

# MERCIER ANSWERS VON BISSING'S "GRIEVANCES" AND PREDICTS SUCCESS OF BELGIAN ARMS

## "My Conscience Does Not Reproach Me," He Tells Governor General—Offers Pamphlet to Prove He Hasn't Violated Invaders' "Laws"—"Belgian People Wonderful"

### Explanatory Comment

THE following extracts from the "Return from Rome" pastoral of March 12, 1915, bear directly on the correspondence given below:

"One day," narrated the Cardinal, "I went to tell the sovereign pontiff that he could never doubt the inflexible piety of the Belgian people and that we had conceived the desire to give him very soon a new testimony of it. 'Holy Father,' I said to him, 'on the first Sunday of the month of May we wish to authorize a general communion in honor of your Holiness.'"

"As for me," replied the Holy Father, 'my honor is Belgium's!'

"Encouraged by that reception, I wrote to the Cardinals of Paris, of Armagh in Ireland, of Italy, and I have confidence that in all the Allied countries there will mount to heaven on the first Sunday in May the same eucharistic prayer. Presented to God by the august chief of Catholicity, this prayer will hasten the glorious relief of our dear Belgium. The Holy Father accords on that day to the cures throughout the whole country the faculty of giving to their parishioners the papal benediction, with a plenary indulgence applicable to the souls of the soldiers fallen on the field of honor."

"You have heard already, I believe, the echoes of the acclamations which, throughout the entire progress of our journey, coming and going, in Switzerland and in Italy, saluted the name of Belgium."

"Even suppose, my very dear brothers, that the final issue of the present gigantic duel in Europe and Asia Minor were uncertain, a fact won for civilization and for history is the moral triumph of Belgium. In union with your king and your government, you have consented to the immense sacrifice of the fatherland. By respect for your word of honor, in order to affirm that in your consciences right transcends everything, you have sacrificed your wealth, your homes, your sons, your swords, and, after eighteen months of constraint, you appear as on the first day, proud of your gesture."

it cast down its eyes before any one, and it has not committed a single revolutionary act.

Its only crime is that it will not die. The only crime ascribable to us—public administration, magistrates, clergy, hierarchy—is that we persist in thinking and saying: "Belgian people in the indissoluble union of your two races—Walloon and Flemish—you shall not die, you cannot die."

I have carefully read your accusation of March 15. I think I can sum up in a few words the charges against me which it contains.

Your Excellency says you were deceived at the time of my coming back from Rome. You expected from me, you say, an attitude full of moderation.

Incidentally, the letter of March 15 mentions the collective letter of the Belgian hierarchy to the German bishops.

Then it finds fault with me for having misused the passport which allowed me to carry out my journey to Rome.

Lastly and above all, you find fault with me for having indulged in my last pastoral in "remarks of a purely political nature."

Your Excellency expected then from me, as you say, "an attitude of moderation" at the time of my return to Belgium.

You wish, no doubt, to give me thus to understand that on your side you intended to act toward me with peculiar kindness.

To tell the truth, I have not been aware of it. When on Tuesday, February 29, at 6 a. m., I was entering Brussels I went at once to St. Louis's Institute. I there said mass and peacefully spent some hours of the morning. Meanwhile five spies kept watch on the institute, and when I proceeded to return to my cathedral at Malines at 11, two policemen in plain clothes, placing themselves at my side, escorted me to within a few yards of my archiepiscopal palace. Indeed, they were so very pressing in their attentions that they could have overheard a private conversation had I not warned my friend to lower his voice.

And your Excellency will not have forgotten that on March 6, a few days after my return and therefore before the publication of my pastoral, which was not read in the churches until the 12th of that month, the newspapers in the service of the German Government announced to the country nine fresh condemnations to death, six of which were followed by instant executions at Mons, for acts which were branded as political crimes. These condemned men were denied the consolation of making their last confession and final confidences to a Belgian priest.

Your Excellency knew of the collective letter of the Belgian episcopate to the bishops of Germany at the moment when you were kind enough to grant me a passport for Rome. Besides I have still to learn that a brotherly exchange of letters between members of the Catholic episcopate falls under the provisions of the penal code, or is forbidden by international law. On the other hand, it harmonizes entirely with the spirit and traditions of the Church.

