

ANNUS IAM PLENUS

On Children of Central Europe

Encyclical of Pope Benedict XV promulgated on December 1, 1920.

To the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and other Local Ordinaries in Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See.

Venerable Brethren, Health and Apostolic Benediction.

1. A whole year has now passed since We (when the war was but a thing of yesterday) called upon all to turn their hearts in pity towards the children of Central Europe, who were so severely afflicted by hunger and want that they were wasting away with disease and were face to face with death. And, indeed, a wonderful joy it is to Us that Our appeal has not fallen vainly to the ground-an appeal which was actuated by that charity which enfolds in its kindly embrace all men, without distinction of race or nation, whosoever bear within them the image of God. The happy issue of our supplication, Venerable Brethren, is especially well known to you who assisted Us zealously in so salutary an enterprise. For in truth, a generous supply of money has been collected from the peoples of every land. There has been, as it were, a noble competition in liberality, with the result that the common father of so many, innocent children has been able to look to their necessities and dissipate their sorrows. Nor do we cease to proclaim the kindly providence of God, Whom it has pleased to use Us as a channel whereby the manifold blessings of Christian charity might flow to His abandoned little ones. In this matter We cannot desist from offering a public tribute of praise to the society entitled the "Save the Children Fund," which has exerted all possible care and diligence in the collection of money, clothing, and food. But, indeed, the general scarcity and the high cost of living, which the war has brought in its train, are of such a complex and varied character that the assistance We have rendered has perhaps neither succeeded in reaching those parts of Europe where necessity pressed hard, nor, where help was given, has it always been adequate to the actual need. To this must be added the fact that in the course of the year following the Encyclical Letter which We addressed to you, Venerable Brethren, on this very topic, there has been no appreciable improvement in the lot of most of those areas where it is evident that the people, and especially the young, find life growing yet harder and harder owing to the shortage of the necessaries of life. Nay, in some parts, war has flamed out anew and calamities of every kind, to the serious loss of those very elements that it is necessary to reestablish; in other parts where the civil State has been overthrown and where most frightful and disgraceful massacres have been perpetrated, it has come about that numberless families have been reduced to penury; that wives have been bereft of their husbands, and children of their parents; there are many districts, too, where it is so difficult to make provision for the food supply that as a consequence the population is afflicted by almost the same hardships which pressed upon it in the hideous days of the war.

2. Wherefore once again, inspired by the consciousness of that universal fatherhood which it is Our office to sustain, and with the words of the Divine Master on our lips-"I have compassion on the multitude . . . for they have nothing to eat"-now, when the anniversary day of the birth of Christ draws nigh a second time We call loudly upon Christian peoples to give us the means whereby we may offer some relief to the sick and suffering children, of whatsoever nationality they may be. Yes, We call on all who have hearts of kindness and pity to make a generous

offering, but in particular we turn to the young children who dwell in the more prosperous cities of the world, to those who can with comparative ease stretch out a helping hand to their poor little brothers in Christ. Is not the birthday of Christ Jesus, in an especial manner the feast of the young? See then how the desolate children of those scattered districts strain suppliant hands to those other happier children, and seem to point to the cradle where the Divine Infant cries in helplessness! Yet is not that Infant the common brother of them all, He Who "being rich became poor," Who from that manger, as from the throne of heavenly wisdom, silently teaches us not only the value of brotherly love but also how men from their tenderest years onward must detach themselves from the longing for the goods of this world and share them with the poor, who in their very poverty are so much nearer to Christ? Surely the children of the richer parts of Europe will have it in their power to nourish and clothe those little ones of their own age who languish in want, and especially should this be so at the approaching season of the Nativity of Our Lord, which parents are wont to render still happier for their children by little gifts and presents. And shall we think that these last are endowed with such a spirit as to be unwilling to contribute even a part of their own little savings, whereby they might strengthen the weakness of children who are in want? Oh, what a deep consolation, what joys they will secure for themselves, if happily they become the means whereby those little brothers of theirs, who are deprived of all help and all pleasure, should spend the approaching Christmas time just a little more comfortably, just a little more happily. For even as the Infant Jesus on the night of His birth blessed with a most sweet smile the shepherds who came to Him with gifts to lighten the burden of His poverty, and even as He brightened their souls with the supreme gift of faith, so He will reward with his blessing and heavenly graces those children who, fired with love for him, shall soften the misery and the sorrow of their little brothers. Nay, there is nothing else more acceptable to the Infant Jesus than thou could do or offer at this season. And so we earnestly exhort all Christian parents, to whom, the Heavenly father had committed the grave charge of training up their offspring to the practice of charity and the other virtues, to use this happy opportunity of exciting and cultivating in the minds of their children sentiments of humanity and holy compassion. And in this matter it pleases Us to set before you an example worthy of all imitation; for we remember that last year many children of the Roman nobility made their offerings to Us personally, offerings which, at the suggestion of their parents, they had collected amongst themselves not without some sacrifice of their individual pleasures.

3. We have said that this work of charity and kindness would be most pleasing to the Infant Jesus. And, indeed, why does the name Bethlehem mean one and the same thing as "House of Bread," unless it be that there Christ was to be born into the light of day, Christ, Who, solicitous for our weakness, gave Himself as food to nourish our souls, and Who in the words "Give us this day our daily bread" taught us to beg ardently every day of the Father for nourishment of soul and body? Oh how Our heart would expand if We were certain that throughout the Christmas festivities there would be no home destitute of consolation and joy, that there would be no child whose sorrow should wring the dear heart of its mother, and that there would be no mother who should look upon her little ones with weeping eyes."

4. And so, Venerable Brethren, We entrust Our project to you, even as We did a year ago, that you may bring it into effect, especially those of you who dwell in districts which enjoy a happier fortune and a more tranquil state of affairs.

5. And inasmuch as those words of Christ Our Lord should take deep possession of your souls, "He that shall receive one such little child in My name, receiveth Me," We beg that you leave no

measure untried whereby the liberality and generosity of the faithful over whom you are set may correspond to the urgency of the present need. Accordingly it is Our wish that you forthwith announce throughout the whole of your several dioceses that a collection of alms is to be made on the twenty-eighth day of this month, the feast of the Holy Innocents, or if you prefer, on the Sunday immediately preceding, for the support of the children made needy by the way and that you particularly recommend this collection to the children in your diocese; further, that with all diligence in your power you see that the money thus collected is sent either to Us or to the "Save the Children Fund," which We have before mentioned.

6. For Ourselves, in order that, after exhorting the faithful by Our words, We may stir their generosity by Our example, We have set apart one hundred thousand Italian lire for this most sacred work of charity. Meanwhile, Venerable Brethren, to you and to all your Clergy and people, we lovingly impart the apostolic benediction, a pledge of heavenly reward and a token of Our own paternal good will.

Given at Rome at St. Peter's on the first day of the month of December in the year nineteen hundred and twenty, the seventh of Our Pontificate.