


## Article

# Pope and Politician in Parallel: The Notion of War and Peace at the Formation of Italian Christian Democracy

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## Abstract

This article examines the conceptual convergence between papal teaching and early Christian democratic political thought on the question of war and peace, focusing on Pope Benedict XV and Luigi Sturzo. While Christian democracy is commonly analyzed through the lens of Catholic social doctrine in areas such as social policy and political organization, its underlying assumptions concerning war, peace and international order remain underexplored. The study reconstructs Benedict XV's wartime and postwar peace teaching, highlighting his moral critique of war, his emphasis on prevention, and his advocacy of juridical and institutional mechanisms such as arbitration, disarmament, and international cooperation. These positions are then compared with Sturzo's political and theoretical reflections, which stress the subordination of politics to moral norms, skepticism toward nationalism and statism, and support for supranational institutions as safeguards of peace. The article situates this convergence within the broader historical transformation of the papacy's relationship to democratic politics, particularly the dismantling of the non expedit principle and the emergence of Italian Christian democracy. It argues that both figures integrate ethical normativity with realism, offering an alternative to power-centered approaches in international relations and anticipating later "just peace" paradigms in Catholic social thought.

**Keywords:** war and peace; social doctrine of the Church; Christian democracy; Christian political thought; Benedict XV; Luigi Sturzo



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## 1. Introduction

Western European Christian democracy is often, and rightly, seen as a political expression of the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. It is not implied that these parties (mainly established in the 1930s and 1940s) are the representatives of political Catholicism, i.e., that they acted precisely in the interests of, and often in strong cooperation with, the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> Instead, these Christian democratic parties are influenced through different mechanisms (e.g., politicians', philosophers' or the electorate's views), which results in the similarity of the professed values between the party and the Roman Catholic Church. This tendency, in certain respects, has been extensively studied. For instance, one of the leading scholars on the topic, Carlo Invernizzi Accetti, convincingly argues that Christian democratic ideology comprises six conceptual building blocks: anti-materialism, personalism, popularism, subsidiarity, solidarity, and Christian inspiration

in politics (Invernizzi Accetti 2019).<sup>2</sup> The authors also maintain that, for instance, in the question of supporting human rights, Christian democrats basically reaffirmed “traditional social morality that has been the backbone of Catholic social doctrine for centuries (Invernizzi Accetti 2019, p. 79). Later in the monograph, the relevance of Catholic social doctrine to Christian democratic ideology recurs across almost every “element” of Christian democracy (e.g., Invernizzi Accetti 2019, pp. 67, 113, 139, 143), confirming the commonplace in the literature that the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church is essential to Christian democracy.

This article examines a neglected aspect of the interplay between the Roman Catholic Church and European Christian democratic parties: the question of war and peace. This aspect has not remained in the background due to a lack of researchers on the topic (which remains valid compared to other ideologies), but rather because of the historical-political environment, i.e., the long peace in Europe. Naturally, several authors underscore the central idea that transnational reconciliation is a significant element within Christian democratic parties, which, among other factors, has led to the initiation of European integration.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the delegation of state power to the supranational level is also intended to prevent war (first and foremost between Germany and France). In other words, the process which has led to the European Union is a peace project. Nevertheless, over the decades, these two key elements have become evident, both naturally and paradoxically leading to their marginalisation, and even when they are highlighted, a more profound understanding of the concepts of war and peace is generally lacking. The unfortunate events of the past years (predominantly, the Russian-Ukrainian war and the Gaza conflict) have provoked Christian democratic parties to reflect on the current situation. Still, beyond addressing these issues as security concerns, little has changed. This may stem from the fact that the question of war and peace in Christian democratic ideology is largely overlooked.

This article will address the question of war and peace from two perspectives: papal and political. From the papal side, Benedict XV (1914–1922) will be examined, focusing on how they—mainly through encyclicals—have addressed the question of war and peace. After the geographically—and thus, probably, intellectually—“closest” variant of Christian democracy, the Italian Christian democracy will be investigated. From the political side, the intellectual father of Italian Christian democracy, Luigi Sturzo (1871–1959), will be in focus, with a particular attention to the same question of war and peace.

Even though the formation of the Italian Christian democracy can be understood as a conflict between the Church and laic Christians, it will be concluded that the primary characteristics of the examined popes and politicians with respect to war and peace (advocacy of peace, support for international order, scepticism toward nationalism and statism, prioritisation of moral values in politics) are essentially parallel. Furthermore, as will be seen, Sturzo explicitly invokes the pope’s teachings in several cases. It must be understood that it is far from evident. The article reflects on the fact that the respective Popes and politicians, and their predecessors, have had serious conflicts that were not only political but also related to differing principles regarding the role of Christians in politics. Ultimately, the article examines the relationship between popes and a key politician in the Italian context, while recalling the Church’s and Christian democracy’s marginalised statements on war and peace.

