

“I Bless Peace:” A Tribute to St Pius X on the hundredth anniversary of his death on 20 August 1914

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Pope Pius X was one of the early victims of the First World War. The eruption of the vast conflict in the first days of August 1914 placed the 79 year old Pontiff in a wretched position. He was genuinely horrified to see the Catholic communities of the Great Powers tear into battle with a ferocity not seen since The Dark Ages. When the Emperor of Austria-Hungary, the aging, venerably Catholic, Franz Joseph asked for a blessing, Pope Pius X replied: “No! I cannot bless any army of Europe, but I bless peace.” It was widely reported at the time that the outbreak of the war had hastened his death: a comparatively minor cold rapidly leading to pneumonia and his passing, on 20 August 1914, barely two weeks after the outbreak of hostilities. His last words expressed his relief that God had spared him the “horrors of war”. The conflict broke his heart.

Requiem masses were offered across Australia in the weeks after Pope Pius' death. Dirges were sung, prayers were offered and churches were hung with purple and black. Clergy and laity spoke of how pleased they were if they had met the Pontiff. Fond personal reminiscences of such encounters were featured in local papers and in the many eulogies of the time. There was much mention of his opening of the church to the laity, his political oppositions to socialism and his tense negotiations with France and other countries where problematic church-state relations strained tradition. There was genuine affection for him across Australia.

In modern day Italy there are currently many commemorative services for St Pius X, especially in his native North Italy where he performed the majority of his ministry before being elected Pontiff in 1903. He is remembered particularly fondly and proudly in Venice, where he was Patriarch and in the small towns of Riese and Treviso where he was born and raised and had his early education.

While, as a Pope, Pius X was conscious of the wider theological and political issues of his world, he also lived according to the simple profundities of a modest personal life. He structured his day around first celebrating and then serving at Mass. Later, he attended the Angelus at midday, and spent some of his afternoon reading his Breviary. He was frugal, even ascetic in his personal habits: eating simply; staying in a single room and sleeping on an iron bed near his office. In this manner he continued the patterns and attitudes of a parish priest throughout his life. Despite his own personal simplicity he was well aware of the need for public professions of faith and prayer, but close observers of him noted that he was not necessarily comfortable himself on such grand occasions, with their elaborate processions and noble connections.

Pope Pius' simplicity made him a very appealing figure in a world which was then still dominated by the trappings of nobility and aristocracy. His humble origins were proof

that education and talent could lead to high office. His popularity in Australia rested in many ways on his reputation as man who had risen far beyond his humble origins in public life without losing the honest commitment to his early values. Such advancement from simple beginnings was seen as a model for all young people. Much was made in the local press of his appealingly humble personal style.

Pope Pius X left a simple will in which he stated: "I was born poor, I lived poor and I will die poor." It was a popular statement at the time and has been widely quoted ever since. His only request on his death was for a small pension to be provided for his aged sister – because he had nothing to leave her. He had remained close to his family, including his brother and sisters, all of whom lived humbly. Some of them were with him when he died.

Archbishop Dr Carr delivered the oration at the Requiem Mass in Melbourne on Thursday 27 August 1914. He quoted Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, in reference to Pope Pius X, stating that:

"His life was gentle, and the elements

So mixed in him that nature might stand up

And say to all the world. 'This was a man.'"

No period in office is without stress, disputation or historical reassessment, but reading the many tributes published to Pope Pius X immediately after his death it is readily apparent that across early post-colonial Australia he had connected with people at every level and was greatly loved.

While we venerate Saint Pius X, the many reports of his last weeks and death as Pope, marred as they were by news from battles far and wide, lead us to the conclusion: that within the mighty power of a world-wide church, within the office of the Pope, within the tradition, within the world of the Vatican, within the Papal Chambers there was a fundamentally decent, simple man of God - A worthy example for young people to follow today.

Pope Pius X reputation continued well after his death. He was eventually canonised on 29 May 1954. At the time, Cardinal Gilroy of Sydney contacted the ebulliently Irish Principal of what was then called Christian Brothers Chatswood (CBC) - Br Max O'Connor. As a result of that conversation Br O'Connor took the Cardinal's suggestion and renamed the school, St Pius X College, the following day.