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Moved by Faith: Transnational experience, local perspective. The Belgians at the Eucharistic Congress of Chicago (1926)

Cécile Vanderpelen-Diagre

Religious anthropology has shown the extent to which pilgrimages are major experiences in the lives of believers: a physical test involving a physical journey, a spiritual test involving expectation and hope with regard to an «extraordinary»¹ event, a social test of faith shared across geographic borders and languages.¹ The congresses that flourished in the last quarter of the 19th century thanks to technical progress in the field of transport added a more explicitly political character to these dimensions. At a time when cities were growing exponentially, these vast religious gatherings – whether they had a scientific or a spiritual vocation – sought to enable religions to take possession of the public space and to make their community of believers visible. While nation-states and cities competed with one another on the occasion of World's Fairs, the Church demonstrated its own ability to mobilize its human and material resources. This was particularly true during the interwar period, the «age of the masses» during which the Catholic Church established a particularly dynamic active presence in the public space (big gatherings, processions, pilgrimages).² The Eucharistic Congress of Chicago in 1926 exacerbated this dynamic through the profusion of means implemented. The million pilgrims who had come from around the world to take part in it were invited to attend the celebration of a thousand masses in a single morning, of a million communions offered to the intentions of the Pope

¹ Charles Keith, *Catholic Vietnam: a church from empire to nation*, Berkeley 2012; John Eade, *Pilgrimage, politics and place-making in Eastern Europe: crossing the borders (Ashgate studies in pilgrimage)*, Burlington 2014; Albertus Bagus Laksana, *Muslim and Catholic pilgrimage practices: explorations through Java (Ashgate studies in pilgrimage)*, Burlington 2014; Philippe Martin, *Pèlerins: XV^e–XXI^e s. (Biblis 144)*, Paris 2016.

² Etienne Fouilloux, *Courants de pensées, piété, apostolat. Le catholicisme*, in: Jean-Marie Mayeur/Charles Pietri/Marc Venard (ed.), *Histoire du christianisme des origines à nos jours. vol. 12: Guerres mondiales et totalitarisme (1915–1958)*, Paris 1990, 116–339.

by thousands of priests and, lastly, to particularly impressive processions if we can believe the press of the day. The latter was proud to publish never-before-seen photos of the event in record time thanks to airplanes.³ The famous news-reel company Pathé News made a film of the event.⁴ For its part, the Church commissioned the Fire Fox Corporation to make a film. Fire Fox, whose director, Winifred Sheehan, was a fervent Catholic Irishman, realized a 96-minute film in the style of the historical epics that were in fashion at the time.⁵ Moreover, the organizers used groundbreaking technology. Thirty telegraph lines were specially set up for the press. To ensure that the voices of the speakers were heard by the hundreds of thousands of listeners, engineers created a machine that amplified the human voice a million times and broadcast it through 45 loudspeakers.⁶ Thanks to this equipment, it is now possible for historians to visualise the *«spectacle»* that this event represented. But how was it experienced by participants? Eucharistic congresses sought to develop personal devotion while reinforcing the feeling of a belonging to a community of believers. What was actually the case? In order to answer this question, the reception by the press and the memories of the writer Henri Davignon, a Belgian participant at the Chicago Congress, are particularly insightful. But before we analyse them, we must retrace the history of the relations between Belgium and the United States. The Belgian pilgrims arrived in America imbued with this history.

1914: the discovery of America by the Belgian authorities

The image of the United States held in Belgium cannot be understood without reference to the history of diplomatic relations between the two countries. When the great European powers recognized the existence of Belgium in 1830, they imposed a neutral status on the country. While this decision kept Belgium out of conflicts, it also entailed that the country scarcely involved itself in foreign affairs, and consequently invested very little in territorial security. The country was therefore practically unarmed when it was invaded by Germany on August 4, 1914. This, among other consequences, propelled the country into the game of international alliances. As early as August 28, 1914, the government sent a mission to the United States to plead its case. The mission was headed by the Minister of Justice, Henry Carton de Wiart, one of the thinkers of the emerging

³ See e.g.: Worship in rain at Mundelein, in: *The Chicago Daily News*, 21 june 1926.

⁴ Eucharistic Congress, British Pathé, 1926. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpyFRj2ttd0]. Accessed 30 March 2018.

⁵ Adrienne Nock Ambrose, *Appealing to the «Movie Mind»: The 1926 Interantional Eucharistic Congress and the Rise of Emic Film in America*, in: *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 34/3 (2016), 51–73.

⁶ The Chicago Congress was from the very first day a splendidous marvel, in: *La Croix*, 22 June 1926, 1.

Catholic democratic movement and an influential figure in the Catholic party. Subsequently, many important Belgian personalities, including several professors of the Catholic University of Leuven, undertook the same voyage to promote the public image of an unjustly oppressed Belgium. Cardinal Mercier sent his deputy, Father Rutten, on a tour of the US in 1915, whereas the Reverend Father Stillemans, who lived in the United States, delivered numerous lectures and pamphlets.⁷

This propaganda proved successful in setting off a vast movement of sympathy for «poor little Belgium» among the American people, and also prompted the US government to participate in the delivery of supplies to the Belgian population through the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB), which was created for the purpose. During the occupation, the Commission dispatched near to four million tons of food supplies to the Belgian population. In addition, the indignation aroused by the invasion of Belgium triggered a movement of opinion in the American population which eventually led to US adhesion to the Allied camp, and subsequently to their entry into the war. Or at least, that was one of the arguments put forward by the American government to justify its policy. During the First World War, there grew between Belgium and the US a relationship which may be qualified as «privileged».⁸ How was this relationship to evolve once the Armistice was signed?

