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Belgian Catholic entrepreneurs’ organizations, 1880 to 1940

A dialogue on social responsibility

ABSTRACT

During the last decades of the 19th century and the interwar period the Belgian Catholic Church entered into an intense dialogue with the entrepreneurial milieu. Building on older networks several Catholic entrepreneurs’ organizations were created. These structures developed intricate discourses, confronting business men with their social responsibility, shaping and affirming their identity and worldview in contrast to that of their liberal counterparts. Belgian Catholic entrepreneurs associations radiated a particular organizational culture, exuding a genteeel atmosphere of a socio-religious debating club. But they also advocated a clear Christian identity, in line with Catholic social teachings and neo-scholastic philosophy. Only a (re)Christianization of the business world, so they argued, would provide a durable solution to existing social tensions. The bon patron catholique had to become an instrument of moral regeneration and social renovation. Members were urged to highlight the Catholic identity of their company, to guide and monitor the families that worked for them and to offer clear and regular support to social works. The discourse of the Belgian Catholic entrepreneurial organizations on the social responsibility of their members would only slowly move away from its paternalist roots. Nonetheless in the interwar period a more structural vision of social relations arose, resulting in a closer collaboration with the Christian workers movement. This prepared the Belgian Catholic entrepreneurs’ organizations for their leading role in the post-war welfare state and its systems of interest mediation and collective bargaining.

Studies of individual companies and biographies of captains of industry often contain observations on the importance of religious opinions for company strategies and business decisions. They point out the influence of religion on the way companies were organized or structured, on collective and individual market strategies, on company practices and traditions, on collective bargaining and on the social climate within companies and sectors. Although these references are remarkably numerous, business historians remain hesitant to ascribe an inherent influence of religion on the business world, which is seen as seemingly dominated by a rational invisible hand. The difficulties of dealing with this issue are of course vast. It is one thing to identify religious belief at the individual level. It is quite another to demonstrate that religious ideas pervaded personal behaviour and choices within a business environment. Historians that have tried to tackle this topic remain rare. Further research evaluating the impact of religion on business values and praxis is indeed required.

In the ongoing discussion on the interaction of business and religion, the role of intermediary structures and networks is often overlooked or minimized. In this article I aim to demonstrate that this perspective is indeed worthwhile to explore. In traditional

social history entrepreneurial associations, and especially those with a distinct religious identity, were often (and sometimes solely) depicted as conservative pressure groups and opponents of the labour movement. Time has come for a re-evaluation and a broader understanding of their societal functions. Our analysis focuses on the Catholic employers’ organizations in Belgium before the Second World War and the dialogue between the Catholic Church and the business milieu on the social responsibilities of the entrepreneurial elite. After briefly sketching the prologue of this interaction, the main networks of the pre- and interwar period are introduced, and their success and influence are evaluated.

The Belgian Catholic entrepreneurial organizations, although differently structured in the north and south of the country, shared a particular organizational culture. Their activities and the messages that they voiced, urged entrepreneurs to reflect on their religious identity and the «Catholicity» of their companies. How did these organizations encourage their members to reflect on the evolving Catholic social teachings? Which normative framework did they propagate? In this context our analysis pays particular attention to the guidelines and role models that were disseminated. What were the main features of their model of a bon patron catholique and how did these representations evolve? Did these images offer a structure to which entrepreneurs could refer when balancing their professional and religious identities? We aim to offer a more detailed understanding of the roots, consistency and content of this Catholic entrepreneurial model as it was developed and propagated by entrepreneurial associations in Belgium.

Middlemen and ultramontanist zealots

Already in the first half of the 19th century, the age of «religious revival», entrepreneurs as part of the new bourgeois elite, gained a growing significance as a point of support for the churches in western Europe. Although more traditional sponsors like the nobility still offered considerable financial, political and logistic patronage, the clergy did not fail to notice the growing social importance of the industrial and commercial elite. Eager to compensate for its losses under the French revolutionary regime, the Belgian Catholic Church developed a wide range of social and educational initiatives. Entrepreneurs sponsored the building of new churches and other religious infrastructure. While in 1815 officially only a few dozen, mostly «useful» religious communities had survived, Belgium witnessed a remarkable resurgence of (female) religious orders and congregations. Most of them counted entrepreneurs amongst their networks of sponsors and middlemen. If only because these religious institutes lacked a legal status allowing them to purchase and own immovable goods, the expertise of these benefactors was more than welcome. Some of the (re)founded religious congregations in the 19th century also

2 A draft version of this article was presented at the 33. Wissenschaftliches Symposium «Religion und Unternehmen» of the Gesellschaft für Unternehmensgeschichte, Düsseldorf, 7–8 October 2010. I would like to thank the participants for their comments and suggestions.

targeted their recruiting efforts explicitly towards elitist, in particular entrepreneurial families.4

As the socio-cultural dominance of the bourgeois elite grew, leading Catholic entrepreneurs in Belgium were called upon by the Church to take up a role in broader socio-pastoral strategies. Although this involvement was mostly individual or family-based, it gradually developed more collective features. Key structures in this early mobilization were the conferences of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, a charitable initiative founded in Paris in 1833 that rapidly expanded in Belgium, with 1,302 local sections and 19,300 active members on the eve of the First World War. The Society appealed to the romantic generosity of the Catholic upper class to take up charitable duties towards the poor, visiting and instructing deprived families, promoting legal and religious marriage and above all distributing food, clothing and coal. The backbone of the Vincentian movement in Belgium was formed by a network of devout Catholic bourgeois families. One emblematic figure was the Ghent textile industrialist Joseph de Hemptinne (1822–1909). He and his Vincentian brothers were involved in very different socio-religious initiatives, newspapers, defence organizations and mobilized financial and even military support for the Vatican in its defence of the Papal States.5

Vincentians founded Sunday schools, libraries, savings banks, mutual health insurance companies, workers’ circles and other patronage initiatives.6 Although the impact of all their social activism should not be overestimated, the Vincentian movement did indeed involve the bourgeois elite in the social apostolate of the Church. Catholic entrepreneurs were urged to participate, not merely because of their wealth but also in their capacity as employers. The Archbrotherhood of Saint Francis Xavier (1854) organized the workers’ elite under the patronage of their employers. During the national Catholic congresses in Mechelen in 1863 and 1867, specific sections were devoted to social and charitable issues. This led to the foundation in 1867 of a Federation of Catholic Workers’ Associations with periodicals as «L’Economie chrétienne» (1869–1878) and «L’Economiste Catholique» (1879–1891).7 The Vincentian networks were explicitly mobilized and politicized during the first School War (1879–1884) leading to a major Catholic electoral victory in June/July 1884. The Catholic party would stay in power until 1914.8

Social Turn, scholastic revival and Jesuit apostolate

After this political victory most of the younger Vincentians redirected their energy to social works. Given the growing social tensions and the rise of socialism, they urged the bishops to create new œuvres sociales and to provide better coordination amongst them. In 1886, a year marked by strikes and deadly riots amongst the working class in Wallonia, a first national Catholic social congress was organized in Liege. A second congress followed the next year, and a third in 1890. These congresses, with about 2,000 participants in each of them, advocated a compelling appeal to industrialists.9 «In this urgent and capital task of the reconciliation of classes and the reconstitution of the world of labour, employers are called to a preponderant, one might even say without exaggeration decisive action», so wrote the eminent Catholic theoretician and publicist Charles Périn (1815-1905).10 That employers were expected to deploy their social activism as a group and join forces was of course not self-evident. In the years that followed however, the first Belgian Catholic entrepreneurs’ organizations were created.

