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Catholic Action and the Impact of Rome in Interwar Belgium

Catholic Action is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable developments in the Catholic Church during the interwar period and especially during the pontificate of Pius XI. In numerous countries new movements for the youth, men and women were created and the faithful masses were mobilised to defend Christian values in a modern, secular society. A stream of papal documents eventually defined the essence of this movement as *the participation of the laity in the apostolate of the hierarchy*, and in 1938 a central office for Catholic Action was formed in the Roman curia under the direction of Cardinal Giuseppe Pizzardo (1877–1970) to guide its many branches in the world¹. In Belgium too, Catholic Action saw a spectacular development. Comparing the resolutions of the provincial council of Malines in 1937 with those of 1920, one is struck by the dramatic differences: in the resolutions of 1937 there is a whole new set of directives on Catholic Action². Moreover, Belgium contributed in an original way to general developments in the Church, especially through the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne of Joseph Cardijn (1882–1967) and the formula of the so-called specialised Catholic Action³. This paper will deal briefly with three aspects of this history: the tensions raised by the development of Catholic Action

¹ AAM, VRP (Malines, Archives of the Archdiocese of Malines, Van Roey Papers), II A 22, Pizzardo to Van Roey, June 29, 1938, in which Pizzardo explains the mission and the modus operandi of the new office. On Pizzardo's central role in the development of Catholic Action throughout the world, see John POLLARD, Pius XI's Promotion of the Italian Model of Catholic Action in the World-Wide Church, in: *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 63 (2012) 758–784, esp. 760s., 769s.

² Acta et decreta concilii provincialis Mechliniensis quarti anno MCMXX Mechliniae habiti (Malines 1923); Acta et decreta concilii provincialis Mechliniensis quinti anno MCMXXXVII Mechliniae habiti (Malines 1938). For a comment on the council's decrees: Alfred MAMPAEY, *L'Action catholique d'après les décrets du Ve Concile provincial de Malines* (Brussels 1939).

³ We can also mention the role played by Christine de Hemptinne (1895–1984) in the campaign to promote Catholic Action for women on a global scale. See POLLARD, *Italian Model* 766–768.

in the Belgian context; the peculiar position of the large Catholic social organisations, especially the Christian Workers; and the role of Rome in accentuating or resolving these tensions⁴.

I. CHURCH AND STATE IN BELGIUM. THE NEW LANDSCAPE AFTER 1918

The Catholic Church in Belgium forms one ecclesiastical province, which in the interwar period consisted of the archdiocese of Malines and the dioceses of Tournai, Liège, Ghent, Namur and Bruges. Since Belgian independence in 1830 the six bishops had met every year in a conference under the direction of the archbishop and in the presence of the papal nuncio. That practice gave them the opportunity to find solutions to common problems. Each bishop, however, remained autonomous in his diocese. Diocesan peculiarities continued to exist and bishops might take separate positions. Some would use the new style of Catholic Action to reinforce their local authority at the expense of national arrangements. Traditionally, the archbishop of Malines played a primary role in Belgian society, but in ecclesiastical matters he only had authority in his own diocese and not outside it⁵. Désiré Mercier (1851–1926) led the Belgian Catholics from 1906 to 1926. He was succeeded as archbishop of Malines by his vicar Joseph Van Roey (1874–1961), who would stay at the head of the Belgian ecclesiastical province until his death in 1961. The two men were quite different personalities and that difference also impacted on the architecture of Catholic Action. A former university professor and promoter of neo-Thomist philosophy, the francophone Mercier was used to considering a situation from a more abstract, theoretical point of view, while Van Roey, born in a modest Flemish farming family, would adopt a more practical approach⁶.

⁴ We could use material from the Segreteria di Stato, Sezione per i Rapporti con gli Stati, Archivio Storico, Città del Vaticano (S.RR.SS.), fondo Archivio della Congregazione degli Affari Ecclesiastici Straordinari (AA.EE.SS.), Quarto Periodo 1922–1939, Belgio–Lussemburgo. See the regesta edited by KADOC Documentation and Research Centre for Religion, Culture and Society (Louvain) on www.vaticana.be, composed within the framework of a heritage project funded by the Flemish Government: “Flanders and the Vatican. The Secret Archives of Pope Pius XI”. We thank Dr. Johan Ickx for making available copies of the relevant documents.

⁵ Cardinal Mercier, archbishop of Malines, complained about this lack of authority to Cardinal-Secretary of State Pietro Gasparri (1852–1934): *La situation d'un archevêque, d'un Primat est anormale. L'Eglise a son chef, chaque diocèse a un chef, une Province ecclésiastique n'en a pas. Si au moins l'archevêque avait [qualité] pour donner des directives provisoires, sauf ratification de l'Autorité Romaine! Mais, de fait, il n'a aucune autorité* (S.RR.SS., AA.EE.SS., IV, Belgio, fasc. 2, pos. 89, 108–111, Mercier to Gasparri, July 15, 1922).