## 2. Introductory Framework: The Catholic Church on War and Peace

The Catholic Church presents itself as a consistent advocate of peace as the highest good (Musto 1986). However, this does not imply that the Catholic Church is wholly pacifist, since the theory of just war developed over centuries largely through the work of Catholic thinkers—most notably Augustine and Thomas Aquinas (Nyirkos 2024). Catholic

teaching has always begun with a presumption against war (Cochran 2024), in harmony with the New Testament, where we read that “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Mt 5:9), and that “love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44). Peace, therefore, is not to be understood merely as the absence of war, but rather as a positive order grounded in justice, love, and human development, as Pope John Paul II (1978–2005) emphasized in the encyclical *Centesimus annus* (John Paul II 1991, n. 18, 52); this understanding has also been reaffirmed in recently by Pope Leo XIV (Leo XIV 2026). At the same time, the Catholic Church acknowledges the right to legitimate self-defence when aggression must be halted in order to protect the common good (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1993, n. 2307–2309).

This study does not aim to reconstruct the rich tradition of just war theory.<sup>4</sup> Rather, it seeks to indicate that, during the period under examination, the version of just war theory applied in earlier eras no longer provided a sufficient foundation for papal statements. At the same time, movement in a pacifist direction was not without obstacles, since at the turn of the century the Holy See viewed international pacifist organizations with considerable caution, as they often had liberal, Protestant, or explicitly anticlerical roots (Barry 2020). In fact, early Catholic peace activists (Mayeur 1987) found themselves in a situation similar to that of liberal Catholics regarded as precursors of Christian democracy (Kalyvas 1996): institutionally, the Catholic Church did not support them and observed their activities with cautious distance.

Following the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy’s declaration of war on Serbia on 28 July 1914, Pope Pius X (1903–1914) issued a final appeal on 2 August, calling upon all Catholics to pray that the leaders of nations might be guided as soon as possible by the spirit of peace (Pius X 1914). However, twenty days later, Pius X died, and the role of the Church’s uncompromising advocate of peace passed to his successor, Pope Benedict XV (1914–1922). Through his initiatives, the theory of just war was increasingly relegated to the background, while the unconditional advocacy of peace came to the fore. a development. This development was accompanied by the strengthening of the laity’s role (Ujházi 2024; Zachar 2023).

### 3. The Pope: Benedict XV

Giacomo della Chiesa, Archbishop of Bologna, an experienced diplomat was elected pope on 3 September 1914, barely three months after he was created a cardinal by Pope Pius X (Regoli 2020). Five days after his election, he issued the apostolic exhortation *Ubi Primum*, which may be regarded as a programmatic statement. The document simultaneously articulates the pope’s universal pastoral self-understanding—embracing all peoples and believers with paternal concern—and his immediate initiative for peace. Urging political leaders to act, he exhorts them to “hasten to take decisions of peace and to extend hands to one another” (Benedict XV 1914b). His call for prayer for the end of the war indicates that, in Benedict XV’s view, purely “political” action is insufficient; genuine peace requires spiritual and moral renewal accompanied by concrete action.

This line of thought is further developed in his first encyclical. Published barely three months after the outbreak of the First World War, *Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum* diagnoses the moral crisis of modernity (Ciriello 2020). In his analysis of the causes of the war, Benedict XV identifies the moral disintegration of the social order, manifested in the absence of charity,, the spread of hatred and envy, the escalation of class and national antagonisms, and the marginalization of the common good. For this reason, peace cannot be achieved through military means alone; it presupposes the restoration of moral order. Peace becomes possible only when human relations are shaped by Christian fraternal charity and the shared dignity of the human person:

“Let us never cease from reechoing in the ears of men and setting forth in our acts, that saying of St. John: ‘Let us love one another’ (1 Jn 3:23). Noble, indeed, and praiseworthy are the manifold philanthropic institutions of our day: but it is when they contribute to stimulate true love of God and of our neighbours in the hearts of men, that they are found to confer a lasting advantage; if they do not do so, they are of no real value, for ‘he that loveth not, abideth in death’ (1 Jn 3:14).” (Benedict XV 1914a, n. 8)

This represents a significant shift in Catholic teaching on war, as emphasis increasingly falls on the moral problematization of war and its prevention rather than its justification (Musto 1986; Baz 2025).

