

ERIC CORSIUS

THE THEOLOGICAL TRADITION OF THE REDEMPTORISTS  
IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF CARDINAL VAN ROSSUM \*

INTRODUCTION; 1. – *The implicit missiological tradition of the Redemptorists*; 2. – *Victor Dechamps' Apologetics*; 3. – “Shift to the right” in *Moral Theology*; 4. – *Alphonsus' son in a direct sense*; CONCLUSION.

INTRODUCTION

The Dutch Redemptorist Willem Marinus van Rossum (1854-1932) is especially known for his work at the Roman Curia, from the time he became a consultor of the Holy Office in 1896,<sup>1</sup> until 1932, when he died as prefect of the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*.<sup>2</sup> Recently, work has been done to elucidate the accomplishments of Cardinal van Rossum in the special monograph *Life with a Mission*, while a more elaborate biography is being prepared.<sup>3</sup> One of the articles in the above-mentioned monograph is especially of interest for the worldwide Redemp-

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<sup>1</sup> Giuseppe ORLANDI, *S. Alfonso negli archivi Romani del Sant'Ufficio. Dottrine spirituali del Santo Dottore e di Pier Matteo Petrucci a confronto*, in *due voti del futuro cardinale W.M. van Rossum*, in: SHCSR 47 (1999) 205-238; Otto WEISS, *Der Glaubenswächter van Rossum. Willem Marinus van Rossum im Heiligen Offizium und in der Indexkongregation*, in: SHCSR 58 (2010) 85-138.

<sup>2</sup> On Willem van Rossum see also Joop VERNOOIJ, *Cardinal Willem van Rossum, C.Ss.R. The Great Cardinal of the Small Netherlands (1854-1932)*, in: SHCSR 55 (2007) 347-400; Jozef Maria DREHMANN, *Kardinaal van Rossum. Korte levensschets*, Roermond/Maaseik, 1935.

<sup>3</sup> Vefie POELS, *Embodied interface. The importance of the biography of Willem van Rossum*, in: *Life with a Mission*, 189-194.

torist community, because it focuses on the influence of Alphonsus de Liguori and the theological tradition of the Redemptorists on Cardinal van Rossum's life and work. In this contribution, Eric Corsius, who wrote the article, has offered to share his views with the audience of the readers of *Spicilegium Historicum CSSR*, as it may lead to valuable responses and new insights from Van Rossum's fellow Redemptorists.

### 1. – *The implicit missiological tradition of the Redemptorists*

There has been much speculation about Van Rossum's contribution to the innovation of missionary policy in the Roman Catholic Church in the first decades of the 20th century. As the Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*, Van Rossum is connected with the overcoming of the national and institutional fragmentation of the missionary movement. He is credited with a huge role in revolutionizing policy on missions. According to this new policy, young local churches achieved a relatively autonomous status and became a subject of the diffusion of faith.<sup>4</sup> A key argument in ascribing this achievement to Van Rossum is his assumed role as the "ghost writer" of the apostolic letter, *Maximum illud* (1919).<sup>5</sup> By stimulating indigenous church communities, with their own bishops, clergy and religious, Van Rossum paved the way for the idea of *plantatio ecclesiae*, which was promoted for the first time by Pierre Charles, S.J., in 1931. Basically, *plantatio ecclesiae* considers ecclesial communities growing and flourishing under their own autonomy.

This idea was not new within the Redemptorist community. It strongly recalls Alphonsus' ideas on the so-called *popular mission*, a method of well-structured revival preaching in the countryside. On the missiological level, Alphonsus made no dis-

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<sup>4</sup> Jan Olav SMIT, *Wilhelmus Marinus kardinaal Van Rossum. Een groot mens en een wijs bestuurder*, Roermond 1955, 21-26; Arnulf CAMPS (ed.), *Oecumenische inleiding in de missiologie. Teksten en konteksten van het wereldchristendom*, Kampen 1988, 242-243 and 422; *Kardinaal van Rossum en de Missiën*, in: *Nederlandsche Katholieke Stemmen* 32 (1932), 323-327.

