

# 1. Missionary Activities and American Nationalism

On November 11, 1919, a committee of five American bishops, led by Archbishop Henry Moeller of Cincinnati, sent a letter to the Apostolic Delegate in Washington Giovanni Bonzano.<sup>1</sup>

They proposed to improve the missionary work in the United States by creating an American Board of Catholic Missions. Its aim would be to model and coordinate the missionary work of both home and foreign missions, making them more efficient.<sup>2</sup> Bonzano sent the letter to the Prefect of Propaganda Fide, the Dutch Cardinal Willem Marinus van Rossum.<sup>3</sup> Van Rossum received the bishops' proposal with mixed feelings. While he was pleased with the increased attention and commitment to missionary activity in the United States, the proposal upset his own plans to establish a universal, supra-national organization for the foreign missions that he hoped would give missionary work a sound financial and structural footing. His idea was to make the long-existing Propagation de la Foi its flagship and move its centre to Rome. This French lay entity, which had existed for almost a century, had served the missions well, but in the American proposal, it would be incorporated into the American Board, which van Rossum believed would be a hastening of its demise in the United States.

---

<sup>1</sup> Henry K. Moeller (1849-1925) became in 1904 archbishop of Cincinnati and had a German-American background. Giovanni Bonzano (1867-1927), was Apostolic Delegate to the United States from 1912 to 1922.

<sup>2</sup> ASCPF, NS, vol. 729, f. 61-62, H. Moeller to G. Bonzano, November 11, 1919.

<sup>3</sup> ASCPF, NS, vol. 729, f. 64, G. Bonzano to W. van Rossum, November 13, 1919. On Willem Marinus van Rossum (born Zwolle, 1854; died Maastricht, 1932), see Vefie Poels, Theo Salemink, Hans de Valk (eds.), *Life with a Mission. Cardinal Willem Marinus van Rossum C.Ss.R. (1854-1932)* (Gent 2011), also published as a special issue of *Trajecta. Religie, cultuur en samenleving in de Nederlanden* 19-20 (2010-2011), 1-2, esp. Claude Prudhomme, "Le cardinal Van Rossum et la politique missionnaire du Saint-Siège sous Benoît XV et Pie XI (1918-1932)," 123-141. See also [cardinalvanrossum.eu](http://cardinalvanrossum.eu).

In my contribution to the Festschrift of Joseph Komonchak, I have told the story of the American Board of Catholic Missions, the motives of the United States bishops to establish and defend it, and the motives of the Prefect of Propaganda Fide Cardinal van Rossum to reject it. It is a complex and thrilling story, which I was able to reconstruct on the basis of a thorough investigation of the Vatican Archives, especially of the Propaganda Fide and the Affari Ecclesiastici Straordinari. In this paper I will give a brief sketch of the counteraction Van Rossum experienced, followed by a short biographical overview of this Dutch cardinal and I will end with some conclusions and statements with respect to the item of Missionary activities and American nationalism.

### **1. The counteraction**

The American bishops' letter of November 1919 brings us right into the middle of a five-year conflict within the highest echelons of the Catholic Church. Van Rossum's plans were attacked by the Propagation de la Foi, because the organization felt threatened by his proposal to remodel its original structure. They were supported by both the French Catholic hierarchy like Cardinal Maurin of Lyon and the government. American bishops resisted his plans as well. They refused to accept the Propagation de la Foi as a universal organization, not only because they felt that their own American methods were much better than the obsolete French ones, but also because they considered the request of Propaganda Fide as an illicit interference in their internal episcopal affairs.

After World War I the stakes for France were high, both in the control of missionary funds and French hegemony in the missionary field. In post-war Europe the situation had changed. Not only Austria and Germany, who had lost the war, but also other countries such as the Netherlands, Spain and Italy, were no longer willing to give France a leading role in missionary activities. Van Rossum's strategy to take over the lead from France and, at the

same time, prevent it slipping into the hands of the United States meant embedding control of all missionary activities in the center of the Catholic world, in Rome at the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Propaganda Fide).

Van Rossum's plans met with resistance not only from the American bishops and the French government, but within the Roman Curia as well. To the Secretary of State, Pietro Gasparri, it was important not to hurt the French feelings more than necessary, and at the same time remain on good terms with the Americans. Moreover, a full-blown struggle for power arose between Propaganda Fide and the young Sacred Congregation for the Oriental Churches, which had grown out of the Propaganda Fide in 1917 and had important financial interests in the United States as well. The first secretary of the new Congregation, Cardinal Niccolò Marini (1917-1922), found it was difficult to compete with the powerful Propaganda Fide, but the Orientale had the advantage that the Pope himself stood at the head of this dicastery. Benedict XV looked for a better relationship with the Eastern Churches in his pursuit of peace, particularly in regard to the Middle East and Russia.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Biographical overview

Who then was this man, Willem van Rossum, who stood up, largely on his own, against 106 American bishops (if we count out Cardinal William O'Connell, who took the 'roman' side)? Why did he so fiercely defend the universal calling of the Church against national interests? Let me present a short biographical overview.

