

The Church in Belgium at a Turning Point. Times of Hope, Protest and Renewal (1945-1980)

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The Catholic Church in Belgium actually consists of two Catholic communities, on the one hand the Dutch-speaking Flemish community in the northern part of the country and, on the other, the French-speaking community living in Brussels and Wallonia, the center and the southern regions of the country. Flanders retained its rural Catholic culture far longer than Brussels and industrialized Wallonia, which were traditionally more receptive towards leftwing currents and secularization. This article will mainly focus on the evolution in Flanders because while francophone Catholicism had played an important role in the Belgian Church in different respects in previous years, Flanders became the epicenter of the Catholic revolution in Belgium in the 1960s.

One more introductory remark regarding the subject and the time period under consideration: the notion “Left Catholicism” or *catholiques de gauche* can be understood in a quite specific sense, referring mainly to the social and political aspects of a far more complex issue. In what follows, I prefer the notion ‘progressive’ Catholicism, enlarging the scope to the associated theological, ecclesiastical and pastoral aspects. It is a way of paying tribute to the importance of the Second Vatican Council as an agent of renewal. Vatican II is also the key organizing principle for the lay-out of this article. While it will be focused on the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, the most dynamic years of Catholic renewal in Belgium, I will begin by taking a brief look back to the preconciliar period, even going back as far as the initial postwar years, in order to trace some roots of progressive Catholicism in Belgium.¹

¹ This article draws on my book: Lieve Gevers, *Kerk in de kering. De katholieke gemeenschap in Vlaanderen, 1940-1980* (The Church at a Turning Point. The Catholic Community in Flanders, 1940-1980) (Kalmthout: Pelckmans, 2014), especially on the final chapter “Een Kerk in tijden van hoop, transformatie en contestatie” (A Church in Times of Hope, Transformation and Protest), 415-438. The book bundles a series of earlier published articles dealing with the evolution of the Catholic Church in Flanders between 1940 and 1980: 1. “De oorlog en zijn verwerking” (The War and its Processing), 2. “De naweeën van de oorlog” (The Aftereffects of the War), 3. “Katholiek Vlaanderen en de joden na de Tweede Wereldoorlog” (Catholic Flanders and the Jews After the Second World War), 4. “Priestervorming in de voor-concilietijd” (Priestly Training in the Preconciliar Period), 5. “Theologische vorming van priesters en leken” (Theological Training of Priests and Laypeople), 6. “Omwenteling in het Leuvense theologieonderwijs” (Revolution in the Leuven Faculty of Theology), 7. “*Aggiornamento* in de Lage Landen” (*Aggiornamento* in the Low Countries), 8. “Een speurbare (r)evolutie: de stem van de leek” (A Tangible (R)evolution: the Voice of the Laity), 9. “Priesterproblematiek in een stroomversnelling” (Priestly Office in Turmoil), 10. “Omslag in de katholieke huwelijksmoraal” (Conjugal Ethics at a Turning Point), 11. “Een strijdvaardige kerk” (A Militant Church), 12. “Ideologische evolutie van studerende jongeren” (The Ideological Evolution of Student Youth), 13. “De opdracht van een katholieke universiteit” (The Mission of a Catholic University). Detailed references to primary sources may be found in this work.

Postwar and Preconciliar Years: Restoration and Renewal (1945-1961)

Immediately after the Second World War, there were signs of rejuvenation and renewal of the Belgian Catholic community, in particular in the French-speaking part of the country. For several decades, the liturgical and ecumenical movement had taken root there. However, the main stimulus for innovation was French Catholicism. The influence of Emmanuel Mounier's Christian personalism, the worker priest movement and the so-called *nouvelle théologie* all bore fruit in Belgian Francophone Catholic circles of theologians and intellectuals. Around 1945, several groups, political formations and reviews sprang up, sharing a desire to rid themselves of the tutelage of bishops and conservative party leaders, to overcome the traditional polarization in politics, and to bridge the gap between the Church and the world of labor. They also pleaded for internal Church reforms such as the emancipation of the laity and the renewal of liturgy and pastoral work. The new currents of opinions were transmitted through reviews such as *La Relève* (1945-), *La Revue nouvelle* (1945-) and the Belgian edition of the French periodical *Témoignage chrétien*.²

However, in the late 1940s, there occurred a conservative backlash. The Cold War caused a polarization on the international front and drove political and ecclesiastical leaders onto the defensive. The postwar political developments in the country forced both the Church leadership and Catholic public opinion, especially in Flanders, to adopt such a defensive attitude, even more than in many other European countries. Indeed the war had left Belgium with a very problematic legacy. The purge and the royal question caused a strong polarization within the Belgian population between a predominantly Francophone anticlerical front, and a predominantly Dutch-speaking Catholic front. In the 1950s, the political scene was partly dominated by a school war, a major societal altercation over the role and influence of Catholic education in Belgium.³ In this way the post-liberation spirit of renewal was soon silenced and counterbalanced by a defensive overtone of Catholic mobilization, anticommunism, party discipline and pillarization. The confessional network – the Catholic schools, the Catholic youth movements, Catholic social organizations – were all flourishing,