⁶ For a biography: Alois SIMON, *Le cardinal Mercier* (Brussels 1960); Robrecht BOUDENS, *Kardinaal Mercier en de Vlaamse beweging* (Louvain 1975); *Le cardinal Mercier*

Catholicism was by far the most dominant religion in Belgium, although the Church was confronted with important regional differences. In the early industrialised provinces of Liege and Hainaut, heartlands of coal and steel, socialism had seen a rapid breakthrough, and religious practice had already diminished in the 19th century. The Flemish provinces in the north kept their rather rural character until the First World War – with the exception of the industrial city of Ghent and the port of Antwerp. Here, religion remained strongly interwoven with public life. These economic differences coincided with a cultural divide, which opposed the Dutch speaking north to the francophone south, bringing about a Flemish movement aiming at the emancipation of the Flemish people in a dominantly francophone Belgian state. That regional dualism had its impact on politics and on religion. The Catholic party had its stronghold in Flanders and the new organisations of Catholic Action, founded in the twenties, would be split from the very beginning along linguistic lines in separate associations for the Flemish and for the francophones.

Belgium had had a liberal and parliamentary system since 1830. Constitutional liberties encouraged religious life from that time on. Although the policy of the liberal government to strengthen civil authority in the middle of the 19th century created strong tensions, it did not bring about a rupture between Church and State. On the contrary, the Catholic party rose to power in 1884. It managed to govern successfully, adapted to the important transformations in society, and was still in control at the outbreak of the First World War. Its legislation encouraged Catholic schools and social welfare institutions. On the eve of the war, lay activism had created an impressive array of the most varied associations. The intertwining of religious, social and political activities was broadly accepted in Catholic milieus, but contested as a “clerical regime” by its Socialist and Liberal opponents⁷.

After the war things were different. Four years of national union against German occupation had altered the political landscape. The Catholic party lost its monopoly and had to share power with Liberals and Socialists in a cabinet of national union. Subsequently, general suffrage was introduced and the Catholic party lost its overall majority in the elections of November 1919. From then on coalition governments were the rule. The weakening of the Catholic party, however, was partially compensated for by the political constellation.

(1851–1926). *Un prélat d'avant-garde*. Publications du Professeur Roger AUBERT rassemblées à l'occasion de ses 80 ans, ed. by Jean-Pierre HENDRICKX–Jean PIROTTE–Luc COURTOIS (Louvain-la-Neuve 1994); Joseph KEMPENEERS, *Le cardinal Van Roey et son temps 1874–1961*. Trente-cinq années d'épiscopat (Gembloux 1971).

⁷ Emiel LAMBERTS, *Van Kerk naar zuil*. De ontwikkeling van het katholiek organisatieleven in België in de 19e eeuw, in: *Tussen bescherming en verovering*. Sociologen en historici over zuilvorming, ed. by Jaak BILLIET (Louvain 1988) 83–133.

Liberals and Socialists, who before 1914 had formed an anticlerical cartel to fight the school legislation of the Catholic government, found themselves in conflict after the war. Social and economic problems dominated the twenties and drove a wedge in the old anticlerical alliance. This happened to the benefit of the Catholics, who managed to remain in ruling coalitions in the interwar period without interruption, mostly with the Liberals, and for a time with the Socialists⁸.

For the Belgian bishops and especially for Cardinal Mercier, who had become a national hero during the war due to his fierce and patriotic resistance against the German occupation, this was a bitter pill to swallow. The bishops were pessimistic when confronted with the more pluralist orientation of Belgian society, let alone the various aspects of modern life that characterised the post war years and affected Christian morality. Not all post war developments were negative. Because of the pivotal position of the Catholic party, the pre-war school legislation was left untouched⁹. Moreover a new law assigning corporate rights to associations was much in favour of the Catholic Church since the law granted property rights to religious foundations and congregations that the French revolution had abolished. However, there was uncertainty over the future and over what needed to be done to continue to defend the faith.

2. TWO MODELS OF CATHOLIC ACTION

The bishops were not only confronted with the loss of hegemonic power of the Catholic party, but also with the division within its ranks. The conflict between conservatives and more socially oriented so-called Christian Democrats, which had started at the end of the 19th century, now reached a high point. Triggered by the spectacular success of socialism and pushed forward by a new generation of self-confident Christian unionists, pre-war Christian Democracy fundamentally changed into an independent labour movement. In July 1921 the National League of Christian Workers (*Ligue Nationale des Travailleurs Chrétiens*, henceforth: Christian Workers) was created. It was a complex body of unions, health insurance funds, co-operative enterprises, women's and youth associations, which not only took a clear workers' standpoint, but also claimed an autonomous place in politics. Its structure was actually copied from the Socialist party model¹⁰. Under pressure from these novel forces the Catholic party

⁸ Emmanuel GERARD, *La Démocratie rêvée, bridée et bafouée 1918–1939* (= *Nouvelle histoire de Belgique*, Brussels 2010) 13–72.

⁹ Jeffrey TYSSENS, *Levensbeschouwelijk links en de schoolkwestie 1918–1940* (Brussels 1993) 48–85.