The social crisis of 1886 was an important incentive, but there were of course many other contextual factors in play. The papacy of the more conciliatory Leo XIII (1878-1903) offered a new and less intransigent context for Catholic involvement. Leo XIII made peace with liberal governments, toned down the radicalism of leading Catholic newspapers and eased the Church’s isolation. In order to successfully answer the challenges of modern (industrialized, urbanized, secularized) society and its growing social tensions, new pastoral methods and strategies had to be developed and implemented, aimed at specific societal groups. In this «turn towards the people» the industrial elite was advised to reflect on its religious identity, its specific role(s) in modernizing society and above all on its duties towards the less fortunate members of society. Already in the encyclical «Humanum Genus» (1884) on freemasonry, Leo XIII had mentioned entrepreneurs as one of the target groups for mobilization and organization. His pastoral message to the French bishops of 8 February 1884 contained more or less the same message. Needless to say that his encyclical «Rerum Novarum» (1891) had an important inspiring and mobilizing effect on all those who were concerned by the social issue and were looking for a so-called third way, a Christian socio-economic alternative somewhere in between socialist collectivism and liberal individualist laissez faire.11

Neo-scholastic philosophy and the bridges that it constructed between transcendentalist Christian metaphysics, rationalistic positivism and science offered an inspirational framework for this social mobilisation of the entrepreneurial class.12 It engaged the

10 Charles Périn, Le patron: sa fonction, ses devoirs, ses responsabilités, Lille 1886, 7, 150.
modern philosophical tradition, demonstrating its shortcomings, and superseded it using the updated categories of medieval thought. The ideal of a harmonious, collaborative, centre-oriented Christian societal model was portrayed as a valid cure for the social and political disruptions of modern society, derailed by liberal individualism, threatened by socialist collectivism and plunged into a state of deep moral resignation. Belgian scholars and institutes played an important part in this international Thomist revival. We need only point to the studies of the later cardinal and archbishop Désiré Mercier (1851-1926) and his Higher Institute of Philosophy, founded in 1889 at the Catholic University of Leuven. Explicitly supported by the pope, Mercier also attracted considerable financial support from entrepreneurial circles, for instance the Thiéry family who made their fortune in wholesale textiles.

From the 1880s on, neo-scholastic philosophy became the intellectual rallying point of Catholic higher education in Belgium. In Leuven nearly all students were familiarized with the answers that Saint Thomas Aquinas had to offer on very different scientific issues, including the problems that the young social and psychological sciences were eager to tackle. The future engineers of the Special Schools for technical studies, united within one (Catholic) Cercle Industriel, were impressed that they would soon take up a crucial role as intermediary catalysts between labour and capital. But the influence of neo-Thomism did not remain limited to Leuven. Mercier’s pupils were also strategically appointed in the state universities of Ghent and Liege. Semi-academic periodicals like the «Revue Néo-Scholastique» (1894), the «Revue catholique de Droit» (1898) or the «Revue sociale catholique» (1896/97) voiced the message into much wider circles. Networks of experts were formed to tackle specific social issues. Some of these social study circles, like the Société d’Economie Sociale of the Leuven scholar Victor Brants (1856-1917) were clearly inspired by the French engineer and social scientist Frédéric Le Play (1806-1882). Others, like the Brussels Société Léon XIII, were strongly linked to Jesuit theological study centres.

14 Annuaire de l’Université Catholique de Louvain, Rapport sur les travaux du Cercle Industriel pendant l’années 1873-1873 et 1873-1874, Leuven 1875, 188.
17 August Castelein, La société Léon XIII pour le progrès des sciences philosophiques, historiques et sociales. Rapport présenté au congrès de Malines, le 10 septembre 1891, Leuven 1891.
The Jesuit Order was of course involved in this Thomist revival. It also played a key role in the mobilization and «social responsabilization» of the industrial and commercial elites. As before the French Revolution, the 19th century Societas Jesu considered the upper classes an important target group of its apostolate. Since the 1830s, the Order had developed thriving programmes to reach out to the leading bourgeois families in Belgium, urging them to support very different social initiatives. Jesuits had introduced the Vincentian conferences and promoted the already mentioned Archbrotherhood of Saint Francis Xavier (1854) and Federation of Catholic Workers’ Associations (1867). The quality and success of the Jesuit colleges, boarding schools and institutions for higher commercial and industrial education (in Brussels, Namur, Antwerp and elsewhere) was clear. The Brussels Saint Michael College was considered a model for all Catholic schools across Europe.18 Already before 1914, but increasingly during the 1920s, Cercles d’Etudes Sociales et Industrielles were established in the Jesuit colleges and (post-)secondary institutions.

Closely linked to their educational apostolate the Jesuits also specialized in the organization of retreats, methodologically based on the «Exercitia Spiritualis» of their founder Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556). The so-called «gentlemen retreats» brought together young bourgeois men who were about to make the most important choices in life (marriage, career, socio-political involvement, etc.). During those three to seven days of spiritual reflection, often close and amicable networks were forged amongst the participants. Afterwards, some of those groups would meet regularly during retreats and other gatherings under the inspiring guidance of Jesuit priests. As friends of the family in many industrialists’ homes, Jesuits acted as father confessor or marriage brokers and animated salon conversations. The growing experience and familiarity of the Jesuit Order with the business milieu was also reflected in the profile of its new members.19 Therefore it is not in the least surprising that Jesuits also played a leading role in the first Catholic employers’ circles and federations.

Catholic federations in Wallonia

During the first national Catholic social Congress in Liège in 1886 bishop Victor Doutreloux (1837-1901) appealed to the local industrialists to form a Ligue des Patrons Chrétiens. It took several years before it was well established.20 Meanwhile in the Hainaut the Jesuit fathers Auguste Lebrocquy (1847-1921) and Jules Lechien (1844-1914)
founded leagues for Catholic entrepreneurs in Mons and Charleroi. In 1894 these regional and local Catholic entrepreneurs’ circles were temporarily forged together in a national federation, the Association des Patrons et Industriels Catholiques (APIC). Key figures of this early federation were the lawyers and entrepreneurs Léon Collinet (1842-1908) and Michel Levie (1851-1939) and the leading mining industrialists Jules Dallemagne (1840-1922) and Omer Lambiotte (1869-1960). APIC enjoyed the support of the Jesuit scholar August Castelein (1840-1922) and of several renowned Catholic industrial families such as Desclée, Morlanwelz Cambier and Casier.

