

"MANY INNOCENT PRIESTS SHOT," MERCIER CHARGES; GERMANS OFFER FAKE PROBE IN KILLING OF CLERGY

Cardinal Answers Inquiry by Giving Names of Clergy in His Diocese Who Had Been Put to Death by the Invader

Explanatory Comment

THE Germans had a favorite blanket "excuse" for most of their wanton slaughter of Belgian civilians. Military headquarters smacked its lips over "Man hat geschossen" (Somebody has fired).

At Charleroi, Herve, Bligny, Hougaerde, Monceau-sur-Sambre, Goggnies and Termonde the invaders insisted that the uniformed townspeople had deliberately attacked the Hun troops.

Had this been so—and such a situation would not have been surprising considering that Germany had been the first to break faith by regarding treaties as scraps of paper—international law would have supported her case.

Such assistance would have been extremely welcome to the empire which was continually running afoul of the accepted codes of civilization.

And so the cry of "frenshooters" (franc-tireurs) was repeatedly raised. It is significant that it was particularly loud whenever the German army suffered a check. The troops would fall back into a town from which hostages and fines had been taken during the advance, and on their return trip the orgy of atrocities—murder, fire, rape, massacre—would begin. The contention was always the same. Civilians had been shooting the Kaiser's soldiers!

Hoping to range American public opinion on his side, Wilhelm formally notified President Wilson on September 8, 1914, that Belgian civilians had fired upon and maltreated the conquering troops and on the next day ordered the government in Belgium to make an investigation of the facts.

The two proceedings were pretentious, but as regards each other badly timed. The Emperor had been characteristically hasty. A week later, when the German commission had completed its inquiry, this significant sentence appeared in the report: "We have been unable to find a single case of civilian attack on German soldiers!"

In the deliberate and dishonorable baiting by the German chaplain of the Cure Tagnon, described below, one more effort to revive the disproved charge was made. For the hundredth time the civilians were stigmatized as "franc-tireurs."

It would not be astonishing if the chaplain of Arlon actually thought he was speaking the truth. For forty-four years "franc-tireur" has been a chronic bugaboo in German military education. A swaggering Uhlan became a "chocolate soldier" at the utterance of the word.

The German army had never recovered from the shock of French resistance in the Franco-Prussian war. The Boche dreamed of "franc-tireurs." They were his nightmare.

He saw them in every dark corner and at the imaginary spectacle he receded to savagery.

cent; but in justice it is not for us to prove their innocence: it is for the military authorities who have proceeded against them to establish their guilt.

Witnesses called to give evidence before a biased commission will in general be afraid to tell the truth. This can only be obtained fully and be universally accepted as such on condition that a mixed commission be formed to investigate it and to guarantee an impartial and exact inquiry.

And, therefore, I cannot but renew for the third time my proposal to confide to a mixed commission made up partly of German magistrates and partly of Belgian magistrates the task of throwing full light on facts about which the Governor General has had the happy idea to institute an inquiry. In order that the results of the inquiry may have all desirable weight, it were well that the tribunal should be presided over by some delegate from a neutral state.

Malines, February 10th, 1915.

(Signed) D. J. CARDINAL MERCIER.

(Signed) VON FLEMING.

Major and Adjutant of the Kreishef of Malines. The proposals of the Cardinal achieved no result whatever.

CHAPTER VII

Release of the Belgian Doctors and Chemists Confined at Heidelberg

REFERENCE has already been made in a preceding letter to a group of Belgian army doctors and pharmaceutical chemists confined at Heidelberg and threatened by the camp commandant with reprisals, to be undertaken as a sort of protest against the supposed bad treatment to which it was falsely alleged the German officer prisoners in France and Belgium had been subjected. The Cardinal, who had interceded with Von Bissing on his compatriots' behalf, received the following reply:

Government General, Brussels, January 30th, 1915.

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

The letter which your Eminence wrote me on December 17th, 1914, led me to obtain precise particulars about the twenty-three doctors and twelve pharmaceutical chemists who have been deported to Heidelberg.