From a diplomatic point of view, and without going into the details of the long negotiations which preceded it, it should be pointed out that the Treaty of Versailles awarded both financial and territorial advantages to Belgium (the Eastern Cantons), mainly thanks to the pro-Belgian commitment of Colonel House, advisor to president Wilson.⁹ In the 1920s, the Belgian authorities sought to preserve this American sympathy rooted in the common war experience. Until 1925 they fostered the hope to see their pre-Armistice debt cancelled, as specified in the Treaty of Versailles. After the Washington Agreement (1926), Belgium continued to hope that its debt would be cancelled or reduced in a ratio proportional to the reduction of German reparation payments. The concern to preserve the image of «Poor Little Belgium» was not, however, the ob-

⁷ Caroline Sägesser, *Les relations belgo-américaines pendant l'entre-deux-guerres*, Brussels 1991, unpublished master thesis, 20.

⁸ Michaël Amara, *La propagande belge et l'image de la Belgique aux Etats-Unis durant la Première Guerre mondiale*, in: *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis-Revue belge d'histoire contemporaine*, 30 (2000), 1–2, 173–226; Bénédicte Rochet/Axel Tixhon, *La petite Belgique dans la Grande Guerre: une icône, des images. Actes du colloque de Namur, 24, 25, 26 et 27 novembre 2010*, Facultés universitaires Notre-Dame de la Paix, Namur 2012.

⁹ Belgium obtained the restitution of literary and artistic works seized by the Germans and the replacement of those that had been destroyed; the payment by Germany of Belgian loans made prior to the Armistice, and an advance payment of 2.5 billion French francs on the first reparation payments owed by Germany.

ject of a well-established political plan: most of this propaganda was the work of a single man, Emile de Cartier de Marchienne, initially the Belgian ambassador to the United States, later to be appointed ambassador in London during the war, where he was to pursue a «transatlantic» policy.¹⁰

On the Belgian side, the Catholic intelligentsia would remain largely pro-American during the 1920s. It must be said that it was strongly impressed by the triumphant welcome that Cardinal Mercier and the Royal family were given in the US. The Cardinal undertook a tour of North America just after the war (September 9 to November 2, 1919), visiting several cities where he was received with great pomp. At about the same time, the King, the Queen and the Duke of Brabant disembarked in New York to start a journey which took them across the US continent to California. During the two months of the trip, the royal delegation was accompanied by two men of letters from the Catholic world, Franz Ansel and Pierre Goemaere. At their return, both of them published a book relating in lyrical detail – the first in the vein of a mediaeval chronicle – the triumphant welcome enjoyed by the sovereigns. Ansel and Goemare were influential figures: the former was a high-ranking civil servant in the Ministry of Public Education, who would become a member of the Royal Academy of French Language and Literature of Belgium. The latter, Pierre Goemaere, was about to set up a prestigious journal, the *Revue belge*, which under his editorship would meet with certain success, supported by the prestige and the money of his father's publishing house, which also published the official documents of the political world and prominent Catholic dignitaries. Both Ansel and Goemaere travelled all over Belgium, delivering lectures on their American experience.¹¹ But the high opinion that the Belgian high society held of the US during the 1920s was also strengthened by the memory left by Brand Whitlock, who from 1913 onwards stayed in Belgium as a minister resident for six years. Not only did he set up the Commission for Relief in Belgium and play a key role in providing food supplies for the country, but until his recall in 1919 this refined man of letters did not cease to display a vivid interest in the country's cultural life.¹² For many, he came to symbolize the kind American older brother...

Significantly, in 1924, a reception at the Royal Academy of Belgium gathered the intellectual and political elites of the country to commemorate the ter-

¹⁰ Sägesser, *Les relations belgo-américaines* (see note 7), 128–166.

¹¹ Franz Ansel, *Le grand voyage du Roi des Belges aux États-Unis d'Amérique*, Brussels/Paris 1921; Pierre Goemaere, *A travers l'Amérique avec le Roi des Belges*, Paris 1920. In the 1920s, the subject also inspired other men of letters: Marnix Gijsen, *Ontdek Amerika*, Bussum/Gent 1927 and Pierre Daye, *Sam ou le voyage dans l'optimiste Amérique*, Paris 1922.

¹² See e.g.: Countess Carton de Wiart, Brand Whitlock, in: *Revue générale*, 10.07.1934, 1–21.

centenary of the foundation of New York. In the speech he pronounced in front of the King, Henri Carton de Wiart elaborated on the historical links uniting his country and America, insisting heavily on the Belgian immigrants who «made» the United States, and concluding that: «it is the same burning need for justice, the same sacred respect for individual freedom, the same love for work, the same thirst for progress, the same concern for honor» that binds our two peoples together.¹³

Another, possibly even more immediate consequence of the privileged relations sprung from the wartime concerns was the creation of the Commission for Relief in Belgium Educational Foundation, which was later to become the Belgian American Educational Foundation, set up by Herbert Hoover in 1919 to finance the exchange of students between Belgium and the US. Between 1920 and 1939, 436 Belgian students were granted scholarships to go study on the other side of the Atlantic, and 189 Americans came to Belgium. One of the most immediate effects of the stay of Belgian students in the US obviously was the acquisition of technologies, know-how and entrepreneurial management skills in the fields of science, medicine and economics.¹⁴ A less tangible, but equally important effect was the social experience acquired in the confrontation with «another culture» of which some of the returnee students became witnesses, widely broadcasting their expertise on the matter in the press. Five former fellows, who went on to have brilliant careers, Paul van Zeeland, Charles du Bus de Warnaffe (both co-students in 1920), Gaston Eyskens, Marnix Gijsen and Jean-Charles Snoy d'Oppuers, all of them graduates of the Catholic University of Leuven, regularly took up their pens to write about the United States in the main journals of the Catholic intelligentsia: in the *Revue catholique des idées et des faits* (published under the auspices of Cardinal Mercier) and *La Revue générale* (the mouthpiece of the Catholic Party since 1865). The overwhelming presence of francophone voices in the domain under study can be explained by the fact that the concerns of the Flemish intelligentsia focused on the issue of the emancipation of Flemish culture (the emblematic careers of Marnix Gijsen and Gaston Eyskens in this respect will be dealt with below). It should also be remembered that in 1930, even though 4.135 million Belgians spoke Dutch vs. only 3.513 million speakers of French,¹⁵ the vast majority of the educated classes still expressed themselves in the language of Voltaire; not least because higher education was almost exclusively provided in French (only the University of Ghent

¹³ Henry Carton de Wiart, Le tricentenaire de la fondation de New-York, in: *Revue catholique des idées et des faits*, 23.05.1924, 7.

