

De Valera sought papal approval for Constitution

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Éamon de Valera sent the head of the department of foreign affairs to Rome in the spring of 1937 to try and get the approval of Pope Pius XI for his new Constitution, before it was presented to the Dáil, according to a collection of documents on Irish foreign policy to be published this week.

Although the Pope refused to endorse the Constitution, as it did not formally recognise the Catholic Church as the only true church, a senior Vatican official said "it was a great change for the better" compared to the Free State constitution.

Joseph P Walshe, the secretary of the department, went to Rome in April, 1937 to seek the approval of the Vatican for the sections of the Constitution dealing with religious matters which recognised the "special position" of the Catholic Church, but which also recognised the other major religions.

In a memo to de Valera, Walshe

said of his first meeting with the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Pacelli: "I thought it well to say at a very early stage that you fully realised that the sections of the constitution under discussion did not correspond with the complete Catholic ideal. You would like to have the approval of the Vatican in so far as it could be given.

"At any rate you wished to have the satisfaction of having the Card Sec and the Holy Father see the sections relating to the Church before putting them before parliament. Card Pacelli expressed his great joy that you had done so.

"You should understand that whatever he and the Holy Father might say they were in the fullest sympathy with you and the Govt in your difficulties, and thus appreciated how great a task it was to achieve anything like the Catholic ideal in the special circumstances."

Nonetheless, the Cardinal told Walsh that in light of his preliminary chat with the Pope he felt obliged to say that "the special posi-

tion given to the Catholic Church had no real value so long as there was not a formal recognition of the RC Church as the Church founded by Christ. Moreover . . . the realisation given to the other churches mollified any advantage which might have been derived from exclusive recognition. He thought we should use the word tolerate in regard to them."

When the Pope finally pronounced his view it came as a deep disappointment to Walshe. "*Ni approvo ni non disapprovo; taceremo.*" (I do not approve, neither do I not disapprove; we shall maintain silence."

Concluding his memo to de Valera Walshe said: "I want to express my great regret at not having been able to do what I was sent out to do." Nonetheless, he concluded: "There is very sincere respect and even gratitude for the extent to which you have been able to go in making our Constit. Catholic."

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The Irish government's military strategy before the outbreak of the second World War was to rely on the British army to come to the aid of this country in the event of a German invasion, according to one of the documents in the latest volume of archives on Irish foreign policy, published this week.

A letter marked "secret" from the secretary of the department of foreign affairs, Joseph Walsh, to the Irish ambassador to Italy, Michael MacWhite, in June, 1938, outlined Ireland's options.

"As you know we have the right to neutrality in any war in which England may be involved, but everybody here recognises that Germany would not hesitate for a moment to attack this country if by doing so she could hope to achieve her purpose of defeating England. So that the feeling of the country in the present war time atmosphere is somewhat pessimistic and we seem likely to be involved whether we wish it or not.

"We are, therefore, interested in providing our-

selves with a system of defence proportionate to our means but adequate for the purpose of warding off an invasion for a sufficiently period to allow the British to come to our aid. That is a humiliating outlook after our long struggle with the British, but the rise of racialism and ideologies involving religious persecution in Europe has made the people think of immediately threatening disasters and has somewhat blunted their feelings of antagonism against the British."

Walsh went on to ask MacWhite if the Italian military achievements might have any lessons for Ireland. "Here we may not speak of rearming, because in truth we are hardly armed at all, and at the present moment we would be unable to repel even a serious landing of troops from the air."

Other documents in the volume show the government was concerned about the potential embarrassment of Ireland's leading Nazi, archaeologist Dr Adolf Mahr, holding a top public service job.

● *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy, Volume V, 1937-1939*, will be published on Wednesday.