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FIFTY YEARS OF REDEMPTORIST MISSIONS
IN FLANDERS

(1935-1985) *

SUMMARY

1. *The Classical Mission*. 2. *The House Mission*. 3. *Mission Stations*. 4. *Days of Faith*: 1) The Preparation; 2) The Preaching; 3) The Follow-up. *Appendix*: The Redemptorist Missions (1935-1985).

The aim of the present article is to offer a brief historical outline of the parish missions — we used to call them simply « missions » — as they were organised by the Redemptorists in Flanders between 1935 and 1985.

In the course of the last few decades the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, Flanders (1985: 5,658,236 inhabitants), has been gradually incorporated into Belgian constitutional law. Between 1873 and 1932 the linguistic laws have been introduced, so that the Dutch language is now officially recognised in administration, justice, education and in the army; in 1962 the linguistic frontier was constitutionally fixed, and in 1970 cultural autonomy was achieved¹.

Since 1961 the Redemptorist monasteries of St.-Truiden (1833-1965), Jette (1841), Antwerpen (1857), Roeselare (1868), Essen (1907), Leuven (1912) and Gent (1928) have formed in the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer the *Provincia Belgii Septentrionalis*. Since that date foundations have been made in Tessenderlo (1963),

* We offer no great bibliography, but merely the publications which directly concern our text.

¹ Letter of Manu Ruijs, editor of *De Standaard*, 19th April 1985.

Kortenberg (1976) and Tiegem (1962). In this article we confine ourselves to the monasteries of Jette, Roeselare, Gent, Antwerpen and St.-Truiden: they have always been fully missionary centres².

Having entered the novitiate in St.-Truiden in 1930, I have lived through this half century with our missionaries, and for many years I worked in the mission stations of Leuven. Therefore I am in a position to appreciate the value of describing the evolution of mission preaching in our province. As will be seen, there were first the classical parish missions; then the « house missions » were introduced (1943); after that the « mission stations » were erected (1950); and then there was the preaching of the « regional missions » (1968) and the « Days of Faith » (1968).

1. *The Classical Mission*

As a young boy I made the mission in my native village. After the Fathers had left, everyone could feel how profoundly mutual relations had been improved and the practice of religion reinforced.

Between 31st March and 4th April 1926 there was a mission in each parish of Brugge. I still remember the crowd that flocked to the market place to pay homage to the Cross of Christ. The Redeemptorist appeared from a distance like a small black speck beside the cross erected and decorated on the steps of the provincial court; and during the sermon the people reiterated their firm belief in Our Lord and their loyalty to Him.

During the novitiate and student years the novices and students were occasionally allowed to go in the evening to a near-by village, where they were happy to listen to the « great sermon » preached by one of our missionaries in an overcrowded church.

Gradually we grew into the mission tradition. According to Canon Law a mission was to be held every tenth year in each parish³. During the second novitiate the young Fathers under the guidance of the Master (Fathers De Smyter, Theyskens, Van Heybeeck,

² Essen and Tenderlo are colleges; Leuven was the seminary (philosophy and theology); Kortenberg and Tiegem are houses for retreats.

³ *Codex Iuris Canonici* (Ben. XV), 1917, can. 1349 § 1: « Ordinarii advigilent ut saltem decimo quoque anno, sacram quam vocant missionem, ad gregem sibi commissum habendam parochi curent ». The new Codex, 1983: « Parochi *certis temporibus* juxta episcopi diocesani praescripta illas ordinent praedicationes quae exercitia spiritualia et sacras *missiones* vocant, vel alias formas necessitatibus adaptatas ».

Geerebaert, Clement, Uten, Bekkers)⁴ became acquainted with the theological background and the practical work of the mission. The plan fitted together magnificently like a fine Swiss watch, with all its different wheels. It dates from St. Alphonsus' time, and L. Grégoire showed in his thesis that in 1836 it had been adapted to the Netherlands, omitting a few details considered too mediterranean; but what remains is even nowadays considered classical⁵.

The opening took place on a Sunday during the Mass. In the afternoon a sermon was given on Salvation (or on mortal sin or on indifference).