¹⁰ *Histoire du mouvement ouvrier chrétien en Belgique*, ed. by Emmanuel GERARD–Paul WYNANTS (Louvain 1994) 146–173.

was reorganised into a federation of four groups: the Christian Workers, the Farmers, the Middle Classes, and the associations for the Bourgeoisie stemming from the old pre-war party. In September 1921 these four groups formed the so-called Belgian Catholic Union (Union Catholique Belge). That model became known – in Flemish as well as in French – as the “standsorganisatie”, most easily translated as “organisation based on social classes”. The creation of the Catholic Union – dividing rather than uniting as it turned out – did not reconcile the opposing interests, and the connection between Christian Democrats, mainly Flemish, and conservatives, mainly francophone, particularly disturbed the interwar period¹¹. Moreover, in the Flemish provinces the Catholic party was challenged by an emergent Flemish nationalism, strongly supported by the lower clergy and the younger generations. A new nationalist party competed for the Catholic votes and the old Catholic Flemish Student Movement was taken over by young radicals, defying episcopal authority¹².

Precisely in those chaotic post war years the bishops took some initiatives to preserve religious and moral values and to mobilise Catholics for that purpose. Seen from their perspective, these initiatives must unite and not divide. Thus, one saw the creation of a youth association (the Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Belge, ACJB) and a women’s association (the Fédération des Femmes Catholiques). In these new associations, which received strong support from Cardinal Mercier, no distinction was made between social classes, though the social origins of the founders did give them a rather bourgeois character. The ambition of these associations was to gather all young people and all women into new religious groupings, completely separate from the existing social and semi-political associations that had characterised Catholic activity until that time¹³.

In only a short time the founders of the ACJB saw their ambitions and their idea of Catholic Action collide with the orientation of the socio-political organisations of the Christian Workers and Farmers. The Christian Workers, aiming at emancipating the working class in every aspect of life, supported the development of its own youth movement: the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne

¹¹ Martin CONWAY, Belgium, in: *Political Catholicism in Europe 1918–1965*, ed. by Tom BUCHANAN–Martin CONWAY (Oxford 1996) 187–218; Emmanuel GERARD, Religion, Class and Language. The Catholic Party in Belgium, in: *Political Catholicism in Europe 1918–45*, vol. I, ed. by Wolfram KAISER–Helmut WOHNOUT (London 2004) 94–115. A more detailed account is available in ID., *De katholieke partij in crisis. Partijpolitiek leven in België (1918–1940)* (Louvain 1985) 57–170.

¹² Louis Vos, *Bloei en ondergang van het AKVS. Geschiedenis van de Katholieke Vlaamse studentenbeweging 1914–1935* (Louvain 1982).

¹³ Roger AUBERT, Organisation et caractère des mouvements de jeunesse catholiques en Belgique, in: *La ‘Gioventù Cattolica’ dopo l’unità, 1868–1968*, ed. by Luccano OSBAT–Francesco PIVA (Rome 1972) 271–323.

(JOC), created by abbé Joseph Cardijn¹⁴. Although its mission was mainly educational, the JOC was embedded in the larger body of the Christian Workers with its trade unions and health-care funds, and its striking political activity¹⁵. In 1925 one of the ACJB leaders warned Mercier of the all-encompassing and dangerous orientation of the Christian Workers: *We are far from the old conception of individual unions, provisions for the sick, co-operative enterprises, and other social associations. This is about setting up an independent and self-sufficient class organisation*¹⁶. Indeed, the Christian Workers were building a comprehensive and exclusive organisation for the working class. The Farmers' League did the same for the peasantry. If the latter was more prudent in its public declarations, it was as determined as the Christian Workers in its ambitions to hold a monopoly on the countryside¹⁷.

For the bishops in particular, there were two sensitive points in the ongoing controversy. The organisation of an exclusive workers' organisation was too reminiscent of the socialist conception of society. The idea of class, and, still more, that of class struggle, frightened the leadership of the ACJB. Their fear was strengthened by the cabinet crisis of 1925, the formation of the very first Catholic-Socialist coalition led by the Christian Democrat Prosper Poullet (1868–1937), and the subsequent split of the Catholic party, as the conservative wing decided to join the Liberal opposition¹⁸. For that reason Cardinal Mercier held off on giving approval to the JOC. *This political separatism of the Christian Democrats*, he told his colleagues in the November 1925 bishops' con-

¹⁴ There exists an abundant literature on Cardijn and on the JOC. See especially: Marc A. WALCKIERS, *Sources inédites relatives aux débuts de la JOC* (Louvain–Paris 1970); Cardijn. Een mens, een beweging. Un homme, un mouvement. Handelingen van het colloquium. Actes du colloque Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve 18–19/11/1982 (Louvain 1983); Lucie BRAGARD et al., *La Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne Wallonie–Bruxelles 1912–1957* (Brussels 1990); Leen ALAERTS, *Door eigen werk sterk. Geschiedenis van de kajotters en kajotsters in Vlaanderen 1924–1967* (Louvain 2004). See also: Gerd-Rainer HORN, *Western European Liberation Theology. The first wave (1924–1959)* (Oxford 2008) 5–53.

¹⁵ The francophone Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne had its Flemish counterpart Katholieke Arbeidersjeugd (KAJ). We will only use the acronym JOC.

¹⁶ *Nous sommes loin de l'ancienne conception qui se bornait à l'organisation des syndicats, mutuelles, coopératives et autres oeuvres sociales; il s'agit de mettre sur pied un Etat ouvrier autonome et se suffisant à lui-même* (Brohée to Mercier, September 4, 1922; ed. WALCKIERS, *Sources inédites* 93). Abel Brohée (1880–1947), the president of the Priest Seminary Leo XIII in Louvain, was the actual founder of the ACJB and a confidant of Cardinal Mercier.