Willem Marinus van Rossum was born on September 3, 1854, in Zwolle, a Hanseatic town in the northern (protestant) part of the Netherlands. He was born in a lower middle class family of barrel-makers, with a German grandfather. Both his parents died when he was nine.

---

<sup>4</sup> *La Sacra Congregazione per la Chiesa Orientali. Nel Cinquantesimo della fondazione (1917-1967)* (Rome: Tipografia Italo-Orientale San Nilo, 1969), 4-10, 83-84; John F. Pollard, *The Unknown Pope. Benedict XV (1914-1922) and the Pursuit of Peace* (London: Burns and Oates, 1999), 195-200; Giuseppe M. Croce, "Le Saint-Siège, L'Église orthodoxe et la Russie Soviétique. Entre mission et diplomatie (1917-1922)," in *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome*, 105 (1993): 267-297.

He was placed in the Catholic orphanage of the town. Being devoted and having a good head on his shoulders, the local clergy helped him to enter the minor seminary of the Archdiocese of Utrecht (1867-1873).

However, he did not choose a life as a diocesan priest, but entered the Redemptorist Congregation and went to the Seminary of the Redemptorists in Wittem.

At the time, Alphonsus de Liguori, canonized in 1839 and a Doctor of the Church in 1871, was popular in the Netherlands. Van Rossum was trained in Alphonsian teachings and he developed into one of the leading experts within his congregation, especially in the field of dogmatics.

For ten years, from 1883 until 1893, he taught this discipline at Wittem and published several treatises. Alphonsus' 'true teachings' became his guideline in his religious life. He did not hesitate to express his views on these 'true teachings' to everybody in clear and compelling arguments. He stood up against his confreres and even his superiors when they deviated from this line, and if they would not retrace their steps, he simply wrote to the general board in Rome. As one can expect, he did not make many friends in this way. But he was noticed by the general board, which decided to place him in Rome in 1895.

In those days, as it happened, the Holy Office was looking for an expert in Alphonsian teachings. Already in 1896 Van Rossum was appointed consultor of the Holy Office. Here as well he stuck to the straight lines of Catholic orthodoxy. Father van Rossum did not admire the modern society with its ideas like liberalism and democratic tendencies. In 1901 he was the first to expose the French priest and exegete Alfred Loisy for his heretical teachings. Note, this was still during the pontificate of pope Leo XIII.

Under his successor, Pius X, Father Van Rossum felt like a fish in the water. Both men opted for a closed Catholicism, safe from threats coming from the outside world, like the political and social strains in Italian society. Strengthening the faith while at the same time

fighting errors was their motto. They tried to defend the true faith on several levels: for instance by codifying canon law, by strengthening devotions to Mary and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and by introducing the Communion of children. What was inherited from Leo XIII was the idea of a universal Church as the one and only universal moral force, with its center firmly in Rome.

Fear for the world outside the Church had its internal consequences. To defend the true faith any possible error had to be fought by the Holy Office. Van Rossum proved to be an excellent worker in this field, always ready to point his finger at the places where people like Loisy deviated. He helped in drawing up a list of errors that became the basis of the anti-modernist documents *Lamentabili* and *Pascendi* (1907). Together with his colleague consultor, the French Jesuit Louis Billot, he formulated the anti-modernistic oath. Between 1910 and 1965 every priest, every superior, every teacher at a seminary, had to swear this oath.

In these years a cordial relationship between Pius X and Van Rossum developed. Van Rossum's support was rewarded by the Pope. At first Pius X put him forward as the new General Superior of the Redemptorists, however in vain. He then created him a cardinal in November 1911. In this capacity, in several ways Van Rossum was a stranger in the predominantly Italian Holy college of Cardinals: as a Dutchman coming from a predominantly protestant nation and as a Redemptorist.

As a cardinal, Van Rossum had a smooth career. Together with Cardinals Merry del Val, De Lai and Pompilj they formed a 'clique' that was known for its strong orthodoxy, a kind of primal or proto-orthodoxy, bordering on fundamentalism. The group drew dangerously near the famous *Sodalitium Pianum* (1909-1921) of Umberto Benigni. Benigni organized a witch-hunt for 'modernists' within and without the Roman Curia. Van Rossum,

however, kept his distance: he did not like Benigni's methods of spying, suspicion and slander.

Moreover, Van Rossum's orthodox ideas and universalism did not get along with the new upcoming and hyper-nationalistic ideology of fascism which in the twenties had quite some adherents within the Curia. Van Rossum disapproved of the Lateran Treaty, the deal made by Pius XI with the help of Pietro Gasparri and Francesco Pacelli (the elder brother of Eugenio Pacelli, Pius XII) with Benito Mussolini in 1929.

The Dutch cardinal was appointed Prefect of Propaganda by Pope Benedict XV on March 12, 1918. It is clear that his appointment as the new 'Red Pope' was related to his nationality. The Netherlands had been neutral during the First World War, which was still going on at the time. In this way the Curia avoided political problems. Van Rossum had shown his qualities as a member of the Propaganda Fide for already six years. In this period he had specialized in the activities of religious institutes in mission fields.

