

**The Unity of Christians:  
The Vision of Paul Couturier**

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**XI**

**Emiel De Smedt, Vatican II, and the Ecumenical Vocation of the  
Brugge Diocese**

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Being the rector of the ecumenical chapel Brugge and a member of the ecumenical link with the Anglican diocese of Lincoln, I am pleased to welcome you to our Diocese and to be here among you.

I must admit that I did not know Bishop Emiel-Jozef De Smedt very well myself, since he was already bishop of Brugge eleven years before I was born. Of course I met him a few times after I entered the seminary, but since he retired in 1984, I was ordained by the present bishop Vangheluwe. As diocesan archivist I am, however, also in charge of the records left behind by Bishop De Smedt, but these fill more than four hundred boxes and only a provisional list has been drawn up; so it is difficult to use these archives for research. There is an exception for the papers he collected about Vatican II and which he deposited in 1976 with the Catholic University of Leuven. These papers were described in a separate inventory in 1999, thanks to the Centre for the Study of Vatican II at that University (1). It is precisely by virtue of his contribution to the Council that Bishop De Smedt promoted the ecumenical cause not only in this diocese, but in the whole of the Roman Catholic Church. The starting-point for this was his appointment on October 25th 1960 as a member of the *Secretariat ad Christianorum Unitatem Fovendam* (SCUF) or Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, one of the preparatory institutions of what was to become Vatican II. This appointment was rather a surprise, since the diocese of Brugge wasn't exactly known at that time for great ecumenical openness; but Bishop De Smedt of course originally belonged to the archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussel (Malines-Bruxelles), where he was an auxiliary bishop from 1950 until his

promotion to Brugge in 1952. So in a certain way, he was an heir to the famous Malines Conversations in the twenties between the Roman Catholic and the Anglican Churches, involving Cardinal Mercier and Lord Halifax. Interestingly enough, there had been some sort of Anglican presence in the diocese of Brugge from the nineteenth century onwards, but most English expatriates had left West Flanders at the beginning of the First World War, and only a few of them returned afterwards. On the other hand the 'Flanders Fields' have continued to be a sacred place for many visitors from the United Kingdom. But, as I said, there was no tradition at all of ecumenical openness in the diocese of Brugge to members of other Christian denominations in Western Flanders, most of whom belonged to the Anglican Church or the official Protestant Church of Belgium (it is only more recently that the Orthodox Churches have also established themselves in West Flanders). After all, Brugge had been a Roman Catholic stronghold ever since Belgian independence in 1830, and the efforts of the successive bishops of the diocese had been to stem both socialism and Flemish nationalism. Another example of Brugge's 'provincial' mentality was the fact that there were no colleges run by religious orders inside the diocese, so the secular clergy had a monopoly on the education of the male Catholic youth. At one point even, an intervention by Pope Pius X had been needed to persuade bishop Waffelaert to allow the establishment of a Benedictine college in Loppem. All this started to change with the arrival of Bishop De Smedt, although certainly on one occasion the new bishop proved to be in line with his predecessors by trying to stop the faithful from casting their votes for the Flemish nationalist Volksunie (People's Union) in 1958. Some Flemish nationalists always bore a grudge against him because of this, although ten years later he made up for it by becoming the first bishop to accept the splitting up of the Catholic University of Leuven into its French and Flemish constituencies. This was our diocesan bishop, who was to play such a key role at Vatican II.