¹⁷ Leen VAN MOLLE, *Ieder voor allen. De Belgische Boerenbond 1890–1990* (Louvain 1990) 215–219.

¹⁸ S.RR.SS., AA.EE.SS., IV, *Belgio: Micara to Gasparri*, August 1, 1925 (the bishops are worried about the growing influence of the Socialists). The cabinet fell in May 1926, amidst a deep financial and monetary crisis, only eleven months after its formation.

ference, *they want to prepare it in the JOC. Yes, they say that this organisation is connected with the ACJB, but they also say it is connected with the Christian Workers and it is obviously in that direction that the evolution will be strengthened*¹⁹. The second sensitive point concerned the priests. Hundreds of them were involved in the Christian Workers and in the Farmers' League. Instead of being symbols of unity, the lower ranks of the Catholic clergy had become involved in the discord. The parish as a place of spiritual community was disrupted by the social and, even more frighteningly, the political activity of some priests.

3. TOWARDS A MODUS VIVENDI

Painful negotiations started behind closed doors. Apparently, the notion of Catholic Action caused a lot of controversy. What exactly was Catholic Action? Should it be confined to spiritual concerns as the teachings of the new pope, Pius XI, suggested? Could the existing Catholic social organisations, engaged in economic activities and in party politics, but also caring for the religious and moral education of their members, be labelled Catholic Action? And what about the autonomy of the existing lay organisations? Under the aegis of Monsignor Van Roey, who succeeded Mercier as archbishop of Malines in March 1926, a *modus vivendi* was gradually elaborated. The first step was set at the very first bishops' conference under his direction, in July 1926. The bishops approved the JOC on the condition that *it would be a section of the ACJB and would not disturb any existing initiative*²⁰. This was a pragmatic decision which, nevertheless, would influence both the ACJB and the JOC. The ACJB was transformed into a federation of youth associations with membership determined by social class. Its activity was reduced to coordination. The JOC, in its turn, was officially recognised as Catholic Action, and that diminished its autonomy, since it now had to accept directions from the bishops. The successful model of the JOC was copied by the farmers' and middle class youth associations, and the organisation of high school students, which all created their own groups as part of the ACJB. The new ACJB officially got under way in August 1927. This model was subsequently duplicated on the Flemish side. Thus, a Flemish and a francophone youth federation, each encompassing associations for different

¹⁹ *Ce séparatisme politique de la Démocratie Chrétienne, on veut le préparer dans la JOC. On dit bien que celle-ci se relie à l'ACJB, mais on dit aussi qu'elle se relie à la Ligue des Travailleurs Chrétiens et c'est dans ce sens, évidemment, que ce courant s'accentuera* (quoted in BRAGARD, *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne* 100).

²⁰ *Cette approbation est donnée à la JOC en tant que section affiliée à l'ACJB et ne désorganisant aucune oeuvre existante* (AAM: Procès verbal de la réunion de NN. SS. les Evêques de Belgique, tenue au palais archiépiscopal de Malines, les 26–27 juillet 1926).

social classes, came into being. This complex structure was later put into place for the girls²¹. It all looked all right on paper, but reality was a different matter.

The 1926–1927 settlement was based on a compromise. The fact that the JOC remained affiliated to the Christian Workers raised ongoing criticism. New conflicts quickly arose. By 1930 Christian Democracy had made important progress in the Walloon provinces. The conservative leaders of the Catholic party in that part of the country were upset by the social initiatives, which had previously been under their paternalistic control but were now directed by the Christian Workers. In their opinion the Christian Workers were no better than the Socialists. As one of their opinion makers declared: *To combat Socialism, they have ultimately created another class party copying in a servile way the organisation, the methods and the spirit of the Socialists*²². At the prospect of losing political influence, the conservatives opposed the Christian Workers' claim to a monopoly on social action as long as they continued to be a political organism and threatened to initiate competing programmes among the working class. That threat ignited a deep conflict and a serious crisis among Catholics, which began in the diocese of Tournai. This conflict would eventually focus on the position of the JOC, which, in the meantime, had become a successful mass organisation. The local bishop took a firm stand. Monsignor Gaston Rasneur (1874–1939) had been, in 1924, the first Belgian bishop to be appointed by Pius XI. Responsible for the most industrialised province of the country, he was permanently confronted with the fight between Christian Democrats and conservatives. More than his colleagues, he played the card of new style Catholic Action and adopted a cautious position toward the social organisations and their political ambitions. He pointed to the JOC: *One can see the ambiguity. They say the JOC has been founded by the Christian Workers, while in fact it has*

²¹ AUBERT, *Mouvements de jeunesse catholiques* 271–323; Louis Vos, *Het dubbelspoor van de Katholieke Actie tijdens het interbellum*, in: *Vijftig jaar Chiroleven 1934–1984. Aspecten uit verleden en heden van een jeugdbeweging*, ed. by Maurits DE VROEDE–Ann HERMANS (Louvain 1985) 33–39; Lieve GEVERS, *Apogée et fin d'une époque. L'archevêché sous le Cardinal Van Roey (1926–1961)*, in: *L'archidiocèse de Malines-Bruxelles. 450 ans d'histoire II: 1802–2009* (Antwerp 2009) 173–253. A study of Belgian Catholic Action from a gender perspective: Tine VAN OSSELAER, *The Pious Sex. Catholic Constructions of Masculinity and Femininity in Belgium, c. 1800–1940* (Louvain 2013) 172–221.