The result of the inquiries I have made is that the competent authorities had at first the intention of attaching them to the Belgian Medical Service quartered in Germany, but that this plan was never put into execution, in the same way as it was not found possible at the beginning to send them into Switzerland.

Under these circumstances, it was found necessary to intern them provisionally in the officers' camp at Heidelberg.

Already on January 3rd orders were sent to conduct them to Switzerland; they will have by now reached the place which they themselves chose for their residence.

I present to your Eminence the expression of my sincere esteem.

(Signed) BARON VON BISSING.

(*A copy of this letter has never been found.) The Cardinal thanked Von Bissing for his intervention:

Archbishop's House, Malines, February 6th, 1915.

To His Excellency Baron von Bissing, Governor General, Brussels.

Sir—In reply to the letter I had the honor of addressing you on December 17th last, your Excellency has been so kind as to inform me that twenty-three doctors and twelve dispensers, prisoners at Heidelberg, have been released.

I rejoice at the result of the steps taken by your Excellency and think it my duty to express my gratitude.

Please accept, dear Governor General, the assurance of my sincere esteem.

(Signed) D. J. CARDINAL MERCIER.

CHAPTER VIII

The Cardinal's Protest Against the Behavior of a German Military Chaplain

Archbishop's House, Malines, February 9th, 1915.

To His Excellency Baron von Bissing, Governor General, Brussels.

Dear Governor General—An incident has taken place at Forrières, in the province of Luxembourg, to which I would call your kind attention. In conjunction with my venerable colleague, Mgr. Heylen, Bishop of Namur, I should like, in addressing your Excellency to forestall any painful controversy.

At Forrières on Thursday, January 7th, the Cure Tagnon had a conversation in the sacristy with the chaplain of Arlon which can be more or less summed up in these terms:

"Many innocent priests in the diocese of Namur have been shot."

"Pardon me," answered the chaplain, "our staff headquarters is in possession of proofs that many civilians were franc-tireurs and that the clergy incited them to fire on the German troops."

"You must not believe all these tales; if one were to pin one's faith to all one hears, I should also believe that the Germans have attempted to violate our nuns."

That very same day the chaplain, in company with a German doctor, paid a visit to the presbytery in order to induce the cure to repeat the statement he had made that morning in the sacristy.

The cure acknowledged that, materially, he had made the statement, but in a vague manner: "people say," "there is a rumor that" and conditionally, "Germans may have violated our nuns."

Imprisonment of Cure

Nevertheless, the chaplain made a categorical and detailed accusation against the cure, the net result of which was the imprisonment of the cure and his condemnation to either a hundred days in gaol or a thousand francs fine.

M. Misson, a public notary, accused of having in the course of familiar conversation with his friend, M. Tagnon, made the same statement, was condemned to undergo the same penalty.

I am convinced, dear Governor General, that the Cure Tagnon has not made the damning accusation against the German army which the chaplain has put into his mouth. But it is not my intention to lay stress on the accusation itself.

It is the behavior of the chaplain that I find odious. A conversation held in the anteroom by two brother priests cannot be the subject for a summons to court. The aforementioned behavior of the accuser who tries to impose on the good faith of his brother priest, airily accepts a cigar which he smokes in his company, enjoys the hospitality of his table, in order to extort from him a confidence with which to trump up a case against him—this premeditation aggravates the guilt of the accuser and the odious character of his accusation.

The military tribunal of Arlon must have been

badly informed of the case to have accepted such an accusation and not to have proceeded against the accuser, rather than the accused.

Calls Dominican "Ungentlemanly"

We, Mgr. the Bishop of Namur and myself, deem that our respect for the dignity of the priesthood and our solicitude for the maintenance of good fellowship, which ought to reign among priests to whatsoever nationality they belong, will not allow us to let pass without censure the ungentlemanly behavior of the Rector of the Dominican Priory at Dusseldorf. We are minded therefore to refer the case to the Reverend Father General of the Dominican Order and to the Holy See at Rome.

