

Piety, Poverty, and Politics

The Dynamics of Vincentian Charity in Modern Belgium (1840-1945)

Thesis submitted for the degree of doctor of history
at the University of Antwerp and the University of Leuven
to be defended by Hannah Fluit

Supervisors: Bert De Munck (UA) and Kaat Wils (KUL)

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University of Antwerp
Faculty of Arts

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Summary

The act of voluntary giving to those in need has been an enduring facet of human history. In the Catholic tradition, benevolence is intrinsically associated with the virtue of charity, prescribing not only the dispensation of alms but also the internalization of love for the other out of love for God within the believer's disposition. Charity moreover served as an important source of social assistance for those facing poverty, preserving this function well into the nineteenth century, particularly in regions strongly influenced by Catholicism and with limited public sources of assistance, such as Belgium. In Belgium, a country 'created' in 1830, Catholics and the Church played a pivotal role in shaping the nation's identity and culture, as well as its social sphere, notably within the fields of social assistance and education. In this context, charity fulfilled multiple functions, serving as a means for believers to practice their faith, a resource for social assistance, and a mechanism to affirm the enduring societal relevance of religion in modernity, which became increasingly contested as time progressed. Charitable organizations like the Ladies of Charity and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, which constitute the main focus of this study, were able to flourish in this environment, persisting as primary outlets for the social engagement of the Catholic lay elites.

For a long time, the master narrative for understanding the history of charity in modern society – and of religion in modernity in general – was rooted in modernization theories. These theories posited the irreconcilability of religious beliefs and practices with the trajectory of modernity, anticipating a diminishing role for religion in society as modernization advanced. When applied to charity, this narrative suggested that, driven by processes of industrialization and escalating social needs, charity would naturally be replaced by more rational approaches to social assistance, ultimately culminating in the development of welfare states. However, reality proved more complex, and religious beliefs and practices remained part of modern life. During the latter decades of the

twentieth century, historians and social scientists sought alternative explanations for the continuing role of charity in modern society and explored the subject through various new perspectives, such as social control and gender history. Nevertheless, the religious dimension of charity faded somewhat into the background. More recently, historians have embarked on a more earnest consideration of religious belief in modern history, leading to a vibrant field of research exploring the development of religious identities, beliefs, and practices in tandem with modernity. Concerning the history of charity, the endeavor to deconstruct the legacy of modernization theories and incorporate the religious dimension proved challenging, however, due to the close intertwining of religious, social, and political goals and motivations in charitable ideas and practices.

Focusing on the Ladies of Charity and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, referred to as the 'Vincentians', this study undertakes an in-depth exploration of the intricate relationship between the spiritual objectives and social goals of charity in Belgium. Spanning the period from the establishment of these organizations in the early 1840s to the tumultuous era of the Second World War, this investigation traces the development of the Vincentian organization during a tumultuous period in history. The tensions created by societal transformations resulted in a complex dynamic of conservation and renewal in the ideas and practices of Vincentian charity, which was closely entwined with the broader developments in Belgium's socio-economic, political, and cultural history. The unique characteristics of the Belgian context significantly shape the outcomes of these efforts, providing a fertile ground for Catholic social engagement, but also fostering intense contestation in the social and political arenas. This study unfolds how the Vincentians continually sought to reconcile the temporal and transcendent objectives of their charitable work to ensure its enduring relevance and legitimacy. These efforts were reflected in the construction of their organizations' image, their personal identities as charitable individuals, their framing of the issue of poverty (or social misery), their approach to 'the poor,' and their self-historicization as part of the Catholic mission of establishing a modern society founded on the Christian worldview.

Devotie, Armoede en Politiek:

De Dynamieken van Vincentiaanse Caritas in Modern België (1840-1945)

Proefschrift voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van doctor in de geschiedenis aan de Universiteit Antwerpen en de Katholieke Universiteit Leuven te verdedigen door Hannah Fluit

Promotoren: Bert De Munck (UA) and Kaat Wils (KUL)

Samenvatting

De praktijk van vrijwillig geven aan zij die minder hebben, is een blijvend onderdeel van de menselijke geschiedenis. In de katholieke traditie is liefdadigheid intrinsiek verbonden met de deugd van caritas, die niet enkel het geven van aalmoezen voorschrijft, maar ook de internalisering van liefde voor de ander uit liefde voor God in de gezindheid van de gelovige. Caritas vormde bovendien een belangrijke bron van bijstand voor mensen die met armoede geconfronteerd werden, en het deze sociale functie van caritas bleef relevant tot ver in de negentiende, bij uitstek in regio's met een sterke aanwezigheid van katholicisme en beperkte sociale voorzieningen, zoals België. In België, een land dat 'gecreëerd' werd in 1830, speelden katholieken en de kerk een cruciale rol in het vormgeven van de nationale identiteit en cultuur, evenals in de sociale sfeer, met name op het gebied van sociale bijstand en onderwijs. In deze context vervulde naastenliefde meerdere functies, en diende het als een middel voor gelovigen om hun geloof te praktiseren, als een hulpbron voor sociale bijstand, en als een mechanisme om de blijvende maatschappelijke relevantie van religie in de moderniteit te bevestigen, die steeds meer betwist werd naarmate de tijd vorderde. Liefdadigheidsorganisaties zoals de Dames van Liefdadigheid en het Genootschap van Sint Vincentius, die de belangrijkste focus van deze studie vormen, slaagden erin te gedijen in deze omgeving en bleven prominente kanalen voor het sociale engagement van de katholieke lekenelite.

Voor lange tijd was het dominante verhaal over de geschiedenis van caritas in de moderne samenleving – en van religie in de moderniteit in het algemeen – geworteld in moderniseringstheorieën. Deze theorieën postuleerden de onverenigbaarheid van religieuze overtuigingen en praktijken met de moderniteit, waarbij ze anticipeerden op een afnemende rol van religie in de samenleving naarmate de modernisering vorderde.

Toegepast op liefdadigheid suggereerde dit verhaal dat liefdadigheid, omwille van processen van industrialisatie en toenemende sociale nood, natuurlijk zou worden vervangen door meer rationele benaderingen van sociale bijstand, hetgeen uiteindelijk zou resulteren in de ontwikkeling van welvaartsstaten. De realiteit bleek echter complexer te zijn, en religieuze overtuigingen en praktijken bleven een integraal onderdeel van het moderne leven. In de laatste decennia van de twintigste eeuw zochten historici en sociale wetenschappers alternatieve verklaringen voor de voortdurende rol van liefdadigheid in de moderne samenleving en onderzochten het onderwerp vanuit verschillende nieuwe perspectieven, zoals sociale controle en gendergeschiedenis. Desalniettemin bewoog de religieuze dimensie van liefdadigheid daarmee enigszins naar de achtergrond. Meer recent zijn historici serieuzer gaan nadenken over religieuze overtuiging in de moderne geschiedenis, wat heeft geleid tot een levendig onderzoeksgebied dat de ontwikkeling van religieuze identiteiten, overtuigingen en praktijken in samenhang met de moderniteit verkent. Wat betreft de geschiedenis van caritas bleek de poging om het erfgoed van moderniseringstheorieën te deconstrueren en de religieuze dimensie diepgaand in de analyse op te nemen echter uitdagend, vanwege de nauwe verstrengeling van religieuze, sociale en politieke doelen en drijfveren in caritatieve ideeën en praktijken.

Gericht op de Dames van Liefdadigheid en de Vincentiusvereniging, oftewel de 'Vincentianen', duikt dit onderzoek dieper in de complexe relatie tussen de spirituele doelen en sociale objectieven van liefdadigheid in België. Deze studie omvat de periode vanaf de oprichting van deze organisaties in het begin van de jaren 1840 tot het tijdperk van de Tweede Wereldoorlog en traceert de ontwikkeling van de Vincentian-organisatie te midden van een bewogen historische achtergrond. De spanningen die voortvloeiden uit maatschappelijke transformaties resulteerden in een gecompliceerde dynamiek van behoud en vernieuwing in de ideeën en praktijken van Vincentiaanse caritas, nauw verweven met bredere ontwikkelingen in de sociaal-economische, politieke en culturele geschiedenis van België. De unieke kenmerken van de Belgische context hadden een aanzienlijke invloed op de uitkomsten van deze inspanningen. Ze boden een vruchtbare bodem voor katholiek sociaal engagement en stimuleerden tegelijkertijd intense strijd in de sociale en politieke arenas. Deze studie onthult hoe de Vincentianen voortdurend streefden naar een harmonie tussen de wereldlijke en transcendente doelstellingen van hun liefdadige werk in hun zoektocht naar blijvende relevantie en legitimiteit. Deze inspanningen uitten zich in de vormgeving van de constructie van het imago van hun organisaties, de manier waarop zij vormgaven aan hun identiteit als liefdadige mannen en vrouwen, hun benadering van het armoedevraagstuk, hun houding tegenover 'de armen', en hun zelfhistorisering als uitdragers van de katholieke missie om een moderne samenleving te vestigen gebaseerd op het christelijk wereldbeeld.

Acknowledgements

As the culmination of this journey approaches, I take a moment to reflect on the trials and triumphs of the past four years and to extend my sincere appreciation to those who have contributed to this thesis, both directly and indirectly.

This dissertation is the outcome of a joint PhD between UAntwerpen (main institution) and KULeuven (partner institution), and its contents have been significantly shaped by this collaboration, for which I am deeply grateful. Allow me to provide a brief history of how this collaboration unfolded. When I applied to the project that led to this thesis, I was working as a research and teaching assistant while simultaneously preparing a FWO application under the supervision of Kaat Wils. Although my initial intention was to explore other options in case my proposal did not succeed, the intriguing questions posed in the project description sparked my interest. The idea gradually took root in my mind that venturing outside my trusted Leuven University and my usual area of interest – the history of radical right movements – might be beneficial to my development as a researcher. This way, I met historians Bert De Munck, sociologist Stijn Oosterlynck, and moral philosopher Patrick Loobuyck, the driving forces behind the interdisciplinary project *Solidarity and Religion in a Modernizing and Post-Secular Context: An Historical, Politico-Philosophical, and Sociological Analysis*. Contrary to my own perception that the interview did not go well, I received the message that I could start on the historical PhD of this project. Consequently, a choice had to be made, and not without some heartache, I decided to embark on a completely new adventure, researching a topic with which I had no prior experience in a university I was unfamiliar with. However, things have a funny way of working out. Bert, responsible for the historical part of the project, became my supervisor and suggested the option of constructing my research project as a joint PhD between UAntwerpen and KULeuven. 'We can ask Kaat to be your supervisor at KUL', he said enthusiastically, pointing out that they were working together in the context of other projects as well. Peter Heyrman agreed to become a member of my doctoral committee, solidifying the connection of this research project to KADOC, which constitutes its primary archival institution, and Tine Van Osselaer accepted the role of chair. And so, the pieces of the puzzle came together.

I believe the framework of this PhD serves as a fine example of the high degree of collaboration and exchange taking place in (Belgian) academia, and I am pleased to have been a part of it. I would like to express my profound gratitude to my supervisors, whose keen interest in and thoughtful commentary on my research I have greatly appreciated. Since the project's inception, I felt much trust and support from Bert, who was always open to my plans and ideas and allowed me considerable autonomy in both the process and the result. At the right times, he offered wise, comforting words, such as 'good research

creates new questions' when I struggled with the scope of my research and 'synthesizing literature is a lost art' when I felt I was summarizing too much. Kaat has broad expertise in modern cultural history, and her contribution to this thesis has been substantial. I believe that Kaat understood where I wanted to go with my research even before I put it on paper, and her encouragements were of great value during the writing process. Time after time, her questions and considerations motivated me to dig deeper – in the literature, in the sources, and in my brain. I also want to express my appreciation for Tine, who I did not really get to know until well into my third year due to Covid, but who has since been an important source of support for my research and me personally. Thank you also to Peter, for always taking the time for my questions and for welcoming me to the KADOC office. My archival prospection was duly postponed because of the lockdown, but as soon as the rules became a bit more flexible, I was allowed to work alone in one of the offices overlooking the courtyard. Despite the empty hallways during this period, it was a very pleasant experience that allowed me to build familiarity with the source material. Patricia's assistance in procuring these sources and her patience with my tendency to hoard archival pieces were of great value to me throughout my research. I want to thank Peter, Patrick, Stijn, Leen Van Molle, Bernhard Schneider, and Filip Santy for their help and feedback as well.

During my research, I had many interesting and warm interactions with various people. Doing a joint PhD can be a blessing in this regard, but also a curse. Between Covid, personal circumstances that forced me to take some time off, and beginning my writing year, I sometimes found it difficult to find my place in any of the three institutions where I had a desk. However, when I was introduced to Lise and Michiel within the context of the interdisciplinary *Solidarity and Religion* project, I immediately understood what Bert had meant when he told me that he, Patrick, and Stijn had put together a team of three researchers that formed 'a good combination' on a professional as well as personal level. I thoroughly enjoyed our regular 'reading club' and the many discussions we had about our subjects and philosophies of life, whether they took place in a cozy coffee bar, on video call, or even via email. A year later, Els began her PhD in the context of the related *Soligion* project, focusing on a similar topic as mine in post-war Belgian history. We not only found common ground regarding our research but also bonded over the challenges of life during a PhD, notably during our long talks in a Swedish sauna last spring. Els made a dedicated effort to get me out of the house once in a while to grab a coffee, after which I returned home to resume writing with renewed energy. I want to thank them for their enduring support and friendship, which I value deeply. For many reasons, completing this PhD was an overwhelming experience for me, but my colleagues at both universities were always kind and treated me like a member of the respective departmental communities, not like the outsider I at times felt like. More broadly, I have found the academic community to be uniquely open to meaningful connections. I will always have fond memories of the many

people I met during the numerous scientific conferences and seminars I attended and participated in over the last decade.

Throughout this PhD trajectory, I was lucky to be able to count on a solid support system outside of academia as well, and I want to express my gratitude to the people who, in big and small ways, motivated me to persevere, distracted me from work, and shared parts of their lives with me. My partner, Allyster, has been with me for almost half my life, and words cannot express the love, respect, and appreciation I feel for him. He nurtured both my physical well-being and inner strength, ensuring I had the confidence and resilience to pursue and achieve my goals. As I have written somewhere else before, in raising me, my parents gave me the freedom to ask questions and the courage to answer them. I want to thank them for their unwavering support, for their listening ears, and for their warmth. Their advice and care were of immense value during the last four years (and always). I share a tight bond with my brother, Victor, and our adventures are a source of great happiness in my life. These adventures occurred less frequent as my PhD progressed, and we resorted to late talks on the terrace and watching corny TV. It is high time for a 'VicHantie' (this wordplay unfortunately does not translate). I also want to thank Maxine, who I met already halfway through, but who has been a great friend to me and provided me with welcome distraction. Adrien, my fellow historian and longtime comrade; the distance between us does not diminish our friendship, and I look forward to all our discussions still to be had. With Britt, my oldest friend, I shared the PhD experience, just as we have shared so much of our lives, joys and sorrows alike. Lastly, I want to mention Philémon, my wise little companion. Thank you to all the other friends and family who were there for me and brightened my days, I love you all.

Hannah
Herent, December 2023

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Introduction

The member of the Society does not limit himself to a quick run to the home of the poor: he sits himself down, takes possession of his only chair, and there hears the story of the misfortunes of this wretch.

He insists, he urges him to unburden himself from certain secrets that weigh on him, mixes his tears with his own, and, with the help of patience, of time, and of kind words, creates in this withered heart the same friendship which he has shown it.¹

In nineteenth to mid-twentieth-century Belgium, the two main Catholic charitable organizations for the lay elites were the Ladies of Charity and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul, exclusively for women and men, respectively. Established in the early 1840s, both organizations took the life and works of Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) as their inspiration. At the core of Vincentian charity, practiced by the members of these organizations, lay a profound commitment to visiting people living in poverty within the intimate confines of their homes and forging meaningful connections with them. Therefore, the material relief distributed by the members of these organizations, in the form of food, furniture, clothing, coal, medicine, and so on, not only served to address the physical needs of the visited families but also aimed to incentivize these families to open their doors to the visitor and be receptive to the charitable exchange about to take place. Central to this exchange was not merely the giving and receiving of alms, but the opportunity it provided to the visitor to instruct, guide, moralize, and convert ‘the poor’. To maximize the beneficial potential of the poor visit, the Vincentians performed these visits weekly and preferably over an extended period. Simultaneously, members of the organizations were expected to seize the opportunity to practice kindness, respect, and humility, and more broadly, to work towards self-sanctification. They were to do so collectively, and, furthermore, the local conferences of the organizations were intended to forge close-knit communities of socially active and spiritually exemplary laypeople. In addition to the weekly visits to their beneficiaries, the Vincentians therefore attended

¹ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 13-14; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 13.

weekly meetings and other joint activities to strengthen their ties. By placing their commitment to combating social misery (both in the material and moral sense) and to self-development in the service of God and the Church, the Vincentians believed that their charitable work – which, as we will see, included much more than the poor visit – could contribute to establishing a Christian version of modern society. Throughout the first 100 years of the existence of these organizations, the subject of this book, the Vincentians remained loyal to this purpose, continuously seeking ways to reconcile their social goals and spiritual purpose in light of societal transformations.

First established in Paris in 1833, the Society quickly gained popularity and new divisions were created across Europe and, later, overseas as well. In Belgium, where the Catholic tradition was and remained strong, the Society was created in 1842 and experienced an explosive growth during the nineteenth century, becoming a highly successful national division of the organization. Around the same time, in the early 1840s, a similar organization was created exclusive to lay women: the Ladies of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. Originally, this organization started out as a grass-roots movement of a handful of Brussels' Catholic working women who wanted to help the poor in their community and committed themselves to making a weekly monetary contribution to be distributed among those in need. In 1842 or 1843, an interested local priest assumed supervision of the initiative and reformed it to an association of Ladies of Charity. The result was an organization that closely resembled the Society, having a membership base of upper-class lay women and being dedicated to poor visits. Both the Society and the Ladies placed their organizations under the protection of Saint Vincent de Paul, patron of charity works, and largely modeled them after the example of Vincent de Paul's seventeenth century *Charités*; charitable associations for lay Catholic women that provided guidance and care for the poor in their homes.

That Vincent de Paul had created a durable format for lay charity was exemplified by the fact that the nineteenth-century iterations of his *Charités*, the Ladies and the Society, were able to amass and largely maintain an impressive membership base during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century and continued their work even after the establishment of the welfare state after the Second World War, albeit in different forms and, in the case of the Ladies, under a new name.² The Society was certainly the largest of the two organizations, counting 19 363 active members at the height of its

² The Vincentians have received even less attention in the period after than before the Second World War. A vast field of research remains open here, especially with regards to the Ladies of Charity, which transformed into *Wederzijds Hulpbetoon* in 1958. For the Society after 1945, see the relevant chapters in De Maeyer and Wynants eds., *De Vincentianen in België* and Els Minne's ongoing research of Catholic inspired poverty initiatives (Belgium, 1950-1990). For a short history of the Ladies of Charity from its foundation until 1990, written by members of the organization themselves, see: van der Sypt, *150 Jaar Bewogen Leven*.

success in 1913.³ The associations of Ladies were much smaller, collectively counting only 2 702 members at their height in 1944.⁴ This disparity can be attributed, among other reasons, to the absence of centralization among the associations of Ladies and the greater competition with other charitable organizations geared towards women, most of which also maintained a local focus.⁵ Moreover, religious orders and congregations remained a highly popular option for women seeking ways to deepen their devotion.

In this regard, the third member of the ‘Vincentian family’, the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, proved to be a very attractive option for women wanting to combine social engagement with a religious lifestyle. Also created by Vincent de Paul in the seventeenth century, this organization offered a middle path between a lay association and a religious order. As a society of apostolic life, the Daughters resembled a congregation because its members lived together in a community, but they were not cloistered, and instead of making religious vows like those required to enter a congregation, its members made a yearly vow of chastity, poverty, and obedience. In practice, the society of Daughters functioned very similarly to a ‘regular’ congregation, however. For many elite women, engagement in a ‘purely’ lay association like that of the Ladies therefore remained a more attractive option which allowed them to combine charitable action with marriage, family life, and wealth. The Ladies, like the Society, furthermore distinguished themselves from the work of the Daughters and many other lay charitable organizations in terms of their broad approach to charity. It was common for charitable organizations and religious institutions to focus on (a combination of) specific types of action (such as education, food distribution, and care for the sick) and/or specific types of social need (such as the combination of poverty with sickness or old age, and particular issues like alcoholism). As such, the Ladies and the Society were a unique type of Catholic charitable organizations that set themselves apart by their purely lay character and upper-class membership, by their low threshold for membership in terms of skill and education, and their principal commitment to helping the poor in general. In this book, which focusses on lay charity in the strict sense of the term, the term ‘Vincentians’ refers only to the members of these organizations, not the Daughters.⁶

During the period between their establishment and the end of the Second World War,

³ Lory and Soete, ‘Implantation et Affirmation’, 54.

⁴ DLSVPB JV 1944.

⁵ On the decentralized nature of women’s charity, see: Heiniger and Topalov, ‘Femmes et Hommes en Charité’, 228-231. *Belgique charitable*, the overview of private and public sources of social assistance around the turn of the century, mentions a great variety of female Catholic organizations, congregations and orders which were active in the social field (Ludovic Saint-Vincent, *Belgique Charitable: Charité, Bienfaisance, Philanthropie etc., etc.* (Brussels, 1893)).

⁶ The Daughters of Charity had a unique identity and (very long) history of their own. See for example: Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief*; Brejon de Lavergnée, *Le Temps des Cornettes*.

the Society and the Ladies created all kinds of initiatives to support their beneficiaries, ranging from Sunday Schools to mutual aid societies and social secretariats, but their main activity remained the poor visit, which they believed was the best tool to provide the poor with personal guidance, promote harmony between the social classes, to propagate and disseminate God's love, and to work towards self-sanctification. This entanglement between the Vincentians' spirituality and social engagement stood at the core of the organizations' identity, but it was also the source of the increasing criticism they endured during the period under study. Because the Vincentians used social assistance as a means to proselytize and required the poor to observe religious duties and display good morality, their charity was not unconditional, and they approached the poor in a way that was prominently paternalistic. In addition, the goal of the Vincentians' charity was not to provide a structural solution to poverty itself, much less to eradicate inequality. As they saw it, poverty and wealth were part of God's design, and both conditions contained pitfalls as well as opportunities to grow in one's faith. Their goal was therefore to alleviate *misery*, for example in the form of pauperism, which they believed was a problem especially in modern, industrialized societies.

Despite the popularity and longevity of the organizations, the Belgian Society and Ladies have featured only marginally in social and religious historical research, and there have been only very few studies dedicated specifically to the history of these organizations. Yet, as I will aim to show in the chapters of this thesis, the history of the Vincentians provides a unique perspective on the history of religious experience and performance, on the continuities and discontinuities in ideas about poverty, its causes, and its solutions, on the expression of class and gender roles and their entwinement with religious identity, and on the Catholic search for continued legitimacy and relevancy in modern society. Guiding the exploration of these topics through the lens of the history of the Vincentian organizations is the question how they reconciled their spiritual purpose and social goals in the face of great changes in the socio-economic and political domains, most notably processes of secularization, the rise of socialism, as well as the changing nature of poverty, the debates that construed it as a social issue, and the available options for social support.

In addition, I examine the ways in which these dynamic configurations of the Vincentian organization's identity and purpose were in turn reflected in their concrete charitable practices, most notably the poor visit, as well as their approach of the poor, whom the Vincentians praised as a source of spiritual gratification, but whom they also categorized in terms of worthiness and deservingness, and whom they loved and feared all at the same time. In addition, I explore how the Vincentians' conception of their goals and purpose also shaped their ideas about what it meant to be good Vincentian men and women in both a spiritual and social sense, identities that developed in conjunction with the class and gender roles that developed among the upper classes as well as those

promoted by the Church. This identity was of great significance, because Vincentian charity served not only to aid and moralize its recipients, but also, at least equally important, to achieve the self-sanctification of its members. This meant that it implored its benefactors to perform and deepen their faith according to the ideal of the Vincentian man or woman, the development of which therefore stood at the core of the organizations' mission.

As an overarching reflection, I consider the convergence of these different aspects of the organizations' ideas and practices into the Vincentians dynamic beliefs about their role in and contribution to modern society, in particular their plight to act as advocates of the Christian worldview and communal ideal, as well as their participation in spaces of political-ideological conflict in an effort to co-create modernity to this end. As I will argue, the history of Vincentian charity has in the past proven difficult to reconcile with the idea of religious modernization, a notion that has largely replaced the teleological secularization narratives of modernization theories. Thus, this study is guided by an explicitly open conceptualization of the 'modern' and 'modernity' in its approach to the history of the Vincentians, which at times opens new perspectives on common assumptions about their ideas, their practices, and their self-historicization in modern society. In turn, these insights shed new light on the history of Catholic charity in modernity and its dual function as a religious practice and a form of social activism.

At the intersection of social, religious, and gender history

Given that religious charity played a crucial role as a significant provider of social aid during the nineteenth century – a period marked by the escalating politicization of poverty – it not only served as a conduit for expressing devotion but also became an integral component of the social, political, religious, and cultural history of much of Western society. Yet, it was not until the 1980s when charity (and, more broadly, the voluntary sector) began gaining interest as a historical subject *an sich*. At the same time, the development of new perspectives in the areas of social, religious, and gender history had important consequences for the ways in which the role and function of charity in modernity was interpreted. In the pages that follow, I will retrace the main historiographical developments that shaped our understanding of the history of charity and that inspired new approaches to the subject.

The initial subchapter commences with post-war narratives of ‘charity-to-welfare,’ portraying charity as the irrational and inefficient precursor to modern, rational approaches to social assistance. Following the discrediting of normative views on modernization that underpinned these interpretations, a ‘voluntaristic renaissance’ emerged, focusing on the private, voluntary sector (charitable or philanthropic) and reassessing the ongoing significance of non-governmental sources of social assistance for both benefactors and beneficiaries. Concluding the transition from overarching narratives to in-depth examinations of charitable institutions, this subchapter provides an overview of studies on the history of the Society and the Ladies in Belgium and beyond. The second subchapter delves into the theoretical foundations of various new historical perspectives developed in the last half-century, exploring their implications for studying the history of charity. This overview begins with the rise of ‘new social history’ and insights from ‘history from below’ approaches. The ‘social discipline’ paradigm significantly influenced the interpretation of charity’s function, but historians examining benefactors’ motivations presented a more nuanced perspective. Gender historians further illustrated that charitable actions were diverse and driven by various considerations, emphasizing women’s religiosity and religiously inspired social action. In the final subchapter, I revisit the long-term impacts of modernization theories on interpreting religion and religious social action in modernity. I explore alternative perspectives on the nature of modernity and the role of religion, focusing on the concept of ‘multiple modernities’ as an alternative to materialist and normative definitions of modernity.

1.1. From charity to welfare?

Despite the crucial role of religious poor relief in the history of European societies, the topic was long neglected by post-war historians. Instead, the history of charity was absorbed into the new and busy sociology-dominated research field of ‘welfare studies’, which was preoccupied with the nature and origin of the welfare states and shaped the dominant perspective on the history of social assistance until the 1970s-1980s. Often, these scholars interpreted the ‘triumph’ of the welfare state – i.e. ‘the complex of policies that, in one form or another, all rich democracies have adopted to ameliorate destitution and provide valued social goods and services’⁷ – as proof of the inevitable victory of secularism over religion itself. Such narratives of secularization told a story of declining religious belief and practice in both the private and the public space, as well as of a continuing expansion of the power of the state. Whilst traditional, religious mechanisms of social assistance could no longer deal with the challenges posed by rapid industrialization and the growth of an industrial and urban working class, so the narrative went, religion in general was at the same time confronted with a sharp decrease in relevance as a moral system. In response to the issue of poverty and social dissatisfaction, the state stepped in through regulation and redistribution, making religious organizations offering poor relief obsolete and eventually creating a highly secularized welfare state. This way, so-called oppressive religious poor relief schemes were replaced with rationalized systems of social assistance based on values of citizenship and social rights.⁸ These narratives were underpinned by theories of modernization that regarded capitalism, democracy, and secularization as integral elements in the development of modern nation-states, with the welfare state seen as the inevitable outcome. This perspective reflected a distinctly normative and linear view of history.⁹ The result was a rather one-sided perception of the relationship between modern society and religious actors, in which the intrinsic characteristics of the latter could have no place in the former.

These modernization theories and their application to the history of social assistance had important ramifications for the scholarly perception of the history of religious charity. After all, the charity-to-welfares narratives were driven by a strong welfare optimism, and the scholars behind them often openly supported this compulsory approach of social solidarity, considering as the most rational approach to social issues

⁷ Hacker, ‘Bringing the Welfare State Back In’

⁸ Grell, ‘The Protestant Imperative’, 45; Safley, ‘Introduction’, 1-4; Stark and Iannacone, ‘A Supply-Side Theory’, 230-231; Orloff, ‘Social Social Provision and Regulation’, 190-192.

⁹ Orloff, ‘Social Social Provision and Regulation’, 192; Moeyes, *Subsidiary Social Provision*, 20-21; Van Molle, ‘Comparing Religious Perspectives on Social Reform’, 9; van Kersbergen and Manow, ‘Religion and the Western Welfare State’, 5-7.

and as ultimate stage of modernity.¹⁰ As the antithesis of the welfare state, private, voluntary modes of social assistance, especially those that were driven by religious motivations, were framed as not only ineffective, but also as irrational, paternalist, and generally as a-modern. However, as time progressed, the acknowledgement that welfare states were fallible and the realization that private, voluntary organizations continued to fulfil important roles in welfare systems led to these narratives being called into question. This change in perspective was driven by several developments both in the socio-political and scientific domains that took place during the late 1970s and 1980s. These years were marked by increasing skepticism about the necessity and benefits of a central state, culminating into an ‘ideological crisis of the state’.¹¹ The economic crises that plagued Europe during this time led to criticism of the welfare state, which was accused of being too costly and inefficient by the political left and right alike.¹² In particular, the ‘new right’ movement, spearheaded by political figures such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, called for a more minimal state, a reduction of public spending, and a partial transfer of social solidarity mechanisms to the community level.¹³

In turn, this re-evaluation of the welfare state in the political sphere did not leave the field of welfare studies unmoved and gave rise to the new and busy field of *comparative* welfare studies, occupied mostly by political scientists and sociologists. Challenging functionalist modernization and secularization narratives, these scholars questioned the idea that the welfare state was the natural outcome of processes of modernization and set out to uncover the mechanisms through which materialist grievances were transformed into public policy. After all, the Western welfare states were by no means copies of each other and great variety existed among them in terms of ideological foundation and intermediary structures, indicating that the development of welfare states was dependent on the historical power and influence of sociopolitical actors. In a first wave of comparative welfare studies, scholars were primarily concerned with the social democratic variable, claiming that strong labor movements and social democratic political rule were preconditions for welfare outcomes,¹⁴ and that variations among countries with equally strong social democratic movements could be explained by the

¹⁰ Moeys, *Subsidiary Social Provision*, 21.

¹¹ For a detailed overview of these discussions in Belgium, see: Arcq and Pierre, ‘Politieke Geschiedenis van de Sociale Zekerheid in België’. See also: Van Damme, *Armenzorg en de Staat*, 9-10. For these debates in an international context: Mayo, ‘Introduction’, 1-21; Cavallo, ‘The Motivations of Benefactors’; Pelletier and Von Bueltzingsloewen, ‘Introduction’, 9-10; Wiener, ‘The Unloved State’, 283-285. See also: Vargas, ‘How Poverty Became a Violation of Human Rights’, 502.

¹² Barrez, ‘Voorbij het ‘Goud’ van de Jaren Zestig’.

¹³ King, ‘New Right Ideology’, 797-799; Daunton, ‘Introduction’, 1.

¹⁴ Hewitt, ‘The Effect of Political Democracy’.

presence of other powers within the political landscape,¹⁵ the distribution of power between social classes,¹⁶ the strength of trade unionism,¹⁷ the countries' position in the international economy,¹⁸ and so on.

It became clear, however, that the social democratic model, which portrayed differences between welfare states as the result of different strengths of social-democratic movements, could not explain nor encompass all Western welfare states. Especially the works by Esping-Andersen had major implications for the field, most notably his suggestion that there were three types of welfare states (social democratic, conservative/corporatist, and liberal) depending on the configuration of market, state and family.¹⁹ The widespread acceptance of the premise that the social democratic welfare state was but one variant, did mean that the question how grievances were transformed into social policy needed to be re-evaluated. Still, the relevant variables were believed to reside in the sociopolitical sphere. Thus, a second collection of studies pointed to Christian democratic movements, stating that these could be as effective in creating welfare states as their social democratic counterparts,²⁰ or even more so,²¹ even if the end-result might look different.

Not only Christian democracy, but religion itself entered the arena of explanatory variables. Authors like Michael Gillespie and Kees van Kersbergen made the argument that different religious traditions, or rather Protestantism and Catholicism, and their corresponding charitable traditions ultimately determined the nature of welfare states.²² These scholars suggested that it was not coincidental that the cradle of the welfare states could be found in the Christian occident. Instead of delaying the development of the welfare state, Christian traditions and the political actors that promoted them could play a fundamental role in laying their foundations during the nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Because the Christian denominations put much emphasis on the virtue of charity and the centrality of the community, they were characterized by a strong tradition in providing social assistance. This way, Christian actors active in the social sphere were often able to influence socio-political debate on social provision and welfare.²³ In

¹⁵ Like the political right (Castles, *The Social Democratic Image*). More broadly, the opportunities for building coalitions (Esping-Andersen, *Politics Against Markets*).

¹⁶ Korpi, *The Democratic Class Struggle*.

¹⁷ Stephens, *The Transition from Capitalism to Socialism*.

¹⁸ Cameron, 'Social Democracy'; Katzenstein, *Small States in World Markets*.

¹⁹ Esping-Andersen, 'Power and Distributional Regimes'.

²⁰ Stephens, *The Transition from Capitalism to Socialism*; Schmidt, *Wohlfahrtsstaatliche Politik*; Shalev, 'The Social Democratic Model'.

²¹ Wilensy, 'Leftism, Catholicism, and Democratic Corporatism'.

²² Gillespie ed., *The Theological Origins of Modernity*; Kahl, 'The Religious Roots of Modern Poverty Policy'; van Kersbergen and Manow, 'Religion and the Western Welfare State'.

²³ Fix, 'Social Work of Religious Welfare Associations'.

addition, the powerful presence of a clerical right in the socio-political sphere could explain radicalization of leftist movements, which in turn fostered debate, action, and change in systems of welfare provision.²⁴ These assertions that religion matters in shaping systems of social assistance was reasonable and welcome in itself. It drew attention to the importance of religious ideas, institutions and associations in both past and present, thereby providing some much-needed nuance to the charity-to-welfare paradigm on the basis of the acknowledgement that the heritage of religious social views and charitable practices were still present in secularized Western welfare states.²⁵

However, variable-based explanatory models, including those centered around the religious variable, were not unproblematic from a historian's perspective. First, the suggestion that religious traditions determined historical patterns of poor relief and/or current welfare systems was equally reductionist as the political-variable paradigm. While the differences between countries with a Protestant or Catholic tradition were over-stressed, the variations within both contexts were underplayed.²⁶ Second, the basic premise of early welfare theories; that the socio-economic condition of modern society created materialist grievances which then had to be met by a rational system of social assistance, was not substantially revised. In other words, the efforts to explain the difference between welfare states resulted in a more nuanced view on the origins of welfare systems, but ultimately did not question the idea that the development of welfare states was the inevitable outcome of the modern condition. Instead, the charity-to-welfare explanatory model was broadened to include mediating variables, specifically the religious and ideological backgrounds of the socio-political actors that shaped the debate about and the nature of the welfare system. This suggested that ideology and religious culture merely shaped the development of charity-to-welfare, but that this process was nonetheless the product of the materialistic condition of modernity.²⁷

Nonetheless, the introduction of the religious factor in the history of welfare development contributed to the acknowledgement of religious actors' role in the field of social assistance and the stamp they left on the nature of welfare states. In turn, these findings inspired scholars to take a closer look at the various actors that were active in the field of social assistance as well as the relationships between them. Especially the concept of the 'mixed economy of welfare', which was introduced already in the 1980s

²⁴ Pavolini, Daniel and Rana, 'Mapping the Relationship'.

²⁵ Related to this is the question whether the welfare state was/is secular in the first place. See for example the discussions in: Bolzonar, *Catholicism and the Welfare State in Secular France*.

²⁶ Cavallo, 'The Motivations of Benefactors', 47.

²⁷ Kees van Kersbergen and Phillip Manow, for example, maintained that modernization theories were right in establishing a causal link between industrialization, the need for social policy, and the emergence of the welfare state, albeit with the added factor of the establishment of a labor market (van Kersbergen and Manow, 'Religion and the Western Welfare State', 7-8).

but gained traction in the 1990s, has proven its merit in this regard. Using this concept, historians and social scientists alike drew attention to the great variety of actors in the field of social assistance, including the state, voluntary organizations, the family, and the market, creating a dynamic mixed economy of welfare shaped by the continually shifting relationships between the various actors active in this field. This way, scholars like Bernhard Harris, Michael Katz, and Jane Lewis have shown that rather than evolving from charity to welfare, the modern field of social assistance did not develop linearly but was characterized a variety of dynamic sources of social support which continuously veered between competition and complementarity.²⁸

In addition, research into the mixed economy of welfare called into question the binaries between modern and traditional; private and public; local and central; voluntarism and obligation. These scholars highlighted the context-specificity and path-dependency of welfare economies by showing that such dichotomies were themselves subject to continuous debate, that actors on either side of the binaries mutually challenged and influenced each other, and that the origins of the welfare state could therefore only be understood by taking into account the complex interplay of ideas and actors in the social sphere. As such, the concept of the mixed economy of welfare did not only contribute to understanding the dynamic origins of the welfare state, but also allowed for a more open perspective on the composition and structure of the contemporary welfare state itself. Rather than being a finished product that should either be glorified as the summum of modernity or rejected as a delusional mistake, contemporary welfare states remain(ed) a product of interacting and changing ideas and actors.

With regards to the Belgian case, substantial efforts have been made to reconstruct the complex interplay of actors and ideas, both religious and non-religious, private and public. Belgian historians like Peter Heyrman, Leen Van Molle, and Jo Deforme have made important contributions to uncovering the structures and origins of Belgium's systems of social provision and welfare, taking into account not only the social turmoil and political debates that led to change, but also devoting attention to the wide variety of social and voluntary organizations that constituted the Belgian social field and that, in different ways, contributed to its development.²⁹ While they did not use the concept of the mixed economy of welfare, these scholars tackled the subject in a very similar

²⁸ Some insightful works on the mixed economy of welfare include: Lewis, 'The Voluntary Sector', 10–17; Innes, 'The "Mixed Economy of Welfare"'; Katz and Sachße eds., *The Mixed Economy of Social Welfare*; Bridgen and Bernard Harris, *Charity and Mutual Aid*; Moeyes, *Subsidiary Social Provision*.

²⁹ See for example: Witte, 'The Battle for Monasteries'; Deforme, 'The Influence of Catholic Socio-Political Theory'; Pasture, 'Building the Social Security State'; Deforme, *Uit de Ketens van de Vrijheid*; Van Molle, 'Social Questions and Catholic Answers'; Van Molle, 'Comparing Religious Perspectives'; Heyrman, 'Catholic Charity and Public Poor Relief'; Heyrman, 'Catholic Private Poor Relief and the State'.

manner, using an approach that strongly emphasized context-specificity and highlighted the diversity of ideas and practices related to social assistance, not in the least those propagated by Catholics. Recently, Hendrik Moeys used the concept of the mixed economy of welfare to examine the nineteenth-century roots of the Belgian welfare state. Employing a very broad perspective, he painted a nuanced and detailed picture of the pre-history and evolution of the subsidiarity principle which is so characteristic of Belgium's welfare state.³⁰ These findings, most of which have been done in the last twenty years, drew attention to the uniqueness of the Belgian case, in which the lack of social legislation for most of the nineteenth century and the principles of subsidized liberty and subsidiarity allowed private, voluntary organizations and institutions to play important, if not indispensable, roles in the Belgian mixed economy of welfare. Especially Catholics were able to reap the benefits of this arrangement, and these studies have been able to show that they were not only able to maintain pivotal positions in the social sphere, but that they also succeeded in leaving their mark on the structure and ideological foundation of the Belgian mixed welfare economy.

The political and academic debates of the 1970s and 1980s inspired not only new perspectives on the history of welfare and the origins of welfare states in the broad sense, but also on specific aspects of the Western systems of social assistance during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Especially the labor movement drew much attention, and a rich body of literature has been produced on the socialist and Christian democratic worker's movement and unions with regards to their contribution to the establishment of welfare states.³¹ Also, many interesting studies have been conducted on the history of social legislation and public social assistance, of pillarization, and of health care systems in Belgium and elsewhere.³² In addition, the critique of welfarism rekindled interest in the social function of private, voluntary organizations, informal support systems such as the family and the community, as well

³⁰ Moeys, *Subsidiary Social Provision*.

³¹ Hewitt, 'The Effect of Political Democracy'; Stephens, *The Transition from Capitalism to Socialism*; Castles, *The Social Democratic Image*; Esping-Andersen, *Politics Against Markets*; Korpi, *The Democratic Class Struggle*; Schmidt, *Wohlfahrtsstaatliche Politik*; Shalev, 'The Social Democratic Model'; Wilensy, 'Leftism, Catholicism, and Democratic Corporatism'; van Voss, Pasture and De Maeyer eds., *Between Cross and Class*.

³² To give just a few examples, on health care: De Maeyer, *Er is Leven voor de dood*; Kerkhoff, *De Staat als Dokter*; Companje et al., *Two Centuries of Solidarity*; Companje et al., *Two Centuries of Solidarity*. On social security: Hennock, *British Social Reform and German Precedents*; Vanthemsche, 'De Oorsprong van de Werkloosheidsverzekering in België'; Vanthemsche, *La Sécurité Sociale*; Pasture, 'Building the Social Security State'. On pillarization: Art, 'Van 'Klerikalisme' naar 'Katholieke Zuil'; Righart, *De Katholieke Zuil in Europa*; Billiet, ed., *Tussen bescherming en verovering*; Hellemans, *Strijd om om de Moderniteit*; Lis, 'Peilingen naar het Belang van de Steun Verleend door het Bureel van Weldadigheid'; Van Damme, *Armenzorg en de Staat*.

as private sources of mutual aid and self-help. Driven by the search for alternatives to the welfare state model and the acknowledgement that voluntary, non-profit, and informal structures play(ed) an important role in the provision of social assistance and support, both in the past and in the present, these bottom-up perspectives created a versatile field of research into the history of civil society.³³

With regards to the history of charity and its non-religious variant philanthropy, a ‘voluntaristic renaissance’ took place in historical research, spearheaded by authors such as Frank Prochaska, who contributed greatly to the historical knowledge of the diverse voluntary sector in modern Britain.³⁴ During the initial wave of research on the history of voluntary charity and philanthropy, scholars primarily adopted an institutional historical perspective. The predominant focus was on mapping the extent and diversity of the voluntary sector during a specific period, often the nineteenth century. The research aimed to unveil the types of relief provided and to explore the financial aspects of the voluntary organizations involved. Despite their institutional focus, these studies often also included broad reflections on the socio-political component of voluntary action, in particular the relationship between voluntary action and the establishment or perpetuation of social and/or political power, as well as the dissemination of moral belief systems through voluntary action. Especially the French, German, and British voluntary sectors have received much interest, not seldomly in a comparative perspective,³⁵ sometimes featuring the Belgian case as well.³⁶

Compared to the international body of literature on charity and philanthropy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there have been relatively few studies devoted to the topic (exclusively) from a Belgian perspective. Worth mentioning in this regard are the contributions made by Stijn Van de Perre, who used a quantitative approach to map Belgium’s expansive voluntary sector around the turn of the century, in addition to examining the complex relationship and blurred lines between private and public sources of assistance, as well as the introduction of new approaches to social assistance during

³³ Moeys, *Subsidiary Social Provision*, 22; Morris, ‘Changing Perceptions of Philanthropy’, 138-139; Daunton, ‘Introduction’, 7-8.

³⁴ Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*; Prochaska, *The Voluntary Impulse*; Prochaska, *Philanthropy and the Hospitals of London*; Prochaska, *Royal Bounty*; Prochaska, *Schools of Citizenship*; Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service*.

³⁵ A few examples are: Maurer, *La Ville Charitable*; Heiniger and Topalov, ‘Femmes et Hommes en Charité’; Topalov ‘Langage de la Réforme et Déni du Politique’; Hennock, *British Social Reform and German Precedent*; Mommsen and Mock, *The Emergence of the Welfare State in Britain and Germany*; Ritter, *Social Welfare in Germany and Britain*; Pelletier and Von Bueltzingsloewen eds., *La Charité en Pratique: Chrétiens Française et Allemands sur le Terrain Social, XIXe-XXe Siècles* (Strasbourg, Presses Universitaires de Strasbourg: 1999).

³⁶ van Voss, Pasture and De Maeyer eds., *Between Cross and Class*; Companje et al., *Two Centuries of Solidarity*; Harris, *Welfare and Old Age in Europe and North America*.

this period.³⁷ Another example is the article by Kristien Suenens and Maarten van Dijk, who examined the charitable activities of female Catholic congregations in West-Flanders between 1830 and 1880 against the background of the growing sociopolitical conflict between Catholics and liberals.³⁸ Peter Heyrman has also devoted significant attention to Catholic charity in his research of nineteenth-century poor relief and of the identity construction of Catholic elites.³⁹

Even though the popularity of lay Catholic charity throughout the nineteenth century (and later) was acknowledged in studies on Belgium's sociopolitical and welfare history, this type of organization was seldomly treated as a subject of inquiry themselves. Being the largest and most well-known lay Catholic charity in Belgium, these studies often refer to the Society of Saint Vincent as the main outlet for the charitable fervor of the Catholic elites and as the prime example of the conservative Catholic approach to the issue of poverty.⁴⁰ In 1992, KADOC studies published a book on the history of the Belgian Society at the occasion of the organization's 150th anniversary.⁴¹ Edited by Jan De Maeyer and Paul Wynants, both experts in the social and political history of Catholicism in Belgium, this book offered a thorough overview of the development of the Society from 1842 to 1992. Its contributors focused much attention on the institutional history of the organization and the development of its network of auxiliary works, delved deeper into the composition of its membership, and at times reflected on the ramifications of religious, socio-economic, and political changes on the ideas and practices of the Society. As the authors themselves stated, this collection did not offer a definitive study of the Vincentians' history,⁴² however, but it did provide a solid basis for further research. Of great value in this regard were the researchers' substantial effort to collect and centralize a large part of the disperse archives of the Society, which are kept in KADOC. Aside from the KADOC study, the Ghent division of the Society has also formed the subject of several masters' theses.⁴³ The Belgian Ladies of Charity,

³⁷ Van de Perre, 'Public Charity and Private Assistance'. See also: Van de Perre, 'Catholic Fundraising to Educate the Poor'.

³⁸ Suenens and Van Dijk, 'La Belgique Charitable'.

³⁹ Heyrman, 'Catholic Charity and Public Poor Relief'; Heyrman, 'Catholic Private Poor Relief and the State'; Heyrman, 'Imagining the 'Bon Patron Catholique'.

⁴⁰ Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor*, 129-139; Van Molle, 'Social Questions and Catholic Answers', 105-106; Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 46-47; Heyrman, 'Catholic Charity and Public Poor Relief'; Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 181-182; De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*; Art, De Maeyer, de Pril and Kenis, 'Church Reform and Modernity', 111-112.

⁴¹ De Maeyer and Wynants eds., *De Vincentianen in België*.

⁴² De Maeyer and Paul Wynants, 'Inleiding', 15.

⁴³ De Ruycke, *Het Sint-Vincentius a Paulogenootschap*; De Schrijver, *Het Sint-Vincentius-a-Paulogenootschap te Gent*; Van Raemdonck, *Het Sint-Vincentius-a Paulogenootschap te Gent*; Vanspauwen, *Het Sint-Vincentius-a-Paulogenootschap te Gent*.

meanwhile, have been the subject of only two explorative studies. One by Filip Santy, which focused on the history of the association in Courtrai, and one by Koen Rotsaert, who did the same for the Ladies of Bruges.⁴⁴

Originally founded in France, the history of the (local conferences of the) French Society has received by far the most attention, usually from an institutional historical perspective or with a focus on the organization's members.⁴⁵ Especially Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée, specialist in the history of charity and social assistance in France, has made great contributions to the historical research of the French Society, approaching the topic from various perspectives, including gender history and the history of elites.⁴⁶ In addition, Society's history in other countries has been investigated as well, such as in Italy,⁴⁷ Scotland,⁴⁸ Germany,⁴⁹ Canada,⁵⁰ the US,⁵¹ and in Brazil.⁵² While the Ladies also had an international presence, only few historical studies have been dedicated to their history, specifically the explorative study by Sarah Curtis on the Ladies in nineteenth century Paris and Silvia Marina Arrom's contribution to the 'forgotten history' of the Ladies in Mexico during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵³

1.2. Sociocultural perspectives on the history of poor relief

Over the course of the last half century, charity gained increasing attention from historians interested in the various sources of social aid and welfare during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Over time, the historical research perspective on charity has shifted from viewing it as incompatible with the modern demand for rational and effective approaches to poverty, to recognizing it as a practice with a profound history that not only endured within an expanding welfare economy but also influenced

⁴⁴ Santy, 'De Dames de la Miséricorde'; Rotsaert, 'De Dames van Barmhartigheid'.

⁴⁵ Dumons and Pelussier, 'Être Congréganiste et Confrère'; Dumons and Pelissier, 'La Congrégation des Messieurs'; Dumons, 'Laïcat Bourgeois et Apostolat Social'; Dumons, 'De l'Œuvre Charitable'; Gaudrie, 'Les Conférences Bordelaises'; Mercier, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*; Udovic, 'What About the Poor?'

⁴⁶ Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*; Brejon de Lavergnée, 'Making the Charitable Man'; Brejon de Lavergnée, 'Furia Caritatevole'; Brejon de Lavergnée, 'L'Affirmation d'un Laïcat Catholique?'

⁴⁷ Ceste, *Testimoni della Carità*; Andreoni ed., *I Visitatori dei Poveri*.

⁴⁸ Aspinwall, 'The Welfare State within the State'.

⁴⁹ Brejon de Lavergnée, 'L'Affirmation d'un Laïcat Catholique?'

⁵⁰ Lemoine, 'La Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul à Québec'.

⁵¹ McColgan, *A Century of Charity*.

⁵² Neves da Silva and Lanza, 'Sociedade de São Vicente de Paulo'; Azevedo, *Ação Social Católica no Brasil*.

⁵³ Curtis, 'Charitable Ladies'; Marina Arrom. 'Las Señoras de La Caridad'.

the characteristics of this social assistance system. The shift in the historical research perspective on charity was instigated by a reconsideration of modernization theories. The once-prevailing notion that the welfare state was the inevitable and desirable result of modernity in the social sphere was revised. This reevaluation paved the way for a renewed focus on voluntarism in the study of the history of social assistance.

While the initial exploration of charity's history primarily adopted an institutional and sociopolitical lens, aligning with traditional methodologies in welfare history, the subject also gained traction in social, gender, and religious history. These research fields underwent significant theoretical shifts in the 1970s and 1980s, marked by a cultural turn in the social sciences that highlighted the significance of context-specific systems of meaning. This cultural shift challenged teleological narratives of modern history, fostering new perspectives on social assistance. Approaches such as social control theories, feminist history, and history from below played a crucial role, eventually influencing the study of the history of charity. Despite taking time to permeate the field, these fresh perspectives and discoveries have proven invaluable in stimulating discussion about the nature of charity and its historical role in society.⁵⁴

Concomitantly to the revision of top-down approaches to the history of welfare states and systems of social assistance, a counter-current of bottom-up perspectives from the late 1970's onwards emerged. The 'new' social historians were concerned with the social meaning of poverty and the experiences of the poor. They criticized the bias of welfare historians toward the political and the institutional, rightfully pointing out their neglect of the beneficiaries of social assistance. The master concept in this body of literature was that of social discipline, inspired by Michel Foucault's concept of 'normalization' and Gerhard Oestreich's concept of 'Sozialdisziplinierung'.⁵⁵ Its introduction into the history of social assistance resulted in a myriad of studies arguing that the domain of social assistance had the (implicit, and sometimes even subconscious) goal of producing social order through the establishment of systems of control, moralization, disciplining, and marginalization of the poor.⁵⁶ Such mechanisms were detected in the context of both charitable and philanthropic private initiatives,⁵⁷ as well

⁵⁴ Orloff, 'Social Social Provision and Regulation', 193; Moeys, *Subsidiary Social Provision*, 22.

⁵⁵ Larry Frohman, *Poor Relief and Welfare in Germany from the Reformation to World War I* (Cambridge, 2008), 1.

⁵⁶ Some examples are: Woolf, *The Poor in Western Europe*; Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance*; Mandler, *The Uses of Charity*; Soly and Lis, *Poverty and Capitalism*; Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*; Piven and Cloward, *Regulating the Poor*; Gutton, *La Société des Pauvres*; Martz, *Poverty and Welfare in Habsburg Spain*; Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice*.

⁵⁷ See for example the contributions in Donajgrodzki ed., *Social Control in Nineteenth-Century Britain*.

as in public welfare institutions.⁵⁸ In all cases, social discipline was seen as a force working in a top-down direction.⁵⁹ As such, the social discipline paradigm echoed the Marxist view on the relationship between the elites and the lower classes as one of power conflict and oppression, framing social assistance as a means for those in power to regulate and control those in need, to keep the exploited from emancipating themselves, to promote conformist behavior, and, in general, to maintain the status quo of social inequality.

While all forms of social assistance, whether public or private, religious or secularized, were scrutinized through the social discipline paradigm, religious charity in particular was judged as a means for the elites to exert control over the populace. Charity was explicitly driven by religious motivations and served as an excellent tool to proselytize and moralize its beneficiaries. Since charities were private, voluntary organizations, they were free to choose whom they provided help to, and they could easily set religious observance as a precondition to receive help. In addition, the goal of charity was to practice religious virtue and not to provide a structural solution to the issue of poverty. After all, the Christian worldview did not see inequality as a problem in itself. So, from a Marxist and social discipline perspective, charity not only contributed to the dissemination of religious belief, religion itself being considered an oppressive power structure, but it also promoted a vision of social assistance as a reward for conformist behavior rather than a social right. For the Belgian case, this argument has most thoroughly been advanced by Antwerp social historian Catharina Lis, who published several books during the 1980s on the laboring poor in the nineteenth century. Using a history from below approach, Lis made a great contribution to our understanding of the nature of poverty and the experiences of being poor during this period, drawing attention to the abysmal labor and living conditions of large segments of the working and lower classes, specifically in the urban area of Antwerp, as well as their struggles to find and receive effective aid.⁶⁰ Examining the latter topic, Lis noted that the goal of private philanthropy and charity organizations (of which she noted that the Society of Saint-Vincent was the most active) was seldomly to genuinely help the poor, but rather to perpetuate the status quo of social inequality by keeping the poor from disrupting it.⁶¹

Since the 1980s, the social control interpretation of the function of charity, while important to our understanding of social power dynamics in modern society, has become so commonplace that it is now often seen as an evident truth. As social and cultural historian Sandra Cavallo remarked, historians dealing with the topic of philanthropy and

⁵⁸ Cohen and Scull eds., *Social Control and the State*; Lis, 'Peilingen naar het Belang van de Steun Verleend door het Bureel van Weldadigheid'.

⁵⁹ Spierenburg, 'Social Control and History', 6.

⁶⁰ Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor*; Soly and Lis, *Poverty and Capitalism*.

⁶¹ Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor*, 128-139.

charity tend to refer to the mechanism of social discipline in an almost reflexive manner, ‘as if to show the historian’s common sense and lack of naivety’, but without elaborating on the issue further.⁶² This reflex was also often present in studies on the history of social assistance in Belgium, in which charity is self-evidently identified as a vehicle for the elites to mold the poor into docile and laborious workers,⁶³ as a means to create dependence and opportunities for conversion,⁶⁴ and to maintain the social order.⁶⁵ This included not only private sources of relief, but also public institutions.⁶⁶

The social discipline paradigm has generated many important insights into the relationship between power, poverty, and social assistance, and firmly established that historians of public and private sources of social assistance should also consider the experiences of the recipients of relief. It made clear that social assistance was about more than ideological and religious beliefs, and that it had tangible consequences for the survival of the poor as well as their position in society. Nevertheless, studies on the history of social assistance using the lens of social discipline have also received criticism not for being wrong, but for their one-sidedness and lack of nuance. In particular, the social discipline framework was rigid in its identification of causes and consequences, which was rooted in a materialist argument that closely resembled that of modernization theories. Again, it was assumed that the process of modernization, essentially understood as capitalist industrialization, created poverty and materialist grievances among the lower classes, which in turn spurred the elites to create sources of social assistance that kept these masses divided and under control, specifically by making assistance conditional on conformist and docile behavior. As such, religious charity was not only seen as ineffective and backward, but also as a tool for oppression that was inherently malevolent towards the poor. This interpretation left little room for nuance with regards to the different treatment of different categories of poor, the power which the poor themselves possessed, the various motivations of benefactors, and the mechanisms of social control that were present in broader society, also shaping the actions of

⁶² As Sandra Cavallo pointed out, this point is often not addressed properly, ‘as if to show the historian’s common sense and lack of naivety’. Cavallo, ‘The Motivations of Benefactors’, 52.

⁶³ Van de Perre, ‘Catholic Fundraising to Educate the Poor’, 101.

⁶⁴ See for example in Van Molle, ‘Social Questions and Catholic Answers’, 103, where she states that charity during the period between 1780-1920 ‘did not present a structural solution to poverty’ and ‘combined material aid on demand with dependence, providing an opportunity for the conversion and for the imposition of discipline and control’, as opposed to Enlightenment-inspired assistance which ‘affirmed the social responsibility of the state and introduced notions of justice and emancipation’.

⁶⁵ Van de Perre, ‘Public Charity and Private Assistance’, 122; Suenens and Van Dijck, ‘La Belgique Charitable’, 183.

⁶⁶ Lis, ‘Peilingen naar het Belang van de Steun Verleend door het Bureel van Weldadigheid’; Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor*; Van de Perre, ‘Public Charity and Private Assistance’; Van Leeuwen, *Bijstand in Amsterdam*.

benefactors.

For starters, it is a difficult endeavor to assess the experience the people receiving relief during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century because in most cases, source material produced by the poor themselves is scarce. Even if the historian has access to letters written by the poor asking for assistance, these provide less insight into the experiences or opinions of the poor than into the expectations that were set for them by the providers of social assistance. Moreover, there were substantial differences in the treatment of ‘underserving poor’, such as vagrants and beggars, and ‘deserving poor’, such as indigent workers and shamefaced poor, and different forms of need could therefore result in different experiences with being on relief. Thus, because of its structuralist foundation, the social discipline paradigm risks blindness towards the possible positive effects of relief on the lives of individual or certain categories of poor.⁶⁷

In addition, social discipline creates a perception of the poor as voiceless victims of an oppressive system. Yet, other studies have shown that making use of private and public sources of poor relief was but one of many survival strategies of the poor, and although the choice to go on relief was often the lesser of two evils, it was a choice in which resided agency.⁶⁸ Moreover, the charitable exchange functioned as a space of interaction and bargaining between givers and receivers. Charity offered elites a means to defend their interests vis-à-vis the lower classes, but the latter also possessed means of pressuring the former. Looting and rioting (or the threat of doing so) were clear ways in which these people could voice their dissatisfaction, but even the refusal of assistance could have important effects, as it ‘deprived the rich of the privilege of giving alms, threatening their eternal salvation’.⁶⁹ In the words of economic historian Peter Mathias, ‘poor relief was the ransom paid by the rich to keep their windows, as well as their consciences, intact’.⁷⁰ Yet, the power of the poor should not be overstated either. Interdependence was not the same as equal power, and to speak of ‘peaceable kingdoms’ most likely goes too far.⁷¹

Rather, these studies have showed that power is never absolute, and because both the benefactors and beneficiaries of charity expected to gain something from the exchange, neither were the boundaries between givers and receivers of charity. This way, they drew attention to the simultaneous existence of various, sometimes contrary, forms of social behavior. Social inclusion and exclusion, assistance and discipline, altruism

⁶⁷ Van de Perre, ‘Public Charity and Private Assistance’, 102-103; Frohman, *Poor Relief and Welfare*, 2.

⁶⁸ Fuchs, *Gender and Poverty*, 197-198. See also: Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France*; Van Leeuwen, *Bijstand in Amsterdam*; Ross, ‘Survival Networks’; Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor*; Van Damme, *Armenzorg en de Staat*.

⁶⁹ Van Leeuwen, *Bijstand in Amsterdam*, 23.

⁷⁰ Mathias, ‘Adam’s Burden’, 154.

⁷¹ Harrison, *Peaceable Kingdom*. A similar view can be found in Prochaska, *The Voluntary Impulse*.

and self-interest, were all sides of the same coin.⁷² Therefore, some scholars have argued that the concepts of social discipline should not be discarded completely, but that the complexity of this mechanism cannot be understood solely in terms of top-down power structures. From a culturalist perspective, social discipline is the mechanism through which socio-cultural norms are enforced (or changed) within the framework of what is considered a well-organized society. As such, social discipline is collectively reproduced within and between the different social groups that make up a community, not necessarily forcefully imposed by the elites, whose actions were themselves a product of the normative systems which permeate society.⁷³ In the case of Catholic charity especially, benefactors not only imposed norms on the recipients of their alms, but also enforced these norms within and among themselves.

The introduction of more nuanced interpretations of social discipline in turn fostered new perspectives on the motivations of benefactors. The social discipline paradigm was based the assumption that poverty caused fear among elites, and that the existence and scale of private and public sources of poor relief therefore reflected socio-economic change. Thus, the social discipline paradigm considered charity essentially demand-oriented.⁷⁴ Yet, historical research comparing statistics of poverty and charitable activity (number of organizations, funding) demonstrated that the relationship between the evolution of both variables was seldomly proportional, suggesting that charity was not entirely driven by materialist demand and that other factors were at play as well.⁷⁵ Charitable engagement offered a means to regulate the labor market,⁷⁶ it could offer a space for elite networking and upward social mobility,⁷⁷ it could function a vehicle for

⁷² Lynch, *Individuals, Families, and Communities*; Harrington, 'Escape from the Great Confinement'; von Saldern, 'Integration und Fragmentierung', esp. 28, 34.

⁷³ Scott, 'Science and Social Control', 1; Frohman, *Poor Relief and Welfare*, 3.

⁷⁴ According to these theories, economic change triggeres poverty and poverty triggeres fear from elites, resulting in their efforts for control. Yet, upsurges in poverty did not always coincide with increased charitable action, suggesting that this relationship is far less linear and more complex. See: Cavallo, 'The Motivations of Benefactors', 49-50. In addition, if the poor were a problem of the elites, this means that the poor had more power than assumed by social control. Then, actions like looting were not merely a form of venting anger and frustration, nor simply a means to acquire goods, but also a means to pressure elites, i.e. bargaining by (the threat of) riot. See: Van Leeuwen, *Bijstand in Amsterdam*, 22-24.

⁷⁵ Cavallo, 'Conceptions of Poverty'; Cavallo, *Charity and Power*; Cavallo, 'The Motivations of Benefactors', 51; Van Leeuwen, *Bijstand in Amsterdam*, 6; Wandel, *Always Among Us*, 1-16.

⁷⁶ Laborers who had no or insufficient income could be put on relief so that migration was counteracted and a pool of workers was always available. See: Van Leeuwen, *Bijstand in Amsterdam*, 5; Cumbler, 'The Politics of Charity', 102.

⁷⁷ Porter, 'The Gift Relation; Cannadine ed., *Patricians, Power and Politics*; Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*. Related to this is the prestigious nature of charity, see: Cavallo, *Charity and Power*, 134; Cumbler, 'The Politics of Charity', 99.

power disputes among elites (not just between elites and the poor),⁷⁸ and it could offer a means for elites to practice or promote their ideological and religious beliefs.⁷⁹

Furthermore, not only could charitable persons be driven by a gamut of motivations, but it is also important to consider that ‘the elite’ was not a homogenous bloc but a diversified group of people with different social backgrounds and varying degrees of power, and that the social background of charitable benefactors was not always clearly elitist. For example, many nineteenth-century charities, such as the Ladies of Charity, started out as grassroots initiatives of the working class before becoming institutionalized within the Church. The Daughters of Charity, with whom the Ladies continued to work side by side with throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century, mostly came from modest or even poor backgrounds. As argued by Cavallo, it is therefore a matter of ‘reconstructing the link between the emergence of specific ideas and measures towards the poor, and particular patterns of relationship and conflict’.⁸⁰

Lastly, research into the history of charity gained much from developments in the field of women’s studies and gender history.⁸¹ From the 1970s onwards, feminist historians contributed greatly to the further deconstruction of modernization theories through the lens of gender history. They introduced the notion of ‘feminization of religion’, which stressed the importance of religion in the life of women and, conversely, the importance of women for the Church, thereby challenging narratives of secularization. On the one hand, the feminization thesis claimed that a quantitative increase in the share of women among worshippers, religious congregations and charitable associations took place from the early nineteenth century onwards, and that women were overrepresented during religious rites like liturgy and pilgrimages and processions. On the other, the feminization thesis also has a qualitative component, with some of its advocates arguing that Catholic piety itself experienced a feminization during this period, with a more loving and compassionate discourse replacing the Tridentine emphasis on fear in the face of a vengeful God.⁸² From a socio-cultural perspective, the

⁷⁸ Macfarlane, ‘Social Policy and the Poor’; Cavallo, ‘Conceptions of Poverty’; Schneider, ‘The Catholic Poor Relief Discourse’.

⁷⁹ The argument that charitable activity was a direct reflection of piety, as argued by Michel Vovelle (Vovelle, *Piété Baroque*) therefore does not hold up either. See also: Cavallo, ‘The Motivations of Benefactors’; Beaulande-Barraud and Goujon, ‘Le Salut par les Œuvres?’.

⁸⁰ Cavallo, ‘The Motivations of Benefactors’, 54.

⁸¹ The following paragraphs on the gender perspective of charity draw upon my article Fluit, ‘Gender and Class’.

⁸² More thorough discussions of the feminization thesis(es) can be found in Suenens, *Humble Women, Powerful Nuns*; Pasture, ‘Beyond the Feminization Thesis’; King, *Religion and Gender*; Bréjon de Lavergnée and Della Sudda, ‘Une Histoire sans Genre’; Werner, ‘Religious Feminisation’; Van Osselaer, ‘Religion, Family and Domesticity’; Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*.

notion of feminization furthered the idea of separate spheres as a way of understanding the social structure of nineteenth-century society. It presented a duality between the masculine, secular and rational public sphere and the feminine, religious and romantic domestic sphere. In this view, women able to express a degree of agency and independence almost exclusively through their engagement in the religious sphere, charity in particular.⁸³

As such, the feminization thesis inspired a new perspective on charitable organizations as spaces in which female benefactors were able to express agency and participate in the public sphere during a time when women's societal freedom was limited in comparison to that of men. However, the strong women-centric perspective of the feminization thesis did create somewhat of a one-sided story. Much like the modernization theories it tried to deconstruct, the feminization thesis presented a structuralist perspective in which secularization took place only in the male, rational, public sphere, and the female, emotional, private sphere was characterized by deepening devotion, not in the least because women recognized the opportunities for agency offered by engagement in religious institutions, most notably lay charitable organizations that did not require taking a religious oath of celibacy and poverty. Yet, despite its value in contesting rigid secularization theories from the perspective of women, in addition to allowing for a reevaluation of the function of charity for female benefactors, the feminization thesis has recently received much criticism for its functionalist interpretation of history and its shaky empirical foundation.

The idea that a quantitative feminization took place has been criticized because it often lacks a long-term perspective, situating the start of this process in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, thereby failing to recognize the importance of women in and for the Church in earlier periods.⁸⁴ In addition, advocates of the feminization thesis employed a narrow understanding of religiosity, focusing strongly on liturgical practice and engagement in religious institutions and organizations. As such, the feminization thesis did not acknowledge that men often expressed their religiosity in different ways, for example by engaging in the professional, public, and

⁸³ See for example in Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class*; Young, *Middle-Class Culture*; Prochaska, *The Voluntary Impulse*; Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*. For a more thorough discussion of these and other theories, see: Van Osselaer, 'Religion, Family and Domesticity'.

⁸⁴ Braude, for example, argues that feminization never happened and that the feminization thesis does not sufficiently take into account that many of its sources were produced by men and reflect their anxieties about declining male religiosity (and power), as well as that it lacks a long-term perspective that stresses women's importance for the Church before the nineteenth century (Braude, 'Women's History'). For a discussion of women's religious engagement in earlier periods, see for example Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*.

socio-political sphere.⁸⁵ Also, charity was a field that attracted both men and women, but male charities were seldomly included in the analysis.⁸⁶ In the same vein, it is important to take into account that even though charity and other socio-religious engagement did offer women important opportunities, the loci of power were more often than not occupied by lay or religious men, and that women's charity tended to be more specialized and locally oriented than that of men, its target audience often limited to other women.⁸⁷

In addition, from a qualitative viewpoint, the separate spheres' theory has been rebutted for its over-emphasizing difference and compartmentalizing the experiences of men and women in a way that does not adequately reflect the nuances of historical reality. Recent research using a comparative perspective on women's and men's religiosity revealed that historical reality was much more complex, as religious devotion was experienced and expressed in many different ways, and various religious masculinities and femininities existed at the same time across different contexts.⁸⁸ The feminization thesis and the separate spheres theory left little room to explore this multiplicity, context-specificity, and intersectionality of gender roles in the context of charity. Lay charities were often disproportionately populated by members of the elite, and like gender, class constituted an essential social category that shaped social interaction. The intersectionality between both categories is therefore key to understanding the dynamics of gender roles in Catholic charity in relation to the socio-political context in which they developed.

