

IN HAC TANTA ENCYCLICAL OF POPE BENEDICT XV ON ST. BONIFACE

Benedict XV

Beloved Son and Venerable Brothers,

Greetings and The Apostolic Blessing.

We are in the midst of many trials and difficulties "and besides the other sufferings, there is my constant daily concern, for all the churches,"[1] to use the words of the Apostle. We have closely followed those unexpected events, those manifestations of disorder and of anarchy which have recently occurred among you and among neighboring countries. They continue to hold us in suspense.

2. In these dark times, the memory of St. Boniface, who brought salvation to Germany twelve centuries ago, is a ray of light and a messenger of hope and joy. We commemorate the ancient union of the German people with the Apostolic See. This union planted the first seeds of faith in your country and helped them grow. After the Roman See entrusted Boniface with this legation, he ennobled it by the exceptional glory of his deeds and, finally, by the blood of martyrdom.

3. Now twelve centuries later, we think you should plan as many celebrations as possible to commemorate this new era of Christian civilization. This era was begun by the mission and the preaching of Boniface, and then carried forth by his disciples and successors. From these came the salvation and the prosperity of Germany.

4. Another purpose of the celebrations is to perfect the present and to reestablish religious unity and peace for the future. These are the greatest goods and they come only from Christ who charged the Church with preserving, spreading, and defending Christian faith and charity. Thus, it is necessary for the Apostolic See to be united with the faithful. Boniface was the perfect herald and the model of such unity. This led to close, friendly relationships between the Roman See and your nation. While celebrating this unity and this perfect accord, we fervently desire to see them reestablished among all peoples so that "Christ might be all in all." [2]

5. We joyfully recall those things recorded so faithfully by the writers of that distant period. Among them the bishop Willibald, Boniface's contemporary, who narrated the virtues and deeds of this saintly man and described the beginnings of his mission to the German people. He had devoted himself to the religious life since his youth in Germany, and he experienced the dangers of the apostolic life among barbarian peoples. Thus he understood that he would reap no lasting fruit without the consent and approval of the Apostolic See and unless he received his mission and mandate from it.

6. After having laid aside the title of abbot, he bid farewell to the monks, his brothers, despite their insistence and their tears. He left and travelled by land across many countries and by the unknown routes of the sea, happily reaching the See of the Apostle Peter. There he addressed the venerable pope, Gregory II, "recounted his voyage to him, his reason for coming, and the desire which tormented him for such a long time." The holy pope, "face smiling and eyes filled with goodness," embraced the saint. He did not speak to him only one time but "every day he had important discussions with him." [3] Finally, in the grandest language and with official letters, he conferred on him the mission of preaching the Gospel to the German people.

7. In these letters, [4] the pope explained the purpose and the importance of the mandate more clearly than the writers of that period who spoke of the mission "from the Apostolic See" or "of the Apostolic Pontiff." The terms he used are so grave and authoritative that we can scarcely find any more expressive: "The intended goal of your religious zeal and your proven faith have become manifest to us. They are such that they compel us to use you as a co-minister to spread the divine word which the grace of God confided to us." Then he praised his knowledge, his character, and his project. By the supreme authority of the Apostolic See which Boniface himself invoked, he solemnly concluded: "Therefore, in the name of the indivisible trinity and by the unshaken authority of Saint Peter, we affirm the purity of your faith and command that, by the grace and under the protection of God . . . you hurry to these people who are in error. Teach them about the service of the kingdom of God by acquainting them with the name of Christ, our Lord." Finally he warned him

to maintain the rules of the Holy See concerning rites in his administration of the sacraments and to have recourse to the pope at any time. From this solemn letter, who would not recognize the good will and affection of the holy pope, and his paternal care toward the Germans to whom he sent one who was so dear to him?