These first Belgian Catholic entrepreneurial organizations were clearly inspired by what was happening in France beginning in 1879. In that year Léon Harmel (1829-1915), a textile industrialist in the small town of Val-des-Bois near Reims, started to propagate the social and organizational reforms that he had implemented in his factory as a model for a «corporation chrétienne». As a genuine «apostle of the factory» Harmel not only drew the attention of Pope Leo XIII, but also inspired a group of Catholic industrialists in the North of France. Assisted by a few Jesuit fathers, they founded in 1884 an Association des Patrons Catholiques du Nord de la France. This network, exuding a monarchist and religious counter-ethnic in opposition to republican and secular Parish authorities, quickly counted more than 177 companies. Leading French entrepreneurs and even the emblematic Harmel attended the social congresses in Liege or addressed meetings of their Belgian colleagues in the industrial south of the country. This French connection but also the older, ultramontane networks in which the federation was grounded, help to explain why the Belgian APIC (1895) could only mobilize a minority of the industrial elite. Anyway, in the same year Belgium also witnessed the foundation of a neutral employers’ organization, the Comité Central du (Travail) Industriel (CCI). This federation of sectoral organizations would soon encompass the main indus-


22 Gérin, Les mouvements populaires en Belgique (cf. n. 27), 167ff.; Mémoire sur la situation de l’industrie en Belgique et sur la question ouvrière [...] adopté par l’Assemblée générale des patrons catholiques, Brussels 1894, 16-17; Dossier on the involvement of Castelein, in: Archives of the Society of Jesus in Flanders, 1434. The Dallemagne family was the owner of the NV Wérister in Fléron (1874), one of the largest mining enterprises of the Liege coal basin. Lambiotte later also successfully ventured into the production of electricity: Lambiotte Omer, Amand, Valère, in: Ginette Kurgan et al. (eds.), Dictionnaire des patrons en Belgique, Brussels 1996, 412.


trial branches in Wallonia. The CCI took the lead in representing and defending entre-
preneurial interests against the (in Wallonia mostly socialist) labour movement. Its
growing political influence also ensured that social policy in Belgium before the First
World War lacked in ambition.26

Although most of the Catholic industrialists in Wallonia joined the ranks of the neu-
tral CCI, large numbers also remained active in regional and local Catholic entrepre-
neurs’ networks. While the role of the CCI as an interest mediator was not refuted,
these Catholic businessmen considered it important that separate structures be present
within the entrepreneurial milieu, promoting Catholic social teachings. But it was only
after the First World War, in 1920, that these regional Catholic entrepreneurs’ circles
in Wallonia again formed a federation, the Union d’Action Sociale Chrétienne (UASC).
This Union, in 1933 again renamed the Association des Patrons et Industriels Catholiques
(APIC), counted strong sections in Namur, Brussels, Tournai, Mons and Charleroi,
Verviers and Luxembourg. The Cercle d’Etudes Sociales des Industriels Liégeois had a some-
what independent status within the federation. APIC’s membership rose from 500 in
1928 to 1,200 in 1938. With prominent board members such as sociologist Maurice
Defourny (1878-1953) and engineer Victor Defays (1871-1957) the UASC/APIC
showed its strong links with the Catholic University of Leuven. The presidency of
Georges Dallemagne also demonstrated the connection with the pre-war federation.
The Jesuits Henry Demain (1879-1939) and Jean-Marie Laureys (1897-1956) were the
main spiritual advisors. During the 1930s the APIC’s societal influence would consider-
ably increase. Leading APIC members such as Henri Velge (1885-1951), Georges Theu-
nis (1873-1966) or Paul Van Zeeland (1893-1973) fulfilled key roles on the political
scene.

Breakthrough in Flanders

The industrialization of Flanders, the predominantly rural and Catholic northern part of
Belgium, only truly started after the First World War. Besides Ghent, already a flourish-
ing industrial textile centre during the 19th century, new industrial centres grew around
the quickly expanding harbour of Antwerp and along the canals and railroads connect-
ing it to Brussels and other major cities. Another important hub of industrial growth
could be found in the south of the province of West Flanders, in the vicinity of
Courtrai. Although the entrepreneurial landscape in Flanders would undergo important
changes during the following decades, family enterprises remained dominant. The
Flemish entrepreneurial elite lacked the financial weight of its Brussels and Walloon
counterparts. French-speaking industrial-financial groups not only had large interests in
the Antwerp maritime sectors but in the 1920s also took the lead in the exploitation of
the important coal reserves in the Flemish province of Limburg. It helps to explain why
Flemish entrepreneurs as the Antwerp industrialist Lieven Gevaert (1868-1935) urged

26 René Brion, 100 ans pour l’entreprise. Fédéra-
tion des Entreprises de Belgique, 1895-1995, Tielt
Lannoo, 1995; Jo Deferme, Uit de ketens van
de vrijheid. Het debat over de sociale politiek in
België 1886-1914, Leuven 2007; Georges De
Leener, L’organisation syndicale des chefs
d’industrie, Brussels 1909.
for a «fleminization» of the business world in the north of the country. To this end they formed a *Vlaams Economisch Verbond* (VEV) in 1926.27

The Belgian bishops showed a growing awareness of the «Flemish issue», but above all they feared the social and religious effects of the imminent industrialization of Flanders. They fostered the creation of Catholic mass organizations for farmers, workers and independent retailers and craftsmen, in the hope that they would offer a framework that would ease this evolution. In the 20s, when all these *standsorganisaties* seemed well established, it was clear that the employers could not stay behind. The *Algemeen Christelijk Verbond van Werkgevers* (ACVW), founded in Antwerp in 1925 by the diocesan priest Albert Henderick (1887-1957) was not inspired by French models, but rather by the Dutch *Algemene Katholieke Werkgeversvereniging* (AKWV, 1915). Its growth was quite remarkable. In 1929 a second centre of the ACVW was created in Courtrai under the impetus of priest Hilaire Van Overbeke (1891-1960) and steel wire industrialist Léon Bekaert (1891-1961). Both were strongly influenced by the Catholic Action, explicitly calling for an organized apostolate of the laymen under the hierarchical supervision of the Church. On the eve of the Second World War the Flemish Catholic employers’ federation counted about 1,250 members, among them a considerable number of executive staff members and members of the free professions.28

ACVW clearly dreamed of forging all Belgian Catholic entrepreneurs’ circles into one Catholic «sub-pillar», next to the existing *standen* that formed the *Union Catholique Belge*, the Catholic party. To that end Bekaert builded bridges towards the French-speaking APIC which until then had barely shown any interest in its Flemish sister organization. In 1935, these efforts resulted in the creation of a national platform, the *Federatie der Katholieke Werkgevers/Fédération des Patrons Catholiques* (FEKAWE/FEPAC).29 Although APIC and ACVW could mobilize only a limited number of industrialists and in most matters continued to operate separately, their influence grew remarkably. Bekaert succeeded in finding a kind of understanding with the neutral CCI, allowing Catholic employers to participate in the official consultative structures that arose during the interwar period and onwards after the war.30

Bekaert also took the lead in the creation of an international federation. In September 1930, the Antwerp ACVW organized a first international conference, with speakers from Germany, France and The Netherlands. Further deliberations were held in The Hague and in Paris. On 12 June 1931, at the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the