**Mercier's Patriotic Restraint**

I am well aware that toward the end of my stay in Rome the German press exerted itself to bring about the withdrawal of my passport and tried to turn to my disadvantage the collective letter of the Belgian episcopate to the bishops of Germany and my interview with M. Briand.

But the collective letter which had not hindered my departure from Belgium could not consistently hinder my return. As to my interview with M. Briand, no one had any inkling of what took place at it, and could not therefore be justified in claiming that it served political ends.

The truth is that during the whole of my journey I practiced a reserve to an extent such as many thought excessive. I remember hearing a diplomat exclaim, "Can it be then that this poor Cardinal Mercier even during his stay here in Italy is still a prisoner of the Germans?" I granted no interview, delivered no speech, did not depart a single mile from my itinerary. I was too anxious to furnish no pretext for a fresh incident such as might be put forward as a plea to bar my return. I foresaw the danger and was forewarned.

The German press, nevertheless, has discovered, so it seems, a political discourse which I am believed to have delivered at Florence, "eine politische Rede in einer Nonnenschule." The fact is that I paid a visit to the Sisters of Providence at Badia di Ropoli, in the suburbs of Florence; they conduct a boarding school for young girls. When I entered the playroom the "Brabanconne" was played, one of the girls read me an address which I answered with a sympathetic reference to our absent country, but without uttering a word that could wound any one. Nothing more. There, as elsewhere, I preserved the reserve which my dignity and my own interest demanded.

The third complaint in your allegation of March 15, the chief one and the one most enlarged upon, is also the most vague and intangible.

I am accused of "indulging in purely political criticisms," of "having given an example of insubordination," of "having pursued an unbridled political propaganda," but no care is taken to define the meaning of the abstract term "political."

The specimens they bring forward of such propaganda enable one nevertheless to conjecture the sense of the accusation.

It seems that I have acted politically when "in contemplating the result of the war I have sought to raise unfounded hopes contrary to the stern reality of facts"; when in order to find ground for these hopes "I have quoted inaccurate statements emanating from incompetent persons"; finally when I said that "the decision I looked for might be brought about by the spread of epidemic diseases."

But what evil is there, pray, in encouraging a suffering people? Should I better second the policy of the occupying power if I drove the Belgians into a state of discouragement and despair?

**His Conviction of Victory**

Deep in my breast I confidently look for the success of our cause. This confidence is based on motives of the natural order, which in my pastoral I refrained from developing precisely to avoid the semblance of meddling with the calculations of politicians or the plans of headquarters. It is based besides on supernatural motives of which my conscience is the sole judge. I cherish this confidence. It sustains my courage and because I love my faithful flock I desire to impart it to them.

Once again where is the evil? I do not claim to hinder you from indulging opposite hopes, and when I read the pastorals and discourses of German and Austrian cardinals and bishops it never occurred to me to impute as a crime to them their exhortations to patience and hope addressed to their flocks and your soldiers. Why is it that what is religion beyond the Rhine is on this side political meddling?

But, say they, you deceive your hearers; "you quote the inaccurate statements of incompetent persons."

Incompetent? Is this quite certain? Suppose I had quoted diplomats, statesmen, military authorities? Why then, indeed, I should be justly accused of speaking politics.

Besides if the words quoted are inaccurate, why

are you so disturbed? If I had quoted the evidence in detail, had brought forward the names of persons who had been mixed up with the events alluded to, I could understand your fears of an agitation. But what reason is there to fear consequences from an anonymous report, which for that reason is considered worthless?

According to the German newspapers my crime is especially this, that I called down on our enemies the chastisement of an epidemic. I said simply in general terms that human means are not enough to secure success, for man, however resourceful he may be or however great his efforts, remains dependent on divine omnipotence. Man proposes, I said, quoting a proverb known to every one and which in every-day language embodies a thought inscribed on every page of Holy Writ—man proposes and God disposes.

No nation, whether friendly or unfriendly, was expressly aimed at in my pastoral, but the first on whom the logical context points the application of this scriptural saying and of the homely Christian proverb derived from it is the nation to which my words were directly addressed, the Belgian nation; her army and together with her the armies of the Allies.

Just before the phrase to which exception is taken I had written, "For us the future is not doubtful, but we must prepare for it and to prepare for it we must foster within ourselves the virtue of patience and the spirit of sacrifice."

And immediately after the offending phrase I said, "Purify your consciences; let purity, modesty, Christian simplicity, reign in your homes; prepare yourselves by contrition, etc."