In his Christmas address of 24 December 1914, Benedict XV interprets peace in the light of the feast itself. Christmas celebrates the birth of Christ as the “Prince of Peace” and thus offers a particularly fitting context for strengthening the desire for peace, since fratricidal warfare fundamentally contradicts the mystery of the Incarnation. In this address he proposed a Christmas truce, “in the hope that, even if we cannot dispel the dark specter of war, we may at least apply some balm to the wounds it has inflicted” (Benedict XV 1914c). Although the 1914 Christmas “truce” probably did not arise directly from the papal appeal (Breezeel 2025; Ashworth 1980, pp. 24–47), its spontaneous character nonetheless illuminates something of the civilization grounded in Christian fraternity that Benedict XV repeatedly emphasized as an experience of “shared humanity.”

The apex of Benedict XV’s peace program is the apostolic exhortation *Dès le début* of 1 August 1917, which goes beyond a general spiritual appeal and presents a concrete set of peace proposals addressed to the leaders of the belligerent nations, aimed at overcoming the root causes of war. It is therefore not surprising that the contours of a “just peace” paradigm become clearly visible in this document (Nyirkos 2024). The central principle is that law must prevail over force. Benedict argues that the foundation of peace should not be military power but the moral authority of law, mutually recognized by all parties. He further proposes the radical reduction in armed forces to the minimum required for maintaining internal order, to be achieved through coordinated and simultaneous disarmament. For the peaceful settlement of disputes, he advocates the establishment of an international arbitration body whose decisions would be enforceable through sanctions. In addition, he promotes the principles of freedom of the seas and free communication as means of reducing future conflicts and fostering prosperity (Benedict XV 1917). The pope also advanced proposals concerning contested territorial questions. Although the peace initiative was largely rejected by the belligerent powers and even met with ambivalent public reactions among Catholic bishops, who feared conflict with patriotic sentiment (Cavagnini 2020), in the long term Benedict XV’s intervention clearly laid the foundations for the modern peace-mediating role of the papacy (Boniface 2020).

From the perspective of postwar teaching and peacebuilding, two further documents merit attention, as they illuminate the pope’s understanding of just settlement and durable peace. Following the armistice of November 1918, Benedict issued the encyclical *Quod iam diu* on 1 December, emphasizing that a ceasefire in itself does not yet constitute “true peace” (Benedict XV 1918). Already here he expresses concern regarding the forthcoming peace negotiations, observing:

“Soon the delegates of the various nations will meet in solemn congress to give the world a just and lasting peace; no human assembly has ever had before it such serious and complex determinations as they will have to take”. (Benedict XV 1918)

For Benedict XV, genuine peace can rest only on the Christian principles of justice; hence, he calls for prayer on behalf of the participants, that they may be granted enlightenment and discernment.

These themes are further developed in the encyclical *Pacem, Dei munus pulcherrimum* of 23 May 1920. The pope emphasises that treaties alone are insufficient to secure lasting peace, since the “seeds of hostility” often remain (Benedict XV 1920, n. 1). Peace is therefore not merely a political condition but a moral and humanitarian reality grounded in mutual charity and the practice of forgiveness, which also deepens justice. Benedict stresses that forgiveness plays a decisive role in sustaining peace even in international relations:

“The war being now over, people seem called to a general reconciliation not only from motives of charity, but from necessity; the nations are naturally drawn together by the need they have of one another, and by the bond of mutual good will, bonds which are today strengthened by the development of civilization and the marvellous increase of communication”. (Benedict XV 1920, n. 14)

He also envisages a form of international cooperation capable of providing institutional frameworks for the prevention of future wars:

“[...] calls for such an association of nations, is the need generally recognized of making every effort to abolish or reduce the enormous burden of the military expenditure which States can no longer bear, in order to prevent these disastrous wars or at least to remove the danger of them as far as possible. So would each nation be assured not only of its independence but also of the integrity of its territory within its just frontiers”. (Benedict XV 1920, n. 17)

Overall, Benedict XV’s pontificate clearly reveals the emergence of a new, modern trajectory within Catholic peace teaching: the moral problematization of war, the primacy of prevention, and the positive juridical-institutional and ethical grounding of peace. From his early pastoral interventions through the concrete peace proposals articulated in *Dès le début* to the postwar encyclicals, he consistently maintains that lasting peace cannot be reduced to political equilibrium or merely contractual arrangements, but must be rooted in justice, reconciliation, international cooperation, and the moral order of Christian fraternity. This conceptual shift not only anticipates the relativization of classical “just war” reasoning but also lays the foundations for the papacy’s modern role as a mediator of peace and a normative actor in international affairs, a role that would continue to develop institutionally throughout the twentieth century.

