PRIESTHOOD AND PRIESTLY TRAINING IN THE LIGHT OF VATICAN II: VISIONS AND EXPECTATIONS IN THE LOW COUNTRIES

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1. Introduction

This contribution will deal with the visions and expectations present in the Netherlands and in Belgium, mainly in the Flemish speaking part of that country, regarding priestly training and ordained priesthood. We will focus on the ideas prevalent among the most concerned, the priests themselves, in particular the secular clergy. In order to detect their visions we did a systematic reading of a selection of theological and pastoral periodicals, which had mainly clerical readers and subscribers. Further on we used other published sources related to the Second Vatican Council, such as the volumes on the vota and the reports of the council sessions as well as the texts of the conciliar decrees. As this is a first approach of the question we did not involve unpublished sources in our research. It will focus also on a clearly limited period of time. We will take into consideration the years of the council itself, thus from 1962 till 1965. So we will deal in particular with the immediate dynamics of the conciliar event itself, not with the effects of the council in the post-conciliar period. Nevertheless we will try to assess the significance of the conciliar documents for the expectations that had been raised in the Low Countries in the former years.

1 We did a systematic reading of the subsequent periodicals: Collationes Brugenses et Gandavenses (three-monthly review of the secular clergy of the dioceses of Bruges and Ghent), Bruges, 1962-65; Collectanea Mechliniensa (two-monthly review of the secular clergy of the Archdiocese of Mechelen and the diocese of Antwerp), Malines, 1962-65; Nederlands Katholieke Stemmen. Maandschrift voor Theologie en Zielzorg (monthly review edited by the diocese of Utrecht with the cooperation of secular and regular priests), Zwolle, 1962-65; Pastor Bonus. Maandschrift voor priesters (monthly review for priests, edited by diocesan priests of the Flemish dioceses), Brussels, 1962-65; Sacerdos. Tweemaandelijks tijdschrift voor predikatie en zielzorg (two-monthly magazine for homily and pastoral care, edited by the Franciscans of the Flemish province), Malines, 1962-65; Tijdschrift voor Theologie (academic review edited by professors in theology

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2. Belgian and Dutch bishops on the eve of and during the council

About 1960 there was still a strongly established priestly body in Belgium and the Netherlands. Both countries belonged to an area wherein the percentage of priests as compared to the population was one of the highest in Europe. On the other hand both countries showed a constant gradual decline of vocations since the Second World War. But this decline did not seem really alarming. This may explain why the issue of the priesthood and priestly training was only a matter of second importance in the vota of the Belgian and Dutch bishops. Only the restoration of the permanent diaconate was given primary attention. In the Netherlands some bishops recommended the permission of married men to that office, the Belgian Bishop of Gent, Calewaert, wanted to restrict it to celibate men. Regarding the priestly office, the bishops brought up the questions of seminary training and celibacy. Seminaries should, according to their recommendations, be better adapted to modern needs with a closer attention to pastoral training. As far as the question of celibacy was addressed, not one of the bishops raised his voice for a mitigation of the rule, even on the contrary, some Belgian bishops advocated to maintain the obligation. Other ideas brought forward were a permanent pastoral training program for priests and the development of a specific spirituality for the diocesan clergy. Finally, some authors proposed to update the clothing of the clergy, while again the Bishop of Gent explicitly rejected a modernization of the clerical dress. Thus, generally spoken, the vota in Belgium and the