² Mark van den Wijngaert, *Ontstaan en stichting van de C.V.P.-P.S.C. De lange weg naar het kerstprogramma* (Antwerp: Nederlandsche Boekhandel, 1976); Roger Aubert, *150 ans de vie des églises* (Brussels: Paul Legrain, 1980); Jean-Louis Jadoulle, "Les visages de l'église de Belgique", in Claude Soetens, (ed.), *Vatican II et la Belgique* (Ottignies: Quorum, 1996), 11-70; Jean-Louis Jadoulle, "The Milieu of Left Wing Catholics in Belgium (1940s-1950s)", in Gerd-Rainer Horn and Emmanuel Gerard (eds.), *Left Catholicism 1943-1955. Catholics and Society in Western Europe at the Point of Liberation*, Kadoc Studies n° 25 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001), 102-117; Jean Piroette et Guy Zelis (eds.), *Pour une histoire du monde catholique au 20^e siècle, Wallonie – Bruxelles. Guide du chercheur* (Archives du monde catholique Église – Wallonie: Louvain-la-Neuve, 2003); Lieve Gevers, "Catholicism in the Low Countries during the Second World War. Belgium and the Netherlands: A Comparative Approach", in Lieve Gevers and Jan Bank (eds.), *Religion under Siege. I. The Roman Catholic Church in Occupied Europe (1939-1950)*, *Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia* n° 56 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 228-236.

³ Kris Hoflack and Luc Huyse, "De afrekening met de vrienden van de vijand", in Luc Huyse and Kris Hoflack (eds.), *De democratie heruitgevonden. Oud en nieuw in politiek België 1944/1950* (Leuven: Van Halewyck, 1995), 27-44; Lode Wils, *Histoire des nations belges. Belgique, Flandre, Wallonie: quinze siècles de passé commun* (Ottignies: Quorum, 1996), 227-233; Jeffrey Tyssens, *De schoolkwestie in de jaren vijftig. Van conflict naar pacificatie* (Brussels: VUBpress, 1997); Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation. Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); José Gotovitch and Chantal Kesteloot (eds.), *Collaboration, répression. Un passé qui résiste* (Brussels: Labor, 2002).

more than ever before, in the mid-1950s. The much-vaunted and proverbial 'rich Roman Catholic life' witnessed its last glorious days precisely during that period.⁴ However, by the middle of the 1950s, things were changing. A variety of signals made it clear that the foundations of the ecclesiastical empire were beginning to shake. The sociology of religion, an emerging new science in Belgium, demonstrated the link between urbanization and secularization, and pleaded for an adaptation of ecclesiastical structures and strategies. The mentality of the church community changed as well. In a climate of decreasing tensions, ecclesiastical renewal tendencies, which had been timidly waiting in the margins, gradually succeeded in coming into the open, and this time not only in French-speaking Belgium but also in Flanders. The most innovative voices came from the Catholic University of Leuven. Not only some professors in theology and philosophy, but also the Flemish Student Association for Catholic Action, centered on the review *Universitas*, acted as a pioneer in that regard.⁵

The year 1958 was a decisive turning point. The death of Pope Pius XII and the election of John XXIII were experienced as the end of an era. In Belgium itself, 1958 marked the beginning of a period of pacification between Catholics and non-Catholics. An important signal of the changing mentality in Flanders was the birth of a new periodical, the monthly *De Maand*, in January 1958. It became an important rallying point for people advocating an open form of Catholicism. When Pope John XXIII announced his plan for the convocation of an ecumenical council in January 1959, his message gave a further boost to the prospect of change in the Church.

De Maand presented itself as an independent voice of progressive Catholic lay intellectuals, who with great frankness commented critically on the events in the Church, politics and culture. In line with the already-mentioned francophone progressive journals, they discussed themes such as the disconnection between the Church and contemporaneous politics, openness towards non-Catholics, and the

⁴ André Tihon, "La Belgique", in Jean Marie Mayeur, Charles Pietri, André Vauchez and Marc Venard (eds.), *Histoire du christianisme des origines à nos jours*, Vol. 12, *Guerres mondiales et totalitarismes (1914-1948)* (Paris : Desclée-Fayard, 1990), 538-554; Emmanuel Gerard and Paul Wynants (eds.), *Histoire du mouvement chrétien en Belgique*, 2 Vols., Kadoc Studies n° 16 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1994); Lieve Gevers and Louis Vos, "Youth Movements in Flanders: A Short History", in Griet Verschelden, Filip Coussée, Tinneke van de Walle and Howard Williamson (eds.), *The History of Youth Work in Europe. Relevance for Youth Policy Today* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 2009), 167-176; 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*, Vol. 2, 1802-2009 (Antwerp: Halewijn in cooperation with Kadoc-KU Leuven, 2009), 173-253; Lieve Gevers, "Een strijdvaardige Kerk. De Antwerpse katholieken ten tijde van het 'rijke Roomse leven'", in Marcel Gielis, Leo Kenis, Guido Marnef and Karim Schelkens (eds.), *In de stroom van de tijd. (4)50 jaar bisdom Antwerpen* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2012), 215-234; Gevers, *Kerk in de kring*, 321-358.