On each weekday morning there was an instruction on the Christian life:

<i>Mon.:</i> Tepidity	<i>Sat.:</i> Suffering
<i>Tue.:</i> Temptations	<i>Sun.:</i> Sunday obligations
<i>Wed.:</i> Charity	<i>Mon.:</i> Frequent Communion
<i>Thur.:</i> Confession	<i>Tue.:</i> For the deceased
<i>Fri.:</i> Duties of Parents	

In the evening the public expected the great sermon:

<i>Mon.:</i> Death	<i>Fri.:</i> Occasions of Sin
<i>Tue.:</i> Judgment	<i>Sat.:</i> No sermon, but opportunity to confess
<i>Wed.:</i> Sixth Commandment	<i>Sun.:</i> Procession of the Holy Cross
<i>Thur.:</i> Blessed Sacrament & Atonement	<i>Mon.:</i> Our Lady ⁶

Such were the themes of a ten days' mission. But the gathering of the parish for general communions, for confessions, for praying the rosary, for the Way of the Cross, led the people ever nearer to God. Their acting as a community through the prayers and hymns they learned and through receiving the Sacraments together, all this

⁴ A. Van Ceulebroeck C.S.S.R., Arch. Prov., Letter of 16th May 1985.

⁵ L. GRÉGOIRE, *Recherches sur les missions paroissiales prêchées par les Rédemptoristes dans le diocèse de Liège de 1833 à 1852*, Thèse de doctorat, Leuven, 1956; A. LION, *De volksmissies in de tussenoorlogse periode — De missieactiviteiten van de Redemptoristen in Oost-Vlaanderen*, Universiteit van Gent, Fa. Letteren en Wijsbegeerte, Academiejaar 1981-82. Licentiaatsthesis; M. VAN DELFT, *Ontwikkeling van de praktijk en de leer van de volksmissie*, Nijmegen, 1950, 143 & foll.; K. VAN WELY, *Gestalte en structuur van de missie bij S. Alfonsus*, Amsterdam, 1964, 417 & foll. A. MEIBERG, « De Volksmissie » in *Katholiek Archief*, 1952, 221-250; 1961, 265-280.

⁶ M. KASSIEPE, « Volksmission » in *Lexikon f. Theologie und Kirche*, X, 679 & foll.; V. GEERBAERT, *De volksmissie*, Antwerpen, 1945, 309 p.

became for them public profession of renewed Christian Faith.

How many people after a general confession went home with a clear and tranquil conscience; how many undertook with their families a fervent life of prayer; how many restitutions were made; how many enemies reconciled; how many vocations to the religious life and to the priesthood found here their inspiration! Whoever looks at the missions with the eyes of faith cannot fail to recognise the power of the Pauline Mystery and power of charismatic preaching in the Church of Christ.

2. *The House Mission (The Door-to-door Mission)*

It is worth noting that Father V. Geerebaert C.S.S.R., the fervent defender of the traditional mission, gave an address at the 1941 mission conference. Starting from his experience gained in mission preaching, he outlined the tremendous evolution that had taken place in the social and cultural field in Flanders⁷.

« The prosperity of the opulent years between 1920 and 1930 contributed to a broader horizon, and middle class folk who until then had seen nothing but their own humble dwelling, learned to travel, to go to the seaside, to listen to everything and to see everything. The trade unions, study circles, adult education evenings and all kinds of associations induced people to reflect and to become alienated. Cinemas brought them into a different world; and the radio brought modern thought to the most remote parts of the country.

« Modern culture and rationalism penetrated imperceptibly all layers of society, and nowadays semi-intellectuals are to be found everywhere. In many respects they are the most dangerous because of their limited horizon; they pride themselves on throwing off the oppressive ties of the village mentality, and they make every effort to emancipate the lower social classes. In fact, the missionaries had already long ago felt the need to take into account this fundamental evolution over the last forty years » (p. 8).

« Formerly, though it might have slumbered, faith remained firmly rooted in the hearts of the people who formed the congregations of the great mission preachers: whereas nowadays, under the influence of the modern life style, a crisis of faith has developed with astonishing speed, which leads to complete religious indifference.

« Two currents clearly emerge: (a) total indifference that manifests

⁷ V. GEERBAERT, *De ontwikkeling van de volksmissie sedert honderd jaar*. Lezing gehouden bij het derde studiecongres van de Missie-Conferentie te Antwerpen, den 23 juni 1941. Brochure, 20 p.

itself by cutting itself off from the faithful or looking down on them with a mixture of scorn and compassion; and (b) practical indifference that still leaves some room for a shred of religious feeling, but gives place to many abuses, putting arbitrariness above duty, and banning faith from daily life » (p. 16).

It was not by accident that our Fathers of Antwerpen started a new kind of mission: the *house mission*. Father Van Heybeek wrote in his little book, *Moderne missionering*, « It is true, the traditional mission in Antwerpen in 1933 attracted overcrowded churches, but thousands of people passed by in the street, for whom there was no mission and who were not in the least interested in the mission »⁸.

