

FARINGDON PEACE GROUP MEETING MAY 2014

'The First World War Peace Pope'

Speaker - Dr. John Pollard

Although Pope Benedict XV is often referred to as the 'unknown Pope', Faringdon Peace Group and visitors learnt much about him and his great efforts for peace in the First World War from historian and biographer John Pollard at their February meeting. He had risen through the ranks of the Vatican Diplomatic Service and was Archbishop of Bologna from 1907-1914 before being ordained Pope in September 1914, just after the outbreak of war. His whole reign was carried out under its shadow until he died in 1922.

From the start he condemned the war, calling it a 'useless slaughter' and an 'unnecessary massacre of young men'. He was outraged by new methods of warfare; trenches, gassing, torpedoing of passenger and merchant ships and aerial bombing of cities. He blamed the war not on Kaiser Wilhelm's quest for world domination but on 'exasperated nationalism' and said 'race hatred has reached its climax'. It was the Pope's duty to represent Catholics fighting on all sides of the war, therefore he could not invoke the 'just war' theory.

The Vatican declared itself neutral and impartial - although it hoped to regain lost territories and stem the spread of Orthodoxy - and as such became a sort of court of appeal receiving evidence from all countries of atrocities committed by the other side. Despite its shaky finances, it carried out humanitarian relief work focusing on POWs, missing people and repatriations, handling 600,000 items of correspondence. It was also involved in feeding starving people in Belgium, Lithuania and Poland.

The Pope's call for a Christmas truce in December 1914 was ignored, but his boldest attempt to bring about a just and lasting peace was his 'Peace Note', which in 1917 was sent to all the warring nations. It called for: the moral force of right to be substituted for the material force of arms; 'simultaneous and reciprocal diminution of armaments'; the establishment of a mechanism for "international arbitration"; "true liberty and common rights over the sea"; "renunciation of war indemnities"; evacuation of occupied territories; and an examination of rival claims over Armenia, the Balkans and Poland.

Unfortunately the plan was rejected, all sides suspicious that he was acting for the other, but his legacy lies in paving the way for subsequent Popes to involve themselves in speaking out against war and acting for peace and justice. As such, he should be known not as the 'unknown Pope' but as the 'Peace Pope'.