the growth of local churches in mission territories, as well as bringing to a halt the exaggerated nationalism of many missionaries.⁴ International happenings of the time, chief among them being the First World War and the French Protectorate over the Catholic missions in China, to a great extent influenced the missionary policies of Benedict XV.

Catholic missions and World War I

As far as the missions were concerned, the First World War presented Pope Benedict XV and his closest collaborators, with a daunting set of challenges and difficulties that seemed almost insurmountable at the time.⁵ Two major problems ensued at the outbreak of conflicts in 1914. The first was the withdrawal of missionary personnel from several missions and their subsequent

³ G. De Rosa, "Benedetto XV" in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 8 (Roma, 1966), 409, 414; J. F. Pollard, *The Unknown Pope: Benedict XV (1914-1922) and the Pursuit of Peace*, 70-71; D. Castillo, "A Broken World," *America* (July 21-28, 2014), 20-23.

⁴ K. Ward, "Christianity, Colonialism and Missions" in H. McLeod, ed., *The Cambridge History of Christianity: World Christianities, c. 1914 – c. 2000*, (Cambridge, 2006), 75-76; A. Hastings, "The Clash of Nationalism and Universalism within Twentieth-Century Missionary Christianity" in B. Stanley, ed., *Missions, Nationalism and the End of Empire* (Grand Rapids – Cambridge, 2003), 15.

⁵ J. De Volder, « Gasparri et Benoît », *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome* (MEFRIM), 116, 1, [Rome, 2004], 243-254.

enlistment into the national armies of their various countries of origin. Up until the beginning of World War I, the Catholic missionary force was predominantly a French affair. For instance, “A full two-thirds of all European priests, brothers, and Sisters working in Catholic missions were French—making for a total of more than 50,000 French religious workers abroad by 1900.”⁶

As was once estimated, their country’s deployment of more than 25,000 French priests, brothers and seminarians to the trenches impacted negatively on Catholic missionary work in the areas of activities and human resources. One good example is the Paris Seminary, which in the year prior to the start of the war, had about 200 students enrolled, but could only muster about twelve students in 1915. The same fate was experienced by other French seminaries both diocesan and of missionary institutes. Until May of 1915, when Italy entered the war on the side of the allies, that country helped to offset some of the shortfalls that had resulted from the French side. As the war got prolonged, Italian missionary institutes began in their own turn to feel the devastating effects of the war on their personnel and recruitment. Other countries like Belgium, Holland and Germany, that had been to some extent traditional sources for the Catholic missionary labor force likewise experienced a depletion in their vocation ranks.⁷ Due to the precarious situation of the missions, an Episcopalian newspaper reported in 1916 that “Roman Catholic missions are undergoing a deadly crisis because of the war raging in Europe.”⁸

⁶ J. P. Daughton, *An Empire Divided: Religion, Republicanism, and the Making of French Colonialism, 1880-1914* (Oxford, 2006), 38.

⁷ R. Aubert, et al., *The Christian Centuries: The Church in a Secularised Society*, vol. 5 (London – New York, 1979), 542; T. Scalzotto, “L’Encyclique ‘Maximum Illud’ et son Importance Historique,” *Omnis Terra*, vol. XIX (Janvier, 1980), 16-17; G. B. Tragella, “Duc in Altum: Benedetto XV e le Missioni,” *Rivista di Studi Missionari*, no. 2 (1920), 5.