To have a clear idea of this new type of mission we must make a little trip abroad.

At the end of February 1917 Father Rottier had a discussion with the Dean of the city (Roermond) about the deplorable religious situation among the working class and their quarter in the town⁹. A suggestion was put forward: to transform a hall or some other place into a chapel and to visit the people in their homes, inviting them to some religious exercises.

This became the « people's retreat » meant for the indifferent. All families were previously visited, especially those in certain neighbourhoods. An address card was left, which those invited were to take with them to the exercises, so that those who hesitated could expect another visit. The sermons remained the same as those of the simple mission. A series of « retreats » was organised in this fashion until the entire parish had been reached. The results were encouraging: far more than the ordinary mission, the people's retreat was fruitful in individual conversions.

From the Netherlands the people's retreat was introduced into Germany by Father Otten¹⁰. The neighbourhood missions (*wijkmissies*), as they were called here, were held for the first time in Hannover (1924). The parish was divided into sections in order to organise the visits systematically. Every missionary took on himself say 100

⁸ B. VAN HEYBECK, *Binnenlandse Missiearbeid — Moderne missionering*, Leuven, 1934, p. 7-8.

⁹ M. KASSIEPE, *De volksmissien in deze nieuwe tijden*, tr. A. Henz, Immaculata-uitgaven, 1936, p. 116; S. SCHERZL, *Compelle intrare*, Pustet, 1937. (Tr. A. HENZ, *Onze moeilijke missie*, 1946).

¹⁰ M. KASSIEPE, *De volksmissie in deze nieuwe tijden*, Immaculata-uitgaven, 1936, 113. S. Scherzl, *Onze moeilijke missie*, 1946, 40.

visits, so that four to six missionaries made some 400-600 visits. According to the *spes fructus* sermons were held in halls but also in the parish church.

From there the idea spread to Flanders. In 1934 Father Van Heybeeck wrote his *Moderne missionering* and two years later it was published again in *Pastor Bonus* (1936, p. 176-183)¹¹. Referring to Holland and Germany, Father Van Heybeeck highly recommends this new method « because many have lost their way and keep away from the Church... but their faith has not died entirely »¹².

Now we must wait until the end of World War II. We see then in the Redemptorist chronicles in Antwerpen that Father Jaak Wassenberg and Father Herman Janssen between 3rd and 12th March 1946 held a mission in Elsdonk, and there was « house visiting with three Fathers ». This was not a complete house mission, but perhaps there the new method was tested. There is no doubt that Father Jaak Wassenberg was a great promoter of the new missions.

This first house mission is reported in the same chronicles: « Mission in Lier (Church of the Holy Cross), 1700 inhabitants between 20th October and 1st November 1946. Father J. Wassenberg and Father Frans Vos ». First the parish priest visited all the inhabitants; then the Fathers went out the whole of the last week and gave out the address cards. « All were visited ». 1384 cards were accepted, nearly twenty were refused. In the evening five hundred persons came to the church. They handed in their cards, so that the parish priest saw that 27% of his parishioners were present at the sermons.

We now find the house mission in our chronicles to an astonishingly increasing extent. E.g. 6th — 14th February 1947, Lilloo (Father Michielsen)¹³; 1st September — 5th October, Deurne-Noord; 26th September — 16th November, St. Eligius, Antwerpen; 15th February — 24th April 1948, Kiel, Antwerpen. The names of some of those engaged in pastoral work have become familiar to everyone in Flanders.

In 1948 the Redemptorists alone preached fourteen house missions. The results, now noted exactly, were considerable. Those

¹¹ B. VAN HEYBEECK, « *Moderne missionering*, Referaat op het Kath. Congres te Mechelen » in *Pastor Bonus*, Dec. 1936, 176-183.

¹² B. VAN HEYBEECK, *Binnenlandse Missiearbeid — Moderne missionering*, Leuven, 1934, 19.

¹³ L. MICHIENSEN, « De missie te Lilloo » in *Inter libros*, 1947, 37-39; Id., « Uitgebreid verslag van de groepsmissie te Kiel » in *Inter libros*, 1948, 57-61.

who attended the mission at least once: 36% in Wilrijk, 39% in Hoboken, 52% in Duffel, 52% in Sint-Amandsberg, 65% in Merkssem, 80% in Halle, 76% in Tienen, 92% in Lochristie, 94% in Eizer and so on. In 1951-1952 we see for Teper 60%, Tielt 79%, Roeselare 67%, Tongeren 76%¹⁴. The house mission with control card was hard work, but effective.