As prefect of Propaganda he pursued a policy based on his view of a Universal Church, with Rome as the center of the Catholic World and the Pope as its undisputed leader. The Red Pope, of course, was the undisputed leader of the mission areas. He reorganized his office in a rather efficient way, looked around for new, reliable and ardent cooperators like Angelo Roncalli (the later John XXIII) and established a strategy to turn the Propaganda Fide from a dicastery of executive tasks into a policy-making instrument.<sup>5</sup> His program can be found in *Maximum Illud*, the apostolic letter of Benedict XV on missionary work of 1919. We can safely assume that Van Rossum had a strong say in the document and in the encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae* (1926) as well. It is even suggested that he drafted it all by himself.

A primary goal in his missionary policy was to overcome national motives and connections as the key element in missionary activity and to build up indigenous churches. He

---

<sup>5</sup> *History of Vatican II*, vol. V, eds. by Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis and Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 427. It states that Propaganda Fide, since its establishment by Gregory XV in 1622, "had operated in an unchanging manner."

ordered all missionaries to keep aloof from politics. He stimulated the training and ordination of indigenous priests, the incorporation of indigenous women in female congregations and the ordination of the first non-western, Chinese bishops in 1926.

His ambition to overcome all national and colonial motives was the starting point of many severe conflicts as we mentioned at the start of this paper. The problems with France are well known –the French considered the Catholic mission more or less as a national assignment - , but the problems with the American Catholics were less known up till now. As I mentioned you can read about it in my contribution to the Festschrift of Joe Komonchak.

### **3. Conclusions and statements**

1. During the long pontificate of Leo XIII (1878-1903), the Catholic Church had presented itself as a universal and supranational institution even while centralizing its curial functions.<sup>6</sup> This policy was continued by Cardinal van Rossum as prefect of Propaganda Fide. To support the ambitions of the Vatican, it was crucial to organize the missions in a new way: no longer in connection with national and colonial interests, but through a world-wide network based on the idea of the universal missionary task of the faithful and controlled right in the heart of Rome. That is why the American Board of Catholic Missions, a combined national organization of foreign and home missions, was cut off in its prime.

Stressing the universal character of mission also put an end to the idea that missionary efforts were a prerogative of the western world. Today, the Pontifical Mission Societies, to which the Propagation de la Foi belongs, count 117 national directors in countries all over the world. Their various nationalities and backgrounds confirm the idea of a really universal Church, albeit from a centralized hierarchical power in Rome, nearly devoid of lay leadership, save for two sisters (all other national directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies still are priests)

---

<sup>6</sup> See Claude Prudhomme, *Stratégie missionnaire du Saint-Siège sous Léon xiii (1878-1903). Centralisation romaine et défis culturels* (Rome: École Française de Rome, 1994), 375-382.

2. The struggle of the American Board of Catholic Missions to get papal approval in the years 1919-1924 is telling for what it says about a nascent episcopal conference and its relationship to the Holy See. Even though Archbishop Moeller and Father Francis Kelley of the Extension Society deny any American nationalism in their conflict with Van Rossum, the American Board of Catholic Missions as an expression of the upcoming self-confidence of the American Catholics had nationalistic features.

3. Van Rossum managed to redress nationalist missionary activities by lodging them in Rome, putting them in the center of the Church. He did not reach his goal easily. In this struggle, tact and compromise were not his most efficient instruments. No one doubted his integrity, missionary heart, and sanctity, but his assessment, flexibility and understanding were criticized. Cardinal Van Rossum was no diplomat.<sup>7</sup> As an archetype of Dutch ‘Catholic calvinism’ Van Rossum was rigid, devote, stubborn and frugal. This however, made him particular suited to reach his goal, an achievement that was appreciated by Father Francis Kelley: “Unhesitatingly I record the fact that it is chiefly to Cardinal Van Rossum that the credit should go for the most enlightened and progressive step made in centuries for the advancement of the Catholic missions of the world.”<sup>8</sup>

4. Van Rossum contributed to the building of a universal Church with local priests, religious, bishops and cardinals.<sup>9</sup> The Second Vatican Council showed a multicultural and colorful church, with participants of all races and countries, as has been depicted by the American-Dutch painter Frederick Franck. We must honor Van Rossum for his endeavors to make that possible.

---

<sup>7</sup> Kelley, *The Bishop Jots it Down*, 218.

<sup>8</sup> Kelley, *The Bishop Jots it Down*, 218.

<sup>9</sup> Hans de Valk, Some matters that should be improved in the government of the Church’. A Remarkable Proposal to Reform the Roman Curia, 1931, in eds., Paul van Geest, Roberto Regoli, *Chiesa, Papato e Curia Romana tra storia e teologia: Scritti in onore di Padre Marcel Chappin, SJ* (Vatican City : Archivio Segreto Vaticano, 2013), 181-203.