Between these two ideas they wish to insert a desire of vengeance, a prayer that a miraculous epidemic should fall on the enemy's army. Thus the logical connection of thought is broken, and to break it was needful to do violence to the context and to truth.

"I must point out as particularly intolerable," your Excellency declares, "the allusion you make in your pastoral to an infringement of the religious liberty of the population in the occupied territory. Your Eminence knows better than any one how unjust this insinuation is."

I am quite willing to furnish the proof of my assertion; but with this stipulation, that I am given an understanding that no harsh proceedings shall be taken against the persons whose testimony I have to produce.

Meanwhile I notice in the allegations of March 15 an undoubted trespass on the liberty of my ministry. Your Excellency there reminds me that you have remitted to my tribunal for punishment, according to canonical discipline, certain ecclesiastics whose preaching had given umbrage to the occupying power. You add that for the future you will not act with like forbearance; the reason assigned for your change of attitude is the example of my own insubordination.

Your Excellency concludes that you have a duty to hold me morally responsible for the acts of the clergy and for the severe chastisements which they draw down on themselves; and you claim for so doing "the legitimate authority recognized in you by the law of nations."

**Answerable to Pope, Not Bissing**

Now if there is one matter which canon law and the law of nations withdraw from the purview of the civil power, it is the exercise of preaching. One of the most inviolable features of religious liberty is the prerogative of the apostolic word. In the Church of Jesus Christ the right of preaching is so sacred that it belongs de jure only to the Pope and the bishops. Priests speak only in the name of their bishop and under his control. You are quite right in holding me responsible for the preaching of my clergy, but my responsibility is not to the civil power, but to the Church and the sovereign pontiff.

Religious authority belongs of right divine exclusively to the Pope and to the bishops in union with him. The Church has at all times resisted the claim of the civil power that all her acts of jurisdiction should be submitted to its approval.

It is evident then that, if even the lawfully established authority of a state had the right to subordinate to its good pleasure the promulgation of papal or episcopal acts, the supreme prerogative of church government would belong not to the Church, but to the secular power. Every legislator is the born interpreter of his own laws.

Your Excellency is quite willing, so you say, to authorize me to transmit to the faithful communications which the Holy Father would desire to make known to them through me. That is something, sir, but it is not enough. The bishop is not only the

mouthpiece of papal instructions; he is himself a teacher by divine right.

I have the right to teach, to instruct, to guide my faithful people. I have that right, inasmuch as by the divine constitution of the Church I have that duty.

And in carrying out that duty I have no other responsibility except to my conscience and to my hierarchical chief, our Holy Father the Pope.

The law of nations codified in The Hague convention does not weaken, but rather strengthens the prerogative which I claim for the episcopate.

Under the rule of the Belgian constitution, the Church enjoys complete freedom. Article XIV of the constitution proclaims liberty of worship and its public exercise. Article XVI declares that the state has not the right to forbid to the ministers of any form of worship the publication of their acts.

Now The Hague convention (Article XLIII) imposes on the occupying power the obligation to respect the constitution and the laws of the country occupied.

When your Excellency brings before my tribunal priests whom you believe guilty of abuse in the exercise of their religious ministry, it is not merely an act of simple courtesy that you are performing, still less voluntary concession of a superior to an inferior. You are showing respect for a prerogative acknowledged to belong to the religious authority by canon law and also by the constitutional law of Belgium, which international law forbids you, as the occupying power, to violate.

And when the Feldgericht of the province of Antwerp condemned to deportation and imprisonment the noble and courageous Chevalier Charles Dessain, on the charge of having published my last pastoral letter, it violated at once canon law, and, through the violation of the Belgian constitution, international law.

As to these provisions of ecclesiastical law and of the Belgian constitution, one can understand that a foreign military court may not have fully grasped them, but it would not be easy to understand how the immediate representative of the imperial power, whose foresight and sincerity may not be called in question, should consent to allow them for a long time to be set aside.

**Final Plea for a Fair Hearing**

Each time that my attention has been called to an outbreak into which an ecclesiastic may have been betrayed while preaching, I have at once held an inquiry and have informed your Excellency of the result and in no single case has your Excellency persisted in the charge. It does not then appear that you have any reason to depart from your present method of procedure. In agreement with your Excellency's views I hold myself responsible for the preaching and the attitude of my clergy; but it is needful that I should be informed of blame-worthy acts laid to their charge, if any responsibility is to be effective.