28 Brouwers, *Vijftig jaar christelijke werkgeversbeweging* (cf. n. 27), vol. I, 331.


encyclical «Rerum Novarum» and the promulgation of its successor «Quadragesimo Anno», the main Catholic entrepreneurs’ organizations in Western Europe held a solemn meeting in Rome where they were received by Pope Pius XI. Not surprisingly a formal international structure was created at that occasion, albeit with limited ambitions and a rather hesitant name: Conferences Internationales des Associations des Patrons Catholiques. Only after the war, when Catholic employers’ organizations could be founded in Germany, Switzerland and Italy, would a genuine international platform be established: the Union Internationale des Associations Patronales Catholiques (UNIAPAC, 1949).31

Organizational culture

The socio-economic, linguistic and ideological cleavages that marked Belgium’s history help to explain the many differences between the Catholic entrepreneurial organizations in Wallonia and Flanders. The Walloon APIC, for instance, was clearly oriented towards big industrial sectors, the Flemish ACVW explicitly incorporated small and medium-sized enterprises. But neither excluded salaried managers or executive staff members, most of them engineers. The Flemish federation and especially its Antwerp wing offered their members a growing array of services: insurance, recruitment offices, child allowances and other social benefits, legal and fiscal advice, etc. This not only facilitated the recruitment of new members but also guaranteed some financial and logistic scope to the organization. APIC only slowly felt compelled to follow this example.

Nonetheless the two federations also had a lot in common. Both the Walloon and Flemish Catholic federations were grounded within rather informal, mostly regional networks. The membership of these cercles patronales varied between 20 and sometimes more than 100 affiliated. At the core of these networks were usually not more than a handful of committed business families and (their) engineers, guided by a spiritual advisor or chaplain. This priest was mostly chosen by the leading members of the network and only subsequently appointed by the bishop or his superior. Nonetheless he was often the key figure, planning and preparing the programme, keeping contact with the members and recruiting new ones. The network habitually met at the priest’s place of residence (school, monastery or research institution).32 Although priests thus played a central role, neither the Walloon nor the Flemish entrepreneurs’ circles considered themselves subordinate to the Church’s hierarchy. The rise and growing success of the Catholic Action group during the interwar period did not change this. In the mid-30s APIC still clearly stated that: «The role that we need to play in our profession is freely determined by our leaders, in accordance with the social doctrine of the sovereign pontiffs, but without special intervention of the ecclesiastical authorities».33

32 Brouwers Vijftig jaar christelijke werkgeversbeweging (cf. n. 27), I, 9-129.
Local entrepreneurs’ circles held an average of about six to eight meetings a year, not including their presence at (inter)national congresses or other external events. Although one can suppose that they also proved to be interesting business networks, these structures above all had a spiritual and educational vocation. Their mission statements were often rather vague, focussing on study-work and the exchange and propagation of ideas. The objectives of the Cercle d’Action Sociale des Industriels Liégeois offer a good example. They simply read: «The study of social problems; the dissemination of solutions and ideas in line with Church doctrine; their realization within industry».34 Even during the interwar period, when the federations quickly expanded their radius of action and increasingly took up roles as interest mediators and interpreters, the local Catholic entrepreneurs’ circles kept on referring to themselves not as social organizations but as part of a doctrinal movement.

Compared to other Catholic associations, especially those for workers, far fewer efforts were made to distribute publications, periodicals or other printed propaganda materials. It was often stated that all this would be a waste of time and money, given the specificity of the target audience, too occupied with other matters to read voluminous study texts, let alone more contemplative treatises. Nevertheless keynote lectures during national congresses or study meetings were sometimes printed and distributed. Some of the chaplains or spiritual advisors also published handbooks and more concise studies on specific topics. During the interwar period the number of periodicals and of their subscribers slowly grew.

Reading through the source materials that reflect on these countless meetings of local APIC- and ACVW-circles during the pre- and interwar period one cannot but acknowledge that their design and aims remained closely related to the traditional model of the Jesuit retreats, the substratum on which most of the Catholic entrepreneurs’ networks had grown. The Jesuit retreats aimed at young bourgeois men, labelled as «gentlemen’s retreats», demonstrated particular features. Clear and concise lectures stimulated the participants to formulate their own opinions. Ample time was provided for individual prayer and contemplation. Fire-and-brimstone sermons or heavy theological disputes were avoided. Participants were led (not forced) to (re)discover God on their own initiative and at their own pace. Vocabulary and metaphors employed were adapted to the target audience. The soul and its spiritual needs, for instance, were often compared with the accounts of a firm: both had to be kept in an orderly fashion and necessitated periodic inspection/introspection. This in turn required perseverance and strong character. Although the listeners were confronted with their own sins and shortcomings, God was portrayed as a forgiving bon Maître.35

The lectures and study-meetings of the Belgian Catholic entrepreneurs’ circles were organized in a similar way and exuded the same, somewhat genteel atmosphere of a socio-religious debating club. Although APIC and ACVW also organized more academic gatherings, the meetings of their local circles had a more relaxed, somewhat uninhibited ambience. Entrepreneurs, so it was commonly agreed, had to be pastorally approached in a soothing environment, away from the burdens of everyday life and

34 Brouwers, Vijftig jaar christelijke werkgeversbeweging (cf. n. 27), I, 77.
35 Suenens/De Maeyer, L’Ecole du Grand Chrétien (cf. n. 26).
amongst their peers. At the meetings of the Catholic employers’ circles one could hear very few sermons, but mostly short and concise lectures, leaving ample time for group discussions but also for private talks and a fine meal.36

The programme offered a mixture of lectures on more general social and sometimes even political topics and discussions on specific concepts and ideas that the latest Catholic social publications had to offer. Recent trends in (social) legislation and the way that these measures needed to be interpreted and implemented, also formed a popular category. Keynote lectures were offered by dynamic guest speakers, preferably fellow industrialists and academic specialists with good public reputations. Some speakers developed specific case-studies on the ways individual companies handled the issues at hand. Others even introduced more technical subjects. Although the speakers clearly had their freedom, the discussion amongst the members was carefully directed by the board members and the chaplain. During these sometimes lively but always polite conversations members habitually pointed to the particularities of their proper industry, region or firm that hindered the implementation of specific schemes and ideas. Condescending remarks about unwilling or immature workers were only seldom reported. Financial arguments on the other hand were not avoided. The members were even urged to calculate costs and benefits of their social frameworks and often those budgets were partly published, proving that only good will and a small investment could generate considerable social profit and welfare.

Catholic activism within a neo-scholastic framework

The conferences, lectures, study and debate seminars of the Belgian cercles patronales thus brought together a growing number of entrepreneurs who felt the need to reflect on their duties and identities as Catholics and as businessmen. These meetings advocated coherent messages, rooted within the dream of a Christian, harmonious, collaborative socio-economic order. The creativity and ingenuity of entrepreneurs, and their dynamism as risk-takers and organizers were regularly remembered and applauded. Gathering Catholic employers and urging them to joint reflections on their individual and collective religious responsibility would act as a weapon in combating the traditional individualism, indifference and neutrality in the business milieu. «It is necessary», so argued a leading industrialist at the Liege congress of 1890, «that we renounce selfishness, do the opposite, look for remedies in grouping and association».37 Given the overwhelming scale of the moral and religious crisis in society, the world of enterprise could not stay uninvolved. Catholic social activism was moulded as an instrument aimed at a restoration/confirmation of the moral leadership of the Church within modern society. The (re-)Christianization of society, the omnia instaurare/restaurare in Christo, required a broad and intense commitment of all Catholics within their diverse milieus. This was an appeal that would be further developed and intensified within the Catholic Action during the interwar period.

