CATHOLICISM IN CRISIS: SATAN’S ASSAULT ON THE CHURCH

Session #1: The Devil’s Challenge and Heaven’s Response

A. Leo XIII and a Changing World

On October 13, 1884, Pope Leo XIII went into a trance, during which he heard Satan boasting to Jesus that—given sufficient time and power—he could destroy the Church. Jesus granted the devil a greater degree of influence (especially over persons consecrated to the service of God) during the 20th century, but foretold that—through the intercession of Mary and the protection of St. Michael the Archangel—the Church would emerge from this trial more glorious than before. Upon coming out of this trance, Pope Leo immediately wrote the famous Prayer to St. Michael the Archangel, and commanded that it be recited at the end of every Low Mass offered throughout the world.

Leo’s predecessor, Pope Pius IX, reigned from 1846 – 1878 (the longest papal reign in history). As a result of the anti-religious revolutions of 1848, Pius became very suspicious of modern ideas (many of which he denounced in his 1864 Syllabus of Errors). Pius convened the First Vatican Council in 1869, which defined the idea of papal infallibility (the teaching that when the pope speaks ex cathedra, or “from the chair,” on matters of faith and morals, the Holy Spirit preserves him from any possibility of error). The Council was never officially concluded, due to the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, and when Italian revolutionaries seized the Papal States in central Italy and annexed Rome, Pius protested by withdrawing into the Vatican as a voluntary prisoner.

Upon Pius’ death, Cardinal Giacchino Pecci was elected to succeed him. Leo XIII, as he chose to be called, is considered the first modern pope, for unlike his immediate predecessors (Leo XII, Gregory XVI, and Pius IX), he sought to bring the Church into dialogue with the modern world—but he also challenged the world to live up to Catholic teachings on social justice. This was particularly true in his 1891 encyclical Rerum Novarum (“Of new things”), which pointed out the evils of both Capitalism and Communism, and insisted that employers had a moral obligation to treat their workers justly in terms of wages, working hours, and the right to form workers’ unions. Rerum Novarum (which also defended the right of private property) was somewhat revolutionary, and is still looked upon as one of the most important papal pronouncements in history. Leo, a former Vatican diplomat, was generally open-minded regarding political democracy (though his efforts to improve relations with the French Republic were unsuccessful, and he warned against overemphasizing the separation of Church and State in America). In religious matters, however, Leo vigorously guarded the teaching and authority of the Church—warning, for instance (in the encyclical Humanum Genus) that “Masonry is a powerful auxiliary of Satan.”

B. St. Pius X and Modernism

The conclave that met after Leo’s death in 1903, following a veto of one of the leading papal candidates by the emperor of Austria, elected Cardinal Giuseppe Sarto, who—showing his continuity with Pius IX—chose the name Pius X. Liberal Catholics today regard Pius X with disdain; traditional Catholics remember him with fondness. No one doubted his personal holiness or humility (and he would in fact be canonized a saint in 1954). Pius lowered to seven the age at which children could make First Communion, promoted the use of Gregorian chant, stream-lined canon law, and vigorously upheld papal authority; he also refused to compromise with the modern world—particularly in regard to measures enacted by anti-Catholic governments.
Pius X is best known for his fierce opposition to (or, as his critics would say, persecution of) Modernism, which has been defined as “the heresy which brought liberal doctrines into the Church, primarily by denying absolute truth and the reliability of the Scriptures” (Anne W. Carroll, Christ the King, Lord of History). Certain scholars and theologians believed that “a questioning, critical, accommodating theology was necessary if the Church were to reach twentieth-century humanity. In its extreme form, [Modernism] doubted the divinity of Christ, postied the Church as purely a sociological enterprise, viewed Scripture as mere literature and held that doctrines must change to suit the time” (“Modernism,” Our Sunday Visitor’s Catholic Encyclopedia). Pius condemned Modernism as “the synthesis of all heresies” in his encyclical Pascendi Dominici gregis (“Feeding the Lord’s flock”), and required all Catholic clergy and university professors to take an Oath Against Modernism. As a result, Modernist theologians “went underground” until a time more favorable to their views arrived later in the 20th century.

C. Benedict XV, World War I, and Fatima

St. Pius X died a few weeks after the outbreak of World War I, and a cardinal with a background in diplomacy, Giacomo della Chiesa, was chosen to succeed him. Benedict XV, the new pope, was faced not only with the tragedy of the war itself, but with the terrible situation of Catholic countries (e.g., France and Austria) fighting against each other. Therefore, he adopted a policy of strict neutrality, which led to both sides accusing him of partiality to the other. The Holy Father did everything possible to ease the suffering caused by the war, and in 1917 presented a seven-point plan for peace—but his efforts to mediate were ignored. (At the insistence of Italy, the Vatican was deliberately excluded from the negotiations which followed the war’s end.)

On May 5, 1917, Pope Benedict publicly appealed to the Virgin Mary, asking her to help bring peace to the world. Eight days later heaven responded. Our Lady appeared to three children—Lucia, Francesco, and Jacinta—tending their sheep near the small Portuguese village of Fatima; she asked them to offer sacrifices for the conversion of sinners and to return to that site on the 13th of each month, promising to work a great miracle on that date in October. The following month, Mary asked the children to pray the rosary for world peace, and stated that she would soon take the younger two of them to heaven (and in fact, Francesco died in 1919, and his sister Jacinta in 1920). In the apparition of July 13, Our Lady showed the children a vision of hell, and called upon Catholics to offer prayers (especially the rosary) and sacrifices for world peace and the salvation of souls; she also predicted that the war would end, but that a worse one would break out if humanity did not repent. To forestall this, Mary said, she would ask that the Holy Father consecrate Russia to her Immaculate Heart, which would lead to the conversion of that nation and a state of peace in the world. Otherwise, Russia would spread her errors (that is, Communism) throughout the world, leading to persecution of the Church, the martyrdom of many believers, and the annihilation of various nations. In the end, she promised, her Immaculate Heart would triumph.

70,000 people gathered at the apparition site near Fatima on October 13, and after Our Lady’s appearance (seen only by the three children), they witnessed the miracle commonly known as the Dance of the Sun. That heavenly body shot off rays of every color of the rainbow, spun madly on its axis, moved back and forth across the sky, and then appeared to plunge to earth (terrorizing the onlookers) before resuming its normal place. Afterwards, the witnesses realized their clothes, and the ground on which they were standing—all of which had been soaked by rain—were perfectly dry. The Church investigated the messages and apparitions at Fatima over in the years that followed, and declared them to be “worthy of belief.” Leo XIII’s vision in 1884 (in which he overheard Satan’s boastful challenge to Christ), and the Miracle of the Sun in 1917, both occurred on October 13—exactly 33 years apart.