I am still anxious to believe that the words "severe chastisement" that slipped from your Excellency's pen do not convey your fixed and final purpose. You will have the goodness to leave nothing undone to spare our priests, whose self-respect you may have admired, penalties which they do not deserve. You would not wish to deprive me of their assistance at a moment when more than ever it is necessary.

It would be just, sir, that the public which has learned of your complaint against the archbishop of Malines should also be informed of his reply.

Taking your stand on considerations which in your mind justified your conduct, you have not hesitated to inflict on me what you must regard as a stigma. Your letter ends with this stern conclusion: "You have misused your high functions and the respect due to your cloth, pursued an unbridled political propaganda, which would entail upon any ordinary citizen penal responsibilities."

It would be difficult for any one to find words of a more infamous character than those you have used in my regard. My conscience protests against this language and hurls back the stigma. This document contains my justification.

Trusting the chivalrous feelings of him whom I am addressing, trusting to the spirit of justice of him who has constituted himself my judge, I respectfully beg him to make known my defense to those before whom he has flouted his accusations against me.

Receive, I pray, Mr. Governor General, the assurance of my sincere esteem.

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

(CONTINUED MONDAY)  
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## Cardinal Mercier's Story

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

THE Cardinal merely acknowledged Von Bissing's letter, intending to answer it later in detail. A month afterward he told the Governor General that he had drawn up a document of justification. He offered to send it to him, with a request to communicate the same to the bishops of Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Archbishop's House, Malines, April 25, 1916.

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

Sir—When on the 20th of last March I acknowledged your letter of March 15, I told you that journeys necessitated by my pastoral duties prevented me from replying at once.

Since then I have prepared an answer. In this document I deal with each of the grievances which your Excellency has drawn up and suddenly and publicly launched at me and at my pastoral office.

The sending of the joint letter of the Belgian hierarchy to the German episcopate is the first grievance; it is, however, merely mentioned.

According to your second complaint, I am supposed to have misused the passport which I obtained through your Excellency's kindness for my journey to Rome.

The third grievance, the chief one, is that in my pastoral of March 7 I have indulged in remarks of a purely political character.

In proof of this third complaint, your accusation of March 15 bases itself on three different facts.

"I have tried, you say, in talking about the issue of the war, to raise hopes which were ill-grounded and out of keeping with real facts"; to "bolster up these hopes," I have quoted vague statements emanating from irresponsible persons; lastly I said that "the decision I hope for might be brought about by the spreading of epidemic diseases."

Against each of these accusations I set down the facts as they really are.

Then as the allegation talks very often about "politics" without defining this abstract word, I have thought that to clear the air of equivocations or to forestall them, it would be necessary to define the dispositions of canon law and constitutional law about the liberty of preaching.

Lastly, your Excellency has shown that you especially took to heart an allusion which I made about an encroachment on the religious liberty of the people dwelling in occupied territory. I have made it my duty to declare that I am ready to lay bare in detail my grievances under this head. Only I ask as a proviso that guarantees of immunity from punishment be granted me for the persons whose names and testimony I may have to quote.

My reply to the address on each of these points is therefore drawn up. It is at your Excellency's disposal. I am sincerely desirous of sending it to you.

But I cannot make up my mind to send it to you spontaneously. In fact, I ask myself what useful purpose would be served were I to do so.

Would it be to convince your Excellency? Why, you have warned me that all my explanations would be shelved; you have made up your mind that all discussion should be useless.

Would it be to enlighten the Belgian people? In the first place I could not do so without exposing myself to the risk of a year's imprisonment.

Moreover, I have confidence in my countrymen. Just as they have confidence in their archbishop and bishops.

Your Excellency thinks the Belgians credulous; how mistaken you are! Our little Belgian people is wonderful for its coolness and common-sense.

Accustomed to think for themselves, they place no reliance on opinions which people try to impose on them without discussion. For twenty months they have not been spared either alarming news, grief of separations, anxiety for the morrow, or intimidating procedures; yet is not your Excellency struck by the unshakable confidence which they hold in the future?

Would it be to justify myself that I ought to send my answer to your Excellency?

But my conscience does not reproach me for anything in which I have gone beyond the boundary marked out for me by my episcopal prerogative. Moreover, in the carrying out of my pastoral office, I depend on the jurisdiction of the Holy See, and my last pastoral tells clearly enough what reception the sovereign pontiff was pleased to grant me.