As a member of the Secretariat of Unity, Bishop De Smedt joined sub-commission IV, *De laicatu et de tolerantia*, which had to prepare the texts about freedom of religion and the priesthood of the laity. For this reason he attended a meeting in Fribourg at the end of 1960, where the so-called *texte de Fribourg* was agreed upon. De Smedt, who was better known for his pastoral than for his theological publications in the past, had gained the advice of several famous Belgian scholars, such as Mgr. Albert Dondeyne, Canon Roger Aubert, and especially the theologian Louis Janssens, who appears to have been the real author of the *texte de Fribourg*. This was typical of the Bishop, who would not hesitate to ask the experts to write texts, which he could then synthesize. He was also a very practical man. One example of this

is the new copy-machine he ordered for the Belgian College in Rome on the opening-day of the Council, which was put straight to use to copy the model-lists of candidates for the conciliar commissions, so that they could be distributed until late in the evening all over Rome that very day. Since the College received no fewer than 164 phone calls on that day, its single line must have been constantly busy; and so the bishops ordered the installation of a telephone exchange with fifteen lines. Again, the bill was paid by Bishop De Smedt (2). His greatest practical skill was knowledge of languages, especially Latin. While other bishops and theologians felt quite uncomfortable with the official working language of the Council, he fully mastered it. This is certainly one of the reasons why he became the *relator* of the text on freedom of religion, which went through seven different versions during the Council itself. He missed the opportunity to make some planned interventions on the *Schema* about liturgy, as the discussion was already closed, so his first real intervention on November 11th 1962 was about the *Schema de fontibus revelationis* ('On the sources of revelation'), but that was buried soon afterwards. On December 1st he made his famous speech on the Church, which he said was too prone to clericalism, legalism and triumphalism (the last word was a new expression, afterwards adopted by several dictionaries). But most of his contributions during the Council related to the declaration on freedom of religion, *Dignitatis humanae*, which was finally sanctioned on December 7th 1965. Even after the text presented to the Council had been considerably changed under the influence of the American expert John Courtney Murray, who defended a more constitutional approach, Bishop De Smedt continued to support it. Some people would consider this to have been a lack of constancy, but in Belgium we always prefer an honest compromise instead of defending our own principles without any hope for success.

I suppose you will all understand the importance of this declaration for ecumenical dialogue. At one stage during the Council the text about the freedom of religion was even added to the *Schema* on ecumenism, together with the text about the Jews; but the whole discussion was already complicated enough, without mixing several different and often highly controversial topics. And so the material was divided again into three different documents, one forming the decree on ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*, adopted in 1964; and the other two being the declarations on freedom of religion, and the relation between the Roman Catholic Church and non-Christian religions, *Nostra aetate*, which were both agreed upon in 1965 (3).

De Smedt was not only an active member of the Council in Rome. He saw the importance of putting it into effect in the local church. And so he kept the faithful at home informed about

the conciliar proceedings in the church press, as well as on radio and television. One of his many writings, published shortly after the Council (1967), was the book *Voor een klimaat van vrijheid* ('Towards a climate of freedom'), which echoes his interventions at the Council about freedom of religion. At its launch he remarked that the new outlook and the changes in the Church came as no surprise to most people, as the diocese had already been moving for some time in that direction.

After the Council, De Smedt remained an active member of the Secretariat of Unity until December 1975. In September 1972 he held a conference on ecumenism and its pastoral implications for the chaplains of different denominations at the NATO Headquarters, Shape. Then, on the occasion of the visit of Dr Michael Ramsey, archbishop of Canterbury, in May 1973, he gave an important speech about the unity of Europe. A few years later these ideas inspired a joint letter by the bishops of Belgium *Een levenskrachtig Europa* ('A vital Europe') and the foundation of the movement *Christenen voor Europa* ('Christians for Europe'). In July 1976 his speech, at the Commemoration of the Malines Conversations, noted the ecumenical importance of Cardinal Mercier for the reconciliation and progress of the people of Europe.

It was now that a concrete ecumenical link was set up between the diocese of Brugge and the Anglican diocese of Lincoln. The starting-point was a visit by Canon John Nurser from Lincoln Cathedral to Brugge in 1978, with a recommendation from Bishop Simon Phipps of Lincoln. The intention was to start an ecumenical dialogue. At the invitation of Canon Nurser a delegation from Brugge, led by auxiliary bishop Eugene Laridon and Professor Adelbert Denaux, made a visit to Lincoln. These visits resulted in a formal link between the two respective dioceses from 1979 onwards, based on so-called 'little steps', the method considered the best possible foundation for ecumenical dialogue. These 'little steps' included regular meetings from representatives of both dioceses; visits by junior clergy as part of their post-ordination training; choir concerts; twinning of parishes; exchange of visiting professors from the Seminary in Brugge and Lincoln Theological College; and delegations at religious ceremonies, e.g. the annual Holy Blood procession in Brugge, or the commemorations of Saint Gilbert (1983) and Saint Hugh (1986) in Lincoln.