⁵ Jan Kerkhofs and Jean van Houtte (eds.), *De Kerk in Vlaanderen. Pastoraal-sociologische studie van het leven en de structuur der Kerk* (Tiel: Lannoo, 1962); Jan Grootaers. "La réflexion religieuse et l'action pastorale du professeur Dondeyne", in *Miscellanea Albert Dondeyne. Godsdienstfilosofie. Philosophie de la religion* (Leuven, Gembloux: University Press/Duculot, 1974), 15-40; Lieve Gevers, "Priesthood and Priestly Training in the Light of Vatican II: Visions and Expectations in the Low Countries", in Theo Clemens and Wim Janse (eds.), *The Pastor Bonus. Papers read at the British – Dutch Colloquium at Utrecht, 18-21 September 2002*, special issue of *Dutch Review of Church History*, 83 (2003), 448-461, esp. 453-454; Gevers, "Apogée et fin", 244-247.

abandonment of a pillarized ghetto-mentality. They also gave plenty of attention to a wide variety of initiatives aimed at rejuvenating the Church from within.⁶

So there was hope but, at the same time, few observers believed in the possibility of deep-going changes happening any time soon. While formulating their demands and wishes for the council, *De Maand* and other reform-oriented publications in Belgium often expressed cautiousness, mistrust and concern regarding the preparatory activities of the council, dominated as they were by the Curia. Moreover the vota, the wishes expressed by the Belgian bishops for the council, came across as moderate, timid and fragmentary. As long as the elderly and conservative Cardinal Van Roey was at the helm of the Belgian Church – until the autumn of 1961 – the chances for renewal were in fact quite limited.⁷

Conciliar Dynamics

The year 1962 saw the breakthrough of the spirit of *aggiornamento*. At the start of that year, Leo Joseph Suenens was named as the new archbishop of Mechelen. His appointment was welcomed in progressive ecclesiastical circles in Belgium as a positive sign. But obviously, the most important event of that year was the opening of the Second Vatican Council in October 1962. The skepticism and cautiousness of the previous years now made way for rising confidence and the belief that this huge ecclesiastical project might be successful. Apart from reform-oriented Catholic periodicals, important centers for reflection and church-innovation in Belgium were the two university parishes, one Flemish and one French-speaking, in the Catholic University of Leuven, both founded in 1959 and canonically recognized in 1963.⁸

At the Vatican Council, a major role was played by a number of professors from the Catholic University of Leuven, both theologians and philosophers, as well as several bishops. They made a strong team, known as the *squadra Belga*, which earned a growing authority as the council went on. Cardinal Suenens, in particular, drew attention and became one of the best known figureheads of the council. The Belgian press followed the activities of the council with great interest. Apart from indignation about the manipulation and the blocking maneuvers of the Cardinals of the Curia, the prevailing tone in most journals and reviews was one of gratitude and joy for the immense amount of work taken on in the space of a few years, changing the image of the Church at a quicker pace than was first thought possible.⁹

⁶ Lieve Gevers, “Développements ecclésiastiques en Flandre à la lumière de Vatican II: la voix des laïcs”, in Claude Soetens (ed.), *Vatican II et la Belgique* (Ottignies: Quorum, 1996), 223-250.

⁷ Claude Soetens, “Les ‘vota’ des évêques belges en vue du concile”, in Mathijs Lamberigts and Claude Soetens (eds.), *À la veille du concile Vatican II. Vota et réactions en Europe et dans le catholicisme oriental* (Leuven: Bibliotheek van de Faculteit der godgeleerdheid, 1992), 38-52; Lieve Gevers, “Apogée et fin”, 247-250.

⁸ Lieve Gevers and Louis Vos, *Kerk vormen in Leuven. 25 jaar Universitaire Parochie* (Leuven: Universitaire Parochie, 1989); Gevers, “Développements ecclésiastiques”, 230-237; Bart Latré, *Aggiornamento in Leuven. Geschiedenis van de Universitaire Parochie (1959-1974)* (Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 2002).

⁹ Claude Soetens, “La ‘squadra belga’ au concile Vatican II”, in Luc Courtois and Jean Pirotte (eds.), *Foi, gestes et institutions religieuses aux 19^e et 20^e siècles* (Louvain-la-Neuve: UCL, Centre d’histoire des religions, 1991), 159-172; Lieve Gevers, “Vaticanum II en de Lage Landen: bronnen en historiografie”, in *Trajecta. Tijdschrift voor de geschiedenis van het katholiek leven in de Nederlanden*, 1 (1992), n° 2, 187-105; Doris Donnelly, Joseph Famerée, Mathijs Lamberigts and Karim Schelkens (eds.), *The Belgian Contribution to the Second Vatican Council. International Research Conference at Mechelen, Leuven*

The Belgian Church was driven by a new dynamic. Concepts such as “general priesthood of the faithful”, “collegiality of the bishops” and “co-responsibility of lay people” became self-evident organizing principles as never before. The constitution on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, promulgated at the end of the second session in 1963 as one of the first decrees of the council, was hailed by Catholic periodicals as “the pinnacle of the entire liturgical movement of the past half century”¹⁰ while the chapter on ‘the people of God’ was characterized as the most successful one in *Lumen Gentium*.¹¹