⁸ As cited by T. Scalzotto, “L’Encyclique ‘Maximum Illud’ et son Importance Historique,” 16. For the preoccupations of Benedict XV in order to spare the missions from further ruins, see *idem*, “I Papi e la Sacra Congregazione per l’Evangelizzazione dei Popoli o ‘de Propaganda Fide’ da Benedetto XV a Paolo VI” in J. Metzler, ed., *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, Memoria*

Another difficulty emerged on the heels of the vindictive policies of France and Britain after the Versailles Conference which had brought the war to an end. Such a vendetta meant that Catholic missions under the supervision of German missionaries paid a heavy penalty as did Germany, which suffered enormous losses as the price of defeat by the allies in 1918. Catholic missionaries of German origin who had been engaged in missionary activities in Kenya and Ruanda-Urundi before the war were never allowed to return to their previous missions after the war. In places like Togo (expelled in 1916), Cameroon (expelled in 1917), Tanganyika and South West Africa (today's Namibia), former German territories were transferred to the governance of France and Britain by the stipulations of the Treaty of Versailles.⁹

The draconian measures adopted by France and Britain were aimed at the total effacement of the German sphere of influence in Africa. However, the expulsion of German missionaries was not limited to its former colonies in Africa. As a result of the war, German missionaries in China were constantly threatened either with expulsion from China or detention in Oceania and Australia. Through many secret diplomatic channels, the Holy See sought to save the Catholic missions under German supervision in China from impending dissolution due to the uncompromising stance of France and Britain. Given the protracted nature of the negotiations at the time, the Holy See at one point, had to employ the services of Cardinals James Gibbons of Baltimore, Adolph Amette of Paris and Francis Bourne of Westminster to pressure Britain and France to spare the vicariates in China under the administration of German missionaries. The Holy See equally sought the assistance of Mgr Stanislaus Jarlin (林懋德) of Beijing to curb the animosity of the

Rerum (1622 – 1972), vol. III/2 (1815 – 1972), [Roma – Freiburg – Wien, 1976], 253-271.

⁹ K. Ward, "Christianity, Colonialism and Missions," 73; J. Gadille, "Le Chiese Cristiane in Africa, Asia e Oceania" in J-M. Mayer, et al., eds, *Storia del Cristianesimo: Guerre Mondali e Totalitarismi (1914-1958)*, vol. XII [Roma, 1997], 1011-1012.

French minister in Beijing against German influence in China, even in religious matters.¹⁰

In view of the enormous difficulties and different hurdles which France and Britain put in the way of the Holy See in their efforts to resettle missionaries from the defeated Central Powers, Count John De Salis (British representative to the Holy See) advised Cardinal Gasparri in a letter dated March 11, 1919 that it was better for the Holy See to rely on indigenous clergy to carry out the Church's work in mission territories. De Salis especially referred to China, pointing out that missionary activity could still continue uninterrupted, even with the ban on missionaries from enemy countries, since the indigenous clergy, assisted by the few remaining European missionaries were capable of staffing all the mission territories.

The French protectorate

As explained earlier, the Catholic missionary effort prior to the war was largely a French-dominated enterprise, but it also had a heavy responsibility attached to it. The French Church provided the missionary personnel, a major percentage of the financial backing, as well as the political support accorded to French missionaries by their home government. For instance, towards the end of the nineteenth century as J.P. Daughton has estimated, "twenty-eight of the forty-four Catholic missionary congregations working in the world were French."¹¹ Nowhere was the predominance of France more visible than in China where of the 700 Catholic missionaries at work there in 1885, more than 500 of them were French nationals. Missionaries of other European nationalities that included Italians,

¹⁰ V. De Marco, "Le Missioni Tedesche in Cina dopo la Prima Guerra Mondiale" in A. Giovagnoli, ed., *Roma e Pechino: La svolta extraeuropea di Benedetto XV* (Roma, 1999), 171-200; *idem*, "L'Intervento della Santa Sede a Versailles in favore delle Missioni Tedesche" in G. Rumi, ed., *Benedetto XV e la pace - 1918* (Brescia, 1990), 65-82, *idem*, *Un diplomatico vaticano all'Eliseo. Il cardinal Bonaventura Cerretti (1872-1933)*, [Roma, 1984].

¹¹ J. P. Daughton, *An Empire Divided*, 38.