²² *A force de vouloir combattre le parti socialiste, il a fini par créer un parti de classe en face d'un autre parti de classe, copiant servilement son organisation, ses méthodes et son esprit*, according to Paul Crokaert (1875–1955), senator and future cabinet minister (Emmanuel GERARD, *Tussen apostolaat en emancipatie. De christelijke arbeidersbeweging en de strijd om de sociale werken 1925–1933*, in: *Voor Kerk en werk. Opstellen over de geschiedenis van de christelijke arbeidersbeweging 1886–1986*, ed. by Emmanuel GERARD–Jozef MAMPUYS [Louvain 1986] 225).

been founded by the clergy and belongs to the Church²³. In his opinion the JOC, as part of Catholic Action, could no longer be part of the Christian Workers²⁴.

In their July 1931 conference the bishops indeed decided that the JOC could no longer belong to the Christian Workers' League. As might be expected, that decision caused unrest, new negotiations and sophisticated solutions. Finally, in October, the bishops officially declared the JOC an organisation of Catholic Action under the exclusive direction of the hierarchy, but accepted the creation of 'committees of coordination' between the JOC and the Christian Workers to discuss matters of common interest²⁵. The bishops would have preferred that the Christian Workers and the Farmers limit their political activity, but they realised that compelling practical arguments were an obstacle to a principled stand in this matter. After all, these organisations – the Farmers' League in the countryside and the Christian Workers in more urban areas – were successful in containing socialism and further secularisation²⁶. All in all, the controversy about the demarcation between Catholic Action, and the social and political activity of the Catholics proved to be academic and even artificial. That was clearly shown in the November 1932 elections, when the Liberals and Socialists joined forces to combat the school legislation and the Catholics feared the emergence of an anticlerical government. The bishops published a collective pastoral letter urging the faithful to vote for the Catholic Party, which was dubbed *the bulwark of the rights of the church*²⁷. In such a situation principles bend. In reality no radical change would occur in the relationship between the JOC and the Christian Workers.

The real test came in May 1936, when the authoritarian Rex movement led by Léon Degrelle (1906–1994), who appealed to the young generation ed-

²³ *On voit l'équivoque. On affirme que la JOC a été fondée par les Travailleurs chrétiens et leur appartient, tandis qu'en fait, elle a été fondée surtout par le clergé et appartient à l'Eglise* (Rasneur to Cardijn, March 9, 1931; ed. Emmanuel GERARD, *Eglise et mouvement ouvrier chrétien en Belgique. Sources inédites relatives à la direction générale des oeuvres sociales (1916–1936)* [Louvain–Brussels 1990] 381).

²⁴ GERARD, *Tussen apostolaat en emancipatie* 203–260.

²⁵ *Pour maintenir l'unité des organisations sociales, il faudrait détacher celles-ci de la politique. A cet effet l'assemblée décide ... d'interdire l'affiliation en bloc à la Ligue des Travailleurs Chrétiens de la JOC et la JOCF lesquelles doivent rester des organisations autonomes tout en s'entendant sur des questions d'intérêt matériel avec la Ligue* (AAM: Réunion des Evêques à Malines, 27 et 28 juillet 1931). The nuncio assisted at the July 1931 bishops' conference. The committees of coordination were suggested by Cardijn and accepted in the October 1931 conference (AAM: Réunion extraordinaire des Evêques à Malines, 21 Octobre 1931). The instructions were communicated to the Christian Workers on November 28, 1931.

²⁶ GERARD, *Eglise et mouvement ouvrier chrétien* 180–208, 310–314, 389–397.

²⁷ Karel VAN ISACKER, *Herderlijke brieven over politiek 1830/1966* (Antwerp 1969) 120–123.

uated with the pure ideal of Catholic Action, won 21 seats in Parliament and threatened to alter Church–State relations²⁸. Degrelle was the former director of the Catholic Action publishing house Rex. Inspired by foreign experiments in Italy and Germany, he found political Catholicism out of date, a mere heritage of the agonizing liberal parliamentary regime. A concordat with the Vatican could settle the long-standing disputes about education, establish the statute of Catholic Action and make redundant the Catholic party and its affiliated organisations²⁹. The bishops now took a firm stand and publicly embraced the status quo. In their 1936 Christmas letter to the faithful they pointed to the danger of communism but rejected a right-wing dictatorship as the worst remedy. They considered the Christian Workers and the Farmers' League as the most efficient instruments in the fight against communism and defended the right of the Catholics to form a strong political formation in order to support Catholic influence in public life³⁰. In April 1937, when Degrelle challenged Prime Minister Paul Van Zeeland (1893–1973) to a symbolic electoral duel, Cardinal Van Roey condemned Rexism explicitly as *a danger for the country and the Church*³¹. Seen in hindsight, the Christian Workers and the Farmers' League had to pay a price for this episcopal support, although it was not too high. They diminished their autonomous party political activity and accepted the creation, in 1937, of the Bloc Catholique Belge, the new and more integrated political structure to supplant the unsuccessful Union Catholique. In so doing, they abandoned their original ideal of an all-encompassing framework for workers and farmers, at least on paper, but avoided the emergence of competing organisations of Catholic Action.

