

# "IS THERE A BELGIAN WHO HAS PLAYED A TRICK?" "UNBEARABLE," MERCIER'S REBUKE TO VON BISSING

## "Steadfast, but Self-Respecting in Their Patriotism," Mercier Writes Von Bissing in Defense of Priests' Utterances From Pulpits

### Explanatory Comment

ANew tenacity characterized the relations of Cardinal Mercier and Von Bissing following the return of the primate from Rome in 1916.

The third of the pastoral letters, "For the Feast of All Saints and All Souls' Day," had been written on October 15, 1915. The Governor General confessed himself pleased with its tone. He was, as is evident in the correspondence, anxious to keep on reasonably good terms with the prelate prior to Mercier's departure for the outside world. That the Cardinal would speak patriotically and frankly of conditions in Belgium was not to be doubted.

His reception by all classes in Italy, where he remained about a month, and in Switzerland, which he traversed en route, was exceedingly fervent. He was clearly recognized as one of the dominant spiritual forces of the war, a staunch patriot and an untiring champion of the truth.

These experiences unquestionably fortified his soul and strengthened him to comfort his flock vigorously and without reserve. The immediate result of this situation was a fourth pastoral letter, "On Our Return From Rome," which violently enraged the Governor General.

With the Cardinal now back in Belgium, Von Bissing had now no longer any need to assume a conciliatory pose. Moreover, the course of the war was productive of new accessions of German insolence.

Mercier returned on February 27, 1916, just four days before the Crown Prince had launched the first terrific attack on Verdun. On the 27th came the news of the capture of Fort Douaumont and the great losses by the French.

A wave of despair swept through the Allied countries. To be sanguine concerning one of the most highly organized and tremendous attacks in the history of warfare was not easy.

Von Bissing was vastly annoyed that at such a time the Cardinal should preach hope to his people and once more insist upon the inevitable triumph of their cause.

And so a new chapter in the correspondence began.

### CHAPTER XX

Guarding the Telephone Line at Vilvorde

AN ACCIDENT had happened in the district of Vilvorde to the telephone wires. What was the cause nobody knew. No matter, the town was made responsible and by way of punishment the magnates of Vilvorde were ordered by the German Commandant to secure the guarding of the line. Several priests and religious having been summoned to act as sentries, the Cardinal sent Von Bissing a letter of protest:

Archbishop's House, Malines, December 18, 1915.

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

Sir—The Kreishef has passed the order to the commercial authorities of Vilvorde to have the telephone lines guarded by the magnates of the commune.

In his proclamation of December 11, 1915, the imperial representative himself says explicitly: It is doubtful whether the line broke down. The immediate consequence is that no "misdemeanor" has been proved, and that therefore there is no case for repression.

Nevertheless the claim is made to impose on the parochial clergy of Vilvorde, on the director and professors, on the priests of the College of Notre Dame, on the Christian Brothers, the guarding for twelve consecutive hours of a telephone line.

The clergy has declared their inability to take up this task and I have approved their decision.

I feel sure, sir, that it will be enough to draw your kind attention to this incident to have an end put to this persecution and in anticipation I express my gratitude to your Excellency, and at the same time beg you to accept the expression of my sincere esteem.

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

The Governor General replied, throwing the responsibility of summoning priests and clerics on the communal authorities:

Government General of Belgium, Brussels, December 22, 1915.

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

I have the honor to inform your Eminence in reply to your letter of the 15th inst. that the appointment of priests for guarding the telephone line of Vilvorde is not due to my administration but to the Belgian communal authorities. I share your Eminence's view entirely that priests should not be constrained for this service. I have given orders to my subordinates to see to it that for the future the Belgian communal authorities do not commit such excesses in exercising their power.

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

(Signed) BARON VON BISSING, Lieutenant General.

### How the Truth was Garbled

The truth of the matter is this: A vicar of the town, the superior of the Christian Brothers, and several reverend professors of the college had been summoned by the communal authorities for sentry duty during the night. At this news the Dean Van Reeth went at once to the town hall. In the absence of the burgomaster he was received by an official, who told him that the orders had been given by the Germans. With a view of finding out for himself the exact meaning of these orders, the dean went to see the Commandant; the latter declared that he had indeed given orders that the telephone wires should be guarded by the magnates of the town, but that he had not specified any particular class of persons.

