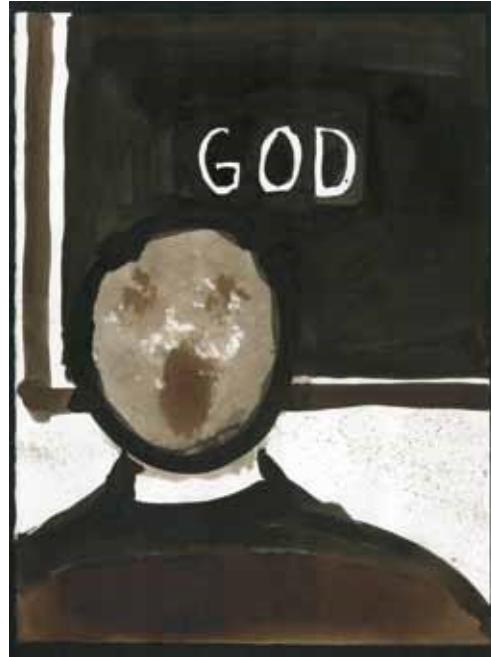


Society



The Church Loses its Stranglehold **Annus Horribilis for the Catholic Church in** **Belgium**

On the 24th of June 2010 the relationship between the Church and state in Belgium changed once and for all. Following an order from an examining magistrate in Brussels, the Public Prosecutor's Office broke open the grave of Cardinal Désiré-Joseph Mercier (1851-1926) in the St Rombout's Cathedral in Mechelen, looking for hidden files on child abuse. Nothing was found. The police also raided the home of the retired archbishop, Danneels, in the same town. In Leuven they visited the committee that was tasked by the Catholic Church with looking into child abuse in its ranks. Almost the entire archives of the archbishopric, all the computers and the committee papers, too, were seized. The operation was named Chalice. The press was involved and the images were relayed around the world.

The reason for the raid was the bombshell that exploded on the 23rd of April of that same year when the

Koenraad Tinel,
Flandria Catholica, 2009,
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Bishop of Bruges, Roger Vangheluwe, confessed to sexually abusing his underage nephew for years more than two decades earlier. The bishop resigned and went into hiding. The brand new Archbishop Léonard subsequently called upon all victims of sexual abuse within the Church to identify themselves to the committee which the Church itself had established in 2000 to hear and help victims. Up to 2009, 34 cases were handled. In the ensuing weeks a total of 475 complaints came in, spanning a period of around fifty years. In September the chairman of the committee, the well-known child psychiatrist Peter Adriaenssens, brought out the final report of the committee, whose members had resigned following the seizure of its papers.

The facts date mainly from the years 1950 to 1980 and two thirds of the victims are boys. The abuse flourished

in a context of power. At the time priests and monks ran the show in both day and boarding schools, and in youth movements. They seemed untouchable. The Church was a privileged caste that was highly respected by society. There was a culture of keeping quiet and turning a blind eye when sexual abuse was detected. Victims did not dare to come out into the open. If they did, frequently no one would believe them. Peter Adriaenssens compared the silence of the Church to a mother who learns from her daughter that she is being sexually abused by her father. Although the mother is convinced that the abuse must stop, at the same time she is completely astounded that it is her own husband who is involved. She tells the daughter she cannot believe it. Moreover, according to the committee, the Church had no language for discussing this abuse of power. A priest, a bishop, works virtually independently with little supervision. In addition they had to shoulder the considerable burden of ensuring that the Church was not damaged. The indignation and moral revulsion in Belgium, and particularly in Flanders, which is Catholic by tradition, was enormous. The institution that for so long had taken a stern view of the moral misdeeds of believers was dealt with severely. The legal situation is complex. Many of the offenders have grown old or died in the intervening period. Frequently the facts date from too long ago for a case to be pursued in a court of law. However there is a call for the term of limitation for sexual abuse by those who have reached the age of majority to be extended. In mid-November 2010 a parliamentary committee was established in the Belgian Federal Parliament to examine sexual abuse and matters pertaining to paedophilia 'within a relationship of authority, especially within the Church'. The bishops and the former and present archbishops, Danneels and Léonard, appeared before it. Danneels admitted that the institution had paid too much attention to self-preservation, but neither of the Church leaders took moral responsibility for the behaviour of those who served under them. They were clearly afraid of a flood of demands for compensation, as happened in the U.S.A. A great many members of Parliament, members of the committee of inquiry, believe there is a deliberate hush-up

operation by the Church hierarchy. Flemish lawyers representing a number of victims of sexual abuse are even preparing a writ against Pope Benedict XVI. Their argument goes that the Pope bears the ultimate responsibility for the abuse, because the Holy See would have given bishops and other kindred spirits instructions 'to organise the cover-up'. Contact has already been made with American confrères who have summonsed the Vatican before.