¹⁴ Kenneth Bertrams, The domestic uses of Belgian-American «mutual understanding»: the Commission for Relief in Belgium Educational Foundation, 1920–1940, in: *Journal of transatlantic studies*, 13/4 (2015), 326–343.

¹⁵ According to the 1930 population census (*Annuaire statistique de la Belgique*, 1955, 99).

operated in Flemish in 1930):¹⁶ even at the University of Leuven, situated in the Flemish part of the country, classes taught in Dutch were rare. As a result, diplomatic contacts remained largely at the hands of the French-speaking élites.

A final important event to be mentioned in the rapprochement between Belgium and the US is the reconstruction of the library at the University of Leuven, which had been burnt down by the Germans in 1914. Two thirds of the reconstruction were funded by Hoover and the Commission for Relief in Belgium Educational Foundation. The building, inaugurated in 1928, is the work of an American architect, Whitney Warren.¹⁷ Small wonder, then, that this University should have become the source of a movement seeking to build cultural and institutional bridges between Belgium and the US.

Religious affinities

Starting with the earliest missionary enterprises of the 17th and 18th centuries, Belgian clergymen set off to evangelize North America, whether the «savages» or the protestant converts. This movement gained momentum in 1857 after the creation of the *Collège américain* of Leuven, which in the first 13 years of its existence, could pride itself on having sent no less than 179 priests to the US and Canada, five of whom were to become bishops. By the end of the 19th century, the number of Belgian priests operating abroad had risen to about 800.¹⁸

Besides the missionary effort, more strictly intellectual exchanges were encouraged by the *Institut supérieur de philosophie* of Leuven. This institute, founded in 1889 by Désiré-Joseph Mercier as a center set up to restore and spread the scholastic philosophy in accordance with Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879), had already taken an interest in the US before the war, both to spread its teaching and because it was seduced by the philosophical currents developing there. In 1914, one of the Institute's students, Father René Kremer, wrote a thesis on American neo-realism. In his introduction, he suggested that the movement across the Atlantic could provide an alternative to the philosophical «drought» left in the wake of materialism, scientism and idealism. His purpose was clear: to find and give explicit expression to the points of contact between neo-realism and Thomism. This, he felt, constituted an opportunity not to be missed, to reconcile modern realism and Christian realism. In philosophical terms, this meant translating into contemporary terms concepts with

¹⁶ Anne-Marie Simon-Van der Meersch/Etienne Langendries, 175 jaar Universiteit Gent. Ghent University, 1817–1992: een verhaal in beeld. A story in pictures, Ghent 1992.

¹⁷ Chris Coppens/Mark Derey/Jan Roegiers, Universiteitsbibliotheek Leuven, 1425–2000, Leuven 2005, 191 sq.

¹⁸ Matteo Sanfilippo, Un regard original sur les Belges en Amérique du Nord. L'apport des sources ecclésiastiques romaines (XVIII^e–début du XX^e siècle), in: Les immigrants préférés, les Belges, ed. by Serge Jaumain, Ottawa 1999, 53–74.

which his forerunners had been grappling since the Middle Ages: the relevance of a sensual and intellectual grasp of knowledge, the intentional correspondence between things which demonstrates the existence of a common essence between them, and therefore of a universal essence. The theological implications were crucial, inasmuch as they referred back to fundamental issues: how can it be explained that the three divine hypostases are one and the same God? How can one distinguish a God who is One from the common substance which causes three men to be men despite the differences between them?¹⁹ Although he kept aloof from the neo-realist positions, which had nothing Christian about them, Kremer could not hide his attraction for a current of thought which he perceived as most promising.²⁰

His optimism was shared by the *Institut supérieur de philosophie* and found its expression both in regular and detailed articles on the American realist movements in the Institute's journal, *La Revue néo-scolastique* and in its efforts to erect bridges towards the other continent, whether by training foreign students or by sending professors abroad.²¹ The *Revue néo-scolastique* carefully observed and recorded the development of classes and studies on Saint Thomas in that part of the world. It surveyed the work carried out at the American Catholic Philosophical Association, to which some of its professors were regularly invited to lecture. During the war, one of the most eminent of these, Maurice de Wulf, a renowned specialist of the Middle Ages and a profoundly committed disciple of Cardinal Mercier, delivered lectures on medieval philosophy at Harvard University (Cambridge, Mass.) and at Cornell University (Ithaca). From 1920 to 1925, he taught at Harvard and after that wrote articles for the *Harvard Theological Review*, *The International Journal of Ethics* (Chicago), *The Catholical Historical Review* (Washington), *The Commonwealth* (New York) and *New Scholasticism* (Washington).²²

This enthusiasm reached its heyday in 1926 at the Harvard Congress of Philosophy, which the director of the Institute, Prelate Léon Noël, attended himself. It was the first time that this conference, which was organized for the first time in Paris in 1900, took place in America. For Léon Noël, it was a sign of the «miraculous prosperity [the US] enjoys». He observed that it was only na-

¹⁹ See e.g.: G. A. McCool, Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century. The Quest for A Unitary Method, New York 1977; Olivier Boulnois/Jean-Yves Lacoste, Réalisme, in: Dictionnaire critique de théologie, Paris 2007, 1185–1189 and M. M. Gorce, Réalisme, in: Idem, 1834–1910.

²⁰ The thesis was only to be published in 1920, completed with references to works published after 1914 (Le néo-réalisme américain, Leuven/Paris 1920).