The dean hastened to write to the burgomaster the following letter:

Sir—I forbid all priests and religious of my district to act as sentries to guard the telephone line, and I assume myself the responsibility for this refusal \* \* \*

In spite of the entreaties addressed to him, the dean refused to withdraw his prohibition. The communal authorities summoned civilians to take the place of the recalcitrant priests and the incident was closed.

### CHAPTER XXI

Before Leaving for Rome the Cardinal Again Recommends to Von Bissing the Moral and Religious Interests of the Political Prisoners

Archbishop's House, Malines, January 11, 1916.

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

Sir—At the time of leaving Belgium, for a few days, I take the liberty of calling your attention once again to the religious and moral interests which are suffering a severe check in the prisons and rooms of the Commandant.

Nearly all those detained, and their number has always been increasing, are put into solitary confinement from the time of their arrest and remain there till their trial. The German authorities have made it a rule to forbid prisoners in solitary confinement to assist at religious services. The upshot of this is that these victims of the great misfortune which Belgium is undergoing, though they have for the most part done nothing with which their conscience reproaches them, are, in fact, robbed of all comfort for their souls and exposed to the dangers of moral depression.

This kind of life, sir, is unbearable, and I shall deem it my duty to notify it to my supreme chief, the sovereign pontiff.

The German authorities have no valid grounds for upholding such a regime.

In fact, the arrangements of the prison are such that each prisoner is in a different pew, whence he can neither see his neighbor nor communicate with him. The warden, stationed at the center of the semicircle, can see all the pews.

Besides this, the priest who says the mass and who preaches is a German. Your Excellency will call to mind that, having in view the keen patriotic feelings of the prisoners, I had asked that a Belgian priest might administer to the wants of religion, in regard to Belgian prisoners, under the guardianship of the German administration, and that this request has been shelved. The German chaplain alone therefore is able to influence the prisoners by word or deed. For the last time, I beg your Excellency to have pity on so many souls; there are more than 400 prisoners at this moment untried at Brussels, suffering from the stunting of their moral and religious instincts.

I beg of you more earnestly than ever no longer to refuse prisoners and condemned men facilities for confessing to a priest, to whom it is humanly possible to open their minds with full confidence. They have gone so far as to refuse a Belgian \* \* \*

*Note—The Cardinal left Belgium for Rome on January 12 and returned February 27.*

"Prisoners Are Robbed of All Comfort for Their Souls and Exposed to Dangers of Moral Depression," Cardinal Says as He Goes to See the Pope

Archbishop's House, Malines, March 6, 1916.

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

Sir—Having returned a few days ago to Belgium, I deem it a duty to thank your Excellency with all sincerity for the facilities you granted me for accomplishing my journey to Rome. I could only congratulate myself, both in going and coming back, on the courteous attentions which were shown me throughout my journey and at the frontier.

Your Excellency's dispatch No. 2021, February 29, reminds me that on the date, December 3, I said I had not been able to carry through an investigation which had then been requested of me about the sermons of the Rev. Wittemberg, vicar of St. Alice. As a matter of fact I did not know up to now and I still do not know what are the exact grievances about which I ought to institute an investigation. But this time your Excellency calls my attention to a sermon preached by the same M. Wittemberg on February 13, and you give details of the theme for which the preacher is held blame-worthy. I forthwith summoned the vicar to the archbishop's house and this is in substance the explanation he has given me: "The gist of my sermon," said he, "was to comment on the parable of the grain of mustard seed and the leaven. I expatiated on the wondrous growth of the church from its very beginning and the transformation effected in the world by the preaching of the gospel. In my peroration, I spoke of the prestige of the papacy at the present time. 'All eyes are turned on Benedict XV. All nations vie with one another for his sympathy. Till now Belgium had had no opportunity to make the voice of her bishops heard, but our archbishop and another member of the Belgian hierarchy are in Rome. We must all have confidence in them. It is, of course, difficult for the Holy Father to see the truth in the midst of different and often opposite versions, which come to him from every side. But let us be of good hope; already there is a rumor afloat that his Holiness has told the bishop of Namur that if he were one day invited to the peace negotiations, he would put down as a first condition the liberation of Belgium.'"

