

# "YOU ARE THE PROVOKERS," CRIES MERCIER

## "You Have Not Captured Our Hearts, Nor Will You Ever Do So," Cardinal Informs Baron von der Lancken in Interview at Malines

### Explanatory Comment

THE SECOND of the Cardinal's thirteen pastoral letters was read in the churches of his diocese at a time when the German authorities were not in the best of humor. Reports of the Allies' long-awaited offensive on the western front, the first large-scale operation of the kind since the battle of the Marne, were coming in. The conflict had reached its height on September 25, 1915. On the next day, a Sunday, the pastoral was read.

Throughout the entire history of the occupation of Belgium it is significant that the chains of despotism were always tightened at moments of crisis for the German cause. Perhaps if the authorities had fully realized the peril of the Kaiser's army they would not have let off the Cardinal as easily as they did.

It is now fairly well established that the Allies barely missed scoring a decisive victory in that September engagement. Politicians at home were intimidated by the cost of the movement if continued, and, as in the later days of Nivelle, orders to proceed with it no further were given. As it was, many German front line trenches were captured and 20,000 unwounded prisoners.

That Cardinal Mercier could specifically forecast such events and time his letter accordingly is a preposterous assumption, which not even Von Bissing himself could actually have believed. But his spirits were dashed by defeat and there was the hope, so often entertained, so seldom realized, that he could worst the primate by a show of power.

As usual, the Governor General began with a weak case. The September letter was much briefer than the Christmas pastoral and consisted largely of scriptural quotations and references. "The truth," declares one passage, "triumphs, the right of God supports it, Satan and the evil spirits, which he has won to his side, are expelled from heaven, and according to the Apocalypse, there is heard reverberating in eternity, the song of the conquerors 'Now salvation has come, and the power and the reign of our God, and the authority of his Christ; because the accuser of our brothers has been hurled into the abyss . . . the blood of the Lamb has triumphed over him.'"

When Von der Lancken came to protest against these words he was placed in the position almost of confessing that the German power was Satanic—not an encouraging beginning for a duel with the primate of Belgium!



VIEW OF CARDINAL MERCIER'S GARDENS  
This is one of the few places in Malines not damaged by German bombardments

Governor General's Office, Brussels,  
August 24, 1915.

To the Tribunal of the Fortress of Antwerp  
Regulation

The refusal to allow the priests de Bruyne and Boone Belgian advocates in the trial of the charge of high treason brought against them is justified; it is quite lawful to forbid all intercourse between the advocates chosen by the accused and the official advocates assigned.

The right of defense, which, according to the ninth paragraph of the imperial decree of December 28th, 1899, belongs to foreign enemies, must be limited by the exigencies of war; these do not permit strangers to be put in possession of the evidence in a charge of high treason, and this could not be avoided if they were permitted to act as advocates for the defense in trials of this nature.

In consequence, Cardinal Mercier's objection of July 23rd, 1915, must be considered as unfounded and must be rejected.

The Governor General,  
(Signed) BARON VON BISSING,  
Major General.

### CHAPTER XVII

#### Interview Between Cardinal Mercier and Baron von der Lancken Regarding the Pastoral Letter, "A Call to Prayer"

ON SUNDAY, September 26, 1915, the clergy in all the churches of the diocese read another pastoral letter of his Eminence entitled "A Call to Prayer." Therein the Cardinal lavished on his flock once more words of encouragement and counsel. "Our trials," he says, "are protracted; do not yield, I beg, to weariness; let us not cease to pray and do good; the sower must wait for the harvest; in its own good time it will come and will not fail us."

After showing that the conflict between good and evil dates from the beginning of the world and that the combat of Lucifer and the holy angels is being renewed unceasingly during the ages, the Cardinal recommends the people of his diocese to take advantage of the Feast of St. Michael, September 29th, and the first days of the rosary month, to redouble the ardor of their prayers for the early deliverance of their Belgian fatherland. He asks them to recite for the future with attention the prayer which is said after mass: "And thou, Prince of the Heavenly Host, we beg thee, cast down into hell Satan and the other wicked spirits who wander through the world for the ruin of souls." The letter concluded with an invitation to communicate once at least in the interval between September 29th and Friday, October 1st, or on Sunday, October 3rd, and while they invoked the Sacred Heart and our Blessed Lady, to place the combatants under the shield of St. Michael.

