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How papal diplomacy began a new approach in 1914

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By [Andrea Gagliarducci](#)

Vatican City, Aug 6, 2018 / 03:09 pm (CNA).- Pontifical diplomacy took on a new approach in 1914, with the election of Benedict XV as pontiff. The viewpoint of that moment is captured in a snapshot: a report from the Secretariat of State on papal diplomacy, drafted at the time of Benedict XV's election.

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written by Church historians
Roberto Regoli and Paolo Valvo.

How did the Holy See change its approach to diplomacy?

In 1914, the Holy See had just 9 nunciatures established in the world. Ties with European countries were decreasing, while relations with Latin American countries were on the rise.

Why?

In 1871, the Papal States were seized by the Italian troops who headed to Rome to make it the capital of the Kingdom of Italy. The Papal States thus lost their territory, and the Holy See became a kind-of state without territory, though it kept up its diplomatic relations.

In Europe, the Church had no strong allies: Italy, Austria and Prussia had signed in 1882 the Triple Alliance, while France was under such strong secularizing trends that brought to the 1905 Law on Separation between



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diplomatic partners. In 1893, Pope Leo XIII opened an apostolic delegation to United States, and in 1899 another apostolic delegation was established in Canada.

A pontifical representation was opened in Central America in 1908 and in Venezuela in 1909, while in 1904 an apostolic visitor was appointed for Mexico, and a delegate was sent to Haiti.

The Holy See's presence in Asia was also strengthened: in 1884, there began a pontifical delegation in India, and in 1905 Pope Pius X sent a delegation to Japan to study the possibility of establishing papal representation there. A pontifical delegate was appointed for China in 1922.

Given this data, it is no surprise that Latin America was the area of significant interest in the 1914 report on pontifical diplomacy. The report described the situation of 12 Latin American countries and of 7 European countries. Among those countries, great space was given to Serbia because of a



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Europe, and it is clear by the reports that the defense of religious interests and religious liberty was one of the central areas of importance for pontifical diplomacy in Europe

Latin America had become one of the Church's main interests, as the countries there were undergoing a shift, too: governments had shed colonial ties, but at the same time they sought the same guarantees the Church had granted to the colonial powers.

In order to evangelize the New World, the Church had given the European kingdoms many concessions, even some influence in appointing new bishops. This was part of a Church-state bond that would be considered unacceptable now. At the time, however, they were part of a widespread practice, one that did bear good fruit, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican Secretary of State, recently said.

Under Benedict XV, a shift in pontifical diplomacy was clear.



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Benedict XV's efforts for peace, which resulted in a letter he sent Aug. 1, 1918 to warring countries.

Benedict XV also worked to get rid of the system of "protectorates," the concessions and agreements made with colonial powers who acted as the real guarantors for the evangelization in outward-bound countries.

This resulted in Benedict XV's 1919 encyclical *Maximum illud* on missionary activity, which called for the formation of local bishops in territories of mission. Following that call, Pius XI later ordained the first Chinese bishops.

Valvo and Regoli noted that "it is evident that the 'diplomatic mind' of the 1914 report had rather pastoral and ecclesial policy priorities."

One example is the Church's relationship with France.

"The key of understanding to the relation with France is that of the pure defence of religious



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relations with the French state, which granted no juridical status to the Holy See, the Holy See made the decision to affirm the French protectorates in the Near and Far East in order to keep connections with France.

Despite the need to keep the links with France, the Law on the Separation of the Churches and the State also had a positive effect: the Pope could independently appoint the bishops, without any interference of the government.

Another example was the approach toward Latin America.

In South America, the Holy See had a nunciature in Brazil, and diplomatic ties in Argentina and Chile. Pontifical representatives had diplomatic rank in Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua, Perù and Venezuela.

The Holy See also was very active “in countries where there was a tendentially hostile separation between Church and States.”



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Catholic religion could have a predominant position, giving in exchange the possibility of advancing suggestions to fill the vacant sees of bishops, for example.

Benedict XV's model was different. As the Holy See lost its structure and most of its secular privileges, Benedict XV promoted a more spiritual role for nuncios, whose task became more pastoral than political, and whose effort in helping the pope to identify new possible candidates for bishops becomes crucial.

After this shift, the Holy See began to be perceived as a neutral figure in the disputes between state, and this led to increased significance of its diplomatic activity. The 1929 Lateran Treaty signed with Italy, which granted the Holy See a small territory, paved the way for the building of a diplomatic network with a large impact because of its reputation for neutrality.

The Holy See now has diplomatic ties established with 183



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The Holy See’s diplomatic agenda, in the end, is that of the common good, and the relations with states are a tool to achieve it.

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