²¹ In 1925, Fulton J. Sheen from Peoria (Illinois) defended before the Institute a thesis entitled «God and Intelligence in Modern Philosophy. A Critical Study in The Light of the Philosophy of S. Thomas Aquinas». The thesis was published in London the same year.

²² Fernand Van Steenberghe, de Wulf, Maurice, in: Biographie nationale, vol. 33, Brussels 1966, col. 253–262.

tural that «the authority [conferred by] a privileged position in the world [...] should induce [the country] to affirm its initiative in the domain of high culture as well.» He was particularly delighted to see that the conference programme devoted considerable attention to metaphysics and especially to scholastics. «At this session, as during the entire Conference, the strong interest aroused over there by our ideas could be felt.»²³

The eminent theologian's stay in the US was a revelation which inspired him to write a long article which he published in the *Revue catholique des idées et des faits*. Aware as he was of the stereotypes with which America was burdened, he refuted these to highlight even better what the country meant to him: «I am not quite sure whether the Americans are more modern than we are. The truth is, rather, that their civilization is younger than ours, and therefore in certain respects more primitive, fresher, and sounder.»²⁴ Compared with the inertia, not to say the paralysis, of Old Europe, America appeared as a promised land untrammelled by the long religious wars which had led the old continent ever deeper into the paths of secularization. This is in fact the ethos displayed by American Catholics. As the last immigrants to have arrived on the territory, they wanted to be the best representatives of American idealism and sought to impose an American Catholic Way of Life: a «pure» Christianity inspired by neo-Thomism.²⁵

Yet, the brilliant intellectual showed some concern about the what his peers declared. Whereas the Catholic world kept praising rural life and advocating a return to the land and to mediaeval feudalism as the path to salvation, Father Noël noted that in America, the heaviest concentration of Catholics was to be found in New York, notably because the European immigration tended to concentrate there. The city, far from drying up Catholic practice, could on the contrary bring it back to life. «Some despondent visitor must have wondered how Christian mortification could go hand in hand with the habit of a daily bath and silk shirts; it must have seemed to him that the automobile would kill contemplation and that the affectedness of the cassock and the priestly anointing would lose itself in the bustling streets. Fortunately, examples to the contrary are not lacking: the brisk and hearty appearance of the American priest hides an uncomplicated, but sincere piety; the elegance of his vestment simply corresponds to the demands of the faithful; if he lavishes the money that passes through his hands, it is a way of not attaching his heart to worldly goods; and the spirited life that he leads in the service of God leaves no room for the pleasures of the table or the selfish habits attributed to the unsophisticated comedy

²³ Léon Noël, Le Congrès de Harvard, in: *Revue néo-scolastique*, vol. 28 (1926), 469–473.

²⁴ Léon Noël, Impression d'Amérique, in: *Revue catholique des idées et des faits*, 24.12. 1926, 4.

²⁵ William M. Halsey, *The Survival of American Innocence: Catholicism in an Era of Disillusionment, 1920–1940*, Notre Dame/London, University of Notre Dame Press, 1980.

priest.» And thus he concluded that the «young, healthy and generous temperament of the American people»²⁶ offered a hopeful promise.

Our data do not allow us to assess or quantify the actual impact of such declarations; but the commitment of one of the most authoritative academic figures of the time to this pro-American movement cannot be ignored, as it illustrates the will to find abroad, across the sea, a new impetus allowing to successfully adapt religion to modern thought. It is therefore likely that Noël's discourse did not go unnoticed. The Institute was regarded as an influential authority by the intellectual Catholic elite. One of its objectives was to propagate the scholastic renewal and take it beyond the closed circle of theologians. Its professors sought to make their students sensitive to, and give them training in, Saint Thomas' doctrines so that they might come to permeate all cultural domains. At the time, one of the obsessive fears of the Catholic elite was the «specialization» of leadership. If the pilgrims were to become technocrats and experts in all sorts of disciplines, they would no longer be willing or able to play the proselytizing role to which they were destined by their faith. For this reason, the Church authorities insisted that Thomist doctrine should be instilled into the general cultural education. With this end in view, the Institute organized lectures, attended by many, on various subjects regarded as part of «general culture» at that time and in that milieu, i.e. art, music, literature, political thought, etc. In addition, it conceived a special baccalaureate which allowed students to receive an education in the humanities, leading to a degree in law, at the same time as a training in Thomist philosophy.²⁷ This programme proved very successful, and was followed by many of the country's future key political and administrative figures, such as Paul van Zeeland or Jean-Charles Snoy d'Oppuers.

The transnational experience of the Eucharistic Congress of Chicago

The surge of attention paid to the US was to receive a renewed impetus in June 1926, when the 28th World Eucharistic Congress was held in Chicago. The first of these biannual Congresses took place in Lille in 1881. Their aim was to give the pilgrims a more visible and lively experience of faith. By means of large processions, Masses, parades and other solemn celebrations, believers were encouraged to experience the «real presence» of Jesus Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist as well as in the emotion triggered by the gathering of brethren and sisters coming from the entire world. Every Congress was to be an event, and from the late 19th century on, the Holy See would invite each country's

²⁶ Léon Noël, *Impression d'Amérique*, in: *Revue catholique des idées et des faits*, 31.12.1926, 9–10.

²⁷ Louis De Raemaeker, *Le cardinal Mercier et l'Institut supérieur de philosophie de Louvain*, Leuven 1952.

clergy to prepare the meeting during the entire liturgical year.²⁸ All countries were encouraged to set up and maintain an organization, the *Œuvre des Congrès* (Works of the Congresses). Belgium took part in the project very early on and joined the Permanent Committee in the late 19th century already. The first Eucharistic Congress to take place outside France, and which therefore inaugurated the passage to the international stage, took place in Liège in 1883.²⁹ In 1901 Pope Leo XIII chose a Belgian, the bishop of Namur Mgr Heylen (1856–1941), to preside over the Eucharistic Congresses (a function he held until 1930).