<sup>5</sup> See the *Preface* in the edition of the apostolic letter in the series *Ecclesia docens* (edited by Redemptorists), Hilversum 1940, 5.

inction between the “popular parish mission” and the mission *ad gentes* (to all nations). Both were rooted in a “grand mission movement”, understood as the entire history of salvation that encompassed all kinds of primary proclamation of faith. According to Alphonsus, mission originates from the Son, who was sent by the Father<sup>6</sup> and is an expression of the infinite dynamic of God’s inviting love for humanity.<sup>7</sup>

Against this background, it is striking that the founder, in his practical elaboration of the popular mission, ascribed “ecclesiogenetical” effects to it. His vision on popular mission was, to a large extent, similar to the twentieth century vision on mission as the “planting” of autonomous ecclesiastical organisms. Alphonsus expected that a lot of the ongoing “work” would be done by the results or fruits of the mission campaigns. At the individual as well as at the collective level, the missionary had to leave behind him a stable situation, guaranteeing that the mission was not a short and fierce fire, but a long-burning flame with lasting results. Therefore, the instruments of perseverance were an integral part of the popular missions and were more or less institutionalized. Firmly rooted practices of prayer had to guarantee the lasting effects of conversion and the revival of faith. Completely according to Alphonsus’ “spirituality of love”, these devotional practices stressed the positive incentive of reciprocal love (human love “returns” the primary love of God for humanity).<sup>8</sup> This complex of practices was called *vita devota*. Its introduction was accompanied by ongoing formation of the local clergy, especially in regard to fostering their competence for hearing confessions and their spiritual leadership.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Lettera II. ad un vescovo novello*, in: *Opere di S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori*, vol. III, 326-336.

<sup>7</sup> Henk MANDERS, *De liefde in de spiritualiteit van Sint Alfonsus*. Brussel/Amsterdam, 1947; K. van WELY, *Gestalte en structuur van de missie bij S. Alfonsus: een historisch-theologische studie van een pastorale praktijk*. Amsterdam 1964, 141-149.

<sup>8</sup> The “dynamics of love” being an infrastructure of Alphonsus’ spirituality was analysed by the Dutch Redemptorist Henk Manders (1913-1996) in his *De liefde in de spiritualiteit van Sint Alfonsus*.

<sup>9</sup> Eric CORSIUS, *Nieuwe wegen voor grensverkeer*, Heerlen 1991, (manuscript), 20; ID., *Een vrij en bevrijdend levend. Een theologisch onderzoek naar de*

A parallel can be drawn with Alphonsus' friend and fellow Redemptorist Gennaro Sarnelli (1702-1744). The latter intended to reform "secular" society (*il mondo*) by creating institutions. In a similar way, Alphonsus aimed at the building of living "cells of faith" at the parish level. This concept was influential for a long time: during the twentieth century in the Netherlands and elsewhere, many Redemptorists explicitly looked upon the popular mission as a kind of "community building".<sup>10</sup>

Hypothetically and in a speculative way, one could ask whether the Alphonsian theoretical and practical concept of parish mission contained the vision of *implantatio ecclesiae* (*avant la lettre*). Be that as it may, let us keep the word *ecclesia* in mind. This word became a "hot item" during the nineteenth century, the century that separated Alphonsus M. de Liguori from Willem Van Rossum.

## 2. – Victor Dechamps' Apologetics

Many generations of students in the Wittem Seminary in the Netherlands received their formation from teachers who used the manual of the Jesuit Frans Xavier Schouppe, which was edited and finalized by the Redemptorist, Frans Harte.<sup>11</sup> As a young professor (1883-1895), Van Rossum wrote some of the tracts that were integrated into the manual; among them was a *tractatus* on the Eucharist.<sup>12</sup> Schouppe's manual was an expression of the theological milieu in which the young scholar Van Rossum lived and worked. I would like to sustain the hypothesis that we can trace the vestiges of this milieu in Van Rossum's *oeuvre*.

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*geschiedenis van de praktische en reflexieve arbeid der redemptoristen in Nederland in het licht van de subjectdiscussie in de theologie, 1833-1990*, Kampen 1999, 129-136.

<sup>10</sup> Herman Borgert C.Ss.R. (1912-1989) contributed to it. See E. CORSIUS, *Een vrij en bevrijdend leven*, 230 v.

<sup>11</sup> Franciscus J. HARTE, Franciscus X. SCHOUPPE, *Dictata theologico-dogmatica. Ad usum stricte privatum RR. FF. studentium Collegii Wittemiensis C.ss.R.* Tomus I et II. Gulpen, 1898-1899.

<sup>12</sup> J. VERNOOIJ, *Cardinal Willem van Rossum C.Ss.R.*, 361, ref. 33.