#### 4. A Fertile Conflict? The Formation of Italian Christian Democracy

In this study, we do not seek to provide a detailed account of the historical development of Christian democracy; rather, we address only selected aspects that illuminate the relevance of our topic. As noted above, liberal Catholicism may be regarded as a forerunner of socially oriented Christian democracy (Sturzo 1947; Almond 1948; Caciagli 2003; Invernizzi Accetti 2019; Botos 2019). Although several such initiatives emerged in parallel across Europe—one may think, for example, of Félicité de Lamennais<sup>5</sup> or Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler<sup>6</sup>—the Catholic Church supported these endeavours only insofar as they remained within the framework of caritas, that is, charitable works of love. Once these efforts began to encourage workers’ self-organization and the formation of trade unions, however, resistance from conservative ecclesiastical circles became dominant (Almond 1948, p. 739).

This type of tension was already evident in the concept of Christian democracy itself in the nineteenth century, since the term was simultaneously linked to the Catholic Church’s self-understanding vis-à-vis modernity and to emerging political institutions. Although

the concept is often associated with twentieth-century party systems, its origins lie in a fundamental dilemma of Catholic thought: how to reconcile Christian anthropology with modern social and political realities. Early usages of the term therefore did not denote a coherent program, but rather competing interpretations that defined differently the relationship between politics, morality, and social reform.

Giuseppe Toniolo's<sup>7</sup> definition conceived Christian democracy primarily as a moral and social-philosophical category rather than as a concrete political system. In his view, democracy served the organic renewal of the Christian social order and was sharply distinguished from liberal and rationalist political democracy (Toniolo 1897). The emphasis lay on promoting the common good, social harmony, and the protection of the lower social strata, while Christian democracy appeared not as a political party but as a Catholic social school. This approach offered a stable yet politically restrained interpretation, which limited the concept's institutional political development (Tornielli 2011, p. 58).

By contrast, Romolo Murri<sup>8</sup> expanded Christian democracy into an explicitly politico-ethical project that integrated democratic participation, human rights, and the secular character of the state into Catholic thought (Forlenza and Thomassen 2024, pp. 49–50). Murri approached the issue from the perspective of social justice and the workers' question and remained open to dialogue with socialist reform movements (Saresella 2015, pp. 590–91). This interpretation, however, exceeded the boundaries considered acceptable by ecclesiastical teaching and ultimately led to ecclesiastical condemnation (Aubert 2003, p. 155). The tension between these two approaches clearly demonstrates that Christian democracy simultaneously carried moral, social, and political meanings that were not easily reconcilable.

Pope Leo XIII attempted to provide a normative resolution to this ambiguity in the encyclical *Graves de communi re*, defining Christian democracy primarily as charitable social activity and rejecting its political interpretation (Leo XIII 1901). While this papal position reinforced Toniolo's moral-social reading and sought to curb the politicizing tendencies represented by Murri, the underlying paradox persisted: although Catholic social teaching inspired new forms of organization, the official ecclesiastical approach remained cautious toward political engagement. In the long term, this duality contributed to the enduring ambiguity, historical layering, and contested nature of the meaning of Christian democracy.

All this also sheds light, from a historical perspective, on the fact that the theoretical convergence between the two figures examined in this paper—Pope Benedict XV and Luigi Sturzo—is far from self-evident. Beneath the apparent convergence of their views on war lies a gradual transformation in the papacy's relationship to the Christian democratic movement. For a long period, the political activity of the Italian Christian democratic milieu was determined by the decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary issued on 29 February 1868, which proclaimed the so-called *non expedit* principle. This decree prohibited Italian Catholic citizens from participating in elections; consequently, Catholics were neither eligible to vote nor to stand for office. The decision reflected Pope Pius IX's (1846–1878) concern that participation in Italian elections would amount to legitimizing a political authority that the Church refused to recognize following the annexation of the Papal States. The situation was further exacerbated by the occupation of Rome in 1870. From that point onward, the popes regarded themselves for a long time as "prisoners of the Vatican" and continued to uphold the *non expedit* principle.