In the early days of January, 1916, I had the honor of writing to your Excellency that my letter would keep up the courage of our people and would prevent the seditious uproar which the German authorities, in their alarm, expected. Sure as I was of my ground, I refused to withdraw my letter and give orders to the clergy to read it. A whole year's experience must have proved to the most pessimistic minds that my forecasts were correct and that therefore we ought to be of one mind in wishing to harmonize the regulations and disciplinary measures of the occupying power with the respect due to the patriotism and the national dignity of the Belgian people. In substance, this is what the article in the Vingtieme Siecle means and in that sense I can only agree with it.

Kindly accept, sir, the assurance of my sincere esteem.

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

### CHAPTER XXII

Renewed Complaints of Baron Von Bissing Concerning the Preaching of the Clergy

Government General of Belgium, Brussels, P. A. I. 2037, February 29, 1916.

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

I write to inform your Eminence that on the 15th of February last, the Vicar Wittemberg, in the course of a sermon preached in the Church of St. Alice, expressed himself as follows: "The German people is a lying people. Till now the Pope has only heard the German version, now he hears the Belgian version. The Cardinal of Malines was received by the Pope at the same time as another Belgian priest; he will be back in a few days with very good news for the Belgians. The Germans will be made responsible for all that has taken place in Belgium; the Belgians will get a slice of Germany."

The Vicar Wittemberg has already given cause for complaint. Your Eminence, in your letter of December 3, 1915, had answered that you had not been able to carry through the investigation you had begun in his regard.

I now beg your Eminence to tell me how you will call this priest to account for his misbehavior, and what steps you are thinking of taking to prevent preachers in the future from making in the pulpit statements which, first, are slanders of the German nation and therefore of the army of occupation; second, are of a nature to disturb and rouse the Belgian people to revolt; and, third, are quite foreign to the preacher's office.

Accept, your Eminence, the wishes of my sincere esteem.

(Signed) BARON VON BISSING, Lieutenant General.

## 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.

Archbishop's House, Malines, December 11, 1915.

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

Sir—I do not know whether your Excellency thinks my letter No. 19182 still requires an answer from me.

As far as I am concerned, I have only one word to add, by way of conclusion, to my preceding letters.

Your Excellency has written me that I have passed over in silence the Abbe Cardyn's sermon at Ste. Gudule. If your Excellency will take the trouble to reread my last letter, you will discover your error. The only objection which the German authorities have, to my knowledge, brought forward against this sermon is grounded on an equivocation which I have laid bare.

I have summoned the priests whose names were mentioned in your Excellency's letter; I have listened to their versions, and I have let them know what my views were, and consequently what their own views must be about their ministry. I pledge myself, therefore, for the correctness of their behavior: "Burgschaft fur korrektes Verhalten der Geistlichkeit" (Surely guarantee for the behavior of the clergy.)

Your Excellency can rest assured that the clergy is not inciting the people to sedition. One year's experience must have convinced you that not one of the ugly prophecies put forward so often by those round you has been realized. Since the time our provinces have been occupied there is a single Belgian who has played a low trick on a German soldier?

Belgian folk are steadfast, but self-respecting in their patriotism, and the Belgian clergy is no stranger to this calm and noble attitude.

Accept, dear Governor General, the expression of my sincere esteem.

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

\*This letter has not been found. Government General of Belgium, Brussels, P. A. I. No. 10637, December 15, 1915.

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

Your Eminence's esteemed letter of December 3 crossed that which I sent you the following day. I have duly received your correspondence of the 11th. I have no intention to enter into detailed discussions of the sermons censured, though, e. g., in the summing up of Cardyn's case I cannot altogether see eye to eye with your Eminence. I insist above all on putting an end to all future abuses of liberty of worship.

It was a pleasure to me to hear that your Eminence sent instructions in this sense to certain ecclesiastics and that you pledge your word anew for the behavior of all the clergy. I rejoice thereat and hope that in this way priests will for the future confine themselves within the bounds of their religious mission, without my having to take steps, which, in the interest of the Church, I would rather avoid.

At the same time, I deem it my duty to make some observations on some of the propositions which have escaped your Eminence. I cannot share your way of thinking when you assert that the behavior adopted hitherto by the clergy during the occupation is not fraught with any danger. If during the year that has elapsed we have had no trouble to deplore, that does not mean that I must not be very wary about the future.

