

FURY OF GERMAN POLICE TURNED AGAINST PRIESTS IN BELGIUM

Raid on College of St. Michael, However, Only Succeeds in Discovery of Copies of Libre Belgique—Rector Is Arrested and Other Clergy Threatened With Imprisonment

Explanatory Comment

THERE is a desperate monotony about most of the relations of the German authorities with Cardinal Mercier. What deeply offended them was the unequivocal courage and frankness of the prelate's pastoral letters.

But the pastors were public documents. The spirit of them repeatedly revived all Belgium and passed triumphantly beyond the frontiers and the German ring of steel.

Could the Germans have had their way they would have promptly punished the Cardinal for his plain speaking. Such revenge, however, was impossible for several reasons.

As the prelate several times explained he was the servant, strictly speaking, of neither the German nor the Belgian Governments, but of the Church of Rome.

It was different with the humbler ranks of the clergy. The Germans trusted to suppression of the facts concerning their treatment of patriotic Belgian priests and to obfuscating the questions at issue so that the truth was difficult to unearth.

And so, whenever the Cardinal bared his brave soul in a pastoral, the Germans retaliated by new arrests among the clerics. It was the nature of the bully to prey upon those persons who were least able to conduct an imposing defiance.

Hence the re-enactment of well-worn situations. The game of pretended indignation over trifles was regularly played immediately after the Cardinal had discharged his most magnificent and inspiring heavy artillery.

As to accord special privileges to the clergy. To grant them after conviction, systematically, so to say, the remission of their punishment would be to ride straight toward the overthrow of justice.

Naturally your Eminence draws attention to the injury caused to the ecclesiastical education and you find therein an adequate reason for claiming exceptions in favor of the clergy.

But it is precisely for that reason that, according to my view, priests should, first and foremost, attend to the performance of their duties and not to run the risk of condemnation.

I think I am all the better authorized to speak in this way, seeing that their crimes, all things considered, bear forsooth the character of political demonstration.

In taking severe steps against clergymen who are guilty of any infringement of the law, the judicial authorities of the occupying power do not apply any principle which is not in keeping with Belgian legislation.

The penal code expressly punishes attacks made in the course of religious services, either against the government or against an act of public authority.

I need hardly tell your Eminence that no one more than the Governor General deploras the necessity of enforcing the code against priests. He regrets to see the clergy thus losing the respect and the dignity appertaining to the ecclesiastical state.

For this reason it is most desirable that for the future priests should not commit any breach of the law and that thus the occupying power should not be constrained to inflict punishment on them.

As justice must pursue its course with impartiality, it is only by preventing measures that it is possible to avoid the consequences resulting from the political action of the clergy, and to gain that end there is only one means, namely, that ecclesiastical authority should see to it that the clergy confine themselves to their religious duties.

The Governor General has previously tried to gain some co-operation toward this end. I may inform your Eminence that he is inclined to give it another trial.

With this end in view, he is about to address a letter to the bishops. He will explain the situation to them and will entreat them to influence their inferiors, in order to bring crimes and condemnations to an end.

I should be content could I hope that my frank and straightforward explanation might contribute to dissipate all evident misunderstandings.

The occupying power, I permit myself to repeat, much regrets being obliged to condemn guilty priests chiefly because it sees in the clergy representatives of the social order, the moral authority of which should remain unimpaired.

As, on the other hand, the ecclesiastical authorities realize that these convictions entail grave inconveniences, I cannot help openly stating to your Eminence that in all this I would like to keep in view our common interests.

I also think that my straightforward language cannot but favor mutual understanding and perhaps promote a collaboration in which neither party would sacrifice anything to the other.

I present to your Eminence the expression of my distinguished consideration and have the honor to be yours very devotedly.

(Signed) L. LANCKEN, Political Department of the Government General of Belgium, Brussels, June 8, 1916

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

I have the honor to inform your Eminence that at the moment of forwarding you my letter of May 30, I had not then learned of the following case:

That is the only reason why I did not mention it. Last Sunday a solemn religious ceremony took place in the Cathedral of Antwerp in the presence of your Eminence.

The sermon which was preached on the occasion by Frere Pauwels turned in great part on purely political topics. I do not wish to enter into details, but simply to state the fact that the preacher departed manifestly from his religious functions, and that the presence of your Eminence lent to this manifestation a special significance.

It will be difficult for other priests not to perceive in this sermon an encouraging example. Accordingly the occupying power cannot allow this incident to pass unnoticed, and it should at any rate have the assurance that Frere Pauwels has been invited by his ecclesiastical superiors to limit his activity to his religious duties.

Up to now I have mentioned this incident to no one. In the general interest I should be glad to learn that your Eminence has taken care to restrain Frere Pauwels from indulging for the future in like manifestations.

(Signed) L. LANCKEN, Archbishop's House, Malines, June 8, 1916.

To Baron von der Lancken, Chief of the Political Department, Government General, Brussels.

My dear Baron—As a result of the confidential conversation that his Excellency the Nuncio of Brussels has had the honor to have with you and of which he was good enough to inform me, I have personally supported Madame Wibin's request to his Excellency the Governor General, Baron von Bissing.

I am confident that this request will be favorably received and I thank you beforehand for the kindness with which you have promised to support it.

But I beg for more than this. I ask for your support on behalf of other matters affecting public order and which deeply concern me. Numerous priests engaged in teaching, notably the rector and prefect of studies of St. Michael's College, the director and several professors of St. Louis's Institute at Brussels are already in prison or threatened with imprisonment.

You are aware that our teaching staff is already greatly reduced, as several of our professors are in the army engaged as ambulance-bearers or chaplains. If the military authorities continue to persecute our clergy, we should be compelled to face the painful contingency of having to close our ecclesiastical colleges.

I particularly call your attention and the clemency of the Governor General to this situation at the moment when the military prosecutor is asking for years of imprisonment against the director and teachers of St. Louis's Institute.

Receive, Baron, the expression of my sincere esteem.

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

*Note—Madame Wibin was asking for a passport to Switzerland.

The Chief of the Political Department of the Government General of Belgium, Brussels, May 31, 1916.

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

In answer to your Eminence's esteemed letter of the 23rd inst., I have the honor to inform you that I have given my support to Madame Wibin's request to the Governor General and also that this will be granted.

The incidents that took place at St. Louis's Institute are seized by your Eminence as an occasion for reopening the question of putting the clergy under arrest. If your Eminence will allow me to speak frankly, a fresh exchange of views is in no way unacceptable to me.

In fact, ever since the beginning of the occupation this question has interested the German, quite as keenly as it has the ecclesiastical authorities. It appears to me, nevertheless, that up to the present your Eminence has not grasped quite accurately the point of view from which the occupying power regards the matter.

Even in your last letter you make use of the expression, "persecution of the clergy."

In no case can it be a question of persecution. When clergymen are condemned this is in virtue of the enforcement of laws and decrees before which everybody stands on an equality.

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