

SPARE CHURCH BELLS, CARDINAL CRIES IN FEAR OF SEIZURE BY FOE

"Metal Converted Into Bullets Might Be Destined to Carry Death Into Ranks of Our Countrymen," Says Appeal to German Governor General of Belgium

Explanatory Comment

IT WAS inevitable that Cardinal Mercier should be deeply and indignantly stirred by definite hints of a German plan to commandeer the church bells. Belgium has long been proud of its metallic choirs, which have in a way become poetic symbols of the nation.

In no country in Europe has the art of bell playing been brought to such perfection. Bells typify the national spirit. They are enriched by legendary lore. They have inspired poets at home and abroad, old and new.

Longfellow paid his tribute to the belfry of Bruges. Emile Cammaerts, in his impassioned poem of the carillons, revealed the soul of Belgium in travail and adversity. His refrain, "Ring, Belgium, ring!" thrilled the hearts of his countrymen in the tragic night of servitude.

As musicians, the Belgians are widely known as obse players. But their mastery of this lovely woodwind is less exclusive than their skill with the carillon. This is an arrangement for playing tunes upon a set of bells by mechanical means. A keyboard resembling that of an organ is used and is to be found in virtually all the important Belgian churches. A set of from twenty to thirty or sixty to seventy bells is employed, giving a remarkably wide scope for melodies and harmonies and permitting performances in various keys.

The carillons of Louvain and Bruges contain forty bells; the carillon of Malines, the Cardinal's city, has forty-four, while in the tower of the Antwerp Cathedral there are upward of ninety bells. The largest of these was cast in 1507. Charles V, at the height of his glory, stood sponsor for it.

The Cardinal was speaking of a profoundly sincere national sentiment when, even apart from their religious significance, he defended the bells and steeple firm for their inviolacy.

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.

[Continuation of Cardinal Mercier's letter to Baron von Falkenhäusen.]

I BEG the competent authority to make known to us once and for all whether or not it will allow us to send Belgian priests in communion with their bishops to help our countrymen.

If it answers in the affirmative, it will thereby supply proofs of its respect for religious liberty and we shall thankfully hasten to the aid of our abandoned brethren.

But in case of a negative reply, I would ask your Excellency to no longer allow censored Flemish newspapers of the extremist section (flamingant) and certain dishonest individuals hiding behind their German protectors both at Gottingen and here, full liberty to calumniate me by alleging that I am a Flemish confessor in Germany and that I am an enemy of the Flemish people.

I have reason to believe that a letter treating of confidential ecclesiastical affairs, addressed to the head chaplain of the German army in Berlin, has not reached him. Will your Excellency allow me to send him a copy in a sealed envelope and yourself insure its safe arrival at its destination? I shall be exceedingly obliged if you will do me this favor.

Accept, sir, the assurance of my sincere esteem. (Signed) D. J. CARDINAL MERCIER, Archbishop of Malines.

Refuses to Send Letters

Political Department of the Government General of Belgium, Brussels, Aug. 17, 1917.

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

The Governor General, after reading your Eminence's letter of the 1st inst., told me that he did not intend to answer it himself. I have just come back to Brussels. On my return his Excellency drew my attention to the necessity of dealing in detail with certain points raised by your letter and this I hasten to do.

First. As regards Sister Celine's pension, the Governor General has already declared to your Eminence that no German authority has compelled the superiors of the Poor Servants of Mary Immaculate to contribute 2000 marks toward Sister Celine's maintenance in the Ursuline convent. According to further information received, we have nothing to add to this declaration.

Second. In this same letter of July 26 the Governor General already observed that the prosecution of the sisters of the Congregation of Mary Immaculate could in no wise be looked upon as an encroachment on the domain of religion by the civil power. The sisters were convicted for infringing decrees of German decrees, viz., one sister for having retained and circulated noncensored publications and for insulting Germans; another for insulting Germans and a third for being in possession of and circulating noncensored publications, for insulting Germans and having no identity card.

These are misdemeanors and well within the province of the civil tribunal and not of the ecclesiastical authorities. Offenses against the common law committed by ecclesiastics are everywhere judged by ordinary tribunals.

Third. As regards the appointment of Belgian priests to internment camps in Germany, obviously we could only admit those priests who, in our judgment, could be trusted not to bring any anti-German influence to bear upon the prisoners. The choice of these priests could, therefore, not be left exclusively to Belgian bishops; it would have to be made in agreement with the competent German authorities. If no solution of this problem can be reached, the special care of the prisoners must be left exclusively in the hands of German priests. There is nothing extraordinary in this, for neither in France nor in England are religious services for German prisoners entrusted to priests sent from Germany. Besides the spiritual interests of Belgians interned in Germany have not hitherto been neglected; they have always been attended to in a satisfactory manner.

