
Merry del Val: a cardinal for our times

*by
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“Always for Christ, for the Church, and for the Truth!”

An interesting and truly extraordinary sequence of events brought Rafael Merry del Val and Pope Pius X together.

Merry del Val, Archbishop of Nicaea, was President of the Academia. In July of 1903 he was preparing for his summer vacation which he usually spent in England with his uncles.

Pope Leo XIII had been ailing for some time. He suddenly took a turn for the worse so that his death was imminent. Merry del Val decided to remain in Rome and to delay his much needed and much desired vacation for a short time. So he thought, but God had decided it was to be otherwise.

As Pope Leo lay deathly ill, the Secretary of the Consistorial Congregation died suddenly. This was of great consequence because the Secretary of the Consistorial Congregation was also to be, on the death of the Pope, the Secretary of the Sacred College of Cardinals and hence Secretary of the Conclave. The responsibility for selecting a new secretary

was to fall to the Conclave after Leo died, and they considered two names presented by the Dean of the College of Cardinals. One of those was Archbishop Merry del Val. After the death of Leo XIII the Conclave chose Merry

“Few perhaps have suffered what that venerable Pontiff and his collaborator suffered. But God was pleased with them; what did the rest matter? Souls came to the Church, returned to the Church, and clung to the Church... ‘Cetera tolle!’ ”

del Val. He was but thirty-seven years of age and a non-Italian. He wrote to a friend: “I am overwhelmed at the trust placed in me by the Sacred College.”

Merry del Val went about his task as Secretary to the Conclave efficient-

ly, tirelessly and devotedly. It was clear to everyone, that the Cardinals had chosen well—a foretaste of things to come some may have thought.

Of the sixty-two Cardinals present two seemed most likely to be chosen, either Rampolla or Gotti. A few spoke of Cardinal Sarto, the Patriarch of Venice but said that it was a highly unlikely possibility. One newspaper said of him: “He hardly ever comes to Rome, he seeks no honors, he is adored by the Venetians.”

On the first ballot Sarto received five votes. On the second ten. Cardinal Puzyna of Austria-Hungary declared in the name of the Austrian Emperor that he had been authorized to veto the election of Rampolla based on a medieval claim of the Roman Emperor “to approve or veto the candidate for the Papacy.” The French and the Spanish had tried to revive the practice. The effect was other than desired, since the votes for Rampolla rose to thirty-two but so did those of Cardinal Sarto. He was now a close second with twenty-four votes. Sarto made it plain

to the Cardinals that if elected he would refuse. By August 3rd (the third day of voting) Sarto was far ahead of Rampolla. Still he was determined to refuse should the necessary number of votes go his way. When it became clear to all that Sarto was to be the choice of the conclave, the Dean of the Sacred College sent Merry del Val to persuade him to accept when he would be elected. He searched about and finally found Cardinal Sarto in the Pauline Chapel kneeling in prayer. F. A. Forbes, in his biography of Merry del Val describes the scene: "Monsignor Bressan, Cardinal Sarto's secretary, was near the door (of the Pauline Chapel) and, on the floor of the chapel, his face buried in his hands, knelt the Cardinal himself. Monsignor Merry del Val looked at the kneeling figure and a great compassion filled his heart. He crossed over softly and knelt beside him. Cardinal Sarto raised his head. 'What is it?' he asked despairingly. 'Is your Eminence immovable in your resolution?' asked the other, 'is the Cardinal Dean to tell the Sacred College officially that you refuse the election?' 'Let him do me that charity,' groaned the Cardinal, and buried his face once more in his hands. The younger man rose, looked down at the bent head, and ceding to a sudden impulse, laid his hand gently on the Cardinal's shoulder. 'Courage, Your Eminence,' he said softly, 'take up the cross that Our Lord has laid upon you.' There was no answer, but when, next morning, the Patriarch of Venice was elected by an overwhelming majority, and they asked him if he accepted the election, he answered broken-heartedly, 'If this chalice may not pass from me except I drink it, the holy will of God be done.' "

He chose the name Pius so that he would 'be called by the name of those who have suffered the most for the Church in this century.' He would be tenth in a succession of wonderful popes who bore that name.

When the Pope is elected the procedure is that the Secretary of the Conclave stays in his temporary position, acting as the Pro-Secretary of State until such time as the Pope has had time to select one of his own accord.

Merry del Val once again looking forward to his English vacation almost immediately submitted his resignation. Pius X prevailed on him to withdraw it and he thought that this position would be temporary, nevertheless. The Pope said: "I beg you to continue in your office until such time as I decide otherwise." The "otherwise" would become the duration of Pius X's pontificate. When this became clear to Merry del Val with his nomination as permanent Secretary of State, Merry del Val protested vehemently at the feet of the

"His farewell message had already been written: 'I ask for pardon from all whom I may have offended and with sorrow I beg God's mercy for not having served Him better. I bless my dear sons of Trastevere and the beloved communities of which I am protector, and I recommend myself to their prayers. I accept death lovingly, when and in whatever manner God may will, in expiation of my sins and in adoration of His decrees.' "

Holy Father who informed him that in selecting him he had acted according to the will of God. "At long last," one biographer writes, "he encouraged him to take up the cross laid upon him, in the very words that the younger man had used to him in the hour of his anguish. Then blessing him with loving tenderness, 'We shall labor and suffer together for the love of Mother Church,' he said, with prophetic insight." On November 9th, Archbishop Merry del Val was made a Cardinal. Three days later his appointment was officially made known to the world. He had just turned thirty-eight.

THE POPE AND THE CARDINAL: THEIR MISSION

In Pius X's first Encyclical he said that "the world is full of unrest." This unrest had one fundamental cause, "the falling away from and forsaking of God." It would be Pius X's all consuming concern "to restore all things in Christ, so that Christ might be all in all." "To bring the race of men under the dominion of Christ."

The holy pontiff did precisely this during the entire course of his pontificate, and the extraordinary measure of his success was in no small way made possible by his trusted friend and remarkable Secretary of State, Cardinal Merry del Val.

What specifically was it that made the Pope and the Cardinal what they were? It was, I dare say, their keen and one might say, dramatic realization of the irreconcilability of the Catholic Church with the spirit of the world. On the other hand, the failure of the modern-day hierarchy can be measured in direct proportion to its abandonment of this truth. The spirit of the world and the Church can no more be reconciled than can sin and grace or virtue and vice or indeed than can the devil be reconciled with God. The rupture is complete. "No man can serve two masters." And any attempt to do so is doomed to failure and can only result in a betrayal of the Church and of Our Lord. Behold the great folly of the modern Church. It is our mission to "overcome" the world, as St. John says, not to sacrifice truth to win the approval of the world. As the Cardinal himself put it: "Never act with a view to please the world. Let us have the strength to bear criticism and the disapproval of the world; let us have no human respect. Provided that God is pleased, what does the rest matter?"

We present to you in the pages of *The Roman Catholic* the story of this great and holy prelate whose life was to be so intimately associated with the life of the Saint-Pope, Pius X. We do it to draw inspiration from his life and to glorify God's wonderful work in His creatures, prayerfully longing for the day when Our Divine Savior, the Head of the Church, will raise up such worthy vessels of grace.