This can, for example, be deduced from the ecclesiological part of the manual. In the sense of Vatican Council I, the chapter regarding the Church (Tom. I, 255-284) stresses the unique and exclusive position of the Roman Catholic Church, which is identified with the true Church of Jesus Christ. The text refers to the four famous *notae ecclesiae* (unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity). According to the manual, only the Roman Catholic Church has these characteristics. In the “sects” these characteristics are simply missing (*desunt*). The unique and authentic quality of the Church is witnessed by evident, visible “facts”. Therefore, the manual completes the familiar theoretical and rather circumstantial apologetics by a simple *demonstratio e factis*. This type of apologetics addresses a person’s common sense without providing any detailed deduction or reasoning. One can simply observe the true Church expanding and supporting itself.

An interesting *excursus* in this chapter contains a typical Redemptorist *proprium*, or treatment, insofar as it refers to the founder as well as the apologetical system of Victor Dechamps C.Ss.R. (1810-1883).<sup>13</sup> Dechamps, who became the Belgian archbishop of Mechlin, was an influential Redemptorist cardinal and a famous “lobbyist” for the dogma of papal infallibility during the First Vatican Council (1870).<sup>14</sup> As a young professor (until 1841), Dechamps lived and worked in the Wittem Seminary. In this seminary, he reportedly developed his initial inspiration for apologetics and his method of *démonstration catholique* or the *méthode de la providence*.<sup>15</sup> At this juncture, we need to briefly digress in order to discuss this method, which we suspect to have influenced Van Rossum.

Victor Dechamps distinguishes two “facts” in the history of salvation: the interior and the exterior fact (*fait intérieur* and *fait extérieur*). On the one hand (and on “the inside”), there is the fact of the human being postulating the existence of an unambiguous and integral revelation. In other words, there is the fact

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<sup>13</sup> F.J. HARTE, F.X. SCHOUPPE, *Dictata theologico-dogmatica*, 282 v.

<sup>14</sup> E. CORSIUS, *Een vrij en bevrijdend leven*, 171-173.

<sup>15</sup> Victor-Aguste DECHAMPS, *Entretiens sur la démonstration catholique de la révélation chrétienne*, Paris-Tournai 1861.

of the heart longing for revelation and the reason requiring it. The quest of human longing is like a river, seeking a path to the sea. This is an end that the human being cannot attain on his own, without some form of self-transcendence. Still, he receives a response to his longing, because, on the other hand (from “the outside”), the Church exists as a God-given response to this particular human longing: the Church seduces and convinces the longing subject insofar as he is marked by the aforementioned *notae ecclesiae*.

The passage in Harte’s manual mentioned above still suggests that we are simply dealing with a “postulate of reason” and an urge for “knowledge” (*cognitio*); however, Dechamps’ thinking surpasses this rationalistic and scholastic framework. Human longing not only “justifies” the revelation: it is mostly an existential need, an Augustinian *inquietudo*, finding its fulfilment only in God as a maternal place of destination. The longing and its response are not a given reality, to be gained deductively, neither are they “data” to be explored by an objectifying gaze. On the contrary, they constitute the existential situation of humanity as such: *Le monde spirituel: c’est nous*.<sup>16</sup>

The French philosopher Maurice Blondel (1861-1949) honoured Dechamps as a modern thinker, who surpassed and overcame the deductive and historical reasoning by discursive apologetics, in favour of a way of thinking that starts with evidence, will and intuition.<sup>17</sup> The starting point is the “intimate experience” of the human soul, recognizing its own void and acknowledging that its longing cannot be fulfilled through its own forces. It is at this point that divine revelation responds to the longing. According to Blondel, Dechamps stresses balance, complementarity and synthesis. The human being is unable to greedily capture revelation, nor is he overwhelmed by it. The “intimate experience” of the longing soul and the “historical experience” of the Church are two aspects of one and the same coin. Both phenomena appear in front of one and the same witness:

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 35 and 41.

<sup>17</sup> Maurice BLONDEL, *Le problème de la philosophie catholique*, Paris [1932], 57-124.

conscience or *le témoin que nous sommes nous-mêmes*. In short, according to Blondel, Dechamps wanders along “all the roads of the soul”. Basically, Dechamps supposes a profound theological anthropology, according to which God Himself has inserted within human nature the metaphysical desire, the desire to break out of the situation of being locked in.<sup>18</sup>

Notwithstanding the simplicity of Dechamps’ construct and the suspicion that his thoughts might be inspired by his desire to defend an authoritarian view on the Church, his system is innovative. Blondel values Dechamps as a typical representative of the nineteenth century, insofar as he describes the craving individual, who has been uprooted and is looking for new roads to become planted in a community and meaningful relationships. He appeals to the individual of the era of the post-*Ancien-Régime*, where the symbiosis of Church and society has been lost.

