

The Catholic Church and Christian Democracy I. (Pope Pius IX and Pope Leo XIII)

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Introduction

On January 16, 2021, the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU), held its leadership election which was won by Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia Armin Laschet. Prior to the election, the website of the German Catholic Church showcased its CDU leadership candidates with the title “*Three Catholic Races*”, but highlighting at the same time that Laschet was probably the “most Catholic” out of all the candidates. According to the article, Laschet is connected to the Catholic Church in all areas of life, be it education, student union, editing an diocesan newspaper, or administering a Catholic publishing house. It is noted that, as Minister-President, he refrained from direct state interference as regards religious freedom during the pandemic, and was even received by Pope Francis during a private audience (Scholz, 2021).

Nonetheless, following the election, the Catholic daily newspaper *Die Tagespost* reported that there was some disappointment in the CDU’s Saxon and Thuringian Catholic working groups noting that Friedrich Mertz was not the one to be elected as leader of the CDU. Dissatisfaction is clearly due to political and non-religious differences. Both Mathias Kretschmer, a Saxon, and Claudia Heber, chairperson of the Thuringian Catholic working group, highlighted Mertz’s economic competence. However, after the election, Kretschmer expressed concern about whether Catholics are still supporters of CDU at all. He once again stressed the need to clarify the meaning of the letter “C” in CDU when addressing issues like family policy, protection of life, and creation protection (Die Tagespost, 2021).

Claudia Heber also said in another interview that the voice of Catholics need to be heard within the CDU, pointing out that “many believe that the Christian principles that underpin CDU policy cannot be heard enough” (Loos, 2021). Heber probably does not have to worry long, as Laschet has previously expressed that the Christian image of man needs to be brought to the forefront (Domradio.de, 2021), however the newly elected party leader may not have such an easy task, for the last twenty odd years it has been advocated that the big “C” is in fact an allusion to conservatism (Enyedi, 1998).

We shan't unravel this any further, but it is worth seeing how the need for a Catholic presence is articulated within one of the largest Christian Democratic parties in the European Union. It is indeed interesting noting how this demand for a Catholic presence has evolved throughout history. In this present study, we wish to provide an introduction detailing the relationship between the Catholic Church and Christian Democracy drawing on the encyclicals of Pope Pius IX and Pope Leo XIII. For a comprehensive introduction to the Catholic non-papal tradition of Christian democracy, see [Ádám Darabos's article \(link\)](#).

Background

[In our previous research article](#) we have already shown the role that the Medieval church has played in the formation of the modern state. We pointed out that governance practices that had developed ecclesiastically gradually incorporating so called guarantee elements, that in today's world may even be called democratic. Of course, there is no suggestion that the Medieval church was a forerunner of liberal democracy, it merely introduced a number of governmental practices like the application of the principle of majority rule and representation, governing boards and conciliarism, the model for mixed government, and the rediscovery of the Roman law, which later will form the basis of the modern state.

The sharp difference between Medieval practices and modern theory was most striking in the early 19th century. The revolutionary wave sweeping across Europe in the 1930s also affected the Catholic Church. Pope Gregory XVI succeeded Pope Pius VIII in 1831, with the support of conservative cardinals and Prince Metternich. Pope Gregory, having published the encyclical *Mirari vos arbitramur*, condemned the “unbridled freedom” of liberalism. The anonymous addressee of the encyclical was clearly the leading figure of liberal Catholicism in France around this time, Felicité Lammennais. Lammennais and his peers vocalized their revolutionary ideas in *L'Avenir*, expounding on ideas such as freedom of religion and the press, the need to separate state and church -which was later condemned by the papal encyclical.

French liberal Catholicism is in many ways seen as one of the forerunners of the socially sensitive Christian democracy (cf. Sturzo, 1947; Almond, 1948; Accetti, 2019), as Lammennais succeeded in addressing the working class destroyed by economic liberalism, moving further away from the church (Szkárosi, 2007). The condemnation of liberalism was thus accompanied by a delay in the development of Christian democracy, the sad result of which was that the Catholic Church was unable to respond to the growing social crisis up until the end of the century. This was despite the fact that, parallelly in France, Catholic initiatives were seen across Europe to reflect on imminent social problems, such was the case in Germany with Wilhelm

Emmanuel von Ketteler, the Bishop of Mainz who first founded the Catholic Workers' Union in 1843 addressing labour related issues in several of his homilies and in his 1864 work entitled *The Workers' Question and Christianity*, right ahead of Marx's *Capital* (Doromby, 1972). However, as the American political scientist Gabriel A. Almond pointed out:

as long as these social welfare trends remained within the framework of the Caritas, they were encouraged by the Church, however the point when these concerns generated the encouragement of workers' self-help and unionism, they encountered church and conservative Catholic resistance (Almond, 1948, p. 739).

