Expert meeting

Cardinal Willem Marinus van Rossum (1854-1932)

Royal Netherlands Institute, Rome

11-12 June, 2009
Cardinal Willem Marinus van Rossum (1854-1932)

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the Redemptorist Willem Marinus van Rossum (1854-1932) was the most high-ranking Dutchman attached to the Roman Curia. The Dutch had not seen a man of his standing within the Catholic Church since Pope Adrian VI (1522-1523). From the moment of his arrival in Rome in 1895, his career went up steeply. He was destined to become a Cardinal in 1911 – the first Dutch Cardinal since the sixteenth century – and was appointed Prefect of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide in 1918. In this position, until his death in 1932, Van Rossum was one of the most influential persons within the Catholic Church.

A Cardinal of a global significance

In the years 1895-1932, Cardinal van Rossum was closely involved in major political and ecclesiastical developments before, during and after the First World War.

1. As a Cardinal holding several posts in the Vatican Curia, he exerted notable influence on the government of the Catholic Church, particularly as a consultor and a member of the Holy Office, as a collaborator and a member of the Commission for the Codification of Canon Law, as a member, and later as chairman, of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, as Grand Penitentiary and as Prefect of the Congregation ‘De Propaganda Fide’. One of his activities, under Pope Pius X, was preparing the condemnation (not implemented by Pius X) of Charles Maurras and his Action Française.

2. To a large extent he was responsible for a major turning point in the mission policy of the Catholic Church, the results of which still can be seen today in Asia and Africa. He aimed at redirecting the Church’s missionary activities which he considered as far too much linked to national and colonial interests. Instead, he opted for strengthening the identity of local churches in mission regions which should have indigenous bishops and clergy. This new course was formulated in two encyclicals, the 1919 *Maximum Illud* (also labeled as the Magna Charta of Catholic missions), and the 1926 *Rerum Ecclesiae*. It is clear that Cardinal van Rossum left his mark on these documents. Reorganizing and centralizing the missions into what he saw as a more efficient mode, with Rome clearly at the command centre, he drew severe criticism from the colonial powers concerned. They saw their influence in ecclesiastical affairs decreasing. France in particular protested, but the Dutch and Belgian governments likewise had problems with the new Vatican missionary policy.
3. Cardinal van Rossum wanted to expand the Catholic Church not only into the so-called ‘pagan’ mission areas, but also in those countries which had been ‘lost’ to the Reformation. He held rather conservative views on the relations between Catholic and non-Catholic Christians. Whereas the Protestant and Orthodox Churches made overtures to one another in international meetings - which turned out to be the preamble of the World Council of Churches - Van Rossum firmly kept to his point of view: the Protestants simply had to convert to Catholicism. In this period, the dialogue with the Protestant Churches was suspended for decades. It was another Dutch Cardinal, Johannes G.M. Willebrands, who in the years around the Second Vatican Council was eager to establish a dialogue with non-Catholic Christians in the ecumenical movement.

4. After the First World War, Cardinal van Rossum as Prefect of Propaganda Fide was also involved in the controversy within the Vatican Curia regarding Zionism and the discussion about the ‘national home’ for the Jews in Palestine. It seems that Van Rossum held a different and more positive view on Zionism than most of his colleagues in the Roman Curia. He had contacts with new movements within the Catholic Church propagating a mission of conversion among the Jews, while at the same time resisting Catholic Anti-Semitism. The controversy culminated in the abolition of the international movement *Amici Israel* (1926-1928) by the Holy Office in 1928.

5. Being the highest Dutch official within the Roman Catholic Church, he played a distinguished role in his native country. As such he was, for instance, involved in the establishment of the Catholic University of Nijmegen in 1923. He also acted as the papal legate at the International Eucharistic Congress in Amsterdam in 1924 (in 1912, he had been a legate to the Vienna congress as well). In the Dutch Catholic press, his presence at the Congress was seen as a major event and a public demonstration of the regained self-consciousness of the Dutch Catholics after centuries of suppression.

6. Finally, we should not underestimate the influence of Cardinal van Rossum within the large and prominent Congregation of the Redemptorists. nor overlook his close contacts with other orders and congregations of religious. He persuaded many of them to supply personnel to further the missionary work of the Church.
Necessity of a new biography

It is clear that the period of Cardinal van Rossum’s leadership of Propaganda Fide deserves historical acclaim. Nevertheless, it is often frustrating to locate specific details about some of his activities and about the influence of his ideas. The existing manuals and specialized monographs pay little attention to him. It is hard to find his name in general histories of the Church or manuals on missiology and mission history. ¹ Thus far, no up to date, critical and academic biography has been written about him. The existing biographies of Cardinal van Rossum have been published more than fifty years ago, in Dutch, and may in fact be called hagiographies.²

Cardinal van Rossum at the Eucharistic Congress in Amsterdam, 1924

To fill in this undeserved and undesirable gap, a plan has been developed for a new biography of Cardinal van Rossum in which due attention should be payed to the wide range of his activities and influence. From the information given above, it is already clear that it will not be an easy task to take into account all of his wide-ranging activities inside the Roman Curia and the central government of the Church, nor to determine his position in the theological and ecclesiastical movements and currents of his time. Although his outlook in these matters was essentially conservative and very orthodox, he was also a modern man as regards the tactics and strategies he chose. This is quite evident in the

¹ A typical example is the last volume of the Storia della Chiesa (the Italian revision and continuation of the originally French general church history known as the ‘Fliche/Martin’), dedicated to the Catholic missions, with the characteristic title Dalle missioni alle Chiese locali, 1846-1965 (Milan, 1990). Even though it was edited by Johannes Metzler, O.M.I., archivist of the Propaganda Fide and prefect of the Vatican Archives, the volume contains only six minor references to Cardinal Van Rossum.

manner in which he conducted himself towards Catholic institutions and the Catholic media. This ambiguity of approach may indicate in a general way the stance with which the Roman Catholic Church confronted modernity.