In 1926, Catholics of the whole world were insistently called upon to go to Chicago. Travel agencies would specialize in Eucharistic cruises and advertise tour packages promising «all-inclusive organization». In post-WWI Belgium, in addition Mgr Heylen and a few of his close personal allies, the permanent committee was composed of Max de Renesse, Henri de Trannoy, Valentin Brifaut and Henri Davignon – all men from important families and involved to various degrees in Catholic party business. Besides the official delegation of the Church, the leading Catholic newspapers dispatched correspondents to cover the event. The Congress made the headlines of the major newspapers *La Libre Belgique*, *Le Vingtième Siècle*, *De Standaard* and *Vers l'Avenir*. The correspondents took the opportunity to write long articles to describe the city of Chicago and its Catholic community (the country's most important urban community). For its part, the Congress was reported with countless details and in an at times highly emphatic style: «Under the Star-Spangled Banner of free America, the Catholic faith shone brightly on the world.»³⁰ The journalists were impressed, even shaken by the huge scale of the Congress, the splendour of the religious settings and robes as well as by the extraordinary organization that the Congress required (feeding, housing and transporting almost a million people). They were also very much surprised by the mobilization of the Catholic minority. Lastly, they mentioned their surprise regarding the vastness of the spaces occupied by the crowds. The famous and very modern Soldier Field stadium (inaugurated in 1924), where many of the ceremonies were held, left a lasting impression, with 400,000 people having gathered there.³¹ They were also able to get a good idea of the city's size when they had to travel to Lake St Mary, in Mudelheim, 40 kilometres to the east of Chicago, for the last day's major procession. Hubert Carton de Wiart, who was covering the event for *Le Vingtième siècle*, flew over

²⁸ Claude Langlois, *Les Congrès eucharistiques. Jalons pour une histoire*, in: *Le catholicisme en congrès (XIX^e–XX^e siècles)*, ed. by Claude Langlois/Christian Sorel (Chrétiens et Sociétés, Documents et Mémoires 8), Lyon 2009, 205–224.

²⁹ Dom G. Oury/Dom B. Andry, *Les Congrès eucharistiques. Lille 1881–Lourdes 1981, Sablé-sur-Sarthe 1980*, 82–85.

³⁰ Amicus, *Carnet du philosophe*, in: *Le Vingtième siècle*, 04.07.1926, 1.

³¹ États-Unis. *Quelques nouvelles religieuses*, in: *La Libre Belgique*, 28.12.1926, 3.

the city in an aeroplane and outlined for his readers the dense railway network and the industrial landscape that was unfurling beneath him...³²

It will be clear by now that the journalists did everything in their power to write texts about the Congress that would convey to their readers the feeling that they were there. The Church too did all it could so that the believers, even those who were not physically in Chicago, could participate in the ceremonies. On 7 June Mgr Heylen published a pastoral letter in which he invited his parishioners «to join the works of the Congress in thought and prayer» and «for all to join in heart and soul». On 20 June he invited them to take part in a general communion and in the songs *Veni Creator* that would be sung everywhere. He added: «The members of the religious communities, the students of our institutes and schools will kindly pray for the Congress.»³³ The press gave daily accounts of the trip of the Belgian delegation to the United States. On the morning of 5 June, on the day the delegation's boat left, a crowd gathered to salute it in Antwerp. The crowd, which included politicians (among whom the burgomaster of Antwerp) and nuns as well as all the town's Catholic schools, came together to salute the travellers.³⁴ Throughout the duration of the Congress, Belgian parishes were mobilized. A journalist wrote:

«In all our parishes, processes inside the churches, canticles, burning candles, flowers ornamenting the altar enabled us to participate in the American festivities; we managed to deduce and to a certain extent to feel the fervour and the joys, and as such the universality of Catholicism and its unity have asserted themselves, once more, in one and the same manifestation and a similar liturgical act. There you have the common piety and that fraternal and comforting religious solidarity towards which each one of us, according to his preferences, has tried to continue to contribute, in an even more intimate fashion, in the eucharistic movement which, from so far away and at the same time from so close, made us anticipate an ever-growing movement of recognition and of joy.»³⁵

After the Congress: relating the experience

After the Congress, a large number of activities were organized throughout the country in order to make as many people as possible benefit from this experience. A first activity: the screening of the film made by Fire Fox. The «grandiose super-film»³⁶ was shown in the major parish halls as well as in certain

³² See his reports in *Le Vingtième siècle* from 15.06.1926.

³³ Thomas-Louis, Evêque de Namur, *Lettre Pastorale annonçant le Congrès eucharistique de Chicago*, in: *Vers l'Avenir*, 07.06.1926, 1.

³⁴ *Au Congrès eucharistique de Chicago. Le départ de Mgr Heylen pour les États-Unis*, in: *Le Vingtième siècle*, 05.06.1926, 1.

³⁵ L. D., *Après le Congrès de Chicago*, in: *Vers l'Avenir*, 28.06.1926, 1.

³⁶ *Chronique religieuse. Le Congrès eucharistique de Chicago*, in: *Le Vingtième siècle*, 25.03.1927, 2.

headquarters of the Catholic Party. Gala evenings were organized, enhanced by the presence of the highest religious authorities. In many cases, a choir accompanied the film, singing the same eucharistic songs as in Chicago. A second activity: the talks. The representatives of the Belgian delegation to the Congress travelled the country to talk in detail about their experiences. To the best of our knowledge, no transcripts exist of these talks, but reports in the press reveal that they essentially highlighted the emotions felt during this event. These emotions were stirred up, on the one hand, by the fact of having taken part in a huge crowd rapt in prayer and, on the other, by the discovery of the technical feats at the service of the faith.