Fourth. Your Eminence believes that a letter addressed by you to the head Catholic chaplain of the Prussian army, Doctor Joppen, of Berlin, has not arrived at its destination. It must be noted, however, that as a sequel to a letter from your Eminence, the head chaplain has sent the Governor General a detailed report on two Flemish priests. The presumption is that the said letter is the one your Eminence has in view and which therefore has been duly received. It is not possible for the Governor General to transmit the sealed letters you forwarded to him to their addresses.

I offer to your Eminence the expression of my sincere esteem. (Signed) LANCKEN.

CHAPTER XLIV

The Governor General Threatens to Seize the Church Bells

A RUMOR had become current throughout occupied Belgium that the military authorities were about to seize church bells. With this rumour...

publication of an order to this effect, his Eminence, in conjunction with their Lordships, the Bishops of Namur and of Liege, expressed his fears to the Governor General and protested beforehand against sacrilegious acts, such as would be committed by seizing the bells.

Archbishop's House, Malines, September 9, 1917.

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

Sir—For some time past a rumor has gained currency among the people giving rise to a very keen and painful impression on all sides. There is a question, they say, of removing the bells from the churches.

Our first impulse was to pay no attention to this rumor, especially as it... had little foundation in fact, in view of the solemn assurances we had from time to time received from the German authorities, that during the time of occupation the rights of the church would be respected. But certain events give us cause for anxiety, especially the seizure of bells in the war zone No. 1 in occupied France; the taking away of bells used for civil purposes in certain districts of Belgium and lastly a bell which was used for worship has just been violently carried off from Magester-lez-Laroche, without the local authorities being advised or warned that this would be done. This last act, the result, no doubt, of a mistake, was at once reported to the military Governor General of Luxembourg by the diocesan authorities of Namur, as being formally contrary to the decree of December 13, 1916, according to which objects belonging to churches and other buildings or places used for ecclesiastical purposes are exempt from seizure and delivery.

"Do Not Shake Our Confidence" These incidents, Excellency, do not shake our confidence, but they fill us with apprehension and will serve to justify our addressing you a collective letter today to demand protection for the rights of the church and ecclesiastical property—a protection which Article 46 of The Hague convention entitles us.

We fear lest the prolongation of the war may some day threaten with danger the weighty interests of religion and Christian art, of which we are the natural guardians. We hope the German authorities will listen to our appeal. We conjure you to intercede with the higher command of the army, should the need ever rise. It is superfluous to repeat to your Excellency that it is the duty of the Belgian hierarchy to keep the patrimony of the church intact and to oppose every act or attempt contrary thereto. Catholic liturgy does not merely look upon bells as objects pertaining to worship; it has included them in the category of sacred vessels. They are consecrated to divine worship through being anointed by the bishop and by the prayers of the church. They must be retained for their exclusively religious purposes and only used for sounding the praises of God and summoning the faithful to prayer. They cannot be alienated without the consent of the ecclesiastical authorities. Their removal, their being utilized for profane purposes, would be looked upon by our people as a sacrilege. Moreover, how painful would it be for the faithful to think that the metal from which the bells are cast and which is as a rule provided by their generosity, might be converted into guns or ammunition for the use of a hostile army and might be destined to carry death into the ranks of their own countrymen, their own children.

We shall be happy to receive from your Excellency a word to calm our fears and to enable us to pacify our sorely tried people.

Accept the assurance of our sincere esteem. (Signed) D. J. CARDINAL MERCIER, Archbishop of Malines.

(Signed) M. H. RUTTEN, Bishop of Namur.

(Signed) TH. LOUIS HEYLEN, Bishop of Liege.

The Governor General gave an evasive answer. Government General of Belgium, Brussels, September 29, 1917.

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

In the letter you wrote me on the 16th inst., your Eminence, in conjunction with their Lordships, the Bishops of Namur and Liege, expresses fears lest the bells in Belgian churches be seized. The hierarchy contemplates a case in which military necessities might lead to the execution of such measures.

I am able to answer that so far there has been no reason for assuming any definite attitude as regards the question raised in this appeal.

I offer to your Eminence the expression of my sincere esteem. (Signed) VON FALKENHAUSEN, Lieutenant General.

The Cardinal acknowledged the receipt of the Governor General's letter as follows: Archbishop's House, Malines, October 4, 1917.

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

Sir—I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your Excellency's letter of the 29th inst., with reference to the preservation of bells consecrated to Catholic worship, and I thank you in the names of my colleagues, the Bishops of Namur and Liege, and in my own, for having quieted our anxiety in this matter.

Please accept our assurance of our sincere esteem. (Signed) D. J. CARDINAL MERCIER, Archbishop of Malines.

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