

Pope Benedict XV

Pope Benedict XV (1854-1922) was head of the Catholic Church from 1914-1922. He is remembered as “the Pope of Peace” for his humanitarian work, diplomatic efforts, and Church reforms during World War I.

Pontificate during World War I

Benedict XV became pope on 3 September 1914, just weeks after the outbreak of World War I, and dedicated much of his reign to addressing the war’s political, social, and humanitarian crisis. He declared the Holy See’s strict neutrality and repeatedly sought to mediate peace, though his 1916 and 1917 initiatives were rejected by both sides.



Humanitarian leadership

He personally oversaw relief efforts, visiting prisoners of war, arranging exchanges of wounded soldiers, and organizing food deliveries to starving populations across Europe. His actions were aimed at reducing unnecessary suffering and protecting civilians during the conflict.

The 1917 Code of Canon Law

One of his most enduring legal contributions was the promulgation of the 1917 Code of Canon Law, which standardized Church law and governance worldwide. This code remains a foundational legal framework for the Catholic Church.

Support for missionaries and Eastern Catholic Churches

Through the encyclical *Maximum Illud* (1917), he promoted missionary independence and established the Congregation for the Eastern Church, strengthening the Church’s relationship with Eastern Catholic communities

Diplomatic and postwar reconciliation

Benedict XV worked to repair strained relations, notably restoring ties with France in 1921 and re-establishing British diplomatic accreditation to the Vatican. His legacy is that of a pope who, despite limited diplomatic success, was committed to peace, humanitarian aid, and Church reform.

Reflection Questions (more than yes and no – what can I do with this information)

Have there been moments in my life when I am called upon to “broker peace” among friends or family members?

What efforts do I make to attempt to alleviate suffering among the poor and needy?

What understanding do I have about various Eastern Catholic Communities?