36 Brouwers, Vijftig jaar christelijke werkgeversbeweging in België (cf. n. 27), I, 53.
37 Doat, Utilité des unions de patrons (cf. n. 26), 3.
As already mentioned, the encyclical «Rerum Novarum» in 1891 had an important mobilizing effect among Catholic employers in Belgium. The fact that the Pope had devoted an entire encyclical to the social issue confirmed that the Church recognized the unbreakable link between her vocation of evangelization and the obligation of every Christian to strive for social justice. The content of «Rerum Novarum» was thoroughly grounded within neo-scholastic philosophy. «The pope spoke in the words of Saint Thomas».38 This was of course far from surprising given the strong belief of Leo XIII, already expressed in «Aeterni Patris» (1879), that neo-scholastic philosophy would provide answers to the crisis of modern society. Ideologies grounded within modern philosophy, so it argued, departed from an incorrect portrayal of mankind. Individualism, rooted within nominalism (universalia post rem), postulated the freedom of every human being. Socialism, finding its metaphysical groundings in idealism (universalia ante rem), subordinated man to the collective. Christian anthropocentrism argued from the epistemological principle of the universalia in re. Man is the clearest reflection of God. He is a social being, neither totally independent nor completely dependent, capable of self-knowledge and of freely entering into communications with other persons, striving towards the common good. A God-given moral order preceded the market, politics or any other factual and normative framework where individual and collective choices could be made. Both the economic and political order needed to be based on an ontological hierarchy of values and finalities.

Although property rights were founded within natural law, property was also a social institution, because it served not merely the welfare of the individual but also of society. It was no coincidence that one of the few summaries of the encyclical was devoted to this issue: «To sum up, then, what has been said: Whoever has received from the divine bounty a large share of temporal blessings, whether they be external and material, or gifts of the mind, has received them for the purpose of using them for the perfecting of his own nature, and, at the same time, that he may employ them, as the steward of God’s providence, for the benefit of others.»39 This concept of stewardship was of course crucial in the Catholic discourse towards entrepreneurs. Man was only the safekeeper, the steward of creation. Even the factory was portrayed as «a gift of God».40 The economy served general material prosperity, for all social entities, safeguarding their independence and according to their specific aptitudes. Socio-economic harmony could only be achieved by justice, with respect for personal dignity and the material interests of all those involved. The principle of equivalence and not market laws should constitute the guideline towards a just price and income. Solidarity was a godly, ethical obligation, for the individual as well as for the state.

39 Rerum Novarum, par. 22.
Discussions about «Rerum Novarum»

While it was clear for many contemporary observers (as it is for modern-day historians) that the papal encyclical was coloured by the background of its authors and the context in which it was written, «Rerum Novarum» and its neo-scholastic framework were usually portrayed to the Catholic employers as the interlinked sources of a concise, organic doctrine (even an alternative ideology), containing everlasting truths, deduced from natural law and the Revelation. These texts, however, seldom proffered clear advice or guidelines and thus demanded continuous reflection and interpretation. The rather loose and unsystematic structure and vocabulary of the encyclical did not help in this regard. It was even a difficult job just to recapture the text and/or to present its content intelligibly to a non-specialized audience.

This helps to explain the many and often furious debates between the different social-Catholic opinions on the way(s) the «Catholic social doctrine» should be interpreted and put into practice. Major points of dispute – even while the text of «Rerum Novarum» was being drafted, but especially after its promulgation – concerned (1) the minimum family wage, (2) mixed corporations versus separate workers’ organizations and (3) the need for further social legislation and thus state intervention. The more interventionist Union de Fribourg of Bishop Gaspard Mermillod (1824-1892) together with the School of Liege, met fierce opposition on these issues from the so-called School of Angers around the «Revue Catholique des institutions et du droit». The debate unfolded not only among the clergy and Catholic academics but also within entrepreneurial circles and even in the Jesuit Order. The encyclical «Graves de Communi» (1901), clarifying the Church’s position on Christian democracy, dampened the disputes, but did not put an end to them.

Some Belgian industrialists indeed followed the example of politicians like Arthur Verhaegen (1847-1917) or Michel Levie (1851-1939) in support of the young but quickly growing Christian workers movement, spurred by the electoral reforms of 1893 and 1899. However, this group clearly was a minority. The prevalent interpretation of «Rerum Novarum» within Belgian Catholic entrepreneurial circles was a somewhat narrow and conservative one. Their views were supported by the writings of several members of the School of Angers. The Jesuit scholar August Castelein for instance took great pains to prove that the pope had merely pointed a finger at the abuses of a small minority of mainly non-Catholic entrepreneurs. He pleaded for unconditional entrepreneurial freedom and for an unquestionable respect for the autonomous authority of


the employer. "Rerum Novarum" dictated that true Christian solidarity required the exercise of justice, complemented by charity. But the encyclical remained far from condemning big business culture. Although usury had to be avoided at all costs, there was no shame in making profits, as long as one did not abuse children and female workers and the workforce was paid correctly. A generous part of those profits could be used to subsidize social initiatives or for individual charity. APIC only reluctantly accepted the ambitions of the Christian workers movement to create independent trade unions and to obtain their own political spokesmen. It required strong words from the Belgian episcopate and several communications with Rome before Castelein and his friends eased their tone.

Balancing justice and charity: the bon patron catholique

Castelein and other APIC-authors skilfully circumvented or minimized several crucial passages of "Rerum Novarum", but they were of course not wrong to stress that justice and charity were central concepts in the papal encyclical. Following the classical writings of Saint Thomas, neo-scholastic philosophy differentiated between (1) general (legal or social) justice related to the *bonum commune*, (2) distributive justice referring to the distribution of goods by the State, and (3) commutative justice between individuals. Although "Rerum Novarum" had cautiously voiced the growing significance of distributive justice in social affairs, the Belgian Catholic employers’ circles kept on referring to the somewhat contractual category of commutative justice. At the same time Castelein and his audience also questioned the validity of justice as the sole governing principle of social relations. Property rights for example were grounded in natural law itself. They conferred the owner of a factory the right to assure the prosperity of his exploitation. The reciprocal rights and duties of employers and workers could thus not merely be based on the employment contract between them. Natural law granted the entrepreneur the power to form and lead "his workers family" following the laws of the family, society and the Church. The most important proof of the commitment of entrepreneurs to their Catholic identity, so they argued, lay in their solicitude towards the material, moral and religious welfare of the less privileged, in particular of their workforce.