The subsequent relaxation of this principle clearly illustrates the evolving stance of the papacy toward Christian democracy. The first significant shift occurred with Pope Pius X's encyclical *Il fermo proposito*, which formally maintained the *non expedit* rule while simultaneously mitigating it by allowing that "in particular cases a dispensation from the law be granted especially" (Pius X 1905, n. 18). This relaxation contributed significantly

to the electoral success of the *Unione Elettorale Cattolica Italiana* (Italian Catholic Electoral Union), which gained parliamentary representation in 1913. Prior to the elections, the president of the Union, Ottorino Gentiloni<sup>9</sup>, reached an agreement with the Italian Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti<sup>10</sup>. In the seven-point pact, Giolitti's liberal candidates committed themselves to safeguarding freedom of education, supporting religious instruction, opposing divorce legislation, and legally recognizing Catholic economic and social organizations (Di Maio 2004). As a result of the so-called Gentiloni Pact, the *non expedit* restriction was lifted in 330 electoral districts in 1913 (Coppa 1967, p. 219), thereby facilitating Catholic political participation and contributing to the containment of Italian socialism. This occurred despite the fact that in the 1903 *motu proprio Fin dalla prima*, Pius X had reiterated Leo XIII's position, affirming that "Christian democrats must never engage in politics nor serve political parties or political aims" (Pius X 1903, n. 13).

The *non expedit* principle was ultimately dismantled definitively during the pontificate of Benedict XV. Its abandonment occurred without a formal public declaration, through a private response issued by the Apostolic Penitentiary (Marotta 2020). This development made it possible, under Benedict XV, for the *Partito Popolare Italiano* (PPI) to be founded following the dissolution of the *Unione Elettorale Cattolica Italiana* in 1919, with Luigi Sturzo serving as its first secretary. It should be noted, however, that although the PPI formally emerged during Benedict XV's pontificate, Sturzo had already articulated the foundations of a Catholic-inspired yet non-confessional democratic party as early as Christmas 1905, in the aftermath of *Il fermo proposito* (Di Maio 2004, p. 112). Nevertheless, the formal establishment of the PPI took place only in January 1919. Even this would not have been possible had Cardinal Pietro Gasparri<sup>11</sup>, Benedict XV's Secretary of State, not granted approval for the formation of a Catholic political party following Sturzo's November 1918 speech announcing the official entry of Catholics into Italian political life (Di Maio 2004, p. 112). At the same time, relations between the Holy See and the PPI were not free of tension: some feared that the party's excessive autonomy might weaken ecclesiastical influence, and that its embedding in national politics could relativize the Church's universal character (Allum 1997; Guasco 2020).

## 5. The Politician: Luigi Sturzo

PPI is considered the first significant Italian Christian democratic party. As presented, the party itself was established in 1919 following a lengthy debate within the Church hierarchy and between the Church hierarchy and the laity. Though the party was divided by different factions and, due to the wake of fascism, it managed to run only in three national elections (1919, 1921, 1924), it can be argued that its first leader as general secretary from 1919 to his exile, Sicilian Roman Catholic priest and politician Luigi Sturzo, was the foremost Christian democrat in Italy.<sup>12</sup> Sturzo was building on the popular movement of political and social Catholicism to found his modern political party (Karsten 2011). This party was a non-Catholic, aconfessional party inspired by Christian idealism (Kalyvas 1996, p. 254), but it had close ties to the Church and Catholic Action (Lyon 1967, p. 83). Sturzo's intellectual work, particularly his conception of popularism (Invernizzi Accetti 2019; Murphy 1981), which he later disseminated as an emigrant, makes him a European Christian Democrat thinker.<sup>13</sup>

During his prolific writing career,<sup>14</sup> Sturzo addressed numerous topics, including war and peace, although these are not the focus of researchers' attention. Sturzo's activities on war and peace are both practical and theoretical. Furthermore, as a man of both, he points to the interconnectedness of the two: "There is a mutual action between fact and theory, or better, between fact and idea, for the fact is the fulfilment of the idea and the idea the classification of the fact" (Sturzo 1930, p. 17). In terms of practical questions, Sturzo, as a

politician and priest, advocated peace: he opposed the Spanish Civil War, and he argued for a “pacified and friendly Italy” (Sturzo 1943a, p. 80).

Sturzo was far from being an exclusively pragmatic politician. First, he devoted his energy to articulating his views on specific wartime situations in his analyses. For instance, his article “Italian Problems in War and Peace,” written in January 1943, begins with the assumption that the West does not understand the Italian situation, for which he seeks to provide an overview (Sturzo 1943a). Similarly, in his short writing titled “The Third World War” (Sturzo n.d.), he summarises the post-war conflict between the Allies and Russia. In these articles, both descriptive and normative elements are present (the latter, explicitly or implicitly). For instance, in the previous article, he is not only analytical but also urges political action; for Italy, he argues, it is necessary to cooperate with and become an integral part of Europe (Sturzo 1943a, p. 80).