To show that Dechamps was a representative of his era, and perhaps a pioneer, we refer to the fact that he fits very well into the nineteenth century, as Charles Taylor describes it. Using Taylor’s terminology, we could express it as follows: Dechamps pointed out a “Catholic road” to enter the “age of mobilization”. Dechamps seems to point out a safe and sure Catholic “path”, enabling the believer to not get lost in the disturbing “age of mobilization”.<sup>19</sup> Taylor refers to the era, where the individual is no longer evidently embedded into a society that reflects the macrocosm. Instead, the human individual has been uprooted and – together with many other individuals – has been mobilized to gather and unite, resulting in new collective entities. Taylor calls the cultural background of this matter the “romantic crisis”. Paradoxically, the phenomena of the “festive” popular Catholicism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century express this urge for union and merging. Without a doubt, the Flemish-Dutch Redemptorists, with their sensational and vehement popular missions, amongst others, led by the famous preacher Bernard Hafkenscheid (1807-1865), have greatly contributed to this popular Catholicism.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-78.

<sup>19</sup> Charles TAYLOR, *A secular age*. Cambridge, 2007, 423 ss., *passim*.

Let us now return to Cardinal van Rossum and his missionary “drive”. Van Rossum “transferred” and continued the apologetics of Dechamps in a remarkable way. For example, his travel memoirs *Aan mijn katholieke landgenooten*,<sup>20</sup> which is a report of his visitation to Northern Europe, was modelled on Dechamps’ dialectic of the longing individual, on the one hand, and the answer to this longing by the Church on the other hand. The memoirs can be read as a historical, existential and romantic apologetic in the tradition of Dechamps, as Blondel estimated it.

Van Rossum ascribes to the Scandinavian Lutherans a deeply-rooted longing for a firm grasp and – correlative to this – a feeling of dissatisfaction with regard to the Protestant Church and an intuition that the Roman Catholic Church is the only true Church.

People feel that Protestantism (...) is not a church that is bound together by a common bond of unity; people see and feel ever more clearly and deeply that it lacks firm foundations; people realize that it is unable to point out a secure path in life. And people are searching and trying to find something that can provide a firm support and sure direction to our existence here on earth. That’s why everyone (...) casts his glance with earnest longing towards the old Mother Church, who has remained unspoiled and unchanging in her teachings and her religion throughout the centuries.<sup>21</sup>

According to Van Rossum, this is especially true for intellectuals, but more generally, he believes that “the people still feel so much for the Catholic liturgy”.<sup>22</sup> He refers to the favourable disposition of the Nordic people towards the Catholic Church. The signs are evident: “While the Protestant churches are for the most part empty, they [the people] look for the Catholic churches, kneel before the altars and the images”.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Willem van ROSSUM, *Aan mijne katholieke landgenooten*, Rotterdam 1923. Italian translation: *Viaggio nei Paesi del Nord*, in: *Vita e pensiero* 10 (1924) 65-77, 129-139; German translation: *Die religiöse Lage der Katholiken in den nordischen Ländern*, München 1924.

<sup>21</sup> W. van ROSSUM, *Aan mijne katholieke landgenooten*, 6-7.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

Dechamps ascribed the apostasy of humanity mainly to the *infidélité de ces rois et de ces princes que la justice de Dieu traitera comme les plus grands coupables*.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Van Rossum regards the spiritual and secular authorities (or at least the social system) in “the North” as the “guilty ones”. They obstruct and impede the common believers to find their way back to the true Church. Negative assumptions and prejudices against the Roman Catholic Church have been fostered for centuries. People who are financially dependent on the Lutheran Church – unless they are martyrs – are unable to convert. The common people seem to be very aware of this reality, which can be deduced from their alleged indignation as Van Rossum is refused entry to the Lutheran cathedral of Odense in order to venerate the relics of Saint Kanut.<sup>25</sup>

As an “apologist” for Dechamps, Van Rossum also observed the *splendor ecclesiae*, which is present in the “small histories” and biographies of heroes and saints, especially of missionaries and converts. He was very willing to write letters of recommendation and prefaces to books that contain such biographies. On these occasions, he recommended the heroes of these stories as a *magnifique spectacle*, appealing to deeper layers in the reader than just the *admiration stérile*.<sup>26</sup> In his introduction to Govers’ biography of the Redemptorist missionary in Suriname, Peter Donders<sup>27</sup>, he recommended the latter as a person for common people – the favourite target group and audience for a Redemptorist even today – to imitate.<sup>28</sup>

In his preface to the German translation of Bessie A. Baker’s *A Modern Pilgrim’s Progress* (London, 1906), Van Rossum rec-

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<sup>24</sup> V.-A. DECHAMPS, *Entretiens sur la démonstration catholique de la révélation chrétienne*, 181.