The council also served as a catalyst for reflections on the priestly office and seminary education. Among the clergy, a strong desire for a more evangelically inspired and world-oriented priesthood became manifest. Reviews of the diocesan and regular clergy opted for a redefinition of the priesthood in terms of service and solidarity, for bridging the gap between clergy and laypeople, and for a reorientation of the priestly office from a sanctifying towards a witnessing and prophetic role. Pastoral care and strategy was considered to be in need of a radical transformation, more attuned to the concerns of modern society. Accordingly, traditional seminary education was also felt to be in need of adaptation; it should become more oriented towards the real world and provide better intellectual and professional training. A new initiative in that respect was the founding by Cardinal Suenens in 1964 of the John-XXIII-Seminary in Leuven, representing a new model of priestly formation.¹²

The conciliar event also had an accelerating effect on changing attitudes regarding the role and function of marriage. Suenens’s interventions during the conciliar debates did not pass unnoticed. He was advocating a more contemporary approach to the Church regarding procreation, arguing “let us avoid a new Galilei-affair”.¹³ The pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* allowed for a personalist approach by recognizing marriage as a community of love and left the door open for birth control, speaking of responsible parenthood. Thus, with birth control taken for granted, the debate among moral theologians and laypeople in Belgium was now shifting to the question of contraceptives. More particularly, the discussion centered around the admissibility of the then newly developed contraceptive pill.¹⁴

Finally, the conciliar years were conducive for the breakthrough of new visions on the relationship between Church and society. The council declaration on freedom of religion *Dignitatis humanae* was received in progressive Catholic circles in an utmost

and *Louvain-la-Neuve (September 12-16, 2005)*, *Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium*, n° 216 (Leuven: Peeters, 2008); Gevers, *Kerk in de kering*, 427.

¹⁰ Peter d’Haese, “De Liturgische constitutie: geen geschenk maar opgave”, *Kultuurleven*, 31 (1964), n° 2, 100.

¹¹ Lieve Gevers, “Formation du prêtre et ministère sacerdotal à l’époque de Vatican II. La réception en Belgique et aux Pays-Bas”, in Mathijs Lamberigts and Leo Kenis (eds.), *Vatican II and its Legacy* (Leuven: University Press/Peeters, 2002) 443-467, esp. 465; Lieve Gevers, “Développements ecclésiaux”, 235.

¹² Lieve Gevers, “Priesthood”.

¹³ Session of 29 Octobre 1964, see Xavier Rynne, *Letters from Vatican City: Vatican Council*, Vol. 3, *The Third Session* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), 161; Leo Joseph Suenens, *Souvenirs et Espérances* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 123; Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, *History of Vatican II*, Vol. 4, *Church as Communion. Third Period and Intersession, September 1964 – September 1965* (Maryknoll, Leuven: Orbis/Peeters, 2003), 310.

¹⁴ Lieve Gevers, “De omslag in de katholieke huwelijksmoraal”, in Roger Burggraeve, Michel Cloet, Karel Dobbelaere and Lambert Leijssen (eds.), *Levensrituelen. Het huwelijk*, *Kadoc studies n° 24* (Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 2000), 52-76.

positive way, even as “an historical event” with a “revolutionary significance”.¹⁵ The encyclical *Pacem in Terris* – perceived as Pope John’s testament and published in 1963, the year of his death – was highly valued as well. It was considered as a confirmation of the importance of human rights, and it was regarded as the “ecclesiastical baptism of the democratic liberties”.¹⁶

Moreover – against the background of the decolonization process¹⁷ – the papal messages and the council document *Gaudium et Spes* enhanced the awareness of the inequality and unbalanced relationship between North and South in the World. The first half of the 1960s witnessed a growing concern among Belgian Catholics about what were then called “underdeveloped countries”, later on rephrased as “developing countries”, and accordingly giving rise to a growing consciousness of the moral duty to solidarity. In keeping with that idea the bishops launched the Lent-action “Fraternal Sharing” in 1961. From about 1965 onwards, the need for a more structured approach to providing aid to the developing world, and also for a radical mentality shift in the Western world itself, began to be keenly felt.¹⁸

The Post-Council Era: Problematic Reception, Crisis, Turn toward the ‘New Left’ (1966-1973)

Towards the end of the council and in the first post-council years, the Belgian church underwent a thorough facelift due to numerous reforms. Most obvious were the changes in the liturgy: more stress on the service of the Word, the use of the vernacular, more evening services, also on Saturdays, architectonic adaptations regarding for instance the turning of the altar to the public and the disappearance of statues, confessionals and the communion rail. Gradually, pastoral consultative bodies were established: parochial councils, councils for priests and around 1970 a general consultative body for both the Flemish as well the French-speaking Church community. This transformation was enhanced by a further process of splitting up the ecclesiastical bodies between the two language groups, in line with the enhanced federalization process in the sixties in the country as a whole, including the separation of the political parties according to community lines.¹⁹ In the context of the Belgian Church, a radical operation in that regard was the splitting up of the faculties of theology, canon law and philosophy as part of the division of Leuven University into two autonomous universities.²⁰

¹⁵ “Bij het keren van de zandloper”, *De Maand*, 6 (1963), n° 10, 578.

¹⁶ Reginald Staf Callewaert, “De katholieken en de gewetensvrijheid”, *Kultuurleven*, 30 (1963), n° 8, 628.