In the following, we want to show the path this resistance took during the papacy of Pope Gregory XVI, and what measures the Church took regarding its socially sensitive teachings moreover, how the relationship between the church and Christian democracy emerged in the wake of liberal Catholicism. We have already outlined this system of relations primarily in light of the papal statements, now we shall also draw on the significant historical and political events that determine each era.

Pope Pius IX and the Mistakes of the Age

Giovanni Mastai-Ferretti was born in 1792 in the Senigallia (part of the Papal State). In 1846 he was elected pope and chose the name Pius. According to some church historians, the Count Mastai-Ferretti family sought to unite the reformists via ecclesiastical law (Conzemius, 2000). According to Victor Conzemius – former professor at the University of Lucerne – the elected pope “belonged to the college of cardinals who were willing to make concessions to the liberal and national currents of the age” (Conzemius, 2000, p. 453). The image of the “liberal pope” is nuanced by the fact that among the chief cardinals of the papal election was the progressive, but patriotic Italian Cardinal Tommaso Gizzi and Luigi Lambruschini, an Austrian sympathizer who served as Secretary of State for Pope Gregory XVI (Török, 1999). Thus, the election of Pope Pius IX seemed more like a midway solution for the cardinals maneuvering when it came to the interests of great powers. The result in this shift may have been as a result of the Archbishop of Milan, Gaetano Gaisruck, who had previously vetoed the election of Cardinal Mastai-Ferretti for pope missed the election (Török, 1999).

In any case, at the beginning of his pontificate. Pope Pius IX did show a willingness for reform: he issued an amnesty order for political prisoners, and a new constitution for the papal state, brought about a council of ministers, appointed the aforementioned progressive Cardinal Gizzi as secretary of state, and granted permission to build railways and publish newspapers. His

popularity came to an end during the revolutionary events of 1848 when as pontiff he did not commit himself to the Italian war of independence against the Austrians. Despite the papal ban, troops from the Papal State joined the Italian army, the liberal Pellegrino Rossi, the Papal Minister of Interior was killed on the steps of the chancellery, subsequently the revolutionaries besieged the Quirinale Palace, which served as the papal residence. Then Pope Pius IX fled to Gaeta, the Kingdom of Naples, where he was in voluntary exile for seventeen months before returning to Rome with the help of troops from the French (Török, 1999; Hilaire, 2001). After his return in 1850, he “switched to non-concessionary counter-revolutionary measures” (Conzemius, 2000, p. 453), which he was able to maintain until the withdrawal of French troops in 1870, after which Piedmontese troops occupied Rome and the Pope considered himself a prisoner of the Vatican.

Historical circumstances must have nuanced the Pope’s brief system- thus requiring a historical overview in order to contextualize Pope Pius IX’s circular letter beginning with *Quanta cura* and the Syllabus attached to the encyclical, which is a bulleted list of the errors of the age. As the result of the events in Italy, the Pope's attitude changes, he concedes and returns to the Pope Gregory XVI’s conservative views. One of the final arguments against the emerging new order may have been the experience of the Paris Commune when Georges Darboy, the Archbishop of Paris was executed in 1871 (Botos – Botos, p. 2015).

The impact of this growing conservatism is the encyclical published in 1864, in which the Pope expresses his concern for civil society that has turned away from religion and cannot distinguish between false and true religions. Referring to Pope Gregory XVI he repeatedly condemned freedom of conscience, religion and speech:

Based on a completely false conception of social government, they are not afraid to cultivate the very dangerous view of the Catholic Church and the salvation of souls that our predecessor mentioned above, Pope Gregory XVI. called it insane, knowing that “freedom of conscience and religion is everyone’s, which must be proclaimed and reflected in law in a well-organized society, and that citizens have the right to express any views, whether verbally or in writing, publicly, without any restriction by ecclesiastical or secular supremacy (Quanta Cura, 3).