In conclusion, the history of religious poor relief has been featured in many different research fields and continues to spark interest among scholars of various backgrounds. This diversity resulted in the topic being approached from numerous angles, which led to many insights in the functions and meanings of charity for all those involved in different places and times. However, it also led to a fragmentation of the subject, which was disadvantageous to fostering discussions among scholars from different disciplines. Time after time, the history of charity and social assistance have proven to be of 'labyrinthine complexity'.⁸⁹ All too often, it was forced into explanatory narratives that grossly oversimplified the historical reality. These narratives were generally strongly

⁸⁵ Blaschke, "The Unrecognized Piety of Men"; Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*; Pasture, 'Beyond the Feminization Thesis', 13.

⁸⁶ Schneider, 'The Catholic Poor Relief Discourse'; De Maeyer, Van Molle, Van Osselaer, and Viaene eds., *Gender and Christianity in Modern Europe*; Topalov ed., *Philanthropes en 1900*; Van Osselaer and Pasture eds., *Christian Homes*.

⁸⁷ Heiniger and Topalov, 'Femmes et Hommes en Charité', 228-231.

⁸⁸ Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*; Werner ed., *Christian Masculinity*; De Maeyer, Van Molle, Van Osselaer, and Viaene eds., *Gender and Christianity in Modern Europe*.

⁸⁹ Weindling, 'The Modernization of Ninetenth-Century Charity', 191.

influenced by the works of sociologists and political scientists, whose industriousness in studying the (origins of the) welfare state made them hard to ignore.⁹⁰ During the last thirty years or so, historians have revisited the subject with newfound confidence and vigor. The insights provided by the social sciences have not been unilaterally rejected, but rather elaborated upon and finetuned to the historical contexts under study. In addition, researchers have introduced new methodologies and themes, steadily contributing to a deeper and more historicized understanding of the experiences of both the benefactors and beneficiaries of charity and philanthropy, as well as the socio-political and cultural meaning of these practices. With regards to charity, the revalorization and revisioning of religious belief as an element which shapes charitable ideas, acts and interactions has been especially welcome. Even more so, integrative approaches that interweave micro and macro historical approaches and consider the interplay between socio-economic, political, and religious factors in shaping the practice of charity.

1.3. Understanding Catholic charity in modernity

Before moving on to the methodological approach and structure of this book, there is one more issue relating to the historiography of charity that needs to be addressed; the question of how to conceptualize and understand the relationship between religion and modernity in the field of social assistance. In the introduction of his 2001 study on Belgian political Catholicism and its relationship to Rome, Vincent Viaene wrote that it felt like ‘flogging a dead horse’ to state that ‘popular Catholicism was constitutive of modernity: rather than withdrawing from and replicating modernity, it co-produced modernity’.⁹¹ Yet, although it has long become self-evident to reject modernization theories and to accept the existence of a ‘religious modernity’,⁹² these realizations have not had many ramifications for the study of charity. This is unfortunate, because the history of charity provides a unique insight into the combined expression of religious devotion and social engagement, which was closely related to two of the main issues that shaped Belgium’s modern society: the role of religion and the Church in society and the social question(s). Therefore, despite the risk of now severely hurting the poor horse, in this subchapter I will elaborate on the concept of religious modernity, the challenges posed by its application to the history of the Vincentians, and why I believe such an endeavor is necessary in the first place.

Earlier in this introduction, I explained that from the 1970s and 1980s onwards, the

⁹⁰ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 14.

⁹¹ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 17; footnote 24.

⁹² Hellemans, *Religieuze Modernisering*.

rejection of modernization theories opened the door to the introduction of numerous new perspectives in the history of welfare and of voluntary social action, many of which had significant consequences for the study of charity during the modern period. However, the history of charity, a practice that was religiously motivated or at least framed as such, is, of course, also a part of religious history. In this field of research, the revision of modernization theories truly upended the narrative. Starting from the 1970s, several (quantitative) historical studies indicated that secularization, measured by the decline of Church attendance and religious activity, did not follow a linear trajectory. In addition, they found that it was not directly correlated with societal developments typically associated with modernization, such as industrialization and urbanization. This sparked a lively debate surrounding the questions how secularization should be defined (both referring to the individual experience and the role of religion in society and politics) and to what extent it was a constitutive characteristic of modern society if at all (both in the present and the past).⁹³

By the 1990s, a new guard of religious historians influenced by post-modernist theories pleaded for a meaningful revision of the idea that the relationship between modernity and religion was antithetical. They suggested that there was no real reason to assume that modernity and religion could not be positively associated, and that through their participation in modernity, religions themselves were imbued by it.⁹⁴ This plea was founded on the post-modernist acknowledgement of modernity as inherently pluriform and internally contradictory, characterized by continues processes of destruction and renewal. This argument, convincingly defended by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, implied that modernity did not exclude the antimodern, but that the latter was an essential feature of the former and an important source of modernity's dynamism.⁹⁵ As such, the deconstruction of the antithesis between modernity and religion entailed the acknowledgement that religious actors and religiously inspired ideas could be forces of conservation as well as drivers of change. Or, in other words, the recognition that modernity was continuously (re)shaped by a multitude of ideas and actors.

Among historians of Catholicism in Belgium (as well as elsewhere), these debates and insights proved highly conducive of more nuanced interpretations of the role of the Church and religion in modern society. These scholars demonstrated that Catholicism and the Church went through significant socio-cultural transformations which had important ramifications for the way religion was experienced and expressed. In particular, they pointed to the religious revival, the charismatic leadership of Pius IX,

⁹³ Pasture, 'The role of Religion', 105-106; Hellemans, *Religieuze Modernisering*, 9-10.

⁹⁴ Hellemans, *Religieuze Modernisering*, 3.

⁹⁵ See for example in Beck, Giddens, and Lash, *Reflexive Modernization*. For a further development of this argument, see for example the volume edited by Michael Allen Gillespie (Gillespie ed., *The Theological Origins of Modernity*).

the late nineteenth-century development of a Catholic social project, and the inter-war Catholic Action movement as examples of Catholic modernity.⁹⁶ In Belgium especially, a country in which Catholicism deeply permeated public and private life throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, the deconstruction of the religion-modernity antithesis inspired many new insights.⁹⁷ Already in the early 1990s, Belgian historian Staf Hellemans argued for a ‘radical’ acceptance of the idea that Catholicism and other world religions constituted an integral part of modernity and a greater analytical openness to processes of change, revision, and renewal in the Church’s socio-political role, which allowed Catholicism to adapt to the modern context in its own creative ways, and in turn co-construct this context via this active engagement.⁹⁸ Of great influence was also Viaene’s 2001 analysis of political Catholicism in nineteenth century Belgium and its relationship with Rome, in which he emphasized the adaptability of the Church and the eagerness of politically and socially engaged Catholics to explore the options offered by modernity, in particular the principle of liberty, and actively contribute to shaping the structure of modern society.⁹⁹

Studies such as these compellingly demonstrated the effectiveness of adopting a more open and less normative approach to religious subjects in modern history. By abandoning the teleological notion that the characteristics of religious beliefs and actors were necessarily in conflict with those of modernity and destined to lose relevance, a newfound appreciation emerged for the multifaceted, complex, and meaningful interaction between religious ideas and expressions within their modern context. Such a shift in perspective was especially welcome with regards to the history of charity. For many years, interpretations of this subject were shaped by the charity-to-welfare narrative, a product of secularization theories that underpinned an antithetical view of modernity. Typically, efforts to revise interpretations of the role of charity in modern society took place within the context of research employing a broad perspective on the

⁹⁶ Hellemans, *Strijd om om de Moderniteit*; van Voss, Pasture, and De Maeyer eds., *Between Cross and Class*; Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*; De Maeyer and Viaene eds., *World Views and Worldly Wisdom*; Deferme, *Uit de Ketens van de Vrijheid*.

⁹⁷ The basic argument that Belgian Catholicism had the potential for adapting to, interacting with, and contributing to modernity (and ‘modern’ systems of social assistance) can be found in many studies dealing with aspects of Catholic social and political history. See for example in Witte, ‘The Battle for Monasteries, Cemeteries and Schools’; Clark and Kaiser eds., *Culture Wars*; Deferme, ‘The Influence of Catholic Socio-Political Theory’; Pasture, ‘Building the Social Security State’; Van Molle, ‘Social Questions and Catholic Answers’; Heyrman, ‘Catholic Private Poor Relief and The State’; Van Damme, *Armenzorg en de Staat*; Deferme, *Uit de Ketens van de Vrijheid*; Lamberts, *Het Gevecht met Leviathan*; Lamberts ed., *Een Kantelend Tijdperk*.

⁹⁸ Hellemans, *Religieuze Modernisering*; Hellemans, *Strijd om om de Moderniteit*.

⁹⁹ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*; Deferme, ‘The Influence of Catholic Socio-Political Theory’; Moeys, *Subsidiary Social Provision*.

field of social assistance, encompassing both public and private, religious and secular actors. These studies revealed that the modern field of social assistance was shaped by a wide variety of ideas and practices that were mutually influential and changed over time.¹⁰⁰

Contributions such as these were of great value to our understanding of modern ideas about social needs and their solutions and highlighted the active part played by religious actors in their development. However, the basic premise of these studies – that modernity was whatever modern actors made of it – did not fully permeate to the study of the history of charity. There is an important difference between the question how the field of social assistance was collectively shaped by different actors and the question how religious actors experienced and interacted with the modern context, and thus how their contribution to the field of social assistance came to be in the first place. With regards to the latter question, much work remains to be done. Historical accounts of charity often tended to adopt an institutionalist perspective, thus sidelining the question altogether. Additionally, these accounts frequently (usually implicitly) adhered to normative conceptions of modernity as developed in modernization theories.¹⁰¹ This entails the danger of directing the analysis in a certain direction. In its normative definition, modernity was associated with change, progress, rationality, and innovation. As such, the predetermined idea that certain ideas or actors were not modern or antimodern entails a considerable risk that the historian disproportionately identifies elements of resistance, conservation, and irrationality. This risk is even more pronounced when dealing with religious subjects because religious discourse itself emphasizes eternal truths and the supra-temporal, distracting from discontinuity and dynamism. Furthermore, it is crucial to differentiate between modernity as a concept used in historical research and, on the other hand, the ways in which it was defined by the historical actors under study. The

¹⁰⁰ Heyrman, 'Catholic Charity and Public Poor Relief', 3. For Belgium, a similar argument was made by Hendrik Moeys, who applied the concept of 'mixed economy of: Moeys, *Subsidiary Social Provision*. In its broader political context, this topic also featured in Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*. For the international context, see for example the volume on early modern poor relief edited by Thomas Max Safley (*The Reformation of Charity*), and the various volumes on health care and poor relief Grell et. al. (Grell, Cunningham, and Jütte eds., *Health Care and Poor Relief in 18th and 19th Century Northern Europe*; Grell, Cunningham, and Roeck eds., *Health Care and Poor Relief in 18th and 19th Century Southern Europe*; Grell and Andrew Cunningham eds., *Health Care and Poor Relief in Protestant Europe, 1500–1700*) as well as Weindling, 'The Modernization of Ninetenth-Century Charity.'

¹⁰¹ Studies of the Vincentians which deal with the question whether their ideas and practices could be considered modern all define antimodernity as anti-revolutionary thinking. For example in: Maurer, *La Ville Charitable*; Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*, and De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate'. These studies furthermore make a distinction between 'modern methods' and 'antimodern ideas'. This separation has also been used to describe the nature of religion in modernity in general, see: Hellemans, *Religieuze Modernisering*, esp. 10.

term was and is entirely conceptual and holds significant symbolic weight, used to give meaning to reality, legitimize oneself or delegitimize the other, promote or validate certain societal developments, or reject them. Utilizing a rigid definition of modernity can obscure the ways in which historical actors themselves used the concept.

Examining how charitable actors themselves interacted with the concept of modernity sheds light on their views regarding their role in modern society. This understanding can only be achieved by maintaining conceptual openness on the part of the historian. Therefore, I believe that to fully depart from the normative, materialist premise of modernization theories, the study of the history of charity could benefit greatly from a more explicit reflection on the concept of modernity and its underlying assumptions. In turn, this approach opens the door to a more nuanced understanding of how religious actors, envisioned their role within modernity. It also illuminates how they interpreted, defined, and instrumentalized the symbolic power embedded within the use of the concepts of modernity and modernness.

One intriguing approach to the analytical challenges posed by the concept of modernity was proposed by the Israeli sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt. He suggested that it is analytically more fruitful to speak of ‘multiple modernities,’ acknowledging the existence of various modern societal constellations characterized by continually changing, unique cultural, and institutional patterns.¹⁰² Eisenstadt conceptualized the core trait of modernity as ‘an awareness of the possibility of multiple visions that... [can] be contested’.¹⁰³ In this perspective, modernization was characterized by the existence of many (if not infinite) possible visions of the ideal modern societal constellation, or in other words, the endpoint to which societies’ efforts should be directed. The mere existence of this multitude of contesting visions, made the attainment of such an endpoint impossible, or at least extremely unlikely. The result was a state of continuous contestation and adaptation, rather than an evolution of ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’. Indeed, defining modernity as a state of continuous contestation renders the dichotomy between the two meaningless. In this view, the modern does not exclude tradition, as traditional views and practices may play an essential role in the field of contestation. According to Eisenstadt, ‘traditions are important sources for modernity’s perpetual constitution and reconstitution’.¹⁰⁴ In this sense, variations in the cultural nature and strength of traditions contributed to existence of multiple modern constellations.

However, their existence within a field of continuous contestation implies that the actors professing traditionalist views equally had to submit to the need for justification

¹⁰² Eisenstadt, ‘Some Observations on Multiple Modernities’, 28.

¹⁰³ Eisenstadt, Sachsenmaier and Riedel, ‘The Context of the Multiple Modernities Paradigm’, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Eisenstadt, Sachsenmaier and Riedel, ‘The Context of the Multiple Modernities Paradigm’, 10.

in their strive towards legitimacy and authority.¹⁰⁵ Thus, if traditionalists contested the specific cultural and institutional constellation of modern society, or even the possibility of contestation itself, they had to enter the modern arena of discussion and must therefore construct and legitimize their identity, beliefs, and convictions. In other words, while Catholics, for example, could self-identify as traditionalist and challenge the modern societal constellation as it was, this act of resistance and the justification of that position itself entailed participation in the field of contestation that shaped modern society. Inversely, this also means that Catholics stressing the progressive or modern nature of their ideas and actions were not an oxymoron by default. Thus, terms like traditional and conservative are useful, but only when stripped of their presumptions about their negative relation to modernity.

According to James D. Faubion, it is precisely in the need for religious actors to seek legitimacy in the face of contestation where the ‘threshold of Western modernity’ lay.¹⁰⁶ In Faubion’s reading of Weber, which was followed by Eisenstadt, the ‘disenchantment’ of society did not imply that ‘modern rationalism’ somehow established its superiority over religion. Rather, Faubion argued that Weber alluded to the decline of the unquestioned legitimacy of a divinely preordained social order, which created space for debate about the nature and possibilities of society. According to this perspective, the various and continually changing modernities which resulted from these conflicts could be understood as responses to the existential question of what society should be and look like, which, at the same time, leave that question intact.¹⁰⁷ These developments took place in different ways, to varying degrees, and at variable speeds across space and time. In Europe, the ‘*de facto* legitimacy of religious dissent’ could be said to have gained foothold towards the end of the eighteenth century,¹⁰⁸ although the roots of its existential and metaphysical crises could be traced back to the fifteenth century confrontation between scholasticism and nominalism.¹⁰⁹ The specific socio-economic, political and cultural changes which took place in society before and during modernization, then, were not necessary conditions for modernization to occur. Instead, they stimulated and provided substance to the existential conflicts which shaped the particular externalizations of modernization in the West, embedded in and contingent upon

¹⁰⁵ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

¹⁰⁶ Faubion, *Modern Greek Lessons*, 113-115, op.cit. Eisenstadt, ‘Multiple Modernities’, 5-6.

¹⁰⁷ Eisenstadt, ‘Multiple Modernities’, 5-6.. Similar arguments were made in O’Brien, ‘History of Christian Political Activism’, 79-89 (see footnote below); Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (‘modernity is better understood as an attempt to find a new metaphysical/theological answer to the question of the nature and relation of God, man, and the natural world’, which he calls the ‘conflictual essence of modernity’, xii, 12-14).

¹⁰⁸ O’Brien, ‘History of Christian Political Activism’, 82.

¹⁰⁹ Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*.

‘specific cultural premises, traditions and historical experiences’.¹¹⁰

This way, non-normative, cultural rather than materialistic conceptualizations of modernity, like the one proposed by Eisenstadt, foster a more open approach to the topic of modernization as it was perceived, interpreted, and continuously redefined by historical actors themselves. Such a conceptualization fundamentally acknowledges the open-endedness of the future in the past. While at first glance, this approach to the concept of modernity may seem overly relativistic, I nonetheless believe that this framework is practically useful. The concept of multiple modernities does not negate that Western modernity can be situated in a particular period, nor that it was characterized by certain changes in the social, economic, political, and religious spheres. It does, however, draw attention to the multiplicity of ideas and actors that shaped and left their mark on these processes of change, including those rooted in traditionalist views and/or explicitly rejected (aspects of) modern society as it manifested itself in a particular temporal and spatial context.

¹¹⁰ Eisenstadt, ‘Multiple Modernities’, 2.

Delineation, sources, and terminology

This research delves deeper into the topic of religious charity in modern Belgium, specifically the question how the two of the most popular lay charitable organizations in Belgium, the Belgian Society and Ladies of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, sought to reconcile the spiritual purpose and social goals of their work in light of the socio-economic, political, and cultural changes that took place in society during the tumultuous period between their foundation in the 1840s and the end of the Second World War. At the same time, I examine how, why, and to what extent this search for religious fulfilment and societal legitimacy shaped the Vincentians' perception of poverty and the poor, their concrete charitable practices and initiatives, as well as their own identity as Vincentian men and women, and, more broadly, their conception of the function of the organizations in modern society.

As such, the questions that guide this research are quite broad and require much contextualization with regards to the societal changes that took place in Belgium over a long period of time. While many studies into the history of social assistance, whether public or private, limit their analyses to the nineteenth century, I have chosen to include the first half of the twentieth century as well and take the end of the Second World War as the endpoint of my inquiry. This way, the entire period between the foundation of the Vincentian organizations and the establishment of the Social Pact, which laid the foundation for Belgium's welfare state in 1944, is considered. As I will argue in Part III, which covers the inter-war period and the Second World War, the aftermath of the First World War and the proliferation of ideological conflict, in particular during the 1930s, had a significant impact on the organizations' charitable strategies and the way they construed their function in society. As such, this long-term perspective provides an opportunity to examine continuities and discontinuities in the Vincentians' ideas and practices against the background of major changes and transformations in Belgian society.

The long timeframe spanned by this research and the choice for a comparative perspective of the Ladies and the Society necessarily came at the cost of some detail. This is especially the case for the Society, a large organization which counted over 1 300 conferences at its height around the turn of the century.¹¹¹ The KADOC monograph on the history of the Society in Belgium remains the primary reference for the institutional history of the organization and its works at its national to local level, including the differences between the main divisions of the organization. This study, which focusses primarily on the macro-level developments of Vincentian ideas and practices, aims to

¹¹¹ See the list provided in De Maeyer and Wynants eds., *De Vincentianen in België*, 343-364.

build on these insights rather than repeat them. With regards to the Ladies, the situation is completely opposite. A lack of previous research combined with a more limited source repertoire means that analytical restrictions are a necessity rather than a luxury. In particular, the decentralized structure of the association of Ladies, of which the different divisions were not officially and only loosely joined together until the late nineteenth century, meant that there was more room for regional variation in their organizational form than was the case for the Society. While I try to take this variation into account during the analyses, it is also important to note that none of the source collections of the different regional divisions span the entire period under study, far from it. Therefore, considering that the different associations of Ladies were nonetheless very similar in terms of their historical inspiration, rulebooks, practices, and organizational structure (also with regards to their foreign counterparts), I have taken the liberty to aggregate some of the findings and refer to Ladies of Charity as a collective. Incidentally, to foster further research, I at times discuss the institutional development of these associations at more depth than that of the Society.

Thus, the primary focus of this study lies on the organizational dimension of Vincentian charity, placing relatively less emphasis on the individual participants in the charitable work. This specific perspective was shaped by the research questions guiding this inquiry, which call for a broad, culture historical approach of Vincentian charity, and further influenced by the Vincentians' steadfast emphasis on the collective and individual humility within the framework of their organizations.¹¹²

With regards to its sources, this study relies on a variety of published and unpublished texts.

◇ Both the Ladies and the Society produced several handbooks offering an in-depth understanding of their mission, organizational structure, and the spiritual foundations driving their charitable endeavors. These handbooks explained the purpose of the organizations, provided overviews of their statutes, and detailed the indulgences associated with their charitable works. Despite generally maintaining the integrity of their contents, these handbooks were periodically republished, occasionally with additional explanations. Additionally, the Society published supplementary monographs that delved into specific aspects of their work and history, addressing topics such as the intricacies of home visits, the establishment of new conferences, and key figures in the organizations' history. These sources offer primordial insight into the spiritual and social

¹¹² The illuminating potential of focusing on individual Vincentians has been aptly demonstrated by Brejon de Lavergnée's prosopography of the members of the French Society throughout the nineteenth century (Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*). Heyrman's contribution on the 'bon patrons' of the late nineteenth century further supports the value of examining the role of charitable engagement in the identity construction of Catholic elites (Heyrman, 'Imagining the 'Bon Patron Catholique').

foundations that underpin the Vincentians' conceptualization of the charitable exchange.

◇ The organizations furthermore published yearly reports at the national and/or regional levels, providing detailed statistical overviews of their expenses and income, the number of active members, and families visited. These reports also discussed the organizations' strategies toward spiritual gratification and addressing poverty, encompassing various initiatives implemented at different organizational levels. The reports delved into their progress in areas such as conversions, regularization of marriages, and more. To contextualize these strategies, the yearly reports usually included reflections on the social and political developments in society that, in some way, affected their work. These reports offer valuable insights as they combine general information on the overall direction of the organizations with details on the operations of local conferences. These yearly reports were, in turn, based on the proceedings of meetings held at the local or regional level, summarized and submitted to the upper echelons each year.

◇ The Society was prolific in its publication efforts, which included various periodical journals. This study specifically focuses on the monthly bulletin of the organization at the national level: the *Maandschrift van het Sint Vincentius a Paulogenootschap* (1877-1947). During the examined period, this monthly bulletin served as the primary periodical publication for organization members. This source is especially valuable because it not only included reflections on societal conditions, the issue of poverty, and the organization itself but also provided information on the activities of local conferences in Belgium and internationally. Furthermore, the bulletin featured (excerpts of) speeches delivered by prominent members of the Church and the organization at various events. This source is especially valuable because it provides a detailed understanding of the Society's perspectives on societal conditions, poverty-related matters, and its internal workings.

◇ The Society was prolific in publishing, and this included several periodical journals. This study focusses specifically on the monthly bulletin of the organization at the national level; the *Maandschrift van het Sint Vincentius a Paulogenootschap* (1877-1947). During the period studied here, the monthly bulletin constituted the primary periodical publication for the members of the organization. It combined reflections on the state of society, the issue of poverty, and the organization itself, provided information on the working of local conferences in Belgium as well as internationally, and included (excerpts of) speeches delivered by prominent members of the Church and of the organization at various occasions, making it an invaluable source to this study.

◇ The source collection furthermore encompasses internal communications, including exchanged letters among the leaders of the organizations, as well as communications between the Society and the Ladies, and their exchanges with other organizations such as *Caritas Catholica*. It also includes reports from the organizations' special reunions

focused on specific topics or occasions. Additionally, the Vincentians actively participated in numerous Catholic (social) congresses during the studied period, of which the reports provide valuable insights into their relationship with the broader Catholic context.

◇ Lastly, the source collection for this study includes documents directly related to the poor individuals and families visited by the Vincentians. During these visits, the visitors made notes on the physical and moral state of the visited, using either a standardized questionnaire or jotting down findings on a blank piece of paper. The Vincentians' investigations reflected the behavior and morals they aimed to instill in the poor and shed light on their concrete reasons for accepting or rejecting them. While these sources often (but not always!) lack detailed information, they still serve as a valuable, previously overlooked source in the historical research of Vincentian charity. Additionally, bundles and registers of inquiries occasionally include letters written by the poor themselves. While interpreting these sources as a direct reflection of the voice of the poor is challenging, they offer a unique insight into how the poor communicated their needs to potential benefactors. This includes the formal protocols they followed, the arguments they presented, what they offered in return, and their ideas about the causes and nature of their poverty.

Up until now, I have not provided a definition of the different terms relating to social assistance and charity. The distinctions between the categories of social assistance were not always as straightforward as they may seem, and their meanings varied across specific cultural contexts and changed over time.¹¹³ Moreover, there exists little uniformity in the use of these terms in historical research, which can create confusion as well.¹¹⁴ In this study, I try to stay as close as possible to the terminology used by the historical actors themselves, while at the same time maintaining a degree of consistency for the sake of clarity. Because this book is based on Dutch and French sources but written in English, this can be challenging, however.

For starters, I will use the umbrella term 'social assistance' to refer to all the different sources of social care offered to the poor, the sick, the elderly, and children by public and private organizations, institutions, and initiatives. It is important to note that this term was not used by the historical actors throughout the entire period under study here

¹¹³ See for example in Stéphane Bachiocci et.al., 'Les Mondes le la Charité se Décritent Eux-Mêmes. Une Étude des Répertoires Charitables au Xixe et Début du Xxe Siècle', *Revue d'Histoire Moderne & Contemporaine*, (3) 2014, 28-66; Susannah Morris, 'Changing Perceptions of Philanthropy in the Voluntary Housing Field in Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century London', Thomas Adam ed., *Philanthropy, Patronage, and Civil Society: Experiences from Germany, Great Britain, and North America* (Bloomington, 2004), 138-160.

¹¹⁴ Morris, 'Changing Perceptions of Philanthropy', 138.

and did not become widespread until the inter-war period. Before then, the terms ‘beneficence’ and ‘assistance’ (without the prefix social) were commonly used to refer to social assistance in general, or with the addition of ‘public’ to denote its governmental framework. When referring specifically to private social assistance, the distinction was usually made between ‘philanthropy’ and ‘charity’.¹¹⁵

Public social assistance in Belgium was for a long time synonymous with the *Bureaus de Bienfaisance* or *Weldadigheidsburelen*, which were created by the French government in 1796 in all municipalities and charged with providing care for the poor and sick at home, distributing medicine, clothing, food, coal, and occasionally money. Established at the same time, the ‘Commission of Civil Almshouses’ (French: *Commissions des Hospices Civils*, Dutch: *Commissie van Burgerlijke Godshuizen*) oversaw all types of institutional care, such as hospitals, orphanages, and homes for the elderly. In 1925, these two public organisms were merged into the ‘Commissions for Public Assistance’ (French: *Commissions d’Assistance Publique*, Dutch: *Commissies voor Openbare Onderstand*), and the term public social assistance largely replaced that of *bienfaisance (publique)*.¹¹⁶ In addition to organizing public sources of social assistance, the Belgian government could issue social legislation to protect and support its population, which happened mostly from the late nineteenth onwards, for example to regulate children’s and women’s labor, or to create mandatory insurance systems. However, the term ‘social security’ (French: ‘sécurité sociale’, Dutch: ‘sociale zekerheid’) did not make its entry until 1944.¹¹⁷

With regards to private social assistance, it was common in Belgium to make a distinction between religious ‘charity’ (French: ‘charité’, Dutch: ‘caritas’) and humanist or laic ‘philanthropy’ (French: ‘philanthropie’, Dutch: ‘filantropie’) in the domain of private, voluntary social assistance. However, in the English-speaking world, the term philanthropy was often used as an umbrella term to denote the general practice of private initiatives for the public good, which could therefore refer to religious charity as well. In historical research, too, this is a common way to use the term.¹¹⁸ In this book, however, I will maintain the distinction that was made by the historical actors themselves. The

¹¹⁵ For a more in-depth overview of the evolving vocabularies, see for example: Bräcker, Collinet, Franz, and Schröder, ‘Von Almosen Zur Solidarität’; Van de Perre, ‘Public Charity and Private Assistance’, 105-106.

¹¹⁶ M. L. Gillard, ‘Mise au Point de la Terminologie : Assistance Charitable, Bienfaisance, Service Social, Hygiène Sociale’, A. Meunier, Albert S. J. Muller, and Is Maus ed., *Actes du VIe Congrès Catholique de Malines, Tome VI: L’Assistance Charitable et l’Hygiène Sociale – La Moralité Publique* (Brussels, 1937), 52-53.

¹¹⁷ Vanthemsche, ‘Ontstaan en Voorgeschiedenis van het Sociaal Pact’, 17-18.

¹¹⁸ See for example Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*; Grogin, ‘Philanthropic Women’; Duprat, *Usage et Pratiques de la Philanthropie* and the contributions in Adam, *Philanthropy*; Heiniger and Topalov, ‘Femmes et Hommes en Charité’.

term charity is used to refer to religious forms of social assistance, whether in the domain of poor relief, education, health care, and so forth, and philanthropy as its non-denominational counterpart. While these two forms of voluntary social assistance could be quite similar in their approach and practices, it was their underlying ideas and beliefs that set them apart. Philanthropic organizations and initiatives usually referred to humanist thought as the foundation for their practices, in particular ideas about social justice and equality. Some of them were explicitly neutral and welcomed Catholic members as well, others were founded with an anticlerical motivation and to provide counterweight to the power of religious institutions in the fields of social assistance and education, for example those created by the Masonic lodges.¹¹⁹ Charity, on the other hand, was explicitly inspired by and founded on religious belief, thereby distinguishing itself from philanthropy as well as public social assistance.

Charitable works could be performed informally, for example by giving to beggars, or formally in the context of a religious organization or institution. Religious orders and congregations, for starters, usually practiced charity in some way or another, for example by organizing soup distributions to the poor, or by creating and working in hospitals or homes for the elderly. Societies of apostolic life, which can be characterized as congregations of lay people living a religious life without taking religious vows, could also practice charity. The most known example being the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, of which the members were primarily dedicated to taking care of the poor sick at home or in their hospitals and to the education of disadvantaged people. Lastly, there were lay charitable organizations, like the Ladies and the Society, of which the members did not live together in a congregation. Even though this type of lay associations were very practice oriented, here, too, collective contemplation and devotional activities played an important role in the organizations' function. In addition to the type of religious organization performing charity, it is possible to make distinctions according to their target audiences. The majority of religious institutions and organizations performing charity focused on one or more well-defined group of people in need of assistance, such as the elderly, the sick and/or disabled, the poor, children and/or orphans, abandoned mothers, and so on. The Ladies and the Society set themselves apart by principally focusing on the poor in general, regardless of their age, health, gender, or even their religious beliefs. As will become clear in the pages that follow, in practice, the Vincentians did categorize and favor certain types of poor, but their theoretical openness to helping anybody in need remained a fundamental element of the organizations' identity.

Lastly, social assistance was not only provided by government institutions and

¹¹⁹ On the activities of the Freemasons in Belgium, see: Tyssens, *In Vrijheid Verbonden*; Tyssens and Vermote, 'Par la Parole et par les Actes...'

private, voluntary organizations, but also by what I will henceforth refer to as ‘mutual aid societies’ (French: ‘sociétés de secours mutuels’, Dutch: ‘onderlinge hulpverenigingen’). This category refers to social organizations in which people are joined together to create mutual support systems and intervene in the case of, for example, unemployment, sickness, retirement, death, or the birth of a baby. Such mutual aid societies could take on many different forms, such as trade unions, burial societies, friendly societies, cooperatives, credit unions, self-help groups, and so on. Especially during the late nineteenth century, a plethora of mutual aid societies were created in Belgium, often with a specific liberal, Catholic, or socialist foundation. So, while the primary goal of mutual aid societies was to create systems of mutual support and risk sharing, they were not devoid of ideological or religious goals and often played important roles in socio-political organizational networks. The boundaries between the different types of social assistance (public, private, and mutual aid) were therefore not clear-cut. Technically, mutual aid initiatives did not fit the category of charity, as the logic underlying the former was one of shared risks and benefits (although this could be defined in religious terms) while the latter was based on the practice of the religious virtue of charity (giving as opposed to mutual sharing). However, during the late nineteenth century, charitable organizations like the Ladies and the Society did create their own mutual aid societies, most notably cooperatives, mutual insurance companies, and self-help groups with a religious focus. The Vincentians considered this a type of charitable action, meaning that mutual aid societies could also exist within a charitable, paternalist framework, even though these societies could not be considered charitable organizations themselves.

Structure of this book

This book is organized into three parts, each covering a period during which the Vincentians confronted specific changes that prompted reflection on their ideas and practices, leading them to preserve or alter their approaches in accordance with the societal role they envisioned for their organizations within the evolving context. Each part comprises two main chapters, each with several subchapters. The first chapter of each part provides a chronologically structured overview of the main developments in Belgium's socio-political and religious domains, exploring how the Vincentians sought to legitimize their charity amid conflicting ideas about the role of Catholicism in the social sphere and in society at large, and about the utility of poor relief in light of the gradual expansion of public social assistance and alternative approaches to the emancipation of the lower classes. The second chapters, approached thematically, delve deeper into how the Vincentians' ideas about charity as both a form of spiritual practice and social activism became integral to their identities as charitable upper-class men and women. These chapters also explore how these ideas translated into the Vincentians' conceptions of deservingness among the poor and into concrete charitable strategies and initiatives aimed at both assisting and moralizing them.

In the first part, commencing with the establishment of the organizations and concluding around 1880, the Vincentians gained momentum amid the religious revival sweeping over Europe during the 1830s and 1840s. However, they were soon confronted with an intensification of the conflict between Catholics and anticlericals, each advocating their own ideas about the role of religion in society. In this 'culture war,' which significantly influenced the Belgian socio-political landscape from the 1850s onward, the Vincentians generally presented themselves as fervent proponents of ultramontane thought. They maintained a steadfast dedication to the Church, conceptualizing the function of their organizations as indispensable tools in the battle against secularism and the religious ignorance of the masses. Simultaneously, the Vincentians believed that their charity served a crucial social function. Beyond alleviating the physical and moral misery caused by poverty, they viewed their charitable efforts as instrumental in fostering harmonious relationships between the social classes, which they believed were increasingly threatened in modern society.

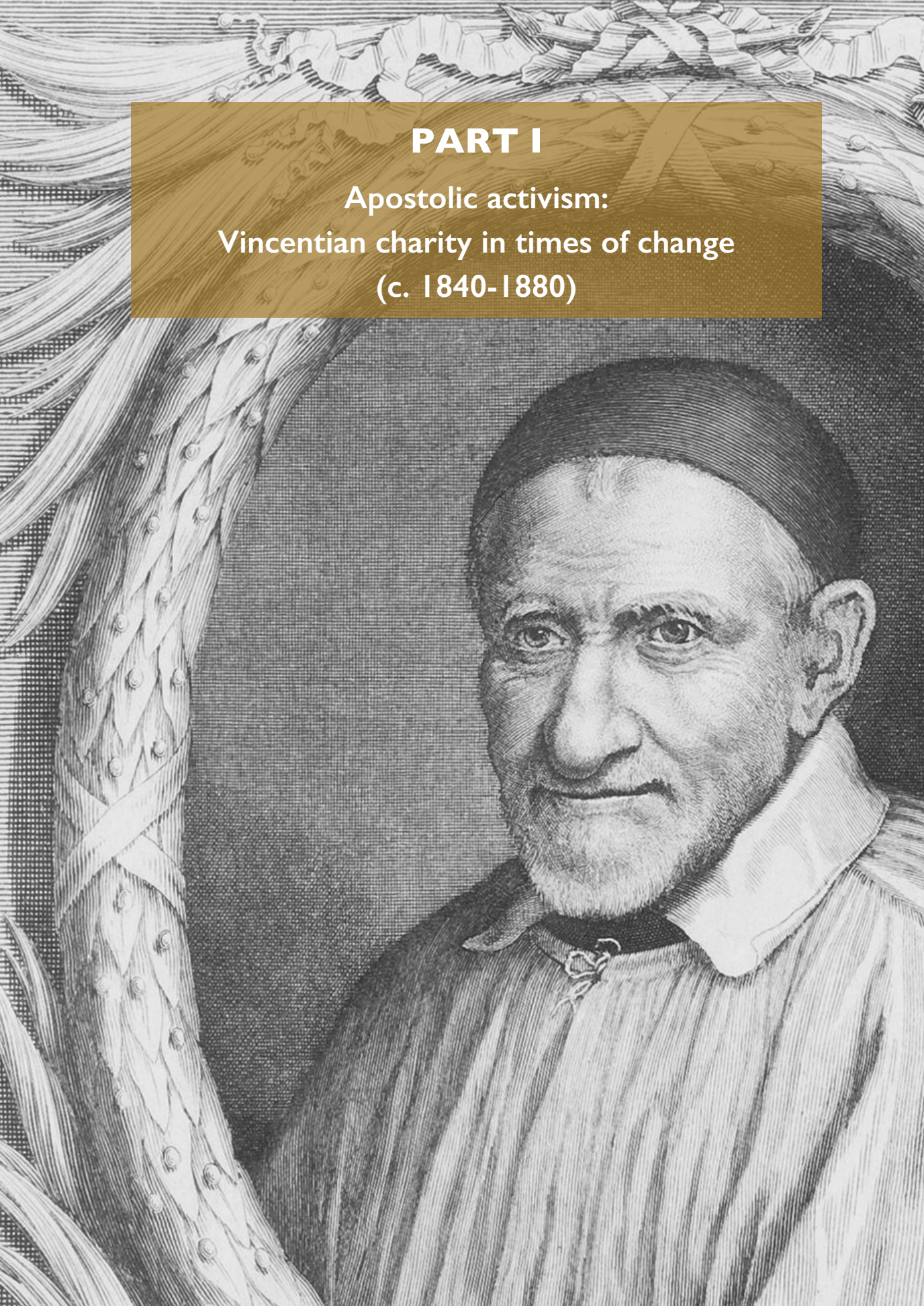
The second period, spanning from around 1880 until the end of the First World War, was marked by intense debates surrounding the social question and the development of a Catholic social project centered around the family, property, and religion. The proliferation of various social organizations during this time posed new challenges for the Vincentians, bringing increased competition and criticism within the socio-political

sphere. However, this period also afforded them the opportunity to expand their charitable works and provided a robust medico-social and ideological framework to legitimize their social action. After the turn of the century, the value of the Vincentians' work was reaffirmed by the Church, which advocated an antimodernist perspective of society and undercut the legitimacy of the radical democratic currents among the Catholics. Instead, it reinforced a worldview closely aligned with that of the Vincentians, affirming their value as organizations dedicated to promoting Christian morality among both their members and the recipients of their charity.

The third period commences after the First World War, marking a significant decline in membership numbers for the Vincentians, a challenge that proved particularly arduous for the Society to overcome. In the aftermath of the war, the Vincentians had to come to terms with profound societal changes, including a notable expansion of public social assistance and legislation, diminishing the working class's reliance on private charity. Concurrently, they were confronted with an ever-expanding influence of socialism among the workers, in addition to the emergence of new far-right ideologies. Additionally, the Vincentians faced competition from Catholic Action organizations, a novel mass movement dedicated to re-establishing the reign of Christ through joint spiritual and social action, with charity playing less important (or at least different) role. Adapting to these shifts, the Vincentians progressively shifted their attention to target audiences other than workers, most notably the shamefaced poor, and made great efforts to attract Catholic youth to their organizations. In addition, they wholeheartedly participated in the battle for modernity, strongly aligning with the Catholic Action project of establishing a Christian modernity and highlighting the importance of their contribution through charity as the basis for Catholic social engagement.

PART I

Apostolic activism:
Vincentian charity in times of change
(c. 1840-1880)



Chapter I

A Charitable Renaissance

The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and Ladies of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul were established in the early 1840s in Belgium, in an atmosphere of romantic Catholic revivalism stimulated by a newfound religious freedom in a country that had recently gained independence. The organizations were part of a charitable renaissance driven by a marked optimism about the potential role for Catholicism in modern society and were able to successfully channel the call for an active, socially oriented lay apostolate. In the years and decades that followed, the organizations gained much popularity and went through an impressive growth, but they were also engaged in a broad conflict between liberals and Catholics, which centered around the question what role should be played by Catholicism, the Church, and religious institutions and organizations in society. In the period between 1830 and 1880, Belgian society went through many social and political transformations that had important consequences for the ways in which religious faith could be expressed and performed, as well as for the conceptualization of Catholicism in relation to modern society. This chapter explores the ways in which the Vincentians tried to navigate a society going through profound changes in the social, political, and religious spheres, which profoundly shaped the perception of social issues and their solutions.

The first subchapter starts with a discussion of the seventeenth century roots of the nineteenth century Vincentian organizations. In the view of both the Society and the Ladies, Vincent de Paul was a visionary, and they closely modeled their organizations after the example of his initiatives and his ideas about the possibilities for lay apostolate. At the same time, the nineteenth century Vincentian organizations were also the unique products of their revivalist context and introduced an innovative spiritual framework as well as practical format to Vincentian charity. The second subchapter delves deeper into the development of political Catholicism after Belgium's independence and its influence on the construction of a social sphere that left much room was to private (religious) initiative, and which allowed the Vincentians to thrive. More broadly, these developments are examined within the framework of the religious revival of the early to mid-nineteenth century, which provided a powerful impulse to popular devotion and lay apostolate. The third subchapter examines the emergence of a more militant ultramontanism from the late 1840s and especially mid-1850s onwards in response to the liberals' increasing efforts towards secularization in the areas of social assistance and

education. Against this background, the Vincentians, in particular the Society, increasingly oriented themselves to Rome, eventually abandoning the principle of discretion in favor of a more outspoken public presence. In the last subchapter, which focusses on the 1860s to 1870s, the conflict between the liberals and Catholics intensified significantly, while intra-Catholic debates made it progressively more difficult to articulate a consentient response to secularization politics. During this period, the Vincentian organizations reached the height of their ultramontane energy, while at the same time maintaining a central position in social-Catholic networks.

1.1. Origins and modus operandi of the Vincentian organizations

Although they were typical products of their early to mid-nineteenth century revivalist context, the roots of the Society and the Ladies of Saint Vincent lay in the works created by Vincent de Paul and the network of pious women surrounding him in the first half of the seventeenth century. During this tumultuous period, the foundation was laid not only for the Vincentian organizations, but also more broadly for the type of lay apostolate and public display of devotion that gained momentum in the early nineteenth century. Therefore, it is relevant to elaborate a bit on the ‘prehistory’ of the Ladies and the Society before delving deeper into the characteristics of the organizations.

In the seventeenth century, the lay associations created by Vincent de Paul and his supporters were both a product and an affirmation of a Catholic revival that brought about a strong charitable impulse in France. Late sixteenth century France was characterized by severe religious conflict and violent civil wars between reformist Protestant and contra-reformist Catholics.¹ On top of that, France was plagued by famine, disease, and poverty. The influx of poor looking for a better life in urban areas combined with a painful lack of both public and private poor relief created much anxiety among the elites and the worldly and ecclesiastical authorities.² At the same time, the misery of the poor ‘weighed heavily and personally on the collective conscience of the forces of the Catholic renewal’, and the Catholic reform proclaimed the ‘eminent dignity of the poor in the Church’ as one of its principal doctrines.³ In these circumstances, a crusading mentality was triggered among devout Catholics, fueled by the desire to expiate personal and collective guilt through a penitent spirituality. This impetus towards religious renewal resulted in a remarkable proliferation of religious orders, but the

¹ For a detailed overview of the events leading to and during France’s engagement in the Thirty Years War, see Wilson, *The Thirty Years War*. See also: Udovic, ‘Seventeenth-Century France’.

² Dinan, ‘Motivations for Charity in Early Modern France’, 178-180; Udovic, ‘Seventeenth-Century France’, 10.

³ Edward R. Udovic, ‘Seventeenth-Century France’, 10.

sixteenth century revival did not only move Catholics towards heroic asceticism. It also fostered an apostolic impulse, which expressed itself in a desire to contribute to the salvation of souls outside of the cloister, most notably those of society's outcasts and the poor.⁴

The myriad of lay charitable confraternities and societies of apostolic life that sprouted from this impulse embodied a novel alternative to the practice of piety. It allowed lay people to venture into the world to spread the faith and aid those in need, both in terms of material aid and (religious) education, thereby offering a way to actively engage in apostolic religious action without being bound to formal vows and a life of monastery seclusion.⁵ One of the most prominent figures in this development was Vincent de Paul, who, in collaboration with several upper class women, was able to create some of the largest and most influential lay charitable organizations in Europe at the time.⁶ Already in 1618, Vincent de Paul established several Confraternities of Charity in collaboration with Marguerite de Silly. The purpose of these 'Charités'⁷ was to bring together local devout women who would commit to bringing material assistance to the sick poor, offer them religious instruction and encourage them to go to confession. As Vincent and de Silly envisioned it, the Charités would be able to provide a more efficient way of helping the poor as opposed to spontaneous help in times of crisis.⁸

The spiritual element in the work of the Charités was considered as important as its efforts to provide material relief. It was inspired not only by the dreadful shortages in the French countryside, but also by the lack of familiarity with the basic principles of Catholicism among the poor and even among the local priests. To make sure the ladies of the Charités themselves were properly educated in religious matters, a small number of women traveled around to check up on, assist, and educate the ladies of the Charités. One of these women, Louise de Marillac, believed that there was a need for a more permanent support network for the Charités. From 1630 onwards, de Marillac therefore brought together girls and women, predominantly from humble backgrounds, who were willing to aid the Charités in their work, thereby laying the foundation for the society of apostolic life named the Daughters of Charity. The Daughters assisted the charitable

⁴ Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 8-9; Edward R. Udovic, 'Seventeenth-Century France', 4-5.

⁵ Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 8. In the words of the later Ladies of Charity: 'to be able without leaving the world, without leaving their families, to participate in the merits of charity and to sanctify themselves by the practice of good works', ODPMG JV 1853-1854.

⁶ The importance of women's contribution to Vincent de Paul's work has been extensively researched in Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*; Ryan and Rybolt eds., *Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac*, and Dinan, 'Motivations for Charity in Early Modern France'; Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief*.

⁷ To avoid confusion, I will not use the English translation 'Charities' to refer to this organization.

⁸ Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 207-208; SVP, *Kort handboek ten gebruike van de buitenconferentieën en aflaten* (Antwerp, 1850's).

ladies by providing nursing services to the sick poor under their care. Also, when needed, the Daughters organized religious instruction for the ladies of the Charités to improve their handling of the spiritual needs of the poor. As a society of apostolic life, the Daughters were sent out to the various Charités, but were expected to return to the motherhouse after to contemplate and receive religious as well as practical instruction (e.g. in medical care). This way, an innovative collaboration was established that proved quite successful. The ladies of the Charités provided funds to the organizations and spiritual assistance to the poor, while the Daughters offered instruction to the ladies and nursed the poor sick.⁹

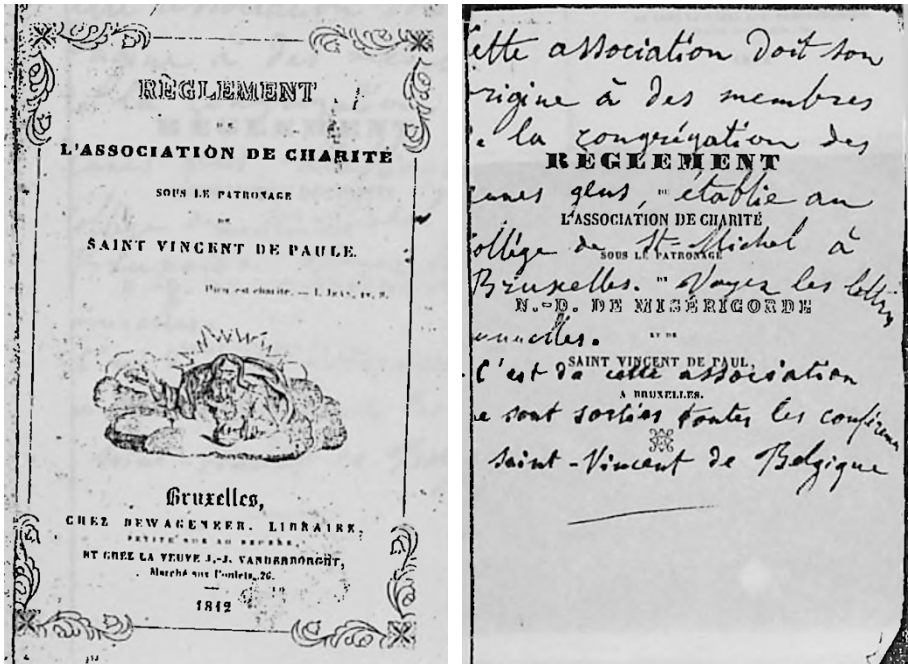
The Charités and (especially) the Daughters of Charity were able to rapidly expand throughout France and several neighboring countries (in the Southern Netherlands, the society of Daughters was established in 1673). This expansion was halted by the Revolution, however, which put an end to public worship and disbanded religious organizations. In 1801, Napoleon allowed the Daughters of Charity to be restored, but the Ladies of Charity did not re-emerge in France and Belgium until 1840. First, some years before the association of Ladies was brought back to life, another Vincentian charity was created in France that did not have direct predecessor. Indeed, the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul was a new creation of the nineteenth century which also took the Charités as its inspiration, but which had an exclusively male membership and maintained strict independence from the female Vincentian organizations. Originally, Vincent de Paul had not foreseen a charitable organization for men but had instead tasked them with evangelizing the poor, to which end he created the society of apostolic life called the Congregation of the Mission (*Congrégation de la Mission*), also known as the Lazarists, in 1626.¹⁰ To this lack of a Vincentian charitable outlet for lay men came an end in 1833, when the Society of Saint Vincent was created by the members of a Parisian Catholic student pension. The goal of the organization was to stimulate social engagement among the Catholic bourgeoisie, spread the Catholic faith and promote good relations among the upper and lower classes. The work was set up very similar to that of the Charités and the later Ladies of Charity, centered around poor visits on the one hand and regular member meetings on the other.

The success of the French Society inspired Belgian Catholics to set up a similar work, but this proved harder than anticipated. Already in 1841, a Society was created in Liège in the context of a Redemptorist youth organization, but it was dismantled because the initiative created conflict between the Redemptorists and the parochial clergy. A

⁹ O'Donnell, 'Vincent de Paul', 24-28; Curtis, 'Charitable Ladies', 131; 177-176; Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 213-216; Dinan, 'Motivations for Charity in Early Modern France', 182; Sullivan, 'Louise de Marillac', 39-64.

¹⁰ Murphy, 'Lazarists/Vincentians', 65.

second attempt took place in Brussels, where a Society of Saint Vincent was established as a secondary work of the Marian congregation of the College of Saint Michael (*Sint Michielscollege*, a Catholic secondary school established by the Jesuits). The Brussels' Society tried to stay independent from the Parisian General Council, but it was fiercely criticized for not conforming to the standards set in Paris and its close connection to the Marian congregation, from which it recruited most of its members. After some years of negotiating, the Brussels conference finally conceded to the demands of its French counterpart and Belgium officially had its own Society of Saint Vincent. Very quickly, conferences were established all over the country.¹¹



Manual of the first Vincentian conference in Brussels, unrecognized by the Parisian General Council, with written reference to its origins in the College of Saint Michael, 1842

Around the same time as the first attempt to establish a Belgian Society, in 1840, the foundation was laid for the female heir of the Charités by a grass-roots social initiative. A group of working-class catholic women in Brussels committed themselves to providing advice and alms to the poor and sick in their environment, and to this end, they created a charitable initiative named the Work of Mercy (*Œuvre de Miséricorde*, *Werk van Barmhartigheid*). Each member was to contribute five cents a week to the work and visit the needy at home to distribute material and moral relief. An interested

¹¹ Wouters, 'De Bewogen Start'.

local priest brought this new lay organization in contact with upper class women who took over the direction of the association, brought in financial means, and facilitated the expansion of the organization. At that point, the Work of Mercy was converted into an association of Ladies of Charity.¹² As such, while it started out as a grass-roots initiative from lower-class women, by mid-nineteenth century the Ladies of Charity had been transformed into an officially recognized lay charity with an upper-class membership base, modeled after the seventeenth century Vincentian Charités.¹³

The format of the Brussels' Ladies served as an inspiration for new associations of Ladies, and the number of associations and conferences of Ladies steadily grew during the rest of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. By 1944, there were over 120 conferences, and the Ladies were present in all Belgian provinces.¹⁴ However, there was no central organ that created these new conferences, so the framework in which they were established could be very different depending on the local context. In Ghent (1849) and Bruges (1855), for example, the Ladies of Charity were established within the context of the Work of the Poor Sick (*Œuvre des Pauvres Malades*). The goal of this work was more explicitly to revive the collaboration between the Ladies and Daughters, making it possible for them to visit the needy together and divide the care for the poor and the sick.¹⁵ The sources suggest that the Daughters slowly retreated from the Work, and that by the end of the 1860s at the latest, the Ladies operated independently from the Daughters (although they did continue to use the infrastructure of the Daughters for their assemblies) and there was no substantial difference between the Ladies of the

¹² Ludovic Saint-Vincent, *Belgique Charitable: Charité, Bienfaisance, Philanthropie etc., etc.* (Brussels, 1893), 152-153; AWK 4, van der Sypt, *150 Jaar Bewogen Leven*, 7.

¹³ As such, the Ladies of Charity was an organization founded independently from the Society of Saint Vincent, unlike what has been suggested by Lory and Soete in their contribution to the monograph on the history of the Society in Belgium: 'Dans la deuxième moitié du XIXe siècle, la participation des femmes aux œuvres de charité est accueillie comme une aide précieuse par les conférences. Ainsi sont constituées, à Bruxelles, l'Association des Dames de charité de la Miséricorde (1840) et, à Anvers, celle des Dames de la Charité de Saint-Vincent de Paul, visitant également des pauvres à domicile. Encouragées par la Société, ces œuvres strictement féminines adoptent une organisation et un règlement analogues à ceux des conférences, mais elles n'obtiennent jamais leur agrégation' (Lory and Soete, 'Implantation et Affirmation', 64-65). In Belgium, the Ladies of Charity were established before the Society, inspired by their seventeenth century predecessor, Vincent de Paul's Charités, as well as by the Society in France (presumably). Although it is difficult to determine who influenced who in what ways, it is clear that the Ladies of Charity were not simply created as a supporting organization for the Society, an observation supported by the Society's strong adherence to the rule that direct cooperation with female charitable organizations was strictly forbidden (at least until the late nineteenth century).

¹⁴ DLSVPB JV 1944.

¹⁵ ODPM, *Règlement de l'Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades (Ghent, s.d.)*.

Work of the Poor Sick and the other associations of Ladies.¹⁶

Both the Ladies of Charity and the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Belgium based their rulebooks on the teachings of Vincent de Paul and the example of the Charités, but the nature of the organizations nonetheless reflected their contemporary context. This peculiarity was visible in (among many other things, which I will discuss in the next chapters) in the design of the associations. As noted by Carol Harrison, the Society was not a confraternity, but rather a fraternity, and herein lay its innovative power. The purpose of a confraternity, which had been the dominant organizational model for urban, elite Catholic laypeople before the Revolution, was to stimulate works of piety and charity. In order to develop this piety, much emphasis was put on the Eucharist and the Mass, which required the leadership of a priest. The Society's conferences, on the other hand, were governed democratically by their membership and remained autonomous vis-à-vis religious authorities. Potential members, leaders and beneficiaries were voted in or out by residing members. Furthermore, the Society gave prominence to the mutual support laymen could give each other to stimulate their devotion. During the weekly meetings, members would pray together and discuss each other's charitable efforts, thereby replacing the joint attendance of the Mass by a fraternal support system meant to promote piety.¹⁷ Incidentally, this did not take away

¹⁶ Due to a lack of sources, it is difficult to determine the exact relation and division of tasks between the Daughters and the Ladies in the Work of the Poor Sick in Ghent and Bruges. The yearly reports of the Work Ghent (ca. 1850-1860) suggest that the Ladies played an assisting role, preoccupying themselves primarily with administration and gathering funds. The manual of the same association, while it did show an image of a Daughter visiting a poor sick, focused explicitly on the Ladies and was almost an exact copy of the manual of the Society, indicating that the Ladies did play a more substantial role and were also visiting the poor. The reports of the Bruges Work of the Poor Sick (1860; 1877) have the title 'Work of the Poor Sick helped by the Daughters of Love' on the front page, but then on the second page, it says 'Work of the Poor Sick helped by the Ladies of Charity' or 'General Assembly of the Ladies of Charity', and the reports continue to report indeed the activities of the *Ladies*. In the reports from 1879 onwards, the Daughters of Charity are no longer mentioned on the title page, but the reports indicate that the Daughters (occasionally) played an assisting role when the Ladies went on their rounds. I am inclined to believe that even during the early years of the associations, the Ladies of Bruges and of Ghent functioned similarly to those in for example Malines and Brussels, albeit in greater cooperation with the Daughters. Considering that the Ladies of Ghent and Bruges held their meetings in the buildings of the Daughters and that it was the clergy man (usually a canon) directing the Work reading the reports, it was not strange that the contributions of the Daughters were acknowledged with so much emphasis. That they were mentioned less and less during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, suggests that the action terrains of the Ladies and the Daughters had by then significantly diverged.

¹⁷ Harrison, *Romantic Catholics*, 201-202. It should also be noted, however, that it was possible for members of the clergy to head a conference, but according to the instructions of the Society's manuals, this should not inhibit the fraternal functioning of the conference. SVP, *Instruction sur les Règles à Suivre dans la Formation des Conférences de Saint-Vincent de Paul* (Paris, 1848); SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855).

from the importance of Mass for the spiritual development of the Society's members, and it remained compulsory for members to attend Mass three times a year on special occasions,¹⁸ but it does illustrate a clear commitment to the fraternal set-up.

In many ways, the Ladies closely resembled the seventeenth century confraternal Charités, but the organization also adopted several of the Society's characteristics. Like the Charités, the Ladies of Charity were in theory a confraternity of laywomen, meaning that the organization was subject to some degree of clerical guidance and that the members were expected to attend the monthly confraternal Mass together.¹⁹ However, it does seem that the Ladies found a middle path between a confraternal and fraternal composition. They were not expected to attend Mass together on a regular basis, except for two times a year on Candlemas and Saint Vincent's feast day, but all the Ladies' general meetings were presided by a member of the clergy who formulated a – often decisive – advice. Just as in the Society, the prayer at the start of each assembly was led by the president of the conference, in this case a laywoman and not a male member of the clergy. Furthermore, although much less centralized, the Ladies copied some of the hierarchical structures of the Society by combining parochial committees with an overarching general council.²⁰

The Society and Ladies' careful construction of the organizations' hierarchy, the leading roles played by laypeople and the outward communication of the organizations' functioning clearly established the lay identity of the Society and the Ladies as well as their commitment to action in the public sphere. For the Ladies of Charity, their search for a middle path between independence and embeddedness within the institutions of the Church meant that they were able to function very similar to their male counterparts, without defying the expectations of women in the Catholic church. After all, women's public presence was not a sinecure, and while the men of the Society were able to maintain their independence in part because men were simply less bound by social constrictions, this was far less evident for charitable women. One can assume that even though in Belgium the Ladies of Charity were founded earlier than the Society, the latter played an important exemplary role and paved the way for a more unrestricted form of lay women's charitable engagement in the years that followed as well.

So, despite their similar sources of inspiration and organizational structure, the Ladies and the Society also differed in many ways. Aside from the first having only female members and the second only male, there were some important differences in

¹⁸ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 51-52: on 8 December (feast of immaculate conception), 19 November (feast of Saint Vincent) and on the day when Saint Vincent's relics are transferred.

¹⁹ Diefendorf, *From Penitence to Charity*, 208.

²⁰ This process would not be completed until ca. the turn of the century (Van der Sypt, *150 Jaar Bewogen Leven*).

terms of organizational structure and culture, as well as with regards to their relationship with the Church. For starters, both organizations appealed mostly to members of the upper classes. While the Ladies of Charity originally also recruited members from more humble backgrounds, the upper-class women of the organization quickly took on more and more tasks during the first years of its existence, including the poor visits, thereby transforming the membership base of the organization to one of upper-class women. Because the Ladies required a substantial financial contribution from all members, women with fewer means did not have access to the organization. This way, a similar situation to that of the seventeenth century was created, in which lower-class women were more inclined to join the Daughters of Charity, even if this did mean living in a community and taking annual vows of poverty, chastity, obedience, and service of the poor. While principally open to members of all social classes, the Society of Saint Vincent equally recruited almost exclusively from the elites. Here too, members needed sufficient financial means to be able to pay the mandatory contribution and enough free time to be able to perform regular visits to the poor. Both organizations required candidate members to be presented before the president of the local division they aspired to join, followed by a vote of approval from the existing members. Candidate members had to possess an immaculate reputation and, most importantly, be devout, practicing Catholics. That candidates were usually introduced via a recommendation by an existing member further fostered the social homogeneity of the organizations.²¹

Although both the Ladies and the Society had an upper-class membership base, the separation between men and women created important differences. The men of the Society were part of Belgium's elite and the upper middle class. They were nobility, lawyers, business owners, politicians, professors, and so on. They were people with the financial means and free time necessary to be a part of the Society, but they were usually also people who had some kind of public role and function in society.²² Even though politics were strictly forbidden in the context of the Society, especially during the first decades of its existence,²³ the conferences did function as a type of gentlemen's club; a place for networking, information exchange, and friendly relations. As such, worldly matters were never far away, even if this was technically not the purpose of the Society.²⁴ As women in the nineteenth century, the Ladies of Charity did not have equal access to

²¹ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 173-175; DLSVP, *Association Charitable des Dames de la Miséricorde de Malines. Statuts et Règlements* (Malines, 1861), 6.

²² In France, the Society started out as a type of student organization, but as the Society expanded its membership, the social background of the members soon evolved upwards. Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*, 75-76.

²³ Lory and Soete, 'Implantation et Affirmation', 67

²⁴ See in particular Jan De Maeyer's chapter: De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate'

the vocations of their male counterparts. They ran the household, took care of their children, and tended to social matters. Charity offered these women a way to practice and disseminate their religious beliefs, but it also allowed them to venture out of the closed milieu of high society, develop their administrative and social skills, and put their networks to good use when gathering funds. So, while this was not a factor of much importance to the men of the Society, charity granted the Ladies access to public life in a way that was otherwise not readily available to them.²⁵

The organizations also differed from one another in terms of independence from ecclesial authorities. Although the Belgian Society did have to concede on accepting the formal authority of the Parisian General Council, the organization (in Belgium and elsewhere) remained an independent lay association without formal clerical supervision, although cooperation with the clergy was essential when establishing new conferences. This was different for the Ladies of Charity, in whose associations members of the clergy did play a role, albeit one that was both limited and hard to define. Foremost, this role should not be exaggerated, as the Ladies themselves performed the home visits, ran the day-to-day operations, and occupied all formal leading positions. Moreover, there were regional differences in the roles played by men in the organization. For example, the Brussels' Ladies operated under the formal, spiritual direction of a secular clergyman, who organized special events such as the association's study days, anniversary celebrations, and other ceremonies.²⁶ The Ladies of Ghent and Bruges were established as part the Work of the Poor Sick, which was presided by a member of the clergy appointed by the bishop, while the female president, vice-president, treasurer, and secretary formed the administrative board.²⁷ In Courtrai, the Ladies were not formally directed by clergy, but they cooperated much more closely than elsewhere. As Filip Santy notes, the Courtrai parish clergy considered the Ladies as their pastoral auxiliaries, and the Ladies were not allowed to visit families without their permission.²⁸ This close relationship was reflected in the Courtrai Ladies' meeting reports, which contained a remarkably large number of transcripts of sermons given to the Ladies by clergy members. However, this did not mean that these Ladies always followed their advice or unequivocally carried out their wishes, and the clergy regularly expressed frustration during the meetings about this.²⁹ The Antwerp Ladies, to the contrary, foresaw no roles

²⁵ Curtis, 'Charitable Ladies'; Van Osselaer, 'Religion, Family and Domesticity'.

²⁶ The first director of the organization was Brussels pastor Ch.-J. Vervloet (van der Sypt, *150 Jaar Bewogen Leven*, 7). See also the report in DLSVPB JV 1941, 6-7, which mentions the transfer of direction between canon De Trannoy (who is mentioned as the director since 1883) to canon Van Reeth, pastor-dean of Notre Dame Laeken.

²⁷ ODPM, *Règlement de l'Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades (Ghent, s.d.)*, 22-25.

²⁸ Santy, 'De Dames de la Miséricorde', 221.

²⁹ DLSVPK JV.

for men in the association other than as honorary members, which could be found in all local conferences but had no function in the association other than providing financial support.³⁰

Male (clerical) involvement at times also determined the way the organization was structured. For example, it was pastor Charles-Joseph Vervloet (1800-1879) who transformed the Brussels grass-root initiative into an association of Ladies in 1840.³¹ In Ghent, it was the bishop and the superior general of the Lazarists and the Daughters who decided that the Ladies would be established in direct cooperation with the Daughters via the Work of the Poor Sick.³² And later, around the end of the nineteenth century, the Brussels Ladies' strive for a federation was complicated by the bishop of Bruges who wished to see the Bruges Ladies head the federation instead.³³ As such, personal convictions and motivations of the involved clergy could have important consequences for the macro-level development of the organization. This fact was all the more important considering that charitable women were expected to display humility and refrain from an overly notable public presence.³⁴ Even though, as will be discussed in the next subchapter, revivalist Catholicism and the various associations and initiatives that sprouted from them engaged lay people to an unprecedented degree, the clergy did remain somewhat apprehensive towards overly independent organization, especially when its members were female.

While the involvement of clergy in a lay charity could potentially limit its freedom of initiative and direction, it could also have advantages. It meant that the organization enjoyed the support of the Church, it could open the door to collaboration in Catholic organizational networks, and it facilitated the collection of funds. That the clergy brought together the Ladies and the Daughters (back) together in the Work of the Poor Sick, for example, brought substantial benefits to the Ladies in terms of knowledge exchange as well as in facilitating relationships with the poor, among whom the Daughters generally enjoyed a good reputation. In addition, it was common for male clergy members to represent and defend the Ladies' interests during Catholic congresses. Even when female members were present, they were seldomly given the stage. All in all, while the Ladies were not always free from male, clerical involvement, their degree of agency was quite high. As Topalov and Heiniger noted in their comparative study of male and female charities ca. 1900, it was difficult for women to exercise influential or leadership roles in charities, and the Ladies of Charity scored very well in this regard. Unsurprisingly,

³⁰ See the overviews of the directions' members and lists of other members in DLSVPA JV.

³¹ van der Sypt, *150 Jaar Bewogen Leven*, 7.

³² ALV 198 Bisschop van Gent Louis Delebecque. Brieven en toespraak naar aanleiding van de oprichting van het Œuvre des Pauvres Malades.

³³ ODPMBR JV 1907, 5-6.

³⁴ Curtis, 'Charitable Ladies', 122.

the authors found that the more segregated the charity, the more likely women were able to express this kind of agency. However, it is important to note that even in charities with exclusively female members, the influence of men was never far away, even if they had no formal power within the organization. This refers not only to male clergy, but also to husbands, fathers, and so on. In general, male lay organizations found it easier to keep control in their own hands, but this did increase the risk of conflict with the clergy and isolation in Catholic charitable networks.³⁵ The Society therefore advised members at the local level to cooperate with and profit from the know-how of other charitable works, in particular the Daughters of Charity, primarily with the purpose of gathering information about and getting into contact with the poor. The Society also urged its conferences to stay in contact with the parish clergy to gather these types of information, but these relationships were often stiffer.³⁶

Perhaps because of this self-dependence, the Society (in particular the Ghent division) was arduous in creating all kinds of auxiliary works to better support the poor families in their care and bind them more strongly to the organization.³⁷ The Society's goal was to set up a network of associations and initiatives that would guide their beneficiaries to a more Christian lifestyle from cradle to grave. The Society's visitors regularized marriages and illegitimate children in cooperation with the Archconfraternity of Saint Francis Regis, they supplied funds to Catholic elementary schools and set up patronages for poor children, they organized evening schools for poor men, distributed 'good' books, offered burial services, and so on.³⁸ The Ladies offered similar services, albeit in a less organized and more ad hoc manner. They would assess the needs of the poor and provide solace on an individual basis, doing much of the same work as the Society (providing help with funerals, gathering clothing and furniture, catechizing), but often without setting up specific, separate works to this end, or doing

³⁵ Fluit, 'Gender and Class', 10-11; Heiniger and Topalov, 'Femmes et Hommes en Charité', 228-231. For a thorough discussion of the clergy's discomfort vis-à-vis the independence of the Society, see: Wouters, 'De Bewogen Start'.

³⁶ SVP, *Instruction sur les Règles à Suivre dans la Formation des Conférences de Saint-Vincent de Paul* (Paris, 1848); SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855); SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874). De Maeyer notes that the clergy's skepticism subsided after the revolutionary year of 1848, and that by 1870, the conferences of the Society were actively integrated in the parochies: De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate', 189.

³⁷ The extensiveness of these networks of auxiliary works differed across regions, with especially the Ghent conferences taking the lead in introducing new initiatives. see: De Maeyer, Heyrman and Quaghebeur, 'Een Glorierijk Verleden', 283-284.

³⁸ See for example: SVP, *Guide Pratique des Conférences de Saint Vincent de Paul* (Brussels, 1852); SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855).

so in a highly local fashion.³⁹ The Ladies also referred the poor to other works they believed could further assist them, such as the Work of Saint Francis Regis, maternity societies, or infirmaries ran by the Daughters of Charity. Nevertheless, the main axis of Vincentian practice remained the poor visit and most of the auxiliary works were in some way conceived as an extension of the visit. For instance, works created by the Vincentians were usually reserved (or obligatory) for members of the households visited, and they made the decision who to refer to which works based on their observations during the visits.