<sup>25</sup> W. VAN ROSSUM, *Aan mijne katholieke landgenooten*, 7, resp. 42 s.

<sup>26</sup> *Lettre de Son Eminence le Cardinal van Rossum*, 30 déc. 1925, in: L.F. ROUQUETTE, *L’épopée blanche*, Paris 1926, 9-10.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Donders was especially devoted to the care of those afflicted with leprosy. He was beatified in Rome in 1982; his cause for sainthood is still active.

<sup>28</sup> *Inleiding*, in: N. Govers, *Leven van den Eerbw. Dienaar Gods Petrus Donders C.S.S.R. Met een inleiding van W.M. Kardinaal van Rossum*, Venlo 1915, [7-12].

commended her book as a mirror for the spiritual elite of his time.<sup>29</sup> This elite group should recognize itself in it and identify itself with the quest of the erring soul. He understood her life as a modern revelation for the “contemporary, well educated part of society”, fulfilling the “needs of thousands of very well educated people in all civilized nations of this era”. Van Rossum describes Baker’s quest – and her experience of having found her home in “Rome, the homeland of the supernature” – in a way that precisely reflects Dechamps’ apologetics. Baker’s autobiography culminates, according to Van Rossum, in the moment that “we observe the Pilgrim disembark the uncertain and unsafe ship of one’s own opinions and enter the steady vessel of the Roman Church, sure of its course”.<sup>30</sup> The recognition of this vessel was not a matter of rational deduction, but of the heart finding a response to and comfort for its longing. This is because Catholicism is more than just a convincing set of evidence: it is a living organism, containing Christ’s own infallibility.

The fact that Van Rossum perceived the longing of the alienated individual of his time so keenly was not only due to his acquaintance with the “diaspora” in Scandinavia. Obviously, it was also influenced by his romantic perception of the contemporary reality of modernization. Van Rossum’s “soul” was marked by cultural pessimism. It made him sad to see the society running wild and “getting loose from God”. His preface to Baker’s book is a witness to this. His pessimistic attitude is also reflected elsewhere. He laments in his letter of recommendation for the new constitutions of the Order of the Redemptoristines, an Order of which he was protector: “O! How many people on this earth – it is sad to have to say this – do not love God”.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> W.M. Kard. van ROSSUM C.SS.R., *Vorwort*, 27 Mai 1914, in: B.A. BAKER, *Heimgefunden. Pilgerfahrt einer Frauenseele*, Freiburg i. Br. 1922, V-XII.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, VI-IX.

<sup>31</sup> “Ach! Wat zijn er vele menschen op aarde – het is treurig het te moeten zeggen – die God niet liefhebben”. *Brief van zijne em. Kardinaal W.M. van Rossum, Protector der Orde van den Allerheiligsten Verlosser*, in: *Regels en constituties voor de ordezuisters van de instelling van den Allerheiligsten Verlosser*, Witem 1931, 4.

### 3. – “Shift to the right” in Moral Theology

A pessimistic attitude also marked Van Rossum’s involvement in moral theology. By his “right wing” position in moral-theological issues, Van Rossum represented the “Wittem School” of morals. This pessimistic attitude was transmitted by scholars of successive generations, starting with Joseph Aertnijs, CSsR (1828-1915).

As suggested earlier, the Congregation’s founder was known for his balanced position in the long debate about so-called probabilism and probabiliorism. The latter position obliged the confessor to always follow the more probable (*probabilior*) option in his judgement, hence, a secure and sure path, while the former position was simply satisfied with probable opinions. Trying to avoid both “laxism” and “rigorism”, Alphonsus devised a creative solution, especially for those moral cases where “law” and “freedom” were balanced. In those cases, the confessor was not obliged to choose the “more certain” position in favour of the law (“just to be sure”) – because it was more probable – but was allowed to grant the penitent his or her freedom to choose, supposing that the other option was equally probable (hence the name “equiprobabilism”).