The one who provided the most detailed analytical account of his experience is Henri Davignon. Son and secretary of Julien Davignon, the Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1900 to 1916, he was a recognized literary figure, who published books with the famous Parisian house Plon and edited the honorable *Revue générale*, founded in 1864 to offer the Catholic intelligentsia a medium liable to compete with that of its liberal opponents. Putting to good advantage his participation at the Chicago Congress, he pursued his journey across North America towards Quebec, a trip which was to provide the inspiration for his book *Heures américaines*.

Heures américaines is in many ways relevant to our research. First of all, it contrasts with most French-language US-related literature of the time by its pro-American stance, which reflects neither naïvety nor ignorance on the part of its author. In the introduction, he admits in fact to having set out on his trip «full of prejudices» since «everybody in Europe is clothed in a suit of ready-made opinions when it comes to moving beyond one's familiar horizon». It is true that, like any cultured French speaker, he was well acquainted with the anti-American writings which had been flourishing for over a century, whether by Victor Hugo, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Charles Maurras, Paul Claudel, or others. But this did not keep him from confidently stating: «Let America offer itself up to us, and we shall see if there is room for her in the stables already covered with a ready-made bedding of prejudice. It is a great opportunity to receive powerful refutations.»³⁷ The second interesting aspect is that the work was written by a believer well aware of the «political» intentions of the Church and of the rulers of his country; and his aim was to publicize these views in the literary idiom.

What becomes clearly noticeable between the lines of *Heures américaines* is that the Catholic writer, disillusioned by the growing secularization in an otherwise devout country, where power must henceforth be shared with non-denominational parties, has found on the other side of the Atlantic a new source of in-

³⁷ Henri Davignon, *Heures américaines. Notes de voyage*, Brussels 1927, 5–6.

spiration, an opportunity for salvation which might be symbolized by the skyscrapers:

«Your skyscrapers? They answer our desire. We have come to the US looking for a renewed image of the greatest religious force which orients all individual energies towards the hereafter. The surprise caused by these monuments whose head is lost in the sky is an excellent beginning. Nothing offers a better combination: the religious invitation and the taste for the spectacular.»³⁸

The American city is a kind of cathedral reaching out towards the sky.

«I persist in singing the praises of the most recent skyscrapers. The receded top floors, the crown-shaped summits, the garlanded steeple-shaped apexes, as well as the width of the roads, divided by a broad strip of white paint channeling the traffic into split lanes, transform the upper ranges of the city into an atmosphere-laden space and, in a word, into an art-filled dream.»³⁹

Obviously, the writer and the aesthete's aim was here to imbue with Christian values the mystique of the New York skyscrapers whose presence can be felt throughout the fine and applied arts.⁴⁰

But Davignon's greatest discovery concerned the media, and in particular the wireless. The Mass, broadcast during the Congress for the «largest audience in the world», gave him the feeling of being «carried away into a dream world.» He felt that far from being man-eating machines, the electrical waves became carriers of the Word, capable of «infinite spiritual action». They were, in a sense, touched by the Eucharist.⁴¹ It must be pointed out that in 1926, radio broadcasting was only in its infant days, and the Belgian radio service was hardly two years old. It is only in the 1930s that programmes came to be organized and that the Catholics could dispose of their own well-defined air time.⁴² Nor had the written press reached the status and aspect of a popular mass medium (text spacing, bold headlines, illustrations) or undergone the transformations that the Rex editions would send it through in the 1930s. These practices were to be imported by Léon Degrelle, who discovered them when staying in the US. But in 1926, Davignon was already dazzled by the organization of American propaganda.

³⁸ Davignon, *Heures américaines* (see note 37), 19.

³⁹ Davignon, *Heures américaines* (see note 37), 19, 31.

⁴⁰ Geoffrey Crossick/Serge Jaumain (ed.), *Cathedrals of consumption: the European department store, 1850–1939*, Aldershot 1999 and Roland Marchand, *Creating the corporate soul: the rise of public relations and corporate imagery in American big business*, Berkeley 1998.

⁴¹ Davignon, *Heures américaines* (see note 37), 79–80.

⁴² Cécile Vanderpelen-Diagre, *Écrire sous le regard de Dieu. La littérature catholique belge dans l'entre-deux-guerres*, Brussels 2004, 91–92.

«What power in this patchwork! And with what intelligence has it been put to profit by the organizers of the Congress! Everything appears to me to have been devised with a superior instinct for the crowd of guests and attendants.»⁴³

The experience of large and mixed crowds must have been the most lasting impression of Davignon's voyage. The Chicago Congress, which according to estimates rallied one million pilgrims, inaugurated the large ceremonies orchestrated by the Church, which rated among the most efficient impulses to the mass culture characteristic of the interwar period. With the proviso, however, that these ceremonies are not to be assimilated to the nationalist meetings the fascists were so fond of: they were gatherings of «simple hearts» coming from «mixed parishes» for an offering to God. Later, Davignon would explain that he brought back from this pilgrimage «an intense awareness of the international reality of the Church, of its conquering strength, and the perennity of the Catholic dogma.»

«Nothing gives such a contradictory image of humanity as the observation of the differences in race, color and tradition; [but] nothing highlights the supernatural unity of humanity as strongly as sharing the same faith.»⁴⁴

How was *Heures américaines* received? The Catholic press applauded the instructive pages it offered; but the most clear-sighted criticism came from Charles d'Ydewalle, a journalist as caustic as he was well-read and well-informed. In what must have been an allusion to the work of André Gide and Philippe Soupault, he wrote: «Since some novelists have taken to writing about what they saw in Moscow or Berlin, it is not a bad idea to go and see what is happening on the other side of the Atlantic as well, and notably in the domain of Catholicism.»⁴⁵ France did not react to this work, and the friends to whom Davignon sent a complimentary copy sent him no more than a thank-you note. One letter, however, deserves to be mentioned: that of Henry d'Yanville, a member of the permanent Committee of France, who explained: «I do not totally share your opinion; but this is inevitable, since you are Belgian and I am French.»⁴⁶ The difference between the two temperaments had already amused the Belgian author, who related the following experience in his narrative: «...in New York, during the colony's banquet, we were surprised to hear a professional consul celebrating the spiritual strength of faith, and an archbishop of Paris retorting by a discreet homage to the President of the Republic.»⁴⁷ Behind this anecdote one catches a glimpse of the writer's admiration for the American model of religious liberty, as opposed to the French brand of secularism advocated and supported by Gallicanism.