Nevertheless, if the chaplain will consent to withdraw his accusation and if your Excellency will condescend to remit the penalty inflicted on the Cure Tagnon and on his parishioner, M. Misson, we shall be pleased to consider the incident as closed.

Kindly receive, Governor General, the assurance of my sincere esteem.

(Signed) D. J. CARDINAL MERCIER, Archbishop of Malines.

I join with His Eminence in begging the Governor to take in hand the cause of my diocesan.

(Signed) TH. LOUIS HEYLEN, Bishop of Namur.

Following this intervention, the punishment inflicted on the cure Tagnon and on M. Misson was reduced by one-half.

CHAPTER IX

The Cardinal Intercedes on Behalf of F. Van Bambeke, S. J., and of the Abbe Cuyllits

F. VAN BAMBEKE, S. J., and the Abbe Cuyllits had been condemned by the German military tribunals for having helped Belgian youths to cross the frontier. As a result of the Cardinal's intervention, the Governor General consented to set the Abbe Cuyllits at liberty and gave permission to F. Van Bambeke to do his punishment in a Belgian prison.

In communicating to the Cardinal this act of clemency, Von Bissing complains for the first time of the patriotic attitude assumed by the clergy. This theme of discussion, which is here only hinted at, will later on form the object of extensive correspondence between his Eminence and the German authorities.

Pleads for Release of Priests

Archbishop's House, Malines, March 27th, 1915.

To His Excellency Baron von Bissing, Governor General, Brussels.

Sir—The Reverend Father Van Bambeke, S. J., prefect of the Central Art and Mechanical School, Rue d'Allemagne, Brussels, has been condemned to two years and a half penal servitude for having provided facilities to two or three young men to pass the frontier, and the Abbe Cuyllits, cure of N. D., at Cureghem, has to undergo one year of the same penalty for a similar offense.

The two ecclesiastics are in poor health, which would be shattered for good and all by residence in a foreign land.

For this reason I appeal with confidence to your Excellency's humane sentiments and ask you to arrange that both the religious and the secular priest may undergo their punishment in our own country.

I would be extremely obliged to you were you to comply with my request, and I beg you to accept, sir, the expression of my sincere esteem.

(Signed) D. J. CARDINAL MERCIER.

Governor General's Office, Brussels, April 4th, 1915.

III b. T. L. No. 1422.

DECREE

Grant of Pardon to the Abbe Cuyllits and F. Bambeke, S. J.

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Malines.

To my deep regret I have often been forced latterly to take a decision about appeals for reprieve in the case of ecclesiastics who have been punished for having behaved toward the German authorities in a manner unworthy of their state.

If I again adopt great clemency in the case of the Cure Cuyllits, of Cureghem, and of F. Van Bambeke, S. J., it can only be an exception; I have only decided to do so in consideration of the pressing recommendations I have received on behalf of the Cure Cuyllits, who is indispensable to his parish, and in view of F. Van Bambeke's poor state of health.

I would observe that in future, if priests are again found guilty of offenses against the German authorities, I shall not avail myself of my prerogative.

The Governor General.

(Signed) BARON VON BISSING, Lieut. General.

Your Excellency's "Kind Act"

Archbishop's House, Malines, April 16th, 1915.

To His Excellency Baron von Bissing, Governor General, Brussels.

Sir—I have had to be away from Malines these last few days and have been unable to reply as soon as I should have liked to letter No. 1422, which your Excellency did me the honor of addressing to me.

In allowing F. Van Bambeke to undergo his penalty in a Belgian prison, your Excellency has done a very kind act for which the prisoner's friends will be grateful; and in authorizing the Cure Cuyllits to re-enter his parish at Cureghem, you have done a good service to the religious and moral interests of our diocese. We thank you in all sincerity and beg you to consider this letter as an expression of our gratitude.

Your Excellency is afraid that you will not in future be able to see your way to show leniency to the clergy, and you warn me of the necessity in which you might find yourself to meet me with a refusal if I should again have recourse to your right to grant a reprieve. I hope there will no longer be any occasion for it.