He criticized the notion that the will of the people, detached from divine and human rights, constitutes law. He also expressed concern that communism wanted to drive religion out of not only society but also the private sector. He condemned the notion that the church could only

exist with the approval of civic power and society. The papal encyclical was thus fundamentally aimed at preserving the order of the church and society (Gájer, 2013).

However, encyclical's appendix, the so-called *Syllabus* is a compilation of the list of errors of the age initiated by the Archbishop of Perugia (later Pope Leo XIII) at the Provincial Synod of Spoleto in 1849. (Gájer, 2013) The compilation of the list was a lengthy process, with eighty errors recorded in the final version, which were recorded earlier by Pius IX. In the *Syllabus*, freedom of the press and conscience, ecumenism, the constitution as the source of all rights, and the rejection of the Catholic religion as the only state religion thus appear as a mistake. The fourth paragraph specifically highlights the mistakes of liberal principles, emphasizing that “such plagues” have already been condemned in several previous papal documents. In doing so, as Almond points out, “the liberal Catholic minority was barely tolerated” which contributed to and “confirmed the rapid de-Christianization of the masses” (Almond, 1948, p. 739).

The development of the forerunners of the reviving Christian Democratic organizations was further complicated by the Apostolic Penitentiary's decree of 29 February 1868 declaring the principle of “non expedit” prohibiting Catholic citizens from voting, that is, non-Catholic Italian citizens. Pius IX believed that participation in elections would “legitimize a political power that he did not accept” (Botos – Botos, 2015, p. 54). At the same time, it was the radicalism of “non expedit” that made it possible for Pius IX to found the Opera dei Congressi in 1874, which became the first major Catholic movement to perform many social and economic functions against the state. It is important to see, therefore, that this provision did not explicitly attack political Catholicism, although it made it more difficult for Catholics to be committed to party politics (cf. Oftestad, 2018) stemming from the denial of the new democratic form of government in Italy having paved the way for his successors.

Conceptual clarification of Pope Leo XIII and Christian Democracy

After Pope Pius's nearly thirty-two-year pontificate, Gioacchino Pecci was elected pope in 1878. He is commonly referred to as the “first modern pope”. As we can see, Pecci was already close as a bishop - he suggested compiling the *Syllabus* to reflect Pius's teachings, whom he also appointed Camerlengo in the last part of his reign, so that he could help the work of his predecessor. Pope Leo XIII, like Pius refused to accept Italy's new arrangement. The possible reason for this is pointed out in the study of Katalin and Máté Botos:

It was only the third time in the 19th century that the Church lost its secular power.
(This was the case in 1815, then in 1850, and finally in 1870, after the withdrawal

of the French troops.) In the past, however, it always regained it. Pius IX thought that the established Italian kingdom would not be permanent either. This is how Pope Leo XIII felt, too. [...] He maintained the rejection of the new order, he principle of “non expedit” proclaimed by Pius IX (Botos – Botos, 2015, p. 55)

Nevertheless, he recognized the greatest problem of the century, the importance of the social question, and in 1891 he published his encyclical on the labor issue, beginning with *Rerum novarum*, which was the first papal social circular. With this, he disclosed a series of documents of Christian social teaching, “on which the Christian (Christian Socialist and Christian Democratic) parties of the 20th century build their political doctrine, or at least consider it its theoretical-moral basis” (Gergely, 1991, p. 3; cf. Hölvényi, 2021). The encyclical marked a fundamental turning point in the ecclesiastical approach to the labor issue. Pope Leo XIII derived the “unsustainable situation” of labor from economic liberalism, but also drew attention to the misconceptions proclaimed by socialism:

the basic premise of socialism on the public ownership of private property must be rejected in its entirety, as it also harms those who should be helped, as it is contrary to the natural rights of individuals, and disrupts public order (*Rerum novarum*, 15).

Among the main proposals made by the Pope was for employers and employees to form professional associations in a corporate manner. In doing so, he explicitly endorsed and encouraged the formation of trade unions. Almond points out that “the subsequent Catholic trade union campaign was quick and successful” (Almond, 1948, p. 741).