¹⁷ The formerly Belgian Congo became independent in 1960.

¹⁸ Monique Costermans, “La coopération”, in Pirotte and Zelis, *Pour une histoire*, 727ff.; Bart Latré, *Strijd & Inkeer. De kerk- en maatschappijkritische beweging in Vlaanderen 1958-1990*, Kadoc Studies n° 34 (Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 2011), 90-94.

¹⁹ The growing division between the francophone South and the Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium led to the establishment of so-called ‘cultural communities’ as legal entities, anchored in the Belgian constitution by 1970. Thus, Belgium now counts three such ‘cultural communities’, a French-speaking one, the Dutch-speaking counterpart, and then a small German-speaking ‘cultural community’ in the extreme eastern section of Belgium.

²⁰ Lieve Gevers, “Naar een nieuwe faculteit”, in Lieve Gevers and Leo Kenis (eds.), *De Faculteit Godgeleerdheid in de KU Leuven 1969-1995*, *Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia* n° 39 (Leuven: University Press/Peeters, 1997), 3-29; Gevers, “Développements ecclésiastiques”, 246-249; Gevers, “Agenda. Challenges for a new university”, in Jo Tollebeek and Liesbeth Nys, *The City on the Hill. A History of Leuven University 1968-2005* (Leuven: University Press, 2006), 10-25.

Conciliar dynamics were persistent in other fields as well. The training programs of priestly, religious and theological education underwent drastic changes and so did the constitutions and rules of abbeys and convents. Diocesan publications tried to improve the involvement of faithful in ecclesiastical life. In 1969, Belgium witnessed the ordination of its first married deacons.²¹ Those reforms consolidated the inner church renewal, which had been eagerly anticipated for some time. Moreover, the conciliar texts and recent papal declarations seemed to have freed the Church from its shackles of antimodernism and anticommunism, and to orient her towards a more open, global and socially progressive view on the world.²²

Nonetheless, it soon became clear that those reforms failed to meet the Catholic population's high expectations. It is striking to see how, very soon after the closing of the council, the positive and hopeful tone of the previous years made way for feelings of frustration, protest, polarization and crisis. The reforms were received in an antagonistic way. They resulted on the one hand in the manifestation of a restorative tendency among people for whom the council had gone (much) too far. Among progressive Catholics, on the contrary, an increasing feeling of discontent and disappointment prevailed: reforms were too slow in coming and were perceived moreover as much less far-reaching than could be justified by 'the spirit' of the council. The mood of *aggiornamento*, so it seemed, was going full steam ahead after the council as well. It was now driven by a dynamic of its own, rushing at far too quick a pace, given the rather moderate goals of the council itself.²³

The problematic reception of the council occurred against the background of a Church and society in turmoil. In particular, in the second half of the sixties, this became manifest in a striving for individual freedom and self-expression, a loss of the patriarchal family model, a consumer youth culture, the sexual revolution and, in general, a crisis of authority.²⁴ In Western society, 'May 1968' was perceived as the moment of the final breakthrough of the revolutionary tide. However in Catholic Flanders, the crisis of authority had already started two years earlier with the outbreak of the revolt in May 1966 against the episcopal decision to adhere to the bilingual character of the Catholic University of Leuven. In Flanders, the Leuven crisis caused a general outburst of anti-authoritarian and anticlerical actions, and such sentiments encouraged progressive Catholic reviews to make ever stronger pleas for de-pillarization and pluralism. The Leuven crisis reached a new climax in the first months of 1968. Among Catholic students in Flanders, at the university as well in high schools, it served as an important catalyst to further enhance and sharpen a critical stance against the Church and an orientation towards the 'New Left'.²⁵

²¹ Gevers, "Formation du prêtre", 466; Leo Kenis, "Une église devenue minoritaire dans un environnement pluraliste. L'archidiocèse sous Léon-Joseph Suenens et Godfried Danneels (1961-2009)", in *L'archidiocèse de Malines-Bruxelles. 450 ans d'histoire*, Vol. 2, 1802-2009 (Antwerpen: Halewijn in collaboration with Kadoc-KU Leuven, 2009), 255-317; Marcel Gielis, Karim Schelkens, Luc Vints, "Een decennium in het teken van het concilie", in Marcel Gielis et al. (eds.), *In de stroom*, 239-261.

²² Gevers, *Kerk in de kering*, 430-431.

²³ Latré, *Strijd en inkeer*, passim; Gevers, *Kerk in de kering*, 431-432.

²⁴ Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the People of Western Europe, 1789-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 135ff.; Hans Righart, *De eindeloze jaren zestig. Geschiedenis van een generatieconflict* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1995); Latré, *Strijd en inkeer*, 101-103.