Your Excellency can hardly forbid me from thinking that, should recourse to your prerogative be eventually justified, you should again see your way to taking such steps as equity demands.

Accept, sir, the expression of my feelings of gratitude and sincere esteem.

(Signed) D. J. CARDINAL MERCIER, Archbishop of Malines.

CHAPTER X

Scheme for an Inquiry on the Subject of Assaults Committed by German Soldiers Upon Nuns

WE HAVE seen how the Kreishef of Malines had communicated to the Cardinal a scheme for an inquiry about priests put to death by German troops during the first weeks of invasion. The Cardinal, having in his letter of January 24th replied that he would lend his aid only to an international committee of inquiry,

which alone could offer guarantees of impartiality, remained unanswered. The scheme for an inquiry was shelved.

Von Bissing raised the point once again. Only, without trying to throw light on all the horrors which had marked the entry of the Germans into Belgium, he would have liked to limit his inquiry to a single point, viz., the outrages committed against nuns by German soldiers. The Cardinal, while he hinted that accusations of this character were not so void of foundation as the Governor General seemed to imagine, declared that he could take no part in an inquiry about facts of so delicate a nature. Von Bissing made a pretext of his refusal to declare that his Eminence thus recognized the falsity of the accusations brought against the German troops; once again he distorted his correspondent's views:

Government General of Belgium, Brussels, I. No. 1243, March 30th, 1915.

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

The foreign press, in addition to a whole series of criminal charges which, for the most part, have been recognized as false, has put forward lately at various times the following grave accusation. German soldiers passing through Belgium have gone so far as to outrage Belgian nuns.

It is enough to remark that such crimes, if they can be proved, would certainly incur my severe condemnation, as well as that of the German Government; but, on the other hand, justice requires that every case should be taken to set aside accusations recognized as false.

I venture to think that the sentiments of justice and the interests of the Church will derive equal advantage from a full establishment of the truth. For this reason, I believe I can rely on your Eminence's willing support to second my efforts in thoroughly sifting the facts.

If your Eminence would be so kind as to forward me the documents which you may possibly have dealing with the cases of violation of nuns in your diocese, I shall then be in a position to take whatever further steps the situation may demand.

I present to your Eminence the expression of my sincere esteem and remain your devoted servant.

(Signed) BARON VON BISSING, Governor General.

Archbishop's House, Malines, April 16th, 1915.

To His Excellency Baron von Bissing, Governor General, Brussels.

Sir—I have duly received the letter No. 1243 with which your Excellency has honored me and I am sorry I was prevented from answering it earlier.

Rumors are indeed being bruited by certain newspapers, and denied by others, about outrages alleged to have been committed by German soldiers upon Belgian nuns, and in agreement with your Excellency I protest against those who thus in a light-hearted way and without proof spread broadcast among the people or entertain such odious accusations.

But when your Excellency asks me to help you in throwing light on the grounds, whether true or false, of these imputations, I find it necessary to ask you a preliminary question.

Has civil authority the right to institute an inquiry about so delicate a matter?

Whom would one question?

The confessor? The doctor? They are bound by professional secrecy.

Should it be the superiors? Do they always know the whole truth? And if they do know it, through having learned it under the seal of secrecy, have they the right to speak about it?

Would any one venture to interrogate the offended parties. Would not this be cruel? Would any one attempt to induce the witnesses to speak at the risk of making known the hapless victims of a violence which would, in the opinion of the public, bring upon them the stain of dishonor?

So far as I am concerned, I would not dare to submit anybody to an interrogatory on so delicate a subject, and any confidences which have already been extended to me spontaneously, or in the future will be made to me on this subject, my conscience forbids me to reveal to others.

Our duty, your Excellency, is to prevent by every means in our power the public from indulging in such wanton and immoral allegations; and I shall approve with all my heart any effort at repression which justice chooses to adopt with those who either of set purpose or through an unpardonable levity invent these tales or spread them broadcast. But I think we cannot proceed any further without encroaching upon the rights of conscience and without also exposing them to violation.