In general, the Society was very well organized compared to the much more loosely structured Ladies of Charity. Not only did the Society build an elaborate network of auxiliary works, but it also developed a clear and efficient hierarchy within the organization that mirrored its French counterpart. At the top of the international structure, the Parisian General Council formed the 'efficient means of moral unity that gives strength to the Society'.⁴⁰ Especially the personae of the presidents of the General Council were of much importance in steering the general direction of the organization, although its basic maxims remained the same.⁴¹ The Belgian Society was headed by the Chief Council (French: *Conseil Général*, Dutch: *Algemene Raad*) in Brussels, which primarily dealt with administrative matters and functioned as the link between the General Council (French: *Conseil Supérieur*, Dutch: *Hoofdraad*) and the Central Councils (French: *Conseils Particuliers*, Dutch: *Centrale Raden*). The latter were situated at the level of the provinces or dioceses and were tasked with promoting the establishment of new conferences and making sure older conferences maintained their zeal. At the local level, the parish or district conferences were grouped in Special Councils (French: *Conseils Particuliers*, Dutch: *Bijzondere Raden*), which coordinated the activities of on average twelve conferences.⁴² Because of the sheer number of conferences (378 by 1863, 625 by 1881, and 1273 by 1912),⁴³ this pyramidal structure allowed the Society to keep track of and give direction to the activities of its members.

The Ladies of Charity, on the other hand, were organized in a much more decentralized manner, had a distinct local focus, and maintained much independence

³⁹ The Ladies of Charity of Saint-Trond, for example, organized a 'Christian education of charity' specifically for the housemothers of the families they visited, who were obliged to attend (DLSVPST JV 1866).

⁴⁰ SVP, *Guide Pratique des Conférences de Saint Vincent de Paul* (Brussels, 1852), 54-55.

⁴¹ The Parisian General Council aggregated the Belgian conferences, published the yearly reports of the Belgian Central Councils, and provided advice when questions arose about the correct interpretation of the manuals (Lory and Soete, 'Implantation et Affirmation', 57). The circulars of the presidents of the Parisian General Council were published in the Belgian editions of the manual from the 1850s onwards.

⁴² Lory and Soete, 'Implantation et Affirmation', 45.

⁴³ Lory and Soete, 'Implantation et Affirmation', 52.

towards each other. At the parish or city level, the Ladies were organized in conferences (also referred to as committees). In many places, the conference remained the highest level of the association, while in others, conferences operated in a cooperative fashion, usually in the context of bigger cities.⁴⁴ In the latter case, the presidents of all conferences gathered in a Council to determine the general direction of the association, appoint new presidents, and organize yearly general assemblies. There was great variety in the number of conferences that could be overseen by a Council: circa 1905, the Antwerp association counted 9 conferences, Bruges 8, and Brussels 28.⁴⁵ For clarity, I will henceforth refer to the highest level (whether aggregated or local) as an association of Ladies. Around the turn of the century, the Brussels' association launched a call for the establishment of a confederation under their leadership, which the other associations slowly but gradually joined.⁴⁶

This differences between the organizations in terms of order and hierarchy were also reflected in the way the organizations produced and kept written material. The Society was incredibly arduous in keeping members lists, overviews of its finances, records of its works, minutes of meetings, internal communications, and so on. Aside from year reports and regularly revised manuals, the Society also produced several periodicals intended for its members, such as the *Maandschrift* published by the Ghent Central Council, as well as for a wider audience, such as the almanac *Allemands Gerief* published by the Antwerp Central Council, in addition to regularly publishing monographs on the history and different facets of the organization. These types of publications highlighted the organization's productivity and efficiency, thereby reflecting the members' concern for public legitimation as opposed to the more contemplative and inward-looking nature of the seventeenth-century Charités. The Ladies equally kept track of their members and finances, and they published manuals as well as year reports, but were otherwise far less inclined to publish. Unfortunately, the lack of an overreaching organizational structure that the associations' archives were kept with less care, and most of it was either lost or has not been made accessible. Yet, although they did so less frequently and less detailed than their male counterparts, the fact that the Ladies of Charity equally produced such

⁴⁴ In those cases, committees were sometimes also referred to as 'conferences' or 'sections'.

⁴⁵ DLSVPBr JV 1905; DLSVPA JV 1906; DLSVPB JV 1906.

⁴⁶ The smaller associations (mostly those on the countryside) were more eager to join his confederation than the larger ones which grouped several committees. 'Affiliated committees' were mentioned for the first time in the Brussels Ladies' year report of 1902. The first committees to join the confederation were Vilvorde, Aerschot, Enghien, Forest, and Jette-Saint-Pierre. Courtrai joined between 1903 and 1906. (DLSVPB JV 1902; 1906)). Because there is a gap in the Brussels Ladies' year reports between 1906 and 1931, it is unclear when exactly the other associations joined. The Antwerp Ladies stated that they were affiliated in 1924, but it is possible that this happened before (after 1906) (DLSVPA JV 1924, 9). By 1931, as far as I can tell, the Brussels Ladies' year report mentions all Belgian associations of Ladies outside of Brussels as affiliated (DLSVPB JV 1931).

documents affirms that for charitable women too, their public image and visibility had become a more significant matter by the nineteenth century.

That the Ladies were less concerned with administration, hierarchy, and publicity than the Society attested to their dedication to their work with the poor rather than with the reputation of their organization itself. This attitude fit within societal expectations of women, particularly Catholic women, whose social engagement was appreciated as long as they remained humble, modest, and unobtrusive.⁴⁷ For the Society, it was a completely different matter. As men of the upper classes, the Society's members did not shy away from promoting a strong public presence for the organization, but this also required great care for the reputation of the organization, both morally and in terms of efficacy and orderliness. A lack of clerical control and guidance meant that they were fully responsible for the proper organization and funding of their association, and clerical skepticism encouraged them to keep a close eye on the activities of the local conferences. After all, the Society wished to uphold a certain prestige surrounding the organization, not only to attract new members but also to not endanger the image of existing members.

1.2. *Revivalism, political Catholicism, and the call for social action*

Despite some important differences in organizational structure and culture, the Ladies and the Society of Saint Vincent were very similar charities with a shared historical inspiration in the works of Saint Vincent de Paul and dedication to the practice of home visits. An important element in the origins and identity of the organizations was their lay character, as they sprouted from a similar desire of Catholic lay people to engage more actively in the practice and propagation of their belief. Indeed, the creation and success of the organizations was linked to a wider post-revolutionary religious revival that took place during the early and mid-nineteenth century, which promoted the performance of devotion through sacrifice and neighborly love rather than mystic contemplation. This revivalist energy was visible in many parts of Europe, both in Catholic and Protestant milieus. In Belgium, the revival gained momentum in the aftermath of the country's battle for independence, which concluded in 1831 with a new, progressive constitution that centered around the principle of freedom. As such, in Belgium, the religious revival was spurred by newfound religious freedom and coincided with the early process of nation-formation, which resulted in a close entwinement between Catholicism and the country's national identity.⁴⁸ Thus, the revival also formed a strong impetus for the

⁴⁷ For a thorough discussion of the language of humility and obedience in Catholic discourses, but also the possibilities of subversion and agency within this language, see: Suenens, *Humble Women, Powerful Nuns*.

⁴⁸ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 187-188; Van Osselaer, 'Reform of Piety', 108. See also Richard Schaefer's contribution: Schaefer, 'Program for a New Catholic *Wissenschaft*'.

development of a political Catholicism in Belgium, which, in turn, significantly influenced the nature and structure of the social field (including social assistance as well as education), in which Catholic organizations and institutions gained a prominent role. At the same time, growing social malaise turned topics related to social assistance into heated debates.

In Belgium, the symbolic meaning of the country's independence was shaped to an important extent by the struggle for religious freedom. The policies of the Austrian, French, and Dutch rulers from the late eighteenth century onwards left a deep impression on the inhabitants of the territory, the great majority being Catholic, and the (mythicized) memory of this past played an important role in determining the political and cultural path the new nation would embark on. Starting in 1780, the Joseph II ascended the throne of the Habsburg Monarchy, of which the territory included the Southern Netherlands. Unlike his mother Maria Theresia, who had introduced enlightened reforms carefully and gradually, Joseph sped up the pace. In the religious domain, the goal of the Josephinist reforms was to establish a Christian enlightenment, which centered around stripping the Church from its excesses and introducing a praxis-centered piety.⁴⁹ The Josephinist reforms encountered much resistance, in particular the civil tolerance for non-Catholics (because it challenged the supremacy of the Church), the abolishment of contemplative orders and reduction of confraternities, and the severe limitation of pilgrimages, processions, and religious feasts. Often, the opposition against Joseph's regulations resisted in particular the authoritarianism with which they were implemented, as trends towards practiced piety were already present in the Netherlands and several of Joseph's regulations were but legal enforcements of accustomed practices.⁵⁰ In 1789, Joseph's reforms led to an open revolt in which the clergy assumed a leading role, thereby strengthening their religious and social authority.⁵¹

The Republic of the United Belgian States which was established in the wake of the Brabantine Uprising was only short-lived, however, as the Southern Netherlands came under revolutionary French rule in 1794. This event heralded a period of radical rationalization, secularization, and centralization. Unlike the Josephinist reforms, which were driven by an effort to enlighten Catholicism, the French rule was characterized by a genuine hostility towards the Church. Religious organizations were disbanded, churches were transformed into 'temples of reason', public religious practices like processions and pilgrimages were forbidden, religious statues were removed (and often destroyed), and men and women religious were forced to pledge an oath of hate to the

⁴⁹ Rogiers, 'Verlichting Metterdaad', 165-173. For more about Enlightened Catholicism, see: Schneider, "Katholische Aufklärung"; Vanysacker, 'Verlicht Ultramontaan'.

⁵⁰ Van Osselaer, 'Reform of Piety', 102-103.

⁵¹ Vandermeersch, 'Het Verzet van het 'Belgisch' Episcopaat'; Van Osselaer, 'Reform of Piety', 104; Witte, 'De Constructie van België', 31-32.

monarchy and loyalty to the constitution.⁵² Those who refused were deported or executed, and several Daughters of Charity lost their lives in this way.⁵³ Although the aggressiveness of the French rule was tempered by Napoleon's concordat with Rome in 1801 and his recognition of the liberty of worship, the state continued to maintain strict control over religious institutions and practices.⁵⁴ When in 1815 Willem I, sovereign of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, took over control of the territory of the Southern Netherlands, the religious question immediately caused much tension. The Catholic leaders still rejected any containment of the Church and, in particular, continued to resist the equality of all religions before the law. Willem, a Protestant ruler, nevertheless imposed a constitution that confirmed religious equality, and proceeded to implement laicizing policies, strengthen state supervision, and limit Catholic educational and charitable activities. Again, the restrictions on the religious freedom of the Catholics and the lack of special protection of the Catholic Church caused widespread unrest and resistance among Belgian Catholics. This dissatisfaction, which had been building for many decades, would provide an important motivation for the Belgian Revolution of 1830.⁵⁵

Although the impact of the years 1830/31 on the daily lives of the new nation's inhabitants should not be overstressed and continuities were manifold, they did symbolize the advent of Belgium as a modern nation state that would forge its own path amidst the cultural, political, and socio-economic challenges of that time. How those challenges were dealt with, had important consequences for the ways in which religious devotion could be experienced, performed, and legitimized. Or, conversely, how it could be challenged. Of great importance to the country's future was its constitution, which established that Belgium would be a parliamentary monarchy. This constitution was drawn up in a spirit of unionism between Catholics and liberals, who agreed to put strong emphasis on fundamental rights, in particular the freedom of religion, press, education, association, and opinion. This way, with the memory of religious oppression fresh in mind, the Belgian Catholics decisively chose to support the right to liberty.⁵⁶ Precisely this embrace of the principle of freedom has been identified by historians as the choice that allowed the Belgian Catholics to establish and expand a substantial role for the Church in the social, educational, and political spheres, and to contribute significantly

⁵² Rogiers and Van Sas, 'Revolutie in Noord en Zuid', 240-243.

⁵³ Dinan, *Women and Poor Relief*, 144.

⁵⁴ Rogiers and Van Sas, 'Revolutie in Noord en Zuid', 244-246; De Maeyer, 'A Varied and Remarkably Landscape', 51; Van Osselaer, 'Reform of Piety', 104-106.

⁵⁵ Witte, 'De Constructie van België', 37-38; Van Osselaer, 'Reform of Piety', 103-106; Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 40.

⁵⁶ Van Osselaer, 'Reform of Piety', 103-107; Witte, 'The Battle for Monasteries', 104-105.

to the construction of Belgium's modern society.⁵⁷ Therefore, it is useful to spend some time on the types of political Catholicism that existed in Belgium, their attitudes towards the relationship between Church and State, and their societal ideals.

Belgian political Catholics in the nineteenth century did not form a unified block, but represented different ideas, ideals, and strategies to achieve those. Here, I will follow Vincent Viaene's typology of nineteenth century political Catholicism in Belgium, which he defined by means of two sliding scales: liberal Catholicism – ultramontanism and intransigence – transigence. Broadly speaking, ultramontanism can be understood as a current in Catholicism that strongly emphasized the Church's independence vis-à-vis the State, and that referred to the supranational authority of Rome (*ultra montes*). As such, ultramontanes were skeptical towards worldly authorities as well as towards civil and political liberties. Liberal Catholics, on the other hands, were characterized by a greater openness towards these liberties out of an optimism about the possibilities that the principle of liberty could offer Catholicism in modern society. It is important to note that liberal Catholicism was a form of political Catholicism, and not a cross-over of liberalism and Catholicism, nor a variation of liberalism. Next, intransigence refers to the refusal to compromise and to high-minded principles, as opposed to transigence, which implies greater openness to compromise and pragmatism. Intransigent Catholics, then, were characterized by a certain radicalism, a greater hostility towards the liberal state, an insistence on religious principle, and a tendency to neglect the autonomy of the temporal. Transigent Catholics, on the other hand, were more inclined to acknowledge the independent logic of the temporal and to maintain pragmatic deference towards the State. This did not mean, however, that transigent Catholics were necessarily more accepting of liberalism or secularism. Thus, Viaene distinguished four possible combinations of Belgian political Catholicism, thereby bringing attention to the multifaceted and dynamic nature of the attitudes of Belgian Catholics in and towards modern society.⁵⁸

During the late eighteenth century, when Catholicism and the authority of the Church were threatened by enlightened and revolutionary regimes, ultramontanism in Catholic Europe north of the Alps was characterized by an intransigent attitude towards the state. These intransigent ultramontanes felt that the internal freedom of the Church was infringed upon by the State, and they took on a rigid, defensive position, invoking the authority of Rome against the State.⁵⁹ This conflict reached its height around 1810-1815, when Napoleon's break with the pope inspired ultramontane Catholics to envision

⁵⁷ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*; Deferme, 'The Influence of Catholic Socio-Political Theory'; Moeys, *Subsidiary Social Provision*.

⁵⁸ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 37-40.

⁵⁹ Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 38-39.

a post-Napoleonic order founded on Catholic doctrine, and to transform their ideas into a substantiated political theory. In Belgium, this intellectual work was carried out mostly in the aristocratic circle surrounding count Henri de Merode (1782-1847), eldest son of one of Belgium's most prominent noble families, and his nephew, Ernest de Beaufort (1782-1858). This group of intransigent ultramontanes defended the idea that religion was the essence of society, without which society could not exist. After all, the social relations and the *raison sociale* that constituted society were based on the eternal truths of religion, and without such shared traditions and unwritten rules civil society could not function. In this view, they were heavily influenced by the ideas of German baron Ferdinand Eckstein (1790-1861), who believed that the moral code professed by the Church would unfold the path towards societal rebirth. The French ultramontane movement, too, would be brought back to life by Eckstein's writings, in turn inciting Frenchman Félicité de Lamennais (1782-1854) to convert intransigent ultramontanism into an ideology that could be engaged in the modern political space of conflict.⁶⁰

The balance and natural order of society as it was safeguarded by the Church, these Catholics believed, had been completely disturbed by the French Revolution and liberalism, which had replaced the God's sovereignty with popular sovereignty, and had thereby removed the moral framework that was needed to keep man aware of his duties towards himself, others, and God. As they argued, man had too much aptitude to evil and leaving him to his own devices would not end well. After all, man inherently sought guidance, hierarchy, and authority. The liberal democratic system, which took away God's sovereignty and uprooted man by destroying traditional corporatist structures, would therefore eventually degenerate into despotism, thereby transferring popular sovereignty to one person and eventually paving the way for the Antichrist.⁶¹ As such, the intransigent ultramontanes believed that man and society required an inseparable combination of religious faith, morality, and authority, all of which could (and should) be provided by the Church of Rome. The State (the body) should therefore acknowledge the indispensability of Catholicism (the soul) and act accordingly by protecting the interests of the Church and by not interfering in the societal domains that naturally belonged to the Church's influence, such as education and charity. If the secular power did not respect this authority, de Merode and his like-minded ultramontanes argued, the pope had the right to resistance by means of releasing the subjects of this power from their duty of obedience, thereby adding a populist dimension to their political vision.⁶²

By the late 1820s, when the Southern Netherlands were ruled by Willem I, de

⁶⁰ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 40-46.

⁶¹ De Beaufort argued that this mechanism had already taken place when the Revolution led to the Napoleonic regime (Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 47).

⁶² Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 40-54; Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 40-41.

Merode and his group of intransigent ultramontanes decisively turned towards political activism by joining power with the liberals in a 'union of opposition' against the Dutch regime from 1827 onwards. Around this time, the emerging current of liberal Catholicism began to influence Belgium's ultramontanes, especially during the years of the Belgian independence and during the construction of a new constitution (1830-1831), in which figures like de Merode took active part. Once again, the Belgian Catholics surrounding de Merode and de Beauafort were first inspired by Eckstein, around whom developed a group of intransigent liberal Catholic thinkers in France and Germany. Lamennais, too, became an ardent supporter of intransigent liberal Catholicism, and would be strengthened in his vision by the example of what Catholics in Belgium were able to achieve during the constitutional deliberations. In essence, the ultimate goals of intransigent ultramontanes and liberal Catholics were quite similar, both professing a theocratic dream and considering traditional religion as the essence of society, without which there was no future. They differed in terms of the mechanism they believed would to this goal, with the former seeing the solution in reestablishing the Church's formal authority over worldly power, and the latter counting on the principle of absolute liberty to ultimately render the State obsolete. The transigent liberal Catholic view was based on the recognition that the modern era presented different challenges, but also new opportunities. Instead of arguing for special protection for the Church or the establishment of religious control over the State, they believed that freedom would eventually naturally lead to theocracy, because modern liberties were the political reflection of the moral freedom to choose between good and evil. This freedom had been gifted to man by God and could therefore only truly exist in relation to God. Thus, there should be a strict separation of Church and State, and the State could act only as a minimal regulating agent while maintaining absolute freedom in everything relating to spirituality and morality, including education and charity. Because the population was religious and because only the Church had true authority in these matters, perfect liberty would allow for the ultimate triumph of the Church, and theocracy would guarantee the continued existence of perfect liberty.⁶³

While the Belgian intransigent ultramontanes did not go as far as the liberal Catholics in their optimism in the possibilities offered by the principle of freedom itself, they did gradually agree that in the present political context, the Church was best served by liberty. They became convinced that any non-Catholic government would always use repressive measures against the Church, that it would not be possible to establish a Catholic state or executive in the immediate future, and that acceptance of civil and political liberty therefore constituted the minor evil. As they saw it, they had nothing to lose by embracing liberty, and liberty for all was the price to be paid by Catholics for

⁶³ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 64-70. See also: Rogiers, 'De Gedaantsewissing'.

their own liberty. As such, they embraced civil and political liberty not for the sake of liberty itself, but to guarantee that the Church would be free of oppression. This openness to seeing the value of liberty was also stimulated by their cooperation with the liberals, and when this alliance laid the foundation of the new constitution, the Belgian intransigent Catholics put their ideas into practice by putting their weight behind freedom of religion and, to make this freedom complete, that of education and association. In addition, they achieved that the matters of education and social assistance were left undecided, leaving these fields open to private initiative. This way, the Belgian intransigent ultramontanes substantially assimilated elements of liberal Catholic thought as a way to adapt their vision to the context of the time. This way, they adapted their apocalyptic fear of the liberal state and accepted it as a necessary, albeit imperfect, step towards the Kingdom of Christ, thereby also letting go of their corporatist dreams (which would return some forty years later, as we will see). Incidentally, they considered the Belgian revolution an example of the people making use of their right to revolt with implicit approval of the Church, which at the same time confirmed the legitimacy of their intransigent ultramontane reliance on popular support for the Church and the intransigent liberal Catholic expectation that the path of absolute freedom would indeed lead to the triumph of the Church.⁶⁴

However, only a few years after Belgium's independence, the Belgian Catholic's sympathies for intransigent liberal Catholicism were tempered by pope Gregory XVI's condemnation of liberal Catholicism, and more specifically, Lamennais' radicalizing ideas, in his encyclicals *Mirari Vos* (1832) and *Singulari Nos* (1834). Here, the pope made it clear that religious indifferentism (the opinion that no one religion is better than the other) was not acceptable, thereby rejecting liberal Catholicism. Moreover, the pope did not want to bestow the Church with the task of guiding humanity through the challenges of modernity, most certainly not if this meant needlessly challenging or subverting the authority of temporal rulers. This Roman position took the wind out of the sails of intransigent Catholicism in general and therefore left the intransigent ultramontanes in confusion as well.⁶⁵ Following these events, the Belgian liberal Catholics disassociated with Lamennais, discreetly avoiding statements about the path to theocracy via absolute liberty, but rather publicly supporting modern liberties as a matter of principle respect for the constitution.⁶⁶ They were able to introduce an early form of the subsidiarity principle in Belgian politics, which entailed that decision-making should be done by the lowest or least centralized competent authority. In the years that followed, they were able to acquire a strong degree of municipal authority,

⁶⁴ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 40-59.

⁶⁵ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 60-61.

⁶⁶ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 74-75; Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 41.

which prevented overly centralized governmental power and established a strong executive dependence on the cooperation of local levels, where the influence of Catholicism and Catholic parochial clergy and institutions were often substantial. After this achievement, the already strained intransigent liberal Catholic movement lost much of its appeal in Belgium, and after 1848, it practically disappeared from the Belgian political scene.⁶⁷

Transigent liberal Catholicism became the dominant voice in Belgium's parliamentary right, which developed after the end of unionism. Now that the revolutionary period had come to an end, these Catholics argued that the country needed a conservative political movement that was specifically adapted to the particular Belgian political context and the country's own traditions. Of great importance to the development of transigent liberal Catholicism was the University of Louvain, in particular the young professor Charles Périn (1815-1905), who contributed substantially to streamlining the basic premises of this current. These Catholics, among whom also again de Merode, now directed their arrows against the liberal Left, arguing that behind the Left's promotion of liberty hid an effort to establish a central State that was hostile towards the Church and would do everything in its power to secularize society. However, while they adamantly denounced a secularized society, they also let go of the intransigent dream of restoring religious unity and establishing theocracy. Instead, they accepted a difference between political liberty and the spiritual liberty offered by Christianity, thereby making a clear distinction between religion and politics and presenting a more realist, digestible, and less utopian vision than that of the intransigent Catholics. This way, they combined support for liberty in so far as it protected freedom of religion with a conservative program centered around authority, tradition, hierarchy, and moral order.⁶⁸ Indeed, to protect true freedom for the Church, they argued, liberty should not degenerate into democracy and a strong government above parliament was needed to ensure order. As such, the Belgian transigent liberal Catholics decisively returned to conservatism, but they remained markedly more open to political liberties than their conservative counterparts in the rest of continental Europe.⁶⁹

As this overview has shown, political Catholicism in Belgium was characterized by its variety and originality, which drew much attention from foreign political and religious thinkers as well. However, all these different types of political Catholicism (including that of transigent ultramontanism, which will be discussed later in this subchapter) did share a common premise, namely that society could only be saved by the Church and that the mission of politically active Catholics should therefore be to

⁶⁷ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 76-77; Lamberts, *Het Gevecht met Leviathan*, 151-153.

⁶⁸ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 77-86.

⁶⁹ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 80; 87-88.

further that goal. In turn, this desire was rooted in the religious revival of the first half of the nineteenth century, a popular devotional movement that gained a markedly strong footing in Belgium and, via the myriad of religious initiatives it inspired, had a lasting impact on the societal role of Catholicism in Belgium. The revival gained this success not only from its wide influence in a country where Catholicism was the religion of the vast majority of the population, but also from the persistent efforts and important achievements of political Catholics, whose own energetic commitment to their cause(s) were spurred and legitimized by revivalist sentiment. Indeed, political Catholicism and religious enthusiasm in the social sphere mutually reinforced each other, sharing at their core the revivalist dedication to redeem post-Revolutionary, modern society via the guidance of the Church.⁷⁰ In the socio-cultural sphere, this desire manifested in an explosion of popular religious fervor that was characterized by a distinctly demonstrative and social spirituality. It stressed the importance of *practicing* piety for the sake of the salvation of society in its entirety, not just the individual or the community of believers.⁷¹

As such, the nature of the revival was remarkably extrovert, which contrasted with the quiet contemplation promoted by Protestantism, as well as with the post-Tridentine emphasis on ascetic spirituality and introvert penitent piety.⁷² The popularity of pilgrimages, processions, religious celebrations, charitable activities, and socially active confraternities reflected the spiritually motivated social activism that lay at the core of the revival and which was characterized by a dedication to bringing about change in society by joint effort. The goal was not solely to develop one's own piety in an individualist or intellectual sense, but rather to practice piety in a performative and communal manner to grow God's presence in society. This way, one could strengthen their own faith while at the same time working towards the salvation of all. As historian of French romantic Catholicism Carol Harrison argued, the social spirituality and lay apostolate of the revival were clear reactions against the individualism of revolutionary liberalism. Revivalist Catholics believed that without faith, there could only be a collection of individuals. Only through an acknowledgement of the transcendent could a meaningful society develop, because 'religious sentiment made the individual aware of his fellows and created the bonds of obligation and affection that gave society density and significance'.⁷³ Underlying this social activism was a dark romantic ethos centered around the glorification of self-sacrifice for the greater good.⁷⁴ Catholic self-sacrifice

⁷⁰ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 112; 168; 200; 185.

⁷¹ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 185-186; 197; Bircher, 'Religious Communities', 142; Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, 108; 115.

⁷² Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 171-172; Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, diss., diss., 107-108; Viaene, 'De Ontplooiing van de 'Vrije' Kerk'; Suenens, *Humble Women, Powerful Nuns*.

⁷³ Harrison, *Romantic Catholics*, 4.

⁷⁴ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 186-189.

served as a means to restore the disturbed moral equilibrium of a sinful society. The goal was not simply to convert the unbelievers, but to sanctify society in spite of itself through sacrifice in the form of Catholic prayer and works. Like Christ himself, romantic Catholics set out to heal the moral wounds of mankind by atoning for their own sins as well as those of the other. Rather than a collection of individual souls, society was conceived of as a social organism, and the spiritual offer of the individual therefore functioned as a public force that made possible collective redemption. This idea of reversibility of expiation and the accompanying heroic conception of personal, voluntary sacrifice were central tenets to nineteenth century romantic Catholicism.⁷⁵

This activist impulse was also visible in the characteristics of the Catholic organizations and institutions that flourished during the revival. For starters, pure contemplation became rare, while active or mixed religious institutions gained popularity. Some older contemplative orders, like the Augustinians and Bernardines, were able to somewhat withstand this evolution by rekindling their traditional parish or charitable work, but in general, even their less strict version of the contemplative ideal lost much of its attractiveness in the nineteenth century. Active orders, which were less or not bound by monastery walls enjoyed much success during the revival. Especially the Redemptorists and Jesuits, which were exempt orders and therefore directly subject to the Holy See, contributed greatly to turning it into a genuine popular movement. The members of these orders in particular were esteemed for their high education levels, constituting a 'genuine clerical elite' that had influence over secular clergy as well as the Catholic higher classes.⁷⁶ They created an extensive network of secondary schools and created or supported the establishment of lay organizations (mostly in urban environments). Of great success were also their domestic missions, during which they travelled the country preaching, converting, and hearing confessions, staging impressive religious ceremonies, distributing devotional pictures, and setting up campaigns (like the one against blasphemy, which entailed that one had to promise to pay a fee for every swear). Their events and activities often put strong emphasis on collective atonement and individual responsibility for the redemption of the community as a whole, offering the population the opportunity to repent *en masse* for the damage done by the French Revolution and bring an end to the moral decay, wars, disease, and famine that had followed.⁷⁷ As such, the Jesuits and Redemptorists were strong proponents of the spirituality of the revival, which centered around the idea that through active piety, one could atone for his own sins as well as those of society, thereby contributing to the

⁷⁵ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 187-188; Van Osselaer, 'Reform of Piety', 108. See also Richard Schaefer's contribution: Schaefer, 'Program for a New Catholic *Wissenschaft*'.

⁷⁶ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 172-173.

⁷⁷ Van Osselaer, 'Reform of Piety', 109; Van Osselaer, 'Reform of Piety', 109-110; Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 186-187; 197-198; Viaene, 'De Ontplooiing van de 'Vrije' Kerk', 44-55.

restoration of the Kingdom of Christ.⁷⁸

Regular clergy, who took vows and lived together in orders or confraternities, also played an important part in the revival. Between 1830 and 1850, many new, often small-scale religious communities sprouted across the country. While the exempt orders promoted the spirit of the revival among the population, these men and women religious were able to significantly expand the influence of Catholicism in the social sphere, notably the fields of education, health care, and charity. They created and staffed primary, secondary, and vocational schools, hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly, rehabilitation shelters for prostitutes, institutions for the mentally ill, and so on.⁷⁹

The secular clergy, furthermore, which was comprised of archbishops, bishops and local parish priests bound to a particular area, equally played an undeniable yet less decisive role in the revival. Many non-exempt orders and congregations were created by secular priests and protected and promoted by archbishops and bishops. Furthermore, mission movements, Sunday schools, and lay organizations were dependent or benefitted greatly from cooperation of the local clergy. However, during the nineteenth century, parish priests were often criticized for their lack of education, inflexibility, and refusal to share authority by the upper echelons in the Church as well as by the Jesuits and Redemptorists, who organized most of their retreats. Both in their self-understanding and in the eyes of the majority of the Catholic people, however, the priests were considered the spokesmen of their flock and the first line of contact with God. Because they were familiar with the resident of their parishes and because they often came from more humble social backgrounds, they were easily approachable as well.⁸⁰ In their effort to promote revivalist, popular devotion, the Redemptorists and the Jesuits, who fulfilled an important role in the formation of secular clergy, made substantial efforts to have parish priests carry out a more Christological, empathetic, and lenient religion. This anti-rigorist shift was another characteristic of the revival that was heavily promoted by the Redemptorists and the Jesuits, and that tied into the popular, accessible aspect of the movement. For example, under the adage ‘lion in the pulpit, lamb in the confessional’, priests were encouraged to be understanding and supportive in the confessional, especially towards women, whose receptivity to and participation in the revival was recognized and strongly valued by the Church (more on that later).⁸¹

The explosion of lay *œuvres* or works, too, was a principal characteristic of the

⁷⁸ Dusausoit, ‘L’Éducation Religieuse et les Jésuites Belges; Lindeijer, Luyten, and Suenens, ‘The Quick Downfall and Slow Rise of the Jesuit Order’; Van Osselaer, ‘Reform of Piety’, 109-110; Viaene, ‘De Ontplooiing van de ‘Vrije’ Kerk’, 76.

⁷⁹ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 173-178.

⁸⁰ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 178-179.

⁸¹ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 173-174; 184; Flew, *Philanthropy and the Funding of the Church*, 40-41.

revival. The concept of the lay apostolic mission was a new phenomenon of the nineteenth century, which entailed that men and woman of the world assumed the role of active protagonists of the Church and promoters of the faith, without committing to membership in a religious institution or priesthood. Lay apostolate could take be performed via political commitment, informal/non-organized action on the streets or in the factories, or lay organizations. Aside from political action, from the mid-1830s onwards a number of Catholic factory owners introduced different charitable and educational initiatives for their workers, for example through housing and schools for the children (staffed by congregations, of course).⁸² Charity, religious conversion, religious education, and the regularization of marriages were the preferred fields of action for lay apostolate. From the 1840s onwards, different kinds of lay organizations began to spring up around the country. This could happen at the initiative of lay people themselves, like in the case of the Ladies of Charity, which started out as a grass-roots charitable initiative of working women, or in the case of the Society of Saint Vincent in Paris, which was created by lay students. Usually, these initiatives were in some way directly dependent on the approval and protection of the secular clergy, which, at the same time, was often eager to keep this authority intact. In the case of the first association of Ladies in Brussels, originally named ‘The Work of Mercy’ (Dutch: *Werk van Barmhartigheid*, French: *Œuvre de la Miséricorde*), the direction of the organization was immediately assumed by pastor Charles-Joseph. Vervloet.⁸³ Such a directing role did not necessarily entail much work, seeing as the members ran the day-to-day operations, but it did allow the clergymen to keep some control on the popular religious activities in their area. Similarly, the first Belgian Society of Saint Francis Regis was established by the same Brussels pastor Vervloet together with pastor Louis Ocreman (1792-1864) in 1839. This lay association was originally created in Paris in 1826 by Jules Gossin (who would become the general director of the Society of Saint Vincent in 1844) with the purpose of regularizing illicit unions and children, and would enjoy much success among charitable laymen in Belgium throughout the nineteenth century.⁸⁴

While there were examples of productive cooperation between secular clergy and

⁸² Gadille and Mayeur, ‘Introduction’, 5-6; Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 180; Harrison, *Romantic Catholics*, 6; Suenens, *Humble Women, Powerful Nuns*, 11; Heyrman, ‘Imagining the ‘Bon Patron Catholique’.

⁸³ van der Sypt, *150 Jaar Bewogen Leven*, 7.

⁸⁴ Originally, the *Société Charitable de Saint Jean-François Régis* was created in 1824 in Paris by attorney general Auguste Sebastien Julien Gossin. The pastors Louis Ocreman and Vervloet established a Society in Belgium, explicitly directed at providing the poor with a means to marry or legitimize their relationship and offspring. The Society of Saint Francis Regis was closely associated with the Society of Saint Vincent in Belgium. De Beukeleer, ‘Het Fonds Saint Jean-François Régis’, 7; Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 180; Wouters, ‘De Bewogen Start’, 32; Duprat, *Usage et Pratiques de la Philanthropie*, 958-960.

charitable lay people to create lay apostolic organizations, regular clergy, in particular the active orders, were generally more prolific in fostering lay works than secular clergy. At times, they were confronted with great difficulty when trying to achieve approval of the parish priests. This was the case for example with the Belgian Society of Saint Vincent, especially during the first phase of its establishment and expansion. First, in Liège, the secular clergy pressured the bishop to disband this first attempt to establish Society in Belgium, which had been undertaken in 1941 by Redemptorist Charles Manvuyse, rector of the College of Saint Michael in Liège. The secular clergy already felt ill at ease about the independence of the Jesuits and Redemptorists, who had steadily built a competing pastoral network.⁸⁵ In Brussels, resistance against connection from the side of General Council and Périn, who was one of the first members as well as a transigent liberal Catholic (he would later change his views and become an ultramontane advocate). In general, lay apostolic organizations confronted the secular clergy with a new type of religious activity that challenged the traditional workings of the pastoral. As Wilfried Wouters notes in his account of this early period in the Society's history, the acknowledgment of lay organizations bestowed with an apostolic mission was a new phenomenon in the Church, and this development was driven primarily by the exempt orders, who considered lay apostolate to be the ideal means to combat the dangers of modern society: liberalism, socialism, individualism, and secularization. The secular clergy, from their end, were often not as convinced. During the 1830s and 1840s, many priests and bishops gave preference to a pragmatic, tactical cooperation with the state and were more partial to the liberal Catholic option, after *Mirari Vos* especially in its transigent form.⁸⁶

Indeed, as members of an exempt orders directly under the authority of the pope, the Jesuits were heavily inclined towards ultramontanism and actively combatted the mennaissian legacy among the secular clergy. After being reinstated in 1832, they became devoted proponents of transigent ultramontanism, the fourth branch of political Catholicism discerned by Viaene, which they disseminated via their influence in upper class circles and their growing role in lay and clerical education.⁸⁷ In Belgium, this transigent ultramontanism had its roots in the great seminary of Ghent, where it had a major influence on a group episcopal leaders from 1816 onwards, among whom bishops Louis Delebecque of Ghent and Jean-Baptiste Malou of Bruges, both of which later made an important contribution to the establishment of an association of Ladies in their

⁸⁵ Incidentally, after being disbanded, the ex-members of the Society of Saint Vincent founded a Society of Saint Francis Regis to take cover, and in 1845 they were able to gain approval from the bishop. Wouters, 'De Bewogen Start', 30-32; 38.

⁸⁶ Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 40-42; Wouters, 'De Bewogen Start', 30-32; 39-41.

⁸⁷ Lindeijer, Luyten, and Suenens, 'The Quick Downfall', 31-32; 34-38; Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 100-102.

diocese, respectively in 1849 and 1854. Under patronage of the pope, his support being expressed for instance in *Mirari Vos*, the Jesuits contributed significantly to the further dissemination of transigent ultramontane ideas among Belgium's Catholic upper classes and clergy.⁸⁸ Transigent ultramontanism was markedly conservative, closely connected to the political and theological doctrines of the ancien régime, as opposed to intransigent ultramontanism, which could be considered a 'new ideological departure under the cloak of tradition'.⁸⁹ In politics, the transigent ultramontanes defended a minimal program that allowed them to join the transigent liberal Catholics in the conservative Right. However, they fundamentally disagreed on the function and desirability of liberty. The transigent ultramontanes placed authority above liberty, and they rejected the idea of popular sovereignty. In their view, Throne and Altar were each sovereign in their own domains and had to work together to keep stability in the political and spiritual order. Although they idealized monarchy and agreed that the constitution was not entirely consistent with the principles laid out in *Mirari Vos*, they usually did not go so far as to reject Belgium's constitution but respected it mostly out of a pragmatic acceptance of the situation as it was.⁹⁰ The transigent liberal Catholics, from their end, were less radical than their intransigent counterparts and equally feared the unpredictable outcomes of democracy. This way, they agreed on the necessity to protect the careful balance that was Belgium's parliamentary monarchy, and make sure to respect the constitutional counterweights to the Chamber of Representatives.⁹¹

While they differed in terms of the premises that underlay their political action, these transigent branches of political Catholicism often advocated the same conservative policy outcomes. With regards to the issues of pauperism and moral decay, which were high on all political Catholics' agendas, both considered charity to offer the solution. In the nineteenth century, pauperism was considered a new form of poverty characterized by a lack of labor in an industrial society. In Belgium, pauperism formed the most urgent socio-economic problem of the 1840s and 1850s. While industrialization continued to intensify, population pressure increased, wages declined, and, from the mid-1840s onwards, the proto-industrial sector of cottage industry imploded due to increased foreign competition on the textile market. Also during the mid-forties, Belgium was struck by the European potato failure and several Cholera epidemics. Catholics watched these developments with great concern, denouncing the moral decay and misery created by industrialization, especially in the large cities and the Flemish countryside.⁹² The

⁸⁸ Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 41-42; Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 100-102; Luyten and Suenens, 'Jesuits'.

⁸⁹ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 100.

⁹⁰ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 106-108.

⁹¹ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 87-88.

⁹² Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor*, 137-139; Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 89-90.

transigent liberal Catholics, among whom Périn, did not consider capitalism to be at the root of these issues. In the economic field, too, liberty ought to be respected as the corollary of the Christian right and duty to search for self-perfection, which required freedom to do so. In this view, the capitalist system was not at fault, but the immorality or flawed beliefs of its actors. The solution therefore lay in pervading the socio-economic sphere with the Christian sacrificial ethos, which would create responsible and thrifty businessmen as well as grateful and disciplined workers. To achieve this utopian capitalist ideal, the liberal Catholics saw salvation (only) in the practice of charity. For starters, charity formed a means to keep social assistance out of the hands of the state and reducing its role to providing a legal framework for charity. In addition, it offered a concrete way to instill a sacrificial ethos in the leading classes and to achieve partial redistribution of wealth. Lastly, charity functioned as a channel through which the Catholics could ‘treat’ the poor in an all-encompassing way, which combined offering them material and physical relief (usually coupled to certain behavioral conditions), teaching them a spirit of resignation (which was necessary to endure life as a wage worker), and providing them with the moral basis and life skills to survive and make the best of things.⁹³

Transigent ultramontanes equally glorified charity as the best solution for the issues of poverty and moral degeneration. They set themselves apart from transigent liberal Catholics by their strong emphasis on inequality as a natural aspect of the world as created by God. They valued authority above all, and by extension, believed that hierarchy and inequality were normal and necessary. With regards to their conceptualization of charity, these premises translated into a pronounced paternalist view focused on resignation of the poor rather than their self-development. Often, this attitude had its origin in the idea that misfortune and misery were the result of sin, and the solution to these problems was therefore a personal responsibility.⁹⁴

For Catholic conservatives of all backgrounds, the Vincentian organizations provided a welcome and suitable channel for their charitable fervor. This engagement was driven by sociopolitical goals and aspirations, as well as an underlying revivalist urge towards joint spiritual activism. The Society, which informally functioned as a gentlemen’s club in addition to a charity, attracted members of the Catholic nobility, bourgeoisie, and upper middle class, ranging from barons to dentists and bankers. While liberal Catholics, certainly played an important role in the organization, the most dynamic, active members of the organization were predominantly ultramontane, especially those of Ghent.⁹⁵ Figures like factory owner Joseph de Hemptinne and baron

⁹³ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 89-92.

⁹⁴ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 102-103.

⁹⁵ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 184-185;

Etienne-Constantin de Gerlache, for example, were influential ultramontanes who believed that a network of charitable associations formed an essential weapon in the battle against liberalism, and who were able to make use of their position to foster the early expansion of the Society. Indeed, after the Jesuits had given up their leadership of the Belgian Society of Saint Vincent to the General Council in Paris, their friends remained in place.⁹⁶ Liberal Catholics were also represented in the ranks of the Society, however, such as Charles Périn, and politician Pierre De Decker.⁹⁷ As women, overt political engagement did not befit the Ladies, but they were part of the same conservative effort, nonetheless. Many of them were prominent figures in Catholic upper-class circles, some also the wives and daughters of members of the Society, who contributed to the dissemination of the ideas that underlay the organizations. In addition, the associations of Ladies were often supported by prominent figures in Belgium's ecclesial leadership.⁹⁸

While charitable lay people had many associations to choose from to practice their apostolate, among others the Society of Saint Francis Regis and the Franciscan Third Order, those seeking a relatively uncomplicated channel to perform the most obvious kind of charity, namely poor relief, had few other options available than the Vincentian organizations. Charity in the form of healthcare and education were predominantly in the hands of religious orders, who grew more and more specialized and moved away from general poor relief.⁹⁹ The Vincentian organizations' dedication to poor relief in both a material and spiritual sense was exceptional in this regard, and it is not surprising that these associations (especially the Society of Saint Vincent) are often considered the number one example of organized lay charity in nineteenth century Belgium.¹⁰⁰

Not only did the organizations and their purpose align with the aspirations of political conservatives, they also, more broadly, thanked this success their compelling

⁹⁶ Wouters, 'De Bewogen Start', 41-42.

⁹⁷ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 185.

⁹⁸ Such as the bishops Louis-Joseph Delebecque (Ghent), Jean-Baptiste Malou (Bruges), Johan Joseph Faict (Bruges).

⁹⁹ Curtis, 'Charitable Ladies', 146-7 (specifically about Dames and Filles de la Charité); Wynants, 'Les Religieuses de Vie Active', 251-2; Art, De Maeyer, de Pril and Kenis, 'Church Reform and Modernity', 111; Bircher, 'Religious Communities', 142.

¹⁰⁰ Usually, the Society of Saint Vincent is the only example given of organized lay charity in Belgium, sometimes with a very short additional reference to the Ladies of Charity. See for example in Van Molle, 'Social Questions and Catholic Answers', 105-106; Heyrman, 'Catholic Charity and Public Poor Relief', 10-12; Gerard, *De Christelijke Arbeidersbeweging in België*, 29; Art, De Maeyer, de Pril and Kenis, 'Church Reform and Modernity', 111-112; Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 46; Van Osselaer, 'Reform of Piety', 113; Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor*, 129. The same was true for the late nineteenth century repertoire of public and private sources of social assistance: Ludovic Saint-Vincent, *Belgique Charitable: Charité, Bienfaisance, Philanthropie etc., etc.* (Brussels, 1893).

embodiment of the spirit of the revival. This was not only true for the form and structure of the organizations, which provided an innovative alternative to the traditional lay confraternity and reflected the revivalist urge towards a strong lay apostolate. It was also true for the organizations' social purpose, which heavily emphasized the importance of practice over theory and promoted a direct, meaningful interaction between giver and receiver. The Society's first official manual of 1846 explained that 'By placing itself from the beginning under the invocation of Saint Vincent de Paul, in order to obtain from this great servant of God some rays of the spirit of charity and faith with which he was inflamed, the Conference indicated quite clearly that it was not by purely theoretical studies, but by works and only by works, to the extent of its own weakness, that it proposed to follow from afar the examples of her blessed patron'.¹⁰¹ Thus, by associating themselves with Vincent de Paul and his legacy, the organizations made clear their commitment to an active, public apostolate as opposed to contemplative seclusion. The Vincentians practiced the virtue of sacrifice within the social sphere for the sake of social good, and they believed it was through this charitable action that the door could then be opened for the proclamation of the word of God. This way, they proclaimed to follow the example of Christ himself, who 'had in the first place wanted to practice that which he would then teach men; *cœpit facere et docere*; our desire is to imitate, according to our weak strengths, this divine example'.¹⁰² Socially activist, spiritually Christological, and focused on self-perfection in a fraternal setting, the Vincentians provided a specific, typically revivalist, yet open and flexible format for charity that maintained its relevancy even after the revival had subsided by mid-nineteenth century.

1.3. *In defense against secularization*

By the mid-1840s, liberal Catholics and ultramontanes alike had moved away from their more radical, intransigent attitudes, giving preference to a transigent, pragmatic, and highly conservative political orientation. Although the basic premises of their thought differed substantially, these two currents of political Catholicism were able to find a common ground that allowed them to join forces in an effort to expand the socio-political influence of Catholicism. The liberals, from their end, became more and more anxious about the fast growing Catholic educational and charitable networks.

In 1846, the liberals created their own party, in which anticlerical sentiment and secularist ambitions gained increasing importance. With regards to the topic of social assistance, the liberals were no less paternalist than the Catholics, but they proposed a

¹⁰¹ SVP, *Règlement de la Société de S.^t-Vincent-de-Paul* (Brussels, 1846).

¹⁰² SVP, *Règlement de la Société de S.^t-Vincent-de-Paul* (Brussels, 1846); ODPM, *Règlement de l'Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades* (Ghent, s.d.).

combination of a free market, a degree of government action to promote economic development in Flanders (where the potato and textile crisis hit the hardest), and an effective, preventative offer of public social assistance.¹⁰³ In general, liberals felt that religious freedom had to be protected by the state, not only because religious freedom was a constitutive element of individual liberty, which stood at the heart of their ideology, but also because they did believe that Catholicism (like other religions) provided the individual with socially useful moral framework. However, religious freedom was an individual right and a personal experience, and the Catholic Church could therefore not claim to be the holder of the only truth, nor could it be acknowledged as an entity with natural rights.¹⁰⁴ By extension, while liberals mostly did believe that Catholic morality was beneficial to society, they were weary of the Church's influence in the fields of education and social assistance. After all, Catholic power in the social and political fields were mutually reinforcing, which, in the eyes of the liberals, threatened the independence of the public power.¹⁰⁵

In 1847, the liberal party was able to win the elections on the basis of this program. This victory marked the start of an era of intense political conflict between the liberals and Catholics, at the heart of which stood the discussions about private (or Catholic) versus public social assistance and education. In the first years after the election, however, the new government was confronted with issues from a different nature. By the mid-nineteenth century, the poverty issue had become so dire that destitution was considered endemic to wage labor.¹⁰⁶ During the late 1840s, the textile and potato crises and the outburst of several cholera epidemics plunged large portions of the population, especially in Flanders, into deep poverty. In turn, the reduced spending power of the people took its toll on the economy in general, with businesses going bankrupt and the state needing to intervene repeatedly and systematically from 1847 onwards. By then, half of the Flemish population relied on private and/or public poor relief, but the resources of these institutions and organizations diminished.¹⁰⁷ The Charity Bureaus only disposed of limited means, and as the number of people in need grew, its list of criteria became more extensive. The Bureau did not necessarily consider the severity of applicant's need, but focused on factors such as the number of children and their age (the more and the younger the children, the greater the chance of receiving support), the sex and health of the main breadwinner (families with young, employed fathers for example were no longer eligible after the 1850s) and the conduct of the applicants (prostitutes or drunks were not considered for support). This way, the Bureau tried to

¹⁰³ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 92; 131; Witte, 'The Battle for Monasteries', 107-108.

¹⁰⁴ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 128-129.

¹⁰⁵ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 128-132.

¹⁰⁶ Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor*, 127.

¹⁰⁷ Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België', 245-252.

limit the number of families relying permanent relief, while at the same time lowering the allowances they received.¹⁰⁸ On the streets, this social and economic malaise created tension, unruliness, and rebelliousness, especially among the unemployed workers.¹⁰⁹ The Catholics were criticized by the liberals for thinking that charity would solve these issues, like in the caricature below, which pictures several different ‘types’ of Catholics going on a ‘tour of the Flandres’ to collect. In front, holding the collection box, is Barthélémy de Theux de Meylandt, one of the participants of the National Congress which drew up the constitution, accompanied by charitable ladies, Daughters of Charity, and a priest.

In 1848, material grievances among the impoverished population and revolutionary agitation erupted in a wave of revolutions that swashed over large parts of Europe. Belgium did not experience large protests, but here too, the events in neighboring countries caused great anxiety among the government, the clergy, and the elites. In the yearly report of the Brussels’ conferences of the Society read before their assembly in August 1848, at the height of the violence of the revolution in France, we can read that ‘it is almost without hope that we fight against indigence. Misery is a ravine, in which



Liberal caricature of the Catholic collections in response to the socio-economic malaise, 1847

¹⁰⁸ Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor*, 105-106; 125-126.

¹⁰⁹ Gubin and Nandrin, ‘Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België’, 245-252.

the poor eternally keeps falling whatever we try to get him out'. The report stressed that the organization's charity could only do so much to better the situation of the poor. On the one hand, it expressed disappointment at the lack of charitable engagement among the rich, who did not recognize their Christian nor social duty. On the other hand, the report explained that charity could only be perfect if coupled to work, but the 'well of labor' had dried up. Despite the hopelessness of the situation, the report concluded that, while many Catholic works had been forsaken because of the revolution, the Society would resist the storm, and if it was all a trial given to them by God, they would show that growing misery only increased their charity.¹¹⁰

Not only did the Catholics fear revolutions from below, but also the re-emergence of a hostile, revolutionary, and expansionist France. Inspired by patriotic enthusiasm, the Belgian liberals and Catholics momentarily overcame their differences to conserve the nation and its institutions. This was to great satisfaction of King Leopold I, who pursued a neo-unionist, conservative collaboration between transigent Catholics and moderate liberals during the 1840s.¹¹¹ To nip the threat of the masses in the bud, the government transformed itself into a police state that quickly and violently repressed emergent revolutionary hotbeds. Revolutionaries were arrested – among whom also Karl Marx, who had been living in Brussels since 1845 – or executed before they could rouse the workers. The support for their ideas was growing however, especially among the petty bourgeoisie and in university circles. To definitively appease them, the government lowered the electoral tribute to its constitutional minimum, thereby increasing the number of eligible voters from 46 to 79 thousand, and it also abolished the tax on press, allowing for voters to adequately inform themselves.¹¹² In combination with the Catholic effort in providing (superficial) relief to the population, this approach succeeded in averting major troubles.¹¹³

The experience did focus the attention of Catholics and liberals alike on the looming danger presented by socialism and its potential to mobilize the population, among whom sickness, unemployment, and hunger were still rampant. For the Catholics, it became clear that their vision of modernity did not only have to compete with the liberal secularist dream, but also with the socialist collectivist program. During the years immediately after 1848, when Catholics and liberals temporarily engaged in a practical cooperation, this realization incited conservative Catholics to denounce socialism more explicitly as an errancy. As Harrison notes, however, utopian socialism and romantic Catholicism as it developed during the revival did share certain viewpoints, especially

¹¹⁰ SVPB JV 1847, 9-16.

¹¹¹ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 155-156.

¹¹² Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België', 256-261.

¹¹³ Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België', 252-254.

their skepticism towards liberalist individualism. Both considered the liberal quest for individual autonomy incompatible with the creation of a cohesive society because it disconnected the individual from their social relationships, thereby denying the primordially of meaningful social bonds in society and subverting the social fabric that held society together. In other words, they both believed that societies, made up out of social ties and interactions, require a sense of *meaning*, a connection beyond the needs and wishes of the individual. Especially problematic in the eyes of conservative Catholics was the socialist quest for social equality. Instead, they promoted an organic view of society in which each member had its place and purpose, subordinate to the interests of the community, and lived in harmony with each other on the basis of Christian morality. In such a society, there was no need and no risk for revolutions.¹¹⁴

Both transient liberal Catholics and ultramontanes espoused charity as the primordial means through which balance and harmony ought to be preserved, and this conviction grew even stronger in light of recent events. The concept of charity presupposed the permanent existence of social difference. Without social difference, charity was not possible, and without charity, there was no way for the rich to answer to the spiritual requirements attached to their status. God had gifted them a comfortable position in society, but this gift had to be repaid, and it was precisely the charitable exchange between rich and poor which allowed for God's love to flow. These ideas were of course strongly put forth by the Vincentians; they formed the basis for their activist spirituality which they put forth ever more strongly in the wake of the revolutions. The Society declared that in light of this catastrophe, charity was no longer solely a Christian, but also an eminently social work.¹¹⁵ Yet, the Evangelic law of charity, which the Vincentians considered the 'best religious and social code of humanity', was not understood well enough among the upper classes.¹¹⁶ Indeed, the Society proclaimed, 'the rich have not recognized their duties, and before long the poor reclaimed what they called their rights'.¹¹⁷

In the spring of 1849, when dealing with the aftermath of the turmoil, the Brussels' conferences reported that the list of poor kept growing longer, but that the financial means of the conferences diminished and that the number of poor adopted and assisted equally decreased. This observation worried the Vincentians, especially during a time when misery continued to take on 'such frightening proportions'. At the same time, these circumstances proved once and for all the necessity and social value of the home visits, which they considered the example *par excellence* of the enormous individual effort

¹¹⁴ Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 38.

¹¹⁵ SVPB JV 1847, 8; SVPB JV 1849, 20.

¹¹⁶ SVPB JV 1847, 10.

¹¹⁷ SVPB JV 1849, 30.

needed to bring the rich and the proletariat (their word) together. That the Vincentians were prepared to make this sacrifice, was exemplified by their fight against poverty as well as the revolution it had nourished. With emotion, the report told of three confraters (whose name or identity were not mentioned, conform the Society's adherence to humility and discretion) who had lost their lives 'on the barricades', and who may as well had been killed by a poor, 'but surely this poor had never received in his miserable hovel one of these young men'.¹¹⁸

The 1848 'spring of the people' not only turned the Catholic opinion against socialism, but it also led to a powerful resurgence of radical intransigent ultramontanism among many ultramontanes during the 1850s, while more moderate ultramontanes moved to the (now mostly transigent) liberal Catholic camp. To an important extent, this change was driven by Pius IX, whose experience with the revolution in Rome led him to a reactionary reflex. Pope Pius IX had ascended the papal throne in 1846, and, during the first years of his long papal career, had proven himself open to the ideas of liberal Catholics. The 1848 revolution in Rome came as a complete shock to him. Appalled at the rebellious population's violent anticlericalism and lack of respect for the Holy See, he sought refuge in Sicily and called upon an intervention by the Catholic powers, in particular France. While the pope had lost his authority in his own territory, he gained the aura of a martyr and his reputation among foreign Catholics increased in esteem, allowing him to put forth the papacy as being at the head of the counter-revolution. In this, the pope, heavily influenced by his conservative entourage in Gaeta, developed a stance that was pronouncedly skeptical of modern liberties and parliamentary regimes, and of post-revolutionary political and social thought in general.¹¹⁹

The feelings of betrayal, disenchantment, and antipathy felt by the pope, who took the events quite personally, were shared by Catholics from other countries. In the eyes of many Catholics, the events definitively delegitimized the liberal Catholic option. Instead, a broad, intransigent ultramontane movement arose that rejected modern liberties and demanded that the Church enjoyed a privileged position in society. After all, the intransigent ultramontanes argued, religious indifferentism allowed misguided and temporal powers to undermine the stability and influence of the Church, thereby threatening the moral beacon of society and paving the way for decay. Once again, the ultramontanes turned against the state, or at least cultivated a deep distrust for the state, which they considered a threat towards the freedom of the Church rather than its

¹¹⁸ SVPB JV 1848, 24. One of the deceased was archbishop Denys-Auguste Affre, whom was asked by Ozanam to act as a mediator in the 'fratricide' of the Revolution. During his intervention, the archbishop was hit by a lost bullet (Harrison, *Romantic Catholics*, 231). Bishop Affre was also one of the driving powers behind the reestablishment of the Ladies of Charity in Paris (Udovic, 'What About the Poor?', 89).

¹¹⁹ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 109; 491-495; 500; Harrison, *Romantic Catholics*, 236-237; Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 47-48.

protector.¹²⁰ Among the population, the pope's trauma instigated all types of initiatives to his support, such as prayers, petitions, and collections. The Society, too, declared itself loyal to the pope, denounced the 'sacrilege' of the revolutionaries, organized special masses during which the poor were asked to pray for the pope, and reveled in the letter he sent from Gaeta in 1849, in which he praised the Society's contribution to the 'triumph of the Catholic Church on its enemies'.¹²¹ This mobilization remained limited in scope however, mostly because the socio-economic malaise did not allow for prolonged financial support (in some regions, like Flanders, large-scale collections were considered misplaced for this reason) and because order was restored in Rome by 1849. However, this short-lived mobilization of the Catholic public prefigured the large-scale mobilization a decade later. Both in Catholic politics and among the Catholic population, the years 1848-1849 laid the foundation of an influential ultramontane current that would characterize the second half of the nineteenth century.¹²²

In Belgium, Catholic skepticism towards liberalism and the state in general furthermore reached new heights in response to the secularist policies introduced by the liberal government precisely during this period of growing Catholic intransigence. The liberal government embarked on this secularist mission already by the end of 1848, thereby bringing an end to the pragmatic, anti-revolutionary cooperation between them and the Catholics. For example, the Society in Brussels reported that they had to cease their patronage of released convicts following a royal arrest. In 1845, the Society stated, it had set up this work precisely at the request of the (then mixed) government, but now it had been transferred to the public administration.¹²³ General outrage from the side of the Catholics broke out in 1850, when the Rogier-Frère government targeted its arrows towards secondary education. With this bill, the government foresaw an extensive network of public schools (for boys), which was to carry out its mission towards the civilization of the population. Provocatively, the bill invited the Church to take part in this education, but only in the context of religious courses and only alongside other recognized cults. This clear example of religious indifferentism was met with a fierce counter-response from the side of the Catholics, who launched massive petitions and turned up the heat in parliament. They demanded respect for the religion of the majority and for the authority of the municipalities. With the events of 1848 still fresh in mind, they made the case that only a solid Catholic education could prevent the cancerous spread of socialist ideas, which were only further stimulated by the liberals' misguided

¹²⁰ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 499-506; Harrison, *Romantic Catholics*, 238.

¹²¹ SVPB JV 1849, 28-29; SVPA JV 1849, 5-6.

¹²² Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 500; 507-508.

¹²³ SVPB JV 1848, 25. The Antwerp Society presented the abandonment of the patronage of liberated convicts as a choice of its own, saying that only few of them were of good will and prepared to repent, and that it was therefore not fair to devote so many resources to them.

secularism. Even the pope joined in on the issue and declared the bill ‘a declaration of war’, further contributing to the unfaltering attitude of the Belgian political Catholics and the episcopate, and even creating doubt among a fair share of moderate liberals, many of whom were still religious and felt deference towards the pope.¹²⁴ To increase the pressure on the government, the bishops forbade the clergy to participate in the new official schools in any way. Finally, in 1852, a compromise was negotiated that entailed that Catholicism would be the only religion taught in the public schools (and non-Catholic students received exemption), that religion would be acknowledged as an essential part of the educational program, and that no handbooks could contain information that opposed Catholic teachings.¹²⁵

Around this time (1848-1852), the Society’s conferences in the major cities also began focusing more strongly on the instruction of the children, youth, as well as the adults of the families under their care. From its inception, the Society was imbued with a strong impulse towards instruction, which developed into a more pronounced paternalist approach during these years of increased anxiety about the influence of socialism and the threat of secularization. In general, the Vincentians (both the Society and the Ladies) believed that good charity entailed more than handing out alms. Instead, charity should offer an all-encompassing approach that included the alleviation of immediate physical suffering, the anointment of moral wounds, the teaching of religious principles and resignation, as well as the guidance towards finding a stable source of income, for example through professional education. This idea was summarized in the adage that ‘no work should be foreign’ to the Vincentian organizations.¹²⁶ As the Brussels Society explained in 1849, the intelligence of the poor had to be enlightened so that they would be more capable to discern their interests amidst the chaos of the times. Indeed, the Vincentians strongly believed that the source of the suffering of the poor was often their own ignorance, their misunderstanding of their own needs, and their inability to find the path towards material amelioration and moral resignation. They reasoned that if the people were taught to better guide themselves, they would be happier and more moral, and in turn, become more receptive to the advice of the wealthy who were trying to help them.¹²⁷

So, to put these ideas into practice, the Society organized so-called patronages. Originally, the practice of patronage was defined in broadly and the term was used to denote the guidance of the poor in general in a way that reflected the Society’s desire to support and guide the poor comprehensively. Patronage would be increasingly

¹²⁴ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 521-522.

¹²⁵ Gubin and Nandrin, ‘Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België’, 289-293.

¹²⁶ SVP, *Règlement de la Société de S^t-Vincent-de-Paul* (Brussels, 1846), 21; ODPM, *Règlement de l’Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades (Ghent, s.d.)*, 14. This stipulation was repeated in later manuals.

¹²⁷ SVPB JV 1847, 10-12.

associated with the guidance and surveillance of children and youth, in which context it referred to the combined effort to protect the children (exclusively boys), place them in guarding schools,¹²⁸ find them a good school, and make sure they attended regularly. This, the Society declared, was one of the main tasks of the visitor because, considering the ‘indifference of the man of the people towards the instruction of his child’, the child was condemned to ignorance without this patronage.¹²⁹

The members of the Society went to great lengths to assure the boys’ education. In several Catholic schools, the visitors were allowed to enter in the classrooms to encourage their young protégés with some good words and to offer them small rewards. At first, the follow-up of the schooling children was up to the individual visitor, but gradually, special committees were created in all major cities to follow up on the patronages.¹³⁰ The first ‘Patronage of Schoolchildren’ (French: *Patronage des Écoliers*) was created by the Society of Ghent already in 1846 and a manual was published to be used by all the patronages in Belgium.¹³¹ This patronage was overseen by a number of appointed members of the Society who paid a weekly visit to the schools and gave the children a score from 0 to 3 on politeness, attendance, conduct, cleanliness, and dedication. These scores were written down on a card, which was handed to the child, who then had to give this card to his parents. During the weekly visit to the family, the parents had to hand the card over to the visitor, thereby assuring that the parents had seen the results and returning the card to the administration of the Society. There was no fixed consequence if the card did not return or if the scores were bad, but a low score did mean that the child would not be given the rewards which were regularly distributed, for example in the form of school supplies, food, and clothing.¹³² During the 1850s, the patronages spread to other conferences and the system was simplified, so that the Vincentians let the teachers evaluate the children using monthly reports, which they then collected and used to determine which children would receive rewards.¹³³

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Society’s youth patronages constituted an

¹²⁸ The goal of guarding schools (‘écoles gardiennes’ or ‘salles d’asile’) was to place children from 2 to 7 years old of poor or working families under supervision during the day. Regular schools did not allow children under the age of 5. The guarding schools provided the children with activities as well as instruction, which would facilitate the transition to primary school. *Œuvre des Écoles Gardiennes de Gand. Jubilé de Cinquante Ans Célébré le 28 Décembre 1896* (Ghent, 1897).

¹²⁹ SVPB JV 1850, 37-39; SVPA JV 1849, 12-13.

¹³⁰ SVPA JV 1849, 12-13.

¹³¹ SVP, *Patronage des Écoliers. Règlement* (Brussels, 1846); ASVPG 2.5.2. Het Patronaat der Leerjongens (1850).

¹³² SVP, *Patronage des Écoliers. Règlement* (Brussels, 1846), 5-8.

¹³³ SVPA, *Conférences d’Anvers. Procès-verbal de l’Assemblée Général du 5 Décembre 1852*. In Brussels, the patronage was officially created in 1855 (SVPB JV 1861, 14-15). The first patronage in Liège was established in 1863 (SVPL JV 1939, 33).

essential work of the Society that most conferences took part in, especially in the big cities, where the goal was to keep the children of the street and away from immoral influences. After finishing school, the visitor would ideally make sure that the now young man started an apprenticeship in a factory (or elsewhere) and continue to monitor his work and moral state, but in practice, these young men were often able to escape the Vincentians' surveillance after leaving school.¹³⁴ In the early 1850s, the Ghent Society created an 'Association of Young Workers' (Dutch: *Vereeniging van Jonge Werklieden*) to 'provide society with virtuous workers by shaping their morals and instilling them with Christian feelings'.¹³⁵ This initiative, too, was followed by the other conferences.¹³⁶ Specifically, the young workers, who could only be admitted if they received communion and attended Sunday mass each week, were expected to spend their Sundays together in the room of the association (from 8 to 11:15 AM and from 1:15 to 8 PM, or slightly different hours in other cities). Here, they would receive religious instruction, pray together, do math and reading, but they could also relax and enjoy some 'honest entertainment' under supervision. To promote frugality and financial foresight, the Vincentians moreover motivated the apprentices to participate in the saving fund of the association. Again, the young boys received a rapport, which would be discussed with the parents by a visitor, if needed accompanied by some admonitions about their upbringing. Even the employers of the boys would be asked 'as much as possible' about their behavior. The Society occupy itself with the education of children and adolescents, but also concerned itself with the religious instruction of adults. After all, the Vincentians believed that to a considerable extent, misery was caused by ignorance, and a better understanding of religious principles would elevate the poor and arm it against disruptive influences. Thus, during this period it also became common practice for conferences to invite (or oblige) the men of the families under their care to receive religious instruction for an hour in the evening or on Sunday, and they were encouraged to bring their sons with them.¹³⁷ As such, the Society was 'in contact every week with the schools, with the children, the apprentices and the workers of all ages and all professions'.¹³⁸

The Ladies of Saint Vincent were equally concerned with the education of the poor under their care and focused specifically on girls (and later also women). There are few sources of this period, limited to the Ladies of Ghent. The handbook of their Work of the Poor Sick stipulated that the organization 'occupies itself also with the free

¹³⁴ SVPB JV 1850, 37-39.

¹³⁵ SVP, *Vereeniging van Jonge Werklieden* (Gent, s.d.).

¹³⁶ SVPA JV 1854, 10-13; SVPB JV 1855, 22-24; SVPB JV 1861, 14-15.

¹³⁷ SVPB JV 1855, 19-22; *Conférences d'Anvers. Procès-verbal de l'Assemblée Général du 5 Décembre 185*; SVPA JV 1854, 13-14.

¹³⁸ SVPB JV 1849, 39.

instruction of young poor girls'.¹³⁹ Incidentally, at that time, primary and secondary education for girls was completely in the hands of private initiative, but the issue gradually became part of the wider debate about education during the second half of the 1850s.¹⁴⁰ According to the year reports of the organization between 1849-1854, two schools had been established immediately after the Work was created (one in the suburbs and one in the city), where the Daughters involved in the Work took care of the education of young girls. The school in the city was attended by 30 girls, almost all of which had been recommended by the honorary members of the Work, while the school in the suburbs received 150 girls.¹⁴¹ The Work, or rather the Ladies and the benefactors, paid for the maintenance of the buildings, for the coal, for the remuneration of the Daughters, for the rewards that were handed out at school, for the clothing and school fees of the girls, and so on.¹⁴²

The virtue of humility, of doing 'charitable action without glare and without noise like all truly Christian works',¹⁴³ would not allow the Ladies of the Work to take credit for the establishment of these schools, but I do not doubt that they were actively involved in the process. The creation of the Work of the Poor Sick in Ghent itself was driven by the initiative of several prominent upper-class women, among whom Mina Lammens (dates unknown) and Louise de Hemptinne (1826-1901). They were able to generate enthusiasm for their idea from bishop Delebecque, who, in the course of 1849, took the necessary steps to bring the plan into fruition. In a personal letter to Mina Lammens, which underscores the influential position of women such as her, the bishop promised that 'everything will be done according to your desires' at the inauguration of the new Work on the 31st of May 1849.¹⁴⁴ The families Lammens and de Hemptinne, as well as bishop Delebecque, stood at the center of the network of radical ultramontanes in Ghent, and their active social engagement was intrinsically connected to their religious zeal.¹⁴⁵ Louise was the sister of Joseph de Hemptinne, who played a leading role in the Society

¹³⁹ ODPM, *Règlement de l'Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades (Ghent, s.d.)*, 14.

¹⁴⁰ Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België', 293.

¹⁴¹ ODPMG JV 1849, 12-13; 1852-1853, 5-6; 9-10; 1853-1854, 9-10.

¹⁴² ODPMG JV 1853, 15. In 1853, the Work spent almost 6000 francs on the schools (including the remuneration of the Daughters) out of a total expenditure of 28000. On a sidenote, the Work thus disposed of significant means that, despite the more limited size of the organization, was comparable to the budget of the Society's divisions. For comparison: in the year 1854, the Antwerp conferences of the Society had a combined expenditure of 19000 (SVPA JV 1854), and the Brussels conferences spent 17000 in 1850, which increased to 37000 in 1855 (SVPB JV 1850; 1855).