²⁵ Louis Vos, Mark Derez, Ingrid Depraetere and Wivina van der Steen, *De stoute jaren. Studentenprotest in de jaren zestig* (Tielt: Lannoo, 1988); Gevers, "Développements ecclésiastiques", 237-240; Lieve Gevers, "Calling and Profession", in Jo Tollebeek and Liesbeth Nys, *The City on the Hill. A History of Leuven University 1968-2005* (Leuven: University Press, 2006), 128-145, esp. 129; Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68. Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976* (Oxford

Meanwhile, Rome followed an ever more restorative course. The encyclical *Sacerdotalis caelibatus* of June 1967 took away the hope shared by progressive laypersons and clerics of a decoupling of priestly office and celibacy. Against the background of the global left-wing student protests in the spring of 1968, the Catholic Church then experienced her own 'May 1968' with the appearance of *Humanae vitae* on 25 July 1968. The encyclical caused a shock wave and achieved the reverse of what had been intended: it made the use of contraceptives in mainstream Catholic *milieus* acceptable. The prevailing sentiment was that the papal authority had overplayed its hand in this matter. For many, the encyclical was the signal to leave the Church. From 1968 onwards, there was a drastic reduction in church attendance in Belgium as a whole.²⁶

Among the more conscientious faithful, on the other hand, the encyclical encouraged an urge for increased public debates and discussions, leading to further polarization. In the wake of *Humanae vitae*, in the second half of 1968 and in 1969, a number of new progressive groups came into being, especially in Flanders, giving rise to an influential 'church-critical' movement. In turn, these progressive initiatives were paralleled by the formation of conservative groups, be it on a more reduced scale. Between these extremes lived a divided Church community which, for the next few years, was to become immersed in sometimes violent conflicts and discussions. The Church was evolving away from unity and cohesion towards diversity and multiformity.²⁷

In the progressive 'church-critical' movement, priests and members of religious orders, both male and female, were, in the initial phase, often the driving force. They were also joined, supported and spurred on, however, by hundreds, even thousands of committed laypeople. They considered themselves as being part of an international movement, the movement of 'Solidary Priests', as they called themselves, with branches in various European countries.²⁸ One of their crucial concerns was the priesthood, in particular the question of celibacy. Apart from that, the progressive church movement also focused on the authoritarian structures and 'pseudo-democracy' within the Church – eventually airing generalized anti-capitalist social criticism as such.

University Press, 2007) 69-74; Latré, *Strijd en inkeer*, 85; Louis Vos, *Idealisme en engagement. De roeping van de katholieke studerende jeugd in Vlaanderen (1920-1990)* (Leuven: Acco, 2011), 361ff ; Gevers, *Kerk in de kering*, 369-374, 391-393.

²⁶ Between 1968 and 1973 Sunday practice in Belgium diminished by almost 10% (from 41,8 % to 32,3 %.) About 800.000 people left the Church – in a country barely counting ten million people as a whole. The reduction in church attendance was most drastic in the traditionally Catholic Flemish region – from more than 50 % to 38 %; Karel Dobbelaere, *Het 'volk Gods' de mist in? Over de kerk in België* (Leuven: Acco, 1988), 46-47, 66-71, 151; Karel Dobbelaere, "La dominante catholique", in Liliane Voyé, Karel Dobbelaere, Jean Remy and Jaak Billiet (eds.), *La Belgique et ses dieux: églises, mouvements religieux et laïques* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Cabay, 1985), 193-193-220; see also J. Derek Holmes, Bernard W. Bickers, *A Short History of the Catholic Church* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oats, 1983), 288-290; Gevers, "De omslag", 70-72; Gevers, *Kerk in de kering*, 310-312, 433-434.

²⁷ Karel Dobbelaere and Jaak Billiet, "Groepvorming in en rond de Kerk in Vlaanderen", *Collationes. Vlaams tijdschrift voor theologie en pastoraal* (1976), 91-114; Peter Wuyts, *Behoudende groepen in de Vlaamse kerkgemeenschap* (unpublished masterthesis KU Leuven, 1986); Bart Latré, "In confrontatie met de ambtsproblematiek. Kritische priestergroepen in Vlaanderen (1969-1990)", *Trajecta. Tijdschrift voor de geschiedenis van het katholiek leven in de Nederlanden*, 14 (2005), 48-79; Latré, *Strijd en inkeer*, 112ff.

²⁸ On the international movement of Solidarity Groups, see Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II. Western European Progressive Catholicism in the Long Sixties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 86-109.

The discord amongst the flock not only concerned the question of whether or not the Council should be perceived as the final or rather as the starting point of church reform. The scope of the discussion was much broader. It ultimately concerned faith itself. Already during the heyday of the *nouvelle théologie* in the 1940s and 1950s, activists had aired a plea for a more existential, true-to-life approach to faith and theology.²⁹ In the revolution affecting the Church at the end of the 1960s, an urge towards individualization, self-expression and authenticity likewise played a prominent role. It resulted in experiments in the renewal of religious life among the rank and file. Out of discontent with the 'Church as an institution', people took refuge in smaller groups, away from the official structures, in the so-called base communities, where they wanted to experience their faith in a life-like and authentic way.³⁰