As mentioned earlier, the legal situation is complex. Although the Church has given the impression that it is capable of developing its own system for administering justice, it is now emphasizing that the victims must turn first and foremost to the justice system, thus to the 'state'. But in the meantime the Public Prosecutor has decided that the examining magistrate who set up Operation Chalice went beyond his remit in seizing the papers of the Adriaenssens committee. He is not allowed to use them in his legal research and must return them to the victims. Exactly how that is to be done remains to be seen.

This *annus horribilis* in the Catholic Church in Belgium should be seen against the background of galloping secularization which started in the mid 1960s, in Flanders especially. In 1976, 36 percent of Flemings between the ages of 5 and 69 still attended Sunday mass every week. In 1998 the figure was 13 percent and in 2009 that dwindled to 5.4 percent. If this trend continues the churches will be empty on a Sunday in 2016. In contrast to the falling 'normal' church attendance, though, baptisms and burials remain popular. The figures for the last few years have stayed at more or less the same level. 71 percent of all those who died received a church burial, and 67 percent of Flemish children were baptized. Church marriages, however, have declined from 30 percent in 2006 to 26 percent in 2009.

Nonetheless the Church still has a strong base in Flemish education: almost 70 percent of all pupils in primary and secondary education are in subsidized (i.e. 'state' funded) 'free' education, and that is Catholic education – in name at least. The Catholic pillar still exerts an influence in the unions, health insurance and the entire care sector, too. In short, Flanders is

no longer 'Catholic', but the culture of Catholicism still persists.

The new Archbishop of Belgium, who was appointed in 2009, the conservative French-speaking Léonard (who also speaks perfect Dutch) has brought about a change of culture as well. Whereas his predecessor, Danneels, had led the Belgian Church for decades by diplomacy and had papered over conflicts – a strategy which did not win him any praise in Rome – his successor is a strictly orthodox shepherd who does not shrink from challenging those who think differently from himself with his pronouncements on homosexuality and Aids, among other subjects. Léonard wants a Church that can take on the world, his message is clear, unremitting and transparent. The patience for which Danneels was formerly praised is long gone, but it is now coming back to haunt him.

Be things as they may, a new relationship is being forged between Church and state in Belgium. The Church has lost its stranglehold forever and will have to find a new place in this secularized society. Some dream of a Church of an orthodox minority, a Noah's Ark. Others believe in a chastened Church more in keeping with modern times, a Church that is more than the sum of its leaders, more than the hierarchy of pope and bishops, a grass roots Church of believers.

Luc Devoldere

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

The Mayor of Rotterdam Is from Morocco

Mayor of Rotterdam since early 2009, Ahmed Aboutaleb was born in 1961 in Beni Sidel, a small clay hut village in the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. He came to the Netherlands in the 1970s and now he's in charge of one of the largest ports in the world. He is a practising Muslim, a Dutchman and a Moroccan. This is the first time that a Dutch municipality has a mayor of Moroccan origin.

Aboutaleb is a member of the social-democratic *Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA - Workers Party). Before he became mayor, he was Secretary of State for Social Affairs, a position he held for almost two years. Over the past few years, Aboutaleb has changed job quite often. He was an alderman in Amsterdam and before that a civil servant in the Dutch capital. He was head of Forum Institute for Multicultural Development and has also held various jobs in journalism and counselling. He was a TV reporter for the commercial channel RTL, for example, and a spokesperson for the Dutch Minister of Culture.

Aboutaleb came to the Netherlands when he was fifteen. As he himself stated in a newspaper interview, he left behind 'a cow, a donkey, a well and an awful lot of rocks'. He wanted to become assimilated into Dutch society as quickly as possible from lower technical school through secondary technical school to technical college. Eight years ago already, the former leader of the PvdA, Felix Rottenberg, had the following to say about Aboutaleb: '...Ahmed's CV is the result of a sense of discipline, self awareness and perseverance that's almost pre-war in nature'. He added that Aboutaleb could easily become a minister or the mayor of Amsterdam. In the same interview, Aboutaleb's wife remarked that the Netherlands was not quite ready for that yet: 'it will probably take twenty years before someone like Ahmed can become mayor of Amsterdam'.

The Aboutaleb family didn't have to wait that long. Though it wasn't Amsterdam but Rotterdam he became mayor of. Aboutaleb's political career did begin in the capital, however. He was elected alderman there and