Sturzo’s theoretical position on war and peace, including just war theory, is most apparent in his books, for instance, in *Internationalism and Nationalism* (Sturzo 1946). In the corresponding (6th) chapter, Sturzo argues that modern wars, as a sociological phenomenon, differ in character from previous wars: they are national wars, fought with national armies (through general conscription) and financed by the whole nation (Sturzo 1946, pp. 174–75). The changes in modern times also included an essential ethical shift, namely, that “with the modern conception of the nation as autonomous principle, as sources of its own morality, the Christian conception of just war had no place in modern politics” (Sturzo 1946, p. 182). It is clear that Sturzo is referring to this not as a theoretical criticism of the Church, but as an empirical fact consistent with the general decline of Christian moral authority in modern times.<sup>15</sup> He adds that even in the so-called “Catholic states” the *national morality* was infused, which is apart from the Christian one (Sturzo 1946, p. 183). Ultimately, this new morality led to an extreme in which “every national claim was not only just, but, also, that it justified any war” (Sturzo 1946, p. 184). It seems to be clear that nationalism is dangerous in several cases, but Sturzo calls attention to the fact that the Popes, in contrast to condemning it without qualification like liberalism, socialism and communism, made distinctions between moderate (and thus acceptable) and excessive (thus dangerous) nationalism (Sturzo 1946, p. 5). Pius XI also made this distinction between the love of fatherland and exaggerated or excessive nationalism, and he rightly focused on the anti-Christian character and the negative consequences of the latter in the 1930s, for instance, in his encyclical letter *Caritate Christi Compulsi*—argues Sturzo (1946, pp. 6, 8, 38, 51, 53). As nation and the power of the state are interconnected, the Italian anti-totalitarian politician is very cautious with the power of the state (Sturzo 1946, p. 178).

But what are the essential characteristics of Sturzo’s thinking on war and peace? First, he is naturally a proponent of peace in international relations. This ethical maxim is consistent with the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and is understood as a fundamental value. This idea is closely related to a broader phenomenon in Sturzo’s thought, which is also central to Catholic social doctrine: moral ideals. Sturzo is clear on this: “The things that count in personal life as in collective life are moral values. These values are worth sacrifice and death, both because they raise the tenour of life and because they are the true values, also to generate peace, tranquillity, and security in human society (Sturzo n.d., p. 4).

Sturzo is—in line with Pope Benedict XV—is generally supportive of international cooperation and institution-building (Sturzo 1943a; 1946, p. viii).<sup>16</sup> When the Italian thinker turns to the question of preventing future wars, he opts for deeper collaboration as he writes that “The League of Nations will have to include all the states, and the regional federations must tend to create permanent economic and moral links to help to overcome nationalistic egotisms” (Sturzo 1943a, p. 80). He also adds that it is the United Nations that will insure

to avoid wars which are fueled by ideologies and not of nationalisms (Sturzo 1943a, p. 81). Elsewhere, he argues for the necessity of an international organisation with two conditions: “all the Member States be equally subject to international order, without the privilege of veto” and “that the principles of international morality and justice be carried into effect by all the Member States” (Sturzo n.d., p. 2). He adds that if a state is not following these rules, he should be eliminated as a member, thus all other states can act against it. The idea of institutionalism in Sturzo’s thought is also emphasised by other scholars (Forlenza and Thomassen 2022).

These two elements are interconnected, as institutionalism not only serves, but primarily serves, moral goals such as peace. Sturzo’s most comprehensive work on the topic, titled *The International Community and the Right of War* (Sturzo 1930), focused on whether, for instance, the formation of the League of Nations<sup>17</sup> could eliminate war from international relations (Sturzo 1930, pp. 17–18).<sup>18</sup> Another prime example of the combination of idealism and institutionalism supplemented by the assumption that human beings are not only obliged but are also capable of moral conduct (which is also a recurring feature in Sturzo’s writings)<sup>19</sup> is perfectly depicted when he writes that:

“It is for civilized men to give preponderance to reason rather than to instinct, and to outstrip the blind confidence evoked by force, accepting the answer of the moral law. All this would be impossible without some form of international authority capable of making laws, of defending justice, and of asserting itself also by force. An interstate organisation without the backing of force would be ineffective and an encumbrance”. (Sturzo n.d., p. 3)

This strain of normativity in Sturzo leads to idealism rather than utopianism; he is, for instance, aware of the obstacles to the formation of a universal international organisation. In 1946, he argues that, although it seems that in the 19th and 20th centuries certain tendencies facilitated this movement, states are simply unwilling to relinquish their sovereignty (Sturzo 1946, p. 180).