#### Invectives Beyond the Rhine

The Germans recognized themselves under the designation of "Satan and the other wicked spirits"; thus the letter let loose in the press beyond the Rhine a veritable torrent of invectives and menaces against the Cardinal. Despite this outburst, the Governor General did not act with the same precipitation in demanding explanations from his Eminence as he manifested on the occasion of the pastoral letter, "Patriotism and Endurance." For ten days he gave no sign of life. It was only on Tuesday, October 7th, that Baron von der Lancken telephoned to Canon Loncin, secretary of the archdiocese, saying that he desired to visit the Cardinal the following day for the purpose of making a communication to him on behalf of the Governor General. An appointment was made for his reception by the Cardinal at 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

"Despite your pessimistic anticipations, has not the country continued calm? Is there a single Belgian during the year that you have been treading our soil under circumstances known to you; is there, I say, a single Belgian that has touched a hair of a single German head? Has a shot been fired at any of your men?"

"No; because we hold a firm hand and keep a sharp lookout."

"Not at all, sir; it is not because you hold a firm hand and keep a sharp lookout. You would certainly admit that if political passions, as you affirm, were inflamed against you, there would be found here and there behind a wall or from the security of an upper story a hand armed with a revolver to fire on you. And among the thousands of our men who risk their lives endeavoring to join our army some few would be found perchance to do you an evil turn in the dark. You, on the contrary, have used every expedient to provoke a rising of the people, but the obstinate calmness of our men has thwarted you."

"So it is we who have provoked you? We are the provokers?"

#### "You Are the Provokers"

"Yes, sir; you are the provokers; and I will immediately furnish the proof."

"At the time my first pastoral was published, what did you do? You sent soldiers in the morning and night on bicycles and motorcycles and also in noisy motorcars through all the peaceful villages of Campine and Wallon district; you suddenly awakened out of their sleep the clergy, sacristans, servants in presbyteries, with threats on your lips and sometimes with a revolver in your hand; you made them open the churches and sacristies, the drawers of desks, in the hope of laying hands on my pastoral and this fine game lasted several days, and while in my letter of January 3rd the Governor General forbade, just as you do today, a rising of the people, the people remained calm in obedience to the counsels of long-suffering preachers by us. Then as now, today, the Belgian people continued submissive, not because of you, but in spite of you."

"And when I went to Brussels to sing a mass at St. Gudule, do you not recollect how you treated me?"

"In imagination, I can still see the rough fellow, who barred my way on the canal bridge at the city gate insolently demanding my identity papers."

"Oh! all our soldiers have not been brought up in drawing-rooms."

"Nor ours either. Accordingly, it is not on this intentional insult that I wish to base my contention. If I have recalled this fact, it is to emphasize another, namely, that when several eye-witnesses, exasperated at this spectacle of impertinence, had respectfully addressed to him with an act of docility, one of your officers ordered a bayonet charge to be made on women and children, who, without uttering a word, had laid upon me marks of respect. Was this, or was it not, calculated to provoke the people?"

"Probably."

"In that case, it will not be possible for me to reply as adequately as I could wish to each of the complaints tabulated in the Governor General's dispatch."

#### Von Der Lancken Sarcastic

"Oh, my mission is not to discuss, but to communicate to your Eminence the Governor General's views."

"Still, it is useful that I should thoroughly understand his views. In a word, I presume the Governor General wishes to know whether or not I embrace his way of regarding things."

"Probably."

"I believe I can recapitulate as follows, Baron, the communication which you have just read me:

- Your pastoral, "Call to Prayer," which was read in all the churches, accompanied at times by commentaries which emphasize still more its trend, is an incitement of a political nature; it is bound to produce among the masses a political ferment, and, in fact, we have noted in more than one place, fore-signs of a seditious outbreak.

- Your Eminence's attitude is so much the less justifiable in that you have given the Governor General reason to hope that in the general interests of the country you would co-operate with him in pacifying the people and also in that you are well acquainted with the benevolent dispositions entertained by his Excellency Baron von Bissing.

- This attitude is with difficulty reconciled with your Eminence's frequent appeals to the Governor General for the granting of favors to your fellow countrymen.

- Lastly, the fact that your Eminence's letter, which was contemporaneous with the German troops' temporary setback of some kilometers on the line of battle, is so striking that it is not susceptible of explanation save as the outcome of a preconcerted understanding of the Primate of Belgium with the allied armies; this serves to prove up to the hilt the political character of the pastoral letter.

"To these four complaints, which I believe epitomize your communication, I desire to make at once a comprehensive reply."

#### Cardinal Awees the Baron

The Baron's silence confirmed the Cardinal in thinking that his recapitulation was accurate.

"I, you say, Sir Baron, that my letter is seditious; that it inflames the people against the occupying authority, and that you perceive already here and there traces of popular excitement.