Spaniards, Portuguese, Germans, Dutch, as well as Austrians and Belgians did not amount to 200.¹²

Until about 1842 France had not shown much interest in China since its primary concerns and attention were directed towards North Africa, particularly Algeria where France sought to expand its colonial and territorial ambitions. That does not mean that France was altogether a newcomer to China. King Louis XIV (1638-1715), the Sun King, in 1685 supported the mission of the first French Jesuit mission to China which was made up of five “mathematicians,” including Joachim Bouvet. Without doubt, in the calculations of Louis XIV and his advisers, the support accorded by the French Crown to the French Jesuits in China was ultimately aimed at circumventing and weakening the predominance of Portugal, not only in China but also the entire Far East. As such, it could be said that the French Protectorate of the Missions in China, which only materialized in the middle of the nineteenth century, and was largely based on the so-called “unequal treaties,” was long in coming to maturity. Before France, Portugal had previously maintained a somewhat loose foothold in China, particularly in Macau, through its *Padroado* (patronage). But given the decline of Portuguese power, which had already begun in the eighteenth century and continued unabated into the 19th, France, in the first half of the nineteenth century had no rivals. Thus mainly for reasons of prestige and strategy, and for the purpose of imperial and economic expansion, it imposed itself as the protector of Catholic missions in China.¹³

Generally, the French Protectorate in China had as its cornerstone the four treaties signed between France and China. These were: (a) Art. 22 of the Treaty of Whampoa (1844); (b) Art. 13 of the Treaty of Tientsin (1858); (c) Art. 6 of the Convention of Peking (1860) and (d) the Berthemy Convention (1865). Further permissions came over time and with the enactment of other treaties.

¹² P. M. Elia, “L’Istituzione della Gerarchia Episcopale e dell’inter-nunziatura in Cina,” *Studia Missionalia*, vol. II (1946), 26.

¹³ H. M. Cole, “Origins of the French Protectorate over Catholic Missions in China,” *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 34, no. 3 (July 1940), 473.

The mainstay of these treaties and conventions was concretized in the various concessions extracted from the Chinese government. These included the revoking of the imperial edict of 1724, which had outlawed the preaching of Christianity in China, the building of churches and hospitals, and legal protection for Catholic missionaries and the Chinese who wished to become Catholics. Through the treaty of 1858 France arrogated to itself the right to issue a passport to Catholic missionaries in China and to those who intended to undertake missionary work in China, regardless of nationality.

On its part, the Holy See was somewhat ambivalent in its attitudes towards the French protectorate in China. While it initially did not enthusiastically embrace the protectorate because of its unpleasant experience with the Portuguese *Padroado*, the Holy See tacitly accepted the protectorate in 1888 when Pope Leo XIII recognized the right of France as the protector of Catholic missions, a right “confided to her by Providence—a noble mission consecrated not only by ancient usage, but also by international treaties.”¹⁴ Leo XIII’s affirmation was a recognition of the directives from the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda Fide which on May 22, 1888 forbade missionaries to make recourse to consuls of any other country except those of France, who according to the Roman Congregation, was the *de facto* protector of Catholic missionaries.¹⁵

In spite of the operative norm, the pontificate of Benedict XV, brought some major changes with regard to the missionary policies of the Holy See. One of the determining factors for such changes

¹⁴ J. Brucker, “Protectorate of Missions,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. XII (New York, 1911), 491; C. Prudhomme, “Stratégie missionnaire et grande politique sous Léon XIII – Le heurt des logiques” in V. Viaene, ed., *The Papacy and the New World Order: Vatican Diplomacy, Catholic Opinion and International Politics at the time of Leo XIII (1878-1903)*, [Leuven, 2005], 270.