Older texts and practices were used to justify this paternalist vision. Some authors even went back to the letters of Saint Paul and the Catechism of the Council of Trent (1566). These writings indeed dictated that respect for the paternal authority proscribed by the fourth commandment was not limited to the family, but had to be extended to all those who were superior to someone "for reasons of power, character, functions and
good deeds». But for the most part the Catholic entrepreneurs’ circles had to draw on other sources to develop a coherent role model for their members. Often reference was made to the exemplary initiatives of other entrepreneurs, among them of course Léon Harmel’s factory and social system in Val-des-Bois. His «Catéchisme du Patron» (1889) and «Manuel d’une corporation chrétienne» (1877) were regularly quoted until the 1930s.47 «The factory is a family», so dictated Harmel in 1890, «the tasks of the employer are the same as those of the father who knows all his children».48 Almost 40 years later this message still resounded in the APIC-meetings: «The obligations of an entrepreneur […] take on the same form and characteristics as those of the head of a family; they are even an extension of them, somewhat like a new application. For us the employer is a delegate of God amongst his loved ones, the humble workers, the weak, the under-privileged […] The entrepreneur has to be a father to his industrial family.»49

Following Harmel’s older handbooks concise checklists were published, summing up ideas, situations and attitudes to which the employer had to pay particular attention or had to reflect upon. Some instructions were merely formal and/or easy to implement. Entrepreneurs had to be openly Catholic, testifying their beliefs not only in the privacy of their homes, but also openly in their factories and business relations. Since they had an exemplary role to fulfil, entrepreneurs were urged to lead virtuous Christian lives, avoiding ostentatious luxury. In order to highlight the religious identity of their company, industrialists were advised to place crucifixes, religious statues or pictures in their workshops and in the vicinity of their factories. Besides Saint Joseph (patron saint of Belgium and of workers in general), the cult of the factory’s patron saint and/or of its branch of industry was to be explicitly promoted. As a real father of his workforce, the bon patron catholique was expected to regularly lead his workers into prayer, confession and procession. He needed to be accessible for them, attentive to their needs, instructing and guiding them, and open to their concerns and problems, but not hesitating to reprimand them, admonishing against concubinage or forbidding them to curse or drink alcohol both during and outside working hours.

All these instructions remained in line with what has been labelled as the ultimate goal of paternalism in the late 19th century, namely the reproduction of a disciplined and stable workforce in a closed entrepreneurial environment.50 Belgian Catholic entrepreneurs’ circles advised their members to be cautious in the recruitment of their workforce: preference had to be given to churchgoing families with satisfying morality, living in the vicinity of the factory. These «good Catholic workers’ families» had to be closely monitored and supported. The employment of women and adolescents was to be avoided. If they were present, female personnel should be separated from men and their supervision entrusted only to women. Young workers had to be carefully recruited, their apprenticeship closely supervised. They could indeed form a nucleus of an apostolic worker elite, a lever bringing about a genuine re-Christianization of their class. Confronted with a more mobile workforce, employers were urged to improve

47 Léon Harmel, Manuel d’une Corporation Chrétienne, Tours 1879.
50 André Gueslin, Le paternalisme revisité en Europe occidentale (seconde moitié du XIXe siècle, début du XXe siècle, in: Genèses 7 (1992), 201-211.
the quality and morality of local lodging houses. Given the importance of their intermediary roles, only Catholics were to be appointed as managers, directors and foremen. «A Christian manager», so wrote APIC board member Victor Thiran (1872-1946), «must oblige himself to descry within all members of his workforce their human person, their Christian soul. […] This mixture of justice and sympathy, guided by good judgement of human nature, confirms the moral character of the true manager. He lets himself be feared, loved, obeyed and followed.»51

Other guidelines had more far-reaching (financial and organizational) implications and therefore did not enjoy a general consensus. But many local sections of APIC indeed advocated that their members had to guarantee their workforce employment and wage stability, even if this would entail «certain sacrifices to obtain work during times of crisis».52 Salaries had to be paid in full and in cash, financial penalties avoided. Working hours had to be limited. As early as 1890 Catholic entrepreneurs’ circles, anticipating a legal solution which only came about in 1905, were encouraging their members to eschew working on Sundays. Older or disabled workers were not to be discharged but kept at work, according to their abilities. The involvement of several Catholic entrepreneurs in the (national and international) movement against industrial accidents, resulting in the law of 1903, proves their growing concerns on this issue. Other, less altruistic motives can of course also have played a role here. As Victor Thiran confessed, «A worker who is well treated will work better and produce more».53

Social sponsorship

In line with Harmel and his different Belgian epigones, APIC also urged its members to initiate or to support social initiatives. There were of course many traditional structures and patronage initiatives, often going back to the 1850s to 1860s: Sunday school, libraries, day-care centres, workers’ circles and retreats, employment offices, social insurance (e.g. health, accidents, pension), savings banks, leisure organizations and commercial and other services. From the 1890s onwards a broad range of new initiatives emerged, answering specific needs of very different target groups: cooperatives, total abstinence organizations, lodging houses, allotments, social housing companies, etc. The list of Catholic œuvres sociales became so impressive that this expanding landscape had to be surveyed in specialized volumes.54 Catholic entrepreneurs’ circles often lacked an overview of what was happening and thus of their possibilities. During meetings specific social initiatives were introduced, and the differences between their methods explained.

Although further research is necessary on the ways in which the Catholic elite directed its social sponsorship in the pre- and interwar period, one can already ascertain a clear preference within employers’ circles for initiatives of a more traditional cast, but with somewhat innovative methods and objectives. The growing involvement of mem-

53 Thiran, Le chef d’entreprise (cf. n. 51).
54 For example Arthur Vermeeersch et al., Manuel social. La législation et les œuvres en, Brussels 1909.
bers of Catholic entrepreneurial circles in the Belgian *Ligue du Coin de Terre et du Foyer* (1899) offers a good example. This organization created and managed city gardens where workers could grow their own vegetables. This did not only foster the health, stability and happiness of the workers’ family, so argued the Ligue, but would also stimulate them to save up money in order to buy a house. For Belgium this was a somewhat new and modern scheme, again developed in interaction with partners in northern France. But the objectives of the Ligue still clearly stressed the morality, diligence and individual responsibility of workers.55

Another and even more decisive argument in directing their social sponsorship of Catholic entrepreneurs was the degree of control that they could exercise over these structures, especially when they deployed themselves within factory communities. A direct rule was of course preferred, but this required a certain scale, continuous attention of the entrepreneur and a long-lasting investment. Local parish priests could be more easily controlled than Dominican and Franciscan friars. The APIC-members also remained reluctant to cooperate with the growing number of *petits vicaires*, diocesan priests involved in social initiatives under a direct mandate of their bishops and often linked to the *Secrétariat Général des Unions Professionnelles Chrétiennes de Belgique* (1904), the nucleus of the Christian Workers’ Movement.