Regarding the Roman Catholic Church’s position on modern wars in general, Sturzo argued that it was highly contingent, political rather than moral, and favoured the side closest to the Church’s ideological, political, or policy positions (Sturzo 1946, p. 185). In more particular, Sturzo’s arguments on war and peace have several explicit reflections on the Popes including Benedict XV.<sup>20</sup> Even in one of his least political books, titled *The True Life: Sociology of the Supernatural*, he underlines that—in contrast to the conventional view that Popes did nothing for peace—both Benedict XV and Pius XII addressed their ideas for lasting peace. In the previous case, the politician refers to the peace plans published on 1 August 1917, which also addressed prisoners and the Church’s religious, moral, and social assistance. Sturzo—even if he argues that the Catholics did not hear its true voice and the Church was not prepared enough to face the situation—“that letter will remain as the loftiest and most far-sighted peace document which has been ever written and one which corresponded to the common feeling of the people” (Sturzo 1946, p. 191). Later also referring to the public protest against war calls Benedict a far-sighted and courageous Pope (Sturzo 1946, p. 198).

## 6. Conclusions

One of the defining features of international relations (IR), for which the question of war and peace is essential, is *realism*. Even IR schools of thought that do not bear the label or are not considered realist wish to reflect on reality. Or if they do not, they are reluctant to treat themselves as simple-minded idealists or moralists. One key similarity between the Papal manifestations and several Christian democrats, including Luigi Sturzo, is their explicit commitment to moral values over politics. This does not rule out the acceptance of

politics as an individual realm with its own nature, but clearly sets the priorities. In the words of Sturzo in his book *Internationalism and Nationalism*:

“The reader of this book will find a dominant thought throughout: the influence of morality on politics and the duty to subordinate politics to morality. Political science is autonomous and has its laws and notions of value; but as a human art, the art of governing human beings, politics is subject to moral laws, because man in his free activity is subject to moral laws, and also because the aims of politics—order, justice, liberty, laws—are essentially vivified by morality”. (Sturzo 1946, pp. vii–viii)

What emerges from the analysis of Benedict XV’s wartime and postwar teaching is a strikingly similar normative architecture. The Pope does not reject political prudence, diplomacy, or institutional realism; on the contrary, his peace initiatives increasingly incorporate concrete legal and institutional mechanisms such as arbitration, disarmament, and international cooperation. Yet these instruments are consistently framed as subordinate to a deeper moral order grounded in justice, reconciliation, and the dignity of the human person. War is not merely a strategic failure but a moral rupture that corrodes the foundations of civilization itself, while peace cannot be reduced to a temporary equilibrium of power or contractual settlement. Instead, it presupposes the restoration of ethical bonds, mutual trust, and responsibility within and among nations.

This convergence between papal thought and Christian democratic political theory challenges the conventional dichotomy between realism and idealism in IR. Rather than representing an escapist idealism, both Benedict XV and Sturzo articulate a perspective that takes seriously the constraints of political reality while insisting that durable order cannot be sustained apart from normative commitments. Their shared emphasis on law over force, institutionalized cooperation over unilateral power, and reconciliation over punitive peace anticipates later developments in Catholic social teaching and resonates with contemporary “just peace” approaches that seek to displace war-centered ethical frameworks.

From a historical perspective, this convergence is particularly noteworthy given the initially ambivalent relationship between the papacy and modern democratic politics. The gradual dismantling of the non expedit principle, the cautious opening toward Catholic political participation, and the eventual emergence of the *Partito Popolare Italiano* illustrate a broader transformation in the Church’s engagement with political modernity. Within this evolving landscape, the intellectual proximity between Benedict XV and Sturzo cannot be understood as accidental but as the product of parallel efforts to reconcile moral universality with institutional pluralism and national sovereignty.

Ultimately, the significance of this convergence lies not only in its historical explanatory value but also in its theoretical implications. By integrating ethical normativity with realism, both papal teaching and Christian democratic thought offer an alternative to purely power-centered accounts of international order. They suggest that peace is not merely the absence of war, but a structured moral achievement sustained by law, solidarity, and the cultivation of political responsibility.

