



## 1 August 1917 - Note to the Heads of the Belligerent Peoples

*At the height of the First World War Benedict XV addressed this open letter to the heads of the peoples engaged in this international conflict. However, this letter, which expressed to the full Benedict XV's horror at the carnage and slaughter of the Great War, failed to be acted upon at an international level. Although this initiative failed, in his own Vatican sphere of activity the Pope was able to promote a revival of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. He believed that science could have an important role in securing reconstruction and progress after the war, and saw in the Academy a vehicle by which to bring together scientists from around the world in a common effort to achieve what he had called for in his letter: 'a just and lasting peace'.*

From the beginning of our pontificate, amidst the horrors of the terrible storm which has fallen on Europe, we have sought three things above all: to preserve complete impartiality in relation to all the belligerents, as is appropriate to he who is the common father and who loves all his children with equal affection; to endeavour constantly to do all the most possible good, without personal exceptions and without national or religious distinctions, a duty which the universal law of charity, as well as the supreme spiritual office entrusted to us by Christ, dictates to us; and lastly, to engage in an assiduous commitment, as our peacemaking mission equally demands, to leave nothing undone within our power which could assist in hastening the end of this calamity by trying to lead the peoples and their heads to more moderate forms of counsel, to the calm deliberations of peace, of a 'just and lasting peace'.

Whoever has followed our work during the three unhappy years which have just elapsed has been able to recognise that we have always remained faithful to the intention of absolute impartiality and to doing good, and thus we have never ceased to exhort the belligerent peoples and governments to become brothers once again, even though all that we have done to attain this most noble end has not always been made public.

At the end of the first year of war, in addressing to them the most forceful exhortations, we also identified the road to follow to achieve a peace which was lasting and dignified for all. Unfortunately, our appeal was not listened to: the war continued fiercely for another two years with all its horrors; it grew worse and indeed it extended by land, sea and even air, where on defenceless cities, on quiet villages, on their innocent inhabitants, there descended desolation and death. And now nobody can imagine for how long these shared evils will multiply and become worse, whether for a few more months, or even worse whether another six years will become added to these bloodstained three years. Will the civilised world, therefore, be reduced to a field of death? And will Europe, so glorious and flourishing, almost overwhelmed by a universal madness, rush to the abyss, to its true and authentic suicide?

In such a highly worrying state of affairs, in the face of such a grave threat, we, not for mere particular policies nor in response to the suggestion or interest of one of the belligerent parties, but moved solely by awareness of the supreme duty of the shared Father of the faithful, by the sighs of children who invoke our action and our peacemaking word, of the very voice of mankind and reason, raise once again the call for peace, and renew a warm appeal to those who hold in their hands the destiny of the nations.

But no longer to dwell upon the general, as the circumstances suggested to us in the past: we want now to descend to more concrete and practical proposals, and to invite the governments of the belligerent peoples to agree upon the following points, which appear to be the bases of a just and lasting peace, leaving to the same governments to apply them at a specific level and to complete them.

First of all, the fundamental point must be that for the material force of arms should be substituted the moral force of law; hence a just agreement by all for the simultaneous and reciprocal reduction of armaments, according to rules and guarantees to be established to the degree that is necessary and sufficient for the maintenance of public order in each State; then, instead of arms, the institution of arbitration, with its lofty peacemaking function, according to standards to be agreed upon, with sanctions to be decided against a State which refuses either to submit international questions to arbitration or to accept the decisions of such arbitration.

Once the supremacy of law has been established, let every obstacle to the ways of communication between peoples be removed through the true freedom and common use of the seas. This would, on the one hand, remove very many reasons for conflict, and, on the other, open up new sources of prosperity and progress for all.

With regard to the damage and costs of war, we do not see any other path than that of the general rule of an entire and mutual remission, justified, for that matter, by the immense benefits of disarmament; and this is even more the case because one cannot understand the continuance of so much slaughter solely for reasons of an economic character.

If in some cases special reasons are in opposition to this, these should be considered with justice and fairness.

But these peaceful agreements, with the immense advantages that flow from them, are not possible without the mutual return of territories which are presently occupied. Therefore, with regard to Germany, there should be a total evacuation both of Belgium, with the guarantee of her full political, military and economic independence in relation to any power, and also of French territory; from the party on the other side there should be equal return of the German colonies.

With regard to territorial questions, such as those, for example, which cause strife between Italy and Austria, and between Germany and France, there is ground for hope that in consideration of the immense advantages of a lasting peace with disarmament, the conflicting parties will examine such territorial questions in a conciliatory frame of mind, taking into account, so far as this is just and practicable, as we have said on other occasions, the aspirations of peoples, and co-ordinating, where this is possible, their own interests with those shared by the great human community.

The same spirit of equity and justice should guide the examination of all other territorial and political questions, specifically those relating to Armenia, the Balkan States, and the countries which make up the ancient Kingdom of Poland, whose noble historical traditions and the sufferings it has undergone in particular during the present war ought rightly to enlist the sympathies of the nations.

Such are the principal foundations upon which we believe the future reorganisation of peoples should rest. They are of a kind which would make impossible the recurrence of such conflicts and would pave the way for a solution to the economic question, which is so important for the future and the material welfare of all the belligerent States.

In presenting them to you, who in this tragic hour hold in your hands the destinies of the belligerent peoples, we are animated by the dear and precious hope that they will be accepted, and that as soon as possible the end of this terrible struggle will be reached, a struggle which every day, even more, appears to be a useless massacre. All recognise, for that matter, that on both sides the honour of arms is saved. Here, therefore, our prayer: welcome the paternal invitation that we address to you in the name of the divine Redeemer, the Prince of peace! Reflect upon your most grave responsibility in front of God and all men! Upon your reflections will depend the peace and joy of innumerable families, the lives of thousands of young people, the very happiness of the peoples, which you have the absolute duty to secure. May the Lord inspire you in decisions which conform to His most holy will, and ensure that you, deserving the applause of the current age, will equally ensure that in future generations you will bear the name of peacemakers.

We in the meanwhile, fervidly joining ourself in prayer and penitence to all the faithful souls who sigh in peace, implore from the Divine Spirit light and counsel.