### Shifting patterns after the war

The social discourse of the Belgian Catholic employers’ circles in the pre-war period thus remained largely embedded in a rather obstinate paternalist reading of «Rerum Novarum». Only from the 20s onwards did their vision slowly evolve into a more open and less hierarchical one. This evolution was clearly inspired by the rapidly changing socio-political context and by the updated social teachings of the Catholic Church. The First World War caused Belgium immeasurable human suffering and material damage. Belgian Church leaders especially loathed the moral degeneration of post-war society. This crisis could of course be ascribed to the brutality of war and the calamities that had occurred, but the Church also pointed a finger at the negligent attitude of the Catholic community itself. The masses could be blamed to some extent, but «on the higher classes rests, according to my opinion, the main responsibility of the current crisis», so wrote the Jesuit priest Albert Muller (1880-1951). They had abused their prestige, neglected the education of the masses, exploited their pre-war political dominance, disregarded their duties of charity and remained indifferent towards their Christian social obligations. Although a wave of political and social democratization had appeased the most urgent demands of the labour movement, the threat of class antagonism and disharmony was not yet subdued. Only through shared Catholic beliefs and guided by the Church and its social teachings could social harmony be restored.56


In light of its bitter evaluation of the religiosity and morality of post-war society, the Belgian Church urged that Catholic social teachings to be brought up to date. The Union Internationale d’Etudes Sociales (1920), presided over by Mercier and usually known as the Union de Malines, answered this call.\textsuperscript{57} Regarding entrepreneurial praxis and social relations, the Union de Malines offered a concise summary of «Rerum Novarum». But it also condemned new phenomena such as the nationalization of enterprises and introduced several new concepts and ideas, for instance arbitration in social conflicts, worker participation in management structures and even profit-sharing and the social shareholder-ship of workers. As for the way in which social bargaining had been organized, the Union clearly embraced the collective structures that emerged after the war.\textsuperscript{58}

Key figures of the UASC/APIC like Maurice Defourny were committed to the activities of the Union de Malines. Catholic employers were explicitly called to action. Their organizations needed to be strengthened, proving their significance and specificity in competition with the growing socio-political weight of the neutral employers’ federations and the labour unions. The Union de Malines undoubtedly articulated this sense of urgency. «For too long now employers also in our country have neglected to answer the appeal of the popes and to organize themselves in Catholic structures […] experience has shown that neutralism is in fact untenable and can only further class struggle». All Catholic employers had to be enlisted in Catholic organizations where the «liberal mentality of egoism» among them could be rooted out and replaced by a Christian spirit of mutual aid, trust and solidarity.\textsuperscript{59} Especially in Wallonia, where Catholic entrepreneurs were often members of both the neutral CCI and the Catholic UASC/APIC, this message was only reluctantly accepted.

Organization of interests

During the 20s the Belgian Church not only launched an appeal to Catholic employers to strengthen their organizations, they also admonished them to accept a larger intervention of the State in social matters, especially in the field of social insurance. Following on the principles of «Rerum Novarum» and the conclusions of the Union de Malines the principles of distributive justice had to be embraced. Although Catholic employers in Belgium had remained very suspicious towards state intervention in social matters until 1914, they were rather quick to accept the important legislative breakthroughs in the years after the armistice. Several factors can help to explain this changing attitude. Belgian industrial activity was nearly annihilated by the war, and the population remained exhausted and impoverished. A quick recovery of the country necessitated important socio-political concessions. It was also argued that social legislation and state-

\textsuperscript{57} Leen Van Molle, Croissance économique et éthique catholique: les points de vue de l’Union de Malines dans les années vingt, in: Eric Aerts et al. (eds.), Studia Historica Oeconomicira Liber Amicorum Herman Van der Wee, Leuven 1993, 317-335.

\textsuperscript{58} Code social. Esquisse d’une synthèse sociale catholique, Paris 1927, 112.

\textsuperscript{59} Van Haudenard, Les groupements de patrons catholiques, in: Dossiers de l’Action Catholique 4-5 (1930); Constant Van Gestel, L’organisation catholique des patrons dans le pays Flamand, in: La Vie intellectuelle 7 (1930), 108-125.
controlled social insurance would help to stabilize the workforce, offering more or less the same social benefits and working conditions in every factory. Although some industrialists still preferred to organize social welfare provisions within their factory walls, many others had experienced that more open and publicly controlled systems could generate important advantages. State subsidies were of course an important incentive. During the war numerous members of the Catholic employers’ circles participated in the local and regional sections of the Comité National de Secours et d’Alimentation. The countless social initiatives in support of the famished population organized by this neutral, government-like structure, learned that not only subsidies from but also collaboration with and control by government agencies proved to be effective and advantageous.

In organizing the food supply and social welfare of the Belgian population during the war, Catholic employers in the Comité National had also often collaborated with representatives of the workers movement. This helps to explain why in the 20s the Flemish and later on also the Walloon entrepreneurs’ circles adopted a more open and conciliatory attitude towards trade unions, especially Catholic ones. «A Catholic employer does not fear the Christian trade-unions, because on his terrain, the one of justice and charity, he can not be overcome», so dictated UASC chaplain Demain.60 The need for such a change was of course related to the radically changed political and social context that had arisen after the armistice. In this new climate it not only looked necessary but also advantageous to enter into consultation with the «more trustworthy» and conciliatory segments of the labour movement.61 Both the Flemish and Walloon organizations made important efforts to reassure their membership that Christian trade unions took a more pragmatic tone than the socialist ones, as they were mostly controlled by priests and shared the same doctrinal background as the Catholic entrepreneurs. Jesuit priests like Joseph Arendt (1885-1952), son of an entrepreneur and in charge of the study services of the Catholic trade union organization ACV/CSC, facilitated this rapprochement.

The Antwerp ACVW rather quickly developed strong contacts and even joint initiatives with the leaders of the local Christian syndicates. The Walloon federation did not go that far, but leading board members regularly expressed their esteem for the Catholic Action organizations for young workers, especially the quickly growing Belgian Katholieke Arbeidersjeugd/Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne of Joseph Cardijn (1882-1967). Its educational programme, aimed at moulding «a new and proud type of Christian worker», seemed to converge with the aims of the older and moralistic patronage initiatives that Catholic entrepreneurs had developed.62 But the entente between the Catholic employers’ and workers’ organizations remained very fragile and conditional. The dialogue was regularly thwarted by the growing political conflicts between the conservative and Christian-democratic wings within the Catholic party. During the 20s several conserva-

60 Henri Demain, L’action du chef d’entreprise, Brussels 1923, 18.
tive politicians, often supported by or linked to industrialist circles, would create their own networks of Catholic social works, competing with the social insurance schemes, cooperatives and other initiatives of the Christian workers' movement. Their competition would only be toned down after the Second World War.63

This growing openness towards collaboration with the Christian workers' movement facilitated the rise of a more structural view on social relations. By the end of the 20s, even the most distrustful Catholic employers came to acknowledge that the joint and mixed bargaining committees created after the war had proven that there was some potential in collective social consultation. Communication lines with the workers' movement, structures where the different social viewpoints of these «industrial partners» could be confronted and reconciled, needed to be created. The guidelines provided by «Quadragesimo Anno» (1931) strengthened the Catholic entrepreneurs in their pursuit of such an organization of interests, especially on a sectoral level. The instructions in the encyclical on that issue again remained rather vague and thus led to new disputes. But the prevailing tone was clear. Class struggle needed to be avoided at all cost. «Therefore the social policy of the State must devote itself to the re-establishment of the industries and professions […] in which men may have their place, not according to the position each has in the labour market but according to the respective social functions which each performs». Labour and capital could deliberate separately, but their «guilds were ultimately destined to cooperate in the highest degree of each industry and profession for the sake of the common good of the country».64