Accept, dear Governor General, a renewed assurance of my deep esteem.

(Signed) D. J. CARDINAL MERCIER, Archbishop of Malines.

"Honor" of German Soldiers

Government General of Belgium, Brussels, P. A. J. No. 1877, April 20th, 1915.

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Archbishop of Malines.

I have the honor of expressing to your Eminence my hearty thanks for your letter of the 16th instant.

I perfectly understand the feelings which hindered your Eminence from undertaking any painful inquiry in order to answer the questions which I had addressed to you. I had indeed no intention of exacting such an inquiry. I had reason rather to believe that if, after all these reports had any solid foundation, the ecclesiastical authorities would, in one way or another, have had cognizance of them. It is enough now to state that neither your Eminence nor the other bishops can furnish any proof based on facts of these reports, and I feel bound again to declare indignantly that they are purposely propagated and with malicious intent.

I willingly agree that an inquiry, having for its object the refutation of these lying accusations, would be of a nature to wound the modesty of nuns. Nevertheless, I cannot refrain from pointing out to your Eminence that in presence of such allegations I myself and all who have at heart the honor and good name of the German soldiers experience like sentiments. It is in the name of these same feelings which your Eminence finds justifiable, while intervening on behalf of the nuns convicted of our care, that I claim the right to check with every means at my command the slanders that are leveled at our troops.

It is with all the more gratitude, then, that I acknowledge that your Eminence, in the most perspicacious way, disapproves of the propagation of such lies in the press, and that I venture to count on your benevolent co-operation in defeating these malicious machinations.

Allow me to offer to your Eminence the expression of my sincere esteem, and I have the honor to be your devoted servant.

(Signed) BARON VON BISSING, (CONTINUED MONDAY)

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Cardinal Mercier's Story

Including his correspondence with the German authorities in Belgium during the war, 1914 to 1918, edited by Professor Fernand Mayence of Louvain University and translated by the Benedictine Monks of St. Augustine's, Ramsgate, England.

CHAPTER VI

Proposal for an Inquiry Into the Murder by German Troops of Priests Belonging to the Diocese of Malines

TOWARD the end of 1914 and at the beginning of 1915 the German Government established in Belgium various commissions of inquiry, composed entirely of imperial officials, whose object was to proclaim to the whole world that the German army was innocent of the crimes of which it had been accused by its enemies, and if now and then severe measures of repression had to be taken they must be ascribed solely to the brutal and savage conduct of the Belgian folk. The result of these one-sided inquiries appeared in a White Book, which will remain for future generations one of the most convincing witnesses of the duplicity, insolence and also of the folly of Prussian militarism.

The Kreishef of Malines proved himself a worthy representative of his Government. Pretending that he had learned from a newspaper article that priests of the diocese of Malines had been killed, though he knew by the Christmas pastoral letter the assertion of the Cardinal that thirteen members of the clergy had perished as victims of German barbarity, he communicates to his Eminence his scheme for an inquiry in the following terms:

The Kreishef, Malines, January 20th, 1915.

To His Eminence the Cardinal, Archbishop of Malines.

According to a newspaper article, several guiltless priests have been killed in the diocese of Malines.

In order to be able to start an inquiry, I beg your Eminence to be so kind as to let me know if this information be correct, and if the answer is in the affirmative to supply me with the names of the victims.

I should very much like to know under what circumstances these priests have been killed and which troops incurred the guilt of these crimes and on what date these events came to pass.

The Kreishef, G. VON WENGERSKY, Colonel.

(Signed) G. VON WENGERSKY, Colonel.

Gives Names of Slain Priests

The Cardinal answered without delay:

Archbishop's House, Malines, January 24th, 1915.

To the Count von Wengersky, Kreishef, Malines.

Sir—I have the honor to acknowledge the letter 268/11, bearing date January 20th, which you have had the kindness to send me.