Aertnijs, and especially his successors, interpreted the mitigated “equiprobabilist” system of the founder in a rather narrow way. The Wittem moralists took a more conservative stance in moral theological debates, preferring “the safe road”, even when opinions in favour of a strict interpretation of the law and those in favour of freedom were in balance. Famous supporters of this “rigorist-like” explanation of the founder’s ethics were Van Rossum’s contemporaries Frans ter Haar (1857-1939) and Lodewijk Wouters (1864-1933), who became involved in harsh polemics at the beginning of the twentieth century. Ironically, their opponents accused them of subjectivism, because they arrogantly alleged “to know better what the risks involved” than did other authors.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Franciscus ter HAAR, *Aequiprobabilisme en gematigd probabilisme volgens de leer van den H. Alfonsus*, Gulpen/Zwolle 1906. Part of a miscellany at the University of Nijmegen containing manuscripts of different authors on this subject.

The motives and reasons behind the choice regarding this “right wing position” may have been political, but it may also have been a matter of socio-cultural context. Were the Redemptorists eager to keep a distance – at that time – from the not very popular Jesuits, the champions of moral-theological “laxism?” Or, were they just conforming to the widespread anti-liberal tendency, which dominated (Dutch) Catholicism during the second half of the nineteenth century – or even to the over-all tendency within the Redemptorist Congregation, promoted by its conservative leaders, who scrupulously stressed authority – like Rudolf von Smetana (1802-1871), Joseph Passerat (1771-1858) and Friedrich von Held (1799-1881)?<sup>33</sup>

As a young scholar, Van Rossum contributed to moral-theological polemics by writing about a famous moral controversial issue.<sup>34</sup> His text discussed whether the confessor should be severe or benign towards sinners, who refused to avoid the occasion of sin or would relapse (so called *occasionarii* and *recidivi*). In these cases, the confessor was puzzled by the question whether he, in absolving the penitents, should rely on their intentions and promises. In his polemics with Giovanni B. Pighi (1847-1926), Van Rossum defended the relatively rigorous opinion that the confessor should be exacting and delay the absolution until the “occasional” penitent or the “recidivist” improved his or her situation and attitude. Van Rossum claimed that this was the only possible correct interpretation of Alphonsus. Two aspects of Van Rossum’s justification are remarkable.

In the first place, Van Rossum characterizes the confessor not only as a judge, but also and above all, as a physician (*medicus*). The confessor-judge seemed to be able to base his judgment (his decision to delay the absolution or not to do so) on an instanta-

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<sup>33</sup> E. CORSIUS, *Een vrij en bevrijdend leven*, 158-180, esp. 173-178; Otto WEISS, *Rudolf Ritter von Smetana, der dritte Generalvikar der transalpinen Redemptoristen (1802-1871)*, in: *SHCSR* 54 (2006) 37-150.

<sup>34</sup> W.M. van ROSSUM, *Commentarius de Judicio Sacramentali Joannis Baptistae Pighi S. Theol. Doct. ad trutinam vocatus*, Rome 1897. Later on, Van Rossum’s text would be one of the key references in the Ter Haar’s monograph about the controversy: Franciscus ter HAAR, *De occasionariis et recidivis juxta doctrinam S. Alphonsi aliorumque probatorum auctorum*, 1927.

neous observation and on the actual intention and disposition of the penitent, whereas the confessor-physician should see the penitent within a broader temporal context and “embeddedness”. He could take the experiences from the past into account (the experience, for example, that some intentions were simply unsustainable) and the factual fragility of human experience (*fragilitas humanae experientiae*). The physician, moreover, looked towards the future and took the possibilities for improvement and for starting a new life into account. In view of that, the confessor-physician had to base his decision on more than just the assertions of the “patient”. He also had to scrutinize the authenticity and radicalism (rootedness) of the inner disposition.

Although the term is a bit anachronistic, Van Rossum assumed a “personalistic” view on man, a view that took the tragic quality of human life and the temporal (biographical) “embeddedness” and development into account. Remarkably and in doing so, Van Rossum pointed towards a process-like ethical anthropology and ethics of his successor, the famous Redemptorist moral theologian, Leonard Buijs (1896-1953), i.e. an anthropology that challenges the human subject to spiritual progress – and even towards the Thomistic personalism of self-transcendence of the Dutch Redemptorist and philosopher Jean Peters (1909-1961).<sup>35</sup> Was it typical for the Wittem School, deeply rooted in the pastorally inspired morals of Alphonsus?

In the second place, Van Rossum took the sociological and historical embeddedness of the penitent into account. Here, his cultural pessimism appears once again. Especially in “our time” (*aetas nostra*, 41 and *passim*), in the late-modern era of “indifferentism” (13, 41 and *passim*), of corrupted morals and where Christian faith is threatened, the confessor had to be very critical in judging assertions of regret and contrition. The confessor should not be satisfied, unless the penitent exhibited deep grief and firm intentions to improve his or her life. Otherwise, there was a danger of absolution being granted to the unworthy.