Much has been written on the ways in which the Belgian Catholic community embraced corporatism during the 1930s.65 Political instability, the economic crisis and high unemployment rates fostered the search for alternative socio-political structures. Foreign models were studied and evaluated. Several board members of the Belgian Catholic employers' organizations developed their own scenarios. Many different meetings and congresses were devoted to these issues, and the list of related reports, articles and books is quite impressive.66 It has often been stressed that the success of corporatism within industrial circles during the 30s reflected their recalcitrant attitude towards post-war political democracy and universal suffrage. Indeed, most corporatist scenarios nearly always promised the leading industrial and commercial circles a stronger and guaranteed voice in politics. The fear of communism strengthened their tendency towards stronger

64 Quadragesimo Anno, 82ff.
66 Amongst the most important Marcel Laloire, Le corporatisme: doctrine et application, Brussels 1936; René Goris, De bedrijfsorganisatie volgend de opvattingen van het ACVW, Brussels 1934; id., De bedrijfsorganisatie der werkgevers in België, Brussels 1937; Henri Velge, L’organisation professionnelle, Projet de réalisation en Belgique, Brussels 1937; Organisation professionnelle et action sociale patronale, Mémoires de la 5ème session des journées sociales patronales, Brussels 1934. See also Joseph Arendt, L’organisation professionnelle, Brussels 1930.
socio-political structures. Philo-fascist formations and parties such as the predominantly French-speaking Rex Movement, the Flemish-nationalist VNV and Verdinaso indeed gained some support from commercial and industrial circles. However, it must also be stressed that the Catholic entrepreneurial organizations not only clearly distanced themselves from political adventures, but also limited their corporatist studies predominantly to the ways in which economic and social relations should be structured. After the strikes of 1936, the leaders of the Catholic employers’ organizations contributed significantly to the success of the first National Labour Conference (1936), which to a certain degree can be seen as the starting point of national collective social bargaining in Belgium.

Towards a more equivalent solidarity

Together with their acceptance of structured social relations and of collective bargaining, Catholic employers’ circles in Belgium also slowly adopted a less hierarchical view on the relationship between employers and their workforce. Earlier we mentioned that the «Harmelian», paternalist image of the employer practically remained unchanged until the mid-20s. The traditional checklists by which individual entrepreneurs could appraise the Catholicity of their actions, did indeed not change fundamentally. Some older admonishments were simply rephrased and/or complemented with new or alternative suggestions. Apart from the traditional social works that Catholic employers were advised to subsidise, the entrepreneurs’ circles now also cautiously suggested that they opened the doors of their factory for the delegates of the Christian workers’ movement.

During the late 20s in the meetings of the Catholic entrepreneurs’ circles the first echoes could be heard of what for instance the Union de Malines had decreed on just wages, on the reciprocity of the labour contract, on the «partnership» that united individual workers and their workers and even on their joint shareholdership. «Quadragesimo Anno» strengthened this tendency towards equivalency, by advising that «the work-contract be somewhat modified by a partnership-contract, as is already being done in various ways and with no small advantage to workers and owners. Workers and other employees thus become sharers in ownership or management or participate in some fashion in the profits received».67

Nevertheless it was only in the late 30s that the ideas of the Belgian Catholic employers’ circles on entrepreneurial social responsibility really began to shift. Although there is growing awareness of the ways in which neo-scholastic philosophy was brought up to date in Belgium between the wars, influenced by the works of Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) or Emmanuel Mounier (1905-1950), we still know very little about how these more «personalistic» ideas were promulgated in broader social networks and circles. However, it is clear that from 1936 onwards concepts such as «servitude» and «brotherly friendship» appear in the writings of ACVW and APIC, stressing the individual dignity of both employers and workers, their reciprocal responsibilities, the need for sincere communication between them, leading to fraternal cooperation: «We have to stop considering workers as production machines. We have to remember that they deserve to be

67 Quadragesimo Anno, 65.
treated as men, as collaborators in whom one needs to respect the eminent dignity of the human person.68 These first writings would form the building blocks for a renewed and modernized social discourse of the Belgian entrepreneurs’ organizations after the Second World War.69

Conclusion

In order to harness the growing socio-political weight of business and enterprise, the Belgian Catholic Church deployed increasing efforts during the 19th century to mobilize and organize the industrial and commercial elite. From the late 1880s onwards a growing number of regional (study) circles were created, often under the guidance of Jesuit priests. These structures, clearly rooted in older (Vincentian and Jesuit) networks, advocated a clear Christian identity, although they remained largely independent from the Church hierarchy. They can be considered as typical exponents of social Catholicism, following its definition by Denis Pelletier as a «succession of sociabilities answering to the immediate needs of a suffering society in which the social doctrine of the Church plays the role of regulating standard».70 The Walloon and Flemish associations followed different paths and only in the 1930s formed a national federation. It would play a leading role in the international Catholic entrepreneurs’ movement.

The Belgian cercles patronales offered their members a forum where they could collectively reflect on their specific identity and duties as Catholics and as businessmen, as well as a platform for the exchange of ideas and experiences. But they were also instruments for the instruction and mobilization of the entrepreneurial elite. Members were continuously urged to become champions in Catholic militancy. They were called to act as servants of social harmony and solidarity, promulgating their belief that Christian principles and teachings had to govern industrial and social relations. Leaving aside the obvious diversity amongst them, Belgian Catholic entrepreneurial circles before the First World War voiced a somewhat narrow and conservative interpretation of Catholic social teachings. Not willing to accept the encyclical in all its consequences, they entered in a long dispute with the young Christian workers’ movement on the interpretation of «Rerum Novarum». Their vision on what could be expected from a bon patron catholique remained based on older, paternalist principles and models. This ideal image only slowly evolved to a more open and less hierarchical one. From the mid-30s onwards more «personalistic» concepts and ideas gained ground.

Although it still remains difficult to decisively evaluate the impact of Catholic social teachings on individual entrepreneurial praxis, it is clear that this ongoing collective dialogue between the Church and the members of the industrial and commercial elite helped them as religious businessmen to shape and refine their understanding of mod-

68 Charles Munier, Une exigence du temps présent. La formation morale et sociale du personnel de maîtrise, Brussels [1939].
69 See the already innovative approaches in Jean Collard/Paul Mahieu, Les réalisations sociales à l’usine, Brussels 1942.
ern society. The structures that were created also fostered important social effects. Despite of their long-lasting paternalist view on individual entrepreneurial social responsibility, Belgian Catholic entrepreneurs considerably strengthened their organizations during the interwar period and began taking up leading roles on the socio-political scene. Their growing openness towards the Christian workers’ movement facilitated the rise of a more structural view on social relations. The awareness of the potential of collective social consultation, reinforced by the guidelines provided by «Quadragesimo Anno» (1931), prepared them for the emergence of systems of interest mediation, collective bargaining and social security. By following this direction, they paved the way for post-war welfare state models in which a balance between free-market forces and social responsibility was realized, supported by a Fordist compromise linking employers and trade unions.

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