¹⁴³ ODPMG JV 1855, 5.

¹⁴⁴ ALV 198 Bisschop van Gent Louis Delebecque. Brieven en toespraak naar aanleiding van de oprichting van het Œuvre des Pauvres Malades.

¹⁴⁵ Suenens, *Humble Women, Powerful Nuns*, 220-221; Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 47-48; Lamberts, 'Joseph de Hemptinne'.

and fulfilled the roles of president of the Special Council of Ghent (1849) and national president of the organization (1871). Joseph was also one of the founders of the journal *Le Bien Public* in 1853, which functioned as the organ of radical ultramontanism (and was backed by Delebecque).¹⁴⁶ Their sister Marie, moreover, was the founder of the Work of the Guarding Schools (French: *Oeuvre des Écoles Gardiennes*) in 1846, which formed an important element in the Society's patronages. She, too, received help from Delebecque to realize her plans.¹⁴⁷

Thus, during the years after the revolutions in neighboring countries, the Belgian Catholics actively expanded their networks of social and educational works, which formed important tools in their efforts to answer to acute social needs, but which were also indispensable to their dissemination of an increasingly ultramontane piety and their campaign against socialism and secularism.

The intransigence and radicalization of the Catholic opinion was solicitously observed by the liberals, but in 1857, it came to an intense conflict with spilled over to the population and put the country on the verge of civil war, and which is commonly referred to as the 'Culture Wars'. The concrete provocation for this conflict was the 'Monastic Law' (French: *Loi des Couvents*, Dutch: *Kloosterwet*), which stood at the core of the conflict between Catholics and anticlericals. In 1854, bishop of Bruges Jean-Baptiste Malou (1809-1864), a prominent ultramontane and supporter of Vincentian charity,¹⁴⁸ published a highly polarizing pamphlet on the superiority of charity vis-à-vis public poor relief. In this complex text, Malou specifically argued that congregations and orders should be acknowledged as juridical persons so that they could legally manage the charitable donations and legacies left to them.¹⁴⁹ Technically, this juridical issue fell under a law of 1796 that was implemented by the French rule, which assigned the management of such charitable funds to the public poor relief institutions. Since 1830, however, it had increasingly become common practice to execute the will of the testators. This had allowed some religious institutions to acquire large patrimonies, and it fostered Catholic control over social assistance. In 1849, a little before its daring bill on secondary education, the liberal government decided that the law of 1796 had to be strictly complied to, a decision that was maintained by the subsequent liberal governments and that was ensued by growing controversy. In 1855, a unionist

¹⁴⁶ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 569.

¹⁴⁷ *Œuvre des Écoles Gardiennes de Gand. Jubilé de Cinquante Ans Célébré le 28 Décembre 1896* (Ghent, 1897), 5-6.

¹⁴⁸ Bishop Malou had received education from the Jesuits in Rome, and in Belgium, he was member of the Marian congregation of Namur from 1848 onwards (Wouters, 'De Bewogen Start', 40). Malou was also involved in the establishment of the Ladies of Charity in Bruges, presiding the solemn inauguration of the organization in December 1854. ODPMBr JV 1877, 4-5.

¹⁴⁹ Jean-Baptiste Malou, *De la Liberté de Charité en Belgique par l'Évêque de Bruges* (Brussels, 1854).

government (which would be the last of its kind) was formed by liberal Catholic Pierre de Decker (member of the Society in Brussels) on the instructions of King Leopold. Conform the position of the bishops, this government proposed a law that allowed for the creation of funds for private charity, of which the manager could be a person chosen by the giver, including clergy. This meant that the funds could be managed by religious institutions, which could allocate the money to any type of charity, including – and this was the liberals’ greatest frustration – all kinds of schools for the needy, that were also allowed to accept non-needy and children for whom they could ask tuitions.¹⁵⁰

The liberal press responded mercilessly to the proposition. The idea that the clergy and convents would be allowed to control charitable funds and allocate them as they pleased invoked images of the ancien régime and the ecclesial *mortmain*, which entailed that inheritances given to convents were no longer heritable nor taxable. Thus, in a fierce press campaign, the liberals satirized the clergy as greedy, hungry for power, and hypocritical. Instead of practicing the poverty they preached, the liberals claimed, the clergy, hid their lust for wealth behind a cloak of moral superiority. Going further, the liberals invoked the conspiracy of a Vatican conspiracy, saying that the Belgian Catholics operated according to the command of Rome. The Jesuits, portrayed as the right hands of the pope, played a particularly nefarious role in this narrative, sneakily influencing Catholic political opinion in an anti-liberal direction. The liberals accused the Catholics of using their power in the fields of charity and education to undermine the political and social authority of the liberal bourgeoisie, and, more generally, the legitimacy of the liberal, constitutional principles, all the while hiding behind these liberties to justify their position.¹⁵¹

In turn, such imageries were captured in pamphlets, cartoons, and derisive songs that riled up the population. This press campaign proved to be highly effective in creating popular outrage. In May 1857, parliament had to be cleared because of several incidents, and the conflict was taken to the streets. Riled up by the support of liberal politicians, a crowd of citizens turned into a mob of violent protestors. The protestors spread out to other cities as well, and for several days, Belgian Catholics lived in fear of anticlerical masses who not only (physically) ridiculed convent members and priests, but also destroyed Catholic buildings and press offices.¹⁵² The Catholic elites equally became object of criticism and mockery. They were accused of cahooting with the clergy and of supporting the convents’ charitable scheme, as well as criticized for their own hypocritical charity. The Society in Antwerp noted that up until then, the visitors had

¹⁵⁰ Gubin and Nandrin, ‘Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België’, 269-298; Witte, ‘The Battle for Monasteries’, 109-110.

¹⁵¹ Gubin and Nandrin, ‘Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België’, 298-299; Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 577-579.

¹⁵² Witte, ‘The Battle for Monasteries’, 111-113.

been able to work in ‘blissful obscurity’, without their intentions being questioned and without disturbance. All of a sudden, the report continued, they were accused of plans and goals they had never even thought about, but they had no choice but to ignore these accusations and continue their charitable zeal. After all, even though the material circumstances had ameliorated somewhat during the last years, ‘the same cannot be said, alas, of the moral miseries!’¹⁵³

At times, the attacks were personal, and they did not spare women. Pauline Gonthyn (1825-1870), wife of Joseph de Hemptinne, for example, became the subject of a farcical smear campaign. Gonthyn was an honorary member of the Ghent Work of the Poor Sick and practiced charity on her own accord as well, for example by organizing soup distributions, surprising the workers of her husband’s factory with visits, and receiving poor and orphaned children in her castle a few times a year.¹⁵⁴ During the Ghent carnival of 1857, the parades were accompanied by exuberant cartoons and songs that mocked and criticized the Catholics. One of these songs, titled ‘Koeivoet (es beter dan boelie)’ (‘cow’s foot (is better than soup meat)’), which targeted Gonthyn, is still sung at carnival today. In 1856, Pauline Gonthyn and several other Ladies of the Work of the Poor Sick had given a speech to the workers of Ghent in which they had urged them to live more frugally to prevent misery. Gonthyn suggested that they drink less alcohol, stop smoking, gather wild herbs for tea to replace coffee, have sex only once a month to preserve their energy, and eat offal and cow’s feet rather than ‘boelie’ (soup meat), which she claimed was cheaper and just as nourishing. The speech severely offended the workers, whose diet was scanty and often deprived of meat. To hear that they lived above their means because they treated themselves to some soup meat, often reserved for Sundays, while the ‘madams’ themselves could eat meat every day, went too far.¹⁵⁵ The song captured the people’s discontent about the speech and, in general, the condescending attitude of the charitable elite, embodied by Gonthyn. The song called her a ‘cursed bitch’ and suggested that she had an affair with a priest, whose sausage she preferred over cow’s feet. This criticism of Gonthyn was captured in a cartoon as well, where she was depicted with hooves and sausages draped around her neck, standing in line to enter the *Cercle Catholique*, dubbed the ‘doghouse’ by the liberals.¹⁵⁶

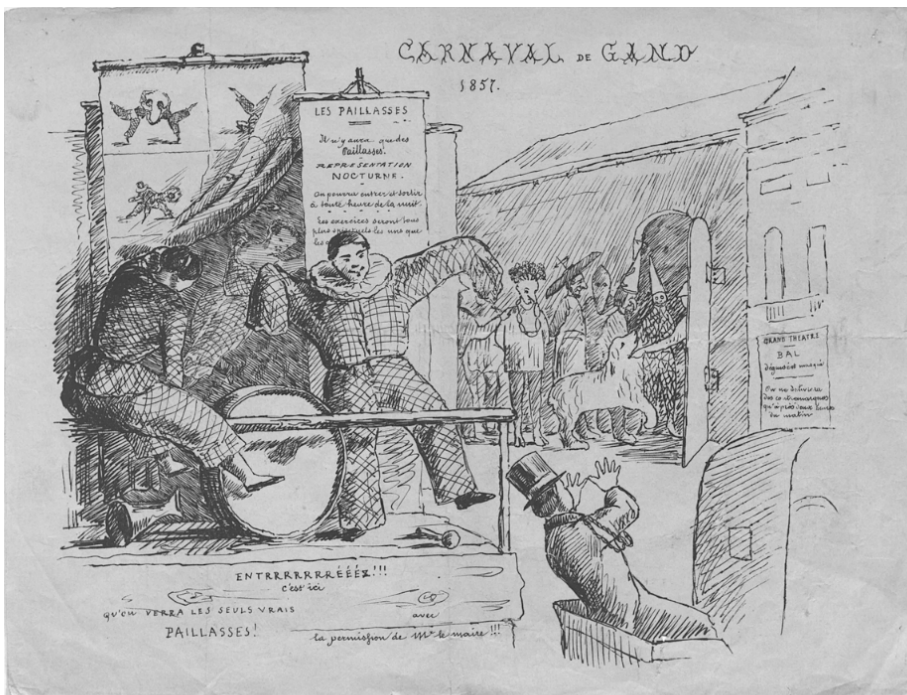
¹⁵³ SVPA 1856-1857, 11; 20-21.

¹⁵⁴ Hemelsoet, ‘Liefdadigheid als Roeeping van de Dame’, 257; 270-272.

¹⁵⁵ Levis, ‘Van alle Markten Thuis’, 275-277; Vandommele, *Gent een Bakermat*, 197-199.

¹⁵⁶ Bart D’hondt, ‘Van ‘t Ongedierte der Papen’, *Liberas Stories*, 4 March 2021.

Incidentally, this incident attests to the public presence of upper-class charitable women. It was often suggested in historical research that charity formed an important means through which women could build such a presence and become socially engaged.¹⁵⁷ Implicitly or not, these authors tended to assume that such a public role was desired by these women, and that the Church offered them an escape from the confines of the home in a society split into a male, public and female, private sphere. However, as the example of Pauline Gonthyn shows, a strong public visibility could also create negative experiences. Moreover, one could ask the question whether it was these women's charitable action which allowed them access to the public sphere, or if this presence was a (often unavoidable) consequence of their status. From the latter perspective, elite women's charity could also function as a way to preserve a positive image, to defend themselves against the criticism brought about by their status and wealth. Surely the charitable engagement of individual charitable women was driven by many different considerations, including religious devotion, genuine concern for the poor, and social customs related to their status, but the example of Gonthyn at least shows that women's intentions and sincerity could be heckled just as well as those of their male counterparts.



Liberal caricature of the Ghent Catholic politicians entering their headquarters; the 'doghouse', 1857

¹⁵⁷ See the introduction of this book.

The events surrounding the Monastic Law had drastic consequences for the future relationship between Catholics and liberals. De Decker resigned his unionist government, and until the First World War, they would no longer seat together in government. For the first time since the revolution 1830, violent protests had taken place in the streets. The population had now irrevocably become involved in the political conflict, of which the scope expanded. Earlier anticlerical criticism had focused specifically on the separation between Church and state, denouncing the unduly power and influence of Catholic institutions and organizations in society, but now, Catholicism *itself* became the object of contention. Before, liberal anticlericalism had in no way been irreconcilable with Catholic faith, and many liberals were devout Catholics (albeit often in a more puritan variation). Increasingly, however, the liberal opinion had become imbued with secularism, and the events of 1857 solidified this stance. From then on, the liberals would progressively denounce Catholicism as a backward belief-system that prevented the civilization as well as emancipation of the lower classes, and that obstructed progress in general.¹⁵⁸

In response to the unrest, the Society warned that war was being waged against Christianity, one in which ‘bad books and bad magazines’ were used as weapons by the enemies of religion and of the clergy. In this war, the Vincentians could not stay at the sidelines: even though the rules prohibited the organization from intervening in political conflicts, its members ‘are not allowed to remain indifferent to any of the great religious and social questions which matter to your salvation and the salvation of humanity’.¹⁵⁹ In this atmosphere, president of the Belgian Superior Council Etienne de Gerlache proclaimed at the general assembly of 1856:

Let us congratulate ourselves, gentlemen, at the sight of such monstrosities [...], for having preserved the Christian sense, which is still, whatever one may say, the best guarantee of common sense. These same men who were dying of fear, in 1848, who called on religion and the priest to help them, crying out: "Save us, for we are perishing! There are no more laws or constitutions that hold!" regained their hearts when they saw the air clearing up. But let's be careful! Socialism is not dead, and society still needs to be saved. [...] Living in the middle of the world, we cannot remain strangers to the vital questions that are being debated here. This is why I would like each of you to take the mission assigned to you seriously. This is why I would like you to be careful to close your ranks rather than widen them; that I would like to see admitted among

¹⁵⁸ Witte, ‘The Battle for Monasteries’, 113-114.

¹⁵⁹ SVPB JV 1857, 22-23.

*us only zealous, active members, fulfilling scrupulously all the obligations that our rules impose on us. As for those who join this work without wanting to bear the burden of it; who are perhaps only looking for a name to serve as a passport to a certain society, I would like to see them withdraw from ours and frankly admit that they were mistaken.*¹⁶⁰

Here, de Gerlache made clear that the time of strict apoliticism had passed. The revivalist call for a lay apostolate had emphasized the advantage of lay people's connection to the world, to their feeling with the social issues existing in society, and this 'living in the world' now made it impossible to remain silent. The enemy standing in the way of society's salvation was embodied by socialism, but also by those who failed to recognize its danger and who were complicit in allowing it to gain footing, i.e., the liberals. Using vivid imagery, de Gerlache urged his fellow members of the Society to take seriously their roles as the defenders of Christian morality and the Church (not in the least the papal authority) and perform all the duties that came with this part. This meant observing their religious duties, but also strengthening their fraternal sentiment, and remaining vigilant when deciding who to admit among their ranks. Much more explicit than in the early years of the organization, the Society attached great importance to respect for order and authority, both within the organization and in society. In agreement with the ultramontane world view, the Vincentians defended the Catholic faith as the moral basis for this order, proclaiming that 'we are the children of this Church without which the society would collapse under the blows of ignorance, corruption and the Revolution'.¹⁶¹ Thus, the advent of a sharp opposition between secularism and Catholicism turned the Vincentians, or at least the Society, towards a more openly politically engaged charity, as well as towards an ever-stronger ultramontane orientation.

1.4. A charitable crusade

Between their introduction to the Belgian context in the early 1840s and the mid-1850s, the Vincentian organizations had gone through important changes in terms of the role they constructed for themselves in society, in addition to significantly expanding their collection of works and initiatives meant to achieve their social and religious purpose. The emergence of a nineteenth-century variation of Vincentian charity was closely entwined with the socio-cultural phenomenon of the religious revival, and its early success made possible by the concurrent development of political Catholicism, which was able to exert significant influence on political debates and decision-making. In turn,

¹⁶⁰ SVPHRB JV 1856, 18-19.

¹⁶¹ SVPHRB JV 1856, 14-16.

these debates and policies affected the workings of Catholic organizations like those of the Vincentians, not only because social assistance was a controversial topic, but also because members of the influential elites were well represented within the organizations. While the Vincentian organizations attracted Catholics with different backgrounds and views, Jesuits and ultramontanes played an influential role in their formation, promotion, and membership base, and this influence became more prominent from the mid-1850s onwards, not in the least because pope Pius IX expressed an increasingly intransigent point of view.¹⁶²

The increasing ultramontanization of the Vincentian organizations was visible in their ever-growing exaltation of the pope, their progressive abandonment of the principle of discretion in favor of a more public presence, and the development of a marked antiliberal character.¹⁶³ This evolution reflected the broader development of the Catholic opinion in Belgium, where the continuing efforts towards secularization of the liberal governments fostered Catholic anxiety about the future of the Church in the public sphere. Via their large networks of socio-religious works and their journals, like *Le Bien Public*, the ultramontanism of the lay elite steadily found its way to the clergy and the wider population from the late 1850s onwards. Especially the regular clergy was susceptible to these ideas, but among the episcopate too, the ultramontane faction grew. After the fiasco of the Monastic Bill, bishops like Malou and Delebecque became strong opponents of the more moderate approach defended by archbishop Engelbertus Sterckx (1792-1867), who tried to unite the Catholics in opposition to secularization politics, but within the framework of the constitutional liberal state.¹⁶⁴ Incidentally, it is telling that all three of them were involved in the associations of Ladies, but gave their own interpretation to the value of their charity. In Ghent, the manual of association of Ladies, established in the context of the Work of the poor sick in cooperation with Delebecque, was almost an exact copy of the manual of the Society, including long elaborations on the social and spiritual function of charity, an extensive list of indulgences, and a letter of the pope.¹⁶⁵ In Malines, however, the manual of the association of Ladies, established in 1861 with approval of Sterckx, was remarkably concise and included only the statutes of the organization. The indulgences, which were granted by Sterckx himself and not the pope, were added only in a footnote. This apparent lack of a broader societal function for the Ladies implied a stronger focus on self-development and humility in the Malines association, which reflected Sterckx' conciliatory position.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶² Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 579; 602-603.

¹⁶³ De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate', 182-183.

¹⁶⁴ Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 41; 45-46.

¹⁶⁵ ODPM, *Règlement de l'Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades (Ghent, s.d.)*.

¹⁶⁶ DLSVP, *Association Charitable des Dames de la Miséricorde de Malines. Statuts et Règlements (Malines, 1861)*.

Among the parliamentary right, however, the support for the episcopate and for the radical ultramontanes was waning. In their eyes, the drama surrounding the Monastic Bill, which had led to the fall of the liberal Catholic government De Decker and the return of a liberal government, proved that Catholic politicians should move away from confessional topics. The ultramontanes, backed by Pius IX, objected that the liberal secularization politics and the inability of the right to effectively counter them confirmed the inherent issues with the liberal constitution. Thus, at the beginning of the 1860s, the Belgian Catholic sphere was characterized by increasing polarization between liberal Catholics and (radical) ultramontanes, whereby the former dominated the political organizations and the latter kept control over most of the popular Catholic works.¹⁶⁷ In light of these growing tensions, Edouard Ducpétiaux (1804-1868), an ex-liberal turned liberal Catholic in the second half of the 1840s, took the initiative to try and generate a commitment to the Catholic cause. He figured the best strategy towards such a truce or even reconciliation was to organize a general Catholic assembly after the example of the German Catholics, who had done so since 1848.¹⁶⁸

These Catholic congresses of Malines (1863, 1864, 1867) had quite the opposite effect, however, and became an arena for the fight between the liberal Catholics and the ultramontanes. In the invitation to the 1863 congress, it was described as an opportunity to discuss the state of the Catholic works (devotional, charitable, educational, artistic, and press), and the means through which they could be protected and their beneficial effects expanded. As such, the topic of the congresses closely related to exactly the issue that was so divisive among the Belgian Catholics; that of liberty within the state. According to the liberal Catholics, the works could only be protected and expanded by guaranteeing a proper application of the principle of liberty, which the liberals had consistently misconstrued and used against them. Backed by Sterckx, they tried to keep the congressional discussions focused on the works themselves, but these efforts were encountered with resistance from the side of the intransigent ultramontanes. In the eyes of the latter, the threat of secularization meant that it had become impossible to disassociate religion and politics.¹⁶⁹

To be clear, both factions supported and participated in the Catholic social works, including the Vincentian organizations, which moreover remained principally apolitical, despite their expression of an increasingly ultramontane piety. It was the factions' different answer to the broader question about the relationship between the Church and the state which soured the relationship between the factions. As such, the Vincentian

¹⁶⁷ Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 45-49; Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België', 318-319.

¹⁶⁸ Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België', 319.

¹⁶⁹ Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België', 20.

organizations received praise from both sides, and the congress members expressed the desire to see them grow in size and influence.¹⁷⁰ On a sidenote, during the 1862 International Philanthropic¹⁷¹ Congress (*Congrès International de Bienfaisance*) the Vincentians were even commended by several liberals and scientists from Belgium and elsewhere, who considered these types of charity as a useful means to mitigate the effects of periods of economic malaise, albeit in combination with increased salaries and a more expansive offer of public assistance.¹⁷²

Of course, this was not the role allocated to charity by the Catholics themselves, who considered it more than simply a practice of alms giving, but as a moral virtue and code that ought to guide and harmonize the relationships between the classes. If applied and followed correctly, the charitable imperative would return balance to modern society and resolve the issue of social misery. This view was also put forth by Charles Périn in the 1860s, who by now had abandoned his liberal Catholic sympathies and had become a leading ultramontane. Périn wrote of the Society of Saint Vincent that charity had never been better understood than by the Vincentians, both with regards to relieving the poor and in the perspective of society's interests.¹⁷³ So, even though the increasing polarization marked the discussions, the participants of the congress did agree on the need to further expand, differentiate, and protect the Catholic works. In turn, they hoped, these works would provide a Catholic solution to social issue and pave the way to a Christian future. In this regard, several voices, including Casier de Hemptinne (Louise's husband), liberal Catholic canon Désiré de Haerne (1804-1890), and Périn,¹⁷⁴ supported the expansion of the 'works of foresight' (*œuvres de prévoyance*), which included saving funds, mutual security associations, cooperative societies, and so on. As de Hemptinne noted, several saving funds had already been created by the Society (c.f. those within the

¹⁷⁰ Victor Devaux ed., *Assemblée Générale des Catholiques en Belgique. Troisième Session de 1867* (Brussels, 1868), 396-400.

¹⁷¹ As noted in the introduction, the term 'bienfaisance' literally translates to beneficence and includes public and private (both humanitarian and religious) sources of social assistance. The main language used at the congress was French, but in English contexts, the term philanthropy is more commonly used as an umbrella term instead, which is why the title of the congress is translated in this way (See also: Van de Perre, "These Mutual Lessons").

¹⁷² See for example in the overview of social assistance in Spain by scientists comte N. d'Alfaro and Dr. Nieto Serrano discussion of 'misery and assistance in Ghent' by Belgian liberal lawyer Gustave Rolin-Jacquemyns (Édouard Ducpétiaux and James T. Hammick eds., *Congrès International de Bienfaisance de Londres. Session de 1862. Tôme I.* (London, 1863), respectively 113-114; 247-248).

¹⁷³ Eerste uitgave in 1861, dan in 1868, 1882. Charles Périn, *Les Richesses dans les Sociétés Chrétiennes. Tôme II* (Paris, 1861), 338-339 (footnote 1); Charles Périn, *Les Richesses dans les Sociétés Chrétiennes. Tôme III* (Paris, 1882), 351-352.

¹⁷⁴ Charles Périn was not present during this debate but talked extensively about the need for better foresight among the poor and Catholic efforts to promote works to this end in his monograph *Les Richesses dans les Sociétés Chrétiennes. Tôme II* (Paris, 1861).

patronages) and within a number of factories, but a more structural effort was needed. The topic of consumer cooperatives proved somewhat controversial however, because several discussants noted, this type of mutual aid society was associated with socialist action.¹⁷⁵ De Haerne rebuked this hesitancy by prophetically stating that soon, the social question would become the major, all-encompassing political issue. Therefore, he explained, it was of utmost urgency to avert an open fight between the ‘little and great capital’ (read: the workers and the patrons), because this struggle could never be won by the workers alone and would have disastrous consequences for the social order. Instead, the elevation of the workers had to happen in cooperation with and under the guidance of the elites. Thus, the participants decided that these types of organizations could and should be given a Christian, charitable interpretation and be part of a wider patronage of the workers, so that they promoted not only the material progress of the workers, but also contributed to social harmony.¹⁷⁶

While the Malines congresses provided the Belgian Catholics an opportunity to develop a joint strategy to expand Catholic influence in the social sphere, the ultramontanes felt a mounting frustration about the liberal Catholic efforts to take control of the Catholic political program. To the dismay of the former, the latter tried to seize the opportunity to develop an actual Catholic political party, which they moreover tried to withdraw from the influence of both the bishops and Rome. In this sense, the liberal Catholics defended a separation between the man in the political world and his conscience. In this view, the religious belief of the individual, politicians included, was a free choice made possible by the constitutional protection of liberty for all, and only with regards to religious conscience should the ecclesial authorities exert direct influence. In his capacity as a politician, however, the Catholic man should respect the constitution and act in accordance with its principles. Thus, the liberal Catholics rejected the idea of a ‘confessional party’ that defended the clerical interests because they wanted to transcend the tumultuous clerico-liberal conflict that had shaped the political debates of the last decades.¹⁷⁷ In 1864, after an electoral defeat of the liberals, king Leopold asked Adolphe Dechamps (1807-1875) to put together a Catholic government. The program proposed by Dechamps strongly reflected this liberal Catholic standpoint. It proposed numerous measures towards democratization (for example lowering the

¹⁷⁵ Not only did the socialists endorse cooperatives, but also the liberals, who, in 1870, submitted a legislative proposal for the regulation of such organizations, believing that they would promote cooperation between labor and capital. See: Van Praet, *Bewogen burgers*, 94; 152.

¹⁷⁶ Victor Devaux ed., *Assemblée Générale des Catholiques en Belgique. Troisième Session de 1867* (Brussels, 1868), deuxième section, 131-148. See also De Haerne’s earlier reflections in Désiré Pierre Antoine de Haerne, *Tableau de la Charité Chrétienne en Belgique, ou Relevé des Oeuvres de Bienfaisance* (Brussels: C. J. Fonteyn, 1857).

¹⁷⁷ Van Isacker, ‘De Confessionele Partij in België’, 421-422.

electoral tribute for the municipal elections) but notably shied away from religious issues. This way, the program was presented as a first step in the direction of establishing a constitutional, democratic party. The king, the more conservative members of the parliamentary right, and the ultramontanes in general rejected the program, however, and the liberals were reinstated in government after early elections.¹⁷⁸

The polarization between ultramontanes and liberal Catholics was strengthened by Pius IX, who was dissatisfied with the liberal viewpoints expressed during the Malines congresses. His stern attitude was reinforced by the announcement that France and Italy had agreed to a treaty and that the French troops would retreat from Rome in 1866, which would leave the Papal state unprotected against Garibaldi's troops. In 1864, he issued the encyclicals *Cuanta Cura* and *Syllabus*, in which he fervidly renewed his condemnation of heresies like liberalism and socialism.¹⁷⁹ Although the liberal Catholics tried to defend themselves against the ultramontanes by accusing them of misinterpreting the texts, their efforts were of little avail and the gulf between them widened.¹⁸⁰ Within the Society, the organization's explicit commitment to the figure of the pope was renewed with vigor. At the general assembly of the Belgian Society in 1865, general president De Gerlache, a fervent ultramontane who also participated in the congresses, stated that all 'children of Saint-Vincent' should consider themselves the obligated defenders of the Church and its chief, the Vicar of Christ, ready to fight the enemies of religion. This defense included combatting 'Voltairean philosophies' which visitors encountered regularly when visiting the poor.¹⁸¹ In addition, the Society supported the pope by means of 'fervent prayers to the Heavens within the conferences of Belgium to gain for him from the Lord the strength to stand up to the storm',¹⁸² by holding Masses for the pope,¹⁸³ by distributing 'images representing the venerate traits of our well-loved Sovereign Pope',¹⁸⁴ by holding collections for the papal zouaves and supporting members who wished to join the zouaves.¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁸ Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België', 316-318.

¹⁷⁹ Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België', 321; Van Isacker, 'De Confessionele Partij in België', 426; Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 49.

¹⁸⁰ See for example the pamphlet by cardinal Sterckx in 1864 (Engelbert Sterckx, *La Constitution Belge et l'Encyclique de Grégoire XVI : Deux Lettres de Son Eminence le Cardinal-Archevêque de Malines sur nos Libertés Constitutionnelles* (Malines, 1864)) and the allocution by liberal Catholic bishop of Namur Victor Augustus at the 1868 Malines Congress (Victor Devaux ed., *Assemblée Générale des Catholiques en Belgique. Troisième Session de 1867* (Brussels, 1868), troisième séance, 101-116).

¹⁸¹ *SVPHRB JV 1865*, 39-41.

¹⁸² *SVP*, *Procès-Verbal de l'Assemblée Générale des Conférences du Brabant et des Délégués des Diverses Conférences de la Belgique, 27 Juillet 1862* (Brussels, 1862), 42-43. See also: *SVPA JV 1873*, 5-6.

¹⁸³ *SVPHRB JV 1873*, 11-12.

¹⁸⁴ *SVPHRB JV 1865*, 9.

¹⁸⁵ *SVPHRB JV 1868*, 95-99; 159-160; 247; 263-264. See also: De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate', 183.

In 1870, the first Vatican Council proclaimed the dogma of papal infallibility. This doctrine formally (or rather dogmatically) acknowledged the supreme authority of the pope in determining what was accepted as formal beliefs in the Catholic Church, thereby adding more weight to the pope's condemnation of liberalism. In the same year, the Italian troops occupied Rome, which created an 'areole of martyrdom' around the figure of the pope and provided an additional justification for his antiliberalism. The idea that an open war was raging between the Church and the liberal states was furthermore confirmed by the religious persecutions that took place in many European countries, like Germany, Italy, and Spain. In France, moreover, the revolt of the Paris Commune in 1871 sent a shockwave across the conservative milieus of Europe. In the eyes of most Catholics, the eclectic, anti-religious, and socialist inspired revolutionary government of the Commune was clearly the result of secularist liberal politics, which had undermined religious authority and, in this way, destroyed the foundation of society.¹⁸⁶

These international events were observed with great anxiety from the part of the Vincentians. The Antwerp Society, usually quite dry and factual in its yearly reports, opened its report of 1870 with the remark that it had become impossible not to 'take a painful look around' and feel deep regret about the 'merciless war' being waged in France (the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871), and even more so about the dangerous position of the pope, 'delivered without mercy to the sacrilegious violence' of the Italians.¹⁸⁷ A year later, the tone of the yearly report was even more bleak. With the Paris Commune fresh in mind, it proclaimed that 'more than ever, it is evident that material misery is in general the fruit of laziness, disorder, and early diseases which arise from it', and reported that drunkenness, libertinism, and subversive ideas were visibly on the rise, in particular among the working class. Confronted with all this, the visitor needed 'true courage', and apply himself to diligent, regular home visits, during which he could surveil the poor and keep them from descending into indigence and demoralization, in addition to contributing the various works, like the patronages, *vestiaire* (clothing and furniture distribution), and saving funds.¹⁸⁸ While they used a much softer tone, the Ladies equally noted that the spirit of the poor was often in a deplorable state, and that their charity was urgently needed to 'heal spiritual wounds, of which the victims are almost always covered with indigence',¹⁸⁹ a comment that alluded to the healing powers of the Ladies, but also insinuated that poverty was a punishment for immorality. In this antisecularist and antiliberal offensive among the poor, the Vincentians were increasingly supported by the secular clergy. Among the latter, many had now

¹⁸⁶ Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 49; Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België',

¹⁸⁷ SVPA JV 1870, 1.

¹⁸⁸ SVPA JV 1871, 3-6.

¹⁸⁹ ODPMBr JV 1877, 5-6.

abandoned their liberal Catholic sympathies in favor of a more ultramontane stance, not in the least because the pope showed himself increasingly intransigent. In the 1870s, the Society's conferences were systematically integrated in the pastoral works.¹⁹⁰

Indeed, the occupation of Rome heralded the culmination of intransigent ultramontane energy during the 1870s in both the social and in the political sphere. The Belgian ultramontanes made good use of the Catholic works to spread their ideas among the population and were able to mobilize the masses in public expressions of piety and devotion to Rome, as well as in religious manifestations with a political message. Again, this current was incentivized by the pope. During the 1870s, at the request of the pope, Joseph De Hemptinne (president of the Belgian Society from 1871 onwards) embarked on a crusade against liberalism. To this end, he created a Belgian division of the secret 'Archconfraternity of Saint Peter' (*Archiconfrérie de Saint Pierre*), the so-called *Croisés* or Crusaders, which received its legitimacy directly from Rome. The association brought together prominent ultramontanes, among whom many were members of the Society and/or part of *Le Bien Public*. Markedly intransigent, the goal of the Crusaders was to 'restore everything in Christ', via their lay apostolate.¹⁹¹ De Hemptinne and his fellows had completely lost trust in the liberal regime and advocated the restoration of the Christian state, some of them even playing with the idea of armed action. De Hemptinne's radical rejection of the Belgian regime and subsequent conflict with the episcopate did however lead to his isolation within the ultramontane camp, and the 'Confraternity of Saint Michael' was created as the more temperate but no less ultramontane counterpart of the Crusaders. Under leadership of Charles Périn, the Confraternity became the main axis of ultramontane opposition against liberal Catholicism and liberalism during the last years of the decade, and, as we will see later, an important influence in the development of Catholic corporatism in Belgium.¹⁹²

That ultramontanism gained such a strong impulse during the 1870s had much to do with the intra-Catholic tensions in Belgium's political sphere as well, in particular the compromising attitude of the Catholic political right, in which liberal Catholicism remained the dominant voice. The Catholic governments D'Anethan (1870-1871) and De Theux-Malou (1871-1878) both chose a non-confessional direction, which meant that they tried to break away from the influence of the episcopate and generally avoided religious issues, even if this created much backlash from the Catholic opinion. Specifically, these liberal Catholic governments refused to undo the secularization policies of the previous liberal governments, which were a painful thorn in the side of

¹⁹⁰ De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate', 189.

¹⁹¹ De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 137-138; De Maeyer, 'De Ultramontanen en de Gildenbeweging', 222-223.

¹⁹² De Maeyer, 'De Ultramontanen en de Gildenbeweging', 222-223.

the ultramontanes and had spurred their return to intransigence. Of great symbolical weight was the matter of burial sites, which had been festering since the 1850s. The liberals, who wanted to put an end to the clergy's freedom to refuse non-believers from being buried on consecrated grounds, had prevented the churches from acquiring any new burial grounds and instead given the municipalities the right to create new sites. This opened the door to civil burials, the first of which took place in 1862, and a series of public disruptions caused by conflict between liberals and Catholics.¹⁹³ The new rules meant that on municipal burial grounds, a Catholic grave had to be individually consecrated. The fact that the clergy required payment to do so created much embarrassment among the Catholics, who decided during the Malines congresses to establish the Association of Saint Barbara (*Association de Saint Barbe*) with the goal of providing the poor burials at no or low cost.¹⁹⁴ The Society followed suit with its own version of this work.¹⁹⁵ The Catholic governments furthermore refused to revise the liberal law that established public control of the churches' bookkeeping since the early 1860s, the law of 1870 determining that clergy were no longer automatically excluded from serving in the army, as well as the liberals' acknowledgement of Victor Emmanuel II as the legal monarch of Italy.¹⁹⁶

The bishops, most of which by now leaned in the direction of a transient ultramontanism and explicitly continued to respect the existing confessional framework, urged the Catholic fractions to resolve their differences. In spite of their efforts, the opposite happened after the Catholic electoral defeat of 1878. The Confraternity of Saint Michael, which counted among its members nearly all important intransigent ultramontanes, decided to bury its plan to revise the constitution, for now, and focus on replacing the liberal Catholic political representatives with ultramontanes.¹⁹⁷ Intransigent ultramontanism soon lost some of its vigor, however, at least for a little while. The installation of a liberal government facilitated the rapprochement between them and the liberal Catholics, even more so after the electoral defeats of 1880 and 1882. Of great importance was of course also the death of Pius IX in 1878, and even more so his succession by Leo XIII. Initially, it was not clear what the new pope's political stance was, but in 1879, he declared his support for liberal Catholic standpoints and urged the ultramontanes to stop their attacks on the constitution. This way, the new pope tried to

¹⁹³ Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België'; 303-306.

¹⁹⁴ The association was established in 1864 in Brussels (Victor Devaux ed., *Assemblée Générale des Catholiques en Belgique. Troisième Session de 1867* (Brussels, 1868), deuxième séance, 69).

¹⁹⁵ This work was first created in Louvain under the name *Œuvre de Saint Charles Borromée* (SVPHRB JV 1865, 32). Not coincidentally, the first civil burial in 1862 had taken place in said city (Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België', 304).

¹⁹⁶ De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 142; Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België', 300-308.

¹⁹⁷ De Maeyer, 'De Ultramontanen en de Gildenbeweging', 225; 229-230.

calm down the heated ultramontanes, and he succeeded in briefly destabilizing the Confraternity, which was left in confusion and saw its president Périn retreat from the organization.¹⁹⁸

The liberal Catholic orientation of the new pope to an important extent disengaged Belgian intransigent ultramontanism from its papal idolatry, orienting the movement decisively to the Belgian context and the conflict between the Catholics and liberals. As such, the end of the 1870s also marked the evanescence of a core trait of intransigent ultramontanism as it developed after the mid-1850s, namely the unrestrained veneration of the figure of the pope, at least during the pontificate of Leo XIII. During the period between the mid-1850s and the late 1870s, the Vincentians had proven themselves to be ardent promoters of the ultramontane cult surrounding the figure of Pius IX, an attitude promoted by the pope himself. Distributing images of Pius IX and organizing prayers to support him was only part of the Vincentians' work, however, and it would go too far to paint the organizations as mere instruments of ultramontane powers. In terms of their charitable action, the Vincentians remained heirs to the imperative to social action established by the romantic Catholic of the revival. As the pressure of the social question rose, however, the original effort to elevate the poor via the establishment of respectful, fraternal relationships did make way for an increased emphasis on patronage, or the all-round guidance of the poor through a myriad of moralizing works.

¹⁹⁸ De Maeyer, 'De Ultramontanen en de Gildenbeweging', 230.

Chapter 2

The Theory and Practice of Vincentian Charity

The Society and the Ladies of Saint Vincent were imbued by the romantic Catholicism of the early nineteenth century religious revival. They advocated a social, active piety centered around the virtue of charity, to be carried out and advanced by a militant lay apostolate. This urge towards a socially activist religious practice was typical of revivalist Catholicism, which left a deep imprint on Vincentian spirituality. Each Catholic organization or congregation, whether religious or lay, professes and practices a specific spirituality aimed at coming closer to God, following the example of Jesus, and living out the Gospel.¹⁹⁹ While religious congregations usually practiced a spirituality centered around contemplation, lay organizations typically chose a more active spirituality, as was the case for the Vincentians.²⁰⁰ They explained their spirituality as twofold: to ‘learn how to know and love one another’, and ‘to learn to know, love and serve the poor of Jesus Christ’.²⁰¹ To achieve these goals, Saint Vincent de Paul served as the spiritual example of the Vincentians, and they dedicated ‘a particular worship [or cult]’ to him, endeavoring ‘to walk in his footsteps’.²⁰² Even after the initial optimism of the revival subsided and made room for a more conservative ultramontaniam, the Vincentian spirituality of the organizations remained central to their discourses and practices, forming an unshakable basis for their struggle towards the Christening of society. This chapter explores the premises of this spirituality as it developed from the early days in the existence of the Society and the Ladies until the late 1870s, and the way it was expressed in the comportment of their members and the practices of their charitable work.

The first subchapter examines the ideal of the Vincentian visitor put forth by the organizations. Drawing inspiration from the example of Vincent de Paul and that of charitable women, this ideal was formed by the romantic Catholics of the revival and

¹⁹⁹ Gautier, *Some Schools of Catholic Spirituality*.

²⁰⁰ De Maeyer, ‘In Amore et Fraternitate’, 176. Of course, many congregations combined contemplation and action as well, not seldomly referring to Saint Vincent. For a detailed analysis of congregations during the revival, see: Suenens, *Humble Women, Powerful Nuns*.

²⁰¹ SVP, *Règlement de la Société de S.^t-Vincent-de-Paul* (Brussels, 1846), 8-9.

²⁰² ODPM, *Règlement de l’Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades* (Ghent, s.d.), 3.

inherently connected to their call for a strong and active lay apostolate. Under the influence of the ever-stronger ultramontane current in the organizations, their quest for social harmony came to the fore more strongly, and with this also the role of the Vincentian as an elite leader in society. Internally, the Vincentian had to strive towards self-development in a joint, fraternal setting, and the organizations' processes of selection served to protect this friendly environment and to keep its reputation high. The home visit to the poor, which forms the subject of the second chapter, stood at the heart of Vincentian charitable work. In effect, the Vincentians had not invented the poor visit, but they considered it a practice which, if carried out in a particular way, formed the ideal means through which they could achieve their spiritual, moral, and social goals. As such, they deemed the poor visit to be a type of pure charity, from which all other types of charitable works could naturally flow. The last subchapter takes a closer look at the beneficiaries of Vincentian charity, in particular the different categories of poor discerned by the Society and the Ladies and the specific approaches they developed towards each of them. While in theory the Vincentians claimed to make no distinction between the poor, in practice they did feel the need to develop a framework on which to base their decisions who to help and in what ways. Thus, they created binary categories to distinguish between poor, but at the same time left much room for nuance and case-by-case decisions.

1.1. The visitor: the embodiment of Vincentian spirituality

Undoubtedly, and they [the members of the Society of Saint Vincent] cannot repeat it too often; they are far from matching this so secure leader [Saint Vincent de Paul]; they do not possess his living faith, nor his great trust in God, nor his burning fervor, and they are far from handing out as much relief all together, as this loving servant of the poor did alone. But despite so many shortcomings, they nevertheless joyfully follow his example and obey his ground principles, convinced that this way, by their flawed abilities, they accomplish the will of Him, who is the way, the truth, and life.²⁰³

The goal of the Vincentians was to approach the example of Saint Vincent de Paul as closely as possible, an example they summarized in the dual creed of love for each other and love for the poor. As stressed in the quote above, found in the Society's manuals of 1855 and 1874, the Vincentians believed that following in the footsteps of Saint Vincent de Paul was a goal that could never fully be achieved, and they could only hope to

²⁰³ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 21; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 19-20.

approximate his good works by continually striving to do so. In its essence, the example of Saint Vincent de Paul was a personification of the charitable imperative as proclaimed by Christ himself. Every Christian was supposed to perform acts of charity, i.e. the voluntary giving of alms, whether material or spiritual, to those in need. The act of charity was a religious performance set in motion by and aimed at the propagation of God's love. God had sent Christ to the people out of love for them and to give them a chance to redeem themselves for their sins. Although it was impossible to fully repay this gift, it was possible to do so to an extent by doing voluntary acts of kindness, as Christ had instructed his followers.²⁰⁴ Especially those who had been given the gift of a comfortable life on earth should take this command to heart, because life on earth was but a chance to develop faith, hope and love, and it was only in the afterlife that true riches awaited. Without sharing there could be no joy in having: 'is it not indeed an ingenious idea of charity that it allows the heart to enjoy the superfluous only by sharing it with those who suffer and who lack the necessary'.²⁰⁵

But following the example of Saint Vincent de Paul did not just mean handing out alms to those in need, it meant doing so in a specific manner and cultivating a particular set of virtues while doing so, which was inspired by the saint's life and work. From 1846 onwards, the manuals of the Society provided a handy list of five of the saint's admirable qualities that ought to serve as a guide for the organization's members. The first, self-abnegation, meant putting oneself in service of the collective; letting go of one's pride, avoiding conflict with each other and with the poor, and accepting the will of God. Second, Christian prudence, entailed being careful when choosing which poor to help; avoiding those who proved unreceptive to the visitor's spiritual alms or whom the visitor could not help without risk of damaging his own or the organization's reputation. The third virtue, love for thy neighbor and zeal for the salvation of souls, contained referred to an attitude of selfless service to the needy, no matter the sacrifices required or difficulties encountered. Fourthly, Vincent de Paul understood the importance of Christ's command to be gentle and humble according to his example (*Discite à me quia mitis sum et humilis corde*), and the Society stressed that softness and kindness towards each other and towards the poor were indispensable for the salvation of the souls of both. Lastly, the members of the Society were instructed to cultivate a fraternal attitude towards each other, to make of their conference a circle of supportive friends and to love their organization no matter its shortcomings.²⁰⁶

Of great importance to the development of this fraternal conception of charity was Frédéric Ozanam, one of the founding fathers of the Society of Saint Vincent in Paris in

²⁰⁴ Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*, 586-7.

²⁰⁵ ODPMG JV 1853-1854, 7.

²⁰⁶ This instruction was repeated in all the Society's manuals listed in the bibliography.



Antoine-Frédéric Ozanam (1813-1853)

1833. As a student at the Sorbonne University in Paris during the 1820s, Ozanam was part of a Catholic student circle together with Emmanuel Bailly, who would become the first president of the Society of Saint Vincent. Together, these students tried to form a counterforce against the prevalent anticlericalism they perceived within the university.²⁰⁷ Their goal was to create a space for young Christian men to find and support each other in their academic and spiritual development.²⁰⁸ These efforts can be understood in the wider context of the romantic Catholic revival, which was to a large extent driven by young people in search of a dynamic, energetic, and socially conscious faith that could break away from the nostalgic, resentful Catholicism of older generations.²⁰⁹ Inspired to put their ideas into practice, the members of the student circle decided to create their first *conference de charité*. Staying true to the foundation of their student circle, Ozanam and his fellows believed that charity should not only be conceptualized as helping the less fortunate, but also as mutual support among each other. As such, the Society of Saint Vincent served as an intimate space for young Catholic men to connect and help one

²⁰⁷ SVP, *Frédéric Ozanam, Nouvelle Edition* (Paris, 1930).

²⁰⁸ Harrison, *Romantic Catholics*, 196-198.

²⁰⁹ Harrison, *Romantic Catholics*, 2.

another deepen their devotion while performing charitable work.²¹⁰

As typical products of romantic revivalist Catholicism, the Vincentian organizations were imbued with the urge towards a strong lay apostolate. Thus, it was no coincidence that Ozanam chose Saint Vincent de Paul, the lay saint of charitable organizations, as the patron of his new charitable association, and the seventeenth-century *Charités* for lay, upper class women as the example for its structure and action. At the core of this lay apostolic mission lay the conviction that to strengthen the role of Catholicism in society, it ought to be propagated by those occupying the civil sphere and not only men and women religious. Lay people possessed the wisdom of living in the world. They had knowledge of the challenges posed by modern society and interacted with others who, as they believed, needed to strengthen or find their faith. Because they did not occupy a formal position of religious authority like priests, furthermore, they were able to interact with the poor more fraternally and freely. Of course, the Vincentians' predominantly elite backgrounds also created a sense of distance and authority, but they believed that as fellow laymen, the rich and poor shared a similar experience which opened the possibility to learn from each other as brothers.²¹¹ This belief also related to the Ozanam's idealization of the family and marital affection as an essential source for societal harmony. As laypeople, the Vincentians were free to marry and have children, which meant that they had intricate knowledge of the sanctity of marriage, of familial values and of the system of mutual affection and obligation on which the family ought to be based.²¹² Therefore, charitable laypeople occupied a privileged position of being able to relate with the poor as well as provide them with a moral example. Through this this lay action, the Vincentians hoped to create a connected and unified society founded on Catholic faith, to make 'of all hearts one heart, of all souls one single soul'.²¹³

This way, Ozanam and his fellows introduced the voluntary association to Catholic organizational life, thereby providing an alternative to the traditional confraternity, which was more embedded within parish structures and devotions, as well as controlled by the clergy. The voluntary association was a format commonly associated with philanthropists, whose attitude towards charity was quite skeptical. Because charity was predominantly the domain of pious women before the advent of the Society of Saint Vincent, this practice was moreover strongly associated with women and, in extension thereof, femininity. Philanthropy, on the other hand, presented itself as its rational, masculine counterpart. Many liberal thinkers argued that charitable almsgiving provided no structural solutions to poverty and did not contribute to transforming the poor into

²¹⁰ Harrison, *Romantic Catholics*, 199-200.

²¹¹ This was continuously stressed in the organizations' manuals. See also: Harrison, *Romantic Catholics*, 6; 188; Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*, 552-553.

²¹² Harrison, *Romantic Catholics*, 191; SVP, *Frédéric Ozanam, Nouvelle Edition* (Paris, 1930).

²¹³ SVP, *Règlement de l'Association de Charité* (Brussels, 1842), 27.

useful economic actors nor dutiful citizens. They believed that almsgiving was ineffective in combatting poverty, created laziness and only served the expansion of Catholicism in society.²¹⁴ Often, these advocates of philanthropy voiced their criticism in gendered terms, accusing charity of being irrational, soft-hearted, and naïve for its focus on the souls of its beneficiaries. From their side, Ozanam and other Catholics argued that because of its lack of a religious foundation, philanthropy was nothing more than a vain activity that did not contribute to the promotion of better relationships between society's different classes, nor to the moral elevation of the poor.²¹⁵ As the Ladies of Charity would later word it, 'To do good with the sole aim of obtaining the recognition of man, is to make a calculation that is often wrong for this world, always wrong before God, who, because he is all justice and all love, only rewards what is done in his name and for his glory'.²¹⁶ In practice, however, the difference between philanthropy and charity was often quite small, with both types of organizations distributing similar types of relief using similar methods, including poor visits. Moreover, while philanthropists (unless on their individual accord) did not approach the poor and the issue of social misery from a religious perspective, they did focus strongly on the connection between physical and moral 'needs'.²¹⁷ This preoccupation with the morality of the lower classes also figured prominently in both the liberal and Catholic engagement in the medico-moral mission of the late nineteenth century, which features in Part II.

The duality between rational, masculine philanthropy and emotional, feminine charity has often been noted by historians and served as an argument in favor of the separate spheres theory, which claimed that nineteenth century society was divided into a male, secular public, sphere and a female, religious, private sphere.²¹⁸ However, recent research has drawn attention to the context-specificity of such gendered discourse, showing that the association between femininity and certain beliefs and practices was often used to discredit them, rather than referring to a historical reality.²¹⁹ The charitable

²¹⁴ For a thorough analysis, see: Van Praet, *Hommes Orchestres*.

²¹⁵ Harrison, *Romantic Catholics*, 203-204.

²¹⁶ DLSVP, *Association Charitable des Dames de la Miséricorde de Malines. Statuts et Règlements* (Malines, 1861).

²¹⁷ The Ghent *Zonder Naam niet Zonder Hart* circles (1855) and *Laurentgenootschappen* (c. 1875), for example, distributed moral relief and visited the poor at home (Van Praet, *Hommes Orchestres*, esp. 206; 366). These initiatives fundamentally differed from the Vincentian organizations, the latter allocating a highly symbolical meaning to the poor visit and, in general, placing the social functions of their charity in a religious framework.

²¹⁸ See for example in Smith, *Ladies of the Leisure Class*; Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*; Young, *Middle-Class Culture*.

²¹⁹ For a more detailed discussion of the separate spheres theory, the feminization thesis, and their critiques,

fervor of the men of the Society of Saint Vincent further attests to this observation. Not only did these men see no threat to their masculinity in engaging in a feminine practice, but they also actively praised the example of women and stressed that Catholic manhood could not do without a warm compassion for others.²²⁰ In his circular of 1841, which was copied in the manual of the Society, Bailly stated that in developing the organization's practical piety, it took the charity of women as its example. 'For a long time', Bailly noted, 'Christian women had the meritorious privilege, if not of charitable gifts, then at least of charitable acts'. The 'awakening of charity among men', then, was a 'remarkable and immeasurable fact' that required a serious commitment to a proper, moral approach of the poor as well as to the meaningful mutual support among members.²²¹ Pious women offered a model on which the Society wanted its members to base their conduct. Virtues such as 'self-abnegation, Christian prudence, effective love of one's neighbor, zeal for the salvation of souls, leniency of the heart and of words', and especially humility and sacrifice, were described as of central importance to the work of the Society, and in this regard, the instructions given in the manuals of the Society and the Ladies were virtually the same.²²²

This way, the Society reconceptualized traits and attitudes associated with femininity by philanthropists as virtues that ought to be developed by all Catholics, especially those engaging in charitable activities. Moreover, the Society's choice of the home visit as its primary field of activity reflected this concern as well. Charitable visiting was a practice strongly associated with women, case in point being the practices of the seventeenth century Vincentian *Charités* and Daughters of Charity, whose example was widely followed in the centuries that followed.²²³ Ozanam himself was said to have accompanied his mother on her rounds, and these experiences could have contributed substantially to his ideas about charity.²²⁴ By imitating and appropriating female virtues and practices, the Society challenged prevalent gender norms and created novel means for men to develop and express their devotion. At the same time, the popularity of the Society's fraternal structure provided women's associations like the Ladies of Charity with a model that provided greater independence and visibility than

see: Pasture, 'Beyond the Feminization Thesis'; King, *Religion and Gender*; Bréjon de Lavergnée and Della Sudda, 'Une Histoire sans Genre'.

²²⁰ See also: Brejon de Lavergnée, 'Making the Charitable Man'.

²²¹ Circular of Emmanuel Bailly, 1841, op. cit. SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 167-168.

²²² Compare ODPM, *Règlement de l'Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades* (Ghent, s.d.); SVP, *Règlement de la Société de S'-Vincent-de-Paul* (Brussels, 1846); SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855).

²²³ Harrison, *Romantic Catholics*, 202.

²²⁴ Léonce Curnier, *La Jeunesse de Frédéric Ozanam* (Paris, 1890), 10-12. On the passing down of charitable practices from father to son, see: Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*.

the strict confraternity did. It should be noted, however, that the ideal of the charitable man put forth by the Society also more broadly reflected the emphasis on social compassion and public displays of devotion in romantic, revivalist Catholicism. Incidentally, some historians have argued that this romantic spirituality itself was a sign of the feminization of religion during the nineteenth century. In recent years, historians have proposed the more convincing conclusion that gender norms were not set in stone, but fluid, malleable, and constantly challenged.²²⁵ Notions of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ could be used to either discredit or approve of certain beliefs and behaviors depending on the motivations of the beholder, and the association between romanticism and femininity made by critics at the time is therefore of limited analytical value to our understanding of the nature of revivalist spirituality in all its aspects.

Although the founders of the Society acknowledged the example of charitable women, for moral reasons direct cooperation between charitable men and women remained strictly prohibited by the Society.²²⁶ In its manuals of 1846, 1855 and 1874, the Society made clear that the General Council did not allow for relations to be established between both organizations, nor with other female charitable associations or individuals. The only way for women to be involved in the work of the Society was by making donations as benefactresses.²²⁷ Interestingly however, the first Belgian Society in Brussels had originally not been keen on adopting this position. In fact, the Parisian Council was shocked to discover that the organization as it was conceived in 1842 also had a female division.²²⁸ While the existence of this division was (strategically?) omitted from the Brussels manual, it did mention that, in case of a lack of members available for visiting the poor, these visits should preferably be carried out by the organization’s benefactors, women included.²²⁹ When in 1845 Pope Gregorius XVI granted a full indulgence for the members of the Society of Saint Vincent, the General Council in Paris seized the opportunity to bring an end to the conflict by withholding this favor from the Belgian conferences. Keeping in mind their goal of self-sanctification, the Belgians conceded on all points. Nevertheless, they did not sacrifice their female division without a rebuttal, arguing that women not only provided valuable donations, but they also made it possible to reach the poor with whom the respectable men of the Society could not

²²⁵ Van Osselaer, ‘Religion, Family and Domesticity’; Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*; Brejon de Lavergnée, ‘Making the Charitable Man’; Bréjon de Lavergnée and Della Sudda, ‘Une Histoire sans Genre’. I come back to this issue in Chapter 2 of Part II.

²²⁶ At least until the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

²²⁷ SVP, *Règlement de la Société de S.^t-Vincent-de-Paul* (Brussels, 1846), 18; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 34. Incidentally, becoming a benefactress (or benefactor) of the organisation also granted indulgences.

²²⁸ Wouters, ‘De Bewogen Start’, 32-35.

²²⁹ SVP, *Règlement de l’Association de Charité* (Brussels, 1842), 26.

interact, in particular single women. The General Council agreed to temporarily tolerate the female division if no new members were allowed. In this way, the conflict was resolved, the Belgian Society of Saint Vincent gained official recognition the same year, and the female division died a silent death.²³⁰ To the Parisian Society, protecting the purity of the charitable exchange also meant that all rumors of indecency ought to be avoided, and an evident way to do that was simply by avoiding contact with charitable women. This attitude reflected the position of the Church, and at least until the end of the century, organizations with mixed membership were generally scarce.²³¹

Even though the members of the Society and the Ladies did not work together (aside from the occasional referral of a poor household), they developed a similar ideal of the charitable person, based on the example of Saint Vincent de Paul and the women of the *Charités*. This charitable person was eminently social, at the same time as being dedicated to spiritual self-development, in particular the process of self-sanctification. A typical element of the romantic revival was its promotion of individual sacrifice to expiate collective sin, and this was reflected in the ideal of the Vincentian. Not only was the Vincentian expected to offer a part (ideally most) of his or her wealth to the poor, in addition to a lot of time and effort, he or she should also utilize the practice of charity as an opportunity to deepen their faith. The interactions with the poor during the practice of charitable home visits would ‘make the pious soul experience very sweet pleasures: they detach the heart from perishable things and inspire the desire for the ineffable joys which are prepared for the faithful souls, and it is thus [...] that the exercise of charity is one of the most effective means of working for our own sanctification’.²³² Moreover, it was important that the Vincentian embarked on this quest towards Christian self-development together, as an active member of their joint brotherhood (or union, as the Ladies described with a more gender-neutral term). Thus, the organizations’ manuals explained, members should not remain passive in their faith, but instead actively seek self-sanctification through acts of worship, service, and sacrifice, and stimulate others to do the same.²³³ Charity, in particular when organized in a group setting, the Vincentians claimed, provided an ideal means to this end, and the visitors were instructed to ‘help each other to fulfill, in the most perfect and most useful way, the evangelical principle

²³⁰ Wouters, ‘De Bewogen Start’, 35-36.

²³¹ This paragraph on the relationships between charitable men and women in the context of the Vincentian organizations draws on my article: Fluit, ‘Gender and Class’.

²³² ODPMBr JV 1861, 10-11.

²³³ SVP, *Règlement de la Société de S.-Vincent-de-Paul* (Brussels, 1846); SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855); SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874); ODPM, *Règlement de l’Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades* (Ghent, s.d.).

of almsgiving'.²³⁴

Although it is tempting to view the Vincentians' deep commitment to self-sanctification as an essentially selfish purpose to which end the poor only served as an instrument, it is important to understand the theological foundation underlying it. Self-sanctification and the effort towards one's own salvation did not only benefit the person practicing it but could also have a beneficial effect on the wider community as it pleased God: 'And Joshua said unto the people, Sanctify yourselves: for tomorrow the Lord will do wonders among you' (Joshua 3:5). Moreover, the Vincentians stressed that spreading the faith and propagating morality among the poor was not possible if they themselves did not commit to practicing what they preached. So, the Vincentians considered their efforts towards personal sanctification as something that benefited both parties, the visitor and the visited, as well as the entire community. The act of almsgiving ought to be performed with a strong pious, compassionate, and sacrificial consciousness that extended far beyond the charitable moment, to become part of the personality of the giver. Only then could it most successfully please God, incite His blessings, and contribute to the redemption of the rich as well as poor. This way, the quest towards self-sanctification provided spiritual meaning to the charitable exchange.

The conferences of the Society and the associations of the Ladies wanted to provide an intimate and devout space for this mutual effort towards personal salvation, and it was therefore of great importance to maintain efficacy in this regard. This required protecting these spaces from disruptive outside influences and upholding certain rituals and rules that were considered conducive for a pious atmosphere. For starters, this meant that members should be selected with great care and held to a high standard. In the Society, candidates had to be approved by all members of the conference to which they applied. Usually, candidates were first recommended to the president by an existing member, who then decided whether to present the candidate to the entire conference. In theory, all Christian men who were 'prepared to unite in prayer and to commit to the same charitable work' were eligible to become a member.²³⁵ The rules of the Society also mentioned that potential members should be able to either instruct the others, or be open to be instructed by them, and that they should spare no effort in loving their fellow members as well as the poor under their care as brothers.²³⁶ So, it was expected of members that they were good Christians, both with regards to their knowledge of its axioms and their practice of religious duties, i.e. attending of mass, participation in the Eucharist, and so on. Furthermore, even though the Society claimed it did not

²³⁴ DLSVP, *Association Charitable des Dames de la Miséricorde de Malines. Statuts et Règlements* (Malines, 1861), 7-8.

²³⁵ SVP, *Règlement de la Société de S.-Vincent-de-Paul* (Brussels, 1846), 21.

²³⁶ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 42-30.

discriminate on the basis of wealth, the manuals did state that a candidate could only be accepted if they were capable of making a sufficient contribution (which was not unsubstantial) so that they may be able to help the poor and not require help themselves. Otherwise, the Society feared that the organization would be abused or that conflict would arise in the meetings. In order to stimulate an intimate friendship and trust among its members, the conferences should moreover limit the number of members. After being accepted, commitment to the weekly meetings of the conference was of primordial importance for each member, and failure to do so could lead to expulsion. In principle, members of all political backgrounds were welcome (as well as politicians), but they could not discuss their views in the context of the organization as to not endanger its spirit of fraternity and friendship.²³⁷

The Ladies' approach to new members was similar to that of the Society, but there were some important differences. Here too, 'all Christian ladies who wish to unite in prayer and participate in the same charitable works'²³⁸ were welcome, but only if they were 'worthy of the trust and affection of the organization'. So, before admitting anyone to their ranks, the Ladies had to make sure that the addition of a new member was not only beneficial to that person, but that they would also be able to 'tighten the connections which unify us'.²³⁹ According to the Ladies, the unity and connection of their Christian friendship did not only contribute to the mutual development of their piety, but also had a more practical advantage of helping each other 'overcome the repugnancies, the disgusts often associated with the practice of good'.²⁴⁰ Therefore, it was important to them to be able to trust and find support in each other during these endeavors. The procedure for the acceptance of a new member was not as democratic as in the Society. Existing members had to first notify the president of new candidates, after which the president informed the other members during the meeting. If anyone had concerns or objections, they were to share them discreetly with the president in the interval between that meeting in the next, after which the president made her decision and shared the news if the new member was accepted.²⁴¹

For both organizations, the regular meetings of the conferences and committees was

²³⁷ SVP, *Règlement de la Société de S.-Vincent-de-Paul* (Brussels, 1846); SVP, *Guide Pratique des Conférences de Saint Vincent de Paul* (Brussels, 1852); SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 5-35; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 21-41.

²³⁸ ODPM, *Règlement de l'Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades* (Ghent, s.d.), 14.

²³⁹ ODPM, *Règlement de l'Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades* (Ghent, s.d.), 12.

²⁴⁰ ODPM, *Règlement de l'Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades* (Ghent, s.d.), 4.

²⁴¹ ODPM, *Règlement de l'Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades* (Ghent, s.d.), 18; DLSVP, *Association Charitable des Dames de la Miséricorde de Malines. Statuts et Règlements* (Malines, 1861), 6; DLSVP, *Association des Dames de la Charité de St-Vincent de Paul à Anvers: Avant-Propos, Règlement, Prières...* (Antwerp, s.d.), 28.

the place par excellence to develop mutual piety and reflect on their work, both in a practical and in a spiritual sense. The meetings opened and closed with a collective prayer led by the presidents, which the organizations to sanctify itself and ‘attract the blessings of Heaven onto our works’. To stimulate humility among the members, they were required to kneel during the prayer. After all, ‘how could someone who refused to humiliate himself before God, have enough humility to serve the poor’?²⁴² Both organizations started their meetings with the prayer *Veni Sancte Spiritus* to invoke the Holy Spirit, a very popular sequence originally written for the mass of Pentecost. This choice was not without meaning, the prayer opens with a call to the Holy Spirit to send down his light (‘Come, Holy Spirit, send forth from heaven the rays of thy light’), followed by a verse that calls upon the charity of the Holy Spirit: ‘Come, Father of the poor; Come, giver of gifts, Come, light of our hearts’. The prayer ends with a call to the Holy Ghost to bestow his seven gifts onto the faithful (wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord) and the verse ‘Grant to us the merit of virtue, Grant salvation at our going forth, Grant eternal joy. Amen. Alleluia’. Through this choice of prayer, the Vincentians created an atmosphere of pious gravity at the start of each meeting and invited contemplation on the importance of love (or charity) to develop piety. Following the recitation of *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, the organizations’ members collectively recited a contemplative prayer that asked the Holy Ghost to fill the hearts of his followers with love and light and ended with a call to Saint Vincent de Paul to pray for them. The prayer at the closing of the meeting was directed at Jesus Christ and asked him to ignite the same burning love among them as he did with Saint Vincent, so that they may be as generous and sacrificial as him in their charitable work:

*Most merciful Jesus, who in thy Church awakened St. Vincent de Paul as an apostle of thy burning love, pour out the same loving zeal upon thy servants, so that they may wholeheartedly give all they possess to the poor out of mere love for Thou and end with sacrificing themselves wholly for them; who lives with God the Father and rules in the unity of the Holy Spirit in all centuries of centuries. Amen.*²⁴³

Exceptions to this sequence of prayers were possible, however, especially among the associations of Ladies, which were separate organizations without a central direction.²⁴⁴ The Malines Ladies of Charity, for example, ended their meetings with a recitation of

²⁴² SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 35; 56-57.

²⁴³ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 58-59.

²⁴⁴ ODPM, *Règlement de l’Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades* (Ghent, s.d.), 34-35; DLSVP, *Association Charitable des Dames de la Miséricorde de Malines. Statuts et Règlements* (Malines, 1861), 7-8; *Association des Dames de la Charité de Marie* (Courtrai, 1873), 8-12.

Memorare instead of an invocation of Saint Vincent de Paul.²⁴⁵ This prayer called upon the Virgin Mary to intercede with God on behalf of the salvation of the believer. This practice of intercessory prayer was quite common in Catholicism and was based on the idea that, being in the presence of Him, saints and martyrs could obtain blessings for others directly from God. Mary played an exceptionally important role in intercessory prayer as she was considered the mother of God's incarnation on earth, and therefore Mother of God, as well as mother and protector of all believers.²⁴⁶ By praying to Mary, the Malines Ladies (or rather the clergy supervising the work) cultivated and emphasized their humility. Lastly, the members prayed for the organizations' benefactors and honorary members, those members who did not perform visits but only contributed financially, and therefore did not participate in the regular meetings.

Joint prayer, mutual support and friendship, the practice of virtues like humility and kindness, and selectivity when choosing new members, were all of great importance to the creation of a devout community in the context of the Vincentian organizations. The Vincentians believed that this brotherhood or union could greatly contribute to their social awareness and spiritual development, and the regular meetings within the organizations functioned as a space for reflection on their work and the practice of piety. In particular, they aimed at achieving a degree of self-sanctification through the joint practice of charity and devotion, and the Vincentian men and women did not shy away from following each other's example in developing their strategies towards this goal. After all, the path towards self-sanctification and the creation of a mutual support system to this end was the primary goal of the organizations. Without it, the practice of charity was in danger of being reduced to a superficial distribution of material relief that lacked a greater connection to the divine. Thus, in order for their work with the poor to be beneficial for society as a whole and contribute to the propagation of God's love among all, the Vincentian's cultivation of 'one heart, one soul' among themselves stood at the core of their spirituality and charitable endeavors.

1.2. *The visit: the charitable exchange and its effects*

The notion of fraternity was not only a guiding principle in the mutual relationships between the members of the Vincentian organizations themselves, but it was also an attitude that should extend to the poor under their care. According to Ozanam, the social virtue of Christianity lay in the equality of all before God, no matter their occupation or sex. The poor should therefore not be approached as the other, but rather loved as a

²⁴⁵ DLSVP, *Association Charitable des Dames de la Miséricorde de Malines. Statuts et Règlements* (Malines, 1861), 5-6.

²⁴⁶ Schillebeeckx, *Mary, Mother of Redemption*

brother whose dignity should be respected and uplifted. Underlying this fraternal attitude towards the poor was a strong concern for the state of the relationship between the upper and lower classes in society. As the Vincentians and many other members of the elites saw it, the economic industrialization had created a ‘modern pauperism’ aggravated by the ‘denudation of the masses’ and ‘selfishness of those who possess’. Societal harmony was threatened by jealousy and hatred against the rich among the poor, and, conversely, the contempt for the poor felt by the rich, who aspired ever greater wealth.²⁴⁷

The home visit was a highly symbolic practice to the Vincentians that fundamentally shaped the way they interacted with the poor, as well as their own identity construction as *visitors*. The home visit was not merely one of the tools the Vincentians had in their charitable toolbox, it was *de raison d’être* of the organizations and an essential aspect of the way in which they presented themselves to the world. In his circular of 1848, president of the General Council Adolphe Baudon described the home of the poor, or, in his words, their ‘little attic’, as a ‘hiding place’ where ‘we have no other witnesses than our suffering friends and the Lord’ and where ‘we will find true and deep founded happiness, that will give our hearts courage against the outward struggles and storms of life’.²⁴⁸ Surprisingly however, the significance of this practice has been explored only superficially in historical research of the Vincentian organizations.²⁴⁹ Therefore, a more thorough investigation is warranted to understand how the Vincentians construed the poor visit as a practice that created both spiritual and social benefits for society, as well as how they envisioned their own role in this interaction.

The poor visit was a practice with a long history, going back at least to the early *Ancien Régime*.²⁵⁰ In the seventeenth century, Vincent de Paul and the devout women surrounding him laid the foundation for the type of organized charity through poor visits that thrived during the nineteenth century. This practice continued to form the heart of the nineteenth century apostolic and social mission of the Ladies and the Society, as well

²⁴⁷ ODPMBr JV 1861, 4-5.