⁴³ Davignon, *Heures américaines* (see note 37), 100.

⁴⁴ Henri Davignon, *Souvenirs d'un écrivain belge (1879–1945)*, Brussels, 1954, Plon, 403.

⁴⁵ Charles d'Ydewalle, *Un grand reportage catholique*, in: *Le Bien public*, 16.06.1927.

⁴⁶ Henry d'Yanville to Henri Davignon, Paris, 20.09.1926, Brussels, Archives et musées de la littérature, I 20/5.

⁴⁷ Davignon, *Heures américaines* (see note 37), 83.

The American view of religious freedom also impressed one of Davignon's colleagues, Baron de Trannoy. In a paper on the subject, written for *La Revue catholique des idées et des faits*, he marvelled at the system of direct implication of worshipers in charities and expressed his amazement at the spectacular results which could be realized through this system.⁴⁸

From the accounts of those who «experienced» the Congress of Chicago, it is clear that it is the capacity of American Catholics to mobilize human and material means at the service of the faith that most impressed them. Two major events would give them the opportunity to draw inspiration from this experience: the construction of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Brussels, the so-called Koekelberg Basilica,⁴⁹ and the Congress of Mechelen/Malines in 1936.

Conclusion

In contrast to their counterparts such as Chesterton in England, Claudel in France, or Gonzague de Reynold in Switzerland, Belgian Catholic men of letters did not necessarily see Uncle Sam's nation as a rival, to be identified as the cause and the sign of the economic and spiritual decadence of their home country. They viewed it rather as an opportunity allowing them to raise themselves to the level of the nations regarded as important in international exchanges. It is significant that in terms of economic and trade relations, Belgium proved to be more receptive than France to Americanization (an attitude clearly perceptible in the automobile and advertising sectors).⁵⁰ This phenomenon was to have an impact on the religious level as well: while in other countries, most Roman Catholics sought in Catholicism arguments to support their nationalism, those at the helm of the Belgian state favored the universalist aspects of a religion characterized, as should be remembered, by its missionary spirit. For this reason, an analysis of their discourse on America allows us to gain a fuller insight into the religious perspective underlying their way of thinking, even if its logic is not immune to contradictions. But the disagreements dividing the Belgian Catholic world on the question of the US do not appear where one would normally expect them: they are more revealing of the divergences within a population of believers stemming from widely different social classes and of a Catholic party torn between conflicting aims and ideals.

The Belgian example shows that the relation between nationalism and Catholicism is not a simple one. Despite the strong influence of a profoundly anti-

⁴⁸ Baron de Trannoy, *Le congrès eucharistique de Chicago*, in: *Revue catholique des idées et des faits*, 16.07.1926, 3–5.

⁴⁹ Pierre Rion, *La basilique de Koekelberg. Architecture et mentalités religieuses*, Louvain-la-Neuve 1986.

⁵⁰ Véronique Pouillard, *American Advertising Agencies in Europe: J. Walter Thompson's Belgian Business in the Interwar Years*, in: *Business History*, 47/1 (2005), 44–58.

American France, Belgians made the relationship work in their own manner. As the sociologist Danielle Hervieu-Léger has shown, religious in-group feeling and national in-group feeling can be compounded so as to consolidate each other, for instance on the occasion of commemorative social events. But this mutual attraction is necessarily of an unstable nature, due to of the tension between singularity and universality which is at work both in the religious and the nationalist logic.⁵¹ Belgian nationalism, though strengthened by the experience of World War I, was subsequently undermined by the rise of Flemish nationalism which called into question the cohesion of the country as well as the legitimacy of its leaders. To make things even worse, the Catholic Party was torn apart over the social issues and by the power struggle between the old conservative right on one side and labor movements on the other. In the face of this threat, the intelligentsia chose to underscore the universal dimension of its religion. In this perspective, the «international Christian order» and Europe were perceived as new rallying emblems. In order to stress this point, the strong evocative power of the notions like youth and novelty was called in to lend attractive substance to the points of contact between Belgium, the United States and the religion of renewal. In this way, they sought to renew between these two «young» countries the ancient friendship which, a century earlier, had stirred up the rage of Charles Baudelaire...⁵²

Our enquiry has been restricted to the speeches of the upper classes of the Catholic world. The popular dailies were more permeable to the typical anti-Americanism as found in *Tintin in America* by the Belgian Catholic cartoonist Hergé.⁵³ The Eucharistic Congress of Chicago enabled Henri Davignon to see another America, that of Catholic Americans. The latter lent themselves particularly well to this practice, since they offered the image of a community with a strongly marked identity. The Irish as well as the Italians maintained a community life proud of itself, reflected in a folklore more visible than in many European Catholic countries. The Congress of 1926 was the occasion for the Belgian Catholic intelligentsia to realize this. The impact of the experience was to «decenter» their religious representations, usually centered on Rome and on France. This shift away from the centre occurred all the more easily that diplomatic and economic relations with the United States were excellent at the time. Indeed, moving a person is not enough to unsettle their mindset. Regardless of the transnational experience, each individual goes through it with their own individual and local glasses.

⁵¹ Danielle Hervieu-Léger, «Renouveau» religieux et nationalistes: la double dérégulation, in: *Sociologie des nationalismes*, ed. Pierre Binrbaum, Paris 1997, 162–185.

⁵² Philippe Roger speaks of the «Belgian America» of Baudelaire (Philippe Roger, *L'ennemi américain. Généalogie de l'antiaméricanisme français*, Paris 2002, 93 sq.).