Apart from a more existential approach, the new experience of faith was marked by a trend towards 'horizontalism', an orientation towards the world, and a noticeable politicization. From the mid-sixties onwards, influential Anglo-Saxon authors, like Harvey Cox and John Robinson, called "for a secular way of speaking about God".³¹ German theologians such as Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann pointed out the "revolutionary power of the Gospel" and the duty of Christians to "social and political praxis".³² The 'church-critical' groups were inspired by the same zeal. They perceived themselves not only as the basis of a church movement, but just as much as part of the 'new social movements' that were springing up in Belgium around that time (environmental, feminist, third world, peace movements).³³ They shared with these movements a 'New Left' vision of society, and they perceived social commitment as a necessary component or, even more so, as the essence of what it meant to be a Christian. In their critical analysis of Church and society they felt themselves inspired by the newly discovered Socialist/Marxist discourse, but at the same time, while allowing for a certain openness towards leftwing dogmatism, they kept their focus on 'human' issues such as liberation, creativity, peace, development aid and care for the environment.³⁴ This combination of radical Catholicism and Marxism, with its underlying ethical impulse, formed a special blend, which explains why precisely Flemish Catholic youth, students at the Catholic University of Leuven and high school students in Catholic secondary schools were the driving force in the revolt of 1968, not only in Flanders itself, but in Belgium as a whole.³⁵

²⁹ Roger Aubert, *La théologie catholique au milieu du XX^e siècle* (Tournai, Paris: Casterman, 1954), 74ff.; Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle théologie – New theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London: Clark, 2010), 141-142.

³⁰ Dobbelaere, "La dominante catholique"; Latré, *Strijd en inkeer*, 219-250, 315-329; base communities in international perspective in Horn, *The Spirit of Vatican II*, 111-163.

³¹ Quotation from a comment on Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), by E. de Liefde, "The secular city: een samenvatting", *Kultuurleven*, 35 (1968), n° 7, 512-513.

³² Some quotations out of a number of comments in Catholic periodicals on the writings and ideas of Metz and Moltmann: Bertrand de Clercq, "Wordt het christendom revolutionair?", *Kultuurleven*, 33 (1966), n° 10, 659; Bertrand de Clercq, "Christenen te gast bij marxisten", *Kultuurleven*, 34 (1967), n° 9, 647.

³³ Staf Hellemans and Marc Hooghe (eds.), *Van 'Mei 68' tot 'Hand in Hand'. Nieuwe sociale bewegingen in België, 1965-1995* (Leuven: Garant, 1995).

³⁴ Latré, *Strijd en inkeer*, 173-212; Gevers, *Kerk in de kering*, 436-437.

³⁵ The British historian Robert Lumley pointed to a similar interaction between religion and politics in the student revolt in Italy: "The religious structure of feeling was of considerable importance in the making of 1968", see Robert Lumley, *States of Emergency. Cultures of Revolt in Italy from 1968 to 1978*

This movement, which combined criticism of the Church with criticism of society at large, was at its strongest between 1968 and 1974. It called forth a significant response within the broader network of ecclesiastical and Catholic organizations. Parochial associations, youth movements, schools, social and charitable organizations, all were kindled by the same spirit³⁶. From about 1969 a gradual shift took place from interest in internal church themes towards ever greater attention to social criticism as such. The mobilization around the problems related to the priesthood reached a final climax in 1971, with the Roman Synod of bishops and the alternative gathering, the so-called 'Operation Synod' of the 'Solidary Priests'. After yet another disappointing outcome, with a repeated refusal on the part of the hierarchy to disconnect the priestly office and celibacy, the critical priest movement gradually faded away. From 1974 onwards the socially critical radicalism as such seemed to be beyond its peak as well. Belgian youth began to express less and less interest in issues linked to protest and dissent. Perhaps underlying this sea-change in public opinion, the economic crisis of 1973 put an end to any post-materialistic dreams³⁷.

Since 1974: Institutionalization, Differentiation, Mitigation

In the second half of the 1970s and in the 1980s, the Catholic 'New Left' movement continued to enjoy a strong growth in numbers, influence and organizational strength. Anti-capitalism and Third World problems remained common ideological denominators, but at the same time there was an evolution towards institutionalization and greater diversity of political expression. The movement found its continuation in Flanders, among other things, in the left-wing movement of *Christenen voor het socialisme* (Christians for Socialism) as well as in the environmental movement *Anders gaan leven* (Agalev = Change Your Life) which transformed itself after some time into a pluralist 'Green Party', eventually casting

(London: Verso, 1990), 77-86, quotation 84; Vos, *Idealisme en engagement*, 449. The significance of the "Catholic World", and in particular "Catholic students at the KU Leuven" as "the most dynamic organization in the Belgian New Left", is also mentioned by Gerd-Rainer Horn, "The Belgian Contribution to Global 1968", *Belgisch tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis*, 35 (2005), n°4, 597-635, quotation 628. But of course the movement deeply affected much larger sections of Belgian society. Apart from Leuven, students at other Belgian universities (Gent, Brussels and Liège) were likewise moved by the spirit of '68; see Horn, "The Belgian contribution", and Louis Vos, "Belgium", in Martin Klinke and Joachim Scharloth (eds.), *1968 in Europe. A History of Protest and Activism, 1956-1977* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 153-162.

