In memoriam Emile Christian Coppens, 1947–2015

In 2015, on August 27th, historians of canon law lost a dear colleague: Emile Christian Coppens, known to all under his short name ‘Chris’. A bibliography of his many legal-historical publications has been published in 2012, in a volume of studies in honour of his 65th birthday1. His main publications pivoted on two topics of research: on the one side canon law around 1200, and on the other side canon law’s impact on legal practice in 19th century Belgium.

His interest for the latter topic focussed on 19th century Belgian marriage law. This had also constituted the central point for his doctoral dissertation of 1984 which passed summa cum laude in the University of Ghent2.

In contrast, in his other preoccupation (for canon law around 1200) he studied unedited manuscript texts. Throughout 35 years, from 1979 until his death, he worked in instalments on editing a very important commentary to Gratian’s Decretum, known under its incipit words ‘Animal est substantia’, written in Paris between 1206 and 1216, and connected to teachings of a lawyer named ‘P.P.’ – probably Petrus Peverellus3. Interestingly enough, this vast canonistic commentary is heavily loaded with references to Roman law. Editorial work had been started by Anton de Groot. In 1979 Chris Coppens joined in. He continued after De Groot’s death and kept publishing the readily edited text in instalments on his internet site http://medcanonlaw.nl/ (with tabs ‘introduc-

2 On secularisation of marriage law in Belgium, in particular in Ghent 1796–1857. The thesis remained unprinted, but Chris Coppens used parts of it in articles which he published.
tion’, ‘distinctiones’ and ‘causae’). The edited text breaks off after Causa 9, however, since its editor has passed away.

Chris Coppens also edited the Ordo iudiciarius ‘Sapientiam affectant omnes’ authored by Petrus Peverellus⁴. He furthermore made substantial contributions to Anton de Groot’s summary catalogue of canon law manuscripts in the Netherlands⁵, and to the same author’s draft for an edition of the Distinctiones ‘Monacenses’ ‘Si mulier eadem hora’⁶.

In Nijmegen Chris Coppens shouldered heavy burdens of redactional work. He managed brushing up the so far rudimentary book production of the Law Faculty to become a major competitor in the Netherlands’ book market for legal-historical and legal-sociological monographs and miscellanies. Between 1979 and 2010 more than 70 books were typeset and printed under his redaction⁷. In addition Chris also helped redacting the legal-historical periodical Pro Memorie (2004–2009)⁸ and was active in historical organisations⁹. All these activities were highly laudable for their altruism – but they left Chris only little time to go ahead with his own research projects.

Chris had been born on 20 July 1947 in the Belgian city of Aalst. After finishing school there, he first went to study philosophy and theology in catholic seminaries (1965–1968), and then he studied history at the University of Ghent where he first graduated in 1972 as a licentiate, with a repeatedly prized thesis on the Flemish historian Paul Frédéricq (1850–1920)⁴.⁹

During subsequent years, Chris earned his living in various employments. Besides, he studied law (at home). In 1977 he obtained a licentiate in law, and years later the law title ‘meester’. His good preparation in law as well as in

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⁶ A.j. de Groot, Distinctiones ‘Si mulier eadem hora’ seu Monacenses, [Rechtshistorische reeks van het Gerard Noodt Instituut, 36], Nijmegen 1996. The edition by De Groot and Coppens was later reworked and thus republished by Rosalba Sorice, [Monumenta iuris canonici, Series A: Corpus Glossatorum, 4], Città del Vaticano 2002.
⁷ Two series: Rechtshistorische reeks van het Gerard Noodt Instituut and Reeks Recht en Samenleving.
⁹ From 2000 onward, for instance, Chris Coppens sat in the board of the Société d’histoire du droit et des institutions des pays flamands, picards et wallons and presided over it 2009–2011.