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<sup>35</sup> H. CORSIUS, *Een vrij en bevrijdend leven*, 228-230 and 251-252. The “red file” in this moral theological tradition is the “transformative” perspective (Taylor, *A secular age*, 430-435 and *passim*) that would also be recognizable in the ethics of faith and virtue of Bernard Häring C.Ss.R. (1904-1998).

On the one hand, by adhering to this cultural pessimism, Van Rossum continued the intellectual development towards a more radical conservatism (i.e., the shift to a right wing position) in the Redemptorist order that already began in the middle of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, his position was a defensive response to the destabilizing consequences of the modernization process, especially industrialization and urbanisation.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. – *Alphonsus' son in a direct sense*

Apart from Van Rossum's assumed indirect and implicit link to St. Alphonsus in his "missiology" (of which I have spoken in the first section of this present article) and his moral theology (in my third section), it seems that there also existed a direct and explicit connection to the founder of the Redemptorists. Such direct and explicit adherence toward Alphonsus can be detected in both his scientific and his popular, devotional *oeuvres*.

In June 1885, the young teacher at the seminary dedicated to his provincial superior a copy of his translation of and commentary on Alphonsus' dissertation on the predestination of Jesus Christ as the Saviour. This copy concerned the classical controversy about the *motivum incarnationis*.<sup>37</sup> Van Rossum had been tormented by ambivalence. On the one hand, he intended his study of the works of the founder to be an act of devotion towards his beloved "father".<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, he was unable to suppress a certain fear that Alphonsus deviated from the theological *mainstream* (which was also expressed in the Wittem manual already mentioned<sup>39</sup>) as well as from the Thomistic norm. At first glance, Alphonsus seemed to sustain a divergent posi-

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<sup>36</sup> This social revolution also marked the pastoral strategies of – at least – the Dutch Redemptorists at the beginning of the twentieth century, who developed a specific kind of mission for presentation in the milieu of cities. Cfr. E. CORSIUS, *Een vrij en bevrijdend leven*, 210-215.

<sup>37</sup> Willem M. van ROSSUM, *Dissertatio adumbrata de Praedestinatione J. Chr. Auctore S. P. N. Alph. Ex Italo in Latinum versa*, Wittem, 1885 (manuscript).

<sup>38</sup> St. Agatha, Erfgoedcentrum Nederlands Kloosterleven (ENK), *Archives of the Dutch Province of the Redemptorists (ADPR)*, inv. nr. 8538, W.M. van Rossum to P. Oomen, 30-6-1885.

<sup>39</sup> F.J. HARTE, F.X. SCHOUPPE, *Dictata theologico-dogmatica*, Tom. I, 764.

tion, implying that God withdraws His grace from humankind and so provokes original sin in order to legitimate the incarnation. Van Rossum – to his great relief – found the key for a “correct” interpretation of the founder’s text by referring to the famous Alphonsian thesis that God does not refuse anyone that assistance which is necessary to avoid sin. In other words: Alphonsus would find the idea absurd that God would withdraw His grace in order to legitimate redemptive incarnation.

In his ascetical writings, Van Rossum also showed his devotion towards his spiritual father. In 1904, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the proclamation of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, he published a florilegium or anthology of Alphonsian texts.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, he honoured not only Our Holy Lady, who in her “quality” as immaculate was the Congregation’s patroness, but also Alphonsus, who had been the main promoter of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Another of the many examples was Van Rossum’s edition of meditations for Advent and Christmas time, in fact, it was a pastiche of Alphonsus’ writings in the same genre. Consciously, he “copied and pasted” the founder’s genre, his rhetorical figures, style and vocabulary.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, there is a remarkable and curious feat of arms in Van Rossum’s literary production. A year after his death, his former secretary and confidant, J.M. Drehmanns C.Ss.R., edited a facsimile entitled *Sint Alfonsus’ lijdensgedachten* (Saint Alphonsus’ thoughts on suffering or on the Passion). In fact, it contained a literal translation by the Cardinal of four devotional texts, written by Alphonsus for Holy Week. According to Drehmanns’ preface, the translation had been written by Van Rossum during a stay in the spa of Karlsbad. The facsimile could be seen as an expression of his own Passion-mysticism and his devotion for the founder. Most likely, Van Rossum wanted to share the spiritual

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<sup>40</sup> Willem M. van ROSSUM, *S. Alphonsus M. de Liguorio et Immaculata Conceptio B. Mariae Virginis*, Romae 1904.