³⁶ See for instance the ideological evolution of a local branch of the Katholieke Studentenactie (KSA-Catholic Student Action), a youth movement for secondary school students at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, as described by Lieve Gevers, *Honderd jaar katholieke studerende jeugd, 1884-1984. De geschiedenis van de Hasseltse Jonge Klauwaarts* (Hasselt: Kadoc-Leuven, 1986), 193-227; also Gevers, *Kerk in de kering*, 369-388. In francophone Belgium, the Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique (JOC, Young Workers Organisation) and the Mouvement Ouvrier Chrétien (MOC, Christian Workers Organisation) were driving forces in the fashioning of 'New Left' milieus; see François Houtart, "Nouvelles formes d'engagements socio-politiques des chrétiens", in Voyé, Dobbelaere, Remy and Billiet (eds.), *La Belgique*, 175-189; Horn, "The Belgian contribution", 625, 627-628; Jean-Louis Jadoulle and Paul Wynants, "Les engagements en dehors du parti catholique et du Parti social chrétien", in Piroette and Zélis (eds.), *Pour une histoire*, 246-248.

³⁷ Latré, *Strijd en inkeer*, passim; Vos, *Idealisme en engagement*, 442-443; Gevers, *Kerk in de kering*, 382-388.

aside its Christian roots. *Chrétiens pour le socialisme* and *Ecolo* were their counterparts in francophone Belgium, be it with an organizational and ideological brand of its own³⁸. Many progressive Christians, with the passage of time, distanced themselves from the sharp edges of their left-wing criticism. *De Vijgeboom* (The Fig-Tree), a bimonthly launched in 1976, became the mouthpiece of progressive Catholics in Flanders. Presenting itself as a periodical for ‘justice and peace’ as well as ‘struggle and repentance’, it was widely read amongst the divergent tendencies in progressive Catholicism, as well as within established Catholic organizations and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the 1970s and 1980s, it had a readership of several thousand³⁹.

But times had changed dramatically. When the dust raised by the revolutionary upheaval of the sixties eventually settled down, people realized that they had become a part of a profoundly different Church. The ranks of church-goers had thinned out, as had the ranks of priests and the religious orders. An evolution took place towards a pluralist society and a fragmented religious culture, in which the Catholic community – ever more clearly – formed a minority. Flanders in that regard followed in the footsteps of its francophone neighbors, Brussels and Wallonia⁴⁰.

To the extent that the younger generations still remained loyal to the Church, the turbulent sequence of events of previous years had caused an irreversible break with tradition. The time of a self-evident Christianity had come to an end. From the second half of the 1970s, many embarked on a journey towards greater spiritualization and privatization of everyday life, taking their distance from social and political commitments⁴¹. As a consequence, the Catholic ‘New Left’ movement turned out to be mainly a ‘generational’ event. It in fact gradually grew older together with its founders and could not avoid shrinking in the long run. The disappearance of the review *De Vijgeboom* in 1990 was a clear sign that the best days of the movement of progressive Catholics in Flanders were over.

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Abstract

Between 1945 and 1980, Belgian Catholicism underwent fundamental change. In the 1950s, conservatism and anti-communism dominated the Belgian Church, which remained solidly rooted in local society. Starting in 1958, it became apparent that change was desired, justification for which was found in the *aggiornamento*

³⁸ Houtart, “Nouvelles formes d’engagements”; Jadoulle and Wynants, “Les engagements”, 248-250.

³⁹ Latré, *Strijd en inkeer*, 219 ff.

⁴⁰ Jaak Billiet and Karel Dobbelaere, *Godsdienst in Vlaanderen. Van kerks katholicisme naar sociaal-culturele kristenheid* (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 1976); Voyé, Dobbelaere, Remy and Billiet (eds.), *La Belgique*; Rudi Laermans (ed.), *Godsdienst en Kerk in een gesecculariseerde samenleving. Een keuze uit het werk van Karel Dobbelaere* (Leuven: Universitaire Pers, 1998); Kenis, “Une église devenue minoritaire”.

⁴¹ Mc Leod, *Religion and the People*, 150-154; Vos, *Idealisme en engagement*, 446 ff. ; Gevers, *Kerk in de kering*, 401-402.

promoted by Vatican II. But the post-conciliar years saw a rapid shift from an optimistic and reformist spirit to a feeling of frustration that fueled protest and crisis. Leftwing Christian movements emerged that, particularly in Flanders, criticized both Church and society. These movements enjoyed their apogee between 1968 and 1974. Flanders soon ceased to be a society organized around Catholicism, gradually becoming a pluralist space in which the Catholic community was simply one of many minorities.

Key words : Catholic Church; Belgium; Vatican II; May '68.

Résumé

Une mutation décisive se produit dans le catholicisme belge entre 1945 et 1980. Dans les années cinquante, le conservatisme et l'anticommunisme dominant encore une Église solidement enracinée dans la société locale. À partir de 1958, une volonté de changement se manifeste et trouve une nouvelle justification dans l'*aggiornamento* promu par Vatican II. Mais les années postconciliaires sont marquées par l'évolution rapide d'un esprit optimiste et réformateur vers un sentiment de frustration nourrissant la crise et la contestation. Des mouvements de chrétiens de gauche s'organisent, en Flandre tout particulièrement, critiquant à la fois l'Église et la société. Ils connaissent leur apogée entre 1968 et 1974. La Flandre cesse bientôt d'être une société organisée autour du catholicisme pour devenir un espace pluraliste dans lequel la communauté catholique n'est plus qu'une minorité.

Mots clés : Église catholique, Belgique, Vatican II, Mai 68.

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