²⁴⁸ Circular of Adolphe Baudon, 14 April 1848, op. cit. SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 331-332.

²⁴⁹ This can be partly explained by these studies’ particular focus. Brejon de Lavergnée concentrated on the Society’s members backgrounds and social relations (Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*). The edited volume on the history of the Belgian Society (De Maeyer and Wynants eds., *De Vincentianen in België*) gives an exhaustive overview of the history of the organization in all its aspects from its establishment until 1990, which at times left little room for in depth analysis of the organization’s discourses and practices. In her study of the Parisian Ladies of Charity, Sarah Curtis focused on the significance of women’s charity in French (Curtis, ‘Charitable Ladies’). Lastly, Philip Santy, in his general overview of the institutional development and activities of the Ladies of Charity in Kortrijk, does not provide additional insight into the meaning of the home visit either (Santy, ‘De Dames de la Miséricorde’).

²⁵⁰ Duprat, *Usage et Pratiques de la Philanthropie*, 954. See also: Van de Perre, ‘Public Charity and Private Assistance’.

as it constituted an essential practice in the work of the Daughters of Charity. The latter were focused on the target audience of poor sick, to whom they provided care at home if they were unable or unwilling to go to a hospital or other care facility. The importance of poor visits in the work of the Daughters seemed to diminish as the nineteenth century progressed, however, and in the context of the Work of the Poor Sick, they left an increasingly large part of the work to the Ladies to focus on their hospitals and schools. Aside from the Vincentian organizations, many other Catholic works performed home visits as well. The Society of Saint Francis Regis, dedicated to regularizing marriages, performed home visits to uncover and combat concubinage among the lower classes.²⁵¹ The poor visit was not only practiced in an organized setting. Throughout the nineteenth century, it was common for members of both the Catholic and liberal elites to visit people living in poverty at home on an individual basis as well. Notably, factory owners and their spouses regularly engaged in home visits to connect with workers, understand their predicaments, and extend various forms of assistance.²⁵² It is noteworthy that the ‘poor masters’ of the public Charity Bureaus also performed home visits before granting assistance to the people requesting help. Afterwards, too, the recipients of relief were paid regular visits to check up on their discipline and moral state.²⁵³ This pragmatic approach to the poor visit, a characteristic shared with philanthropic organizations conducting similar visits, stood in stark contrast to the spiritual essence of the Vincentians’ visits. The Vincentians framed this practice as the *raison d’être* of Vincentian charity.²⁵⁴

To nineteenth century Catholics, the poor visit was more than a practical approach to charity. In their eyes, seeking out and helping the poor at home was a practice that held a deeply symbolical meaning and great social value. Under impulse of the romantic Catholic thinkers and scientists of the early to mid-nineteenth century, charity gained

²⁵¹ *Association des Dames de Saint François Régis. Oeuvre des Mariages. Rapport Présenté au Congrès de Malines 24 Septembre 1909* (Liège, 1909).

²⁵² See also Hemelsoet, ‘Liefdadigheid als Roeping van de Dame’.

²⁵³ Van de Perre, ‘Public Charity and Private Assistance’, 102-103; Van de Perre, ‘De Dokter der Armen’; Lis, ‘Peilingen naar het Belang van de Steun Verleend door het Bureel van Weldadigheid’.

²⁵⁴ The only Belgian instance of a philanthropic organization conducting home visits that was mentioned in *Belgique Charitable* was Le Violette in Brussels, established in 1890 (Ludovic Saint-Vincent, *Belgique Charitable: Charité, Bienfaisance, Philanthropie etc., etc.* (Brussels, 1893), 157-158), even though other, much older, philanthropic organizations like the *Zonder Naam niet Zonder Hart* circles also practiced home visits (Van Praet, *Hommes Orchestres*, 206). It seems that home visits held considerably less *symbolic* significance for this organization compared to the Vincentians, and were not at the centre of the philanthropic organizations’ identity. It is also relevant to note that in some other countries, most notably Britain, visiting the poor was a tradition performed by a much broader segment of the elites (among whom many women – the ideal of the ‘lady bountiful’) and public authorities. See for example: Crawford, Greenwood, Bates, and Memel, *Florence Nightingale at Home*; Rimke and Hunt, ‘From Sinners to Degenerates’; Gerard, ‘Lady Bountiful’.

new significance. Charity was no longer defined solely in its spiritual dimension, but also as a type of social action that contributed to establishing social harmony and that constituted a legitimate solution to the social question, thereby constituting an alternative for or supplement to public social assistance.²⁵⁵ In 1824, almost a decade before Ozanam created the Society, Joseph-Marie de Gérando (1772-1842) first published his influential monograph *Le Visiteur du Pauvre* on the scientific and societal utility of the poor visit.²⁵⁶ Gérando was an anthropologist, a philosopher, a politician, and a charitable Catholic. He wrote his monograph in response to a contest organized by the *Académie de Lyon* in 1820, which posed the question how indigence could truly be understood, and in what way distributing alms could be rendered useful to both the beneficiary and the benefactor. Gérando's prizewinning answer proposed the poor visit as the ultimate solution to the problems posed. The poor visit, he argued, provided the visitor with the opportunity to observe and inspect the poor and their living environments, thereby allowing him to gain insight in the nature of indigence. At the same time, the poor visit established proximity and trust, making it possible for the visitor to moralize, guide, and instruct the poor, but also to surveil them.²⁵⁷

The similarity between the ideas of Gérando and Ozanam is clear, but deceptive. The poor visit as conceived by Ozanam was useful not as a tool to investigate indigence and surveil the poor, but to know the poor in their own homes and to establish a charitable exchange that was mutually beneficial to the visitor and the visited, both in a spiritual and social sense. Indeed, even though Gérando was also a Catholic and the spiritual dimension of charity was evident in his book, he primarily approached the subject from an academic perspective.²⁵⁸ In this regard, it is interesting to note that between the first and second quarter of the nineteenth century, poor visits were not solely the domain of charitable (and the occasional philanthropic) actors, but also of scientists. Taking this scientific approach to the poor visit to the next level, French sociologist and economist Frédéric Le Play spent over two decades studying and gathering data on the material and moral life of 36 diverse poor families, eventually publishing his findings in a series of 36 monographs titled *Les Ouvriers Européens* (1855). In 1864, he published a book on the social principles he deemed most conducive to achieving the prosperity of

²⁵⁵ Rodriguez, 'De la 'Charité Investigatrice'; Farrel-Vinay, 'Welfare Provision in Piedmont'.

²⁵⁶ Joseph-Marie de Gérando, *Le Visiteur du Pauvre* (Paris, 1824). Similar efforts to provide substance to the poor visit as a legitimate answer to social questions were undertaken by Thomas Chalmers (1821) in the United States and Daniel von der Heydt (1853) in Prussia. See: Rodriguez, 'De la 'Charité Investigatrice', 10.

²⁵⁷ Joseph-Marie de Gérando, *Le Visiteur du Pauvre* (Paris, 1824). See also: Rodriguez, 'De la 'Charité Investigatrice'; Farrel-Vinay, 'Welfare Provision in Piedmont'.

²⁵⁸ See also: Farrel-Vinay, 'Welfare Provision in Piedmont'.

society, in which he allocated an important role to religion.²⁵⁹

The centrality of the home visit to Vincentian charitable spirituality and practices was quite unique in the field of social assistance. The poor visit allowed the visitor to practice compassion and work towards self-sanctification, while at the same time offering the poor a more discrete and dignified type of relief that opened the door to moral instruction. Not the distribution of material relief, but the friendly, fraternal, but at the same time paternalist interaction of the rich with the poor was the main purpose of the poor visit. In line with the vision advanced by romantic Catholics like Gérando and Ozanam, the Vincentians believed that this interaction contributed to bringing about social harmony, a conviction that grew stronger in light of the 1848 revolutions and the Catholic battle against secularism during the following decades. On the one hand, the Vincentians claimed, home visits promoted a loving and charitable attitude among the rich, centered around the virtues of sacrifice, discretion, and respect, so that the poor may appreciate them as compassionate guides rather than enemies. On the other, they set out to combat the jealousy among the poor, which they considered a vice opposite to the virtue of charity, by offering them a considerate ear and a helping hand.²⁶⁰ By giving them moral support, material help and spiritual guidance, the Vincentians hoped to restore the poor in their self-worth and bring them closer to God so that they may enjoy His blessings and be guided to resignation. Even the simple act of getting to know each other could make both the poor and the rich aware of their prejudices and benefit the confidence between them:

Christian charity, and it alone, can break down this barrier, can reunite these two classes so separated, so opposed to each other: by inspiring the rich with the spirit of sacrifice, it makes him give to the poor a part of this superfluity that God has given him, and sometimes, it makes him overcome his repugnance, to go and see this poor man up close, whom he often despised, because he did not know him. It is also the exercise of charity that makes the poor feel that he hated the rich, because he had never seen him up close. Yes, when he sees a rich person visiting him in his poor attic, he says to himself: the rich are not what I thought; see, they themselves come to visit me; they come to help me, so there are still good souls among the rich. And thus, by the exercise of charity, one of the great evils of our time can be averted.²⁶¹

Eventually, the Vincentians believed, these charitable interactions would lead to a more harmonious society in which both the poor and the rich understood their roles and duties,

²⁵⁹ Goyau, 'Pierre-Guillaume-Frédéric Le Play'.

²⁶⁰ SVP, *Règlement de la Société de S.^t-Vincent-de-Paul* (Brussels, 1846), 14-17.

²⁶¹ ODPMBr JV 1861, 4-5.

in addition to inciting, or reciprocally reinforcing, God's benediction of His followers.

That the Vincentians were convinced that the home visit was the most powerful tool to reach out and reach through to the poor also had to do with practical considerations. For one, the practice of home visits was exceptionally accessible for those in search of a charitable outlet. The visitor did not require specific skills to be able to help the poor, unlike charitable care for the sick, the elderly or orphans in designated Catholic institutions. He or she only needed to answer to a request for help submitted directly to the organization or find a poor household via the local priest or the Daughters of Charity and could subsequently 'come to them with some aid, investigate their situation, speak with them', after which 'the learning period will soon have passed'. The poor visit was a straightforward work that could therefore be called the 'daily bread of charity'.²⁶²

Not only was it relatively easy way of doing charity, but the poor visit also offered other advantages in terms of the intimacy it offered during the interactions with the poor. The needy did not have to move to the source of relief, they did not have to stand in line, and they did not have to face the embarrassment of being denied help in public. Instead, the relief came to them in the form of a weekly visit from a committed benefactor.²⁶³ Because the charitable act took place in the private and intimate setting of homes of the poor, the Vincentian strategy promoted a sense of familiarity, confidentiality, and trustiness in the relationship between giver and receiver. This was to the benefit of the visitor not only because it facilitated their interaction with the poor, but also because it allowed them to assess and follow up on the moral and material state of the poor to an extent that would otherwise not be possible. For one, the visit allowed the Vincentians to get to know all members of the family and investigate their conduct. Foremost, the visitors were interested in the family members' knowledge of the Christian religion and the degree to which they practiced liturgical rites and other public displays of devotion. They looked for the presence of religious paraphernalia in the home, recommended further decorations when not impressed, or refused families when finding unwanted elements. In the latter respect, the visitors were weary of any indication of adherence to hostile ideologies like socialism, and therefore checked the family's reading habits, the respectability of the schools the children attended (if they went to school at all) and of the companies the youth and/or adults worked at, and so on. The Vincentians also investigated the families' sleeping arrangements and deemed it a severe moral issue if children shared a bed with their parents. In that case, they made it a priority to arrange

²⁶² SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 147.

²⁶³ This commitment was considered of essential importance to the practice of poor visits, and the members of either organization were in no way allowed to have someone else carry out their task. SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 65-66.

the necessary furniture and curtains to create a more adequate sleeping situation.²⁶⁴ Outward appearance, both in terms of displays of devotion (e.g. church attendance) and visible indications of piety within the house, were considered to be a reflection of one's internal moral state, a common idea among nineteenth-century elites.²⁶⁵ As the Society worded it, 'at the domestic hearth, everything has a meaning, even the soulless objects, even the walls, which one sees adorned with some external indications of religion in one home, and in another with godless or immoral imagery'.²⁶⁶

This attention for moral issues in the family and their home did not mean that the Vincentians were not interested in their physical state and the quality of their living space. They equally checked whether the family had sufficient furniture (like beds and chairs), a stove and coals to keep warm, adequate clothing and shoes, especially to go to school or work with, and sufficient food to sustain themselves. However, the primary goal of providing relief was to open the door of the home of the poor, and the true value of the visit lay in its moral, spiritual, and social harmony promoting qualities. The Vincentian poor visit had a purpose far beyond providing temporal material relief to the needy, otherwise it would be nothing more than soulless philanthropy. Instead, although it was 'legitimate to hope for and agreeable to obtain the recognition from the poor they have relieved', the Ladies stressed that the 'hopes [of the visitors] must rise higher and ascend to God'.²⁶⁷ They explained that 'yes, the corporal alms are necessary, to gain the trust of the poor, but to the corporal alms you add the spiritual alms, and that is the distinctive mark of your charitable association, it is the personal visit of the poor, it is the courageous sacrifice of your comfort, of your walks, of your free time, to visit the poor yourselves in their sad and often very unclean residences'.²⁶⁸ Or even more bluntly: 'the main goal of the associates is to win souls to Our Lord [...] to whom they grant material assistance, in order to make their advice more relishable'.²⁶⁹ As such, the Vincentian made it very clear that their goal was not merely to provide material relief to the needy, and that such efforts were but a means to an end, as summarized in the Vincentian motto *Dieu comme but, les pauvres comme moyen*. Thus, the Vincentians believed that material alms did not provide real solace to the poor; alms offered only a temporary relief of suffering. The gift reached its full potential if it was accompanied by

²⁶⁴ This is mentioned in all the Society's manuals after 1874. SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 55-56.

²⁶⁵ Curtis, 'Charitable Ladies', 138.

²⁶⁶ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 248-249.

²⁶⁷ DLSVP, *Association Charitable des Dames de la Miséricorde de Malines. Statuts et Règlements* (Malines, 1861), 8.

²⁶⁸ ODPMBr JV 1861, 10.

²⁶⁹ '... afin de mieux goûter leurs conseils'. DLSVP, *Association des Dames de la Charité de Marie* (Courtrai, 1873), 1.



J. Ponceaux del. et fecit, 1744.

Allegorical depiction of the three Godly virtues: Faith, Hope, and Love, 1744

good advice of the knowledgeable rich, and by the spiritual and moral support of a fellow lay man. By learning the survival skills needed for life in modern society, and by moreover learning how to resign in their social status and role as given to them by God, the Vincentians assumed that the poor would be able to live a more pleasant and calm life, in turn appeasing social tensions.

This greater interest in the spiritual and social effects of the poor visit than in the efficacy of the material relief itself was reflected in the organizations' texts. The descriptions of the purpose and process of the visits in the Vincentians' manuals had the goal of inspiring the visitors. These 'guidelines', often in the form of stories, were markedly less concerned with the question how to most efficiently physically aid the poor, and instead tended to passionately and almost poetically described the spiritual gratification obtained through the poor visit. The yearly reports were usually structured in a way that first highlighted the absolute numbers of visits performed and material aid distributed, followed by several accounts of particularly inspiring examples of poor individuals who had undergone a spiritual transformation. While the overview of material help provided are quite dry, the examples of successfully applied moral alms were described in an inspiring, more emotional manner. These anecdotes told stories of conversion, of gratitude and newfound happiness in the homes of the poor. The report of the general assembly of the Belgian Society in 1857, for example, recounts the story of a family of eight living in dire conditions, 'a hole' resembling 'a lair of animals more than a residence of humans'. Despite their obvious need, the father of the family initially refused to accept any alms from his visitors, saying 'I am poor, but I am proud'. The visitor told him that 'it is the alms of God, which you are refusing, and it is bad of you to deny it to your unfortunate children'. Although the man 'would rather die without complaining than to live and hold out his hand', he was touched by 'the divine mercy which watched over his children and the poor with so much affection'. Eventually, it was the mother who reached out again to the visitor, and when he came, he 'found the family in an indescribable state', 'dazed by pain, dying of need, the unfortunate mother vainly presenting her dried-up breast to a four-month-old baby; five other children surrounding them completing the picture of hunger'. The conference decided to distribute urgent, non-specified relief to the family, and when the visitor met the father of the family once again, his attitude had completely changed, 'amazed by what was done for them in the name of God'. He then 'listened patiently to the strong but charitable remonstrances of [his visitor], and it was with tears that he thanked him'.²⁷⁰ In this anecdote, the material circumstances of the poor family are highlighted with fervor, they paint a picture of a household in great need for a charitable intervention, but the relief provided was but a means to an end, and it's concrete contents and physical effects were

²⁷⁰ SVPHRB JV 1856, 12-13.

therefore not described in more detail. The goal was to open the father's heart to the benedictions of the divine mercy, through the figure of the Vincentian visitor. After gaining the father's trust, the visitor reproached him like a caring father for not accepting the help of God earlier, for which the visitor was then thanked with tears.

Such anecdotes draw attention to the complexity of the charitable exchange. As historian of the French Society of Saint Vincent Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée argued, the charitable act should not be understood as a linear, direct gift from giver to receiver, but rather as a triangular, reciprocal exchange between giver, receiver and God.²⁷¹ Charity was not just neighborly love, it was understood as an expression of Divine Love, God *being* Love and charity being the manifestation as well as reciprocation of God's love for His people. God's ultimate deed of love had been His sacrifice of his Son for them, and it was through the figure of the poor that this love could be repaid and propagated. In this spiritual performance, the poor represented Christ Himself: 'When we truly love the poor, we also love Jesus, who, being rich, made himself poor for us'.²⁷² By helping the poor, the Vincentians saw themselves as helping the personifications of Christ on earth, thereby answering to His words 'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat,... I was nude and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me,... truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me. Matthew XXV, 35, 36 and 40', an excerpt that was repeated in so many of the Vincentian's sources.²⁷³

The poor, from their end, were not merely subject to the 'violence' of a unilateral gift, violent because it excludes the possibility of repayment which they could never repay.²⁷⁴ Instead, they could return what they had received through gratitude towards and prayer for their visitor and the organization to which they belonged: 'the prayers of the poor whom they relieve, whose merits and sufferings rise to Heaven each day, to attract to the Work and to those who have the good fortune to cooperate in it, blessings and graces, which would otherwise be unknown to them'.²⁷⁵ Not to mention that their mere acceptance of the visitor's gift provided the latter with an opportunity for self-sanctification, making the act of acceptance itself an immediate form of repayment. By

²⁷¹ See in particular the chapter 'La Charité: Discours et Pratiques' (Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*, 533-596).

²⁷² ODPMBr JV 1861, 9.

²⁷³ DLSVP, *Association Charitable des Dames de la Miséricorde de Malines. Statuts et Règlements* (Malines, 1861), 8.

²⁷⁴ 'La violence ne découle pas de l'incapacité matérielle pour le pauvre de donner car l'obligation morale de rendre en retour ne s'impose pas forcément à lui. Mais elle tient à la mise à distance par laquelle le donateur fait sentir qu'il n'attend pas de retour. Le don unilatéral est violent en ce qu'il supprime la possibilité d'un retour.' Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*, 584.

²⁷⁵ ODPMG JV 1853-1854, 10.

accepting the visit, the material gift and the moral counsel offered by the Vincentians, the poor also answered to God's love by engaging in the charitable exchange as well as by conforming to the prerequisite set by the Vincentians to open their hearts to the Catholic faith and to perform religious practices. Both visitor and visited could hope to receive blessings from God in response to their engagement in the charitable exchange. This last exchange was made more tangible by the Church, which acted as an intermediary by bestowing indulgences upon both the Vincentians and the poor whom they visited.

The poor could go even further in adding spiritual depth to the charitable exchange. A great potential achievement of the Vincentian home visit was the 'wonderous and yet so common spectacle, of poverty accepted with mansuetude and even joy and carried with dignity, as being a precious title of brotherhood with Our Dear Lord Jesus'.²⁷⁶ This referred to the religious concept of redemptive suffering, the act of accepting one's hardships and offering one's pain to God. Redemptive suffering was considered the epitome of surrendering to the will of God, and a way of providing meaning to earthly hardships by using these experiences to feel closer to Christ by walking in his footsteps. Like the rich who sacrificed time and resources to add some comfort in the lives of the Christ-like poor for the sake of God's love, the poor themselves could offer their suffering to God out of love for Him. This way, the poor were able to make their suffering useful and bearable. Through this act of sacrifice, the poor could contribute to the remission (but not forgiveness, which could not be earned) of not only their own sins, but those of others as well, much like Christ Himself had done by suffering and dying for the sins of humanity. By stimulating redemptive suffering among the poor, the charitable exchange could generate spiritual blessings that extended far beyond the individuals involved, benefitting the whole of society. For the Vincentians themselves, this 'noble task' of 'inspiring love for suffering' and 'teaching [the poor] to sanctify their tears' allowed them to 'perfect their own hearts in the most sublime of virtues, the perfect charity'.²⁷⁷ This promotion of redemptive suffering can be considered a practical expression of the doctrine of reversibility of expiation which had gained a popular *élan* through the revival. Under the influence of ultramontanism, the concept of redemptive suffering became more prominent in the discourses of the Vincentians from the 1850s onwards, as it accorded with the Belgian ultramontanes' efforts to rechristen society via the social sphere. The promise of spiritual effects extending *beyond* the redemptive sufferer explains why the Vincentians valued the practice so highly, in spite of the great

²⁷⁶ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 14-15; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 13.

²⁷⁷ SVP, *Procès-Verbal de l'Assemblée Générale des Conférences du Brabant et des Délégués des Diverses Conférences de la Belgique, 27 Juillet 1862* (Brussels, 1862), 53-54.

dedication and mentoring it required.

Even though the Vincentians considered poverty a part of the human experience, a necessary one at that, they believed that modern society was plagued by severe imbalances. On the one hand, secularizing trends and religious illiteracy among the lower classes had eroded religion as the indispensable social fabric of society. At the same time, rampant capitalism and pursuit of profit had created inhumane living conditions for the lower classes, the scale and severity of which surpassed those of the past. According to the Vincentians, charity could offer a solution to all these problems, or in the words of the president of the Superior Council de Gerlache directed at the Belgian Society in 1852:

*'Charity [...] is perhaps the last chance for salvation of the society. The masses are tormented by bad passions and bad doctrines. [...] The law represses, she punishes, but she does not moralize. [...] The miseries, forever conditions of human life, are supported more difficultly supported today; the chances for the industry upset the existence of the worker; the rich harden in their selfishness, the poor is irritated by his suffering and deprivations. An inextricable disturbance has confused the ideas, changed the principles, hardened the feelings. Only charity can re-establish peace, calm down the enmities, bend the hearts, enlighten the spirits. Its work is not only that of the clergy, of the rich, of the socially eminent; it's the work of all: it is necessary that everyone dedicates themselves to it in the degree they can, and we can do a lot when we want to.'*²⁷⁸

Charity combatted the physical suffering of the poor, the victims of 'modern pauperism', brought the members of different social classes together so that their prejudices may be reconsidered, and pleased God so that He may disperse His blessings on the living.²⁷⁹ As such, the concept of modern pauperism functioned as an important legitimation for the Vincentian's work. This is why they repeatedly described the living conditions of the poor they visited in a highly visual, often even shocking manner, comparing their homes to the 'lair of an animal'²⁸⁰ or 'dirty and stinking basements',²⁸¹ invoking the imagery of 'all sexes and ages mixed together [...] heaped onto each other'²⁸² and of

²⁷⁸ Gaston de Gerlache, *Circulaire du Président du Conseil Supérieur aux Membres de la Société de S-Vincent de Paul de Belgique* (Brussels, 1852), 2-3.

²⁷⁹ ODPMBr JV 1861, 5.

²⁸⁰ SVPHRB JV 1856, 13.

²⁸¹ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 187; 458-459; 515.

²⁸² SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 458-459.

poor sick laying on ‘a bed of pain’.²⁸³ The imagery of suffering, filth and immoral living conditions served as a motivation to practice charity. It drew attention the physical *need* for relief among the poor and highlighted the heroism of the Vincentian visitors who overcame the barriers of mutual distrust and social division to bring the poor ‘bread that relieves the body’, and ‘heavenly manna that comforts and strengthens [their souls]’.²⁸⁴

Despite the Vincentians’ strong emphasis on the importance of moral alms, the material relief they offered was of great importance to win the trust of the poor and to aid them in their suffering. The form of the material alms therefore mattered a great deal as well. The Vincentians seldomly distributed monetary alms and preferred to cater to the specific needs of the poor they visited.²⁸⁵ This is why the Society and the Ladies distributed all kinds of goods, ranging from basic necessities like bread, meat and coal tickets, to clothing and furniture, kitchen utensils and even craft tools like hammers and pincushions. According to Catharina Lis, the Antwerp Society distributed little bread and instead preferred to hand out clothing and food in the form of rice, legumes, and meat-soup. From this, Lis derived that the Vincentians were more concerned with exerting social discipline on the poor by ‘distinguishing them from the rest of the poor by their clothing and their diet, transforming them into examples of respectability’, than with actually relieving hunger.²⁸⁶ While I agree with Lis that the Vincentians’ material relief was meager (they explicitly stressed that alms should be small themselves), I do not believe the Vincentians tried to impose a bourgeois ideal on the poor by means of denying them bread and giving them meat. When comparing the year reports of different regional divisions of both organizations, it is clear that in general, bread was and remained the largest expense of the local conferences throughout the nineteenth century. Interestingly, however, there were sometimes exceptions to this rule. The Antwerp conferences did in fact spend more of their budget on other types of food than bread, as well as a large sum on furniture and clothing. Yet, Lis did not consider the Antwerp Society’s own explanation of this choice, which was that in their experience, the poor themselves encountered less difficulty finding bread than other foods, clothing, and furniture.²⁸⁷ The Ghent Ladies of the Work of the Poor Sick also allocated a larger part of their budget to the purchase of meat and all kinds of seemingly luxury products like wine, chocolate, fruits, and eggs than bread. The reason for this was that these Ladies

²⁸³ ODPMG JV 1853-1854, 6; SVPHRB JV 1868, 212.

²⁸⁴ SVP, *Frédéric Ozanam, Nouvelle Edition* (Paris, 1930), 5.

²⁸⁵ Money was only given when it was unavoidable, and in those cases the visitor was instructed to follow-up on the way it was used by his poor. SVP, *Guide Pratique des Conférences de Saint Vincent de Paul* (Brussels, 1852), 11; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 42; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 10.

²⁸⁶ Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor*, 131.

²⁸⁷ SVPA JV 1851, 11; SVPA JV 1879, 7.

occupied themselves primarily with sick poor, and these foods were considered to have a medicinal effect.²⁸⁸ Thus, I do not think it is fair to assume that the Vincentians' dedication to moralization necessarily stood in the way of their desire to provide useful relief to the poor, especially not if this argument rests upon the organizations' spending on bread. Moreover, since they considered material alms a key to open the door to moral instruction, it was in their best interest to distribute relief that was actually appreciated by the poor.

The Vincentians prided themselves in being creative in the help they provided and adapting it to the individual needs of the poor under their care, often repeating that one of the strengths of Christian charity was 'being universal, applying a remedy for each misery, finding a resource for every deprivation'.²⁸⁹ So, aside from dispensing basic goods like food, clothing, and furniture, the visitors had several other sources of relief at their disposal, to be distributed according to the individual needs of the poor they visited. Also falling in the category of material of physical alms, for example, were the visitors' efforts to place the sick, the elderly and orphans in designated (Catholic) institutions where they could receive the care they needed, or to provide medicine to the sick when they refused to leave their homes. To this end, the Vincentians, and most notably the Society, often contributed to the establishment of such institutions and continued to provide them with support.²⁹⁰ Furthermore, the Vincentians were instructed to make substantial effort to find occupation for the poor who had lost their job, at least if they were still capable of working. This goal was important to the Society in particular, which already mentioned it in its first manual of 1842,²⁹¹ but the Ladies, who often lacked the social capital necessary for such endeavors, did not mention it explicitly. Some types of material relief also possessed an inherent moral feature. By organizing, financially contributing to, or attending funerals, the visitor could make sure the deceased received a Christian burial, and at the same time aid their relatives.²⁹² Christian books, furthermore, provided the poor with a moral form of entertainment, which the visitors hoped would keep them out of the cafés and strengthen their faith.²⁹³

²⁸⁸ See the expense reports in ODPMG JV 1852; 1853; 1855.

²⁸⁹ ODPMBr JV 1861, 6.

²⁹⁰ See also the various contributions in De Maeyer and Wynants eds., *De Vincentianen in België*.

²⁹¹ SVP, *Règlement de l'Association de Charité* (Brussels, 1842), 16.

²⁹² ODPMBr JV 1861, 7; 10; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 556-558; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 158; 553-554. Being present and contributing to the funeral of a person who was under the care of the organizations granted seven years and forty days of indulgences.

²⁹³ ODPMBr JV 1861, 13; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 25; 39; 441-442; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 15; 23; 54; 386. One of the typical auxiliary works present in many of the Society's local

However important relief in the form of food and goods was to them, the Society and the Ladies continuously stressed the importance of moderation when distributing material relief. As both organizations explained in their manuals, the Society in 1846 and the Ladies in 1850, ‘we will not be ashamed to give modest alms; that which is little in the eyes of the rich, is a lot in the eyes of those who have nothing; the modesty of the alms is one of the conditions of our existence; we typically do not have other resources than voluntary offerings; [...] our tender interest, our regards themselves provide a value to our relief that it would not have by itself’.²⁹⁴ A few years later, the Society added that ‘true charity is always poor, like the ones it alleviates’.²⁹⁵ This attachment to modesty and the spiritual framework surrounding the gift also implied that a lack of resources could not be used an excuse by conferences with limited means. It was through the zeal of its members that the organizations could thrive, and money was only of secondary importance. After all, the future president of the Society Adolphe Boudon noted in 1848, ‘the weakness of the tool in no way inhibits the godly hand that moves it from being skillful and strong’, implying that if God was pleased by the Vincentians’ charitable work, He would find a way to use it as a way to ‘let His omnipotent mercy shine’.²⁹⁶ The poor, from their side, had to understand that the purpose of the organizations was not to satisfy all their physical needs, and that instead, ‘an existence based on charitable help’ was ‘highly precarious’. The material alms provided by the organizations were small, and the visitors of the poor had to motivate the latter to ‘apply all their ingenuity to provide in their needs themselves’, so that they eventually would no longer need assistance.²⁹⁷

Despite the growing anticlerical criticism against Catholic efforts in the social sphere, and the accusation against the Vincentians of creating a ‘profitariat’ held in place by meager alms that provided no structural solution to poverty,²⁹⁸ the Society and Ladies doubled down on the usefulness of the poor visit in stimulating a Christian morality on the basis of which society could be saved. In the atmosphere of rigorous ultramontaniam, they actively expanded the means through which they could reach and morally elevate the poor, thereby creating an ever-growing collection of auxiliary works ‘that follow man from his birth to his grave’ and that attested to the ‘force of circumstances and

conferences was the library, however small. The Ladies also distributed good reading material among their poor, but did not do so systematically until the inter-war period.

²⁹⁴ ODPM, *Règlement de l’Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades (Ghent, s.d.)*, 13.

²⁹⁵ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 154.

²⁹⁶ Circular of Adolphe Baudon, 14 April 1848, op. cit. SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 328.

²⁹⁷ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 35.

²⁹⁸ De Maeyer, ‘In Amore et Fraternitate’, 178.

manifold miseries' which made these works necessary.²⁹⁹ That the moral component in these auxiliary works was as important or even more so than in the home visits, attests to the deep conviction held by the Vincentians that in order to restore Christian society, an all-encompassing, militant approach was needed to instill religious faith and pious practice in all social strata of society. In the words of de Gerlache, president of the Belgian Superior Council, in 1852: 'Modern society has been Christianly constituted from bottom to top; it must be restored in a Christian way if we want to raise it solidly'.³⁰⁰

1.3. *The visited: defining deservingness*

The primary goal of the Vincentians was to sanctify themselves through the practice of charity, and to relieve the material and moral misery of the poor while doing so. Their purpose was not to provide a structural solution to poverty, as they believed poverty to be an unavoidable and even necessary human condition, but to relieve misery caused by the excesses of egocentric liberalism and capitalism. By consequence, the Society explicitly stressed that its conferences 'do not have the necessary objective to relieve *a large number of unfortunate* [original emphasis].'³⁰¹ Even though both organizations did aim at helping as many poor as possible, as exemplified by their continuous celebration of the rising number of visits performed and goods distributed in their yearly reports, the quantity of people visited could not come at the cost of the quality of the visit. It remained of central importance to achieve a charitable exchange with the most spiritual benefit for both parties. The person who was visited could not simply be a receiving subject in this interaction, but was instead expected to display an openness to the moral instruction and guidance offered by their visitor. In addition, the Vincentians hoped that the poor would reciprocate their gifts through gratitude, prayer, and the practice of redemptive suffering. These expectations implied a level of selectivity when considering which poor to visit, despite the organizations' principal openness to all poor. Indeed, the organizations' limited means, their dedication to long-term guidance of the poor, and their concern for spiritual gratification inadvertently disqualified many of those looking for relief. In this sense, selectivity was a practical necessity for the organizations, but one that required some form of justification in function of their higher purpose. As a result, both the Society and the Ladies developed notions of deservingness to guide their

²⁹⁹ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 16; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 14-15.

³⁰⁰ Etienne C. de Gerlache, *Circulaire du Président du Conseil Supérieur aux Membres de la Société de S-Vincent de Paul de Belgique* (Brussels, 1852), 9.

³⁰¹ SVP, *Instruction sur les Règles à Suivre dans la Formation des Conférences de Saint-Vincent de Paul* (Paris, 1848), 3.

work, which inevitably affected their approach to the poor, as well as their own image in the perception of outsiders.

One of the distinct features of Vincentian charity was its universality. This principle did not only refer to the organizations' efforts to provide relief for each ailment, but also to their principal openness to all poor, no matter their background or beliefs. The Society claimed that 'We are the dispensers of the gifts of God, who is the common Father of all people, and lets his sun shine for all. Therefore, we will love all poor without distinction: the claim of the poor to our pity is their poverty itself; we will never investigate whether they belong to this or that party'.³⁰² The Ladies, too, stressed that no poor should be refused help because of their beliefs.³⁰³ After all, Christ himself came to save *all* people, no matter their backgrounds or credence.³⁰⁴ Despite such discourse, the Vincentians did in fact refuse help to some and discontinued their help to others in function of their personal, societal and religious goals. At the time, many critics believed this selectivity to be proof of the Vincentians' hypocrisy and hunger for control of the lower classes. Liberals and socialists accused the Vincentians of creating a 'profitariat' among the poor they helped, taking away their motivation to take matters in their own hands to improve their situation, and of favoring Catholics when deciding who to help, thereby refusing help to non-believers and forcing conversion among the poorest in return for meagre material alms.³⁰⁵ Incidentally, such accusations are echoed in historical research as well. Social historian Catharina Lis, for example, called the Vincentians 'mini inquisitors' who forced the poor to endure endless moralization in return for material support that barely made any difference and in fact only served to maintain the status quo.³⁰⁶ Yet, the Vincentians' decision-making with regards to whom to help was much more complex than solely the exclusion of non-believers. The Vincentians saw their work as an integral element to the restoration of harmony in society, and in this respect not only the concept of deservingness was of importance, but also those of fairness and justness, all of which transcended the interaction with the individual poor. Indeed, the Vincentians' decisions on whom to help and whom to deny help can be considered concrete, practical expressions of ideas that had a lot of reach in a country in which Catholicism had a very

³⁰² SVP, *Règlement de la Société de S.-Vincent-de-Paul* (Brussels, 1846), 16; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 32; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 29.

³⁰³ ODP, *Règlement de l'Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades* (Ghent, s.d.), 7-8.

³⁰⁴ SVP, *Règlement de la Société de S.-Vincent-de-Paul* (Brussels, 1846), 16; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 32; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 29.

³⁰⁵ De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate', 178. See also: Heyrman, 'Catholic Charity and Public Poor Relief', 14-16. Sometimes, such accusations are echoed in historical research as well.

³⁰⁶ Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor*, 131-133.

strong foothold, during a time when the elites (Catholics and non-Catholics alike) generally maintained a highly patronizing attitude towards the lower classes. Therefore, the nuances in the Vincentians' logic of selection deserve more attention.

A typical element in the discourses of the Society and the Ladies until the late nineteenth century was the abstractness with which they referred to those whom they visited (in their texts), almost exclusively using words such as 'poor', 'indigent', 'unfortunate', 'needy', and so on, sometimes with the added prefix of 'sick' or 'elderly'. Only when discussing individual cases did they provide a more detailed description of the characteristics of the visited. As such, the abstract notion of 'the poor' could refer to a great variety of people in need, but it served primarily as a concept. When talking about the poor as a generalized group, the Vincentians invoked the image of need among the lower classes, as well as their connection to the personae of Christ, the king of the poor. The poor did not gain individuality unless through their interaction with the Vincentian during the visit. Despite this apparent discordance between the poor as a concept and the poor as an individual, the latter was of great importance to the Vincentians. After all, a Vincentian visitor was expected to pay 'their' poor a weekly visit over a long period of time, to create a friendly bond with them and to express a genuine concern for their personal struggles and progress. The visitors' findings were then to be discussed during the meetings as well, so that the other members and president could provide advice on how to achieve the goals set for each of the visited poor. But before the poor could be helped, moralized, and guided, the Vincentians had to examine each case individually to determine whether it was *useful* to engage in a charitable exchange with them, or in other words, whether the exchange would have the desired temporal and spiritual effect. The selection criteria they employed to make this decision were based on a set of binaries, relating to the physical circumstances of the poor, their sex, and their beliefs, each linked to certain presuppositions.

One of the first inquiries that had to be made when considering the adoption of a poor person or family, was whether they were honest or dishonest. In the Vincentian framework, dishonesty could mean different things, but the dishonest poor needed to be avoided at all costs. It was therefore imperative that the visitor assessed the character of the poor as soon as possible, preferably even before the first visit. There were generally three ways in which the someone in need could come to the attention of the Vincentians: through a direct request for help from the poor themselves, through a recommendation by an external charitable person or organization, or through an active search for a home to visit by a Vincentian member (usually by obtaining information from the parish priest or other local charity organizations). One of the first questions asked to determine whether the poor was honest or not, was whether they lied about their income. According to the Society's manuals of 1855 and 1874, this was a matter of applying 'Christian prudence'. It noted that, especially in larger cities, 'the poor are sometimes insidious:

they hide how much they can gain, and this way obtain attention and relief, that should be shared with others'.³⁰⁷ Similarly, it was possible that the poor secretly tried to accumulate private and public sources of relief. While it was not considered a problem *an sich* when the poor received relief from the public Charity Bureaus, and the Vincentians visitors even helped the poor with their applications, the poor did have to be honest about what they received so that the aid provided by the organization could be adjusted accordingly. Combining resources from different charitable organizations, on the other hand, was strictly forbidden. For these reasons, the Society advised its members to be smart and to not believe everything the poor said at face value, but also to not insult the poor with excessive distrust. It was therefore a common practice to ask for information from 'people who are capable of assessing their [the poor] situation', such as 'the Daughters of Love, the pastors of the parishes and other persons'.³⁰⁸ The Ladies did not mention this guideline explicitly, but one can assume that they, too, relied on the information provided by the Daughters and clergy, with whom they had more intimate connections than the Society did. In the context of the Work of the Poor Sick in Ghent and Bruges they worked together directly.

If the poor lied about their finances, this created immediate suspicions about their actual need from the side of their visitor, even though technically, the relief offered by private and public institutions was often too little to actually relieve poverty, and it is not difficult to imagine why the poor would try to combine as many sources as possible. In the eyes of the Vincentians however, such dishonesty was proof of an amoral inclination characterized by greed and deceitfulness. Aside from lying, dishonesty could refer to other unwanted or sinful behavior as well. The Society warned its members to be prudent when dealing with poor who 'succumbed to great vices, such as drunkenness, excessiveness and adultery', or even worse, poor who did not live in 'decent homes' (Dutch: 'treffelijke huize', 'treffelijk' meaning moral, respectable, honorable).³⁰⁹ While the former behaviors were not necessarily considered reason for refusal, as long as there was still hope for betterment, an indecent home was to be avoided at all costs.³¹⁰ If the organizations agreed to help dishonest poor or continue to help them after it became clear that they would not change, the Vincentians believed this could send out a very wrong message to other, honest poor who actually deserved help. It could irritate the

³⁰⁷ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 34-35; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 31-32.

³⁰⁸ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 11-31; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 10; 32; 140-141.

³⁰⁹ De Vries and Winkel, *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal*, entries 'treffelijk' and 'treffelijkheid', 2297-2309.

³¹⁰ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 68-69. What exactly an indecent house referred to, was not explained further in the Society's manuals.

honest poor and ‘wrongfully led them to think that the Society did not value good morals and honest behavior’. In addition, the Society stated that dishonest poor should be avoided because ‘He who does not love himself, will love others badly’ (Dutch: ‘kwalijk’, meaning maliciously, badly, difficultly), thereby putting into question the ability of dishonest poor to reciprocate love during the charitable exchange.³¹¹ As such, categorizing the poor as honest or dishonest was of great importance when deciding whom to help, although the organizations did acknowledge that the distinction was sometimes difficult to make. The visitor had to rely on their common sense and consider both the prospect of change in the behavior of the individual dishonest poor and the consequences that helping them could have for the image of the organization.

A second binary that served as a basis for (pre)selection was that of the sex of the poor.³¹² This factor was of course not something the poor could control, but it mattered a great deal to the Vincentian organizations. After all, the question whether and how interactions between men and women should take place in the setting of charitable activities was a matter of moral significance. During the nineteenth century, the spiritual value and therefore the moral purity of the charitable exchange was of primordial importance to the Vincentian organizations. The Society’s first official manual of 1846 stipulated that its charitable work should never endanger the Christian lifestyle of its male members and that therefore, they ‘should never forget that they do not have a mission towards persons of the other sex, if they are young, out of fear that they will find their own demise while trying to procure the salvation of others’. This remark alluded to the risk of fostering unfounded rumors, but also to the possibility of something immoral actually happening. In addition, the manual noted that it was also in the interests of the poor under the care of the organization to avoid scandals at all costs. Otherwise, this could have dire consequences for their reputation in the community and therefore also for their progress.³¹³ Of course, many of the families visited by the members of the Society had daughters, and avoiding those altogether was not feasible. The manual of 1855 clarified that while young women, especially when living alone, should not be adopted, it was possible to visit families with young daughters as long as the visitor was of respectable age and immaculate reputation.³¹⁴ With regards to adult women (mothers, widows, elderly women), the Society’s manuals made no further recommendations.

³¹¹ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 68-69.

³¹² The following paragraphs dealing with the sex of the visited draw on my article Fluit, ‘Gender and Class’

³¹³ SVP, *Règlement de la Société de S-Vincent-de-Paul* (Brussels, 1846), 11; SVP *Instruction sur les Règles à Suivre dans la Formation des Conférences de Saint-Vincent de Paul* (Paris, 1848), 4 ; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 27; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 25; 68; 430.

³¹⁴ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 417; repeated in SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 68.

For both the Society of Saint Vincent and the Ladies of Charity, the reputation of the organization was very important. For the latter, however, this concern did not translate into the same degree of hesitancy towards interactions with the other sex. In the Ladies' manuals, which were typically more practice-oriented than those of the Society during this period, no restrictions were mentioned concerning the Ladies' contact with poor men. In fact, none of the manuals from this period mention any stipulation with regards to the sex or age of those they visited. However, the Ladies had to have been at least a little concerned with the safety of their members. Their manual of the twentieth century do mention that they should perform their visits in pairs and that those who were unmarried should preferably be accompanied by a married or widowed member, especially when visiting poor in shady neighborhoods.³¹⁵ Presumably, similar directions were given in this first period, albeit more informally. Because of the absence of reflection on their own moral weaknesses as well as on the possible threat posed by the poor, the sources of the Ladies in this period paint a picture of its members as purposeful women, unimbued by temptation and even fear, and of the poor as ever welcoming subjects for a visit. By consequence, both men and women were brought up as either examples of piety or as cases that required moral intervention in the yearly reports of the Ladies.³¹⁶ The Ladies also took care of young girls (in addition to boys) and were especially preoccupied with their education, helping them find a spot in parochial schools, setting up sewing classes, aiding in the establishment of housework schools, orphanages, and so on.³¹⁷

In 1861, the Ladies of Bruges mentioned that 'several young persons, in danger of losing themselves, have been saved by their placement in refuge homes; this way, you [the Ladies] have placed five young girls in the home for the repented'.³¹⁸ So, the Ladies not only provided help to innocent girls, but also to those who were *in danger* of ending up on the wrong path, implicitly referring to prostitution. Although the Society did not want to engage directly with young women, and certainly not with immoral ones, they did sometimes refer women in danger to the Ladies. This happened for example in 1857, when a visitor of the Society came across a young, beautiful widow of only 23 years old with three children. Soon, her means ran out, and 'she declared that it was thanks to her religious sentiments that she had resisted to the danger of her position, a danger even

³¹⁵ Association des Dames de la Charité de S^t-Vincent-de-Paul à Anvers, *Introduction, Historique, Règlement, Prières, Etc.* (Antwerp, 1934), 21.

³¹⁶ DLSVPST JV 1866; 1875; ODPMG JV 1852-1853; 1853-1854; 1855; ODPMBr JV 1861; 1898-1907.

³¹⁷ For example, the Work of the Poor Sick in Ghent organized sewing classes for children of both sexes in 1852 and paid them a salary for their work, as to prepare them for becoming 'perfect workers' (ODPMG JV 1852-1853, 5-6). By the next year, the class had become too large and the Ladies helped place the children in local Catholic schools (ODPMG JV 1853-1854, 9-10).

³¹⁸ ODPMBr JV 1861, 12.

larger because she had beauty to accompany her youth, and because hunger, that fatal adviser, had long been the assiduous guest of her hearth'. She also admitted 'that after having searched in vain for sufficient means of existence, driven by desolation, she was on the point of accepting the offer made to her by a show director, to work in one of the concert cafés in our suburbs, for a salary of 50 centimes per evening'. This type of work was not considered appropriate for a decent woman because it suggested that she was 'available' and made her vulnerable to threats to her respectability.³¹⁹ Because the member of the Society himself could not assist her further, as the rules did not allow for it, his conference requested the help of the Ladies of Charity, who were then able to relieve the woman's misery and help 'with the exceptional dangers that we have signaled'.³²⁰ Although described rather vaguely, here, we see two examples of women who could not yet be categorized as 'fallen women', but were *in danger* of falling and could therefore be helped without any moral objections as long as the proper protocol was followed (applying in the first place to the Society, whose members were not allowed to help directly).

In other cases, the moral state of the poor did not allow for mercy, however. In 1861 the Ladies reported the story of a large house inhabited by several poor families, where the 'impiety, immorality and discord that reigned here, troubled the entire neighborhood'. The Ladies, working together with the Daughters of Charity, obtained permission from the owner to 'purge this receptacle of vice' and made the inhabitants leave, some with the help of the police. They had the place cleaned and repaired, and the Daughters gathered several elderly poor to rent the rooms, thereby transforming the house from an 'image of inferno' to a 'small terrestrial paradise' where the inhabitants 'love each other like brothers and sisters'.³²¹ In this example too, the immorality of the poor is described in very vague terms, but it is clear that the Vincentians considered some poor beyond saving. Conversely, there are also cases in which we would expect the Vincentians to deny help, but they helped anyway. Despite the directive that the Society's members could not visit young women, the General Assembly's report of 1865 tells the story of a 'poor lost girl' living a 'savage life without ever approaching the church' in 'plain vagrancy, without a fixed dwelling, lodging in barns and other similar shelters'. She also had 'two children born of her disorders'. Surprisingly, the Society's visitors pitied and decided to help this 'poor creature', renting her a small house for which they found some furniture. The girl, 'accustomed to abandonment and the harshest treatments', was stunned and touched by all this help, and she was reported to now 'conduct herself well, frequent the church and the sacraments, and send her children to

³¹⁹ Vleugels, *Narratives of Drunkenness*, 45-47.

³²⁰ SVPHRB JV 1856, 11-12.

³²¹ ODPMBR JV 1861, 12.

school'. The same report recounts another remarkable event concerning an 'infamous house that received military men [...] and chased away honest people'. According to the accounts of the Society, 'God, undoubtedly tired of all these scandals, released against this house all his plagues at the same time'. The mother and her two daughters who inhabited the house were struck by disease and misery, but 'abandoned by all, these poor creatures received relief and care from our members'. Thanks to this aid, they 'quickly deplored their past actions and returned to their religious feelings'. And when the mother died, the members of the Society took care of her funeral, satisfied to be 'repaid for their pains and sacrifices by the idea that the house from which they left would not be reestablished'.³²² What these two examples show, is that despite the stipulations in the manual, local conferences of the Society were allowed and even applauded for considering each case individually. There was no one fits all approach, and even when dealing with fallen women, the men of the Society could in some cases not only decide that they did deserve help, but also administer that help themselves.

It is clear that in practice, the sex-based binary in the selection of poor was subject to much nuance and interpretation by local conferences, and this was even more so the case for the third binary, that of Catholic versus other- or non-believing poor. Already in their first manual of 1842, the Society explained that one of the goals of the visit was to 'revive among these unfortunates, almost always ignorant, the principles of our holy religion, their only source of real support and their only hope'.³²³ In the first official manual of 1846, this remark was elaborated upon:

Among the poor, some have the good fortune of being Cristian, others are indifferent, several even impious. We should not refuse them even in that last case; but our language should be different depending on the attitude of those who we address; we recall that Jesus Christ recommended his disciples to unite the prudence of the serpent and the simplicity of the dove. The alms open the souls for trust; and it is therefore through the corporal alms that we prepare the path for the spiritual alms. Saint Vincent de Paul often recommended to not try the latter until after doing the former. [...] Jesus Christ came to free and save all men, the Greeks as well as the Jews, the Barbarians as well as the Romans. We will not distinguish between those visited by suffering and misery any more than he did. However, Saint Paul recommends to Christians to first come to the aid of their brothers in the faith: maxim ad domesticos fidei: we will therefore show a special interest in the

³²² SVP, *Assemblée Générale des Conférences de Belgique* (Brussels, 1865), 26-28.

³²³ SVP, *Règlement de l'Association de Charité* (Brussels, 1842), 5.

*unfortunate who have the good fortune to be Christians, and who honor this title by the virtues that religion commands us to practice.*³²⁴

This excerpt, which was repeated (in similar wording) in other manuals of both the Society and those of the Ladies during this first period,³²⁵ clarifies that non-believers should not be excluded from the work of the organizations, although they did require a different kind of approach. While pious, practicing Catholic poor could be given material help and moral support without much scrutiny, a more careful approach was desired when dealing with non-believing poor, and certainly with those who were irreverent towards the Catholic faith. The excerpt referred to the advice given by Christ to his disciples when first sending them out to proclaim the Kingdom of God: to be prudent like the serpent and simple like the dove (Matthew 10:16). The dove, common symbol of innocence and peace, signified simplicity, softness, and open-mindedness. The dove cannot attack, it cannot bite or strike its opponent, it can only have faith. The serpent, without invoking its symbolic connection to the devil but seen as an animal created by God, is aware of its surroundings and luring threats. The snake is careful, shrewd, intuitive to danger, and equipped with tools to defend itself. By combining the strengths of these two animals, like the disciples of Christ had done before them, the Vincentian visitor could positively apply both apprehensiveness and softness to their approach of the poor. Like the disciples, the Vincentian ventured out into the world to profess the Word of God, but they needed to carefully assess which battles to choose and trust their (animal-like) instincts.

The question that mattered the most in this regard, was how much moral good could be achieved with the poor. To what degree could the Vincentian visitor open the heart of the poor to the Word of God? Often, such a question could not be answered during the first visit, much less before the visit. It was a matter that took time, which is why ‘the visitors especially treat the most ignorant, the most difficult and the most distant from religious sentiment with much courtesy and cordiality’.³²⁶ But there had to exist limits to the extent to which a visitor should go to achieve conversion with the poor. Not only could excessive effort send a wrong message to the faithful poor, Saint Vincent himself also advised to follow the maxim *ad domesticos fidei* (especially to those of the household of the faith). So, it seems that the Society and Ladies tried to diversify their

³²⁴ SVP, *Règlement de la Société de S.-Vincent-de-Paul* (Brussels, 1846), 10-11.

³²⁵ SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 26-27; SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den H. Vincentius-a-Paulo* (Ghent, 1874), 24-25; ODPM, *Règlement de l’Oeuvre des Pauvres Malades* (Ghent, s.d.), 7-8, but not DLSVP, *Association Charitable des Dames de la Miséricorde de Malines. Statuts et Règlements* (Malines, 1861), which contains only statutes and no directives.

³²⁶ SVP, *Guide Pratique des Conférences de Saint Vincent de Paul* (Brussels, 1852), 6.

‘pool’ of beneficiaries: those among whom they could proselytize, and those whom they could reward for their good morals. In light of the spiritual benefits of the charitable exchange, both categories of poor could contribute to the self-sanctification of the Vincentians, but it was imperative to not waste too much time and means on those poor who remained adamant in their wrong beliefs and bad behaviors. In order to make this process of selection more efficient, the Society’s practical manual of 1852 advised the conferences to be mindful when assigning a visitor to a certain household. It explained that in the case of a ‘ignorant or unbelieving poor, whose conduct makes them worthy of interest, but who nevertheless blasphemes the divine Providence, curses the day that saw him be born and engages in acts of despair, the conference entrusts him preferably to the solicitude of knowledgeable visitors, of a calm nature, imposing, endowed with anointing and who, with the force of patience and affectionate relations, can, with the help of material relief, of religious instructions and of time, bring hope to this heart parched by adversity’.³²⁷

A last binary important to the Vincentians, was the distinction between ‘regular’ poor and the shamefaced poor (Dutch: ‘schamele armen’, French: ‘pauvres honteux’). Although this binary did not exclude either from help, it did determine the visitors’ approach of them and the type of help they received. Shamefaced poor were defined as people who had once lived a comfortable life but were now confronted with poverty due to reasons such as sickness, war, and death of the main breadwinner. Because of their previous social position, these people were often too ashamed to ask for help from charitable institutions, but they also tended to fall between the cracks of public assistance. The Dutch term ‘schamele armen’ grasps this idea well, containing both a reference to the sparsity of their means (‘schamel’, meaning meager, scanty, insufficient) and the emotion that went with it (‘schamel/beschaamd’, meaning ashamed, humble). The Vincentians considered the experience of shamefaced poor to be distinctly different to that of other poor. Because of their former comfort, to which the Vincentians related as fellow members of the upper classes, their ‘misery is to them a terrible torture of which the bitterness and intensity is increased at every moment by the disgrace of decadence [in society]’.³²⁸ With regards to the shamefaced poor, the Vincentians made an extra effort to help them regain employment so that they could make an honest living again.³²⁹ In the meantime, or in the case when they needed continued support because working was not an option (which was often the case), the shamefaced poor needed to be treated with exceptional discretion.³³⁰ Unlike the other poor, the shamefaced poor

³²⁷ SVP, *Guide Pratique des Conférences de Saint Vincent de Paul* (Brussels, 1852), 14.

³²⁸ DLSVPST JV 1875, 2.

³²⁹ ODPMG JV 1852-1853, 8.

³³⁰ DLSVP, *Association Charitable des Dames de la Miséricorde de Malines. Statuts et Règlements* (Malines, 1861), 1-2.

could receive monetary alms. The reason for this was that their visitors wanted to avoid shaming them further by handing them food which they would then have to exchange for food in public, thereby making their difficult position, which they so desperately tried to hide, known to others. In a similar vein, the Ladies of Saint-Trond, who required of all housemothers under their care to attend a ‘Christian education of the work of mercy’, made an exception for the women of shamefaced households.³³¹

Through these binaries of honest versus dishonest poor, religious versus non-believing poor, ‘regular’ poor versus shamefaced poor, and female versus male poor, the Vincentians concretized, categorized, and hierarchized the abstract notion of ‘the poor’. These binaries did not unambiguously correspond to practices of inclusion and exclusion, but they served as guidelines for the Vincentians to rely on when making the decision whether a poor should be adopted, followed up, or abandoned. In order to gain insight in these factors, the Vincentians made use of questionnaires during their visits. A first set of questions provided general insight into the composition of the household: the number of inhabitants, of children (if any), the name, age and birthplace of everyone living in the house, and so on. Second, the visitors inquired about the degree to which the inhabitants complied with religious duties. Of particular interest to the visitor was the marital status of the poor (specifically if the marriage was acknowledged by the Church), their regular attendance of mass, whether the children had been baptized, received communion, and went to a Christian school (if they did not have to work), and the presence of religious paraphernalia in the house (the Bible, a crucifix, an image of Mary, ...). Third, the visitor inquired into the causes of the household’s infortune (e.g., sickness, death, insufficient income) and the possibility of them (re)gaining sufficient financial means with the help of the visitor. A fourth set of questions related to the physical circumstances of the household, e.g. the number of beds in the house (if any) and whether parents and children or children of the same sex had to share sleeping arrangements, the items of furniture in the house (or lack thereof), the quality of the household members’ clothing and shoes (also whether they had clothing acceptable to go to school and work with), and so on.³³² After gaining all necessary information (either for the first time or by means of follow-up), the visitor discussed their findings during the meeting of their local conference. Together with their fellow members, they decided whether to continue help and what strategy to maintain as to achieve moral and material progress with their poor.

As such, the lists of questions primarily served as a means to keep the visitor attentive to both the moral and physical circumstances of the poor which the Vincentians considered most important. Of course, the poor could only be eligible for help if they

³³¹ DLSVPST JV 1866, 6-7.

³³² SVP, *Guide Pratique des Conférences de Saint Vincent de Paul* (Brussels, 1852), 6-8.

were in an objectively observable physical and moral state of *need*, but the questionnaires did not offer a framework for a conclusive definition of need. Consequently, they usually did not serve as a basis for selection *an sich*. Sometimes, however, local conferences could decide that if there were many households in similar conditions requesting help, they would focus for example on families with the greatest number of children.³³³ Some conferences put a lot of weight on the religious practices of the poor, and would only continue help for households who, for example, could prove their attendance of Sunday Mass. However, this approach was often contested within the conferences, and it was by no means standard practice.³³⁴ In general, the Vincentians made their decisions on the basis of the considerations discussed above, and the concrete information obtained through the questionnaires served this end only secondarily, which is also why the questionnaires were by no means filled in or preserved in a systematic manner. Indeed, the guidelines for the selection of the poor remained rather vague during this first period, and the Vincentians relied heavily on their intuition to determine the degree to which progress could be made within the individual poor households. The Vincentian organizations were not rationalized institutions with the goal of helping the poor as efficiently and as fairly as possible. Instead, the notion of *progress* was of central importance to them because the charitable exchange centered around mutual spiritual development, and the poor could function as media to reach closer to God in a variety of ways. In this respect, different types of poor offered the Vincentians different charitable experiences and gratifications. The most important factor when determining whether to accept a family, then, was the degree to which they showed receptiveness to and participated in the charitable exchange.³³⁵ As such, the tension between maintaining universality on the one hand and guarding the spiritual potential of the charitable exchange on the other, created much room for interpretation within the organizations, and this was precisely the aim.

³³³ SVP, *Guide Pratique des Conférences de Saint Vincent de Paul* (Brussels, 1852).

³³⁴ Bousset and Delmer, 'La Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul à Bruxelles', 250, footnote 18.

³³⁵ See also: Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*, 546-550.

Conclusion

[...] a work like ours, so well adapted to the needs of the time, cannot perish. It may at times have appeared stationary, but only soon to gain new momentum; it is now implanted in almost all parts of the world, and we dare to count it among those that God grants special protection. In view of this holy crusade – which tackles society both from below and from above: from below, by striving to restore Christian sentiment among the most suffering part of the people; and from the top, by trying to improve its members themselves – we have thought that it was destined to become one of the bulwarks of Catholicism in the struggles which are still reserved for it.³³⁶

During the period between the early 1840s and the late 1870s, Vincentian organizations experienced a number of significant changes. Despite criticism from various quarters, the organizations managed to expand significantly in terms of membership numbers and geographical distribution, but also in terms of the works through which they attempted to carry out their charitable mission. The origins of the organizations were rooted in the Catholic revival; a wave of romantic popular devotion that broke out in full force in Belgium after independence and launched a real charitable renaissance. Central to the spirituality of this revival was the primacy of the social, which translated into a strong impulse for lay apostolate, driven by a deep awareness of the social responsibility of the individual. The foundation of this spirituality was a romantic ethos that glorified voluntary self-sacrifice as the ultimate way to heal a sick society. Charity in that context not only referred to the practice of giving to the poor, but also in a broader sense to a religious, guiding framework for the interaction between people in society. It was therefore a common view among Catholics that, as before, modern society should be founded on charitable principles and, more generally, on Christian morality.

Inspired by the seventeenth century works of Vincentius à Paulo, which at the time were also an expression of a socially motivated spirituality, the nineteenth century Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and Ladies of Charity devoted themselves to poor relief through home visits to the needy. Ozanam, the Society's most influential founder, laid

³³⁶ Allocution by baron de Gerlache, president of the Chief Council of the Society of Saint Vincent in Belgium, in SVPHRB JV 1856, 20.

the foundation for the modern interpretation of Vincent de Paul's works. This figurehead of romantic Catholicism believed that charity was not only the ideal means to provide material and moral care to the poor, but also to create a more socially committed Catholic elite and thus to achieve and maintain social harmony. Indeed, early in the nineteenth century it was already clear that in addition to the conflict between liberals and Catholics about the relationship between Church and state, the social question would become the main area of contention in the nineteenth century socio-political field. In this way, despite their fundamentally apolitical nature, the Vincentian organizations found themselves in the middle of an emerging social conflict from the moment they were first conceived. The concrete operation of the organizations and the ideas they propagated were therefore strongly influenced by the complex political dynamics in Belgium, but also those abroad, Rome par excellence.

In this first period, the close interrelationship between the Vincentian organizations and the political world was primarily noticeable in their evolution from a romantic optimism about the social potential of charity to a more uncompromising, realistic, and pragmatic attitude. The Catholic revival provided a powerful impetus to the development of a popular devotional movement, to the proliferation of Catholic works that allowed for the simultaneous practice and propagation of the faith, and to the development of a militant political Catholicism. While there were different opinions within this political Catholicism regarding the utility and desirability of freedom and the liberal state, the various factions shared a commitment to establishing a society based on Catholic doctrine, driven by optimism about the potential role of the Church and the Catholic faith in shaping modern society. Despite divergent ideas about how the establishment of a Christian society should take place, through a bottom-up or top-down process, through freedom or authority, Catholics agreed that the virtue of charity should be central to this Christian society. The Vincentian organizations therefore formed an ideal channel for the Catholic elite, regardless of their political leaning, to put their beliefs into practice. In this sense, the Vincentians did not 'reject modern society in all its manifestations' nor were they 'consumed by a nostalgia for the Christian Middle Ages', as historian of Belgian Catholicism Emiel Lamberts claimed.³³⁷ Rather, they put their work at the

³³⁷ Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 46-47. Granted, Lamberts made this statement in 1984, when the social paradigm was still highly influential in the historical image of charity. However, Lamberts referred to the Vincentians' promotion of neogothic art, highly popular among ultramontanes, as the primary argument of his statement. Jan de Maeyer more accurately stated that the Vincentians' promotion of neogothic art and architecture reflected their *interest* in the middle ages (De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate', 187), in a similar way as neomedievalist corporatism was inspired by and not an exact copy of medieval guild systems (as we will see in Part II). In 1992, Lamberts seemed to have adjusted his opinion of the Society somewhat, and he explained that 'the charitable and religious action of the Vincentians was

service of Christian society *in* modernity, the ideal of which combined a romantic rejection of the Revolution and its inheritance with the acknowledgement of the irreversibility of many of the societal developments which had taken place since then. They did not unequivocally reject societal change but wanted to contribute to creating a solid and effective Catholic response to such change in order to lead it into the right direction.

Under the influence of increasing social distress, the (threat of) popular uprisings, and the increasingly secularizing policies of liberal governments, a conservative shift occurred in Catholic opinion from the late 1840s onwards. For liberal Catholics, this change was strongly accelerated by the papal condemnation of Lamennais, which led them to abandon their revolutionary dreams of a theocracy born out of absolute freedom and instead focus on promoting a conservative agenda within the contours of the liberal state. While these transigent liberal Catholics became the voice of the parliamentary right, the ultramontanes gained an increasingly firm grip on Catholic social, educational, and cultural works, through which they propagated an ever more intransigent Catholicism. As the liberals implemented more robust secularizing policies and as the Pope in Rome grew increasingly hostile toward liberalism, the ultramontanes adopted a militant, combative posture. Although most intransigent ultramontanes did not entirely reject the Belgian constitution (anymore) during the 1860s and 1870s, they placed authority above liberty and believed that, in the interest of society as a whole, the Catholic Church should enjoy special protection.

Many ultramontanes were active in the Vincentian organizations, and they managed to exert a great influence on its operation and the message it conveyed. On the one hand, this ultramontanization of the Vincentian organizations expressed itself in an explicit and very active devotion to the Pope, around whose figure they developed a certain idolatry. On the other hand, this ultramontane influence also reinforced the Vincentian focus on patronages. During this period, both Catholics and liberals tended to approach the lower classes in a paternalistic manner, but the ultramontane attachment to authority translated into a very pronounced hierarchical view of society. This perspective emphasized that the poor (or rather the lower classes in general) needed intense guidance, both morally and materially, from their superiors: the charitable Catholic elites. The fact that Catholics increasingly encountered rebelliousness and anti-clerical sympathies among the workers, whom they believed were plagued by immorality and misguided ideas, only reinforced this trend. For this reason, the Vincentians expanded

predominantly dictated by a conservative reflex. The leading figures of the Society of Saint Vincent were anxious about the undermining of the social order and to them, religion was a factor of societal stability' (Lamberts, 'De Ontwikkeling van de Sociaal-Katholieke Ideologie', 50), thus sidelining the question of the relationship between Vincentian charity and modernity altogether.

extensive networks of Catholic works alongside and in symbiosis with their action through weekly home visits. Especially from the mid-1850s, the Vincentians were actively involved in providing and supporting Catholic education and religious instruction (for both adults and children), organizing various popular devotional events and activities (such as processions and pilgrimages), establishing mutual assistance, and even promoting neo-Gothic art. This diverse set of activities demanded a significant commitment from the Vincentians themselves, who assumed an exemplary role towards both the lower and upper classes.

In this regard, historian Vincent Viaene remarked that in the course of the 1850s, the balance of Vincentian charity thus shifted from sincere concern to paternalism, and from respect to condescension. He concluded that the Vincentians consequently departed from the original intent of Ozanam's spirituality, to the extent that it constituted a 'failure of some sorts'.³³⁸ Indeed, Ozanam, a romantic philosopher with great sympathy for liberal Catholicism, especially the ideas of Lamennais, had in mind a charitable action based primarily on respect for the dignity of the poor. And it was indeed true that there was a trend towards a more pronounced paternalism in the Vincentian organizations. However, I disagree with Viaene that concern and respect were irreconcilable with paternalism, nor that the organizations undermined their original mission by focusing on patronage, or that this should be deemed a failure. Vincentian charity, as conceived by Ozanam and his circle, was undoubtedly innovative in its time, reflecting the romantic enthusiasm of the revival. Catholics of all persuasions saw the salvation of modern society as embedded within the Christian ethos. Ultramontanes and liberal Catholics alike believed that the charitable imperative in particular would guide society towards individual self-sacrifice for the greater good. Not only was this vision arguably naive, it also inherently contained a paternalistic element as it was the responsibility of the upper classes to enlighten the poor about this spiritual truth. This intention was put into practice by subsequent generations of Vincentians, who greatly expanded the organizations' charitable works in function of this moral instruction. Ozanam also considered the visit to be a moment in which the wealthy attempted to materially uplift the poor, not only through the distribution of material aid (which was often limited), but also by helping the poor find employment, educating them on good habits (such as thriftiness), and, in essence, teaching them the necessary survival skills to thrive in the modern society. In this sense, the patronages and paternalism of the Belgian Vincentians after 1850, instead of constituting a break with Ozanam's vision, constituted a conservative and functional interpretation of it in function of the Catholic offence against the threats of liberalism and secularization.