Nevertheless, I should like, sir, to be able to send you my pamphlet, because there is a fraction of the public to whose esteem and affection I am attached and with which you alone can put me in touch; I mean my brethren, the faithful, the clergy and the Catholic bishops of Germany and Austria-Hungary.

If one may judge by the language of the press, Catholic and non-Catholic, of these two countries our brethren must know and judge very ill of us. They know not what we are. In every case, where we have been put on our trial since the war began, they have only heard witnesses for the prosecution. You have published broadcast among them your own accusa-

tions. They know nothing of the point of my offense, my pastoral.

Could I only hope that as a loyal soldier and just judge you would consent to put before them my pastoral, your allegation and my justifying rejoinder, with what joy would I not send you, by return of post, this last document dealing with my case?

Not only would I congratulate myself on knowing my honor was safeguarded, but I would above all see in this communication to my brethren, whom I believe to be in good faith, yet in error, a means of paving the way for the time when peace is proclaimed, for preparing a reconciliation, in Catholic charity, of souls which suffer in feeling that they are so violently estranged from one another.

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

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

**"Let Bygones Be Bygones"**

The Governor General von Bissing met the Cardinal's desire with a curt refusal.

Government General of Belgium, Brussels, P. A. I. No. 5063, April 20, 1916.  
To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

In your esteemed letter of the 20th inst., your Eminence asks whether I am inclined to accept and hand over to the German bishops a detailed document to justify your behavior. The reasons which, after ripe consideration, have determined me to say in my letter of March 15th that I could not allow new discussions about this matter, still hold good. I regret that I cannot accede to your Eminence's wish. I am all the more inclined to hold fast to my opinion because from the hints which your Eminence gives about the contents of your document of justification I believe that further discussion would be useless.

The public and particularly the German bishops have been able to form their own judgment from the writings which have reached them. The last pastoral of your Eminence was published in extenso in the press. If discussion on this matter were reopened, only trouble could come from it, most especially among the Belgian people. It is precisely because I recognize that the great majority of the Belgian people behave correctly that I wish to avoid everything which might provoke a fresh agitation. Basing my judgment on the same grounds, I venture to think the best justification for your Eminence is to let bygones be bygones and to take account of circumstances and needs arising from our occupation of the country.

I offer to your Eminence the expression of my sincere esteem.

The Governor General, BARON VON BISSING, Lieutenant General.

**The Unaccepted Defense**

The following is the justification which Von Bissing refused to accept:

Archbishop's House, Malines, April 24, 1916.

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

Sir—A full month has elapsed since your Excellency thought fit to appeal to public opinion to bear witness that your behavior toward the Belgian people and myself has been beyond reproach, whereas mine has been blameworthy and seditious.

The procedure is assuredly a strange one. Nevertheless, I would not complain of it, if it had pleased your Excellency to join to your accusation the text of the pastoral which you indicted.

But, on the contrary, I have been accused and judged without a hearing. I have been condemned by a verdict which, it is declared, is irrevocable.

I have been made a defenseless butt for the comments of hate, the slanders and the ribaldry of the German press. Your government has forced the Belgian press to publish your accusations. It has allowed the free circulation of cartoons which insulted me and had I, in self-defense, published two lines of protest, my printer would have paid the service rendered me with one year's imprisonment.

In the letter which I had the honor to write to your Excellency under date March 20, I gave hopes of an early answer, which I intended to make to your letter No. 2606, dated March 15. But I preferred to put off my reply for two reasons.

In the first place, time soothes one's mind and allows one to reflect.

Secondly, it is well that your Excellency should have a fresh proof that you were mistaken when you believe the Belgians to be excitable and always threatening to disturb public order. Belgian patriotism is unconquerable and proud, but it is, and remains, dignified; it does not yield, but it retains its self-possession.

**"Belgian People, You Cannot Die"**

Already for twenty months, notwithstanding the dark memories which float about our atmosphere, in spite of annoyances, regulations without stint, requisitions and searches, condemnations to fine, imprisonment, deportation, death, which fall thick upon us like hail itself, this fair little people of Belgium keeps within bounds. It neither bows its head nor does

\*Note—One of these cartoons depicted the Cardinal under the shape of a parrot on its perch. Von Bissing standing up on his side with uplifted finger was telling him to hold his tongue.

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