A new biography, to be published in English, should therefore be based on a wide-ranging archival and historiographical research. It will aim at an international academic readership: those working in the fields of general missiology, mission history, general church history, global and non-Western history, international politics in the interbellum period, Dutch history and the history of van Rossum’s own Congregation of Redemptorists.

The initiative for a new biography of Cardinal van Rossum has been welcomed and supported by a range of Dutch academic institutions: the Nijmegen Institute of Missiology (NIM), the Katholiek Documentatie Centrum (Catholic Documentation Centre) of the Radboud University of Nijmegen, the Faculty of Catholic Theology Tilburg/Utrecht and the Koninklijk Nederlands Instituut te Rome (Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome). Both the St. Clemens Province and the General Council of the Congregation of Redemptorists are supporting the initiative. Missio, the branch of the Pontifical Missionary Works in The Netherlands, has also welcomed the plan for a biography of Cardinal van Rossum.

Pilot project

Financial support of the St. Clemens Province of the Redemptorists, Missio and the Faculty of Catholic Theology –Tilburg/Utrecht has made it possible to set up a pilot project in order to prepare the intended biography. The aim of the pilot project (2008-2009) is to make an inventory of the relevant archives and available source materials, as well as the existing relevant literature. It also aims at getting an overview of relevant current research. The pilot project ends with a meeting of international experts to be held in Rome on Thursday and Friday, 11-12 June, 2009, on which occasion the state of the research will be reviewed.

The inventory of archives and literature and the results of the meeting of experts mentioned above will serve as the starting point for further work on the biography of Cardinal van Rossum. It is a propitious moment for the work to begin since, as a result of the recent opening of the Vatican archives (in the fall of 2006), the pontificate of Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) will be the subject of ongoing historical research during the next decades. This is an outstanding opportunity to give Cardinal van Rossum, and the role he played around the world and in the Roman Catholic Church, proper recognition within current historiography.
Program of the Expert meeting

The program is provisional.

Thursday 11 June, 2009, morning session

9:00
Opening and welcome adress

9:15-10:00
Dr. Joop Vernooij C.Ss.R. (Nijmegen), Dutch historian and former parish priest in Surinam
*The Dutch Catholics and the ‘Great Cardinal of the Small Netherlands’.*

10:00-10:45
Dr. Otto Lankhorst, librarian of the Religious Archives Centre in the Netherlands ‘Klooster St. Aegten’
*The youth of Cardinal van Rossum in the context of the (religious) history of Salland, his region of origin.*

coffee break

11:15-12:00
Dr. Ellen Tops, Dutch historian
*An analysis of a collection of visual material concerning Cardinal van Rossum, 1911-1932, from a semiotic perspective.*

12:00-12:45
Mons. prof. Giuseppe Maria Croce, archivist of the Vatican Secret Archives
*The Roman Curia in the period 1895-1932.*

lunch

Thursday 11 June, 2009, afternoon session

14:00-14:45
Dr. Anna Luisa Casiraghi, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan
*The work of the Commission for the Codification of Canon Law, and the input of Van Rossum as a collaborator and member of this Commission.*
14:45-15:30
Don Luis Cuña Ramos, director of the Archivio Storico of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples
*The source material about Cardinal van Rossum available at the Archivio Storico and his role as Prefect of the Propaganda Fide.*

tea break

16:00-16:45
Dr. Otto Weiss, historian (Münster)
*Cardinal van Rossum and the Holy Office.*

16:45-17:30
Dr. Johan Ickx, archivist of the Sacra Penitenzieria Apostolica
*Cardinal van Rossum as Penitenziere Maggiore.*

**Friday 12 June, 2009, morning session**

9:00-9:45 hrs.
Dr. Vefie Poels, historian, Nijmegen Institute for Missiology (NIM) and the Catholic Documentation Centre (KDC), Radboud University of Nijmegen
*The attitude of Cardinal van Rossum towards the protestant churches, particularly in Scandinavia.*

9:45-10:30
Dr. Theo Salemink, church-historian, Faculty of Catholic Theology in Tilburg/Utrecht
*The relationship of Cardinal van Rossum with Francisca van Leer and the association Amici Israel (abolished in 1928 by the Vatican).*

coffee break

11:00-11:45
Dr. Eric Corsius, missiologist and staff member of the Dutch Region of the St. Clemens Province of the Redemptorists
*Cardinal Willem van Rossum and his position within the theological tradition of the Redemptorists.*

11:45-12:30
Prof. Marcel Chappin S.J., *Vice-prefetto* of the Vatican Secret Archives and professor of Church History at the Gregorian University in Rome
*Cardinal van Rossum and the International Eucharistic Congresses.*

lunch
Friday 12 June, 2009, afternoon session

14:00-14:45
Prof. Claude Prudhomme, professor of History at the Université de Lyon, France
The missionary policy of the Holy See between 1918 and 1940.

14:45-15:30
Dr. Carine Dujardin, historian and senior staff member of the KADOC – Documentation and Research Centre for Religion, Culture and Society in Leuven (Belgium)
The involvement of Cardinal van Rossum in the missionary activities in China.

tea break

16:00-16:45
Dr. Hans de Valk, historian and staff member of the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome
Cardinal van Rossum as Prefect of Propaganda Fide and the missionary policy in the Dutch colonies.

16:45-17:45
Dr. Vefie Poels presents the preliminary results of the Dutch pilot project for a biography of Cardinal van Rossum.
General discussion.