I am answerable for the tranquillity of the country and to uphold it I have at my disposal measures adapted to meet all emergencies. But I count especially on preventive measures. I wish to avoid new trials for the population, which might be caused by the passion or foolishness of a few. As matters stand, provocative sermons are having an evil influence, for they are awakening among their hearers consequences outside the churches, especially in times of military and political stress, as was the case about the time of last Michaelmas. This opinion, which I have held from the beginning of my entry into office, is shared by a number of witnesses to whom your Eminence can hardly take exception. The excerpts

from a Brussels newspaper, the Vingtieme Siecle, which I inclose with my letter, show clearly that such prudent addresses by preachers can be understood by the faithful as incitements to effective revolt. Such manifestations, were they tolerated, would by the very nature of things end by creating little by little a permanent danger.

From another point of view, also, these sermons, which I cannot tolerate, exercise a more inciting influence than your Eminence appears to think.

The people believe that these verbal excesses issuing from the empuces of the pulpit have the sanction of ecclesiastical authority behind them.

Thus Catholics who have in my offices expressed their disapproval of the theme of several sermons have said explicitly that they did not expect that, after your Eminence's pastoral letter, there would be any intervention on the part of ecclesiastical authorities.

In the report quoted from the Vingtieme Siecle the same thought comes to the surface. The pastoral letter of last Christmas appears to embody a program and to act as an encouragement to the faith-ful. I venture to think that this straightforward language has cleared up the situation, and I have a right to hope that the country which I have administered since the time of the war and on which I have not ceased to bestow my utmost care will enjoy tranquillity for its own greater advantage.

Accept, your Eminence, the wishes of my sincere esteem.

(Signed) BARON VON BISSING, Lieutenant General.

### Bold Words from a Brussels Paper

The following extracts of a correspondence from Brussels in the Vingtieme Siecle of December 2, 1915, were inclosed with the preceding letter:

How the Belgian people gave expression to their religious feelings.

### IMPRESSIVE DEMONSTRATIONS IN THE CHURCHES

For the house of God is the only place where one is still allowed to publicly proclaim the ardor of one's feelings as a citizen, where the national colors float freely, exposed to every eye, where resound, sustained by the peals of the organ, the hymns dear to our patriotic hearts, where from the pulpit words—noble and manly—are heard, by which are fed and nourished our energies.

The Belgian clergy, regular and secular, is equal to its task in these days of public mourning. The example given to them by the head of the episcopate, the program he has drawn up for them in the famous pastoral letter have stimulated the zeal of the most faint-hearted.

### THE PATRIOTIC APOSTOLATE OF PREACHERS

\* \* \* There are times \* \* \* when the public, spellbound and electrified by the proud words emanating from the pulpit, feels an irresistible desire to give full vent to the surging emotions by which they are agitated. They forget the majesty of the place and abandon themselves to the joy of breaking forth into raptures of delight.

On the evening of All Souls' Day in a Brussels church, where hundreds of spectators were squatting even on the steps of the altar, the advertised preacher, who wore the gown of the disciples of St. Dominic, gave out to his audience with a bluntness, excusable under the circumstances, that they must restrain themselves from any demonstration out of place in such a spot. \* \* \* The orator had taken as a theme for his sermon, "Patriotism." He spoke of the war, the country, its glories past, present and future, with an enthusiasm and an earnestness calculated to send a thrill through every one. His language was quivering, clear and inflamed. One felt that he was inspired with an ardent conviction which he was desirous of sharing with others. His eloquence set forth in bold relief the heroic deeds he called to mind, as well as memories from the past, put together in such a way as to make a picture which epitomized these events in a striking manner. Moreover, his language was so bold that his audience, panting for breath, was really intoxicated by hearing him express with a freedom scornful of possible reprisals, ideas and sentiments which harmonized so well with theirs.

Such harangues have a salutary effect on the crowd. We are comforted, braced up, electrified. If after that, the national anthem, "Vers l'Avenir," resounds stentoriously through the vaulting, sung with full voices, then immediately patriotism raises its head, our lips quiver \* \* \* It is at times like these that we do realize how dear our country is to us, and what sacrifices we are prepared to make to save her.

The Cardinal, looking upon the discussion as closed, left Von Bissing's last letter unanswered; nevertheless in the appeal which he addressed to him before going to Rome, in favor of political prisoners, he corrected the erroneous interpretation which the Governor General had made of certain passages in the article in the Vingtieme Siecle.

*Note—The passages printed in heavy type were underlined by Von Bissing.*

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