At the same time the demand for traditional missions continued, so that house missions and traditional missions were continually mentioned in the chronicles.

3. Mission Stations

A new word is heard. In 1950 Father Jozef Schotsmans succeeded in having solemnly consecrated a poor little church in Afrikaalaan in Gent in the middle of a depressed quarter¹⁵.

In Leuven as well, near our scholasticate, namely, in the alleys of Burgemeesterstraat a second mission station was established. Here Father Deschutter arrived on 4th February 1952. At Easter, 13th April 1952 a chapel was officially inaugurated in a shed adapted for the purpose¹⁶.

On the other side of town there was another typical neighbourhood of neglected people. On 16th June 1954 a third mission station began operations at Zevenslapersstraat 15 under the spiritual guidance of Father Alfred Deboutte¹⁷.

The object was to establish a mission in the neighbourhood of religiously indifferent people and of marginal families. It would last maybe for years, but it would not be confined to an appeal for conversion, seeking to renew the social environment itself, mindful of the principle that man is 80% the product of his environment.

¹⁴ L. ARTS, « Vijf-en-twintig jaar Volksmissie 1939-1964 » in *Sacerdos*, 32 (1964-65) 23; B. VAN HEYBEECK, « In de rode burchten door de moderne missiemethode » in *Sacerdos*, 15 (1947-48) 293-300; H. PROESMANS, « Geloven in de huismissie » in *Inter libros*, 1948, 42-50; J. SCHOTSMANS, « Techniek van het huisbezoek » in *Inter libros*, 1948, 50-57; G. CLEMENT, « Tegen de huismissie? » in *Inter libros*, 1948, 65-72; O. MEERSCHAUT, « Huismissie » in *Inter libros*, 1951, 25-29; G. CLEMENT, « Tegen de Huismissie » in *Sacerdos*, 16 (1948-49) 274-282; « De missionibus domesticis » in *Analecta C.S.S.R.*, 1952, 90-92.

¹⁵ « Redemptoristenwerk in Vlaanderen — De Afrikalaan » in *Sint-Gerardusbode*, 55 (1951) 122-123.

¹⁶ A. DEBOUTTE, « Van café tot kapel » in *Sint-Gerardusbode*, 56 (1952) 149-151.

¹⁷ A. DEBOUTTE, *Missie — Parochie — buurthuiswerk — Vijfentwintig jaar pastorale evolutie, 1944-1969*, Leuven, Sintal, 1969, p. 11.

Remarkably enough, this venture coincided with the first budding activities of social centres, already very much organised in the Netherlands, and in France known as « centres sociaux » in Germany as « Nachbarschaftsheime ». In the fifties local social activities were called into being in some streets of Schoten, Antwerpen, Mechelen etc, all of them under Catholic-religious inspiration.

Looking for contact with each other, forty-one of them associated on 13th March 1967 in one federation¹⁸, recognised by the Ministry of Culture. Here we shall deal only with what we Redemptorists called our mission stations.

Taking advantage, as others did¹⁹, of the emerging social sciences, we had our theological views, which we shall briefly describe here.

A mission station operates in a particular neighbourhood²⁰, among the ramshackle, mostly overpopulated dwellings. The youth of these small streets are aggressive and unstable in behaviour. The turmoil of modern life all about them repels the elderly, confining them to their homes in an uneasy isolation. The social and psychological factors for a sound family life are hopelessly wanting.

Whoever wished to apply under these circumstances the theology of « Christian care for man as a whole » was forced to enter into relationship not only with the people concerned, but also with all institutions that could contribute to the human well-being: public assistance, Justice, educational authorities, youth-protection, family assistance, health care etc.

A local centre was thus considered as being a centre for social action, but we Redemptorists considered it as something far deeper, namely as an essential expedient for establishing direct contact with the human person, as Christ's incarnation had taught us, in order to live in close touch with the needs of the marginal people.

Thinking exclusively of mission preaching did not suffice. Seen

¹⁸ Federatie voor bijzondere volksontwikkeling door buurtwerk, 10 Maart 1967, Kortenberglaan, 158, Brussel. See Belgisch Staatsblad, n. 4962, 12 oktober 1967.