¹⁵ Un Prelato Romano, “Il Protettorato Cattolico della Francia nell’Oriente e nell’Estremo Oriente,” *Civiltà Cattolica* 55 (1904), 257-276. For other fissures of the French intrusions and its religious protectorate in China, confer, E. P. Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony: China’s Catholic Church and the French Religious Protectorate* (Oxford, 2013), 23-34.

was the opposition of France in 1918 to the establishment of direct diplomatic relations between the Holy See and China. In 1886 France had previously energetically frustrated the attempts made by Leo XIII and Emperor Guangxu (1875-1908) to establish diplomatic relations, which would have resulted in the sending of a papal nuncio to Beijing and the accreditation of a Chinese ambassador to the Holy See.¹⁶ In the summer of 1918, France no longer the strong force of opposition it was in 1886, relied on the support of the United States of America to foil the initiatives of the Holy See and China to cement diplomatic ties.¹⁷ Every effort made by the Holy See to get France to see the need for the presence of a papal nuncio in Beijing was met with the procrastination of the “first daughter of the Church.” Cardinal Gasparri (Vatican Secretary of State) in a letter of August 22, 1918, addressed to Cardinal Adolph Amette (Archbishop of Paris), expressed Pope Benedict XV’s frustration at the uncompromising stance of the French government.

After its painful defeat and humiliation, the Holy See under Benedict XV became more determined than ever to work for the realization of its age-old policies regarding the missions. Those policies, described as principles or goals, since the seventeenth century, and beginning particularly with the establishment of the Propaganda Fide in 1622, had remained at best only wishful

¹⁶ C. Prudhomme, *Stratégie Missionnaire du Saint-Siège sous Léon XIII (1878-903): Centralisation Romaine et Défis Culturels* [Rome, 1994]; O. Sibre, *Le Saint-Siège et l’Extrême-Orient (Chine, Corée, Japon) de Léon XIII à Pie XII (1800-1952)* [Rome, 2012]; P. Taveirne, “The Missionary Enterprise and the Endeavors to Establish an Ecclesiastical Hierarchy in China and Diplomatic Relations with China 1307-1946,” *Tripod*, no. 54, vol 9 (1989), 53-66; S. Ticozzi, “Lou Tseng-Tsiang (1871-1949) and Sino-Vatican Diplomatic Relations,” *Tripod*, no. 152, vol. 29 (Spring 2009), 9-32; L. Trincia, “Francia, Cina e Santa Sede: La ‘Querelle’ intorno alla Nunziatura di Pechino nel 1886,” *Rivista di Storia della Chiesa in Italia* 51, no. 1 (Gennaio – Giugno 1997), 1-34; F. Vecchi, “Interferenze Francesi negli Approcci Diplomatici tra S. Sede e Cina nel XIX secolo. L’accordo Italo-Cinese del 1886 nel quadro dei ‘Trattati Ineguali’,” *Il Diritto Ecclesiastico* 114, vol. III (Luglio – Settembre 2003), 1154-1210.

¹⁷ For the roles played by America and France in blocking the efforts of the Holy See and China, see D. J. Alvarez, “The Department of State and the Abortive Papal Mission to China, August 1918,” *The Catholic Historical Review*, vol. 62, no. 3 (July 1976), 455-463.

aspirations on the part of the Holy See. Those major principles or goals were: (a) priority should be given to the formation of a native clergy in mission territories; (b) assurance of financial autonomy for the missions in order to make them less dependent on subventions from European governments and their vested interests, and (c) the establishment of the exclusive authority of the papacy over the missions—to neutralize the influence of other political interests by bringing the missions squarely under the direct control of the Holy See.¹⁸ In the context of world affairs during and after World War I, those goals were once again revived, and thenceforth, they underpinned every policy of the Holy See. As far as the missions were concerned, these goals were uppermost in the minds of Pope Benedict XV, Cardinal Gasparri (Secretary of State) and Van Rossum (Prefect of Propaganda Fide).