This development was further exacerbated by the socio-political changes that

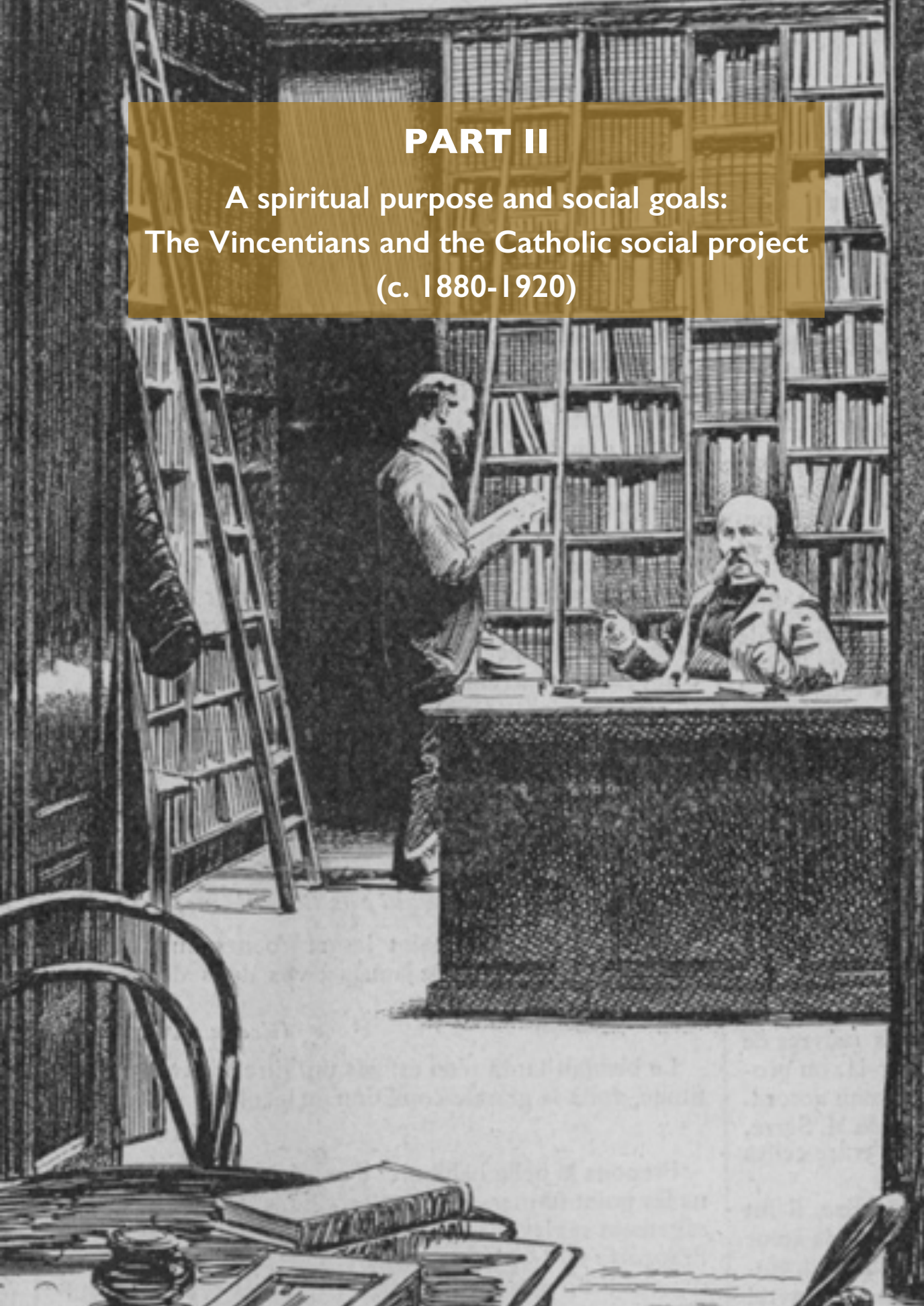
³³⁸ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 183.

unfolded in the following decades, both domestically and internationally. Growing anticlerical resistance among the population and liberal attempts to limit the power of Catholicism simultaneously resulted in greater suspicion of the lower classes and in an increasing desire to mobilize the people in the fight against liberalism and secularism. Moreover, after the revolution of 1848, Ozanam himself also ended up in a certain isolation due to his persistent loyalty to the future ideal of a Christian democracy, which few other Catholics still believed in.³³⁹ From this perspective, rather than a failure, the shift towards stronger ultramontanism and paternalism among the Belgian Vincentians was a relatively unsurprising development, driven on the one hand by the pressure to formulate a satisfactory response to growing social issues, and on the other hand, the idea that a full-scale war had erupted between the Catholic and liberal worlds. The fact that the membership numbers of the Society and the Ladies continued to rise significantly throughout the latter nineteenth century demonstrates that the organizations had by no means lost their momentum due to their reorientation. The notion that this represented a sort of failure on the part of the Vincentians is more so a judgment on the value of their work from a contemporary perspective, rather than a statement on their historical social relevance.

³³⁹ Harrison, *Romantic Catholics*, 232.

PART II

A spiritual purpose and social goals:
The Vincentians and the Catholic social project
(c. 1880-1920)



Chapter I

The Vincentians and the social question

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Catholics felt increasingly threatened by criticism of the substantial influence of Catholic organizations and institutions in the social sphere, and the stark rise of ultramontane thought in the decades that followed attested to this feeling of unease. By the 1880's, however, the conflict between Catholics and their opponents would take on an entirely new and much more acute élan. In the late 19th century, Belgium witnessed a period of intense societal transformation and ideological conflict that would leave an indelible mark on its political and social landscape. Of particular importance were the debate and conflict that developed around the social question, which rose to the top of the socio-political agenda during this period. The introduction of plural male suffrage in the early 1890s, moreover, definitively introduced the masses to politics, and the subsequent entrance of socialists in parliament put political tensions on edge. These sociopolitical developments took place against the backdrop of the second industrialization, which was spurred by the introduction of new technologies, like electricity, the combustion engine, in addition to all kinds of chemical breakthroughs and the invention of new communication media like radio and telegraphy. At the same time, colonization and international trade introduced new consumer goods on the markets. But while the upper classes' options for conspicuous consumption rapidly multiplied, the working classes were not able to profit from the advancements of the *belle époque* in the same way.¹ This chapter explores how the Vincentians navigated these societal transformations and defended the function of charity in a rapidly expanding sphere of social organizations during the period between 1880 to the First World War.

The first subchapter starts with the advent of the School War, a socio-political conflict during which Catholics employed far-reaching means to counteract the liberal attempts to secularize education, in which the Vincentians took active part. More broadly, this conflict was about the relationship between religion and the state, and the uncompromising position of both camps contributed to the consolidation of secularism as a political ideology. At the same time, the ever-growing threat of socialism put the social question high on the Catholic agenda, fostering the further development of corporatism based on the example of medieval guilds. The Vincentians, too,

¹ Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België', 460-473.

implemented corporatist ideas in their charitable work. During the second half of the 1880s, which serves as the start of the second subchapter, the corporatist theory of the Union of Freiburg gained a strong footing in Belgium. Although differences in opinions were manifold among the Belgian Catholics, this corporatist model, which centered around the values of 'Religion, Family, Property' was able to provide the Catholics with a more structural approach to the social question which the Vincentians eagerly assimilated. During the early 1890s, however, many voices within the Catholic world began pleading for a more effective, legislative approach to the social question. Challenged by a Catholic democratic current within the Society, its conservative leadership nonetheless firmly protected the apolitical character of the organization and refused to create social organizations with a political dimension within the framework of the organization. The last subchapter, which starts with the pontifical transition from Leo XIII to Pius X, examines the powerful resurgence of antimodernism in the Catholic sphere. Backed by the pope's call for Catholic action, the Vincentians were able to reaffirm their adherence to the original character and purpose of the organizations. The outbreak of the First World War, nevertheless curtailed the Vincentians' optimism. Unable to take on a meaningful role in providing relief to the population, the organizations were struck a heavy blow.

1.1. An ongoing quest for class reconciliation

The 1880s heralded decades of intense societal change in Belgium, many of which were centered around the nascent ideological conflict between Catholics and secularists. While the matter of the Church's role in society's social sphere had already created many areas of tension, the conflict now evolved into a much more existentially laden direction and brought the country to the brink of civil war. The concrete provocation of this development was the School War of 1879-1884. The liberal cabinet Frère-Orban II, which came into power in 1878 and put an end to eight years of Catholic rule, set out to drastically curtail the power of the Catholics in the social sphere. In 1879, the government passed a law on public primary education which entailed that each municipalities had to provide at least one public primary school, that private schools could no longer receive government subsidies, that teachers should hold official state diploma's, and that religious education had to be organized outside the regular school hours and at the request of the parents.² The liberal government set out to reform the educational system according to their rationalist doctrine, based on the idea that reason, not religion, was the just foundation for universal morality. They believed that schools

² Art, De Maeyer, de Pril and Kenis, 'Church Reform and Modernity', 113; Deneckere, 'Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België', 480-482.

should foster political socialization and civic participation ('Bildung'), that schools served as spaces for scientific instruction, that religion had no place in a rational educational system, and that the state ought to curb the influence of religion on the formation of its citizens.³ As such, the liberal government took an important step in consolidating secularism as a political ideology built upon the principle of state neutrality in matters of public interest.⁴

Immediately, the new school law incited a very strong response from the entire Belgian Catholic world: its episcopate, politicians, schools, parents, and its other social organizations felt that the liberals had begun an open war for the souls of the country's children, and therefore also society's future. In their view, the new law was in direct contradiction with the Catholic's right to preach their religion, guaranteed by the constitution.⁵ The Catholic response was led by the bishops, whose strategy was rather extreme. In the Churches, the 'Schools without God' were condemned and endlessly slandered, and priests went door to door to warn, reprimand, and menace parents. Those who sent their children to the neutral schools, as well as the Catholic teachers who chose to work there, were radically excommunicated, or constantly threatened with excommunication. Catholics who backed the neutral schools or refused to take a stance were severely punished by depriving them of religious burials and weddings, by forcing them to sit in the back of the Church, thereby humiliating them in front of their own community of believers.⁶ To take the wind out of the sails of the neutral schools, new Catholic primary schools sprang up all over the country, invariably accompanied by victorious processions and celebrations.⁷ For the first time, the Belgian Catholic masses were mobilized on a large scale. Headed by the bishops, the Catholics organized impressive, militant protest marches in response to the liberal school policy. The faithful took to the streets with red and gold flags and chanted Catholic slogans. It regularly came to physical altercations between Catholic and liberal protesters, and between protesters and law enforcement.⁸

The harshness of the Belgian bishops was not unanimously approved of by the rest of the Catholic world, however. Before becoming pope, mgr. Pecci had served as a nuncio in Belgium From 1843-1846. Here, he experienced the height of the Catholic

³ Witte, 'The Battle for Monasteries', 118-119.

⁴ Witte, 'The Battle for Monasteries', 114-115.

⁵ Witte, 'The Battle for Monasteries', 119-120; Tihon and van de Sande, 548-550; Deneckere, 'Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België', 482-485.

⁶ Witte, 'The Battle for Monasteries', 119-120.

⁷ 3 385 new Catholic schools were created in the span of five years: Witte, 'The Battle for Monasteries', 120-121; Tihon and van de Sande, 'La Belgique et les Pays-Bas', 549. See also: Art, De Maeyer, de Pril and Kenis, 'Church Reform and Modernity', 113.

⁸ Witte, 'The Battle for Monasteries', 121.

revival, felt inspired by the Belgian Catholic's ability to profit from the opportunities offered by the modern constitutional state and the liberties it protected, and tried to foster good relations between Belgian Catholics and the government.⁹ In his new capacity as pope, Leo XIII reprimanded the bishops for their actions, and urged the Belgian liberal-Catholics and ultramontanes to settle their differences and to channel their resistance towards laicization through the appropriate governmental institutions.¹⁰ Thus, from 1879 onwards, the Belgian Catholics were confronted at the same time with what they considered a vile liberal attack on the freedom of religion, and a pope who urged them to show restraint and prudence in their response to this attack.

This message compelled the intransigent ultramontanes to tone down their radical message. Joseph de Hemptinne withdrew from politics (but remained the president of the Society), and Charles Périn, who had virtually become the leader of the ultramontanes, was pressured by Cardinal Dechamps to leave the University of Louvain in 1881.¹¹ Indeed, the episcopate took advantage of the circumstances to tighten their control over the headstrong laity once again. Thus, the Confraternity of Saint Michael had to shelve its plan for a constitutional revision, but it did manage to exert significant influence on the new Catholic political program. The Confraternity controlled the National Union for the Redressal of Grievances (*Union Nationale pour le Redressement des Grièfs*), which was established in 1883 with the goal of binding the parliamentary right to a Catholic political agenda in view of the upcoming elections, and which played an important role in mobilizing the Catholic people. The ultramontanes had long been dissatisfied with the lack of assertiveness among Catholics in parliament, and through the Union, they finally succeeded in organizing the Catholic party more cohesively and giving a more confessional slant. The more pragmatic, transigent orientation of the ultramontanes, the deepening divide between the progressives and conservatives within the liberal Party, and the public displeasure with several controversial decisions of the liberal government in the areas of education and agriculture, contributed to a land-slide victory for the Catholics in 1884.¹²

The new Catholic cabinet, headed by the pronounced ultramontane Jules Malou (brother of bishop Jean-Baptiste), set out to completely turn back the clock on the liberal education laws, but the liberals did not leave it at that. Together with the socialists, they organized several mass marches in Brussels and other cities, in response to which the Catholics mobilized even greater numbers of protesters. What was particularly alarming

⁹ Viaene, *Belgium and the Holy See*, 390-400.

¹⁰ Lamberts, 'Van Kerk naar Zuil', 106; Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 53; Gubin and Nandrin, 'Het Liberale en Burgerlijke België', 323; Tihon and van de Sande, 'La Belgique et les Pays-Bas', 548.

¹¹ Lamberts, 'Joseph de Hemptinne', 98-101; Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 53.

¹² Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 53-54; Witte, 'The Battle for Monasteries', 121; Deneckere, 'Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België', 486-487.

for the Catholics as well as the king was the emergence of a growing republican faction within the liberal and socialist protests. This faction not only criticized the policies of the Catholic government but also, more broadly, challenged the legitimacy of the parliamentary monarchy. As a result of these tensions, King Leopold II intervened, leading to the downfall of the Malou II government a few months after it took office.¹³ The moderate Catholic government led by August Beernaert took its place and stayed in power until 1894, during which time it was able to calm down the conflict, at least to an extent. The cabinet Beernaert introduced a law that made it possible for the municipalities to fulfill the requirement of having at least one primary school by adopting one or more private (Catholic) schools, instead of having to provide a neutral public school. This way, the Catholics were able to acquire subsidies for many of the newly created free primary schools, while the liberals largely failed to keep up. In addition, teachers no longer needed to possess a state diploma and religious education was allowed during the school hours again.¹⁴ On the other hand, public education and public social provision remained largely out of the influence of the Catholic clergy.¹⁵

The School War had irrevocably changed Belgium's political culture. For one, education would remain a top priority on the agenda of each side, who acknowledged it as one of the main areas where they could foster and demonstrate support for their beliefs. In addition, the streets had now become an important arena for settling political conflict, and mobilization of the masses an essential political tool. In turn, both the matter of education and that of mass politics related to the start of a steady process of democratization, in which political factions attached increasing importance to gaining popular support. Incidentally, this period has been marked by historian Emiel Lamberts as the one in which the Church started to turn towards the people.¹⁶ Furthermore, the conflict exposed the main areas of contention that would dominate Belgian politics in the decades to come, in particular the friction between the Flemish, Catholic countryside and the Walloon, socialist industrial cities.¹⁷ As such, the opposition between Catholics and secularists, which had dominated Belgian politics for so long and centered around the question to what degree Catholicism should permeate social institutions and public life, shifted to a genuine ideological rift. In this sense, the conflict became more all-encompassing and distinctly socially oriented, centering around different views on how society itself ought to be structured, on the question what was fair and just, and, in general, on what modern society should look like in social, political, as well as economic

¹³ Deneckere, 'Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België', 486-495.

¹⁴ Deneckere, 'Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België', 496-Art, De Maeyer, de Pril and Kenis, 'Church Reform and Modernity', 116; Witte, 'The Battle for Monasteries', 121-126.

¹⁵ Lamberts, 'Van Kerk naar Zuil', 106.

¹⁶ Lamberts ed., *Een Kantelend Tijdperk*.

¹⁷ Witte, 'The Battle for Monasteries', 126.

terms.

The School War did not leave the Vincentians unperturbed either. Despite politics not being allowed within the confines of the Society, it was clear to the organization that the issue went beyond mere politics since it affected the moral education of the children of the families they visited. In a broader sense, the Vincentians interpreted the liberal school law an attack on the validity of Christian morality and on the community of faithful. Already in 1879, the Society urged its members to double their efforts to contribute to the development of new Catholic schools and to ‘populate them with the offspring of the working classes’.¹⁸ One of the concrete reasons why the new school law hit so close to home for the Vincentians, was because the public Charity Bureaus in some areas were accused of refusing (medical) help to families whose children attended Catholic schools. Because these refusals of help affected several of the Society’s poor families, the Vincentians felt that they were dragged into the conflict *nolens volens*. In response, the Society praised and provided additional assistance those families who rather went without the allowances of the Bureaus than to send their children to the ‘schools without God’.¹⁹ The Charleroi conference reported that the circumstances forced it to limit its help mostly to families of which the children attended Catholic schools, because they were denied all help from the Charity Bureaus, even their medicines.²⁰ This misconduct was also the subject of the caricature below, published in the Catholic journal *Le Travailleur*. It shows a liberal freemason (see the Square and Compass on his waist) sending away a family after hearing that the children went to Catholic schools (‘But we are hungry sir’ ‘Doesn’t matter, that is not our problem. Leave me in peace now!’). A clever play of words, the signboard says ‘Bourreau de Bienfaisance’ instead of ‘bureau’, meaning ‘executioner of assistance’.

The conduct of the Bureaus shocked other, more politically active Catholics as well, and inspired several among them to create a *Comité de Charité* (Charity Committee) in which members of the Society also played a role. Established almost immediately after the liberal school law was passed in 1879, the Charity Committee was to substitute the allowances and medical help that was normally provided by the Charity Bureaus but had been taken away from families who sent their children to Catholic schools.²¹ Even after the Catholics had retaken control of government in 1884, Baron Charles de Gruben, former president of the Antwerp Charity Bureau and current president of the Charity Committee, declared himself appalled that the Bureaus continued to consider itself

¹⁸ MSVP January 1879, 12.

¹⁹ MSVP January 1879, 12; February 1880, 31; August 1881, 122; January 1883, 9; March 1884, 245.

²⁰ MSVP August 1881, 122.

²¹ Comité de Charité, *Rapport lu en Assemblée Générale du 23 Octobre 1881* (Antwerp, 1881); Comité de Charité, *Rapport Présenté au Nom du Comité Central à l’Assemblée du 10 Octobre 1884 Présidée par Sa Grandeur Monsieur Goossens, Archevêque de Malines* (Antwerp, 1884).

authorized to deny help to families whose children attended Catholic schools. These families now relied on private charity, and this confirmed the continuing need for such initiatives.²² Although the Charity Committee remained an independent initiative from the Society, the latter was kept informed of the Committee's activities and conversely, so it seems, provided the Committee with information on the families that were affected by the Charity Bureaus' discrimination. Since the Committee visited these families at home to assess the families' needs and distribute financial and medical aid, it is likely that they relied on the expertise of the Society's visitors in this regard as well, possibly even going on visits together. Either way, the Vincentians' dismay at the (perceived) discriminatory conduct of the Charity Bureaus, the establishment of the Charity Committee, and its connection to the Society, illustrate how political conflict about education quickly extended beyond the schools and trickled down into the Society. Additionally, it draws attention to the close connection between charity and education in the broader Catholic social engagement.



Caricature of a liberal official of the 'Bourreau' de Bienfaisance wearing the masonic symbol refusing to help a poor family because the children attend a Catholic school, 1885

²² Baron Charles de Gruben, 'Réponse au n° 47 du Questionnaire, 24 Juillet 1886', *Procès-Verbaux des Séances d'Enquête Concernant le Travail Industriel*, Vol. 2 (Brussels, 1887), 79.

Indeed, while the School War divided Belgian politicians on the future of the country's educational system, the matter would soon be overshadowed by a much larger area of contention that had been festering for many decades and would grow increasingly pertinent in those to come: the social question. As we have seen in Part I, the term social question was in use in Catholic circles since the revolutions of 1848. From the 1880s onwards, all over Western Europe, the term developed into a catchphrase and it referred to a plethora of anxieties about the socio-economic, political, and moral circumstances of the lower classes in industrialized societies.²³ Catholics, liberals, and socialists, would each formulate their own distinct answers to the social question, thereby furthering their own ideological development and the transformation of their, sometimes diametrically opposed, world views into concrete policies that were to guide society in the direction of their idealized version of modern society. As we will see in the next subchapter, the development of social Catholicism as a solution to the social question gained a strong impulse after the revolutionary protests of 1886 and the organization of the Liège congresses (1886, 1887, 1891) in its wake. At the heart of the Catholic social project(s) that resulted from these exchanges lay the development of corporatism, a theoretical framework for the social organization of society that had already gained increasing traction in the previous decades.

With its plea for cooperation between social classes in function of the establishment of social harmony, corporatism formed the ideological basis for Catholic social action. Catholic corporatism strove towards an organically structured society, in which each part had its function and purpose, and in which these parts worked together for the greater good of society. As such, it closely aligned with the Catholic views on social difference and hierarchy. Catholics like the Vincentians had already for decades propagated acceptance of one's social position and the duties that came with it, as well as mutual understanding and reciprocity between people from different backgrounds. Corporatism provided a clear ideological framework for social action in this regard that gained support especially in ultramontane circles. Inspired by the guild system of the Middle Ages and Ancien Régime, theoretical corporatism already become popular among Belgian ultramontane academic circles in the 1860s, in which Charles Périn figured as one of the most influential corporatist thinkers. The influence of this corporatism broadened substantially in the face of political secularism, and it was heavily promoted by the Confraternity of Saint Michael.²⁴ In his encyclical *Humanum Genus* of 1884, Leo XIII spoke out in favor of a developed corporatist guild system as well. In his view, these

²³ Van Molle, 'Social Questions and Catholic Answers', 101-102.

²⁴ Deferme, *Uit de Ketens van de Vrijheid*, 68-69; Tihon and van de Sande, 'La Belgique et les Pays-Bas', 551-552; De Maeyer, 'De Ultramontanen en de Gildenbeweging', 226-227. See also: Heyrman, 'Imagining the 'Bon Patron Catholique'', 116-117.

corporations could contribute to the solution to the social question by promoting class solidarity, but also by taking the wind out of the sails of the freemasons. With this, he gave substance to the belief, common among Catholics, that the freemasons were responsible for socialist agitation and the strong growth of socialist social organizations.²⁵

During the late 1870s and the first half of the 1880s, with the School War in the background, the admiration for theoretical corporatism began to be translated into concrete initiatives. On the one hand, with its emphasis on class reconciliation built on Christian morality, corporatism provided further legitimation for traditional charity like that of the Vincentians. On the other, it inspired the creation of new social organizations such as company corporations in which workers and patrons worked cooperated to find solutions to disagreements in matters regarding salary, working hours, and benefits. In this type of Christian company, the relationship between patrons and workers should be fraternal and harmonious, but hierarchy remained essential, and the patron ought to take on a fatherly, guiding role.²⁶ At this time, most Belgian Catholics were inclined to follow the guild-based corporatist model, which rejected state interference and delegated much responsibility to business owners and executives, urging them to create mutual health insurance funds and saving funds linked to their enterprises. To unite same sector workers, parochial guilds were created, again with adjacent mutual funds, which were overseen by the parochial clergy.²⁷ As such, the corporatist Catholics promoted a social action that put much emphasis on freedom and individual responsibility, and which rejected interference from the state. The workers had to work towards their own emancipation voluntarily and they could do so via Catholic social organizations, which had to be organized were nevertheless organized in a paternalist manner. These social structures, so they believed, had to institutionalize the elite's patronage of the people, because excessive freedom exacerbated man's weakness and proneness to sin and therefore threatened the wellbeing of the individual as well as that of society.²⁸

Amidst the political turmoil of the school war and the emergence of corporatism as an ideological framework for Catholic social action, the Vincentians searched for ways to maintain their social relevancy. They skillfully entwined the call for corporatism and the battle against the legacy of the French Revolution to legitimize and give new impulse to their moral function. In line with the guild-based corporatist model, the Society emphasized the responsibility of the workers' bosses or 'masters' in promoting good

²⁵ De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 177; De Maeyer, 'De Ultramontanen en de Gildenbeweging', 236.

²⁶ De Maeyer, 'De Ultramontanen en de Gildenbeweging', 239; Heyrman, 'Imagining the 'Bon Patron Catholique'', 128; 130; 133-134.

²⁷ De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 220-223.

²⁸ Defermé, *Uit de Ketens van de Vrijheid*, 71-72; De Maeyer, 'De Ultramontanen en de Gildenbeweging', 227-228.

Christian morals among their employees, and, conversely, of seeing to it that young Catholic apprentices were placed with good Christian bosses.²⁹ As early as 1880, the Society aligned itself with the corporatist call for a reinvigoration of communal solidarity mechanisms. It explained that the Revolution had severed the bonds between the different social classes by destroying the guild system, and, most importantly, by dissolving the religious glue that held society together and that lay at the basis of these types of solidary institutions. As a result, the poor and the rich had become equally estranged from each other. According to the Society, the works of Catholic charity were the only means that could rectify this situation because they were dedicated to restoring the moral fabric of society, and among those, the Society of Saint-Vincent occupied a primary place.³⁰

As such, the Society defended Catholic charity, and most importantly its own charity, as the first step in the direction of societal recovery. Other tools to promote good relationships between the classes and to aid the workers to better their own situation, such as the guilds, could only be successful when built upon a strong moral foundation and combined with charitable fervor. Indeed, the Society believed that the benefit of their work could not be subject to discussion. However, this attitude did not mean that the Society remained completely indifferent to the benefit of corporatist organizations as proclaimed in *Humanum Genus*. As early as 1879, the conference of Rumilies (Tournai) reported to have instituted a successful saving fund for ‘their’ poor, which had the added benefit of providing a material reason for visiting the poor without having to distribute alms at each visit.³¹ In 1882, a new Brussels’ conference created a ‘guild’ to honor Saint Vincent and support the members of the parish. This guild was made up of the conference members and the parish’ family heads, thereby promoting cooperation between the different social classes, who each made a regular financial contribution to the organization. The conference members saw to it that in times of need, the money was redistributed among the poor. Thanks to this initiative, the conference reported that the poor no longer begged in the streets, and that liturgical practice had improved among them.³² It is interesting to note that this type of ‘guild’, although inspired by the examples of the Middle Ages, was very reminiscent of already existing mutual aid funds, but was now re-imagined in a corporatist framework that prioritized inter-class cooperation in combination with paternalist guidance and control by the Vincentians themselves.

In addition to creating several societies of mutual assistance on the level of the conferences, both the Society and the Ladies gradually began urging the poor to take

²⁹ MSVP April 1879, 50-53; September 1887, 131-136; November – December 1887, 180-181.

³⁰ MSVP July 1880, 106-107.

³¹ MSVP January 1879, 15.

³² MSVP April 1882, 60-61.

part in Catholic social organizations established outside the Vincentian organizations as well.³³ This practice was not yet systematic, but the Vincentians clearly recognized the benefit of engaging the poor in social organizations that provided them with a degree of security and promoted providence, and that contributed to encapsulating the lower classes in an organizational life built on Catholic morals. This development also had to do with the broader role foreseen for the parish clergy. In accordance with the guild-based corporatist model, which favored local initiative, the Society started to transfer many of their auxiliary works, such as workers' circles, patronages, and Sunday schools to the parishes. This allowed the organizations to focus more strongly on preaching and the home visit, to strengthen the guiding role of the priests in the lives of the poor and to promote a sense of community among the parish members.³⁴ Incidentally, this development reflected a strong improvement in the relationship between the Society and the clergy, which became apparent in the wake of the School War. The parish and pastoral clergy showed themselves increasingly interested in the workings of the organization, going so far as to attend the conference meetings, and were more eager to acknowledge the expertise of the Vincentians and rely on their influence on the poor, particularly with regards to the observance of liturgical rites.³⁵

So, in the years during and immediately after the School War, the Society took some careful steps in the direction of a more socially conscious or emancipatory approach of the working classes. Similar trends were visible with the Ladies, although they left few sources of this period. The word careful needs to be underlined, however. Proposals for extensive reforms were not welcomed by the conservative ultramontanes, who maintained the upper hand in the Society and preferred local social initiatives in combination with a deeper cooperation with the clergy in the creation of Catholic communities. With their cautious acceptance and promotion of local mutual aid societies and the like, the Vincentians showed themselves receptive for the message of the corporatist Catholics as well as of the pope in *Humanum Genus*, which they incorporated in the existing framework of their charitable spirituality. In their view, guilds and other corporative organizations could not reach their desired effect without the establishment of a firm, Catholic moral basis in society, and they believed that charity continued to be the primary tool to achieve this. This way, the moral goals and benefits of Vincentian charity remained its central tenets, and the Vincentians felt supported in their mission by Leo XIII's call for an active apostolate against the freemasons and the socialists. At the same time, the growing importance of and focus on the social question caused a gradual shift in the way the Vincentians legitimized the moral and religious purpose of their

³³ See for example: DLSVPK 1887.

³⁴ De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate', 192; MSVP March 1879, 38.

³⁵ De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate', 189.

organizations. While the Vincentians increasingly stressed their role in contributing to a moral and harmonious society, the goal of self-sanctification and personal development, which had been the center of their organizational identity for so almost half a century, gradually moved to the background, at least for now.

1.2. *The social value of Vincentian charity*

In the wake of the School War and in response to the growing urgency of the social question, not only in Belgium but also in the rest of Europe, the Belgian Catholics enthusiastically took part in the search for a Catholic answer to modern social problems. There was a general sense among the Catholic elite of living in an era on the verge of great societal change, and they wished to contribute to, or even fundamentally shape its outcome.³⁶ In Belgium, the social question was put firmly on the agenda of the Catholics following the international economic crisis of the 1870s to 1890s, and in particular after the crisis year of 1886. At that time, plummeting wages and unemployment triggered a wave of violent protests and strikes in the Walloon industrial basin around Liège. These protests started with the fifteenth anniversary of the Paris Commune and were imbued with a revolutionary flavor, causing deep unrest among the upper classes and the government.³⁷ The socialist party became increasingly visible, and its demands for an amelioration of the living conditions of workers and for universal suffrage ever harder to ignore.³⁸ In response, the National Union for the Redressal of Grievances organized several congresses on the topic of social works in Liège (1886, 1887, 1890) with the goal of spurring the development of a Catholic alternative to the socialist workers' movement.³⁹

At the time of the 1886 social protests, the majority of Belgian Catholics shared the opinion that the existing charitable and moralizing initiatives constituted an adequate solution to keeping the influence of socialism on the lower classes at bay. At the same time, during the 1880s, the influence of guild-based corporatism was expanding. This corporatist school, which originated in Angers (France), centered around the meso-level in society. It focused on promoting intermediary structures between the micro-level of the individual and the macro-level of the state, as well as on fostering the development of a middle class to act as a buffer between the elites and the workers. During the Liège

³⁶ De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 220.

³⁷ Van Molle, 'Social Questions and Catholic Answers', 107; Deneckere, 'Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België', 505-506.

³⁸ Art, De Maeyer, de Pril and Kenis, 'Church Reform and Modernity', 116; Deneckere, 'Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België', 506-509.

³⁹ Tihon and van de Sande, 'La Belgique et les Pays-Bas', 551-552.

congresses, which attracted a wide international audience, the Belgian Catholic became more familiar with the German-Austrian corporatist model as well, which was able to gain a growing number of supporters.⁴⁰ This corporatist model was developed by the Union of Freiburg, a collection of leading, mostly ultramontane, Catholics studying the social question. They proposed a macro-approach to corporatism by turning the state into an active participant in the creation of an ideal society through granting it a regulatory function. The Freiburg corporatist vision received support from pope Leo XIII, who put the Union under his patronage in 1884. A year after his publication of *Humanum Genus*, which praised the guild-system, his encyclical *Immortali Dei* of 1885 opened the doors to state intervention by recognizing two spheres in society: the moral-religious and the civil sphere.⁴¹

Similar to the French corporatist tradition, the goal of the Freiburg model was to establish an organically and hierarchically structured, solidary society, in which social inequality did not stand in the way individual dignity and social worth. But the Freiburg thinkers believed that neo-Medieval guilds were not sufficiently far-reaching to achieve this goal, and they proposed a broad restructuring of society not according to class, but according to profession. In their view, it was people's profession that determined their personal and social life, and so it was through profession-based corporations that they should seek to fulfill their socio-economic and moral needs. In this corporatist formula, the elites continued to play an indispensable guiding (read: patronizing) role that secured their leading position in society. As such, corporatism was to provide an alternative to the individualism of liberalism and the collectivism of socialism by restoring the bonds between the individual and the collective that had been destroyed by unbridled industrial capitalism. In their pursuit of restoring an organic and harmonious society, the Catholics advocated for the promotion of 'natural' communities, emphasizing the significance of family, profession, and local community.⁴²

The central goal of this corporatist model was to guide the lower classes, specifically the workers, in developing their self-reliance within a network of Catholic social organizations. Therefore, these corporatists wanted to establish intermediary structures that bound individuals to each other and to society as an organic whole. These corporative meso-organizations themselves would also be organized in a hierarchical way and provide a means to channel and communicate the socio-economic and

⁴⁰ De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 224; Lamberts, 'De Ontwikkeling van de Sociaal-Katholieke Ideologie', 53-54; De Maeyer, 'De Ultramontanen en de Gildenbeweging', 221; Moeys, *Subsidiary Social Provision*, 132-133.

⁴¹ De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 224; Lamberts, 'Het Ultramontanisme in België', 56; De Maeyer, 'De Ultramontanen en de Gildenbeweging', 223-226.

⁴² De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 225; Lamberts ed., *Een Kantelend Tijdperk*, 54-55; De Maeyer, 'De Ultramontanen en de Gildenbeweging', 225-226.

democratic desires of the workers to the state. This meant that the corporations would have to be granted a degree of influence on legislative matters relating to wages, prices, and labor regulations. In this regard, the corporatists posited the principle of subsidiarity, which, in the most general sense, entailed that higher level governmental institutions should delegate authority in social matters to lower-level institutions and free initiatives as much as possible, and provide adequate means and support to the latter to achieve their goals. More concretely, the advocates of subsidiarity proposed that the state subsidized meso-level social organizations and that it created channels through which these organizations could contribute to policy and legislation. At the micro-level, the corporatist societal structure had to be held up by the Catholic family. The ideal family displayed a strong morality, a good work ethic, and a sober lifestyle. It formed the basis on which the cultural and material elevation of the population could take place, and it was therefore imperative that the meso-level institutions and the macro-level government helped the families to achieve this. Property was to play a pivotal role in the elevation of the households: by guaranteeing the workers proper material security, they would be able to settle down in a home of their own and *gain something to lose*. In turn, this balanced and grounded middle class would no longer feel attracted to rebellious ideas and focus on providing for their families, forming a buffer between the upper and lower class.⁴³ This body of ideas was captured in the motto ‘For Religion, Family, and Property.’⁴⁴

The ideas of the Freiburg Union, disseminated via the Liège congresses, were of great influence on the Belgian Catholics. Not all were supporters, like Périn, whose attachment to radical anti-interventionism and to charity as the only solution to social ills led him to refusing to take part in the congresses.⁴⁵ In spite of the protest of Périn and others, the principle of subsidized liberty, which delegated government intervention as much as possible to lower levels of authority, made the idea of state intervention more digestible to many conservative Catholics.⁴⁶ That the Catholics had been able to secure a stable governmental power base also contributed to this openness. On the other hand, Freiburg corporatism maintained a solid moral foundation that stressed the importance

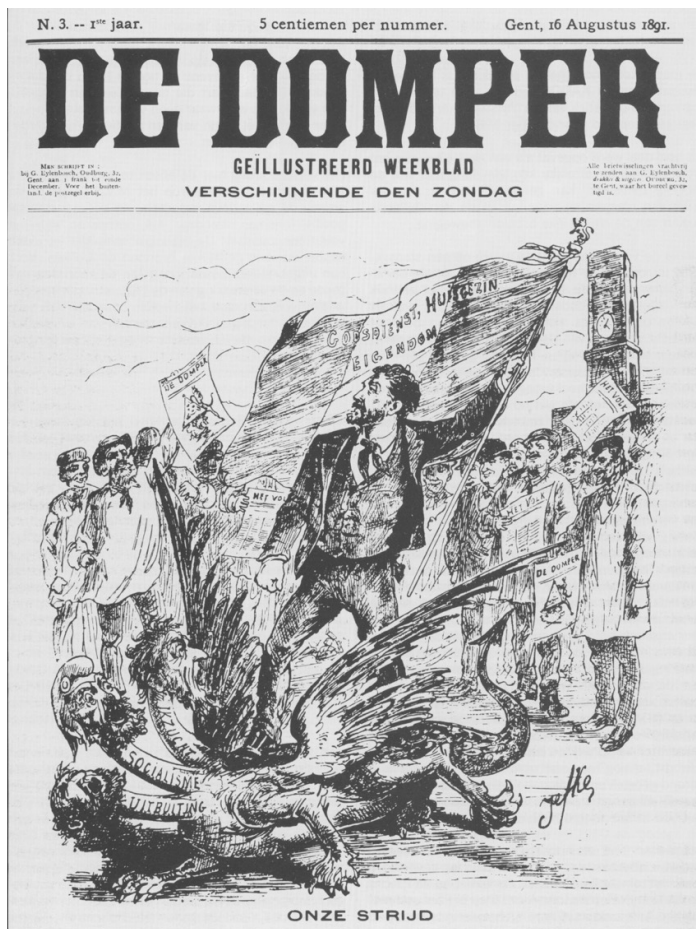
⁴³ De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 226-227; Lamberts ed., *Een Kantelend Tijdperk*, 54-55; Gérin, ‘Les Mouvements Populaires en Belgique’, 148-149. Emiel Lamberts, ‘België sinds 1830’, 269; Deneckere, ‘Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België’, 599-600; De Maeyer, ‘De Ultramontanen en de Gildenbeweging’, 241-242.

⁴⁴ Van Molle, ‘Social Questions and Catholic Answers’, 110-112; De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 226-227; Lamberts ed., *Een Kantelend Tijdperk*, 54-55; Gérin, ‘Les Mouvements Populaires en Belgique’, 148-149. Emiel Lamberts, ‘België sinds 1830’, 269; Deneckere, ‘Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België’, 599-600.

⁴⁵ Périn believed that any degree of governmental intervention was an assault on private initiative, and therefore, on the freedom of the Church (Heyrman, ‘Imagining the ‘Bon Patron Catholique’’, 209).

⁴⁶ Deferme, ‘The Influence of Catholic Socio-Political Theory’, 97-100.

of social harmony and the patronage of the lower classes. The Freiburg alternative moreover had an outspoken ultramontane dimension, as it propagated the conviction that the salvation of society lay in the hands of the Church. Several members of the Union of Freiburg even went so far as to repeatedly argue for an international arbitral role for the pope, but they had to back down due to Leo XIII's reservations towards such a position. Instead, the pope motivated the Catholic population to take up an active public role in the mission to restore the primacy of Christian moral principles. Thus, the ultramontanes transformed themselves from 'crusader knights to missionaries of the people'. Freiburg corporatism, in turn, provided the ultramontanes with the tools to fulfil their mission.⁴⁷



The Christian workers' movement: 'religion, family, property' defeats 'selfishness, socialism, exploitation', 1891

⁴⁷ De Maeyer, 'De Ultramontanen en de Gildenbeweging', 228-230.

The new course of thinking and of social action thus gained strong footing in Belgian Catholic circles, fostering the development of a Catholic democratic current rooted in ultramontanistism.⁴⁸ Very much inspired was also Arthur Verhaegen, who wanted to engage the Society in the new direction set out by the Freiburg corporatists. In a speech to the Ghent conferences in 1887 and again in 1888, he pointed out that bread tickets accompanied by reprimands could only go so far in combatting the influence of socialism on the workers, and that the latter could not be blamed for succumbing to the prospect of prosperity, even if this prospect was built on socialist delusions. Therefore, he argued, the Society should contribute to providing quality social organizations built upon Catholic morality, such as mutual sickness and saving funds, loan guilds, professional guilds, and so on.⁴⁹ In his view, this was a logical development for the Society, entirely in the spirit of Saint Vincent's legacy. After creating the *Comité van Maatschappelijke Werken* (Committee of Societal Works) via the Central Council of Ghent, he declared that 'from Heaven where he triumphs, Vincentius a Paulo no doubt beholds, with satisfaction, the new branch which his youngest sons will graft upon the ancient but ever-blooming tree of Christian love. And we, sons of Vincentius a Paulo, we may place the social works under his protection just as the works of charity now existing are placed under the same protection'.⁵⁰ But the more conservative ultramontane personae who were strongly represented in the Society, among whom founder of the ultramontane journal *Le Bien Public* and president of the Belgian Chief Council Joseph de Hemptinne, were not as enthusiastic about Verhaegen's plans for the Society. De Hemptinne responded negatively to Verhaegen's Committee, and eventually he had to place it outside of the Society.⁵¹ Nevertheless, Verhaegen remained a member of the Society; these commitments did not conflict with each other.⁵² He was certainly 'permitted' to establish various guilds, savings funds, mutual aid societies, etc., within the context of the Ghent Society, but the Committee went too far in the eyes of De Hemptinne.⁵³

After this disappointment, Verhaegen took part in the creation of the *Volksbond* (Popular League) in 1891. As it was conceived by Joris Helleputte (1852-1925), a prominent ultramontane and corporatist Catholic politician, the *Volksbond* was to guide and develop the corporatist project in Belgium. All popular organizations that agreed with the slogan Religion, Family, Property and the societal project it underlay could join

⁴⁸ De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 14-15; 230.

⁴⁹ MSVP January – February 1887, 15-28; May – June 1888, 70-75.

⁵⁰ MSVP May – June 1888, 75.

⁵¹ De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 232; De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate', 192-193.

⁵² SVPG JV mentions Verhaegen in various president roles until 1900. 1878-1890.

⁵³ See the various initiatives discussed in the yearly reports of the Ghent Society during the late nineteenth century.

the league.⁵⁴ Already, however, the Freiburg vision of a complete reconstruction of society along corporative principles started to move to the background in the circles of Catholic democrats. Instead, at the Liège congress of 1890 many Catholics agreed that socialism had to be fought with its own weapons, such as workers' syndicates and consumption cooperatives. In addition, these Catholics argued, a more substantial social legislation was needed to protect the material and moral state of the population. Incidentally, Freiburg corporatism thus facilitated the entwining of ultramontanist and Christian democracy in Belgium.⁵⁵

In 1891, the development of social Catholicism gained new impulse after Leo XIII issued his famous, explicitly antisocialist encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. In this text, which was in part inspired by the congresses, the pope argued in favor of a socially conscious Catholic action that focused on the moral and material amelioration of the worker's existence. In line with his previous messages, he equally emphasized the continuing need for popular pastoral care, religious preaching, and moral instruction of the workers.⁵⁶ Even though *Rerum Novarum* confirmed the necessity of (further) developing new instruments to provide a Catholic answer to the social question(s), it did not give a clear answer to several important questions, most notably whether preference should be given to workers' only or mixed corporations, what role should be played by the state, and how a fair pay could be obtained for the workers. The latter point was of course relevant in light of the Catholic promotion of property ownership, but not all Catholics supported legislative intervention in this regard. As a result, in the wake of the encyclical a battle of interpretation emerged, and a division began to crystalize between on the one hand, the Catholics who defended state interventionism, social legislation and the establishment of dialogue between workers and patrons via syndicates, and on the other, the non-interventionist Catholics who proposed wanted to maintain a liberal, self-regulating market balanced by the development of societal corporatism and the promotion of Christian morality. The first group included both Catholic democrats with ultramontane backgrounds, like Verhaegen and Helleputte, and the more radical, upcoming Christian democrats, like Adolf Daens (1839-1907). The other group represented the conservative camp, including for example de Hemptinne, which clung to the corporatist solution wanted only minimal state intervention in social matters.⁵⁷

Under pressure of popular manifestations, parliament adopted plural male suffrage

⁵⁴ Gerard, *De Christelijke Arbeidersbeweging in België*, 42.

⁵⁵ De Maeyer, 'De Ultramontanen en de Gildenbeweging', 229-230. See also: Van Isacker, *Averechtse Democratie*.

⁵⁶ De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 278; De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate', 190-191; Van Molle, 'Social Questions and Catholic Answers', 108-109; Tihon and van de Sande, 'La Belgique et les Pays-Bas', 552.

⁵⁷ Tihon and van de Sande, 'La Belgique et les Pays-Bas', 552; De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 280-281; De Maeyer, 'Les Congrès Catholiques en Belgique'.

in 1893, which entailed that all men could vote, and that a second or even third vote was allocated to men who were family heads, possessed property, and/or had a secondary or higher education. Thanks to the introduction of this new electoral system, the socialists were for the first time able to acquire several seats in Parliament, and even surpass the liberals. In the same year, a new Christian democratic party was established under leadership of pastor Daens with a democratic and emancipatory program centered around social reform. Deans antagonized the Catholic conservatives as well as the Catholic democrats because he did not hesitate to side with the socialists or liberals to achieve his goals. Especially the Catholic democrats felt pressured by the Christian democratic *Daensist* movement, but they found support in the pope, who, in his address to the Belgian bishops (*Permoti Nos*) of 1895, specifically dealt with the Catholic debate in Belgium. Leo XIII made clear that the solution of the social question still lay in the promotion of Christian morality and in the cooperation between workers and patrons, concluding that the social question still required a Catholic and not a socialist solution.⁵⁸

By 1900, the Catholic party itself had transformed its program into one that, to a large extent, echoed and absorbed the goals of the Christian democrats. By the time of Daens' death in 1907, what was left of the Christian democratic party dissolved and most of its members moved to the Catholic party, while some joined the liberals or socialists.⁵⁹ It had become clear to the Catholics that in order to continue to win elections in a competitive political context fired up by a greatly expanded electorate, the Catholic party had to defend and align the interests of a vastly diverse group of voters. The fierce politicization of the debate surrounding the social question was also reflected in and supported by the steady expansion of the Catholic organizational field parallel to those of the liberals and socialists, a process also referred to as pillarization.⁶⁰ In the Catholic pillar, workers, farmers, artisans, and so on, were grouped in designated organizations (both separate and together with patrons) intended to provide them with a combination of moral instruction, various forms of mutual assistance, and guidance towards self-reliance. The bishops declared that under the watchful eyes of the clergy, in each village and each city, the Catholic population should be supported and expanded by a plethora of associations, guilds and unions, charitable organizations like those of the Vincentians and Xaverians, mutual assistance, savings and loan funds, Sunday schools, women's circles, retreats for working men, etcetera.⁶¹

Thus, the Vincentians continued to be part of a broader Catholic effort to reform

⁵⁸ De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 306-307; Coppa, *Politics and the Papacy*, 65.

⁵⁹ Tihon and van de Sande, 'La Belgique et les Pays-Bas', 552-553; De Maeyer, *Arthur Verhaegen*, 292-295.

⁶⁰ The term 'pillarization' is not uncontroversial. See for example Moeys, *Subsidiary Social Provision*; Hellemans, *Strijd om de Moderniteit*.

⁶¹ Art, De Maeyer, de Pril and Kenis, 'Church Reform and Modernity', 117.

society along Christian morality. As we shall see more elaborately in Chapter 2, the Ladies and the Society strongly promoted the values captured by the slogan Religion, Family, Property from the 1880s onwards. In their battle against moral degeneration among the lower classes and their effort to restore Christian values and relationships in society, they heavily promoted temperance and traditional Christian familial roles. Temperance, which included a resistance to the temptation alcohol, orderliness, frugality, and so on, was stimulated during the home visits, but the Vincentians also created a plethora of social works to guide the people to a more sensible lifestyle, including saving banks and mutual aid societies. Although such initiatives were not entirely new to the Vincentians, in this period they were systematically implemented in the local conferences. In addition, the visitors urged the visited to take part in Catholic social organizations outside of the Society, whether it be for sickness, pensions, savings, or loans. Instead of seeing other social organizations as competition, the Vincentians argued for a collaboration to achieve a combination of preventative and curative charity.⁶²

Thus, the Vincentians showed that they were sensitive to the social goals and strategies propagated by the Catholic political circles, the episcopate, and the Catholic social organizations by integrating them in their discourses as well as practices. Especially by promoting self-reliance among the lower classes, the Vincentians highlighted their contribution to the Catholic social project. However, they did not go so far as to question their methods *an sich*, because according to them, the benefit of charity, an essential religious virtue in, was irrefutable. After all, the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* explicitly recognized charity as an ‘antidote against the arrogance of the century and the immoderate love of oneself’, and in the eyes of the Vincentians, this confirmed that charity continued to maintain its relevancy as the solution to the social question.⁶³ This way, while the Vincentians did appropriate the message of the (Freiburg) corporatists, they increasingly aligned with the more conservative current within the Catholic sphere following the emergence of a determined Catholic and Christian democracy. Indeed, the latter’s abandonment of the absolute corporatist solution in favor of more substantial legislative action did not sit well with the character of the Vincentian organizations. Not only would an alignment with Catholic democracy endanger the apolitical principle of Vincentian charity, its call for the emancipation of the workers also more fundamentally

⁶² SVPJ JV 1896, 6; 10-14; SVPJ JV 1899, 22; SVP, *Manuel à l’Usage des Membres Visiteurs des Conférences de Louvain. Écoles Catholiques, Patronages, Bibliothèques, Associations Pieuses* (Leuven, 1900); DLSVPK JV from 1887 onwards).

⁶³ SVPJ JV 1899, 11-12; ODPMBr JV 1899, 5. See also: SVP, *Les Nocés d’Or de la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul en Belgique* (Brussels, 1893), 46-48; SVP, *Les Nocés d’Or de la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul en Belgique* (Ghent, 1895), 54; SVP, *Le Cinquantenaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul à Bruges* (Bruges, 1901), 56.

conflicted with the Vincentian view on social issues. After all, the nature of Vincentian charity was deeply paternalist, based on the idea that the lower classes required guidance of the elite, and moreover centered around the development of fraternal relations between them. It is not surprising, then, that the conservative, leading figures in the Society, like Belgian president de Hemptinne and international president Antonin Pagès resisted the creation of worker-only initiatives within the organization. Much less so taking in mind that syndicates were considered inherently political. Nonetheless, they did consider them extremely valuable in the fight against socialism, and they did not object to the practice of motivating the workers to join antisocialist syndicates, which was especially common in Ghent.⁶⁴

The same considerations led the Vincentians to refuse participation in the Liège congresses, in spite of the calls of Catholic democrats like Verhaegen for a more outspoken engagement in the debates surrounding the social question.⁶⁵ The congresses were deemed way too political for the Vincentians by its conservative leaders. After all, the matter of state intervention stood high on the agenda of the congresses, and it proved to be a divisive issue as well. Because the Vincentian organizations were principally apolitical, their refusal to engage in discussions on state intervention in the social sphere was in line with their principles. Instead, the Society continued to stress that no amount of theoretical discussions could be more beneficial to the poor than a personal visit that brought advice and material help, and that this practice furthermore remained the best way to achieve class reconciliation.⁶⁶ In a deeper sense, the Vincentians' hesitant stance also reflected their discomfort with the emerging Catholic and Christian Democratic current and its call for new methods of action. Even though the Vincentians found ways to absorb views from both the French and the Freiburg corporatist schools and proclaim their own contribution to the Catholic social project, the identity and practices of the organization was on tense terms with the mission to provide the workers with means to achieve self-emancipation.

During the Malines General Assembly of Catholics in 1891, the Vincentians saw an opportunity to clarify their position. This congress was organized by the more conservative Catholics and the episcopate, who conceived it as a counter-reaction to the Christian Democratic trend at the Liège congresses and generally presented a more conservative interpretation of *Rerum Novarum*.⁶⁷ Both the Society and the Ladies were

⁶⁴ See the allocution of Antonin Pagès: SVP, *Le Cinquantenaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul à Bruges* (Bruges, 1901), 43-49. For Ghent, see: SVPJ JV 1901, 22; SVPJ JV 1904, 19.

⁶⁵ De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate', 193-194.

⁶⁶ SVPJ JV 1890, 9; SVP, *Discours prononcé par S.E. le Cardinal Goossens, Archevêque de Malines, à l'Occasion du Cinquantième Anniversaire de la Fondation de la Société de St. Vincent de Paul, en Belgique, 20 novembre 1892*, 6; SVPJ JV 1896, 5; SVPJ JV 1899, 12-13.

⁶⁷ De Maeyer, 'Les Congrès Catholiques en Belgique'.

present at this congress, and the former even organized the general assembly of Belgian Conferences during this congress, which in itself served as a confirmation of the organization's utility in the eyes of the organizers. Here, the vice-president of the Society declared that 'we will not have to change anything about our rules and traditions' because 'our Conferences will continue to function in their spirit of pure charity, without political concerns, having as its purpose to make us better at the same time as the poor that we are visiting, but, more than ever, we will bring our concern to the working class and its moralization, remembering that the poor who ask for our help are workers whose circumstances have reduced them to misery'.⁶⁸ To highlight their dedication to this social purpose, various members of the Society's governance discussed at length all the different initiatives undertaken by the organization in addition to continuing its home visits.⁶⁹ The Ladies, some of whom were present but did not speak themselves, were praised by the clergy in the direction of the organization as a 'treasury of mercy for the unfortunate' that 'like that of St Vincent de Paul, [can be considered] the work of the century, the one that can calm the spirit of antagonism between the poor and the rich and bring together the different classes of society'. With regards to both organizations, the participants of the congress adopted the conclusion that their works were of great use to the population and that local conferences should be established in all parishes.⁷⁰

With their contribution to the Catholic social project backed by the lion's share of the Belgian Catholic milieu, the Vincentians started to venture outside of their apolitical enclosure in the wake of the introduction of plural male suffrage in 1893. Even though the president of the Parisian General Council had clearly stated in 1892 that the future of the Society depended on its adherence to the 'scrupulous observance' of the interdiction of politics, his tone had markedly changed a few years later. At the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Society in Ghent, he declared the following:

It will perhaps be objected to us, that [by creating various social works] we are throwing ourselves into the social question and that we are doing politics. Let this objection not make us hesitate too much. If the social question were a purely economic question, the conferences would not have to concern themselves with it, but it is also, it is above all a moral question; it therefore comes within our domain and we must, in our sphere, try to resolve it, by our

⁶⁸ Paul Ryckmans ed., *Assemblée Générale des Catholiques en Belgique. Session de 1891, Tôme I: Assemblées Générales* (Malines, 1892), 223.

⁶⁹ Paul Ryckmans ed., *Assemblée Générale des Catholiques en Belgique. Session de 1891, Tôme I: Assemblées Générales* (Malines, 1892), 221-247.

⁷⁰ Paul Ryckmans ed., *Assemblée Générale des Catholiques en Belgique. Session de 1891, Tôme I: Assemblées Générales* (Malines, 1892), 621-629.

*moral teaching and by our works, by the search for justice and by a greater outpouring of the spirit of charity.*⁷¹

Similarly, the association of Ladies in Arlon, established in 1893, stated in their report of 1901 that:

We must prove to these disinherited people that those they call the fortunate on earth are thinking of them, that they are ready to extend their hand to them and help them within the limits of possible. This is the only way to repress, if not to prevent, the ideas of revolt always ready to germinate in the heart of the worker, when he sees poverty establishing itself in his home.⁷²

Not only did the Society and the Ladies avowedly posit charity as a solution to the social question, but they also began showing support for the Catholic social project by, albeit indirectly, supporting the electoral interests of the Catholic party.⁷³ This change in the comportment of the organizations can only be understood against the background of an increased socialist threat. The socialists had been able to conquer seats in parliament, and seeing as the Vincentians had a long tradition of combatting socialist thought among their poor, it became a logical extension of this effort to actively, explicitly, and systematically discourage their poor of engaging in socialist organizations or consuming socialist propaganda.

For this, the organizations had two tools at their disposal. First, they answered socialist propaganda with Catholic propaganda, thereby turning the methods of the socialists against them, similarly to what had happened with the socialist social organizations: 'To the impious and anti-social propaganda, which is unleashed with so much violence and makes a monstrous war on religion and on the very foundations of society, it is essential to oppose a propaganda which can divert young people from bad reading material'.⁷⁴ The Society believed that it was no longer sufficient to teach the poor patience and resignation, the visitors also had to be able to refute the arguments of their adversaries. So, the visitors had to actively engage in discussions with the poor

⁷¹ SVP, *Les Noces d'Or de la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul en Belgique* (Ghent, 1895), 54.

⁷² DLSVPAr JV 1900-1901, 2

⁷³ To be clear, the Catholic social project was not at the service of Catholic electoral interests, rather the other way around. In this sense, the Vincentian's promotion of these electoral interests indirectly contributed to the advancement of the Catholic social project via political channels.

⁷⁴ SVP, *Manuel à l'Usage des Membres Visiteurs des Conférences de Louvain. Écoles Catholiques, Patronages, Bibliothèques, Associations Pieuses* (Leuven, 1900), 34. The use of propaganda, often even professionally, had steadily made its way into many of the Catholic social organizations from the mid-1890s onwards. See: Gérin, 'Les Mouvements Populaires en Belgique', 151.

about political matters and distribute amongst them ‘good books’.⁷⁵

Secondly, the organizations decided to abandon poor families of which the fathers were discovered as socialists. The Courtrai Ladies, for example, decided in 1902 that checking the reading material of the poor and reprimanding them was no longer enough, and that, from then on, they would abandon families of which the father was socialist or engaged in liberal syndicates. They even went so far as to investigate where the poor bought their bread. The socialist cooperative bakeries had proven very successful, and the Ladies stated that by buying their bread, the poor directly contributed to the socialists’ finances, and therefore also their ability to spread propaganda. Therefore, not only did the poor have to disclose who their baker was, the Ladies cross-checked this information with the bakers themselves. When in 1906 the Society opened its own ‘cooperative’ bakery, of which the profits were distributed back to the poor on the basis of the Society’s judgement of need, the Ladies’ poor were henceforth only allowed to buy their bread there.⁷⁶ But while unreformable socialists were abandoned, the Vincentians elaborately celebrated instances where socialists were converted ‘back’ to Catholicism.⁷⁷

While the Vincentians explicitly considered socialism as one of the greatest dangers to society of the time, socialism was but one expression of a much broader current of thought that threatened traditional Christian morals. During the Malines congress of 1891, the term ‘respect humain’ (human respect) was widely used to designate all philosophical currents that were hostile to the Church. This term, which made its first appearance in seventeenth-century Counter-Reformatory circles, very broadly referred to an excessive preoccupation with the judgement of man at the expense of the judgement of God. As such, human respect opened the door to sin and evil because its morality was purely based on the esteem of others, and not on divine law or even love for God.⁷⁸ At the Malines congress, many speakers warned against this ‘bizarre sentiment’ that ‘stifles more virtues than pride generates vices’ and plagued even Catholics themselves.⁷⁹

From that point onwards, the term frequently appeared in the sources of the Society

⁷⁵ SVPG JV 1896, 9-10; 13-16; SVPG JV 1897, 11; SVP, *Les Œuvres de la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul en Belgique. Rapport Présenté à l’Assemblée Générale* (Lille, 1898), 9-10; 21; SVP, *Instruction sur les Devoirs des Présidents dans la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul* (Paris, 1899), 28; SVP, *Manuel à l’Usage des Membres Visiteurs des Conférences de Louvain. Écoles Catholiques, Patronages, Bibliothèques, Associations Pieuses* (Leuven, 1900), 34; SVP, *Le Cinquantenaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul à Bruges* (Bruges, 1901), 21-22; DLSVPB JV 1887, 4; 1902, 9-11.

⁷⁶ DLSVPK JV 1891-1906.

⁷⁷ ODPMBR JV 1898, 16-17; SVPG JV 1898, 23; DLSVPB JV 1897, 10.

⁷⁸ Boutry, ‘Le Respect Humain’; Hennesy, ‘Human Respect’.

⁷⁹ Paul Ryckmans ed., *Assemblée Générale des Catholiques en Belgique. Session de 1891, Tôme I: Assemblées Générales* (Malines, 1892), 199; 227.

as well, especially in the discourses for the occasion of the fiftieth anniversaries of many of the Central Councils during this decade. This was no coincidence, as the Society seized these anniversaries as an opportunity to organize exuberant feasts meant to provide luster to the organization and, at the same time, propagandize against those who made the mistake of basing their conduct on human respect, whether it be socialists, liberals, or Christian democrats. That the Society to an extent abandoned its own principle of discretion by organizing these feasts, was considered justified in its battle against this ‘diabolical spirit’ of human respect, and the fact that the organization had made it to fifty years was a victory in itself that required celebration.⁸⁰ The Ladies, ever modest and humble, refrained from celebrating their anniversaries, but equally inscribed themselves in the battle against the enemies of the Church. Like those of the Society, and perhaps even more so, their discourses were pervaded with allusions to this battle, describing themselves as militants of the Church, their organization as a sacred militia or phalanx, mobilizing for the sake of social peace and moral regeneration.⁸¹ The Antwerp Ladies of Charity, established in 1899, firmly stated that, from its inception, their organization was devoted to supporting the Church in its ‘formidable fight’ against its relentless enemies, which had ‘dominated the entire 19th century and will likely mark part of the 20th’.⁸²

1.3. *Strengthened by antimodernism, weakened by war*

By the turn of the century, the realization that the clock could not be turned back on modernization had settled in among even the most conservative Catholics in Belgium. What this modern society could and would look like, nevertheless remained subject to debate. In 1903, a new pope was appointed, Pius X, who’s marked antimodernism served as a correction to Leo XIII’s strategy of compromise and negotiation, expressed in an openness towards alternative ways of integrating Catholicism in social life. So much so that all Catholics, from conservatives to Christian democrats, appropriated *Rerum*

⁸⁰ SVP, *Les Noces d’Or de la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul en Belgique* (Brussels, 1893), 16; SVP, *Les Noces d’Or de la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul en Belgique* (Ghent, 1895), 17-19; 28-29; 49-50; SVP, *Le Cinquantenaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul à Bruges* (Bruges, 1901), 26; 45-46; 55. See also: SVPJ JV 1898, 28; SVP, *Manuel à l’Usage des Membres Visiteurs des Conférences de Louvain. Écoles Catholiques, Patronages, Bibliothèques, Associations Pieuses* (Leuven, 1900), 4.

⁸¹ DLSVPB JV 1887; 1902; ODPMBR JV 1898, 24; DLSVP, *Association des Dames de la Charité de St-Vincent de Paul à Anvers: Avant-Propos, Règlement, Prières...* (Antwerp, s.d.).

⁸² DLSVP, *Association des Dames de la Charité de St-Vincent de Paul à Anvers: Avant-Propos, Règlement, Prières...* (Antwerp, s.d.), 4-5.

Novarum as an explicit support of their world view and course of action.⁸³ And even though Leo XIII had explicitly advanced neo-scholastic Thomism as a way to integrate faith and reason in his 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, lively discussions continued on the topic of how to reconcile Catholic theology with the developments in modern philosophy, most notably the historical-critical method. Building on Thomas Aquinas' teachings, neo-Scholasticism as it developed in the late nineteenth century posited that objective truth is both real and knowable, and that the natural world could be understood through reason while the supernatural world could be accessed through revelation and intuition. By the turn of the century, historicism and relativism, which posited that objective truth is interpreted subjectively, had become significant threats to the philosophical underpinnings of neo-Scholasticism.⁸⁴ Pius X, whose motto became *Instaurare Omnia in Christo* (to restore all things in Christ), followed his predecessor in his efforts to promote neo-scholastic Thomism as an alternative to Enlightenment teachings. However, in his view, it was not enough to stimulate neo-scholastic theology and philosophy; currents of thought in the Catholic sphere that did not align with its basic tenets needed to be condemned. With his encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* of 1907, Pius X declared modernism 'the synthesis of all heresies', thereby condemning all untraditional or alternative interpretations of dogma, whether moderate or radical, and taking a firm stance against the attempts of integrating humanist concepts into religious teachings. In 1910, to solidify his stance, the pope introduced an antimodernist oath to be taken by all priests.⁸⁵

In his battle against modernism, Pius X did not only target modernist theology and philosophy; modernist politics and social modernism needed to be combatted as well. The influence of humanism (or human respect) in the social and political spheres undermined Christian social teaching, which was based on eternal morality and not the temporal interests of specific groups. In this regard, not only in theology but in all aspects of public life, the pope envisioned doctrinal unity among the Catholics. Seeing as the politically engaged Christian democrats did not subject to the hierarchy of the Church, they, too, were deemed modernist and therefore incompatible with the direction Catholicism ought to take in modern society.⁸⁶ Although he did not completely reject efforts towards social reform, such reform had to be achieved within the boundaries of Catholic teaching and tradition. And so, Christian democratic action should be an

⁸³ Deneckere, 'Nieuwe Geschiedenis van België', 596; Tihon and van de Sande, 'La Belgique et les Pays-Bas', 552-554.

⁸⁴ Lamberts, 'Religious, Political and Social Settings', 32-36.

⁸⁵ Heyrman, 'A Conservative Reading of *Rerum Novarum*', 199-200; Gadille, 'Face aux Nouvelles Sciences Religieuses', 460-462; Gadille, 'L'Anticléricalisme à son Apogée', 481-486; Talar, 'Swearing against Modernism'.

⁸⁶ Agócs, 'Christian Democracy and Social Modernism'.

extension of the Church deprived of its political élan, functioning as an alternative form of charity through its top-down tutelage of workers interests. Accomplishing this vision immediately proved more difficult than expected, however, because the Christian democrats fundamentally opposed the concept of a hierarchical social in the official doctrine of the Church. In addition, Pius X felt that the value of charity in creating a Christian, balanced society had been neglected. Charity, in his view and that of other neo-Thomist Catholics, was indispensable to the establishment of a Christian community because it promoted a symbiotic relationship between rich and poor, thereby contributing to social harmony and rendering political efforts towards social reform obsolete. In line with his paternalist conception of social aid and support, Pius X defended mixed labor organizations instead of those exclusive to workers, but on this front, too, it was too late to change the tide.⁸⁷

Although quite a few Catholics felt that Pius X approached the issue of the role of Catholicism in modern society all too conservatively, the Vincentians gratefully welcomed his views, in particular his emphasis on the benefits of charity. In an allocution during the general assembly of the Belgian conferences in 1909, president of the Parisian General Council Paul Calon declared:

*We are grateful to have always remained indissolubly united in heart and mind to the Head of the Church, for not having deviated from the principles of our first founders, for having resisted the suggestions which wanted to lead us either to practices more in line with modern tastes, or with reckless novelties.*⁸⁸

Thus, after a period of relative uncertainty brought about by intense multiplication and diversification in the social organizational field, the Vincentians felt reassured in their choice to remain faithful to their charitable identity and traditional practices. On the one hand, Pius X specifically confirmed the value of the Vincentian's work by calling the Society a 'pious and peaceful militia' that formed a powerful tool in making souls receptive to the truth of the Gospel and in contributing to the conversion of the world.⁸⁹ On the other, he also more generally stressed the importance of lay apostolate, which stood at the core of the Vincentians identity, thereby reinvigorating the energy of the revival in which the organizations had their roots. Pius X envisioned a powerful collaboration between the clergy and the laity to achieve the goal of restoring all things in Christ. This meant not only leading souls to God, but to establish a Christian

⁸⁷ Agócs, 'Christian Democracy and Social Modernism', 75-78; Lamberts, 'Religious, Political and Social Settings', 36.

⁸⁸ SVP, *Assemblée Générale des Conférences de Belgique Réunies à Malines* (Brussels, 1910), 18

⁸⁹ SVP, *Assemblée Générale des Conférences de Belgique Réunies à Malines le 26 septembre 1909* (Brussels, 1910), 10-12.

civilization in all areas of life. Therefore, the laity should take part in the ecclesial ministry, while obediently submitting to the Church's hierarchy in the domains of spirituality and education, in social and economic life, in the family, and even with regards to politics. This help from the laity he called 'Catholic action'.⁹⁰

The Vincentian organizations, themselves born from an urge for spiritually motivated social action, gladly answered to this call. In a text entitled 'The Society of Saint-Vincent de Paul: A Powerful Means of Catholic Action', published in 1910, the bishop of Moulins (France) explained that the societies of mutual aid, the syndicates, and the cooperative societies, directed by zealous Christians who helped the indigent to help themselves, all formed an important element in Catholic action. But the establishment of new Catholic social organizations did not render charity obsolete, as the spirit charity should pervade all efforts towards the alleviation of suffering. Charity was and would remain the basis, the inspiration, and the example for Christian social works. Therefore, with its supernatural and divine character, its disinterested and generous nature, the legitimacy of pure charity as the orientation point for other social works remained. And even if, in some places, the need for material alms decreased, the need for moral alms remained and often grew, confirming that there would always be important work to be done by the Vincentians.⁹¹ To aid in the Catholic action, the Belgian Vincentians worked together closely with the ecclesial authorities. While the clergy and the episcopate promoted the establishment of new local branches of the organizations, the Ladies and the Society proselytized among the poor (who were often hard to reach for the clergy), expanded their collection of auxiliary works to promote a Christian lifestyle among them, and promoted adherence to (and regularly even created) Catholic social organizations.

The charitable activities of the Vincentians, especially the poor visit, also provided an excellent means to promote the pope's call for a more qualitative practice of faith. To restore all things in Christ, Pius X put a renewed emphasis on liturgy and the Eucharist, on marriage before the Church, on the Marian cult, and on the regular and first communion, for which he lowered the age from 12 to 7.⁹² In every way they could, the Vincentians tried to contribute to this project. They distributed good books and surveilled the reading material of the poor, organized retreats for workers, had the poor assist with pilgrimages and processions, organized first communions for the children and provided them with the adequate attire, helped attract children to Catholic schools by supplying them with clothing, providing them with lunch and all kinds of tickets, and,

⁹⁰ Lambert Johan Joseph Marie Poell, *De Encycliek 'Il Fermo Proposito' van Onzen Heiligen Vader Pius X, aan de Bisschoppen van Italie over de Katholieke Actie* (Tilburg, 1905).