¹⁹ A. VANDAMME, « De krotwoningen en hun bewoners » in *Gids op Maatschappelijk gebied*, Jul.-Aug., 1953, 660-666; G. ROBBERECHTS, *Levenswijze van de Gangbewoners te Leuven*, Thesis, 1908 Kath. Sociale School voor Vrouwen, Poststraat, Brussel; A. BROECKAERT, « De grote zielzorgproblemen van onze tijd — III, De algemene ontkerstening » in *Sacerdos*, 18 (1950-51) 129-139; I. ROSIER, *Ik zoek Gods afwezigheid*, 's Gravenhage, I, 1956 (364 p.), II, 1957 (470 p.).

²⁰ CH. RIBBENS, *Problemen bij de aanvang van Opbouwerk in een buurt te Leuven*, 1967. Thesis op het Hoger Instituut voor Maatschappelijk en Cultureel Werk, Poststr., 111, Brussel, 119 p. + 4 bijlagen.

as a whole, the Christian renewal of the neighbourhood was based on the neighbourhood « house », and was conceived as team work. From the neighbourhood centre good use could be made of social casework (for individual or family cases), of social groupwork (for groups), and even of community organisations (for the entire neighbourhood). Many activities were set up to meet the concrete needs of a limited neighbourhood.

Essential for the mission station was the cooperation of priest and laymen in one team. A sister, a social assistant, a nurse, a social teacher, a young economist, a young doctor, a family assistant... Professionalism? By all means, but inspired by what some philosophers and theologians call personalism and by the doctrine of the Church in the decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (no. 7). Each member of the team was personally responsible for the mission station as far as his professional competence was concerned. As a faithful man he was bearing testimony of his faith to the people of the neighbourhood; so he became involved in the whole neighbourhood and he had the salvation of every inhabitant no less at heart than the Redemptorist working at his side. The priest, however, was responsible for the evangelical-liturgical guidance, for only he could guarantee the plenitude of Christ's sacramental salvation.

So we saw it come about twenty years later after the great parish church had been declared a ruin and pulled down, the neighbourhood of Burgemeesterstraat, Leuven, was chosen for building a new parish church; and thereupon it was reintegrated into the parish. With pride the mission station came to an end²¹.

The work of Zevenslapersstraat, Leuven, ceased in April 1970. The team lost its necessary harmony through the infiltration of aggressive elements tinged with Communism.

The Afrikalaan mission station went downhill during the sixties, and on 21st August 1969 was given back to the diocese of Gent. On 30th August 1969 the Redemptorists left the neighbourhood²².

In 1965 when the secularisation movement was beginning the provincial, Father Huysmans, convoked a provincial consultation in Essen (5th-7th June). As to the apostolate of the Flemish pro-

²¹ « Afscheid van een missiestatie » in *Geloof en Leven* (Sint-Gerardusbode), 79 (1975) 79-84. On 16th September 1973 Father Schotsmans preached for the last time in his chapel. On 13th April 1975 in the new church of St. Joseph in the same place there was a farewell feast for him.

²² Omzendbrief P. Provinciaal, 81, 29th September 1969.

vince, the meeting clearly confirmed his support for our missionary work. Two main lines of action appeared: renewed preaching and mission stations. One of the conclusions was: « The province should make a greater effort to create and to promote new mission stations. Opinions were unanimous: it is possible to find enough suitable Fathers for this »²³.

But the revolution of 1969 was already in the air. In spite of these happy decisions the enthusiastic impetus was checked and in the end choked by the secularisation that manifested itself universally and strongly in the society and Church of western Europe.

4. Days of Faith

Just as for the house missions we must first have a look beyond our frontiers. In France Father Motte had proposed to set up for Bordeaux a new type of popular mission: *Mission générale* — *oeuvre de l'Eglise* (1947). The first aim, he said, was to transform the parish into a *missionary community*.

From France Father Motte's views went over to Germany and the Netherlands²⁴. The *Milieu-missie* as it was called had been explained at length in 1953 in the popular missionary committee by Father H. Borgert²⁵. In 1956 a team of mission preachers was formed from among ten Orders or Congregations. Maintaining the classic ideas of the popular mission, the *Milieu-missie* wanted to adapt the spiritual aims of the sermons to the social needs of the environment. It was understood that in the first place an inquiry would be instituted and certain areas indicated according to their needs; and then a plan was to be drafted and the mission held so as to create a new mentality. The parish thus left would continue to be called « missionary » and if necessary provided with new institutions to carry out

²³ Omzendbrief P. Provinciaal, 23, 8th August 1965.