Missions within an ecclesiastical orbit

For successive popes, *Maximum Illud* became a major point of reference for other documents on the missions. And for the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide, it was a sort of *Guidebook* because for over half a century, the many directives of Propaganda Fide bore the imprints of the policies that were clearly expressed in *Maximum Illud*. That papal document was revolutionary in its strong emphasis on the formation of a local or indigenous clergy in mission territories. From the end of the First World War up to the eve of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the increase in the number of local clergy in Asian and African mission countries was truly phenomenal and the quality of their formation was equally remarkable. It would not have been possible without the initial impetus given by Pope Benedict XV as the *pacesetter*. It was a

¹⁸ V. U. Iheanacho, *Maximum Illud and Benedict XV's Missionary Thinking: Prospects of a Local Church in Mission Territories* (Saarbrücken, 2015), 111-112; C. Prudhomme, "Stratégie missionnaire et grande politique," 352. See also E. Ducornet, *La Chiesa e la Cina* (Milano, 2008); C. Prudhomme, *Missioni Cristiane e Colonialismo* (Milano, 2006).

momentum that was sustained with vigour by Popes Pius XI and Pius XII, respectively.¹⁹

Even before Benedict XV decided to devote an apostolic letter to the missions, some voices within the ecclesial community both in Europe and in some mission areas, like China had been heard from. The remotest of these voices was that of Joseph Gabet, a French Vincentian missionary in China, who in 1847 addressed a memoir to Pope Pius IX on the state of the missions in China. He strongly defended the local Chinese clergy against whom some European missionaries had directed vitriolic criticisms. Gabet identified three main hindrances to the progress of the mission work in China: (a) the lack of an indigenous clergy and the improvised nature of their formation; (2) the extraneous character of Christianity in China and (3) the infighting or rivalry among missionary congregations over mission territories. In Gabet's mind, his memoir was meant to assist the pope in coming to the aid of the missions in China so that the greatest result could be achieved using the same missionary personnel as was then present, and with the same means.²⁰

From the missions in China, Mgr. Jean Baptiste de Guébriant (Bishop of Canton, and from 1921, superior general of the Paris

¹⁹ R. Hickey, ed., *Modern Missionary Documents and Africa*, 5. See also S. Neil, *A History of Christian Missions* (Harmondsworth, 1964), 518; W. Henkel, "Catholic Missions in the XX Century," *Annuario Historiae Conciliorum* 44 (2012), 263-290; C. Pioppi, "Una tappa importante del passaggio dalla missione alla Chiesa locale in Estremo Oriente. La recezione della *Maximum Illud* nei testi del Primo Concilio Cinese del 1924," *Annuario Historiae Conciliorum* 44 (2012), 291-342. And as rightly observed by Richard Gray, until the outbreak of World War I, Protestant missions in Africa by "far outstripped Catholics in their contribution to African education" but after the war, "the overall Catholic insistence on the requirements of an indigenous clergy was to provide independent Africa with a distinctive element in civil society... The requirements of an indigenous clergy were given absolute priority by Benedict XV ('Maximum Illud,' 30.9.1919), and reiterated by Propaganda Fide's Cardinal Van Rossum and Pius XI." Cf. R. Gray, *Christianity, the Papacy and Mission in Africa* (New York, 2012), 137-138.

²⁰ V. U. Iheanacho, *Maximum Illud and Benedict XV's Missionary Thinking*, 170-177; G. Tragella, "Le Vicende d'un Opuscolo sul Clero Indigeno e del suo Autore" in *Der einheimische Klerus in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Festschrift P. Dr. Laurenz Kilger, OSB zum 60. Geburtstag dargeboten* (Schöneck – Beckenried, 1950), 189-197; L. Mezzadri, *Le Missioni Vincenziane in Cina a metà del XIX secolo* (Roma, 2000).

Foreign Missions Society), lent his voice to the demand for decisive leadership on the part of Rome. De Guébriant, in his quinquennial report for 1915, implored the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide to quickly get the attention of the Holy Father with regard to the missions of China. According to him, an authoritative word from the Pope would accomplish much, not only for the missions in China but equally for all the Catholic missions everywhere in the world.²¹