<sup>41</sup> ID., *Meditazioni per le Domeniche dell’Avvento e per la novena del S. Natale*, Romae 1930. The sources Van Rossum used, i.e., the *Opere ascetiche* of De Liguori, can be easily found in their almost complete edition at the following website: <http://www.intratext.com/IXT/ITASA0000/>.

heritage of Alphonsus with his compatriots. In his turn, Drehmanns showed his own devotion towards the Cardinal by editing a facsimile of his handwritten pages, including erasures and corrections.

Van Rossum died as a devoted “son of Alphonsus”. During his life, although he needed to take some distance from his Congregation because of his administrative position, Van Rossum obviously remained close and perhaps drew closer to his “spiritual father”. A kind of “intensification” and growing spiritual intimacy between the two had taken place. A comparison of Van Rossum’s posthumously published writing with the notes he wrote as a young mission preacher in Roermond is striking.<sup>42</sup> According to this collection of notes, his earlier sources and references were only Dutch and French-speaking authors from the eighteenth century. The founder of his congregation did not even appear. One could ask whether – and if so, why – Van Rossum had actually developed a more intimate relationship with his “father” during his life and career and even used texts of the founder in a “copy and paste” way. It would be worthwhile to do further research on his personal motivation and the supra-personal causes of his growing conservatism. Was Van Rossum, tormented by his chronic illness and by sorrow for the de-Christianization of modern European civilization, looking for a more secure foundation? Around the beginning of the twentieth century, had there been a revival in the reception of the writings of Alphonsus, due to the centenary of his death and to the influence of Alphonsus’ heritage in the famous dogmas proclaimed in 1854 and 1870? These and other questions can be answered only by further research.

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<sup>42</sup> St. Agatha, ENK, ADPR, inv. nr. 8531: “*Scripta: aantekeningen en verhandelingen van kardinaal W. van Rossum C.Ss.R.*”.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we have attempted to confront Van Rossum's theological "production" with the Redemptorist tradition. One could ask whether his theological accents are original or unique. Most probably, they are neither. More important and relevant is the fact that he consciously chose certain positions. At least his points of view show correlations with the theological tradition of the Redemptorists and its own dynamics. In the first place, the Alphonsian tradition of popular mission as an "ecclesiogenetical" practice probably made Van Rossum receptive to the idea of mission as promoting autonomous communities. In the second place, Van Rossum applied the romantic apologetics of Dechamps – which stressed the "meeting" of the longing subject and the Church – to the dynamics of contemporary mission. In the third place, Van Rossum followed the "right-wing" interpretation of casuistic morals from his contemporary confreres in Wittem. Last but not least, during the course of his life, he drew closer to Alphonsus in his spiritual and theological writings, including making use of the founder's writings in a very direct and explicit way.

## SUMMARY

Cardinal Willem van Rossum (1854-1932) was a devoted son of St. Alphonsus (in line with Alphonsus' moral and ascetical teachings), and was also, very importantly, endowed with a Redemptorist missionary heart and spirit. In this article the Dutch theologian and missiologist Eric Corsius, gives ample evidence of these traits in the Dutch Cardinal. Corsius also indicates how the thinking of Van Rossum was by somewhat influenced by the "romantic apologetics" of Redemptorist Cardinal Victor Dechamps and by the "right wing" tendencies of the professors of the Redemptorist seminary at Wittem in the Netherlands. Key notions of Corsius about Van Rossum are that he consciously chose to hold certain theological positions, and that his Redemptorist roots served him well in the years when he held key posts in the Vatican.

## RÉSUMÉ

Le Cardinal Willem van Rossum (1854-1932) était un fils dévoué de St Alphonse, en phase avec son enseignement moral et ascétique. Et trait important, il était aussi doué d'un cœur et d'un esprit missionnaire rédemptoristes. Dans cet article, le théologien hollandais et diplômé en missiologie Eric Corsius donne d'amples exemples de ces traits présents dans l'âme du Cardinal hollandais. L'auteur montre aussi comment la pensée de van Rossum fut quelque peu influencée par "l'apologétique romantique" d'un autre Rédemptoriste le Cardinal Victor Dechamps et par les tendances "de droite" des professeurs du studendat rédemptoriste de Wittem dans le Limbourg hollandais. L'idée centrale de Corsius sur van Rossum est que celui-ci a choisi en conscience de suivre certaines positions théologiques et que ses racines rédemptoristes lui ont bien servi lorsqu'il tenait des postes clé au Vatican.