²⁴ J.F. MOTTE, *Mission générale, oeuvre d'Eglise*, ed. Fleurus, 1957; Id., *La mission générale. Six ans d'expérience au C.P.M.I.*, Ed. Cerf, verzamelwerk, 1961; A. HENNEBERT, « Missions regionales et mission traditionnelle » in *Evangéliser*, Nov.-Dec., 1958, 239 & foll.; A. BRAL, « Réveil in de missiepredikatie » in *Sacerdos*, 32 (1963-64) 11-17; 561-573; A. MEIBERG in *Katholiek Archief*, 1961, p. 265 & 278.

²⁵ H. BORGERT, « De milieu-missie en haar achtergronden » in *Inter libros*, 1962, 9-17. The whole issue was on the theme of the Milieu-missie. H. BORGERT, « Milieu-missie en haar dienende plaats in de pastorale vernieuwing » in *Nederlandse Katholieke Stemmen*, 1961, Jan. 13 & foll.

its apostolic and liturgical inspiration²⁶.

The year 1962 became a landmark in Flanders. Flemish missionaries of different Congregations were acquainted with the ideas of the Netherlands Redemptorists and had assisted at the congress about the *Milieu-missie* in Noordwijkerhout, and they now decided to form a missionary group and to meet three times a year to consider how to renew the apostolate for the Flemish people.

A member of the missionary group, Father A. Franssen, had just finished his doctoral thesis: *The Regional or General Mission in France*²⁷. Impressed, therefore, by what had happened in the north and in the south, the group decided to elaborate its own mission plan for Flanders. From the start they kept their work at the mission stations (dechristianised quarters) and preaching (for the faithful) apart. They were quite aware of the need for pastoral restructuring, provided that it remained inseparably linked with the preaching of the Word of God²⁸.

When in 1967 the deanery of Beveren-Waas was preparing a regional mission (thus was the *Milieu-missie* translated here) in the whole area some 29,145 questionnaires were distributed; and on the foundation of this broad public opinion poll (21,822 completed forms were returned) Father De Maeseneer C.S.S.R. wrote the book, *The Future of the Parish*²⁹. It was considered to be a preliminary study. Then at the end of March 1968 the mission was preached in the whole region. During it the missionaries tried to find a balance between meetings in church and meetings in a hall, where informal conversations were held. A balance between the following categories was aimed at: young people, single people, married people. The clergy wanted very much to set up a parish council, in which the results of the public opinion poll could be used to take some pastoral directions.

Regional mission? In view of the extent of the deanery it could very well be called so, but the missionaries used the name, *Fortnight of questions concerning the Faith*, and the colloquial language of the

²⁶ FR. DE MAESENEER, « Geloofsdagen. Een missionair gebeuren » in *Collationes*, 8 (1978) n. 2, 243.

²⁷A. FRANSSEN, « De regionale of algemene missie in Frankrijk » in *Sacerdos*, 27 (1959-60) 303-314; 359-369; 28 (1960-61) 9-26.

²⁸ FR. DE MAESENEER, « Geloofsdagen. Een missionair gebeuren » in *Collationes*, 8 (1978) n. 2, 243-255.

²⁹ FR. DE MAESENEER, *De toekomst van de parochie*, Sint-Niklaas, 1967, 142 p.

people made it even shorter: *Days of Faith*³⁰.

Essential for all this was not the name, but the content. It became evident early that an important change had taken place between the *Milieu-missie* in the Netherlands and the *Days of Faith* in Flanders.

We are now in 1967-1968: Flanders, situated as it is at the crossroads to England, the Netherlands, Germany and France, has more than once in its history had occasion to assimilate the influence of unbalanced spirits. This time, however, the new current of what is called secularisation struck like an enormous wave and so heavily that our people woke up after one dark night in a different religious world. Those who know the history of Flanders must speak now of its « low church-mindedness » (*laagkerkelijkheid*). The figures put it quite plainly (to use the terms of sociology) in the ideological (subjective selection of truth) as well as in the ethical (individualism), ritual (Sunday obligations) and social (individualism) fields. Regardless of personal judgments, pastoral activities had to be tackled at once in every diocese, and so in every parish³¹.

It is in this context that we considered the mission in Beveren-Waas. From the book, *The Future of the Parish*, it appeared that the people were at that time still falling between two stools. What was expected from the priest and the wish for dialogue were emphatically expressed: people were still willing to make room for religion in all fields of their worldly lives, but confusion had caused a great deal of uneasiness.