Bishop De Smedt felt that ecumenism between different churches in different countries was all to the good, but the test would be in closer ecumenical links between Catholics and

Anglicans at home in England. In due course, the Catholic bishop of Nottingham, James McGuinness, whose diocese covers Lincolnshire, added his consent to the initiative in 1981, and a representative of Nottingham, Fr Brian Dazeley, joined the dioceses' link committee in Lincoln. A highly symbolic 'little step' in 1983 was the appointment of Professor Denaux as a canon at Lincoln Cathedral, and the admission of Canon Nurser as a member of the noble confraternity of the Holy Blood in Brugge.

Bishop De Smedt retired aged 75 towards the end of 1984, and his own official ecumenical role came to an end (4). But he was succeeded by Bishop Roger Vangheluwe, who had been involved from the beginning in the link with Lincoln and Nottingham. Although the exchange of professors from our Seminary with Lincoln Theological College ceased, following its closure, young clergy in post-ordination training continue to visit each other and to share experiences and insights. And a recent consultation between the bishops was entitled 'A soul for Europe', recalling Bishop De Smedt's 1973 speech which inspired the Belgian bishops' joint statement on 'a vital Europe' and the resulting 'Christians for Europe' initiative.

Every five years, the bishops and their committees evaluate the effectiveness of past activities and discuss prospects for the future are discussed. In 2000, all dioceses agreed to strengthen the link, with an exhibition-stand in each Cathedral; a group visit of the bishops with greater participation by the lay faithful and the wider public; a youth pilgrimage from Brugge; enhanced links through our respective websites (5); visits during the Week of Prayer; and a priority to twin parishes. Even though distances overseas, and the risks of being broken off when sympathetic clergy move parish, make these twinning contacts vulnerable, the links can really reach the ordinary faithful in their parishes and thus touch the heart of life in our dioceses. A new role for the link-committees will therefore be not only to help make first contacts, but also provide greater support and continuity for existing twinings.

We sincerely hope that we shall be able to intensify the links and exchanges between our dioceses through the parishes. Not only would it strengthen the bond between us, it would help to continue in our day and for the future the ecumenical vision of spiritual emulation and convergence towards Christ envisaged by pioneers like Paul Couturier and Bishop De Smedt.

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Notes

1. A. Greiler & L. De Saeger (eds.), *Emiel-Jozef De Smedt, Papers Vatican II: Inventory. With a Preface by Leo Declerck* (Instrumenta Theologica 22), Leuven, 1999
2. The French theologian Yves Congar OP, a *peritus* at Vatican II, also enjoyed the hospitality of the Belgian College. Both he and Couturier had met during a retreat at the Belgian priory of Amay-sur-Meuse in 1932.
3. De Smedt also accompanied the secretary of the SCUF, Bishop (later Cardinal) Willebrands, on a visit to several Eastern Patriarchates (Beirut, Jerusalem, Cairo) in July 1965 in an attempt to secure their good-will with respect to the chapter *De Judaeis*.
4. He died on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1995 and was buried at the cemetery of Assebroek (Brugge). In October 2002 his remains and those of four predecessors were interred in the crypt of Saint Saviour's Cathedral in Brugge, which had been closed since 1864.
5. See [www.kerknet.be/bisdommen/brugge](http://www.kerknet.be/bisdommen/brugge), or [www.lincoln.anglican.org](http://www.lincoln.anglican.org), or [www.nothinghamdiocese.org.uk](http://www.nothinghamdiocese.org.uk).