

A POLITICAL INSTRUMENT TO ASSERT THE GRANDEUR OF THE CHURCH

Not before 1918 did the canons of the Abbey of Saint-Maurice again envision undertaking missionary activity.

In the meantime, the context had changed: the colonial imperialism of the major European powers led to the "Great War" of 1914-1918, which left deep and lasting traumas behind it. The period between the wars marked both the peak and beginning of the decline of the colonial empires that had been built in the 19th century.

Under the pontificate of Pius XI, which began in 1922, calls for missionary mobilization became more and more frequent, in particular through the publication of many papal encyclicals on the expansion of Catholicism. The high point of this new conquering strategy was the Universal Missionary Exposition held in 1925 at the Vatican. Taking its inspiration from similar events organized by various European nations since the late 19th century, this missionary fair adopted many characteristics of the colonial expositions, all the while departing from them in two regards. For one thing, the commercial stands were replaced by stands boasting of the merits of evangelising missions, and, for another, a certain moral distance was taken from the "ethnological exhibitions", in particular from the "Negro villages"?also called "human zoos"? that could be seen again in 1931 at the Universal Exposition in Paris: at the missionary fairs, mannequins were used. This major event, the largest exhibition ever held by the Holy See, constituted a political instrument to assert the greatness of the Church. At stake was the restoration of the prestige of the Holy See amid the new order of nations; which prestige it had lost with the military abdication of the pontifical troops during the Capture of Rome on 20 September 1870. A judicial resolution of this question was reached with the Lateran Accords of 1929, after which date the successive popes officially considered themselves to be prisoners held within the walls of the Vatican. Being bereft of an army to spread its influence throughout the world, the Holy See no longer sought to conquer territory, but intended to become the spearhead of a global campaign to "conquer souls", to use the terms of the period.

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