Father Anthony Cotta, another Vincentian missionary in China, expressed the opinion that missionaries in China should work in such a way as to render themselves “redundant.” That is, they must lay the foundations for the emergence of local churches in mission areas, and then pass the task of nurturing those nascent churches on to the indigenous clergy, under the leadership and direction of indigenous bishops chosen from among the local clergy. This was not the common practice at the time. The reluctance of the missionaries to turn their missions over to the care of the local clergy, and Rome’s procrastination frequently caused the local clergy to remain under an interminable apprenticeship or a perpetual tutelage to the leadership of European missionaries. The latter were sometimes far younger in age and in years of ordination than the local clergy in those mission areas. In such a hierarchical structure operative on the missions, the ideas of Cotta that the missionaries must never remain leaders for all eternity was both novel and revolutionary in equal measure. No wonder that Cotta paid dearly for his temerity. He eventually left the Vincentians, and joined Maryknoll, the newly formed (1911) Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America.

Another person opposed to the missionary status quo of their milieu was Vincent Lebbe, a friend and confrere of Cotta. They gathered around themselves a few like-minded missionaries and some local Chinese clergy. Their little group later became known as the *Tientsin Movement* because of their location in the district of Tientsin within the Vicariate Apostolic of Maritime Chihli in Northern China. Through his advocacy of Chinese patriotism against the political pretensions of France in China, and his

²¹ Archives of Propaganda Fide, *Nuova Serie*, vol. 766 (1922), 128.

unwavering support for the Chinese indigenous clergy, Lebbe insisted that the progress of the missions and the Catholic cause in China could only be furthered by no one else but by Chinese Catholics themselves, under the leadership and guidance of Chinese indigenous clergy with Chinese indigenous bishops playing prominent roles in their own affairs.²²

It should be noted that until the publication of Benedict XV's missionary apostolic letter on November 30, 1919, the debate in some missionary circles on the place the local clergy should occupy within missionary structures had been a perennial problem. Canon Léon Joly, for example, reopened the debate in the first decade of the twentieth century with the publication of his two-volume work, which focused primarily on the causes and factors that accounted for the failure of Catholic missions in Asia. In the estimation of Joly, despite the huge investment made in those missions in terms of personnel and finances, the missions in Asia, particularly in Japan, India and China, were not successful because of the obvious absence of a local clergy. This was particularly noticeable on the occasions when local authorities either expelled or killed the foreign missionaries.²³

In all the debates on the indispensable place of the indigenous clergy in the growth and sustainment of the missions, the Holy See was not altogether a bystander or a disinterested observer. For

²² For a brief biography of Cotta, cf. E. P. Young, *Ecclesiastical Colony: China's Catholic Church and the French Religious Protectorate*, 74, 148-150, 186-192, 216-222. See also, <http://www.maryknollmissionarchives.org/index.php/history/85-cottafranthony>. For the memoirs of Cotta and Lebbe, cf. Archives of Propaganda Fide, *Nuova Serie*, vol. 699 (1921), 758-767, 769-801; 835-905; C. Soetens, ed., *Recueil des Archives Vincent Lebbe*, 5 vols. (Louvain, 1982-1986). For works on Lebbe, see J. Leclercq, *Thunder in the Distance – The Life of Père Lebbe* (New York, 1958); Soetens, op cit.; J. P. Wiest, “The Legacy of Vincent Lebbe,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. XXIII, no. 1 (January 1999), 33-37; “L'Assoluta necessità di un clero autoctono in Cina. La figura del p. Vincent Lebbe (1877-1940)” in L. M. Ferrer – P. L. Guiducci, ed., *Fontes: Documenti Fondamentali di Storia della Chiesa*, [Milano, 2005], 588-594.