In his wide-ranging work *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe*, Stathis N. Kalyvas, a professor at Yale University, argues that “the strategies pursued by the Church had unintended yet important political consequences that led to the emergence of new identities and organizations” (Kalyvas, 1996, p. 24). In fact, *Rerum Novarum* can be considered the first “strategy” that also mobilized Catholics politically. It also created an opportunity for liberal Catholics to articulate the need for a democratic republic, as did the Le Sillon movement founded in France by Marc Sangnier. At the same time, in Italy, Romolo Murri, a Catholic priest from the Opera dei Congressi set about organizing the Christian Democratic movement. This led to a paradox that “when the church became the engine of political subculture, its official program turned away from politics” (Enyedi, 1998, p. 124). Thus, the call for the formation of workers' unions, proclaimed by the *Rerum novarum*, brought with it the politicization of organizations, despite the fact that the encyclical did not even implicitly encourage it.

Recognizing this, ten years after *Rerum novarum*, he publishes *Graves de communi re*, which was the critique of Murri's organized Christian democracy.

In the encyclical, the Pope undertook to define Christian democracy, emphasizing that Christian democracy has nothing to do with social democracy. Moreover, Leo XIII has downright called it a "crime" to attach political significance to the name Christian Democracy, as it signifies a charitable act done primarily for the benefit of the people:

[...] Moreover, it would be a crime to distort Christian Democracy, because although democracy in its philological and philosophical significance entails popular government, in its present application it must be applied without political significance and thus means nothing more than the benefit of the people, and nothing more than performing a charitable Christian act (*Graves de Communi*, 7).

As Martin Conway, a professor at Oxford University, points out, "in the pre-1914 era [...] the term "Christian Democrat" was used to express the popular orientation of these movements and did not imply any identification with the principles of a democratic political system" (Conway, 1997, p. 17). The encyclical draws attention to the fact that the Christian Democracy movement "must remain completely free from the passions and vicissitudes of the parties" (*Graves de Communi*, 7). According to some authors, "the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 and the emerging Catholic social movements in the meantime also have an impact on the background of the Pope's aspirations" (Gájer, 2017, p. 293). The papal definition states that Christian democracy seeks to create a better life for the masses while also protecting private property, as it "must preserve the various differences and degrees that are indispensable in the community of any well-organized nation" (*Graves de Communi*, 6). Thus, according to the papal definition, Christian democracy "strives for the lower strata of the people, but cannot forget the interests of the higher social classes, nor does it oppose a legitimate power in order to achieve its goals" (Gájer, 2017, p. 293).

The complexity of Pope Leo's thinking is shown by the fact that while in Italy he maintained the term "non expedit" and protected Christian Democracy from politics, in his encyclical *Au milieu des sollicitudes* addressed to the French he sought the recognition of the republican form of state. Pope Leo's "negotiations" with the French may be the subject of a separate study, so here we can only point out that in this encyclical the Pope states that any form of state can be good if its goal is to achieve the common good (see Gájer, 2017).

Conclusion

In the study, we examined the encyclicals of Pope Leo and Pius, pointing out the position of the Catholic Church on the socially sensitive Christian democracy, which emanated from liberal Catholic circles, and developed during the 19th century. We could see that Pope Pius's initial reforms were overridden by the Pope's history and, in the wake of the emerging revolution, he returned to his predecessor's views. As a result, he reaffirmed his condemnation of the freedom of religion, conscience and speech, and drew particular attention to the untenability of liberal ideas organized among the clergy. At the same time, the Opera dei Congressi movement, which was set up on his initiative later became one of the cradles of Christian democracy, reflecting on social problems addressed by Romolo Murri.

After the long pontificate of Pius, Pope Leo shared the views of his predecessor in many respects, including “non expedit”, thereby also recognizing the problems in society. He published the first social encyclical, which to this day serves as one of the basic documents of Christian Democratic parties. However, in connection with the movements initiated by *Rerum novarum*, the Pope clearly separated the concept of Christian Democracy from both politics and socialism and set the goal of promoting social activities in the spirit of Christian love.

Examining the initial steps of the Catholic Church and nascence of Christian Democracy both provide an opportunity to place Catholics in the history of Christian Democracy, and to make Catholic teaching accessible to those for whom Christianity has a political meaning. Of course, the relationship between the Catholic Church and Christian Democracy did not end with Pope Leo, but rather was an impetus for a dynamic development, the subject of our next research.

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