⁵³ See e.g. Rodolphe Bringer, *Un neveu d'Amérique*, republished 3 times (Marcinelle 1936, 1937, 1938) and Julienne Moulinasse, *L'Oncle d'Amérique*, Averbode 1935.

*Moved by Faith: Transnational experience, local perspective.
The Belgians at the Eucharistic Congress of Chicago (1926)*

From 20th to 24th June 1926, the Eucharistic Congress of Chicago brought together almost a million pilgrims from around the world. For the Belgian delegation led by Bishop Mgr Heylen, the president of the Eucharistic Congress, it was a genuine discovery. Having set off with a highly favourable opinion of the United States, which had helped *«Poor Little Belgium»* a lot during the First World War, the Belgian pilgrims were dazzled by both the technical means on display and the mobilization of American Catholics. Upon their return to Belgium, these pilgrims related their experience with great enthusiasm during talks and in newspaper articles. One of them, Henri Davignon, published a book, *Heures américaines*. These accounts are very interesting because they show the extent to which the international pilgrimages are experienced as emotional encounters with Christian *«brothers»*. The faith shared with men and women who speak different languages and the coming together of so many people in large crowds moved the Belgian pilgrims profoundly. However, these stories also show that the pilgrims viewed the others with the prejudices of their country of origin.

Eucharistic congress – pilgrim – Belgian catholicism – memory – transnationalism.

*Vom Glauben bewegt: Transnationale Erfahrung, lokale Perspektive.
Die Belgier am Eucharistischen Kongress von Chicago (1926)*

Vom 20. bis 24. Juni 1926 versammelte der Eucharistische Kongress von Chicago fast eine Million Pilger aus der ganzen Welt. Für die belgische Delegation unter der Leitung von Bischof Mgr Heylen, dem Präsidenten des Eucharistischen Kongresses, war das eine echte Entdeckung. Nach einer sehr positiven Meinung der Vereinigten Staaten, die im Ersten Weltkrieg dem *«armen kleinen Belgien»* sehr geholfen hatten, waren die belgischen Pilger sowohl von den technischen Mitteln als auch von der Mobilisierung der amerikanischen Katholiken beeindruckt. Nach ihrer Rückkehr in Belgien erzählten diese Pilger von ihren Erfahrungen mit grosser Begeisterung in Vorträgen und Zeitungsartikeln. Einer von ihnen, Henri Davignon, veröffentlichte ein Buch: *Heures américaines*. Diese Berichte sind sehr interessant, weil sie zeigen, wie sehr die internationalen Pilgerfahrten als emotionale Begegnungen mit *«christlichen Brüdern»* erlebt wurden. Der Glaube, der mit Männern und Frauen geteilt wurde, welche verschiedene Sprachen sprachen, und das Zusammentreffen so vieler Menschen in großen Menschenmengen haben sie tief bewegt. Die Geschichten zeigen aber auch, dass die Pilger andere mit den Vorurteilen ihres Herkunftslandes betrachtet haben.

Eucharistischer Kongress – Pilgerschaft – Belgischer Katholizismus – Erinnerung – Transnationalismus.

*Guidés par la foi: expérience transnationale, perspective locale.
Les Belges au Congrès eucharistique de Chicago (1926)*

Du 20 au 24 juin 1926, le Congrès eucharistique de Chicago rassembla près d'un million de pèlerins venus du monde entier. Pour la délégation belge menée par l'évêque Mgr Heylen, président du Congrès eucharistique, ce fut une véritable découverte. Partis avec des sentiments très favorables à l'égard des États-Unis qui avaient beaucoup aidé la *«Poor Little Belgium»* pendant la Première Guerre mondiale, les pèlerins belges furent éblouis par les moyens techniques mis en œuvre ainsi que par la mobilisation des catholiques américains. Ils revinrent en Belgique et racontèrent cette expérience avec beaucoup d'enthousiasme lors de conférences et dans des articles de presse. L'un d'eux, Henri Davignon, édita un livre, *Heures américaines*. Ces récits sont particulièrement intéressants car ils montrent à quel point les pèlerinages internationaux sont vécus comme des expériences émotionnelles de rencontres avec les *«frères»* chrétiens. La foi partagée avec des

hommes et des femmes parlant d'autres langues et le mélange des corps dans les foules les touchent profondément. Ces récits nous apprennent, cependant, que les pèlerins regardent les autres avec les préjugés de leur pays d'origine.

Congrès eucharistique – pèlerin – catholicisme belge – mémoire – transnationalisme.

*Mossi dalla fede: esperienza transnazionale, prospettiva locale.
I belgi al congresso eucaristico di Chicago (1926)*

Dal 20 al 24 giugno 1926, il Congresso eucaristico di Chicago riunì quasi un milione di pellegrini venuti da tutto il mondo. Per la delegazione belga condotta dal vescovo Mgr Heylen, presidente del Congresso eucaristico, fu una vera scoperta. Partiti con sentimenti molto favorevoli riguardo agli Stati Uniti che avevano aiutato molto il «Poor Little Belgium» durante la Prima Guerra Mondiale, i pellegrini belgi furono impressionati dai mezzi tecnici messi in atto e dalla mobilitazione dei cattolici americani. Ritornati in Belgio, raccontarono questa esperienza con molto entusiasmo in occasione di conferenze e in articoli di giornale. Uno di loro, Henri Davignon, pubblicò un libro, *Heures américaines*. Questi testi sono molto interessanti perché mostrano a che punto i pellegrinaggi internazionali sono vissuti come delle esperienze emozionali d'incontri con i «fratelli cristiani». La fede condivisa con uomini e donne che parlano altre lingue e il mescolarsi dei corpi nella folla li scuote profondamente. Questi testi ci insegnano, tuttavia, che i pellegrini guardano gli altri con i pregiudizi del loro paese d'origine.

Congresso eucaristico – Pellegrino – Cattolicesimo belga – Memoria – Transnazionalismo.

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