²³ L. Joly, *Le christianisme et l'Extrême Orient: Missions Catholiques de l'Inde, de l'Indo-Chine, de la Chine, de la Corée*, Paris 1907; *idem*, *Mission Catholique du Japon*, Paris 1907.

instance, Pope Benedict XV on two different occasions indicated that the local clergy in any mission territory occupied a unique place and were the privileged persons best equipped to bring the Christian faith to their own people. Pope Benedict wrote this in a letter dated March 4, 1918 to Fr. Leonard Vossen (rector of the Pontifical Seminary of Kandy, Ceylon). In Benedict's view, because the local clergy were chosen from among the indigenous people, these people would not consider them as foreigners, and being local themselves, "they would not raise suspicion, and for reasons of friendship and relationships with family and the community, they would have easy access to both influence their countrymen and to elicit their support."²⁴

The Apostolic Letter

In reference to Benedict XV's *Maximum Illud*, Claude Soetens justly asserted that its origin, unlike other pontifical documents, cannot be traced to a single source. No source can be cited as having a strong influence on the pontifical document in question.²⁵ For this reason, *Maximum Illud* is best understood within the international background of its time. Pope Benedict XV and his collaborators must have drawn from a very wide spectrum of reservoirs in drafting the document. As Saverio Paventi wisely pointed out, "*Maximum Illud* is the first document to study the missions in their totality with a panoramic vision. It gives firm norms and directives. This is to the great merit of Benedict XV, which is very often forgotten and unknown."²⁶

²⁴ Benedictus XV, "Ad R. P. Leonardum, S.I., Moderatorem," *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. X (1918), 135.

²⁵ C. Soetens, "La Svolta della 'Maximum Illud'" in A. Giovagnoli, ed., *Roma e Pechino*, 76.

²⁶ S. Paventi, "Il quarantennio della prima Enciclica Missionaria," *Clero e Missioni*, no. 2 (Marzo – Aprile 1959), 121; N. Kowalsky, "La 'Maximum Illud' e il Clero Indigeno," *Clero e Missioni*, no. 3 (Maggio – Giugno 1959), 197. A similar view was presented by A. Seumois, "Formazione dei Missionari secondo l'Enciclica 'Maximum Illud,'" *Clero e Missioni*, no. 6 (Novembre 1959), 438-444; S. Trinchese, *Roncalli e le Missioni: L'Opera della Propagazione della Fede tra Francia e Vaticano negli anni '20*, (Brescia, 1989), 26-27.

In the understanding of Benedict XV, two major obstacles inhibited the progress of the missions, and unfortunately retarded their transition from missions to full-fledged local churches. Those two hindrances were (a) congregationalism on the part of missionaries in the forms of rivalry among the missionary congregations themselves, and their unwillingness to prepare a local clergy capable of assuming ecclesiastical responsibility for their local churches; and (b) nationalism often manifested in exclusiveness, which tended to make of a particular mission territory the exclusive preserve of certain missionaries of one nationality.

To facilitate the elevation to the episcopacy of local clergy in order to lead their local churches, Benedict XV in *Maximum Illud*, in strong terms disapproved of every form of superficial priestly formation that was then operative in many mission areas. He declared such formation as deplorable and not being suitable to meet the demands of the Catholic priesthood. According to the pontiff, “the best hopes for the Church of the future” were founded on the raising up of a local or native clergy. In summation, the missionary apostolic letter of Benedict XV was anchored on four main points: (1) directives handed down to the heads of the missions; (2) the enlistment and adequate formation of the indigenous clergy; (3) better organization and coordination among the different Catholic missionary funding organizations; and (4) the thorough formation for future missionaries.²⁷

Besides those four keystones of the apostolic letter, Benedict XV finally settled the question that touched upon which missionary strategy to adopt between two options: intensive or extensive. The Holy Father gave his approval in favour of an extensive approach to evangelization. Mgr. Joseph Freri (director of The Society for the

²⁷ Benedictus XV, *Maximum Illud* – Apostolic Letter on the Spread of the Faith throughout the World (November 30, 1919), *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. XI (1919), 400-455. For a detailed study of the document, see V. U. Iheanacho, *Maximum Illud and Benedict XV's Missionary Thinking*, 229-234. The English version of the document was published in New York (1919) by The Society for the Propagation of the Faith. It is not easily available nowadays, but a schematic form of it can be found in R. Hickey, ed., *Modern Missionary Documents and Africa*, 27-29.