⁹¹ SVP, *Un Moyen Puissant d'Action Catholique* (Paris, 1910). See also: M. l'abbé Dassonville, *Conférences de Saint-Vincent de Paul Comme Moyen d'Action Sociale* (Reims, Bureaux de l'Action Populaire, ca. 1910)

⁹² Pollard, *Money and the Rise of the Modern Papacy*, 14.

most importantly, checking school attendance, they saw to it that their poor attended Sunday Mass and the observance of Easter duty with more rigor than before, continued to regularize marriages together with the Society of Saint Francis Regis, and so on.⁹³ To keep the workers away from cafés, which were considered hotbeds for socialism, the Vincentians joined in the Catholic effort to provide moral entertainment, sometimes even using material incentives to attract the workers (mostly men). In Courtrai, the Society organized gatherings for men in which moral education about their duties was coupled to supervised entertainment. Working together with the local division of the Ladies, the Society distributed personal invitations to all the men of their visited families aged 21 and above. Attached to the invitation, the men found two tickets for a pint of beer, and they were promised tobacco and board games at the location.⁹⁴ This example shows the lengths to which the Vincentians went to influence the lives of the poor, but in the years that followed, the Society expressed much dissatisfaction with the turn-out at these occasions, illustrating that it became increasingly more difficult to ‘protect’ their poor from the influence of socialism and liberalism.⁹⁵

But while the Vincentians congratulated themselves on all their contribution to Catholic action, irrespective of the setbacks they often encountered in the field, criticism from the socialist side grew. In 1910, several socialists in parliament complained that the Vincentians withdrew support from families if they read the wrong paper or refused to send their kids to Catholic schools, thereby forcing the fathers to lie or give up their freedom to receive alms.⁹⁶ To the Vincentians, however, these types of strategies were an evident extension of their dedication to the restoration of all things in Christ, and despite their principal apolitical character, some local divisions even considered it opportune to intervene in the elections. From 1909 onwards, the Ladies of Courtrai, for example, were encouraged to ‘consolidate the Catholic opinion’ in light of the national elections of 1910, 1912 and 1914, and, in particular, act against the influence of socialism among the workers. They surveilled the reading material of the poor and distributed Catholic journals (*De Gulden Spore*), checked whether they attended socialist meetings or had socialist sympathies, whether they had joined socialist or liberal

⁹³ See for example the general assembly reports of the Society and the yearly reports of the Ladies: SVPHRB JV 1909; SVPHRB JV 1910; 1912; 1913; SVP, *Discours Prononcé par M^r Albéric de Pierpont, Président du Comité Central de Namur, à l’Assemblée Générale du Pèlerinage Namurois Tenue à Lourdes, le 30 avril 1909* (Ghent, 1911); DLSVPK JV; DLSVPA JV; DLSVPB JV.

⁹⁴ DLSVPK JV 1902.

⁹⁵ During their meetings in 1905, 1908, and 1909, the Ladies of Courtrai were reprimanded because participation in this work was insufficient and the Ladies should make more effort to distribute the invitations. (DLSVPK JV).

⁹⁶ AKVB *Annales Parlementaires, Séance du Mardi 1^{er} Mars 1910* (Brussels, 1910), 702; AKVB *Annales Parlementaires, Séance du Mardi 29 Novembre 1910* (Brussels, 1910), 134.

organizations, whether they bought their bread at socialist cooperatives, whether they attended socialist or liberal feasts and movie theaters, whether they participated in socialist strikes, and so on. In 1910, the Ladies reported that fourteen families had already been abandoned in light of the elections because they were suspected of socialist sympathies and had engaged in such prohibited activities.⁹⁷ Incidentally, the Courtrai Ladies' efforts to influence the outcome of the elections can be considered an example of women's indirect political participation, and therefore of their agency in the public sphere through their participation in Catholic charity. Because the organization was directed by male clergy (and because there were no doubt individual differences of opinion), it is difficult to determine the extent to which the Ladies initiated, executed and supported this strategy, but the many instances of abandoned families and the prominence of the topic during the meetings does suggest that the Ladies eagerly made use of the opportunity to engage in public political debate and action.

When in August 1914 Belgium was invaded by Germany and dragged into a bitter war for the four years to come, the work of the Vincentians was abruptly and profoundly disturbed. Almost immediately, several conferences completely disbanded because of the destruction and the killings done by the German army and the exodus that followed. Already after a few months, many conferences had lost a great number and sometimes even all their members to the carnage of war, whether it be because they had fled the country, were executed, conscripted, or deported as prisoners of war.⁹⁸ Those conferences that continued their work, found it increasingly more difficult. Because life became exponentially more expensive, donations to the organizations shriveled while at the same time, the cost of basic necessities like bread and coal skyrocketed. To supply the Belgian population with such necessities and distribute foreign aid packages, a semi-official *Nationaal Hulp- en Voedingscomité* (National Help and Food Committee) was established in September under the presidency of the businessman and philanthropist Emile Francqui. The Committee was backed by the recently instated government in exile, comprised of Catholics, liberals, and socialists together in a 'sacred union'. Soon, the Committee *de facto* fulfilled the role of a shadow government, providing material help and financial support for people confronted with loss of income and material damages through a network of local divisions.⁹⁹ Many people who were active in private charitable and philanthropist organizations before the war, including members of the Vincentian organizations, now engaged in the Committee. They usually did so under their personal title since the goal of the Committee was to transcend political and

⁹⁷ DLSVPK JV 1910.

⁹⁸ Dhaene and Wynants, 'Achteruitgang en Crisis', 85-86.

⁹⁹ Tihon, 'La Belgique', 539; Emiel Lamberts, 'België sinds 1830', 285-286; Dumoulin, 'Het Ontluiken van de Twintigste Eeuw', 808-814.

confessional boundaries. The fact that the Committee had a monopoly on donations, collections, and the sorts, further contributed to its position as the spill of war-time aid.¹⁰⁰

The deaths and dislocation of many members, a general lack of funds and of goods, and the dominance of the National Help and Food Committee struck a heavy blow to the Society and the Ladies. Where their conferences remained operative, however, the Vincentians displayed much creativity in their efforts to support the local population. They organized soup distributions for the people and in the schools, they aided prisoners of war, helped care for the injured in hospitals, organized shelter for refugees, but also continued, to the extent possible, to hand out food (mostly bread and milk), coals, and clothing.¹⁰¹ But the Vincentians also remained apprehensive about the threat of a moral depression sinking in among the population and therefore carried on with exerting moral influence over the needy. They still offered (or imposed) moral guidance and good reading material, using the threat of abandonment to correct behavior they deemed unwanted. The Ladies of Courtrai, for example, reported that several families had to be abandoned because their daughters had been all too friendly with the Germans, a problem that was caused by the parents who sent their children to ask for food from the German soldiers. And even during wartime, these Ladies continued to surveil the sleeping arrangements of the poor, making sure that parents and children slept separated.¹⁰²

In 1918, immediately after the war, the Central Council of Limburg expressed itself happy with all the different initiatives set up by its conferences during the war, but it also regretted that many conferences had seized their work because they declared that they were unable to acquire material goods to distribute, and because many had dissolved into the National Help and Food Committee. The Council argued that although it was true that the organization could not work like before, these conferences had lost sight of its primary goal: to deepen the faith of its members in a fraternal setting, and to pray and have regular meetings to this end. In addition, even if there was little material help to offer, there still remained much work to do with regards to the morality of the population, and even more so than before: ‘expensive times and need too often arouse feelings of envy and hatred in the hearts of some, and bring upon their lips words of rebellion and slander against God, of execration against their neighbor – pursuit of profit and ostentation supplant in others the Christian thoughts of righteousness and pity’. In the

¹⁰⁰ Dhaene and Wynants, ‘Achteruitgang en Crisis’, 86-87

¹⁰¹ Dhaene and Wynants, ‘Achteruitgang en Crisis’, 88; DLSVPK JV 1914-1919; APBJ 12.2.1.504 *Middenraad van Limburg. Verslag der Werkzaamheden Gedurende het Jaar 1922 Voorgelezen in de Algemene Vergadering van 23 Oktober 1923* (Hasselt, 1923).

¹⁰² DLSVPK JV 1916.

spiritual need of the poor, the Vincentian still had a vast field available for his zeal, and 'no one does not see that the future of family, fatherland and Church depends on it'.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ APJB 12.2.1.504 Brieven over de aantrekkelijkheid van het Genootschap na de oorlog en brieven van de conferenties over hun werking (1925-1926).

Chapter 2

Categories of difference in the Vincentian social project¹⁰⁴

In the Catholic world, the last quarter of the nineteenth century until the First World War was marked by the advent of social Catholicism. This was a broad movement that was expressed in a great variety of different ideas about the social needs in society and their possible solution via a Catholic social project. At their core lay a deep concern about the moral and physical state of the working population, stirred up by the workers' ever-louder call for a fairer treatment and the concomitant rising popularity of socialist organizations. Of great importance to this development of social Catholicism(s) was the elaboration of corporatism as a well-rounded ideological framework for the creation of a Christian society, which was summarized by the motto 'for Religion, Family, and Property'. Even though Belgian Catholics remained divided on the issue of state intervention in the social sphere, with Christian democrats for example arguing for broad legislative reforms, the need for a Catholic answer to the social question was considered undebatable.¹⁰⁵ This extensive theoretical development and social engagement of the Catholics also reflected broader trends in the medico-social and sociocultural fields. During the late nineteenth century, the social sciences made great advancements, and the scientific market was flooded with all kinds of theories about the causal relationship between the living conditions of the lower classes, their health, their (im)moral behavior, and their effects on the state of society as a whole. Of great relevance was the temperance movement, spurred by a growing fear of inebriated masses and a concern for the adverse effects of alcohol on the workers' health, morality, and productivity. The feminist movement, too, created some important changes in the ways in which women's role in society was envisioned and opened the door to new opportunities for social agency. This chapter delves deeper into the Vincentians' responses to these sociopolitical, scientific, and cultural changers, and how these were reflected in their charitable work as well as their own identity (re)construction.

The first subchapter examines how the Vincentians applied corporatist and social Catholic ideas about the workers' needs into their charitable work. Their central aim was

¹⁰⁴ Small parts of this chapter draw on my article Fluit, 'Gender and Class'.

¹⁰⁵ See Chapter 1 of Part II.

to contribute to the promotion of the Christian nuclear family, which was considered the micro-level foundation of the Catholic social project. To do so, the Vincentians took active part in the temperance movement, combatting alcohol abuse among men and fostering orderliness among women. More broadly, they tried to instill a sense of social responsibility and mutual care within the lower-class families, in which each member was ought to fulfill their designated role and contribute to a financially and morally stable home. Mutual aid societies, in particular saving banks and after the turn of the century also consumer cooperatives, became important tools in their efforts to promote temperate families in pleasant homes. Conversely, these new accents in the charitable work of the Vincentians were also reflected in their adoption of a more outward, exemplary role in society, which is analyzed in the second subchapter. As members of the leading elite, they felt that they had to practice what they preached in order to achieve effective societal change. Among the Ladies, the strong focus on familial roles in social Catholicism also led to a relative abandonment of their attachment to humility to draw attention to their charitable, and by extension social, contribution as *women* of the upper classes.

1.1. Promoting temperate families in pleasant homes

In response to the social unrest of the late nineteenth century, the Catholic elite increasingly emphasized the importance of the family as the cornerstone of society. Against the individualism of liberals and the collectivism of socialists, they pitted the organic unity of the Christian family. The rebellious socialist workers in particular were perceived as threatening, unstable and adrift. The family, grounded in a stable and pleasant home, was considered a key element in creating social peace and harmony.¹⁰⁶ Thus, the many social organizations and mutual aid societies created in the framework of the Catholic social project became active promoters of the Christian family among the working classes under the motto ‘for Religion, Family, and Property’.¹⁰⁷ Older Catholic organizations like those of the Vincentians, too, inscribed themselves in this Catholic social project. The development of corporatism and Catholic social teaching during the late nineteenth century moreover took place in junction and under the influence of the broader developments in the field of medico-social sciences, which brought about a hygienist and temperance movement that significantly broadened the moralizing efforts of the elites towards the lower classes.

At the core of the Catholic social initiative stood the concept of the healthy and moral Christian family. Social Catholics viewed the Christian family as a secure refuge for all

¹⁰⁶ Van Molle, ‘Social Questions’, 110-111; Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, diss., 58-60.

¹⁰⁷ Lamberts, ‘De Ontwikkeling van de Sociaal-Katholieke Ideologie’.

its members, a genuine home organized around the hearth, where parents and children fulfilled their respective familial roles by caring for one another. A pivotal figure in shaping these views was the French sociologist Frédéric Le Play, whose mid-nineteenth-century research on impoverished families led him to increasingly emphasize religion as a primary tool in addressing social challenges. Le Play fervently supported corporatism, advocating for intermediary structures that linked individuals to the collective, organic unity among diverse social and economic groups, and, most notably, the promotion of the *famille-souche* or the ‘root family’. The term root family denoted a specific family structure characterized by multiple generations cohabiting or residing in close proximity. Modeled after the stable agricultural family, this familial paradigm was perceived as the bedrock of social stability and economic prosperity, playing a vital role in sustaining social order and continuity. In the context of modern industrialized society, the family had become destabilized, posing a threat to society at large.¹⁰⁸ These convictions resonated among Catholics throughout Western Europe, including Belgium. Despite differences in specific strategies and emphasis, the shared mission among Catholics was to restore the family, endow it with property, and instill its members with religious morality. This mission formed the ideological basis for many social organizations and mutual aid societies established during this period, as well as the endeavors of numerous Catholic initiatives, such as those undertaken by the Vincentians.

Much like the hierarchy and explicit division of roles and responsibilities among different social and economic groups in society, a similar structure existed at the micro-level of the family. The role of the housemother held particular significance in this framework. Cultural historians note that, starting from the late nineteenth century, the Church idealized the non-celibate Catholic mother, often portraying her as the ‘angel at the hearth’.¹⁰⁹ The liberal bourgeoisie shared the view that the home-centered mother was pivotal for maintaining a stable household and, consequently, for the well-being of society. However, in Catholic discourse, the mother was ascribed an additional significant religious role. Within the Catholic cult of motherhood, the Christian mother was seen as a catalyst for piety within her household, thereby cultivating an atmosphere of warmth, tranquility, and happiness.¹¹⁰ Although the Catholic discourses promoted a strong woman at the hearth, there was a clear hierarchy in the Christian family and the father was expected to maintain his authority in the household. However, this authority

¹⁰⁸ Brejon de Lavergnée, ‘Le Play et les Milieux Catholiques’, 159-180; Assier-Andrieu, *Chroniques du Juste*, 77-103; Coronel de Boissezon, ‘La Réinvention du Conservatisme’, 113-156.

¹⁰⁹ Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, diss., 64. See also, on evangelical discourses: Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain. Understanding secularisation 1800-2000* (London & New York, 2001), 58-87. As we will see in the next subchapter, the Vincentians did not use the term angel to refer to housemothers, but rather reserved it for priests, sisters, and themselves.

¹¹⁰ Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, diss., 59-65.

should not be limited to negative discipline and control; the father should contribute to the household in a positive sense as well by providing in the family's material needs, by taking up an active role in the children's upbringing, and by acting as an example of piousness. The 'patriarchal domesticity' promoted by the Church also included a distinctly public aspect, because the societal role of the active Catholic man was not limited to the domestic sphere. As such, the housefather functioned as the representative of his family in the public sphere, a function that drastically expanded after the introduction of plural male voting in 1893.¹¹¹ With regards to the children, both parents were considered responsible for their (religious) education, with the father taking up a larger role in this respect once the children reached a certain age. From their end, the children were expected to show obedience, modesty, piety, and innocence.¹¹²

From the Catholic perspective, the cherished ideal of the Christian family was perceived as increasingly imperiled in recent times. Immoral ideas and habits had taken root, especially among the working class and urban poor, jeopardizing not only societal stability but also public health. In Belgium, as in the rest of Western Europe, around the 1880s, growing concerns about the restive lower classes, coupled with new insights from fields like medicine, sociology, and psychiatry, prompted collaborative efforts by the bourgeoisie and public authorities to educate and moralize the population. Broadly speaking, research in this period established causal connections between people's living conditions and habits on one hand and their physical health and moral well-being on the other. Advances in understanding contagious diseases and other illnesses revealed that poor hygiene (lack of cleanliness, inadequate light, ventilation, and sanitation) and unhealthy dietary practices directly contributed to sickness. This newfound knowledge also highlighted the potential for preventative action, which was considered not only possible and necessary but also urgently required. Both Catholic and liberal scientists and elites shared the belief that the lower classes were susceptible to degeneration. In their view, physical unhealthiness and moral decay were mutually reinforcing, posing a significant threat to societal well-being.¹¹³ For instance, alcoholism was identified as a severe problem among lower-class men, deemed endemic. Seen as an infectious disease, it spread throughout the population, leading to both illness and moral degradation, straining both private and public sources of social assistance, and contributing to deviant

¹¹¹ Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, diss., 69-70; Trev L. Broughton and Helen Rogers, 'Introduction: The Empire of the Father', idem eds., *Gender and Fatherhood in the Nineteenth Century* (Houndmills, 2007), 1-28; Brejon de Lavergnée, 'Making the Charitable Man'; Schneider, 'Masculinity, Religiousness and the Domestic Sphere'.

¹¹² Schneider, 'Masculinity, Religiousness and the Domestic Sphere', 38.

¹¹³ D'haeninck, Vandersmissen, Deneckere, and Verbruggen, 'Public Health', 143-146; Jarrem, *Streetlife*, 260-262; Rimke and Hunt, 'From Sinners to Degenerates', 63-67

behavior.¹¹⁴

While the recognition of the importance of hygiene and related factors for individual and public health was not new, the late nineteenth century witnessed a significant expansion in their scientific foundation, marked by the bacteriological revolution. Concurrently, efforts to implement these findings into practice also notably increased.¹¹⁵ The moral dimension of the hygiene movement played a crucial role in shaping its objectives and approaches, resulting at the same time in the medicalization of social issues and the conceptualization of morality as medicine. This led to a comprehensive top-down initiative to educate the lower classes, particularly the workers, towards adopting a healthier, disciplined, and more moral lifestyle.¹¹⁶ Public authorities intervened through legislative measures, such as imposing taxes on alcohol, mandating medical checks for risk groups like prostitutes, and implementing medical inspections in public schools. Additionally, they improved sanitation in cities and financed scientific research. However, state interventionism in Belgium remained limited and contentious, with (radical) liberals predominantly supporting such campaigns and measures, doctrinaire liberals favoring a minimalist state role, and Catholics safeguarding the independence of private institutions in the social and medical sectors. Given that Catholics assumed control over the government in 1884 for the subsequent thirty years, state involvement mainly took the form of subsidization.¹¹⁷ More so than the state, the medico-moral mission of prevention was undertaken by a diverse group comprised of physicians, clergymen, teachers, and socially engaged elites. A wide array of Catholic and liberal charities, philanthropic societies, social organizations, and mutual aid societies actively participated or were established for this purpose.¹¹⁸

Despite the shared concern among Belgium's Catholic and liberal elites and authorities for public and societal health, they integrated this mission into the frameworks of their respective societal projects. Catholics seamlessly incorporated the medico-moral mission into their broader vision of establishing a society grounded in Christian principles and morality. Catholic corporatism viewed society as an organism, emphasizing that for peace and harmony to prevail, all components of the organism

¹¹⁴ Vleugels, *Narratives of Drunkenness*, 1-2

¹¹⁵ See also the various contributions in Grell, Cunningham, and Roeck eds., *Health Care and Poor Relief in 18th and 19th Century Southern Europe* and Grell, Cunningham, and Jütte eds., *Health Care and Poor Relief in 18th and 19th Century Northern Europe*, which provide a long-term perspective on the evolution of medico-social ideas across Europe.

¹¹⁶ Luyten and Guillardian, 'Medicine, Money, and Mutual Aid', 210; D'haeninck, Vandersmissen, Deneckere, and Verbruggen, 'Public Health', 145-146; Vleugels, *Narratives of Drunkenness*, 35-36; Rimke and Hunt, 'From Sinners to Degenerates', 63-67

¹¹⁷ Luyten and Guillardian, 'Medicine, Money, and Mutual Aid', 213-214; D'haeninck, Vandersmissen, Deneckere, and Verbruggen, 'Public Health', 144-145.

¹¹⁸ D'haeninck, Vandersmissen, Deneckere, and Verbruggen, 'Public Health', 145-146.

needed to be healthy and comprehend their roles and responsibilities. The elites, considered to be natural leaders of society, were tasked with instructing the lower classes on fulfilling their roles, enabling them to lead stable and happy lives, and thereby contributing to societal progress and prosperity. The significance of religious morality in promoting individual and societal well-being was consistently underscored in this context. It served as a compelling guide for behavior and habits that were deemed beneficial on both the individual and the societal levels, such as the virtue of temperance and familial values. Moreover, it offered an alternative perspective to liberal individualism and social collectivism concerning social relations within society, grounded in the notion of a natural hierarchy established by God, with charity as the guiding principle to prevent and cure social misery.

The Vincentian organizations echoed the social Catholics' deep concern about the moral and physical state of the family and its household. Since their beginnings, the Vincentian organizations of the nineteenth century considered it an essential duty to foster Christian marriage and moral households among the poor. As the Christian family became a subject of political relevance, linked to the Catholic social project, the Vincentians more than ever believed their charitable action should strengthen and protect the families under their care. The ideal type of the Christian family propagated by Catholic social thinkers served as a model for their work with the poor, a model on the basis of which they could judge the moral state of the family and determine what work needed to be done. In the opinion of the Vincentians, they did not necessarily need to avoid families that strayed far from this ideal type, but rather it should be assessed to what degree the family showed itself receptive to the visitor's guidance. They believed that poverty and moral decay were closely intertwined, often forming a destructive cycle wherein material deprivation led families to focus on immediate needs, potentially forsaking religious duties or losing their faith altogether.

In turn, the Vincentians feared, the lack of a sound moral basis for their conduct opened the door to irresponsible behavior and bad outside influences, resulting in even more physical suffering. For example, the visitors reprimanded parents that had few means, and yet chose to spend what little they had on their own pleasures, e.g. in the form of alcohol, instead of providing their children with clothing and food. In general, the Vincentians observed that many parents used their children for their own gain, for example by sending them to work in the factories instead of sending them to school, thereby depriving them of a better future. At the same time, the parents of poor families often neglected their religious duties, such as attendance of Mass, and did little effort to keep the faith alive in the home, exemplified by the lack of religious paraphernalia in

the house, in particular the crucifix.¹¹⁹ This way, the parents set a bad example for their children, so that the cycle continued. The Vincentians believed that such conduct was caused by the parents straying from their faith and forgetting their familial duties. Reminding the family members of their duties vis-à-vis each other, society, and the Church, could therefore lead them back to the righteous path and allow them to regain control of their material situation as well.¹²⁰

From the late nineteenth century onwards, the Vincentians' mission of restoring the Christian family among the poor quickly became centered around the promotion of temperance, considered to be the lever for the moral and material upliftment of the impoverished. Intemperance, predominantly associated with alcohol abuse, became a major concern during the latter half of the nineteenth century, drawing much attention from the leading classes and authorities. Alcohol was linked to debauchery, domestic violence, social upheaval, and disease. The observation that alcohol was often present at protests and that taverns served as meeting places for workers with socialist sympathies heightened fears of inebriated masses attempting to overthrow the social order.¹²¹ This concern peaked from the late 1880s to the early 1900s, leading to the creation of various anti-alcohol groups and initiatives supported by both liberals and Catholics. Catholics, in particular, were fervent in their efforts against alcoholism, connecting it to the idea that a broader societal degeneration was taking place and advocating for the restoration of religious morality. They asserted that alcoholism had become deeply ingrained in the working class, posing a hereditary risk and necessitating anti-alcohol education and temperance societies for children. In her study on the perception of drunkenness in Belgium, An Vleugels highlighted how Catholics assimilated scientific insights into the dangers of alcohol within the framework of their religious and social beliefs, using these insights to further legitimize the idea that Catholic morality held eternal truth.¹²²

According to the Vincentians, too, the problem of intemperance and the danger for the public order which it entailed could not be solved merely through the education of the working classes or a ban on alcohol. As they saw it, alcohol abuse was directly linked to the lack of religious knowledge and practice among the workers, both factors contributing to discontent and increasing the potential for subversive behavior, while at the same time making it more difficult for the lower classes to find peace in their socio-economic circumstances and to improve their situation to the extent possible. Indeed,

¹¹⁹ MSVP May 1882, 66. See also: Paul Ryckmans ed., *Assemblée Générale des Catholiques en Belgique. Session de 1891, Tôme I: Assemblées Générales* (Malines, 1892), 224-225.

¹²⁰ MSVP January 1882, 3; May 1882, 66; June 1882, 90; January 1883, 5; February 1884, 231-232; November – December 1888, 160; August – September 1889, 134-135.

¹²¹ Vleugels, *Narratives of Drunkenness*, 113-115; Phillips, *Alcohol*, 173-215; Heyrman, 'Catholic Charity and Public Poor Relief', 24-25; Van Praet, 'The Opposite of Dante's Hell?', 167-168.

¹²² Vleugels, *Narratives of Drunkenness*, 126-131.

the Vincentians often reported that in the families they visited, the fathers' alcohol consumption severely threatened the material and mental wellbeing of the mothers and children. A father that spent his (or better, the family's) limited means on alcohol and spent his time at the tavern instead of on his children's upbringing, was a father that had lost his sense of duty towards not only his family, but towards the rest of society and God as well.¹²³ The Society reported many instances of fathers neglecting their duties in this way, to the extent that the visitors sometimes considered it necessary to move the children far away from the intemperate and sometimes aggressive father's bad influence.¹²⁴ The Ladies, too, considered alcohol abuse 'the worst of all social miseries of our time', causing 'more damage the three historical plagues combined, the famine, the pest and the war!'.¹²⁵ They explained that alcohol ruined the endurance and energy of the workers and took away from them their self-control while wasting their income and condemning their wives and children to deprivation and illness. With regards to the relationship between alcohol abuse and illness, the Ladies noted not only the indirect effects (money spent on alcohol was money not spent on food, medicine, and housing), but also the direct relationship between alcohol use and diseases such as tuberculosis which posed a great threat to worker communities.¹²⁶

To combat alcoholism in the workers' families, the Vincentians tried to convince the fathers to make their family their priority and live according to Catholic morality. The Vincentians' primary means of action was of course the home visit, during which they explained the dangers that alcohol posed to the family's health, finances, and morality. In addition, the Vincentians urged the poor to join any of the many Catholic retreats, circles and other types of associations and initiatives for the Catholic working class, which were important instruments in the Catholic efforts to moralize the lower classes and multiplied from the late nineteenth century onward. They provided education, targeted specific problems, promoted piety, strengthened social ties among the Catholic population and kept its members from wandering towards cafés or socialist gatherings. The Vincentians often set up or contributed to such initiatives, which were usually reserved for either men or women, and urged the poor to take part in them.¹²⁷

However, both the Ladies and the Society believed that alcohol abuse could be combatted most effectively by promoting another aspect of temperance: foresight through saving. As the Ladies' work of the Poor sick worded it, alcohol was the great

¹²³ MSVP June 1882, 90; August 1888, 120-121; October – November 1888, 160

¹²⁴ MSVP January 1883, 7; February 1884, 231; February 1886, 21-22

¹²⁵ DLSVPA JV 1908, 24.

¹²⁶ DLSVPA JV 1908, 24-26; 1912, 28; 1913, 13-14; 17; ODPMBR JV 1902, 18 ; 1905, 13.

¹²⁷ See, for example, the various men's circles and the Work of Saint John the Baptist for men and the Oeuvre de la Sainte Famille for women. Some conferences of the Society made attendance to their 'men's circles' obligatory to receive help (SVPHRB JV 1912, 12).

enemy and saving the great friend of the poor.¹²⁸ Indeed, the Vincentians believed that alcoholism was, in the first place, the result of a bad mentality and of general immorality among the workers. The Society linked alcoholism to laziness, wastefulness, intemperance, and vanity.¹²⁹ Frugality (not avarice), then, served as the antidote for these exteriorizations of immorality. After all, being frugal was a sign of an overall good and moral mentality, linked to modesty, temperance, humility, foresight, responsibility, and so on. At the fiftieth anniversary of the Society in Bruges, the city's conservative bishop Gustavus Waffelaert (1847-1931) explained:

*You have understood that saving is eminently moralizing, that it goes hand in hand with temperance in the father of the family, with order and economy in the mother, with the care that is demanded of both of them for the Christian education of children. You have understood in a practical way, what I kept shouting from the rooftops, that the greatest scourge for our religious populations is alcoholism; that the social question among us would be largely solved if we succeeded in exterminating the abuse of drink. There is no more urgent charity, no more precious alms, spiritual as well as temporal, to give to the poor, than to inspire in him a taste for saving at the same time as the love and practice of sobriety, and to help him by all means to apply himself to it.*¹³⁰

In addition, promoting frugality through saving institutions like mutual societies and saving funds fit very well with the spirit of the times. The Vincentians enthusiastically framed the promotion of saving institutions as a solution of the social question, created their own saving institutions in the local conferences, and strongly encouraged their families to take part in them.¹³¹ Overall, the Vincentians reported to be satisfied with the results of their efforts to promote saving. Seeing the success of its local saving funds, the Central Council of the Society in Ghent, for example, declaring that 'One has to admit that saving is not that difficult, seeing as so few inhabitants retrieved their money. What one would otherwise have drowned [read: spent on alcohol], one will find later with the offspring, when it becomes necessary to pay a debt or to provide for other great expenses'.¹³² Of course, this strategy put much emphasis on the individual responsibility of the poor, and less on the external factors that contributed to their indigence. Even though the Society was aware that the workers' salaries were very low and considered

¹²⁸ ODPMBR JV 1902, 18.

¹²⁹ MSVP March 1885, 43-44.

¹³⁰ SVP, *Le Cinquantenaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul à Bruges* (Bruges, 1901), 56. This quote was also repeated in the yearly report of the Work of the Poor Sick: ODPMBR JV 1898-1900, 12.

¹³¹ MSVP September 1882, 162; September 1885, 141; March 1886, 35; ODPMBR JV 1901, 18.

¹³² MSVP May – June 1888, 82.

this unfortunate, they nevertheless continued to focus most of their attention on the workers' journey towards self-improvement within a Catholic framework to achieve an amelioration in their material circumstances.¹³³

The Vincentians' dedication to promoting saving among the working classes as a solution to the issue of alcohol abuse indicates that they considered intemperance to be a broader problem than excessive drinking. Indeed, the Catholic temperance movement went further and viewed intemperance as a moral issue that expressed itself in various, interrelated ways, from alcoholism to a lack of financial foresight and the chase of shallow pleasure. In this respect, not only men's alcohol abuse, but also women's lack of frugality and economy threatened the Christian family and therefore also societal harmony. Opposed to the Catholic ideal of the Christian mother at the hearth who took care of her family, both morally and physically, stood the intemperate mother who neglected the care for her husband and children. From the 1880s onwards, concomitantly with their battle against alcoholism, the Vincentians began their mission towards the exaltation of working-class mothers. At the heart of this project stood the promotion of values such as frugality, tidiness, and piety, which would allow women to take up their designated role in the household and created a warm, loving home. Creating such an inviting environment was considered of great importance to the Vincentians, in particular because they assumed that the men of the working-class families would be more inclined to spend their time there instead of in the taverns or on the streets. The Ladies believed that women were most capable of 'sowing joy around them', especially when they were pious and dedicated. If she was tidy, clean, and frugal, if she had some taste to make the home beautiful, and if she had some intelligence to make nourishing but modest meals, she was able to make her hearth an attractive place to be and, in this way, keep her husband on the right track.¹³⁴

As such, the temperance movement gave the Ladies a new zeal in their mission towards the women of the lower classes, proclaiming that 'they are the ones who must be convinced, because temperance works should be enriched by the help of women, who are so eminently interested in the fight against alcohol. It is peace, the happiness of their homes, the future of their children that they defend, and immense is their power of propaganda'.¹³⁵ Interestingly, while alcohol abuse was certainly not limited to men, discussions on this issue were conspicuously absent from the Vincentians' yearly reports, manuals, etcetera. This silence itself was revealing; women were seen as victims of drunk men or their saviors, and the Vincentians, like the elites in general, were at least

¹³³ For example, the Society in Brussels noticed that the poor who were part of one of their mutual societies were forced to retrieve more than they put in because their wages were insufficient. MSVP May 1886, 74.

¹³⁴ ODPMBR JV 1900.

¹³⁵ DLSVPB JV 1902, 11.

hesitant to tread outside this narrative. Female drunkenness was unsettling, associated with ‘dangerous sexuality’ and unpredictability, challenging the conventions of feminine and masculine behavior, and posing a grave threat to the family and the societal order.¹³⁶ The Society’s questionnaires moreover indicate a harsher judgment towards women engaging in vices such as drinking, adultery, and domestic violence. These behaviors were immediate grounds for denying assistance or removing families from aid lists. The questionnaires of the Conference of Saint Jan Berckmans (1879-1903), for instance, reveal numerous reasons for rejecting a family. These include improved financial conditions, children attending liberal schools (‘in spite of reprimanding’), non-compliance with advice, and instances of drinking problems and adultery, such as the case of an unfaithful woman who left her husband and four children after selling all their belongings. Note that the latter family, including the seemingly innocent husband and children, was rejected due to these circumstances. In the same set of questionnaires, instances of similar behaviors by men were not cited as reasons for rejection.¹³⁷

During the visit, the Ladies were urged to strengthen the frugality of the poor mothers for the benefit of their families. Caring for the finances of the household and making sure this was done intelligently was an important task of the mother. She had to ‘save and deprive herself relentlessly, resist the solicitations of outside pleasures, and perform with zeal the incessant work required by the good maintenance of a household’.¹³⁸ As such, women were the masters of their households, and this was a role that was given to them by God. Therefore, a woman’s’ domestic role was comprised of ‘manual, intellectual, and spiritual work’ all at the same time, and she had to perform her duties in such a way that she functioned as the auxiliary of Christ and the Church, meaning that she was responsible for enforcing Christian morality and traditions in her home.¹³⁹ More practically, the Ladies could assist their poor women in their duties by informing them about insurance, pensions, and savings institutions, so that they could take part in them themselves as well as motivate their husbands to do the same. While there were many general social institutions to choose from, there also existed a whole variety that was catered to the specific needs of women, such as maternal mutual aid societies that assisted women throughout their pregnancy and after, focusing especially on hygiene.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Vleugels, *Narratives of Drunkenness*, 45-51.

¹³⁷ ASVPA 3.19.1 Inlichtingsformulieren over de bezochte families (1879-1903).

¹³⁸ DLSVPA JV 1908, 13-14.

¹³⁹ DLSVPA JV 1908, 12-14; 35; Association des Dames de la Charité de St-Vincent de Paul à Anvers: *Avant-Propos, Règlement, Prières...* (Antwerp, s.d.), 6-7.

¹⁴⁰ The Ladies Antwerp provided a list of these various types of mutual aid societies (such as the mutual aid societies for dowries and savings, and those directed at the family or professional groups), but without reference to concrete initiatives (DLSVPA JV 1909, 18).

Despite their belief in the benefits of saving institutions, the Ladies preferred tool for the betterment of working-class mothers, and by extension the family, was Catholic household education. Indeed, the Ladies observed that many of the mothers in the families they visited were ignorant of their duties, sometimes so much so that their children died of hunger because their mother decided to resume working too early, because they had little knowledge of what to feed their children so that they remained healthy, or because they did not practice adequate hygiene.¹⁴¹ Here too, the Vincentians were quit harsh in their judgement and focused on the individual responsibility of the people living in poverty. One can assume that many poor mothers did not want to go back to work in the factories immediately after giving birth but felt forced to do so, and that their inability to feed their children nourishing meals was often not caused by ignorance but by a lack of means. Either way, the Ladies were convinced that proper Catholic household education would provide a solution to many of the moral and physical shortcomings in the lower-class families. Because they wanted to prevent these problems altogether, they emphasized the need for young girls to attend household schools and strongly urged mothers to send their daughters to such institutions.¹⁴² Moreover, to reward the mothers who displayed the desired behavior, from the late nineteenth century onwards, the Ladies and the Society both rewarded the ‘best’ or ‘most deserving’ households of the local divisions with awards for cleanliness and order.¹⁴³

Such an award also adorns the wall of the interior of the ‘model poor’, as depicted in the special edition of *Le Patriote Illustrée* on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Brussels’ Society in 1892. The illustrations were drawn by the impressionist Franz Gaillard, known for his illustrations of everyday scenes in Belgian cities.¹⁴⁴ Gaillard apparently accompanied the Vincentians for this edition, capturing their work. While the ‘first place for cleanliness’ is challenging to discern, it is strategically positioned just above the family mother, engaged in conversation with the visiting gentlemen. This serves as a symbolic culmination of their collaborative efforts, ushering prosperity into the impoverished household. This interior contrasts sharply with that of that of the ‘cardboard worker’, almost functioning as a before-and-after scene to underscore the positive impact of the visitors. The initial image portrays a household with much room for improvement, a fresh terrain for the visitors. The revered ‘sole chair of the poor’ (referenced in the introduction) stands ready for the visitor. The room is cluttered

¹⁴¹ DLSVPA JV 1909, 25-26.

¹⁴² DLSVPA JV 1909, 28-30

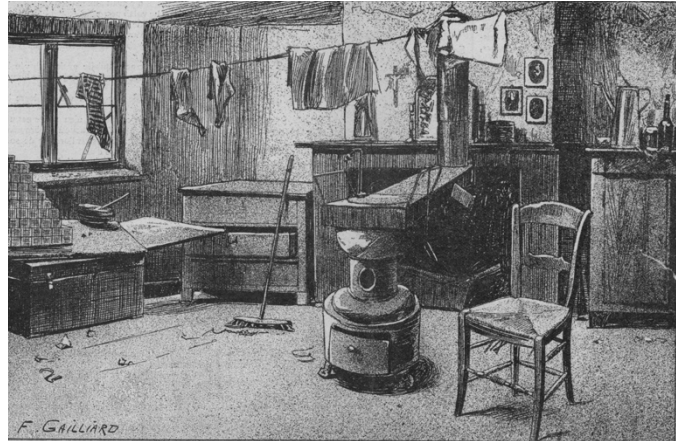
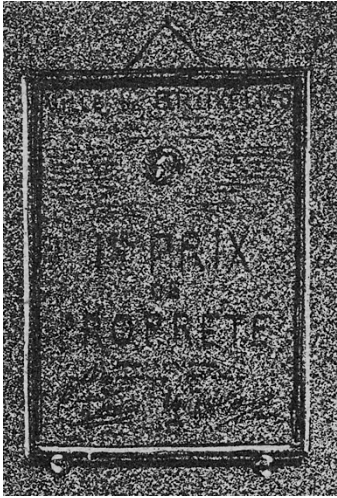
¹⁴³ DLSVPB JV 1897, 7; 1902, 16; 1906, 8; ; 1935, 8; 1937, 11; DLSVPA JV 1906, 8; 1907, 6; 1908, 8; 1909, 8; 1911, 8; 1912, 9; 1913, 8; 1924, 7; 1927, 18. The conference of Saint Trond was a trendsetter, having already started handing out awards for orderliness and morality at least since 1866: DLSVPST JV 1866, 4.

¹⁴⁴ John, *Medievalism in Nineteenth-century Belgium*, 162.

(Gaillard meticulously portrays scattered debris on the floor) and indicates of a lack of resources (a broken window, a chair with loose reed, a precarious stove). Yet, the interior also reflects the resident's potential. A crucifix on the wall reveals religious devotion, cardboard boxes with glue pots signify industriousness, and the makeshift construction of a worktable, supported by a suitcase and a cabinet drawer, along with a dining table balanced on the stove and fireplace, showcases ingenuity. In the third interior, a bedroom/living space 'underneath the beams', the situation is even more dire. A narrow, windowless, and dark room conveys significant poverty, detrimental to the inhabitant's health. Debris litters the floor, a mattress with protruding hay sits crumpled in the corner, an uncovered bed is adjacent to a bucket for personal needs, and a random shoe lies in the center. A brush is present but concealed, clearly less used than in the 'cartonnier's' household. Here too, a crucifix testifies to the resident's good disposition.

Contrastingly, the 'model poor' household is not only exceptionally clean but also much more inviting. Absent are socks drying in the middle of the room, food sits on the stove, and deliberate decoration with curtains, orderly frames, and other ornaments creates a cozy ambiance – a genuine home. A clock (emphasizing an awareness of time as part of productive life) and a mirror (enhancing light and openness) complete the scene. Unlike in the other drawings, residents are depicted, particularly the contentedly smiling housewife. Her dedicated efforts in terms of economy and frugality contribute to the household's prosperity, evident in the beautiful stove. She is engaged in a congenial conversation with the visitors, who don't have to sit on a singly chair but can take place at a table, and whose work here consists mainly of follow-up. This household, indeed, no longer cries out for assistance. Intriguingly, there is no crucifix visible, an otherwise consistent element in depictions of 'good' poor. Has she internalized good morality to the extent that no external confirmation is needed, is the crucifix simply out of view, or did the Vincentians want to show that much good could also be done in unbelieving households? While the latter scenario is conceivable, as it was a theme explored in other depictions of the home visit by the charitable man,¹⁴⁵ in this specific

¹⁴⁵ Brejon de Lavergnée, 'Making the Charitable Man', 101. Here, Brejon de Lavergnée discusses an 1872 engraving of a member of the French Society visiting what appears to be a worker laying sick in bed. The absence of a crucifix reflects the Vincentian idea that good can always be done among the poor, even if they were unbelieving or harbored anticlerical sentiment, as long as they showed themselves receptive to the charitable exchange. Incidentally, the historian interprets the presence of a clock (and an almanac) in the image as an indication of a 'secular relationship with the passage of time and of life', and therefore of the religious indifference or anticlericalism of the worker. I am however more inclined to think that in the case of the image in *Le Patriote Illustrée*, the clock was an indication of prosperity and/or industriousness. In art and philosophy, the clock could symbolize or embody many things, including both the socialist critique of capitalist industrial exploitation and the Catholic exaltation of the sacred rhythm of time within the context of worship and religious rituals.



Les intérieurs pauvres

CHEZ UN OUVRIER CARTONNIER

(Voir texte p. 574)



Les intérieurs pauvres

UN PAUVRE MODÈLE

(Voir texte p. 574)

The 'poor interiors' encountered by the Vincentians: 'at a cardboard worker's' and 'a model poor', with close-up of the award for cleanliness on the wall of the latter, 1892

instance, I find it improbable. This is because the Vincentians were generally disinclined to visit individuals lacking potential for conversion or those who did not observe religious duties over an extended period. As a general observation, this series of drawings, discussed further in the next subsection, exhibits a certain scientific or systematic quality in both form and content, aligning with the Vincentians' work characterized by efficiency and rationality. As a general observation, it can be added that this series of drawings – of which I discuss the rest in the next subchapter – suggested a certain scientific quality or at least a systematic, efficient, and rational aspect in the work of the Vincentians.

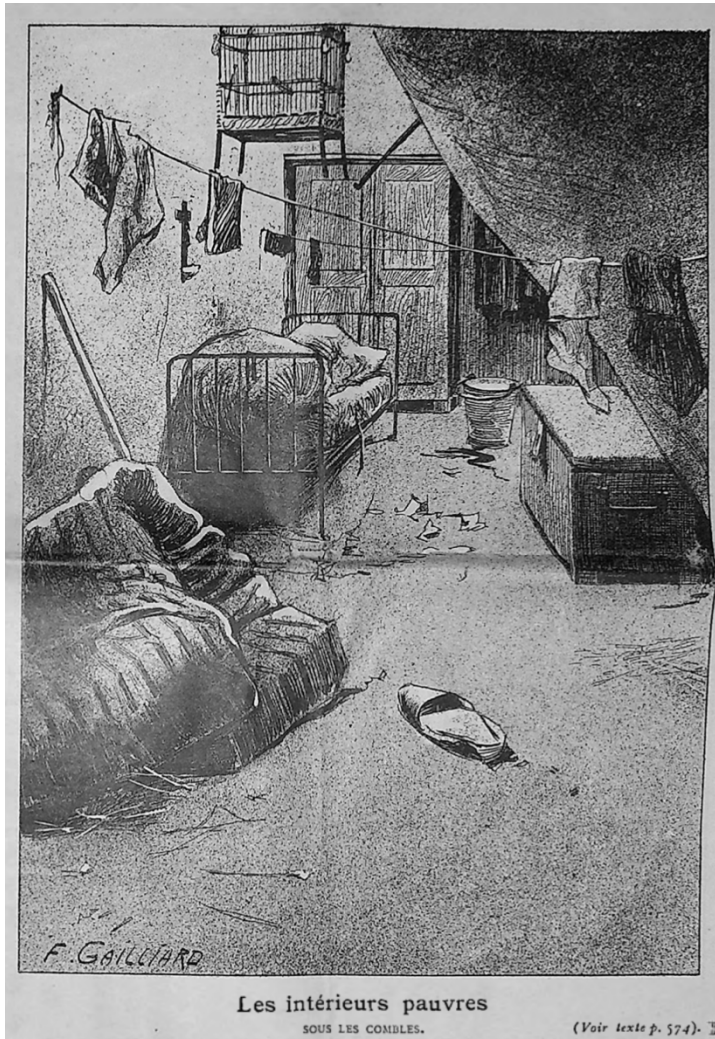
Evidently, in the eyes of the Vincentians, the role of the mother in the household was one that emphasized care, intelligence, and piety. As such, they echoed the opinion of the episcopate and regretted that many women felt the need to go to work outside the home, whether they wanted to or were forced by a lack of means. In its monthly bulletin, the Society referred to an address by Liège's 'bishop of the workers', Victor-Joseph Doutreloux (1837-1901), at the 1887 Congress of Social Works. In this address, he lamented: 'her [married women] place is, in actuality, not in the workhouse, but at the hearth, in her home, with her children; Oh! What were it to wish that she could return there!'.¹⁴⁶ In a speech to the Ghent conferences of the Society in 1888, the Catholic democratic bishop of Ghent Hendrik Karel Lambrecht (1848-1889) explained that 'No king in his palace, with all his wealth, is as beautiful as a Christian mother gathered round the hearth with her children. In such a family there is no conflict, and it is truly to heaven that the father who reigns there leads his beloved'.¹⁴⁷ The Ladies, too, felt that the widespread practice of women from the lower classes working outside the home had devastating effects on the quality of their family's lives. So much so that the cost of women's work outweighed its benefits:

During their absence, the household is abandoned; the meals, hastily rushed, are insufficient, unclean, indigestible, expensive; the children, badly cared for, become puny and vicious; the characters sour; sadness and bad humor invade a home which soon no more resembles a family hearth than rags resemble clothing! How surprising it is that the worker, who has all the more need of calm and well-being as life becomes more difficult and uncertain for him, hastens to flee such a hovel and take refuge in a cabaret!¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁶ MSVP November – December 1887, 179.

¹⁴⁷ MSVP May, June 1888, 95.

¹⁴⁸ DLSVPA JV 1908, 18; 30.



The 'poor interiors' encountered by the Vincentians: 'beneath the beams', 1892

Therefore, the Ladies were urged to join forces with the fathers and sons of the families, whom they were certain appreciated the importance of a well-run household.¹⁴⁹ As such, the Vincentians' project of reforming the lower-class women went further than promoting temperance and piety, it was an all-encompassing effort to mold these women according to the middle- and upper-class ideal of a housewife. This ideal was also exemplified in the Ladies' attempts to instill 'good taste' in them, not only with regards to the interior of their homes and the meals they prepared, but also in the way they

¹⁴⁹ DLSVPA JV 1908, 18.

dressed, all the while keeping in mind the importance of frugality.¹⁵⁰ Even more explicitly, the Ladies confidently declared that ‘the Holy Spirit, in this admirable portrait of the strong woman, has chosen, as a type of the ideal woman of all times, a housewife belonging to the upper classes of society’.¹⁵¹ So, to help poor women achieve a better life for themselves and their families, they had to be molded to the image of the Lady herself.

In conclusion, from the last quarter of the century to the First World War, the battle against intemperance among the lower classes became one of the main objectives of the Vincentians, intrinsically linked to the promotion of what they viewed as the ideal Christian family. By framing it as a consequence of insufficient moral development, a cause for (excessive) material deficiency, and as a threat to social harmony, the Vincentians inscribed themselves in the Catholic social project. By teaching the lower-class families moderation, self-control and commitment, the Vincentians believed they could foster a more peaceful, morally elevated, and materially successful household, and consequently also a more harmonious society. This way, they increasingly legitimized their charitable activities with reference to their benefits in society rather than solely in spiritual terms. This change was also reflected in the type of information the visitors gathered during their visits, with many of the inquiry forms of local conferences now containing questions related to the family’s adherence to Catholic organizations, syndicates, and saving institutions, to the family members’ alcohol consumption, and to the orderliness of their homes.¹⁵²

To a certain extent, this caused the focus of the charitable exchange to shift from benefactor to beneficiary. Although the Vincentians continued to repeat that the poor should be receptive to their advice and reprimands, and therefore set conditions for the receivers of their charity, they enthusiastically stressed the possibilities for bettering the moral and material situation of the poor to a much greater extent than before. Indeed, in the period before the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Vincentians equally underscored the importance of the prospect of being able to change unwanted behavior among the poor, and this stipulation allowed them to exceptionally take on cases of men and women who displayed immoral behavior such as alcohol abuse. Concomitantly with the explosion of the debate surrounding the social question, however, tackling immoral behavior became the focal point of the Vincentians’ work, and they professed the spiritual value of facing these problems head on and in accordance with the expectations

¹⁵⁰ DLSVPA JV 1908, 23; 1913, 14-15.

¹⁵¹ DLSVPA JV 1908, 38.

¹⁵² See for example: ASVP Conferentie Sint-Paulus Antwerpen 22, Formulieren met informatie over bezochte gezinnen (1890-1950). Many conferences also continued to use the same information forms as they had used for the previous decades, containing no questions specifically related to the alcohol consumption or saving habits of the visited.

set for each member of the family in the Catholic social project. In turn, this allowed the Vincentians to highlight their contribution to the solution of the social question, as well as to the establishment of a Christian society as an alternative to the current state of affairs, which they believed was riddled with immorality and suffering among the lower classes.

1.2. *Gender and class in the Vincentians' identity construction*

From the viewpoint of the Vincentians and many Catholics, the emergence of Catholic workers' associations and initiatives toward the end of the nineteenth century did not render traditional charity obsolete. This sentiment was reflected in the continually increasing membership of the Society and the Ladies' associations until the outbreak of the First World War.¹⁵³ Despite the increased emphasis on self-emancipation in the Catholic efforts in the social sphere, charity was still considered of central importance to fostering societal harmony. The Vincentians persisted in emphasizing the spiritual and moral significance of their visits to the poor, aligning themselves with the evolving landscape of social Catholicism. According to their perspective, charity served to foster resignation to the will of God among the poor and promote understanding between social classes, contributing to the establishment of social harmony. They argued that the real threat to society lay not in social differences but in jealousy and hatred between classes.¹⁵⁴ The wealthy were urged to acknowledge the 'sovereignty of He who distributes the means' and express retribution through acts of charity.¹⁵⁵ Simultaneously, the poor were called upon to accept the offered assistance and open their hearts to the guidance and instruction of those positioned higher in the social hierarchy. Beginning in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Vincentians incorporated corporatist thought into their perspective. This ideology gained prominence as a Catholic response to the social question, presenting itself as an alternative to both liberal individualism and socialist collectivism. Aligned with the broader medico-moral mission of Catholic elites and authorities, the Vincentians found that their original social and spiritual objectives seamlessly fit within these frameworks. This allowed them to position their work with the poor in service to the broader Catholic social project. In tandem with the expansion of their educational and moral mission, the Vincentians gradually relinquished their commitment to discretion and humility. Instead, they began presenting themselves as experts in the field of social assistance and as role models for both the impoverished and

¹⁵³ Lory and Soete, 'Implantation et Affirmation', 51-54.

¹⁵⁴ See, for example, ODPMBR JV 1900, 5; SVP, *Cinquantenaire des Conférences de Saint Vincent de Paul à Bruges, 1851-1901* (Bruges, 1901), 4-5.

¹⁵⁵ ODPMBR JV 1904, 10.

the affluent.

From the late 1850s onward, the Society underwent a gradual departure from the principle of discretion. Influenced by perceived threats against the Church and religion, intensified by political conflicts between Catholics and liberals, the Vincentians felt compelled to assume a more prominent role in the public sphere. Responding to these challenges, they actively participated in Catholic congresses and aligned themselves more overtly with ultramontanism. This way, they aimed to communicate their ideas to the Catholic bourgeois community and align themselves with the broader Catholic endeavor to influence the country's social and political structures. Identifying as militant knights of Christ and the pope, the Vincentians sought to moralize the masses and solidify their connection to the Church. In contrast, the Ladies, during the period preceding the 1880s, adopted a different stance. While they shared a militant devotion to the Church and God, societal constraints on women's public presence in a deeply patriarchal context meant that they had to carry out their mission in a manner avoiding direct engagement with socio-political issues, centering instead around the virtue of humility. During the late nineteenth century, however, the renewed emphasis on the family in Catholic discourse during the late nineteenth century, coupled with the Vincentians' active involvement in promoting temperate and healthy families in pleasant homes, significantly influenced the construction of their identities as charitable men and women.

These transformations were particularly evident in the discourse of the Ladies, who, quite suddenly, began to underscore their distinctive contribution to the spiritual, moral, and physical upliftment of lower-class families. Prior to the 1880s, the Ladies seldom discussed their identity or role as women in their texts, a trend mirrored by the male clergy directing the associations. While the men of the Society emphasized the value of men's charity from the organization's inception,¹⁵⁶ the Ladies either felt no such need, as they saw themselves within a long tradition of women's charity (with a direct predecessor in the seventeenth-century Charités), or refrained from doing so to maintain humility. Intriguingly, it was the male clergy overseeing the associations, not the Ladies themselves, who initially highlighted the uniqueness of women's charity. In her exploratory study of the Parisian Ladies, Sarah Curtis observed that priests, as early as the mid-nineteenth century, believed that the charitable lady could exert greater influence on the poor than even priests or nuns, who, as professionals, engaged in proselytizing. This influence was attributed to the otherworldly perception of the charitable lady in the eyes of the poor.¹⁵⁷ Similar characterizations of the Ladies emerged

¹⁵⁶ See Chapter 2 of Part I. Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée noted the same for the French Society: Brejon de Lavergnée, 'Making the Charitable Man'.

¹⁵⁷ Curtis, 'Charitable Ladies', 141.

in the texts of Belgian associations from the late nineteenth century onward. According to the clergy directing the Work of the Poor Sick, one reason the Ladies held substantial influence was precisely because of their elevated social class. Canon Vuylsteke, the director of the work in Bruges, conveyed to the Ladies during the 1900 annual assembly that when priests or sisters visited the poor, the latter often failed to recognize the “pure and holy intentions” of these men and women religious. Instead, the poor easily assumed it was simply their job, viewed as an unfortunate sign of the materialist *zeitgeist* by the clergy. When a wealthy Lady visited the poor, however, “they could not but recognize these visible angels as messengers of Godly charity”, and precisely herein lay the apostolic mission of the Ladies.¹⁵⁸

Of course, social difference was an essential element of the charitable visit, and receiving a visit of a member of the high society was believed to honor the poor regardless of the sex of the visitor.¹⁵⁹ The charitable lady stood out, however, was like an ethereal apparition, and functioned as a visual representation of the charitable act. Nineteenth-century images of charitable ladies typically depicted them dressed in beautiful clothing, in great contrast to the poor.¹⁶⁰ In the image below, estimated to originate from the last quarter of the century, the Lady is fully dressed conform the style of the upper classes, while the mother of the family she is visiting is wearing a simple, bland dress that almost fades into the background. The wooden clogs on her feet, prominently visible, her simple, comfortable hairstyle. Unlike the lady, who is standing in an upright, proper, and controlled posture befitting an elite woman, the poor woman is sitting down, leaning on her knee to support her baby. Even the Daughter of Charity, the Lady’s companion during the visit, nearly disappears into the background and plays an assisting role, looking somewhere in the distance while providing a medicine to the sick husband, and not engaging in the exchange taking place between the Lady and the mother of the family, who is positioned in the middle as the focal point of the visit. Notwithstanding the clear social difference between the charitable lady and the poor mother, the latter is not presented in clear need of assistance. As the one who is taking care of the household, she conveys self-composure, strength, and dignity in spite of her obviously challenging position, not even reaching out to the discreet package handed to her by her visitor. The scene is approved of by Saint Vincent de Paul himself, who bestows his blessings and draws attention to the spiritual meaning of the charitable exchange.

¹⁵⁸ ODPMBR JV 1900, 10-11 ; 14. See also ODPMBR JV 1901, 11.

¹⁵⁹ See also: Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*, 552-553.

¹⁶⁰ See also Brejon de Lavergnée, ‘Making the Charitable Man’, 100-101.



The Daughters and the Ladies of Charity visiting the poor and sick, late nineteenth century

As active contributors to the Catholic societal vision, mothers were tasked with safeguarding the spiritual and moral well-being of their husbands and children, attending to their physical needs, and managing the family's finances. The 'angel of the slum' fulfilled these roles and more, being an example not only to her husband and children but extending her maternal guidance to the families under her care.¹⁶¹ The reports of the Work of the Poor Sick, which were composed and read by the clergy, regularly drew attention to women's contribution to combatting social issues among the lower classes and fostering healthy, pious homes. In 1889, for example, bishop Waffelaert emphasized that as women, the Ladies of Bruges were more likely to gain the trust of the mother and the children, which put them in a strategic position to improve the moral and physical condition of the household. Given the Catholic social project's emphasis on the family and the central role of the mother, the clergy highly valued the Ladies' contributions. The bishop even described them as more adept than their male counterparts to 'probe these wounds [the lack of order in the woman and intemperance in the man] and apply effective remedies to them', precisely because of the exemplary role she was able to provide to the mothers.¹⁶² Appraisal of the Ladies' particular talents as charitable *women* such as these were rare in these reports, however, which continued to stress humility above all traits throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In this regard, it is interesting to compare the yearly reports of the Work of the Poor Sick with those of the Antwerp Ladies, established in 1899. Unlike the Ladies of Ghent and Bruges, which operated within the Work of the Poor Sick and whose reports were written and read by the clergy in the direction of this joint work, the Ladies of Antwerp were directed exclusively by women, who wrote and read their own reports.

The Antwerp Ladies considered their womanhood an essential aspect of their identity and work from the outset. The first edition of their manual opened with a reference to the sentence 'where there is no woman, man will wander mourning' from the book of Sirach (36:27), which they translated to 'where there is no woman, the poor and destitute will moan'. According to the manual, the fragment meant that 'without the pious woman, the poor man was not capable of creating a hearth where he could unwind and reflect'.¹⁶³ On the one hand, this referred to the role of the devout mother at the hearth, specifically applied to poor families. In another sense, the manual said, the fragment was also applicable to the relations between classes, implying that the poor required guidance from the rich woman. Thus, the greater the wealth of a woman, the

¹⁶¹ DLSVPBr JV 1879, 5-6; MSVP November – December 1887, 182.

¹⁶² ODPMBR JV 1898, 31-32.

¹⁶³ Association des Dames de la Charité de St-Vincent de Paul à Anvers: Avant-Propos, *Règlement, Prières...* (Antwerp, s.d.), 3. The interpretations of the fragment offered in the manual were disputable, but by referring to this wisdom book, the Ladies symbolically traced back the awareness of the value of women in relation to the poor to pre-Christian times.

greater her responsibility towards the needy. Or, as the manual put it, ‘the apologetic and social role of women grew proportional to her influence’, and ‘the development of a true category of *femmes d’oeuvres* attested to this’.¹⁶⁴ In general, the essence of the female apostolate was to ‘bring together hearts’, and it was up to women from the higher social classes to take the first steps in the direction of class reconciliation. Moreover, women were more suitable for the work of poor visits because, aside from material alms, they also had the ‘gift of their personality, intelligence and heart’ to offer.¹⁶⁵ For them, this charitable act was not only a means for self-sanctification and a way to develop their spirit of faith, humility and serenity, all coveted characteristics in women, but also to contribute to the solution of social issues in society.

As such, the Antwerp Ladies echoed the virtues assigned to charitable ladies by the clergy, but more strongly emphasized the dimension of social utility by inscribing their work in the Catholic social project. When describing their members as angels, which they rarely did, they did not echo the angel-type of the clergy which relied heavily on appearance, but rather referred to them visiting Lady as a ‘liberating angel sent by the Providence’ who spent all day in the areas where the workers lived, looking for poor whom they could help, uncovering hidden misery, and saving families at risk of ‘sinking into despair or dying of hunger’.¹⁶⁶ The Ladies were eager to highlight their social utility, religious influence, and their militant and energetic attitude. Proudly, they declared that ‘We are the militant members of the militant Church; the obligations of this militia are universal and sacred; they constitute the *Catholic* life, and, lastly, life, it is action [original emphasis]’.¹⁶⁷ This dedication to action remained central to the Ladies’ work and identity. They regretted that among upper-class women, physical work had become synonymous to menial labor, irreconcilable with these women’s pride, sensuality, and laziness. The Lady of Charity, on the other hand, understood not only the importance of physical work in the household and of giving a good example to the housemothers they tried to uplift, but also the intrinsic religious value of physical work when the spirit and heart were applied while working. The Vincentian organizations had been originally established in the spirit of an action-oriented lay apostolate, and throughout the nineteenth century, the Ladies stayed true to the practice of piety through social action. In their opinion, work and action, with a foundation of religious values, remained the best strategy to combat social ills. On the one hand, this referred to the Ladies’ pious charitable mission, but on the other, it was relevant for the poor under their care as well:

¹⁶⁴ Association des Dames de la Charité de St-Vincent de Paul à Anvers: Avant-Propos, *Règlement, Prières...* (Antwerp, s.d.), 5-6. See also: DLSVPA JV 1908, 32.

¹⁶⁵ Association des Dames de la Charité de St-Vincent de Paul à Anvers: Avant-Propos, *Règlement, Prières...* (Antwerp, s.d.), 26.

¹⁶⁶ DLSVPA JV 1909, 9.

¹⁶⁷ DLSVPB JV 1902, 4.

mothers had to be taught the value of caring for their families and fathers needed to rediscover the honor and satisfaction to be found in their work.¹⁶⁸

This explicit preoccupation with the men of the poor families was a fairly new element in the Ladies' charitable work. Before, the Ladies also regularly came into contact with poor men, for example through their efforts to regularize marriages and accomplish conversions or when taking care of the sick and the elderly, but their primary mission had always been towards women and girls. This sentiment was also expressed by the men discussing the association of Ladies of Charity at the 1892 General Assembly of Catholics in Malines, during which the speakers described the Ladies and the Society as complementary because the latter adopted only families with 'chefs' (read: fathers), and the Ladies adopted only families headed by widows or ladies.¹⁶⁹ However, nowhere in their rulebooks was it stated that they should refrain from helping men, and the Ladies' yearly reports show that they did in fact deal with men throughout the nineteenth century. Around the turn of the century, the various associations of Ladies, including those directed by the clergy, began to draw attention to the specific issues, like alcohol abuse and a lack of saving mentality, that plagued poor men and the contribution charitable women could make in combatting those.¹⁷⁰ They were also very concerned about the number of men adhering to socialism and the effects this had on the stability and happiness of their families. According to the Ladies, socialism was the agitator of the people that led men to stray from their families, from their work, and from God. Therefore, the Ladies advised the visitors to not limit their scope to women and children when they observed that the father brought sin into the family, but to also speak of God with him and address his false beliefs face to face. They noted that even though the Ladies were less inclined to occupy themselves with these men than the Society's visitors, they were just as capable to guide men back to the Catholic faith, to inform them about Catholic social organizations and retreats, and to stimulate temperance among them.¹⁷¹

In general, the attitude of the Ladies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century seems to have been one of increased confidence and visibility, centered around a clear expression of the organizations' social utility and religious influence. This way, they increasingly emphasized their contribution to the Catholic social project through their work with lower-class families, which, in turn, they felt was adequately underpinned by contemporary scientific insights (e.g. in the field of hygiene and medicine), by widespread beliefs about the utility of promoting order, frugality, and

¹⁶⁸ DLSVPA JV 1908, 35-37.

¹⁶⁹ Paul Ryckmans ed., *Assemblée Générale des Catholiques en Belgique. Session de 1891, Tôme I: Assemblées Générales* (Malines, 1892), 627-629.

¹⁷⁰ ODPMBr JV 1901, 18.

¹⁷¹ DLSVPB JV 1902, 8-11; 1913, 18; 30

cleanliness to increase the quality of life among the lower classes, as well as by a strong Christian morality that was considered the basis of societal harmony by social Catholics. From this followed that the Ladies considered it logical that they would direct their efforts to not only women and girls, but to the family as a whole. As such, the Ladies claimed an increasingly larger role in society, and, in line with this assertiveness, they began to stress the uniqueness of their contribution to a much larger extent than before, going so far as to compare the quality of women's charity to that of men. Similar to what the male clergy supervising the Work of the Poor sick expressed, namely that charitable women were more capable to dissect and remedy moral wounds among the poor than charitable men, the Ladies believed that as women, they were better suited to uncover what troubled the souls of the poor and to inspire them towards patience and resignation. Women, they thought, were more attentive, more understanding, and more apt at consoling the poor.¹⁷² The 'superiority of the feminine method' was centered around women's power of 'softness, delicacy, and especially patience', which allowed them to succeed even in turning indifferent and hostile men into pious and practicing Christians.¹⁷³ Because women were 'more soft, more compassionate, more tactful, and more loving than men', as well as 'more religious', they were gifted for works of charity or education and excellent auxiliaries of the Church in the reconquest of souls. Saint Vincent de Paul knew this, and it was for these reasons that he created the *Charités* for women.¹⁷⁴

From their end, the men of the Society refrained from making such comparisons between themselves and charitable women. Overall, the men of the Society rarely mentioned the Ladies of Charity specifically, although they did praise charitable women in general for not chasing vanities and riches – like other women of the upper classes – but instead fulfilling their charitable mission. Citing bishop Doutreloux in the Society's monthly bulletin, these charitable women were described as soft and subservient when giving out alms and as able to incite gratitude among the poor, to the great happiness of her husband, children, and everyone else.¹⁷⁵ However useful lay women's charitable contribution, the Society did not repeat the 'angel of the slums' trope professed by the clergy. Instead, the Society reserved the term angel for the Daughters of Charity, for the priests, and for themselves. The Daughters, for starters, were, in the eyes of the Society; 'angels on earth' who 'live in the presence of God' and were entirely devoted to the care of the needy. The Society's conferences regularly made use of the Daughters' services, for example when encountering sick in the in the families under their care who were

¹⁷² DLSVPA JV 1906, 11.

¹⁷³ DLSVPA JV 1913, 18.

¹⁷⁴ DLSVPA JV 1913, 30-31.

¹⁷⁵ MSVP November – December 1887, 182.

unable to go to a hospital and required care at home, or who were close to dying and needed their last days to be filled with prayer.¹⁷⁶ The Ladies, too, considered the Daughters as ‘guardian angels of the poor’ whose efforts were of great value to the association and to the poor themselves, not only with regards to caring for the sick, but also because of their moral influence on the poor, for example when needing to convince the families to attend Mass.¹⁷⁷ In addition to these women religious, the Society regularly referred to men religious as angels. Priests, in the eyes of the Society, were guardian angels to not just the poor, but to the entire Christian community. They were the leaders of the parishes who ‘keep us on the path of Christian love’.¹⁷⁸ When performing their charitable work with great piety and compassion, the men of the Society also merited the angel label, as they themselves believed. On several occasions during the 1880s, the monthly magazine of the Society described the visiting members as ‘comforting’ or ‘guardian angels’ to the poor. Thanks to them, the poor were able to anoint their suffering hearts and reconcile them again with their lives and society, all the while bringing them were brought back to the Christian faith.¹⁷⁹

The Society and the Ladies’ particular use of the angel trope deserves some more attention. In historical research, attention has mostly gone to the association between the angel and the housemother and, to a lesser extent, men and women religious.¹⁸⁰ That the angel motif was also used for lay charitable men and women, is less known, but sheds more light on the Vincentian’s identity construction. The characterization of priests and nuns as angel types, for starters, was not new and not uncommon, although it has more often been observed with respect to women religious in historical research.¹⁸¹ Because

¹⁷⁶ MSVP May – June 1889, 92.

¹⁷⁷ DLSVPB JV 1897, 8; ODPMBR 1897, 15.

¹⁷⁸ MSVP November 1880, 171; March 1887, 59; SVP, *Les Noces d’Or de la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul en Belgique* (Brussels, 1893), 54; SVP, *Instruction sur les Devoirs des Présidents dans la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul* (Paris, 1899), 42.

¹⁷⁹ MSVP February 1880, 21; March 1882, 38; January 1884, 205.

¹⁸⁰ On the angel at the hearth, see for example: Della Sudda, ‘From the Angel of the Household’; Marissal, *Moeders en Vaders*; Van Osselaer, ‘Religion, Family and Domesticity’.

¹⁸¹ The gender perspective in historical research has more often been applied for research into women religious than men religious, which could explain why the association between women religious and angels is more known (on women religious, see for example: Schneider, ‘The Catholic Poor Relief Discourse’; Malchau, ‘Angels in Nursing’; Suenens, *Humble Women, Powerful Nuns*). However, Tine Van Osselaer also noted the use of the angel motif to describe priests (Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, diss., 43). Taking a superficial look at sources not produced by the Vincentians, the general comparison between priests and angels appears for example at the Malines congress of Catholics in 1867 (Victor Devaux ed., *Assemblée Générale des Catholiques en Belgique. Troisième Session de 1867* (Brussels, 1868), 215), or, to celebrate the character of one particular priest, in Lodewijk Mercelis, *De Priester, Engel Onzer Dorpen. Gedicht ter Gelegenheid van het Zilveren Jubelfeest van den Zeer Eerweerden Heer J. Smulders, Vijf-en-Twintig Jaren*

these men and women took vows of celibacy and poverty, and because of their great dedication to spiritual contemplation and practice, they were thought to stand closer to God. As guardian angels of the people, their task was to watch over them, take care of them, help them in prayer, and in general bring them closer to God as well. As such, when used in reference to men and women religious, the angel motif referenced a certain transcendence of the body, as well as a spiritually guiding role. Before the late nineteenth century, the Vincentians exclusively referred to men and women religious when speaking of angels (in addition to actual biblical angels, of course). The Society's manuals, for example, explicitly stated that its members should consider priests as angels that guided them in Christian life from the beginning.¹⁸² Presumably, this was also a way for the independent Society to acknowledge the spiritual authority of the parish priests, with whom their relationships were ameliorating during the late nineteenth century.¹⁸³

By the late nineteenth century, the angel type was expanded to include lay people as well, in particular the angel at the hearth. This way, the Christian housewife was elevated in rank and bestowed with a spiritual mission reminiscent to that of the men and women religious, albeit limited to her direct environment. That the Church assigned such an important role to the housewife should be understood in the context of the Catholic social project, in which the family functioned as the smallest entity of the social organism and the mother therefore allocated an important civic responsibility via her family.¹⁸⁴ This ideal of feminine domesticity, although not very progressive by today's standards, created room for a more positive reconceptualization of women and their function in society. As such, the Catholic appreciation of women as angels at the hearth provided them with a vehicle for social agency that functioned as an alternative to liberal (or secular) and socialist women's movements, in a time when women did not enjoy complete citizenship and could not participate freely in the public sphere.¹⁸⁵

Remarkably, while the Vincentians echoed this exaltation of the Christian mother in their work with the poor, they did not refer to her as an angel at the hearth. Instead, they reserved the term angel for the Daughters of Love and, in the case of the Society, the priests, as well as for themselves. As such, the Vincentians appropriated the angel type to emphasize their own spiritual value and role in the Catholic social project, even though the 'charitable angel' was not a common trope outside of these organizations.