8. His perception of his mission and his love for Christ continually urged this holy apostle to action. It consoled him in his afflictions, raised him in his discouragements, and inspired him with confidence when he despaired of his strength. It was evident right from his arrival in Phrygia and in Thuringia when, according to a writer of that period: "following the command of the pope, he spoke of religion to the senators and to the heads of the people and showed them the true way of knowledge and the clear light of understanding." [5] His zeal kept him from laziness and prevented him from even thinking about rest or staying in one place as in a peaceful harbor. It spurred him to undertake difficulties and the most humble work solely to obtain or to increase the glory of God and the salvation of souls.

9. Right from the beginning of his mission, he communicated with the Holy See via letters and messengers. In this way "he made known to the venerable apostolic father everything which the grace of God accomplished by his means," and he "sought advice for the Holy See in matters which concerned the daily needs of the Church of God and of the people's welfare." [6]

10. Boniface was outstanding in his unique sense of devotion. When he was an old man he revealed this quality to Pope Zachary in a letter: "With the consent and by the order of Pope Gregory, I bound myself by a vow to live in intimate relationship with and at the service of the Apostolic See almost thirty years ago. I would always let the pope know both my joys and my sorrows. This way we could praise God together in happiness, and I could receive the strength of his advice in times of sadness." [7]

11. We find here and there pairs of documents which attest to the uninterrupted exchange of letters and the remarkable agreement of wills between this valiant preacher and the Holy See, an agreement continued by four successive popes. The popes always helped and favored him. Boniface, on his part, neglected nothing, and abandoned none of his zeal nor efforts to fulfill the mission he received from the popes he venerated and loved as a son.

12. Pope Gregory, noting Boniface's achievements, decided to confer the highest rank of the priesthood on him and to elevate him to the episcopacy of the whole province of Germany. Boniface, who had earlier resisted this honor from his dear friend Willibald "accepted and obeyed because he did not dare oppose the desire of such a great pope." [8] The pope added to this great honor another special favor worthy of note to German posterity when he awarded the friendship of the Holy See to Boniface and to all his subjects forever. Gregory had already given proof of this friendship when he wrote to kings, to princes, to bishops, to abbots, to all the clergy, and to the people, whether they were barbarians or recent converts. He invited them "to give their approval and their co-operation to such a great servant of God, sent by the Catholic and Apostolic Church to enlighten the nations." [9]

13. This special friendship between Boniface and the Holy See was confirmed by the next pope, Gregory III, when Boniface sent messengers to him on the occasion of his election. "The messengers demonstrated to the new pope the pact of friendship between his predecessor and Boniface and his companions" and "the messengers assured him that he could depend on his humble servant in the future." Finally, they asked "just as they had been instructed, that the pope's subject might again benefit from friendship and union with the holy pope and the Apostolic See." [10] The pope received the messengers favorably and gave them new honors for Boniface, among them "the pallium of the archiepiscopate. Then he sent them back to their own country laden with gifts and relics of saints."

14. We can hardly recount "the gratitude of this apostle for these signs of affection nor express the comfort which the pope's esteem brought him. Inspired by the power of divine mercy" [11] the saintly man received the strength and the heart to undertake the greatest and most difficult things: to build new churches, hospitals, monasteries, and strongholds; to travel to new countries preaching the gospel; to establish new dioceses and to reform old ones, removing the vices, the schisms, and the errors; to sow everywhere true dogma and virtues, the seeds of Christian faith and life; and even to civilize barbaric peoples made savage by inhumanity. This he achieved by using pious disciples and many persons summoned from England.

15. Although already ennobled by remarkable and holy works, and despite attacks, misfortunes, worries, and advancing

age, he did not give way to pride nor to the love of leisure. He always kept in mind his mission and the orders of the pope. Thus, "because of his intimate union with the pope and all the clergy, he came to Rome a third time in the company of his disciples to speak with the Apostolic Father and to recommend himself to the prayers of the saints because he was already advanced in years." [12] Again this time the pope received him graciously and again "showered him with gifts and relics of the saints." The pope also gave him precious and important letters of recommendation some of which have come down to us.