Propagation of the Faith, in New York) had in 1917, two years before the publication of *Maximum Illud*, developed the idea of an extensive approach which according to him, was “to cover maximum ground with the minimum number.”²⁸ From the point of view of Benedict XV, Vicars and Prefects Apostolic (heads of missionary circumscriptions) and their missionary collaborators, as well as their different missionary congregations and institutes were not to be satisfied with the small number of converts while a vast multitude of people in broad mission territories remained in ignorance of the Christian message. Therefore, it was imperative for missionaries on the ground in mission areas to launch out much more into the deep (*duc in altum*) for a greater evangelization. In the years immediately following the publication of *Maximum Illud*, Propaganda Fide formulated that principle of extensive propagation into a questionnaire to assist Vicars and Prefects Apostolic in assessing with some degree of accuracy the number of people not yet reached by the Gospel. One of the questions was framed in this way: “What is the portion of your vicariate that is not yet reached by the Gospel, and what percentage of the population is still outside the influence of the Christian message?”²⁹

CONCLUSION

The reconstruction of Catholic missions after World War I and their flowering thereafter owed their roots to the leadership role of

²⁸ J. Freri, *Native Clergy for Mission Countries*, [New York, 1917], 4.

²⁹ W. M. Van Rossum, “Epistola ad Episcopos, Vicarios, Praefectosque Apostolicos ac Missionum Superiores: De Relationibus Missionum, Singulis Quinquenniis Exhibendis” (April 12, 1922), *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, vol. XIV (1922), 287-307. See also R. Hickey, ed., *Modern Missionary Documents and Africa*, 27; G. Goyau, *Missions et Missionnaires*, 170; G. D’Souza, “Le Missioni Cattoliche alla vigilia del Concilio Ecumenico,” *Civiltà Cattolica* 113, vol. IV (1962), 3-14. For the repositioning of Propaganda Fide to meet mission challenges of the twentieth century after the publication of *Maximum Illud*, see, E. Kimman, “Money and Missions” in P. Van Geest – R. Regoli, ed., “Suavis laborum memoria.” Chiesa, Papato e Curia Romana, tra storia e teologia / Church, Papacy, Roman Curia between History and Theology. Scritti in onore di Marcel Chappin SJ per il suo 70o compleanno / Essays in honour of Marcel Chappin SJ on His 70th Birthday, Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Città del Vaticano 2013 (Collectanea Archivi Vaticani 88), 439-452.

Pope Benedict XV through the publication of *Maximum Illud* in 1919. Unfortunately, he did not have the honour to raise a single native priest to the dignity of the episcopacy. The honour and privilege of ordaining the first six Chinese bishops in contemporary times was left to his immediate successor Pope Pius XI who on October 28, 1926 at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, crowned many centuries of Catholic missionary work in China with the achievement of those episcopal ordinations. It is also beyond doubt that the Holy See's greater openness shown in accelerating the episcopal ordinations of indigenous clergy, first in India (1923), China (1926), Japan (1927), Indochina (1937) and Africa (1939) may not have been possible without Pope Benedict XV's courage, and the initial impetus given by him.

In a similar measure, his insistence on the leadership of Rome in directing Catholic missions meant that Rome, and no longer Paris or Lyons, became the clear inaugurator and heartbeat of Catholic missionary activities from 1919 onwards. Once that happened, the leadership of Rome brought about a greater atmosphere of internationalization into Catholic missions in terms of missionary personnel.

The continuous emphasis in those decades of the twentieth century on missionary cooperation helped to blunt some sharp edges of the often contentious mission principle of commission (*ius commissionis*) that pitched Catholic missionaries against one another in some places over mission territories and boundaries. Evidently, Pope Benedict XV in *Maximum Illud* did not resolve every foreseeable problem and difficulty confronting the Catholic mission situations of his day. He, nonetheless, laid the foundation for the future flowering of those missions which eventually, with the passing of time, have become full-fledged local churches. Pope Benedict XV provided them with the potential to act as the future catalyst of the Catholic Church outside Europe, the old continent.