This was an additional reason for going on with the *Days of Faith* — courageously and on a grand scale — right from the start. When *Orientaties*, the monthly review for parochial animation, devoted its ninth issue of 1973 entirely to the *Days of Faith*, the promoter of the new mission, Father De Maeseener, wrote: « The purpose of the *Days of Faith* is to set a new movement going in order the better to adapt the concrete church community of a parish or deanery to the religious needs of today and tomorrow »³². The intro-

³⁰ A. DEBOUTTE, « Geloofsdagen » in *Geloof en Leven* (Sint-Gerardusbode), 1969. 243; FR. DE MAESENEER, « Geloofsdagen. Een missionair gebeuren » in *Collationes*, 8 (1978) n. 2, 243, n. 7.

³¹ A whole issue of *Collationes*, Vlaams tijdschrift voor Theologie en Pastoraal, 8 (1978) n. 2, with articles about recent ideas in pastoral theology and catechesis. A further issue is relevant, 13 (1983) n. 4 on the parish today.

³² FR. DE MAESENEER, « Geloofsdagen » in *Orientaties, Maandelijks tijdschrift voor pastorale animatie*, 1973, n. 9, p. 7.

duction given by Mgr. E.J. De Smedt characterised the intention very well: « *Days of Faith?* I see much in the idea. The days of faith are an experiment in a new way of preaching on a larger scale. The people who launched the idea have thoroughly examined what faith had to offer. They used their imagination. They talked over this religious discovery with others and they ultimately ventured upon this new initiative. They set their hopes on a doing-it-together. The first results are positive ».

1) *The Preparation*

In this first phase the Fathers, with the help of the priests and laymen of the entire region, (e.g. deanery or parish groups), try to draw up an inventory. This inventory concerns first of all the people's questions about faith and morals. At the same time it seeks the means, instruments and methods to be used by the Fathers to minister to the needs. After this a joint consultation is held by the laymen and Fathers and a pastoral plan is drafted in which they agree on some attainable objectives (a kind of two or three year plan).

Another important point during this preparation phase is the active role of the laymen. It is not enough for the priests or laymen simply to consent to the Fathers coming to work in their region: they must themselves be actively involved in setting up the opinion poll, and they have to formulate it themselves³³.

2) *The Preaching*

« There are no structural reforms without preaching and no preaching without structural reforms ».

By structural reforms in the *Days of Faith* we understand the working or target group bringing about practically and concretely what the preaching had made clear. Therefore, the preaching during the *Days of Faith* is aimed at building up the local Church, the moral and spiritual education of the faithful, and thus developing a concrete sense of responsibility. Practice has taught that people discover their place in the Church community only after having experienced a cer-

³³ Studiegroep voor de vernieuwde missie, *De volksmissie als doorbraakbeweging*, 1970, 11-12.

tain stability in their faith, sufficient moral self support and sufficient Church-mindedness.

As many people as possible are called to pass through a renewal of faith. For a few Sundays the sermons explicitly refer to the themes of the *Days of Faith*. In the meantime people are strongly urged to assist at the talks and conversations that take place during the week. The form and rhythm of these depend upon local possibilities. Together they seek a proper balance as regards the place where the preaching will be delivered: the church, a hall, in the different districts, and at meetings in various homes. There is no fixed range of subjects here, though some themes must always and everywhere be present. It is advisable to take young people, the elderly, the sick and persons living alone in separate groups for conversation and preaching.

A separate meeting for the parish council, the teaching staff, the religious communities and the members of the Christian organisations is necessary for a real Church formation.

3) *The Follow-up*

This second phase being brought to an end, the next step is the restructuring of pastoral activities. And this can be done by means of well planned parish councils, where these do not yet exist. This can be done by submitting an action plan to the parish or to the deanery which they are entitled to amend or to reject. But if rejected someone should advance a counter proposal; otherwise one would be working in vain. In any case, youth policy, social service, catechism for children and adults, liturgy, culture and leisure, solicitude for non-church-goers, the foreign missions and developmental aid need to be organised. This could best be done by putting forward suggestions as to possible means of action at a congress or foundation meeting³⁴.

After the first *Days of Faith* in Beveren - Waas the new missions followed one another at a great rate over the whole of Flanders. 1969: Temse, Tielrode, Kruibeke. 1970: Velzeke, Zottegem, Mere, Edegem³⁵. In the Appendix we offer a summary.

On 22nd June 1975 a meeting took place in Gent during

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁵ *Geloof en Leven* (Sint-Gerardusbode) 71 (1969) nos. 5-6, 90-95.

which the rector of Gent at that time proposed to reintroduce the traditional missions along with the *Days of Faith*. So we find in the chronicles: 1 mission in Aartrijke with 7 *Days of Faith* in 1976, 2 missions and 9 *Days of Faith* in 1977. The other Redemptorist houses, too, continued to give traditional missions³⁶.