16. The two Gregories were succeeded by Zachary, heir to their pontificates and to their concern for the Germans and their apostle. Not content to renew the ancient union, he increased it by showing more confidence and good will toward Boniface. Boniface acted the same way toward Zachary, as the number of messengers and of friendly letters which were exchanged show us. Among other things, which would be too lengthy to recall, the pope addressed his representative in these friendly terms: "Beloved brother, know that we cherish you to the point of wanting to have you with us every day, to be our associate, as a minister of God, and steward of the Churches of Christ." [13] It was therefore appropriate that the apostle of Germany wrote a few years before his death to Pope Stephen, Zachary's successor: "The disciple of the Roman Church resolutely asks from the bottom of his heart friendship and union with the Holy See." [14]

17. Moved by a very strong faith and burning with love and piety, Boniface seems to have drawn his unique and faithful union to the Holy See first from the contemplative life of monasticism in his own country. Later, when he was about to undertake the difficulties of the apostolic life, he promised this fidelity at Rome by an oath at the tomb of Saint Peter, prince of the apostles. He exhibited this fidelity in the midst of dangers and struggles as the mark of his apostleship and the rule of his mission. He never relented from recommending this fidelity to all those for whom he was a father in Christ. In fact, he was so diligent that it seemed he desired to leave it to them as an inheritance.

18. Thus, advanced in years and worn out by his work, he spoke of himself very humbly: "I am the least and the worst of the representatives which the Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church sent to preach the Gospel." [15] But he held this Roman mission in high esteem and he enjoyed calling himself "the German representative of the Holy Roman Church." He wanted to be the devoted servant of the popes, and their humble and obedient disciple.

19. He fixed deeply in his mind and scrupulously observed what the martyr Cyprian, the witness of the ancient tradition of the Church, affirmed: "there is one God and one Christ; There is one Church and one founded on Peter by the word of the Lord." [16] That is what the great Doctor of the Church Ambrose also preached: "Where Peter is, there is the Church. Where the Church is, there is no death but life eternal." [17] Finally Jerome very wisely taught: "The welfare of the Church depends on the dignity of the papacy. If we do not give the pope sovereign and independent power, there will be as many schisms in the Church as there are priests." [18]

20. The tragic history of old discords proves this to us. The evils which came from them confirms it. It is of little benefit to recall those evils at the present time when we are burdened with new disasters and bloody massacres. We should deplore them all and leave them in eternal oblivion if possible.

21. Rather let us celebrate the ancient unity which bound Boniface, the first apostle of Germany, and the Germans themselves to the Holy See. His mission was the source of faith, of prosperity, and of civilization for the Germans. We could recall many other worthwhile details; but we have said enough - maybe even too much - for it is so well-known that a long speech filled with proof is not necessary. We enjoyed sharing these old memories with you in order to gather consolation to bear the present more courageously. We are strengthened by the hope of future unity and of attachment to the Church in "the fullness of peace and the bounds of charity."

22. It is pleasant for us to recall the examples and the remarkable virtues of Boniface, and especially the friendship and unity which we wanted to celebrate in this letter. Yes, he lives among you; indeed he lives in glory. He lives as "the representative of the Roman Catholic Church for Germany." He still performs his mission by his prayers, his example, and the memory of his works by which "he who is dead still speaks." He as a faithful prophet and herald of Our Lord and Savior Jesus, seems to exhort and invite his people to unity with the Roman Church. Christ himself beseeches his people "to be one."

23. He invites the faithful disciples to cling to the Church more closely and more lovingly. He invites those who have

separated from unity to return to the Church after abandoning the old hatreds, rivalries, and prejudices. He invites all the faithful of Christ, old and new, to persevere in the unity of faith and wills. From this unity divine charity and the harmony of human society will flourish.