4. ROMAN IMPACT

The immense popularity of Pius XI and the mystique surrounding the symbol of *Christus Rex* marked the Belgian Church in the interwar period, and clearly showed the worldwide impact of the papacy. Did the Vatican also affect the architecture of Catholic Action in Belgium? Yes, it surely did, but in a dif-

²⁸ Emmanuel GERARD, Hoe de vorming van een Vlaams en rechts front mislukte. De geschiedenis van de Concentratie in 1936, in: Wetenschappelijke Tijdingen. Tijdschrift over de geschiedenis van de Vlaamse beweging 75 (2016) 367s.

²⁹ S.RR.SS., AA.EE.SS., IV, Belgio, fasc. 64, pos. 197, 26–35; fasc. 64, pos. 197, 62–74: Micara to Pacelli, August 15, 1936 (according to Van Roey, the basic principles of Rex are similar to those of Nazism); Micara to Pacelli, November 18, 1936 (annexed: The article *Rex veut la paix religieuse. Le concordat nécessaire*, published in the Rexist newspaper *Le Pays réel*, November 3, 1936).

³⁰ VAN ISACKER, Herderlijke brieven 126–135. S.RR.SS., AA.EE.SS., IV, Belgio, fasc. 17, pos. 161, 3–9: Micara to Pizzardo, December 29, 1936 (annexed: the pastoral letter).

³¹ VAN ISACKER, Herderlijke brieven 135–137.

fuse way. The Belgian Catholics could not ignore the ongoing stream of statements, public letters and other Roman documents on the issue. In the past, however, they had always given a local interpretation to curial declarations. Belgian Catholics were keen to receive their blessings from Rome, but they had a well-developed set of Catholic associations, directed by self-conscious lay people, and established in the framework of a liberal democratic regime. Many did not feel the need to import an Italian model. On the other hand, different reasons could motivate people to embrace the new style of Catholic Action promoted by Rome. For the bishops it certainly was a way of reinstating their authority in the myriad of associations and institutions, especially imposing ecclesiastical control over the youth, which they considered as their privileged constituency. For the critics of democracy it was a way of fighting the Christian Democrats. All in all, the development of Catholic Action was a subtle game of power, played out within the Belgian Catholic community, and between Malines and Rome. The Vatican authorities, needless to say, were well informed of the Belgian situation, not only through the reports of the nuncio, Monsignor Clemente Micara (1879–1965) for most of this period (1923–1946), but also through direct contact with the bishops and with quite a number of other persons³².

At first the influence of Rome could be felt, not as the result of a direct intervention, but in a more subtle way. The ACJB leadership liked to refer to Italy as an example. Their leaders felt encouraged by the orientation the new pope Pius XI gave to the Catholic associations, when he separated them from politics in fascist Italy³³. Some, like abbé Louis Picard (1886–1955), did not hide their sympathy for Mussolini. Their concern about the position of the JOC was inspired by a strong distrust of democracy, and their suspicion that Christian Democracy in Belgium was nothing more than a mild copy of socialism. They were upset by the emergence after the April 1925 elections of a 'democratic' government coalition, supported by Socialists and Christian Democrats. According to Picard, who had been a student of the Gregoriana in Rome before the war, the Christian Workers betrayed the teachings of the Church as established in the encyclical *Graves de Communi*. Social action as part of Catholic Action was a duty of all Catholics; for that reason it could not be combined with political activity, which created exclusivity and conflict³⁴.

³² Most of the periodical reports of the nuncio on the general situation in S.RR.SS., AA.EE.SS., IV, Belgio, pos. 161. Material on the Catholic party in pos. 169, Catholic Action in pos. 188, 193 and 197.

³³ On the circumstances: HORN, *Western European Liberation Theology* 38–45. POLLARD, *Italian Model* 760–762.

³⁴ GERARD, *Katholieke partij in crisis* 245–267.

The Christian Workers and the Farmers' League felt that new winds blew in the Vatican. They were afraid that Rome might intervene directly to impose the Italian model of Catholic Action. In 1927, in particular, they expressed their concern about a possible doctrinal statement by the Congregation of the Council that would mark a clear demarcation line between Catholic Action, social action and politics. This fear was related to a conflict in Northern France that opposed trade unions and employers, and that had been introduced before the Roman curia, which was considering a resolution on the issue. The Belgian organisations anticipated and defended their position before the nuncio: the combination of religious education and social activity was in accordance with the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and the political activity was justified in the Belgian context. They contacted their Roman friends in order to learn about the position of the pope and his entourage. Visitors to the Vatican learned, indeed, about Monsignor Giuseppe Pizzardo's concerns about the orientation of the Christian Workers and more especially about the Dominican father Georges Rutten (1875–1952), a senator and the most visible priest of the Christian labour movement in Belgium³⁵. The Vatican archives reveal that one of Rutten's Belgian opponents had denounced him in Rome as a socialist. In a somewhat distorted account of the Belgian situation we read: *The Belgian Christian Democrats are no better than the Italian popolari. Mussolini knew the evil he had to cope with*³⁶. Eventually nothing happened in 1927, but the Vatican continued to feel apprehension. On the occasion of the pilgrimage of the Christian Workers to Rome in May 1931, their leader, cabinet minister Henri Heyman (1879–1958), was received in an audience with the pope. We are not informed about the outcome, but the nuncio had prepared three questions for the pontiff: why does Belgium need a Christian labour organisation? Why an autonomous organisation? Why an organisation dealing directly with politics³⁷? Apparently, the Vatican, always attentive to 'true principles', had some concerns about the Christian Workers, but it did not consider intervention. Regarding the Farm-