The names of the priests and religious of Malines diocese who to my knowledge have been put to death by German troops are the following: Dupierreux, of the Society of Jesus; the Brothers Sebastian and Allard, of the Congregation of Josephites; Brother Candide, of the Congregation of Our Lady of Mercy; Father Maximin, a Capuchin; Father Vincent, a minor conventual; Carette, a teacher; Lombaert, Goris, De Clerck, Dergent, Wouters, Van Blaedt, parish priests.

On Christmas Day, when I published my pastoral letter, I did not yet know with certainty what had been the fate of the cure of Herent; since then his body has been found at Louvain and identified.

Other figures quoted by me in my pastoral letter ought now to be added. For instance, for Aerschot I gave the number of victims as ninety-one, but the total of Aerschot's dug up now reaches 143. However, the time has not yet come to insist on these detailed facts. Their enumeration will come to light in the inquiry which you lead me to expect.

It will be a consolation to me to see full light thrown upon events which I had to recall in my pastoral letter and on others of the same kind.

But it is indispensable that the results of the inquiry should appear to all with an authority beyond dispute.

With this end in view, I have the honor to propose to you, my dear Count, and to the German authorities through your kind intervention, that the Commission of Inquiry be composed equally of German delegates and Belgian magistrates to be appointed by our Chief Justice, the whole to be presided over

by the representative of a neutral country. I cherish the hope that his Excellency the Minister of the United States would not refuse to preside either himself or through a delegate of his own choice.

Accept, I beg you, dear Kreishef, the assurance of my sincere esteem.

(Signed) D. J. CARDINAL MERCIER, Vicar General Summoned

On February 2d the Kreishef summoned one of the Vicars General. Mgr. Van Roey went to the Kommandantur at 11 a. m. He found himself in the presence of an adjutant, who asked him the following questions: At what place had priests been killed? What day? By what troops? Do you aver that they were innocent?

Mgr. Van Roey replied that he had not been directly concerned in the project for an inquiry, but that, as far as he knew, his Eminence had corresponded about this matter with the Governor General or with the Kreishef.

"Yes," replied the adjutant, "we have heard his Eminence's letter. The Governor General has taken cognizance of it and has sent it to us with annotations. We do not wish to disturb his Eminence again; we had hoped that you could provide the information we desire."

The interview ended by Mgr. Van Roey's declaring that all he could do was to submit to the Cardinal the Kreishef's wishes.

The Kreishef of Malines, February 8th, 1915.

To His Eminence Cardinal Mercier, Malines.

I should be much obliged if your Eminence would fix a date for receiving my adjutant. He is commissioned to ask your Eminence for precise details regarding the priests of the diocese of Malines who were shot.

I beg your Eminence to accept the expression of my deep respect and I have the honor to be your devoted servant.

(Signed) G. VON WENGERSKY, Colonel and Kreishef.

The Cardinal replied, fixing the interview for February 9th, but his letter was delivered to the Kreishef after some delay so that the adjutant was unable to present himself at the Archbishop's House on the appointed day. Von Wengersky told the Cardinal of it:

The Kreishef of Malines, February 9th, 1915.

To His Eminence the Cardinal Archbishop of Malines.

To my great regret, I have to inform your Eminence that, as the result of a mistake, your letter was not delivered to me till 2 o'clock this afternoon. My adjutant has therefore been unable to proceed to your palace at the time mentioned.

If convenient to your Eminence, he will present himself tomorrow at the same hour.

I beg your Eminence to excuse this mistake and to accept the expression of my profound esteem.

(Signed) G. VON WENGERSKY, Colonel and Kreishef.

Agrees to Receive Adjutant

This letter from the Kreishef crossed the following from the Cardinal:

Archbishop's House, Malines, February 9th, 1915.

To the Count Wengersky, Kreishef, Malines.

Dear Count—I am afraid I did not receive my letter this morning in time to enable you to see your adjutant. I hasten therefore to inform you that I shall be delighted to receive your delegate tomorrow, Wednesday, at 4 p. m. (5h. German time). However, to prevent his taking a step which he might believe fruitless, I think it my duty to warn you that