"This is the third time that you have ventured to address me in language such as this. The first time was last January, when my letter on 'Patriotism and Endurance' appeared; the second time in June, when, deprived of my motorcar, I was compelled to walk on foot to Vilvorde in order to reach Brussels, and this is now the third time that you renew such language.

"Has experience, then, not opened your eyes?"

## Cardinal Mercier's Story

Including his correspondence with the German authorities in Belgium during the war, 1914 to 1918, edited by Professor Fernand Mayence of Louvain University and translated by the Benedictine Monks of St. Augustine's, Ramsgate, England.

### CHAPTER XV

#### The Governor General Authorizes the Corpus Christi Procession

Governor General of Belgium, Brussels,  
May 18th, 1915.

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

I have the honor to inform your Eminence that I have given instructions to all the governors, military and civil, who are under my orders, to permit this year, on request, the customary processions of Corpus Christi. But I trust these processions will preserve their strictly religious character and that no advantage will be taken of them to make them serve political ends. Only religious hymns and banners will be permitted; national anthems (the Brabançonne, etc.) and national flags are forbidden. If it is usual for bands to take part in the procession, they are forbidden to play the national anthem and must confine themselves to playing an accompaniment to the religious chants. It is forbidden to fire off guns or fireworks.

I trust that your Eminence's good sense and influence will succeed in hindering any abuse of the liberty which I willingly grant in consideration of the interests of religion.

The Governor General,  
(Signed) BARON VON BISSING,  
Major General.

### CHAPTER XVI

#### Von Bissing Refuses to Allow Belgian Counsel to Defend Fathers de Bruyne and Boone, S. J., Arraigned Before the Military Tribunal of Antwerp

FATHERS de Bruyne and Boone, S. J., were arrested on June 12, 1915, on the charge of having helped young men desirous of joining the Belgian army to cross the frontier. After having been kept in the most rigorous solitary confinement for more than five weeks, they were to appear on July 27th before a court-martial to be held at Antwerp. The barristers, M. Franck and M. Vaes, had offered to defend the accused. The military court rejected this proffered legal assistance and claimed the right to nominate its own official counsel. The Cardinal, having learned these facts, intervened for the recognition of the rights claimed by the defendants. The Governor General agreed to defer the matter for further inquiry, but absolutely refused to grant the de-

defendants Belgian counsel. The former appeared before the tribunal on August 12th, 1915. F. Boone was condemned to twelve years' penal servitude; F. de Bruyne was acquitted.

Archbishop's House, Malines,  
July 26th, 1915.

To His Excellency Baron von Bissing, Governor General, Brussels.

Sir—Fathers de Bruyne and Boone have to appear before the Government "Gericht" at Antwerp on Tuesday, July 27th.

If I am not mistaken, the ninth paragraph of the "Kaiserliche \*Verordnung ueber das ausserordentliche Kriegsgerechliche Verfahren gegen Auslaender" recognizes the right of the accused to be defended before courts-martial.

The court-martial at Antwerp refuses the offer made by the two barristers, M. Franck and M. Vaes, to defend the prisoners, whom the accused themselves had chosen, and claims the exclusive rights of naming an official pleader for the defense.

The barristers likewise claim the right to examine collaterally with the official counsel the charges which have been made against the accused and the right of providing their clients with the means of defense. This demand has just been formally rejected.

It is clear then, sir, that the rights of defense guaranteed by the law of the Empire are not recognized here.

As the interests of priests belonging to my diocese are at stake, I deem it my duty to report this unfortunate incident to your Excellency and beg you to give an urgent order for the postponement of the suit that it may be possible for the defendants to prepare their defense in co-operation with counsel of their own choice.

Please accept, sir, the expression of my sincere esteem.

(Signed) D. J. CARDINAL MERCIER,  
Archbishop of Malines.

#### Belgian Lawyers Barred

The Governor General of Belgium, Brussels,  
Sept. 16, No. 955.

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

In answer to your Eminence's esteemed letter of July 26th, I have the honor to inform you that immediately after receiving it I gave orders to defer to a later date the depositions of the trial set on foot against the priests de Bruyne and Boone. I have submitted the whole of this affair to a minute inquiry.

I regret nevertheless to be unable to give effect to your Eminence's request; the necessities of war do not allow strangers to become advocates for the defense in a trial for treasonable acts. I have the honor to communicate herewith to your Eminence the certified copy of the regulation which I have sent on this subject to the competent authority.

I offer to your Eminence the expression of my sincere esteem and I have the honor to be your devoted servant.

(Signed) BARON VON BISSING,

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