24. Who would not listen to this invitation and this exhortation of the Holy Father? Who would despise this paternal teaching, these examples, these words? For, to borrow the words of an ancient writer, your compatriot, whose words are so clear and so appropriate at the time you celebrate the centenary of the mission of Boniface in your country: "If, according to the Apostle, we have had for teachers our fathers in the flesh and if we honored them, should we not obey all the more our spiritual fathers? It is not only God who is our spiritual father but also all those whose wisdom and example teach us the truth and arouse us to cling strongly to the faith. Abraham is called the father of all believers because of his faith and obedience which are an example for all; in the same way Saint Boniface can be called the father of the Germans because he led them to Christ by his preaching, confirmed them by his example, and offered his life for them, thus giving them the greatest proof of love anybody can show." [19]

25. Boniface did not limit his astounding charity to Germany, but rather embraced all peoples, even those who were enemies of one another. The apostle of Germany thus charitably embraced the neighboring nation of the Franks. He became their prudent reformer and his companions, "descendants of the English race," upon whom "he, their countryman, the representative of the universal Church and the servant of the Holy See" conferred the task of extending the Catholic faith. This faith was first announced to the English by the representatives of Saint Gregory the Great, who were sent to establish it among the Saxons and the peoples of the same race. Boniface recommended to his countrymen to preserve "the unity of love." [20]

26. Because charity - to use again the words of the same writer we praised above - "is the beginning and the end of all good things, may we also let it outline the boundaries of our actions," [21] beloved son and venerable brothers. We long for the day when the rights of Almighty God and of the Church, their laws, their worship and their authority will be restored in this troubled world. We hope that then Christian charity will end wars and furious hatreds, dissensions, schisms, and the errors which crawl everywhere. May it link the peoples by a more stable treaty than the transient pacts of men. Its special means toward this goal are the unity of faith and the ancient union with the Holy See. This Holy See was established by Christ as the foundation of his family on earth and was consecrated by the virtues, the wisdom, the efforts of so many saints and martyrs, such as Boniface.

27. Once this unity of faith and hearts is established throughout the world, what Pope Clement wrote to the Corinthians in the first century will be appropriate for all of Christendom: "You would give us great joy if, obeying us, you would cease your illegitimate rivalry as we recommended in this exhortation to peace and harmony." [22]

28. May the apostle and martyr Boniface help us all obtain this, but especially the peoples who are rightfully his either by race or by choice, completing in heaven that which he never ceased to strive for on earth: "I do not cease to invite and to urge all those whom God gave me during my mission, as listeners or as disciples, to be obedient to the Holy See." [23]

29. Meanwhile, as a pledge of hope and of happy results for your celebrations, we lovingly give you the apostolic blessing. And to give even more importance to this feast, we draw for you from the holy treasury of the Church the following favors:

I. On any day of next June and July, except those of Pentecost, Corpus Christ, and of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, in all the churches and public oratories of Germany where the centenary will be celebrated, any priest will be able to celebrate the mass of the Saint, either during the fast of three days or on the day of the celebration.

II. On the day of the feast, the bishop or his representative will be able to administer the papal blessing.

III. Whoever visits the churches of Germany on the day of the centenary will be able to obtain a plenary indulgence toties quoties.

Given at Rome, at Saint Peter's the 14th day of the month of May in the year 1919, the fifth year of our Pontificate.

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1. 2 Cor 11.28.

2. Cor 3.11.
3. Willibald, Vita S. Bonifadi, chap. 5, pp. 13-14.
4. Boniface, epistle Exigit manifestata, 12 (2).
5. Vita S. Bonifadi, chap. 6, p. 16.
6. Ibid., chap. 7, p. 19.
7. Epistle 59 (57).
8. Vita S. Bonifadi, chap. 7, p. 21.
9. Boniface, epistle Sollicitudinem nimiam, 17 (6).
10. Vita S. Bonifadi, chap. 8, p. 25.
11. Ibid., chap. 8, pp. 25ff.
12. Ibid., chap. 9, pp. 27ff.
13. Boniface, epistle Susceptis, 51 (50).
14. Epistle 78.
15. Epistle 67 (22).
16. Caecilius Cyprianus, epistle 43, p. 5.
17. Enarr. in Ps. 40, n. 30.
18. Contra. Lucif., 9.
19. Othlonus the Monk, Vita S. Bonifadi, bk. 1, last chapter. 20.
20. Boniface, epistle 39 (36).
21. Ibid.
22. St. Clem. Rom., Ep. I ad Corinthios, 63.
23. Epistle 50 (49).

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