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## Abbreviations

Enc.      Encyclical  
Ex. Ap.    Apostolic exhortation

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The difference between political Catholicism is maintained even if, as Stathis Kalyvas argues, there is a remarkable continuity between prewar ‘Catholic’ parties and postwar Christian democratic ones in organization, personnel, ideology and even strategy (Kalyvas 1996, p. 5).
- <sup>2</sup> For a short conceptual introduction on Christian democracy, see Kalyvas and van Kersbergen (2010).
- <sup>3</sup> For a comprehensive summary, see Kaiser (2007).
- <sup>4</sup> For more on this topic, see: (Reichberg 2024; Braun 2019; Cahill 2018a, 2018b; Chu 2012; Himes 1991).
- <sup>5</sup> Félicité de Lamennais (1782–1854) was a French Catholic priest, philosopher, and publicist, an early representative of Catholic liberalism. He defended freedom of conscience, freedom of the press, and the separation of church and state, which brought him into conflict with papal teaching. Although he later distanced himself from the Church, his thought strongly influenced nineteenth-century Catholic social and political debates.
- <sup>6</sup> Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler (1811–1877), Bishop of Mainz, was a German Catholic social thinker and politician and a forerunner of modern Catholic social teaching. He emphasized workers’ rights, just wages, and the social responsibility of the state in response to industrialization. His ideas directly influenced later papal social encyclicals, especially *Rerum Novarum*.
- <sup>7</sup> Giuseppe Toniolo (1845–1918) was an Italian Catholic economist and sociologist and an early pioneer of Christian democratic social thought. He criticized both liberal capitalism and socialism, advocating a social and economic order oriented toward the common good. His ideas influenced Catholic institutional and social renewal in early twentieth-century Italy.
- <sup>8</sup> Romolo Murri (1870–1944) was an Italian priest and political thinker, a leading figure in the early Christian democratic movement. His political activism brought him into conflict with the Holy See, resulting in his suspension and excommunication in 1909. His career illustrates the tensions between modern democratic politics and ecclesiastical authority.
- <sup>9</sup> Ottorino Gentiloni (1865–1916): Italian Catholic lay leader and president of the *Unione Elettorale Cattolica Italiana* (1909–1916).
- <sup>10</sup> Giovanni Giolitti (1842–1928): Italian liberal statesman and five-time Prime Minister (1892–1921), architect of parliamentary reformism.
- <sup>11</sup> Pietro Gasparri (1852–1934): Italian cardinal, canon lawyer, and Vatican Secretary of State (1914–1930). Principal architect of the 1917 Code of Canon Law, and chief negotiator of the Lateran Treaties (1929).
- <sup>12</sup> Though Sturzo had a dual role as a priest and politician, as Murphy (1981) refers to it, it is obvious that in his national public life, he acted primarily as a politician, thinker and journalist. For further reading see: Molony (1977).
- <sup>13</sup> For his own understanding of Christian democracy, see Sturzo (1947). Sturzo, due to his forced move to Britain, where he continued to build the Christian democratic movement (Keating 1996). In fact, Sturzo’s activities and impact spread across Europe and the US (Kaiser 2000; Kaiser and Kosicki 2021).
- <sup>14</sup> This article does not limit itself to the writings of Sturzo under Benedict XV, since his views are more complete by including his later writings. Furthermore, Sturzo’s writings appear substantially consistent throughout the years on the most relevant questions concerning war and peace.
- <sup>15</sup> It seems that, for Sturzo, the peak of this loss of authority in moral guidance was around the First Vatican Council (Sturzo 1946, p. 186).
- <sup>16</sup> Sturzo was also an anti-colonialist, as he argued that The political maxim that must be acknowledged by everyone is that Africa belongs to the Africans and that the other countries that have a share in it are only fiduciaries entrusted with the mission of concurring in the welfare of Africa in order that she may achieve her own economic and political autonomy (Sturzo 1943b, pp. 65–66).
- <sup>17</sup> Sturzo refers to the fact that neither Pope Benedict XV nor Pius XI opposed the idea of the League of Nations (Sturzo 1938, p. 224).
- <sup>18</sup> In this book, Sturzo also intends to formulate his own theory of war after criticising the previous ones (see Sturzo 1930, pp. 208–22).
- <sup>19</sup> For instance, Sturzo also writes that “... the tendency toward a peaceful international order is innate in the soul of the people...” (Sturzo 1946, p. 179).

- <sup>20</sup> Obviously, Sturzo's references to the Popes are not limited to the question of war and peace, fact, he elaborates extensively on them: he, for instance, writes about Pope Pius X's position on the Roman question and their personal encounter (Sturzo 1946, p. 56), Pope Pius XI's anti-totalitarian teachings (Sturzo 1946, p. 43), fight against anti-Semitism (Sturzo 1943b, p. 72; 1946, p. 46).

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