³⁵ Several documents in KADOC (Louvain), Archives of the Farmers' League, 957, especially: Luytgaerens, *Bezoeken gedurende mijn verblijf te Rome van 27 April tot 1 Mei 1927* (memorandum); Luytgaerens, *Zeer vertrouwelijk. 9 mei 1927. Het Vaticaan en de christelijke werkmansorganisatie in België* (memorandum). See also GERARD, *Eglise et mouvement ouvrier chrétien* 291–296, 343–346.

³⁶ The source was the daughter of Charles Woeste (1835–1922), the famous conservative leader and long-time president of the Fédération des Associations et des Cercles catholiques, framework of the Catholic party before the war: *Mon père disait: où on est catholique où on ne l'est pas. Les démocrates chrétiens belges ne sont que le parti populaire italien. Mussolini savait à quel mal il s'attaquait* (June 19, 1926. S.RR.SS., AA.EE.SS., IV, Belgio, fasc. 32, pos. 176, 18s.).

³⁷ GERARD, *Tussen apostolaat en emancipatie* 245.

ers' League, Rome on many occasions expressed its admiration for this successful organisation until the financial debacle of December 1934³⁸.

A distinct position was taken by Joseph Cardijn and the JOC. Whereas the leadership of the Christian Workers tried to keep Rome out of the discussion, Cardijn was keen to have the benediction of the pope. Since his first audience in February 1925 he felt Rome's approval. He was again received by Pius XI in September 1929 on the occasion of the pilgrimage of the JOC and in June 1931 to prepare another pilgrimage, not to mention the several audiences that would follow. His feedback to Cardinal Van Roey, the archbishop of Malines, was most encouraging. In 1928, Cardijn wrote in the JOC's weekly: *The Pope admires and loves the JOC*³⁹. And indeed, on the occasion of the jubilee congress of the JOC in Brussels in August 1935, Pius XI, through Cardinal-Secretary of State Pacelli, dubbed the JOC *an achieved form of Catholic Action. The JOC, indeed, realises in His opinion an achieved form of Catholic Action, which is one of the key ideas of His pontificate*⁴⁰. Rome's stand in this matter may be seen as its most influential intervention, since it was not self-evident that a class-based organisation would gain this generous recognition.

Cardijn, however, paid his price. He made important efforts to compromise and to minimise the perhaps controversial aspects of his movement. Begun as a unionist youth association, the *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne* evolved into an almost spiritual congregation, aiming at the rechristianisation of the workplace and dropping any intervention in the hard core matters of industrial relations⁴¹. The JOC drifted away from its original environment after the

³⁸ KADOC (Louvain), Archives of the Farmers' League, 972: Luytgaerens to Van Roey, April 30, 1927; (*Z. H. heeft dus wezenlijk de katholieke actie, vermengd met de economische actie, goedgekeurd*); Luytgaerens, *Bezoek bij Monseigneur Van Roey op 13 mei 1927* (memorandum). Several documents (comments on the annual reports of the Farmers' League) in S.RR.SS., AA.EE.SS., Belgio, pos 169. Monsignor Jan Eduard Luytgaerens (1863–1946), general secretary of the Farmers' League from 1903 until 1936, was always careful not to highlight the political dimension of his organisation. See VAN MOLLE, *Belgische Boerenbond* 198f.

³⁹ *La Jeunesse Ouvrière. Hebdomadaire illustré*, IX, 45, November 10, 1928. In 1929, after a visit to Rome in order to prepare the pilgrimage: *Je suis vraiment confus de la sympathie et de l'admiration que j'ai rencontrée à Rome pour la JOC* (July 31, 1929; AAM, VRP, VI 5).

⁴⁰ *La JOC en effet, réalise, à ses yeux, un type achevé de cette Action Catholique qui est une des pensées maîtresses de son Pontificat* (AAM, VRP, VI 5; Pacelli to Cardijn, January 11, 1935). See also the autographed letter of Pius XI to Cardinal Van Roey, August 20, 1935, *par laquelle Sa Sainteté a bien voulu rehausser le prochain Congrès Jubilaire de la JOC et donner à cette chère Jeunesse de Belgique une nouvelle marque de Son vif intérêt et de Sa tendre affection* (AAM, VRP, VI 5; Pacelli to Van Roey, August 19, 1935).

⁴¹ Louis Vos, *Het maatschappijbeeld van Cardijn tussen de twee wereldoorlogen*, in: Cardijn. Een mens, een beweging. Un homme, un mouvement. Handelingen van het

1931 bishop's decision to separate it from the Christian Workers. There is no evidence that Rome imposed that decision. The July 1931 intervention of the Belgian bishops was clearly inspired by the conflict in the diocese of Tournai and the firm stand taken by Bishop Rasneur. Yet, the crisis between the Vatican and the fascist dictatorship in the spring of 1931 may be seen as a fertile background. Returning from his audience with the pope in June 1931, only a few weeks after the fascist repression of the Catholic youth organisations in Italy, Cardijn reported: *I was very moved when I saw how much the Pope loves the JOC and the JOCF. The fascist persecution is a clear proof of the importance the adversaries of the Church attach to the organisation of the youth*⁴².

