

Twenty First Sunday in Ordinary Time, 2026

On Friday we celebrated the feast - well, Obligatory Memorial, properly speaking - of St. Pius X, Pope from 1903 to 1914. Today, as we make our way through St. Matthew's Gospel, we come to Matthew 16,13-20, the foundational text for the Papacy. Additionally, we have a relic of St. Pius X available for veneration. I will, therefore, say something about Pius X.

I will start with a summary of Pope Pius X by one of the greatest historians of the Papacy, Baron von Pastor: "He was one of those chosen few men whose personality is irresistible. Everyone was moved by his simplicity and his angelic kindness. Yet it was something more that carried him into all hearts . . . all who were admitted into his presence had a deep conviction of being face to face with a saint. And the more one comes to know about him, the stronger this conviction becomes."

Not too long ago, I celebrated Mass for an overnight men's event. A younger friend of mine expressed considerable scepticism about such events. A fairly accomplished martial artist himself, he is nonetheless concerned that events specifically for men can slide into exercises in mere machismo, lightly flavored with religion. As an amateur Medievalist, heavily influenced by Maurice Keen's classic work on Chivalry, I disagreed with him. There is a warrior instinct, stronger in some cultures than in others, but never absent from men, that needs to be guided, not so much tamed as pointed in the right direction. It doesn't have to be brutal and barbaric. It can serve civilization and Christianity. Courage can be rescued from mere bravado and given a high, even holy purpose. I see such courage in Pius X.

Pius X was a cleric of course, a deacon, a priest, and a bishop. Still, his story can show laymen as well as clerics two things that need to be part of any particularly male expression of Christianity, namely a will to protect those entrusted to you, and courage in doing so. When I speak of courage, I certainly don't mean an eagerness to engage in conflict; and yet courage definitely means being willing to accept conflict for the sake of defending those entrusted to one's care. Perhaps we very modern men, especially clergy, have become too conflict averse to defend what needs defending. It is not unhealthy to revolt against the merely muscle bound and aggressive masculinity of such bizarre pop culture characters as, for example, "Rambo"; but for the defense of things and people that need defending, there must be Christian and civilized ways to face conflict courageously. I think we see this in St. Pius X.

For reasons rooted in France's torturous political history, France's government of 1905 launched a ferocious attack on the Church. The anti Catholic laws of 1905 were complicated, but they can be summarized as demanding that the Church submit to State control, including State nomination of bishops, as a condition for keeping her property. In two dignified but strong documents, St. Pius X refused to give in. The price of resistance was steep, namely the sacrifice of all of the Church's property, including even church buildings. About those who considered this too high a price, St. Pius said, "They are too concerned with material goods, and not enough about spiritual." The shock of sudden poverty was very hard for the French church, but, in the long run, it gave the French Church a revival that lasted for half a century. As the Bishop of Nevers observed, looking back, "Pius X, at the cost of sacrificing our property, freed us from slavery. May he be blessed forever for not shrinking from imposing that sacrifice on us."

Often, perhaps too often, we hear it said that "freedom is not free." Though perhaps said too often and too easily, it is nonetheless true. The French Church's freedom was bought at a

considerable sacrifice of property and with the expenditure of much effort, not with blood, as far as I can tell, but with much sweat and many tears. As the reward for that sweat and tears, the French Church kept her honor before God and her self respect. Indeed, she even gained the respect of the French government, which eventually started to treat the Church much more cooperatively. It might be said with truth that honor is its own reward. More importantly, for the courage to defend what God has entrusted to us, there is a heavenly reward.

Pius X helps us see the difference between the courage to take a risky stand when faithfulness and honor require it, and a mere willingness to gamble with danger and to throw lives away. Many intelligent people had warned that the compulsive competitiveness and militarism of Europe's great Powers was likely to produce a great war. Intelligent optimists thought that the destructive power of modern artillery and machine guns was so obviously terrible that Europe's powers would never be foolish enough to start a European war. So much for optimism! Intelligent pessimists thought that a European War was coming. Not a pessimist, but certainly intelligent and a saint as well, Pope Pius predicted when the war would come - in the Summer of 1914. Though he foresaw it, it still broke his heart. He knew that the outbreak of the War that was called "The Great War" (World War I, we call it now) would kill him. "This is the last affliction which the Lord will visit on me. I would gladly give my life to save my poor children from this ghastly scourge." Who knows? Perhaps his last, sudden illness was a prayer, an offering to the Father in union with the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ, that helped keep the "Great War" from becoming the end of Europe and the beginning of the world's end. Pope Pius developed a nasty cold. On 19 August, 1914, his nasty cold was declared to be bronchitis. On 20 August, 1914, he died. In a sense, Pius X was one of the first fatalities of the "First World War."

I think that it takes two to make a friend, and also two to make an enemy. If that is true, then Pius X had no enemies. A truly Christian masculine spirituality is not about fighting enemies; nor is it about avoiding conflict and criticism. St. Pius X's pontificate had been full of conflict and criticism; but it was conflict and criticism incurred for the sake of defending Justice and Faith. Much criticism came from within the Church, from people who wished that on several issues he had been less uncompromising. After he died, however, the Catholic people realized almost unanimously that they had just undergone the extremely rare and rather unnerving experience of being led by a saint. When Pius X was canonized in 1954, a pope hadn't been canonized since 1672 (Pius V). The recently deceased Roman Pontiff canonized three of his predecessors, which might lead us to imagine that popes are more or less automatically saints. Not so. It seems to me the "average" pope of history has been God fearing, devout, morally serious, and intellectually respectable. True saints, however, have been rare. They have also been rather unnerving, because they seem to play by somewhat different rules. They make the rest of us a bit nervous. They cheerfully yield on things that normal people consider important, and prove utterly uncompromising on matters which others think might be susceptible to making a deal. To a sometimes startling degree, they have no need to defend their personal honor or group interests, but will take risks for the honor of the Faith and the defense of justice.

Yes, I do think that there is, within the big tent of Christian spirituality, room for a distinctively masculine spirituality. I think such a spirituality will naturally have both lay and clerical versions. Both versions can learn from St. Pius X the spiritual value of facing risks for Justice and the Faith.