* * * *

Fifty years of missions in Flanders, 1935-1985. Traditional missions, house missions, mission stations, *Days of Faith*. The traditional missions witness the power of charismatic preaching in the Catholic Church and they are changing people so that they live by the Mystery of Christ. House missions and mission stations brought the mission nearer to the indifferent world, nowadays falling away from the faith. *Days of Faith* are now bringing a renewal of faith to post-conciliar parishes.

Our Flemish people are going through this period as they went through other difficult times, namely with a strong faith in Christ's gospel and in *Petrus*, who together with the Council and Synod Fathers transmits the full and theologically justified *sana doctrina*. Our people as a rule do not take extreme positions as some are doing elsewhere. We have seen this again on 17th to 19th May 1985. The Pope visited his people, and the answer of Flanders was: Christ's gospel and *Petrus* remain ever the central elements of our life of faith.

None the less, our Redemptorist missionaries are often confronted with heterogeneous groups and experience between superficial innovators and conventional Christians quite a lot of painful, even fevered contradiction. But they go on working with courage and humility, convinced of the worth of adapting our Alphonsian mission to the contemporary world.

³⁶ Chronicles of *Opera apostolica ad extra* in each house: Roeselare, Antwerpen, Gent, Sint-Truiden, Jette. HM means *House mission*.

APPENDIX

*Missions, House Missions (HM) and Days of Faith (DF) in each House (1935-1984)*³⁷.

	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
Roeselare	25	10	21	28	20
Antwerpen	16	14	13	4	11
St.-Truiden	23	11	22	7	13
Gent	22	20	23	22	19
Jette	34	22	19	13	25
	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944
Roeselare	11	2	4	7	11
Antwerpen	12	1	3	3	4
St.-Truiden	—	3	3	6	7
Gent	9	1	6	2	6
Jette	9	1	5	3	3
	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
Roeselare	38	49	53	21	5
Antwerpen	26	38	24	13	6
				6HM	3HM
Gent	27	51	63	31	16
Jette	23	42	39	34	11
					3HM
St.-Truiden	21	36	28	12	7
				6HM	4HM ³⁸
	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954
Antwerpen	7	7	6	11	11
	2HM	7HM	9HM	5HM	8HM
Roeselare	—	10	9	18	23
	—	2HM	2HM	1HM	4HM
Gent	1	4	5	9	18
	1HM	3HM	2HM	2HM	3HM
St.-Truiden	4	9	7	6	2
	2HM	3HM	—	—	3HM
Jette	1	4	11	16	27
	4HM	4HM	—	—	—

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ In the chronicles «with house visiting.» (without control card).

	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
Antwerpen	17 10HM	19 6HM	4 3HM	3 6HM	11 6HM
Roeselare	21 9HM	15 12HM	13 11HM	12	26
Gent	21 3HM	23	13	9	20
St.-Truiden	5 10HM	4 12HM	2 6HM	5	9
Jette	21	19	18 7HM ³⁹	7	8 7HM ⁴⁰
	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964
Antwerpen	4 3HM	14 1HM	14	12	7
Roeselare	27	22	10	9	8
Gent	14	14	12	18	10
St.-Truiden	10	14	14	12	10
Jette	6 3HM ⁴¹	18	11	20	12
	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
Antwerpen	10 ⁴²	21 ⁴³	12 ⁴⁴	9	5
Roeselare	7	5 1HM	8	12	6
Gent	9	—	—	—	—
Jette	10	14	9 2DF	3 2DF	— 1DF
	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974
Roeselare	6	4	4	4	2
Anntwerpen	7	4	3	1	2
Gent	—	—	—	—	—
Jette	— 5DF	— 5DF	3 6DF	3 4DF	6 5DF

³⁹ In the chronicles: « house mission of 14 days and more ».

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ In the chronicles: « with or without house visiting ».

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
Roeselare	—	—	—	—	—
	2DF	2DF	4DF	—	—
Antwerpen	—	2	4	—	1
Gent	—	—	—	—	—
	—	—	—	2DF	7DF
Jette	—	—	2	2	5
—	6DF	5DF	5DF	1DF	—
	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984
Roeselare	—	—	—	—	—
	—	1DF	1DF	2DF	1DF
Antwerpen	—	1	—	—	—
Gent	4DF	3DF	3DF	5DF	4DF
Jette	3	1	1	—	—
	1DF	—	—	—	—