Cardijn was not only encouraged. He was also to receive direct instructions from Rome to keep his movement on the right track. We see this from the correspondence between the nuncio and Monsignor Pizzardo in 1932. Both dignitaries expressed their admiration but also their concern about the extraordinary drive of Joseph Cardijn. Pizzardo asked the nuncio *to show the right path to the excellent priest without losing Cardijn's enthusiasm. Nihil sine episcopo* was Pizzardo's advice, nothing without the bishop⁴³. Indeed, Cardijn was inclined to arrange affairs without referring to the diocesan authority. His movement was strongly centralised on a national level, while Catholic Action – according to the official declarations – had to be embedded in the diocese under the direction of the bishop. This centralisation would indeed raise a serious conflict in the diocese of Bruges, where the new bishop, Monsignor Henri Lamiroy (1883–1952), insisted on his prerogatives. *First Bruges, then Brussels*, was the bishop's motto. Bruges was the only diocese to make an attempt to implement scrupulously the Italian model, including the argument that it would better protect Catholic Action in the case of a dictatorship⁴⁴. Pizzardo, however, did not encourage the Bruges formula, because it risked the destruction of the JOC⁴⁵. The dynamic and charismatic Cardijn, it should not come as a

colloquium. Actes du colloque Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve 18–19/11/1982 (Louvain 1983) 149–181.

⁴² *J'ai été très ému en voyant combien le Pape aime la JOC et la JOCF. La persécution fasciste est une preuve combien éclatante de l'importance que les adversaires de l'Eglise attachent à l'organisation de la jeunesse* (AAM, VRP, VI 5: Cardijn to Van Roey, June 23, 1931).

⁴³ S.RR.SS., AA.EE.SS., IV, Belgio, fasc. 59, pos 193, 18–23, 42–45: Pizzardo to Micara, 6 May 1932 (Appunto confidenziale pel Nunzio Aplíco affinché ne possa trarre argomenti per indirizzare opportunamente l'ottima Can. Cardijn senza che perda il suo santo entusiasmo); Pizzardo to Micara, June 28, 1932. See also POLLARD, Italian Model 776s.

⁴⁴ Emmanuel GERARD, Sociale werken en Katholieke Actie (1914–1952), in: Het bisdom Brugge (1559–1984). Bisschoppen, priesters, gelovigen, ed. by Michel CLOET (Brugge 1984) 515–526.

⁴⁵ S.RR.SS., AA.EE.SS., IV, Belgio, fasc. 64, pos. 197, 25.

surprise, had his critics in Rome as well as in Belgium. The spectacular success of his movement – also on an international level – and the central and almost providential role Cardijn himself played in this evolution, caused envy. Even the nuncio in Belgium expressed some criticism of Cardijn, who was too keen to put himself in the spotlight, and he was not the only one to think in that way⁴⁶. Whatever the nuncio's personal opinion on Cardijn may have been, Pius XII would declare in 1946 that Micara had been *the friend and protector of the JOC*⁴⁷.

Amidst a European crisis of liberal democracy and the rise of dictatorship, Belgium kept its constitutional regime, its liberties and its parliamentary institutions unscathed throughout the interwar period, although political instability nurtured anti-parliamentary ideas and movements. It seems that the nuncio had come to accept the Belgian regime – the 'hypothesis' as they used to say in the nineteenth century – as most satisfactory, although not in line with official theory. After all, the rights of the Church were guaranteed in the constitution. He took a firm stand against Léon Degrelle, who had suggested that a concordat might protect the Church in Belgium better than a Catholic party. The idea was given some attention by Secretary of State Pacelli and his staff⁴⁸, but like most of the local bishops, Rome adopted a pragmatic approach to social and Catholic action in Belgium and did not want to intervene radically in the complex – and all in all successful – religious, social and political achievements of the Belgian Catholics. In spite of all the controversy, the various organisations of Catholic Action, as well as the Farmers' League and the Christian Workers, proved to be strong instruments of the Catholic presence in Belgian society.

⁴⁶ See the nuncio's critical assessment in February–March 1936 of Cardijn's plan to promote the JOC in South America (S.RR.SS., AA.EE.SS., Belgio, fasc. 57, pos. 193, 128–145).

⁴⁷ *Notre ancien nonce Apostolique à Bruxelles, qui fut aussi votre protecteur et ami vénéré* (AAM, VRP VI 5: Pius XII to Cardijn, April 26, 1946).

⁴⁸ S.RR.SS., AA.EE.SS., IV, Belgio, fasc. 75, pos. 206, 50; fasc. 65, pos. 197, 3s.; fasc. 76, pos. 206, 55; fasc. 77, pos. 206, 15: Pizzardo to Micara, November 21, 1936 (Degrelle has been received incognito); memorandum Barbetta on the idea of a concordat, December 9, 1936; Pacelli to Micara, 3 April 1937 (optimistic about the chances for Rex); Pizzardo to Micara, April 9, 1937 (Micara is advised not to intervene in party politics).