Pastoor te Wechelderzande (1865-1890) (Brussels, 1890). This topic nevertheless requires (and deserves) further research.

¹⁸² SVP, *Handboek van het Genootschap van den Heiligen Vincentius a Paulo* (Brussels, 1855), 215. This point was regularly repeated in the Society's sources of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

¹⁸³ De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate', 189.

¹⁸⁴ Van Osselaer, 'Religion, Family and Domesticity'; Della Sudda, 'From the Angel of the Household', 144; 149-150.

¹⁸⁵ Suenens, *Humble Women, Powerful Nuns*, 50-53.

Thus, their selective use of the angel trope reflected the difference they maintained between themselves and those they visited. Not the poor were the angels, but the charitable visitors (and the nuns and priests) who guided and protected them. Moreover, the readiness with which the men of the Society referred to themselves as angels, clearly shows that the angel type was not exclusively reserved for women and ‘genderless creatures’,¹⁸⁶ but that Catholic men could equally present themselves as angels as a way of highlighting their compassion, piety, and zealotry.¹⁸⁷ That the men of the Society called themselves angels, does therefore not have to be interpreted as an assimilation of Catholic femininity. Instead, the men of the Society were committed to cultivating personal traits that were an extension of their religious identity, and their gender identity was inherently entwined with this ideal.

Indeed, the men of the Society were not interested in following the example of the philanthropic man, who presented philanthropy as the incarnation of rational masculinity as opposed to feminine, emotional charity. In the eyes of the Society, the difference between philanthropy and charity had nothing to do with the opposition between rationality and emotionality, but with the relationship between the act of giving and the love for God. This love, they believed, was not present in the impersonal, humanist philanthropic gift, which deprived the act of giving from its spiritual potential and prohibited the philanthrope from practicing true empathy vis-à-vis the poor and from working on personal improvement through this work.¹⁸⁸ Therefore, practicing charity entailed religious self-development from the side of the Vincentian, and modesty, humility, love, and piety were required regardless of the sex of the visitor. As Brejon de Lavergnée notes, ‘to be a Catholic man was to be a charitable man’.¹⁸⁹

At the same time, the spiritual purpose of the visit was inextricably connected to its value in combatting social misery, and the Vincentians were eager to underscore their expertise with regards to social issues and their solutions. The drawings made by Franz Gailliard in the 1892 edition of the *Patriote Illustrée*, dedicated to the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Society in Brussels, captured this self-conceptualization well.

¹⁸⁶ Schneider, ‘The Catholic Poor Relief Discourse’, 44; 54.

¹⁸⁷ Incidentally, that the Vincentian men and women referred to themselves as angels, but not to each other, seems to indicate a certain level of competitiveness between them, also exemplified by their continued hesitancy towards working together, even though by then it had become entirely accepted for the Society to have other charitable women assist in their work. There were exceptions, however, like the *Œuvre des Forains* (the Work of the Fair People), in which the Ladies, the men of the Society, and the Daughters worked together. See: ODPMBR 1877, 11-12; 1879, 17-18; 1897, 26-27.

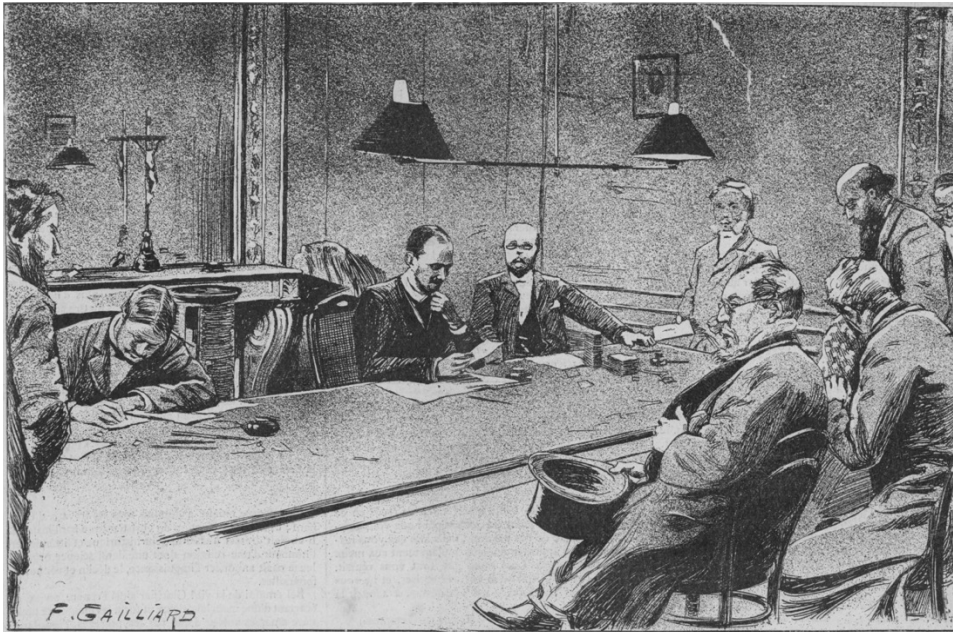
¹⁸⁸ MSVP February 1880, 21; December 1881, 184-185; SVP, *Les Nocés d’Or de la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul en Belgique* (Brussels, 1893), 36; 42; SVP, *Les Nocés d’Or de la Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul en Belgique* (Ghent, 1895), 17; SVPG JV 1899, 13; SVP, *Le Cinquantenaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul à Bruges* (Bruges, 1901), 53; SVPG JV 1906, 9-10; SVPHRB JV 1912, 20

¹⁸⁹ Brejon de Lavergnée, ‘Making the Charitable Man’, 103.

The first image presented two members engaged in a discussion amidst a sea of books. The drawing suggests that the Vincentians used the library as a place of work – hence also the coat hanging behind the door and the books laying on the table in the foreground. The second drawing shows a weekly meeting of the members, during which they discussed the needs of each of the poor families under the care of the conference and prepared the tickets for food and other goods to be distributed among them. The drawing conveys the tediousness of this process, its boringness even (especially the gentleman in the front seems ready to go home). These images draw attention to the work that went into the preparations of the poor visit, and to the intelligence and the seriousness of the Vincentians when doing this task. These drawings were followed by the before and after pictures of the poor interior discussed in the previous subchapter, to show the ingenuity and effectiveness of their work. Indeed, like the Ladies, the members of the Society sought to inscribe themselves in the broader Catholic social project, and to this end cultivated an image of its members as knowledgeable men, both in terms of religious teachings and the latest scientific insights, who served as an example to both the poor in their care and other wealthy men. Therefore, in tandem with the increasing importance of the Catholic medico-moral mission towards the lower classes, the Society continuously stressed that it was vital that its members internalized the qualities they tried to instill in the poor, like sobriety, frugality, and devotion. This way, they also answered to the ideas promoted by the Liège congress of 1886 (in which many members took part in individual title), where the resolutions were made that the Catholics of the leading classes should forego luxury as much as possible and participate in the Vincentian works as well as the various medico-social works.¹⁹⁰

Thus, it appears that the Vincentians search for social utility and relevance at the end of the nineteenth century resulted in a partial convergence of Catholic gender roles in the ideal of the elite charitable person as a social example. The Ladies put significantly more emphasis on the rationality and the scientific basis of their charitable action, actively underscored the importance of their influential position in society as wealthy women, and explicitly expanded their field of action to include poor men as well. As such, the virtues of humility and modesty somewhat took a backseat, while ‘masculine’ characteristics like rationality were emphasized more strongly, in addition to the ‘feminine’ qualities of patience, softness, and piety. Also, the expansion of the Ladies’ field of activity and their alignment with the Catholic social project can be interpreted as a way to take up a more prominent role in the male-dominated public sphere. The men of the Society, while also stressing their receptiveness to new ideas about the structural causes and solutions of poverty, keenly drew attention to their compassionate, loving,

¹⁹⁰ Union Nationale pour le Redressement des Griefs, *Congrès des Œuvres Sociales à Liège. Deuxième Session – 4-7 Septembre 1887* (Liège, 1887), esp. 174-184.



LA SALLE DE RÉUNION
Au local de la rue des Longs-Chariots

(Voyez texte p. 574.)

The members of the Brussels' Society in their library and meeting room, 1892

and pious disposition to differentiate their work from that of philanthropists and the public sources of social assistance. This way, they assimilated virtues and characteristics associated with Catholic femininity to accentuate their contribution to poor relief as well as their personal, religious self-development. At the same time, the ideal of Catholic masculinity professed by the Society also referenced men's responsibility in both the domestic and public sphere. Like all heads of the ideal Christian family, the Vincentian man ought to fulfil his fatherly duties with great care, and this meant that he should make sure that his wife and children fulfilled their religious duties, that he should occupy himself with the education of his children (in particular as they got older) and maintain authority within the household. As a Catholic man of the elites, he also had a mission towards his wider environment, which included the poor, his neighbors, his parish, and the other members of his conference, whom he should protect from the enemies of the faith and bad habits, and among whom he should spread love and encourage morality as well as spirituality.¹⁹¹

These observations corroborate recent findings in historical research on Catholic gender roles, which posit that religious devotion was experienced and expressed in many different ways, and various religious masculinities and femininities existed at the same time across different contexts. Especially in the context of Catholic gender roles, it is often difficult and even unproductive to make clear-cut distinctions between masculinities and femininities, as religious virtues were often not considered gender-specific, even though some virtues were thought to be of particular importance to one or the other sex.¹⁹² As such, the observation that Catholic masculinities often exalted characteristics that are associated with feminine gender roles, such as humility, compassion, and domesticity, does not need to lead to the conclusion that during the nineteenth century a feminization of piety took place, as some historians have argued.¹⁹³ Instead, Catholic gender roles were relative, malleable, and challengeable, and in the context of Vincentian charity, they were defined only in function of the spiritual and social purpose of the organizations. This way, by the end of the nineteenth century, Catholic charitable women were able to assume traits that could be considered masculine, in particular rationality and social leadership, which in turn allowed them to expand their field of action and social agency. As such, both the Vincentian men and women tried to cultivate their societal roles as promoters of the Catholic social project,

¹⁹¹ MSVP July 1884, 315; June 1887, 102-104. See also: Brejon de Lavergnée, 'Making the Charitable Man'; Schneider, 'Masculinity, Religiousness and the Domestic Sphere'.

¹⁹² Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*; Werner ed., *Christian Masculinity*; Jan De Maeyer et.al. eds., *Gender and Christianity in Modern Europe*; Suenens, *Humble Women, Powerful Nuns*; Pasture, 'Beyond the Feminization Thesis'.

¹⁹³ More thorough discussions of the feminization thesis(es) can be found in Suenens, *Humble Women, Powerful Nuns*; Pasture, 'Beyond the Feminization Thesis'; De Maeyer, Van Molle, Van Osselaer and Viaene eds., *Gender and Christianity in Modern Europe*; King, *Religion and Gender*; Bréjon de Lavergnée and Della Sudda, 'Une Histoire sans Genre'; Werner, 'Religious Feminisation'.

which in the first place required them to develop and propagate their religiosity as well as their sense of sense of social duty, regardless of their sex. In this respect, the Vincentian's societal role as pious members of the elite was of central importance, serving as the source of their social obligation to care for those less fortunate, their leadership role vis-à-vis the lower classes, and their commitment to establishing a harmonious community.

Conclusion

*Our modern charity, our Catholic charity above all, is impregnated by the spirit of the times.*¹⁹⁴

During the period from 1880 to the First World War, the Vincentians witnessed a significant intensification of the socio-political debate surrounding the social question, in which the opinions of the participants in the discussions drifted further apart. The bitter School War of the first half of the 1880s had, as never before, opened the door to the involvement of the people in political issues, and stimulated the creation of a genuine Catholic party with a democratic program. In the years that followed, the social question increasingly dominated the political agenda and became the subject of a conflict between defenders of very different visions of the future of society. Especially after the introduction of universal male suffrage in 1893 and the entry of the socialists into the parliament, the battle intensified. Within the Catholic camp itself, differences of opinion also resurfaced. The ultramontanes, who assumed a somewhat more pragmatic attitude in their approach to suffrage and liberal democracy in general during this period, came under pressure from an eclectic yet strong Christian democratic movement, which soon asserted itself within the new party. The Christian democrats strongly relied on pope Leo XIII's famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, but the more conservatively inclined Catholics, including the Vincentians, did not hesitate to interpret the encyclical to their own advantage either.

In practice, the uproar surrounding the social issue and the papal endorsement of a more emancipatory approach to the lower classes resulted in an explosion of new social organizations, many of which were inspired by socialist initiatives. Within the Catholic world, this social action was underpinned by a corporatist ideology, which posited the development of a Christian, harmonious class-based society as an ideological alternative to socialist collectivism and liberal individualism. The Vincentians also embraced these corporatist principles, which they deemed perfectly in line with the goals they had been striving for since the inception of their organizations. Not only did the Vincentians believe that the new Catholic social project was by no means incompatible with traditional charity, but they were also convinced that charity should continue to be a part of the Catholic solution to the social question. As such, the Vincentians systematically worked to establish a network of mutual aid societies, which they integrated into their

¹⁹⁴ DLSVPB JV 1887, 5.

charitable work through home visits and patronages. In terms of content, the Vincentians increasingly directed their moral alms toward promoting self-reliance, temperance, orderliness, and hygiene – virtues they considered crucial for the advancement of the lower classes. In this way, they aimed to combine a preventive and curative approach.

Despite the introduction of such innovations in Vincentian work (or at least their systematic implementation in the conferences, as prevention was not new to the organization), the period of Pope Leo XIII's pontificate was also one of uncertainty within the organizations. Within the Society, internal contradictions arose, personified by the conflict between Joseph de Hemptinne and Arthur Verhaegen. According to Verhaegen, the Society did not go far enough in assimilating the message of *Rerum Novarum*, which led him, as an ultramontane, to increasingly align with the Christian democratic camp. However, his opponents believed that he went too far in copying the socialists and advocated a more conservative interpretation of the Pope's message. When analyzing the spirituality of the Society during this period, Church historian Jan De Maeyer explained that the Society was unsure how to deal with the 'troubling' double message of Leo XIII, who, on one hand, called for moral instruction and preaching in the battle against freemasonry and socialism, and on the other hand, emphasized the need for social action using the instruments of the socialists against them. This, he continued, presented the Society with a choice between the 'modernization of social action' and the 'more religious, moral, and educational approach'. According to De Maeyer, the conservative voices who preferred the latter approach won the argument within the Society, which, in his opinion, meant that the Vincentians rejected the option of modernizing their work. The fact that the conservative Vincentians also refused to have the organization participate in the congresses of Liège, moreover, was interpreted by De Maeyer as an extremely defensive action. After the turn of the century, the Vincentians would have felt emboldened by the strong emphasis that Pius X placed on apologetics and antimodernism during his pontificate, which would have resulted in them secluding themselves even more than before in a cocoon of self-affirmation and self-satisfaction.¹⁹⁵

Having arrived at this conclusion of Part II, the reader will hopefully not be surprised that there are some nuancing remarks to be made regarding this dichotomous analysis of Vincentian ideas and practices in the period from 1880 until the First World War. Firstly, the message of *Rerum Novarum* was not necessarily as paradoxical to contemporaries as suggested by De Maeyer. The fact that it was possible for different Catholic factions to appropriate its content indicates that the various aspects of Leo's message were indeed reconcilable. In fact, the distinction between the Ultramontanes and Christian democrats was often not as substantial as portrayed. Daens was more of an outlier than a representative of the entire Christian democratic movement. Verhaegen, whose fusion

¹⁹⁵ De Maeyer, 'In Amore et Fraternitate', 190-194.

of ultramontane and Christian democratic ideals was more representative for the Catholic opinion, continued to advocate cooperation between labor and capital despite his enthusiasm for emancipatory social organizations, viewing the control of the emancipatory-democratic movement primarily as a means to keep the people loyal to the Catholic party. The discord that occurred within the Society was therefore more about form than about content; the sore point was mainly that the conservatives within the organization wanted to maintain its fundamentally apolitical character. The increasingly close relationship between the Catholic party and Catholic social organizations (which was promoted by Verhaegen) and the obligation of the latter to bind workers electorally to the former thus obstructed direct involvement of the Society. Nevertheless, the Vincentians were also becoming less hesitant to conveying a political message during their charitable work. Even if it was only about discouraging socialism, the implicit endorsement of the Catholic party was quite apparent.

In fact, in part thanks to the further development of corporatist philosophies, a socially conservative vision proved not to be incompatible with 'progressive' forms of action. Thus, it was not a problem for the Vincentians to not only encourage the integration of the poor into various Catholic social organizations, but also to create works themselves inspired by socialist examples, such as savings banks and cooperatives. The moralizing message they conveyed through their home visits, patronages, and social works increasingly focused on prevention and emancipation, primarily through the promotion of the family and traditional familial roles, as well as the teaching and encouragement of temperance. These were, of course, very socially traditional interpretations of the concepts of prevention and emancipation, but the Vincentians were far from alone in holding these views. The same themes also figured prominently in the rest of the (political) Catholic world and could even be found among liberals. Indeed, the great emphasis on the social issue, which had largely been prompted by the growing fear of socialism, translated into a patronizing attitude of the elite toward the lower classes, who had to be educated before they could be trusted as voters.

The fact that the Society did not participate in the Liège congresses, despite Verhaegen's insistence, seems to have been primarily motivated by the desire to remain loyal to the organization's identity. There was simply no pressing *need* for the Vincentians to completely reconsider their methods. They remained focused on self-sanctification and the moralization of the poor, and their ever-increasing membership and conference numbers indicated that they maintained relevance in the Belgian Catholic world. As far as the Vincentians were concerned, Pius X's message only affirmed that they had done the right thing in preserving the original character of their organizations. In my opinion, during this period, despite some uncertainty caused by major societal changes, the Vincentians' position was not unambiguously defensive. In the Catholic world, it was far from a widespread idea that traditional charity was incompatible with

the modern society or a socially engaged Catholicism, on the contrary. It was a time of great debate and conflict, but also of optimism about the possibilities for social engagement in modern society, including for the Vincentians. Only in the interwar period would this situation change more fundamentally, as we will see in Part III.

PART III

**Between hope and despair:
Return to the essence of Vincentian work
(1920-1945)**



Chapter I

Charitable spirituality in the face of ideological turmoil

The end of the First World War heralded a time of profound societal transformation. While continuities were manifold, the interbellum was characterized by unprecedented massification, democratization, and social progress, but also of mass unemployment, violent political conflict, and the threat of dictatorship. After the war, the thirty-year rule of the Catholics came to an end. Instead, the parties would from then on govern the country through coalitions. But while this introduced a larger degree of compromise to politics, it also confronted the parties with a lack of efficiency and the difficulty of maintaining a clear program. In Belgium, like in many other parts of Europe, processes of democratization and increased critique of the democratic political system were two sides of the same coin. In many ways, the interbellum was a time during which the old, bourgeois ideals of the nineteenth century came face to face with the young, twentieth-century search for renewal and rebirth.¹ This chapter examines how the Vincentian organizations, by now on their way to their centennial anniversary, navigated these sociopolitical and cultural transformations, veering between renewal and conservation, and between the appropriation and rejection of modernity.

The first subchapter begins with the Vincentian's response to the organization's predicament immediately after the war, when they were confronted with diminished membership numbers and means. At the same time, the Vincentians had to adapt to a significantly altered social context, characterized by the fast expansion of social legislation and the introduction of single male suffrage. The 1920s were a period during which the working class enjoyed an improvement of their social protection, purchasing power, and general quality of life. This meant that the Vincentians had to develop a new relationship with what had always been the main target audience of their charitable work. This proved especially difficult for the Society because the organization had to come to terms with internal criticism in addition to a socio-religious organizational field and a mixed economy of welfare that left increasingly less room for charity. In the second subchapter, which begins with the Wall Street Crash of 1929, the optimism of the roaring twenties gave way to a deep recession. This allowed the Vincentians to reaffirm their

¹ Gerard, *In de Schaduw van het Interbellum*, 9-10.

social value, but, with the future survival in mind, they continued to try and innovate their charitable methods, for example by introducing social services for workers, and sought to rejuvenate their ranks. The latter goal was of particular importance to the men of the Society, who observed with a sense of jealousy and disappointment how the Catholic, socially engaged youth preferred Catholic Action over charity. In spite of the difficulties the Society and the Ladies were confronted with, or precisely because of these challenges, the organizations actively tried to create a role for themselves in the Catholic battle for modernity and continued to advance the virtue of charity as an essential building block of a just future.

1.1. Are there no more poor?

Despite all their efforts to continue their work to the extent possible and to prevent their local conferences from dying out (both literally and figuratively), the war had dealt a heavy blow to the Vincentian organizations. When the war was over, the restoration efforts of the Vincentians would have to take place in a profoundly altered context. After returning to Belgium, the government wished to maintain its composition of ‘sacred union’. In addition, under pressure of the socialists, it decided to introduce universal single male suffrage (established in 1919) and to work on social reforms as soon as the war was over. This change in Belgium’s electoral system meant that the Catholics could no longer profit from the extra votes given to the elites of the country in the plural voting system, and that the time of homogenous governments was over, even though they remained in government until 1945. The three main parties would from now on govern through coalition and compromise. This way, the workers were both rewarded for their loyalty to their country during the war and kept under control, in spite of the resistance from many conservative Catholic politicians. The Catholics could nevertheless benefit from the introduction of women’s suffrage on the level of the city councils (not parliament) because women tended to vote Catholic.²

In the years that followed, the unionist governments carried out the foreseen social reforms, issuing legislation to safeguard the eight-hour workday and the 48-hour week, to make old age pensions mandatory, to provide child benefits, and to abolish the last restrictions on the right to strike. In addition, the governments provided more subsidies to the mutual insurance organizations, made efforts to increase public health, and made

² Tihon, ‘La Belgique’, 541; Emiel Lamberts, ‘België sinds 1830’, 290-291; Conway, ‘Building the Christian City’, 119-120; Gerard, ‘De Democratie Gedroomd’. For a detailed overview of the political discussions within the government in exile and the path towards the introduction of the new electoral system, see Gerard, ‘De Democratie Gedroomd’, 883-902; 936.

primary education free and obligatory.³ In the meantime, to expand its popular basis, the Catholic party opened its ranks to workers, farmer, and petty bourgeoisie. In 1921, the Catholics and liberals were able to push the socialists out of the government and, aside from a brief intermezzo in 1925, keep them in the opposition until 1935.⁴ Despite continuing differences of opinion on its precise contents and extent, the after-war years and the 1920's were marked by a general consensus on the benefit of social reform and the idea that such reform was necessary to reward and aid the population, which had suffered greatly. The measures taken in this regard also helped to protect the population from the effects of the economic downturn that set in during the war and that lasted until the second part of the 1920s. When the economy recovered, wages, purchasing power, and the general standard of living increased noticeably.⁵

Typically Belgian, the system of social security that developed through these reforms left much room to the social organizations that had developed in the decades before, reinforcing the ideological division in the social sphere. Catholic, socialist, and liberal syndicates, corporations, mutual insurance organizations, and so on, were centralized and rationalized in their own 'pillars', each receiving support from the state. This way, the population could choose, or was forced to choose, a network of social support organizations on the basis of ideological or religious motivations. Because of this, political polarization in the social sphere continued and deepened further. In addition, the war had laid bare a linguistic-cultural divide in Belgian society that had been brewing since the country's independence, and which was forcefully brought to the fore by the German occupier's *Flamenpolitik* and the issue of language in the Belgian army. In the years to come, the Flemish question would become an unavoidable subject on the Belgian political agenda, constituting a topic of contention both between and within the traditional parties.⁶

All in all, during the interbellum, the focus in Belgian politics shifted away from the opposition between clericals and anti-clericals, to be replaced by a growing conflict between conservatives and democrats. The former '*bloc bourgeois*' was made up out of conservative Catholics and liberals who shared an antisocialist sentiment, a conservative social view, and a francophone-patriotic stance. The democratic force was represented by the socialists, the Christian democrats and the Catholic flamingants. As such, the opposition between conservatives and democrats within the Catholic political sphere

³ Gerard, 'De Democratie Gedroomd', 934-935.

⁴ Emiel Lamberts, 'België sinds 1830', 294; Dhaene and Wynants, 'Achteruitgang en Crisis', 89; van Velthoven, "Amis Ennemis?", 30.

⁵ Emiel Lamberts, 'België sinds 1830', 288-289; Gerard, 'De Democratie Gedroomd', 959-960.

⁶ Tihon, 'La Belgique', 538-539; Dumoulin, 'Het Ontluiken van de Twintigste Eeuw', 822-826. For a detailed overview of the development of the Flemish Question immediately after the war, see Gerard, 'De Democratie Gedroomd', 902-933.

became more apparent, even though the episcopate made substantial efforts to maintain a sense of unity among them. Conversely, the cohesion between the two ideologically diverse blocs of conservatives and democrats should not be overstated either, as their opinions differed on many accounts.⁷

In Catholic circles, many felt frustrated at the feeling of being pushed into a defensive position in a sociopolitical context that seemed to drift further and further away from Catholic morals and values.⁸ This frustration was not limited to the Belgian Catholics, but was echoed in Rome, too, where the popes continued to argue for unity among Catholic against modernism. Benedict XV, pontiff from 1914-1922, renewed his predecessor's condemnation of modernism, but he also stressed the need for Catholic cohesion across national borders, for which he saw a great need during the war. He therefore put an end to the climate of suspicion and condemnation within the Catholic world and expressed a vision of a supranational Church which provided moral guidance across political borders.⁹ His successor, Pius XI, combined the messages of Benedict XV, the pope of peace, and of Pius X, who wanted to restore all things in Christ, by calling for 'the peace of Christ through the reign of Christ'. He, too, argued against unrestrained nationalism, which came at the cost of fraternity among the peoples. In his view, many of the problems in society and between nations were caused by the exclusion of God and Christ from legislation and public affairs. In order to shift from a defensive to an offensive approach that could mobilize the masses, he reinvigorated the call for Catholic Action (now with capital letters) through the apostolate of Catholic organizations and works. This popular Catholic Action movement, he believed, would bring about a new impulse to the creed of the laity and stimulate a public cult of Christ.¹⁰

In 1931, Pius XI issued his famous encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, subtitled 'on the restoration of the social order', and conceived as a follow-up to Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*. In this text, the pope argued that the socio-economic order should not be considered separate from the moral order, and he therefore argued in favor of the promotion of private property in service of individual freedom, of faire wages, of solidarity across social classes, and of the principle of subsidiarity. This latter principle built on the notion of subsidized liberty as it had developed in the nineteenth century and entailed that 'higher levels of authority should leave as much as possible to their lower counterparts or free initiatives (negative notion), even though they have a right and a duty to support them (positive notion)'.¹¹ So, in its confrontation with liberals and socialist critiques of the validity and desirability of a religiously inspired social and

⁷ van Velthoven, "Amis Ennemis?", 29-30; Gerard, *De Christelijke Arbeidersbeweging in België*, 40-41.

⁸ Gerard, 'De Democratie Gedroomd', 1000-1001.

⁹ Mayeur, 'Trois Papes', 16-18.

¹⁰ Mayeur, 'Trois Papes', 22-23; Gerard, 'De Democratie Gedroomd', 989; 1002-1003.

¹¹ Moeys, *Subsidiary Social Provision*, 27; Mayeur, 'Trois Papes', 35-36.

political order, the Church incorporated ideas about freedom and state intervention in its social teachings to argue for moderate state intervention and the protection of non-governmental social organizations, thereby also reinvigorating the basic premises of Freiburg corporatism. As such, the subsidiarity principle became a powerful tool in the defense of Catholicism's influence in the public and social sphere, especially in Belgium, where the Catholics appropriated it as a logical continuation of the country's tradition of subsidized liberty in the social sphere.¹²

Thus, the Catholic field in Belgium during the 1920s was characterized by a certain disillusionment with party politics, a further expansion of the Catholic social organizations, and a strong influence of the Catholic Action. While the latter notion already had its origins in the early twentieth century texts disseminated by Pius X, who used it to refer to the collection of Catholic lay organizations which contributed to solving the social question in a Christian manner, the term was further defined and concretized by Pius XI, who declared that Catholic Action was needed to restore Catholic spirituality and morality in the individual, the family, and society. In this regard, the pope envisioned a principally apolitical apostolate of lay people under the guidance of the ecclesial authorities and Rome, and this subjection to Church hierarchy was a condition for organizations who wanted to take part in the Catholic Action movement.¹³ On the one hand, the call for Catholic Action inspired the creation of new organizations, especially those directed towards youth. In Belgium, two well-known examples were the *Association Catholique de la Jeunesse Belge* (Catholic Association of the Belgian Youth, ACBJ), created by the priest Louis Picard in 1921, the *Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne* (Christian Worker's Youth, JOC), which was established in 1924 by Joseph Cardijn and quickly spread to other countries, and the *Jeugdverbond voor Katholieke Actie* (Youth Association for Catholic Action, JVKA) of 1928.¹⁴ This way, the Catholic organizational field in Belgium during the interbellum consisted of a combination of class-based and mixed-class (or 'unity') Catholic Action organizations, the social organizations which had their roots in the late nineteenth century, and the older charitable organizations like those of the Vincentians. In principle, all these organizations were part of the Catholic Action movement through their shared moral and religious purpose, but the Church required that the social organizations refrained from commenting on politics or government decisions, which often led to heated internal discussions and the depoliticization of many social organizations.¹⁵

¹² Moeys, *Subsidiary Social Provision*. 31.

¹³ The pope's development of Catholic Action also constituted a way to reach a *modus vivendi* with Mussolini. See: Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, 173.

¹⁴ Conway, 'Building the Christian City', 122-124; Van Osselaer, 'Christening Masculinity?', 380-382; Mayeur, 'Trois Papes', 22-23; Gerard, 'De Democratie Gedroomd', 1002-1004.

¹⁵ Van Osselaer, 'Christening Masculinity?', 382; Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, diss., 135-137.

In the aftermath of the war, the Vincentian organizations assessed their losses and tried to figure out where to go from there. Both the Ladies and the Society were confronted with a decrease in the total number of conferences, members, and visited families, as well as with shrinking financial means. In 1913, the Society had 1302 conferences, reduced to 987 by 1923.¹⁶ The Antwerp Ladies (the only division for which we have comparable numbers) saw their membership diminish from 274 Ladies in 1913 to 179 in 1921, and the number of visited families from 606 to 381 in the same years, which meant that the organization fell back to its statistics of 1906.¹⁷ For both, total revenues and costs were only slightly lower in the early 1920's than before the war, but at the same time, consumption prices had quintupled.¹⁸ Even though it was clear that much had changed, the Society and the Ladies stressed their mission stayed the same. The Ladies of Antwerp explained in 1921 that 'The great war had not brought any radical transformation to the moral and social order. Humanity stays the way it is with its same selfishness, its same mistakes, and its same passions. The political and religious battles resume'. The Vincentians had shown themselves very receptive to Pius X' call for Catholic action to restore all things in Christ, and during the pontificate of Benedict XV, they repeated their dedication to the promotion of liturgy and Eucharist, to their cooperation with social organizations, to the distribution of good reading material, and, most importantly, to encouraging social harmony through the development of good relations between the classes. In this regard, the Ladies argued for the development of an 'intelligent' type of charity to succeed in the post-war world. As they understood it, intelligent charity was *true* charity, which should 'examine the causes of misery in order to provide an effective remedy' and 'raise those who fall, protect those who are still standing, encourage those who are courageously struggling to improve their condition'. Even though both organizations argued in favor of diversification in their activities, in particular to aid in the prevention of social misery, they continued to stress the centrality of the poor visit and its spiritual value as the start and end of their charitable action.¹⁹

In the eyes of the Ladies, the consequences of the war, which they identified mainly as a loss in membership, were merely a practical and temporary setback to their organization. Recovery was a matter of finding new members to fill the empty spaces, combined with the promotion of intelligent charity and a stronger focus on the poor who did not or only to a limited extent profit from social reform and organizations, like the shamefaced poor, the elderly, the sick, the involuntarily unemployed, and so on.²⁰ Within the Society, on the other hand, there seemed to exist more insecurities about the future

¹⁶ Dhaene and Wynants, 'Achteruitgang en Crisis', 91.

¹⁷ DLSVPA 1913; 1921.

¹⁸ Dhaene and Wynants, 'Achteruitgang en Crisis', 94; DLSVPA JV 1913; 1921.

¹⁹ MSVP 1920; 1921; DLSVPA JV 1921, esp. 9.

²⁰ DLSVPA JV 1921; 1924, 11-13.

of the organization. Almost immediately after the war, the Society's texts started to discuss and defend the organization against the critique that there were (or would soon be) no more poor, and that the organization had therefore become obtuse. The idea that 'charity has had its time' was of course not new, but never before had the Society engaged so explicitly with this existential critique. Throughout the 1920s, the Society constantly repeated this statement to then refute it with every possible objection. The main argument was that even if physical deprivation was eradicated, there would still remain work to be done to combat spiritual and moral poverty, and that this type of need had only grown larger in the after-war society. Aside from direct moral and religious guidance, there also surely was still a need for good advice and leadership, for the protection of children, for the visitation of the sick, for informing victims of the war of their rights, for the distribution of good books, for the regularization of marriages, and so on. The Society also pointed out that there were 'hidden poor', like the shamefaced poor, for whom the material alms remained very useful. Lastly, the main goal of the organization had always been to strengthen and deepen the faith of its own members, and there was no reason why this function should now be neglected.²¹

Despite the proclaimed confidence that there would always remain a need and a function for the Society's work, the prominence of this existential critique in its own texts indicates that the organization struggled substantially with this issue. The question is also where this criticism came from. In the sources of the Society, the idea that there was criticism of the organization based on the argument that there were no more poor was often stated without any reference to its origins ('some say', 'many believe', 'we heard'...), as though the criticism came from all directions. While it is likely that the socialists, for example, were optimistic about the social reform they had been able to achieve and believed that traditional charity had had its time, it is hard to imagine that they considered the poverty problem solved *an sich* and used this argument to discredit charity. Apparently, the critique sometimes originated from the clergy, the Vincentians' supposed allies. Some priests no longer acknowledged the benefits of having a conference of the Society in their parish. They were afraid the conference would become a burden rather than a help, and some even suggested that there were no poor in their

²¹ MSVP November 1920, 120; June 1921, 88; October 1921, 146; January 1922, 14-15; February 1925, 39; July 1929, 205-206; July 1930, 29; SVP, *Het Bezoek der Armen en het Genootschap van S. Vincentius a Paulo door een Conferentievoorzitter* (Bruges, 1923), 95-97; APBJ 12.2.1.504 *Middenraad van Limburg. Verslag der Werkzaamheden Gedurende het Jaar 1922 Voorgelezen in de Algemene Vergadering van 23 Oktober 1923* (Hasselt, 1923), 9-14; SVP, *De Geest van S. Vincentiusgenootschap en de Ware Verhouding der Conferentiën tot de Liefdadigheid en tot de Sociale Werken. Voordracht van E. H. F. Cap* (Brugge, 1924); SVP, *L'Œuvre des Nouveaux Pauvres (S. Jean Népomucène). Rapport Fait à la Réunion Extraordinaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul de Belgique le 6 Septembre 1924 par le Baron Verhaegen* (Ghent, 1924).

parish. To this, the Society replied that its conferences provided useful services to the priests, such as helping organize the various parish works and collecting funds, and that its visitors were often able to reach households that the priests themselves could not.²²

But most importantly, it seems that the criticism originated from within the organization, from its own members. Many conferences that stopped working during the war had not been reestablished because its (ex-)members believed that there was no longer a need for their work. The living conditions of the working class had increased drastically, and they figured that if there was no longer a demand for material alms, the Society was no longer useful. Especially in the countryside, this idea was common and led to the disbandment of many conferences. Conversely, a lack of financial means in the conferences was equally brought up as a reason to quit, because many members considered handing out material alms an essential aspect of the Vincentians' work. But in the eyes of the leaders of the Society, these contemplations were erroneous and completely contrary to the spirit of the organization. Not only did there remain plenty of material misery among the lower classes, if only one looked closely enough, the idea that there was no more work for the Society also betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding of its purpose, which was the sanctification of its members and of society. To give weight to this argument, the Society pointed out that even Ozanam himself had established a conference in a suburb of Paris where there were no poor, and he had made it clear that the work of the Vincentians did not require the presence of poverty. In the analysis of the Society, this problem was caused by a lack of motivation when there were no alms to give, and therefore a lack of spiritual resolution and creativity that had to be fiercely combatted.²³

After Pius XI took office in February 1922, the Society tried to counterbalance the negativity of the discussion about the endurance of poverty by positively aligning with the reinvigorated Catholic Action movement. The organization maintained a good

²² MSVP November 1920, 109-113; SVP, *Het Bezoek der Armen en het Genootschap van S. Vincentius a Paulo door een Conferentievoorzitter* (Bruges, 1923), 96-97.

²³ MSVP 1921, esp. the editions of June, July and October; January 1922; April 1922; 50-51; October 1923, 155-156; March 1925, 70-71; April 1925, 106-107; October 1925, 301; February 1926, 42; September 1926, 260-261; 266; 268; October 1926, 298-299; November 1926, 324-326; February 1927, 37; May 1927, 144; November 1927, 322-323; September 1928, 252-253; ASVPHRB JV 1924, 40; APBJ 12.2.1.504 *Middenraad van Limburg. Verslag der Werkzaamheden Gedurende het Jaar 1922 Voorgelezen in de Algemene Vergadering van 23 Oktober 1923* (Hasselt, 1923), 9-15; SVP, *De Geest van S. Vincentiusgenootschap en de Ware Verhouding der Conferentiën tot de Liefdadigheid en tot de Sociale Werken. Voordracht van E. H. F. Cap* (Brugge, 1924); SVP, *L'Œuvre des Nouveaux Pauvres (S. Jean Népomucène). Rapport Fait à la Réunion Extraordinaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul de Belgique le 6 Septembre 1924 par le Baron Verhaegen* (Ghent, 1924); APJB 12.2.1.504 Brieven over de aantrekkelijkheid van het Genootschap na de oorlog en brieven van de conferenties over hun werking (1925-1926).

relationship with Pius XI, and it had done so even before he became pope. At various occasions, mgr. Ratti had spoken at the Society's general assembly and expressed his support for this 'excellent' organization. As pope, too, he expressed his admiration and the wish that the Society may expand its 'beneficent influence'.²⁴ Pius XI's Catholic Action movement gave the Society confidence that 'the new times unfold the new action of the Holy Church' with the purpose of completely saturating societal life with the values of Christianity. This return to Christian morals was the only way that the death of the already deadly ill society could be avoided. In this battle against 'modern paganism', in this turning point in history, the Society declared itself a loyal troop of laymen that would handle its task, nothing less than the reconstruction of society, with renewed zeal.²⁵ As such, the Society considered itself an integral element of Catholic Action, and this alignment provided a source of socio-cultural legitimacy to the organization which it eagerly embraced.

Since youth played a very important role in this movement (cf. the success of the ACBJ and the JOC), the Society did its best to find a connection in this respect as well. On the one hand, this entailed setting up concrete relations with these organizations with the goal of establishing mutual relations and exchanges. The Society hoped that it could recruit new members from the youth organizations and asked them to spread awareness about its works, it invited the leaders of the youth organizations to speak at its assemblies, and it promoted the organizations to the children of the families that were visited.²⁶ On the other hand, because of the success of the Catholic Action youth movements, the Society once more took the opportunity to posit itself as an original source of Catholic social action. It proclaimed that originally, the Society itself had been an organization by and for youth, and proudly stated that Ozanam had always been a 'Catholic Action man'. The Society had been founded so that Catholic youth could influence the poor, and so that this youth itself learned how to live and act more in line with Christian apostolicism.²⁷

Interestingly, the Ladies did not explicitly connect their work to the Catholic Action movement, although they did state that they answered to Pius XI's call for a strong lay apostolate.²⁸ Moreover, they did not consider a lack of poor as an existential threat, nor did they go out of their way to refute this criticism to prove their continued relevance. Instead, they acknowledged that among the working classes, there was less need for their services, and so they redirected their efforts to other types of poor and to encouraging

²⁴ MSVP May 1922, 68-71; June 1922, 83-84.

²⁵ MSVP May 1922, 73-76, June 1922 93-94.

²⁶ Dhaene and Wynants, 'Achteruitgang en Crisis', 100-103; MSVP September 1924, 259; June 1925, 174; July 1927, 212.

²⁷ MSVP September 1929, 265-268.

²⁸ DLSVPA JV 1927, 19.

liturgy, regularizing marriages, distributing Catholic reading material, and promoting social organizations, in particular mutual assurance societies.²⁹ This strategy paid off: the Ladies saw their membership and conference numbers slowly but steadily increase throughout the 1920s, and this upsurge would continue even more strongly during the 1930s. In comparison to the last available statistics before the war, from 1906, the total number of Ladies in Belgium increased from 849 to 1541 in 1930, and the total number of visited families from 2700 to 3629. The Antwerp Ladies were not able to reach their numbers from 1913 (274 Ladies and 606 families), but by 1930, they had 208 Ladies that visited 402 families, which was at least an improvement from the situation immediately after the war.³⁰ In comparison, the statistics of the Society were more prone to fluctuation and showed no real upward trend, a situation that continued throughout the 1930s. The total number of its conferences (1302 in 1913) went from 987 in 1923 to 1024 in 1927 and back to 898 in 1930, and the number of members (19363 in 1913) went down from 10181 in 1927 to 9935 in 1930.³¹

When comparing the Ladies and the Society in the 1920s, their different approaches to the challenges of the time seem, to an important extent, to have been linked to their ideas about the societal function of their organizations. The Society, while it did acknowledge that there were still different types of poor to help, found it difficult to let go of its influence on the working classes. Here, the impact of the introduction of the ‘one man, one vote’ electoral system should not be underestimated, as it definitively put the masses at the forefront of sociopolitical conflict. Almost constantly, the Society’s texts repeated that the moral and religious state of the workers was worse than it had ever been, and the visitors’ spiritual guidance remained highly relevant.³² Therefore, the organization maintained that poverty had many faces, and that combatting *moral poverty* among the workers was just as important. In other words, even if material poverty had decreased among the workers, they were still poor in a moral sense. Consequently, the material alms, the bread ticket which for so long had been described as the gift that opened the door to the house of the poor, could no longer serve as the starting point for their charitable work with the workers. Thus, as we will see in Chapter 2, the Society put much effort in developing alternative sources of relief, for example in the form of social services. This stubborn attachment to the workers betrayed the Society’s urge for sociopolitical relevancy. After all, concern for the moral and material state of the working class had been the driving factor behind the social question of the previous century, the development of an extensive social organizational field, and the social

²⁹ DLSVPA JV 1921; 1924; 1927; 1929.

³⁰ Comparison of the reports of the Brussels’ Ladies (comprising numbers from other divisions in the country but limited to the period before 1906 and after 1930) and the Antwerp Ladies (DLSVPB JV; DLSVPA JV).

³¹ Dhaene and Wynants, ‘Achteruitgang en Crisis’, 90-92.

³² See Chapter 2 of Part III.

reforms after the war. As such, its relationship with the workers had allowed the Society to take part in the construction of Belgium's modern society, and its members seemingly felt aversion towards the idea that their action would now become limited to society's outcasts and a handful of shamefaced poor. As such, the internal complaint that there were no more poor, with its devastating effects on the organization, was not so much a literal issue than a reflection of the Society's members' unease about losing their grip on the workers, interpreted as a loss of relevancy in society itself. They feared losing respect, prestige, and authority in society, but by reacting to this fear, they made themselves more vulnerable to it and undermined their organization from the inside.

The Ladies, from their side, apparently felt more inclined to accept that their work would have to change and adapt according to the changes that took place in society. Perhaps, this more rational and calm approach can be in part explained by the fact that the opportunities for female social agency remained scarce, especially in the Catholic realm, despite some careful legal advancements in women's emancipation during the 1920s.³³ While all kinds of Catholic social organizations and initiatives flourished for women as well, there were few in which lay women themselves were not the receivers, but the givers of social support and moral instruction. And even though the work field of the Ladies became somewhat smaller because of the socio-economic progression of the working classes, they felt that this did not devalue their work.

Conversely, however, it is likely that the general lack of options for female agency in the social and political spheres and their incomplete citizenship also meant that the Ladies and their work were less likely perceived as a threat. Unlike many members of the Society, none of the Ladies were directly involved in politics, simply because this was still not an option for women. By extension, it was more likely for critics of charity to point their arrows at the ecclesial authorities (men) who promoted these types of charitable works. The Society, on the other hand, could not or did not want to profit from this clerical buffer in the same way, which meant that the organization and its members were more susceptible to direct and even personal criticism from not only anticlericals, but also from Catholic democrats who believed that traditional charity was of limited utility in modern society. Add to this the fact that the members of the Society often occupied influential, not to mention political, positions in society, it is not surprising that the Vincentian men were more often the subject of negative judgement and were more

³³ With the introduction of universal single male suffrage, women could not vote for parliament, but they *were* electable (the first woman was elected for parliament in 1929, for the socialist party), and they could also vote during the municipal elections. Also in the 1920s, women were allowed to act as lawyers, official secondary education was established for girls, and the principle of marital power was softened in several respects (women could now work and manage their own finances, they could litigate, and close contracts). Although progress nonetheless, the advancements in women's emancipation remained limited and politics was still the domain of men. Gerard, 'De Democratie Gedroomd', 935-936.

likely to (selectively) engage with criticism as well. That the Society chose to bundle external and internal criticism in the easily refutable idea that there were no more poor, while at the same time insisting on the spiritual essence of its work, nevertheless betrays that the organization was torn between an unwillingness to subject itself to profound reflection on the social utility of its charity and, on the other hand, its search for societal relevancy by co-shaping the morality of modern society.

1.2. A battle for modernity

The optimism about the increasing living standards among the population during the 1920s ended abruptly when in the second half of 1930, the effects of the Wall Street Crash in 1929 reached Belgium. Between 1932 and 1935, Belgium ended up in a deep depression. As an export country, Belgium was highly sensitive to the developments on the international economic market. The financial crisis resulted in a drastic reduction in production (up to 25% in the metal and textile sectors), cut export in half, and caused the bankruptcy of many businesses. By consequence, the population was confronted with mass unemployment, which in turn weighed heavily on the government and on the labor unions, as well as with severe pay cuts and declining purchasing power. Because membership of the unions was not obligatory, many of the unemployed were left without any income replacement and had to rely on public assistance and private charity, themselves unable to meet demand. The unions, from their side, grew significantly during this period, in particular the Christian union, which was now able to break the quasi-monopoly of the socialist union. This can be explained by the fact that many people who were previously less interested in the syndical movement, like workers in the countryside, who were often Catholic, now looked for social support. In addition, Flanders, predominantly Catholic, was affected more severely by the crisis than socialist Wallonia, and many Flemish workers now joined the Christian worker organizations. Incidentally, for women, the crisis had an unexpected consequence. Under impulse of the Catholics, the government tried to counter unemployment among men by limiting the number of female workers in industries and government administration, so that these positions could be taken up by men instead. These measures also fit within the Catholic promotion of the family with the mother at the hearth but were countered by socialist women's protests under the banner of 'right to live'. The Catholic proposal to put a general ban on married women's work did not pass. In general, the dire socio-economic situation in Belgium incited a call for more social provisions from the state. The term 'social security' made its entrance, even though the government introduced only limited reforms during the 1930's, focusing mostly on streamlining the existing government services. It would take until 1944 until a genuine social security system was introduced,

which included mandatory sickness and unemployment insurance.³⁴

For the Vincentians, the consequences of the crisis were ambiguous. On the one hand, the crisis confirmed once and for all that poverty would indeed remain a problem, and there would always be poor. This way, the local conferences of the Society could no longer claim that there was no work to be done in the parishes, and the benefit of material alms was confirmed once again. After a significant drop in the number of conferences of the Society (from 1024 in 1927 to 921 in 1931), the organization was able to expand again to 984 conferences by 1935 and gained a little over 1700 members in comparison to 1930, good for a total of 11677.³⁵ The Ladies, too, were able to attract more members in this period, growing from 1541 active Ladies in 1931 to 1664 in 1934.³⁶ Financially, however, it was a difficult time for the organizations. Even though the organizations spent a larger sum on monetary alms to come to the immediate aid of those affected by the crisis, for example by paying for rent and for the contributions to mutual aid societies, their income did not increase noticeably, and inflation meant that they could achieve less with the same amount of means.³⁷

Yet, the organizations tried to offer support to the victims of the crisis in other ways as well. Both the Ladies and members of the Society engaged actively and played an important role in the parish help committees which were established all over the country at the request of the episcopate and queen Astrid.³⁸ In addition, they continued to distribute goods such as food, clothing, coals, and furniture, in addition to organizing meals for the poor and hand out soup in schools. Despite the difficulties posed by the crisis, the Vincentians welcomed the opportunity to reaffirm their social utility and the possibilities it offered to perform spiritual work among the needy. A Brussels' committee of Ladies noted that 'the economic crisis and the augmentation of rents offers the occasion to enter into contact with families where there is an immense moral good to be done' and considered the situation an 'advantage because it is comforting to see these distressed people come back to the Faith of their childhood, after years of religious indifference'.³⁹ Indeed, the crisis opened many doors of the worker families that had previously closed to the visits of the Vincentians. The Society reported that 'the fact alone that so many needy families come knocking at the doors of the Societies of Saint Vincent, is the best proof that Christian charity has not become superfluous in our

³⁴ Gerard, *In de Schaduw van het Interbellum*, 197-200.

³⁵ Dhaene and Wynants, 'Achteruitgang en Crisis', 93-94.

³⁶ Comparison of DLSVPB JV.

³⁷ Dhaene and Wynants, 'Achteruitgang en Crisis', 95-96; comparison of the numbers in DLSVPB JV.

³⁸ Dhaene and Wynants, 'Achteruitgang en Crisis', 107-109; Bousset and Delmer, 'La Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul à Bruxelles', 257; 260.

³⁹ DLSVPB JV 1931, 6.

century of social legislation'.⁴⁰

The crisis was not the only thing occupying the Vincentians during the first half of the 1930s, however. In 1933, the Society celebrated the 100th anniversary of the organization's first establishment in Paris, an occasion that had to be celebrated with great festivities. In Belgium, too, the Society had been anticipating this anniversary for years, and it stressed that the occasion served as an opportunity to triumph over those who claimed that the organization had had its time and was doomed to disappear. But in order to triumph, the conferences needed to get their affairs in order and perform their charitable action with renewed zeal, so that the Society could revive the prosperity it used to know. In particular, the Society called for the establishment of conferences in every parish in the country, for faithfulness to the rulebook and to the goal of self-sanctification, for regular attendance to the conference meetings, for the creation of new work, and for an increased effort to attract young men to the Society's ranks.⁴¹ As such, the years leading up to the centennial served as a moment of renewal for the organization. That the Society's jubilee took place in the year that was declared a 'Holy Year' by Pius XI, added even more luster to the festivities. Like in Paris and Rome, the Society celebrated its anniversary with solemnities, processions, and celebrations in Belgium's large cities like Brussels, Antwerp, Liège, and Ghent, which were honored by the attendance of high members of the episcopate, as well as in the local parishes all over the country. Afterwards, the Society's leadership declared itself pleased with the celebrations and hoped that they would provide new motivation to its members, and that they would confirm to the rest of society that the organization was still very much alive and kicking.⁴²

While the populations of Europe dealt with the ravaging effects of the economic crisis and the Society celebrated its centennial, the political scene during the interbellum became increasingly characterized by extremism and often violent ideological conflicts. In this period, the masses became a political force to be reckoned with, both in reality and in the cultural imagination. Communist, Fascist, and National-Socialist ideologies were able to mobilize impressive numbers of people across the social spectrum who advocated for an alternative to the liberal-democratic system. Indeed, the latter had lost much of its appeal in many European countries, especially after the crisis, which proved

⁴⁰ MSVP April 1932, 88-89.

⁴¹ MSVP September 1928, 244; May 1929; 140-141; August 1929; 222-223; November 1929, 331-332; May 1930, 23-24; June 1930, 8-9; July 1930, 8; August 1930, 10-12; May 1931, 6; July 1932, 155; October 1932, 223-224; December 1932, 273-274; January 1933, 4-5; April 1933, 85-89; June 1933, 137.

⁴² AHR 12.4.4, Knipselboek samengesteld door secretaris Paul van Steenberghe met documentatie over de vieringen van het eeuwfeest van de geboorte van Frédéric Ozanam (1913) en van het eeuwfeest van het ontstaan van het Genootschap (1933). The Society's monthly magazine reported extensively about the centennial festivities: MSVP July – December 1933; January – December 1934.

difficult to contain by Europe's democracies. In Belgium, too, the legitimacy of the parliamentary democratic system visibly came under pressure. Not only did Belgium have its own fascistic movements like Légion Nationale (1922°, Belgian nationalist), Rex (1930°, Belgian nationalist), Verdinaso (1931°, Flemish nationalist), and VNV (1933°, Flemish nationalist), which were able to mobilize at times large portions of the population and even performed violent activism, many politicians of the traditional parties also felt increasingly frustrated with the slowness of parliamentary politics and the constant need for compromise. This disillusionment was most noticeable at the right side of the Catholic party, which was characterized by a dismissive attitude towards the success of the Flemish movement, socialism, unionism, and, in general, the democratization of the political system. In their vision of a 'new order' for Belgian society they proposed a corporatist ideal and promoted a Francophile, authoritarian Belgian nationalism. That the mixture of Belgian nationalism, conservative Catholicism, and authoritarianism could convince and mobilize significant segments of the population was proven when in 1936, out of the blue, the extremist party Rex under leadership of Leon Degrelle was able to acquire 21 out of 202 seats in parliament, mostly at the cost of the Catholic party. Although Rex lost much of its popular support after being condemned by the Church in 1937, the events had sent a shockwave through Belgium's political scene, causing all parties to rethink their strategies.⁴³

The success of a party like Rex confronted the conservative Catholics with their lack of vigor and capacity to channel the discontent of the masses. Especially their failure to connect with the youth proved a painful point. Indeed, the youth stood at the center of much of the political and ideological conflicts of the inter-war period, not only in Belgium but in the rest of Europe too. Youth symbolized the future and the strength needed to reform society, and the vitality of youth was glorified especially in right-wing currents, most notably in extremist milieus. This was the case also for many youth-centered Catholic groups and organizations. The Catholic Action movement, with its absolutist, militant, and antipolitical nature (in the sense of turning away from traditional party politics), challenged the Catholic party's adherence to democratic politics and confronted traditional Catholics with the mobilizing power of a pseudo-political, combative, and youth-centered religious movement. Indeed, the Catholic Action organizations were accused by contemporaries of promoting a totalitarian and authoritarian clericalism, and many of the Christian-democratically inspired social organizations in Belgium (like the Farmer's League and the Christian Worker's Movement) felt ill at ease with the strong ecclesial authority over these new social organizations. Not surprisingly, the Catholic Action organizations proved to be somewhat of a breeding ground for antidemocratic and authoritarian movements, with

⁴³ Gerard, *In de Schaduw van het Interbellum*, 213-245; Gerard, 'De Democratie Gedroomd', 1056-1067.

many (ex-)members supporting a strong leadership and state, a hierarchical, corporatist societal structure, encompassed by an all-permeating Christian morality and spiritual purity. Not coincidentally, the name Rex was a derivative of Pius XI's call for *Christus Rex*, or the establishment of Christ's reign on earth, which stood at the core of Catholic Action. Leon Degrelle himself was active in a 'unity' Catholic Action youth organization before establishing his own militant party. Moving away from the principal a-political nature of Catholic Action, the young intellectuals spearheading the new political movements like Rex combined facets of Maurassian thought (specifically his adage 'politics first'), fascistic ideology, and a traditionalist Catholic world view. Although importance of radical Catholic parties and organizations in Belgian politics and society should not be overstated, as many remained quite small, they were able to leave a deep impression on the more traditional Catholic political sphere, furthering the idea that there was a pressing need for rethinking what an ideal society should look like in the modern era. Both the fascistic Catholic movements and the Catholic Action organizations firmly drew attention to the power of and the need for an offensive stance towards the renewal of modern society to appeal to younger generations and create opportunities for mass mobilization.⁴⁴

These developments in the Belgian political and social sphere did not leave the older Catholic congregations and organizations indifferent.⁴⁵ Both the Society and the Ladies realized that attracting young men and women to their organizations was of vital importance to keep them from dying out, to maintain a relevant position in the social sphere, and to foster innovation in their works. The Ladies, from their end, tried to attract young women to their organization by including them in the local conferences, but also by creating separate conferences for them under the name 'Louise de Marillac', after Vincent de Paul's right hand.⁴⁶ The Society, too, fostered a youth-friendly atmosphere in its conferences by offering young men the opportunity to voice their opinions and desires during the weekly meetings and by establishing separate student conferences.⁴⁷ For the Society, however, the matter of attracting youth became an existential question during the 1930s. While the Ladies were able to expand their organization significantly during these years, surpassing their prewar size around 1935, the Society continued to struggle considerably to keep its membership numbers on the same level as during the 1920s. It reached its postwar height in 1932 with 12237 members, compared to 19363 in 1913. The Society blamed this issue mostly on the lack of new, young members, which

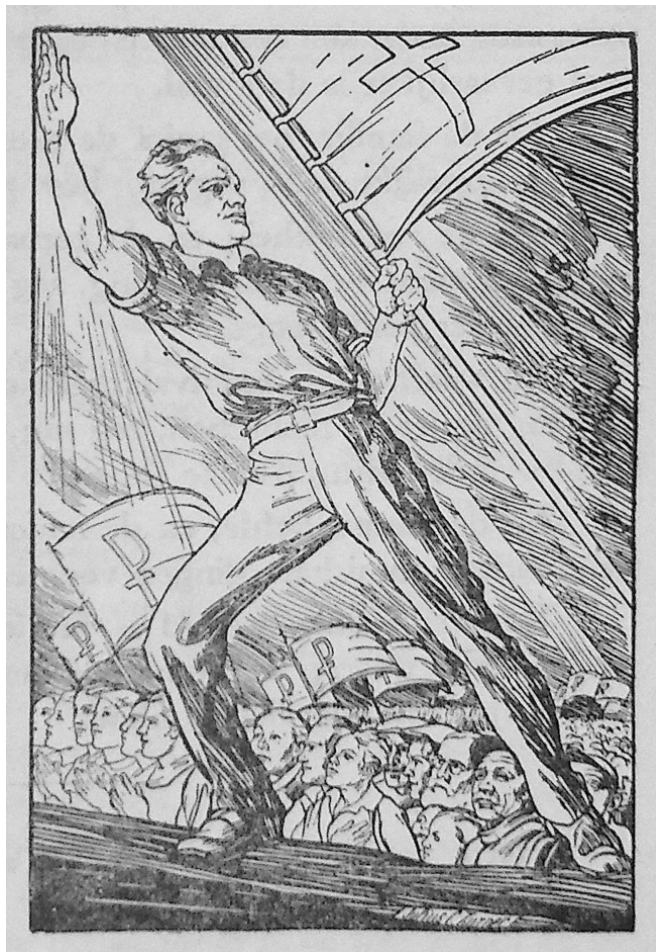
⁴⁴ Conway, 'Building the Christian City'; Sauvage, *La Cité Chrétienne*; Van Osselaer, 'Christening Masculinity?', 383; Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, diss., 137-138; 140-141; Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, 182; 186-189.

⁴⁵ Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, diss., 141-142.

⁴⁶ DLSVPB JV 1936, 5; 7-8; 11; 1937, 5; 1942, 13.

⁴⁷ MSVP March 1933, 53-55; April 1933, 83-84.

created a vicious circle in which the image of the organization as old and outdated made it increasingly difficult to appeal to the young.⁴⁸ At the same time, the Society had to deal with more and more competition from the Catholic Action movement, which was able to mobilize both young and adult men. Among the Ladies, this competition was experienced less intensely because (young) men remained the focal point of Catholic Action. Indeed, it remained the case that men's presence and influence in the public domain meant that they were the primary target group for political and religious movements, and since Catholic Action was aimed at rechristening society, men's apostolate was considered of vital importance.⁴⁹



The Catholic Action Man, 1936

⁴⁸ See Chapter 2 of Part III.

⁴⁹ Van Osselaer, 'Christening Masculinity?', 385.

The Society was very aware that ‘whoever has the youth, has the future’.⁵⁰ This not only meant that youth and youthfulness were necessary for the survival of the organization, but also more generally that the role of Catholicism in society was to a large extent dependent on the possibility to transmit religious beliefs and practices to the younger generations and to motivate them to practice an apostolate themselves as well. In essence, the new Catholic Action movement, the fascistic Catholic political movements of the inter-war period, as well as the older and more traditional Catholic political party and social organizations, such as those of the Vincentians, shared a dedication to transforming modern society into one that was structured along Christian values and morals, in one form or another, during a time when the future of society seemed unsure, open-ended, and malleable. The cultivation of the potential for change through youth was an important element in this battle, but there were other ways, too, for social and political actors to emphasize their contribution to the molding of modern society. It is no coincidence that during the 1920s and especially the 1930s, the Vincentians’ use of the terms ‘modern’ and ‘modernity’ increased exponentially. Until the First World War, the Vincentians only seldomly reflected on their relation to the modern and modernity, but this increased drastically after under the influence of the ever-stronger sociopolitical debates between supporters of highly divergent world views and ideals.

The Vincentians’ position vis-à-vis modernity was often ambiguous, between a condemnation of current modernity and a promotion of an alternative, future modernity. Already in the late nineteenth century, the Ladies and the Society emphasized the modern nature of their charity by framing it as a product, an outcome of modern societal needs, as well as an effective means to combat social and moral issues that transcended the individuals under their care and benefitted modern society as a whole. During the inter-war period, they continued this argument in the same vein. Stressing the modern nature of the organizations became an important way to justify the role they played in society. An example of typical discourse of the Society during this period, the report of the Brussels’ conferences of 1930 declared that:

*The Society of Saint Vincent can consider itself a truly modern work, in the correct sense of the word. Always renewed according to its own nature and its own course of action, according to the modern spirit and the appropriate means of time, it continues its labor of charity and its Christian apostolate. Its aim remains the restoration of peace and moral progress in the world for the greater happiness of individuals and the eternal salvation of souls.*⁵¹

⁵⁰ MSVP January 1930, 6; June 1930, 7.

⁵¹ MSVP July 1930, 22.

It was precisely the adaptability of the organizations and their potential to change which was now considered proof of its modern nature. In the rulebooks of the organizations there had always been the stipulation that ‘no charitable work may be foreign to us’, even though the focal point remained the poor visit. According to the Society and the Ladies, this stipulation attested to the foresight of their founders, Saint Vincent and Ozanam, whose contribution to modern Christian social work they regularly praised.⁵² In this way, the Vincentians equated being modern to being able to adapt and change their methods according to societal circumstances. The Ladies, for example, claimed that the instruments of the association consisted of ‘the prayer, the gift of oneself, and also the most modern and adapted means of action’.⁵³ On the topic of attracting young women to the organization, the Ladies advised to ‘modernize a bit the category of our proteges’, referring to the conferences that only visited the elderly, which was apparently not the most attractive target audience for youth.⁵⁴

The Society, too, regularly expressed the desire that the organization adapted to the needs of the modern times, for example by practicing ‘modern spiritual care’ which called for ‘help of the laity, lay apostolate, Catholic Action, help to the clergy’. Specifically, this meant that the Society’s visitors stimulated adherence to various Catholic social organizations among the visited, but also that they fostered good relationships with the institutions related to what they called ‘modern public poor relief’, in addition to participating in the battles against public immorality, alcohol abuse, lack of housing, and so on.⁵⁵ In this project, the Society stressed that ‘diverging from the origins is degeneration, returning to the origins is reform’, thereby making clear that changing and modernizing was a good thing, but only if done through a reevaluation of the original spirit of the organization.⁵⁶ As such, emphasizing the modern nature of the organization was a way for the Society to stress its societal relevance, saying that ‘in our modern days of moral and material disruption, no work is AS MODERN, AS RELEVANT as our Society of Saint Vincent. Another proof that the Spirit of Christ must renew the world [original emphasis]’,⁵⁷ and that ‘the Society of Saint Vincent is not a work for old people, but one of the most ultra-modern works that applies the most

⁵² MSVP December 1927, 357; September 1930, 18; August – September – October 1933, 183; 199; February 1934, 41-42 (where Ozanam’s contribution to the ‘charity movement’ is compared to the influence of Mozes, Paulus, Luther, Napoleon, O’Connell, Mussolini, and Hitler on the great spiritual movements and currents of thought); May 1934, 100-101; January 1938, 16; August 1938, 187; DLSVPA JV 1911, 41-42; 1912, 3-7; 19-23; 1924, 12-13.

⁵³ DLSVP, *Vereeniging der Dames van Liefde van St-Vincentius a Paulo te Antwerpen* (Antwerp, 1934), 8.

⁵⁴ DLSVPB JV 1932, 4.

⁵⁵ MSVP March 1930, 27-30. See also: MSVP November – December 1933, 256; March 1936, 50; 63; July 1936, 149; August 1936, 171-179; August 1936, 184.

⁵⁶ MSVP March 1930, 26. See also: MSVP September 1930, 22; May 1938, 99.

⁵⁷ MSVP May 1934, 103-105.

relevant principle: reaching the soul of the people through the body'.⁵⁸

This appropriation of modernness also meant that the Society no longer wanted to be considered a charitable institution in the narrow sense of the word, but rather as a social institution that expressed a 'modern Christian love of man',⁵⁹ even going so far as to claim that the Society had been 'the source of the entire social movement of the 19th century'.⁶⁰ Despite the need for new and modern methods, the Society also continued to defend the value of the poor visit in modern times, although this practice required some adaptation as well since the needs and attitudes of the poor had changed a lot in comparison to before the First World War. More lenience and diversity were needed, for example by replacing the old bread ticket with the 'omnibus ticket' that allowed the poor to choose the food products they needed and by being less reserved when it came to handing out financial support, but also by refraining from using 'sharp, outdated power maxims' and condemning different ideas when speaking to the needy.⁶¹

While the Vincentians associated themselves with modernness in the positive sense of being in touch with the needs of the time and adapting their ideas and practices accordingly, this did not mean that they considered the modern as necessarily good, to the contrary. In the eyes of the Vincentians, modern poverty, whether material, moral or spiritual, was the result of modern societal ills. Especially the Society was eager to contrast its own modernness, which remained loyal to Catholic dogmas and the social mission of the organization, to the modern decadence and delusions which plagued society and diverted the people away from Christian life, leading to social and political conflicts and injustices. The greatest threats to a harmonious society remained socialism, communism, modern paganism, individualism, the pursuit of profit and of pleasure, and the disruption of the traditional family, which resulted in debauchery, immorality, and indifference. In addition, the media of modern entertainment through which degenerative ideas were spread, for example in the form of cinema, novels, and radio, were considered part of the problem, in particular because they were used by the adversaries of Catholicism.⁶² Contrary to this decadent modernity, the Society posited a vision of a modern society which included all of its technical advancements, but which was based on Christian faith and morality. Typical for the *zeitgeist* of the times, the Society noted that it was frightening not to know the future of society, and that it may turn out to be either the 'time of God's Kingdom or that of the antichrist'. So, the Society

⁵⁸ MSVP July 1936, 155. See also: MSVP August 1936, 178; March 1938, 56; 59.

⁵⁹ MSVP May 1934, 103-105.

⁶⁰ SVP, *Kleine Catechismus van het Sint-Vincentiusgenootschap* (Antwerp, 1937), 6.

⁶¹ MSVP August 1936, 171-173.

⁶² MSVP May 1931, 11; July 1931, 3-4; December 1931, 12; May 1932, 119; July 1932, 146; June 1933, 128; March 1934, 72; December 1934, 269; February 1936, 44; March 1936, 65; May 1936, 109-111; November 1936, 261-262.

vowed to do everything in its power to contribute to a 'new social order' created by the Church.⁶³

The Vincentians and other Catholics were of course not the only ones proposing an alternative modernity. During the 1930s, extremist ideologies, both on the right and the left side, were able to gather mass followings which were prepared for violence to establish their vision of an idealized future. And yet, the Vincentians, always ready to berate socialism and communism as sources of evil, had remained rather silent in its texts vis-à-vis the possible threat posed by Fascism and National-Socialism until the war broke out.⁶⁴ In May 1940, despite its neutrality, Belgium was once more dragged into a world war. Again, the country was occupied by the German invader, this time led by Adolf Hitler's National Socialist army. Already in September 1939, the United Kingdom and France had declared war to Germany after the latter had invaded Poland, thereby violating international treaties. Almost immediately, the Soviet Union became involved as well, equally occupying parts of Poland. Amidst the atmosphere of international armament, violent uproar, and ideological confrontation, the Society called for prayer and trust in the Divine Providence to keep Belgium from being involved, but it was also aware that even if it succeeded to do so, the country's population would be affected by the general mayhem either way.⁶⁵ In the Society's monthly magazine of March 1940 we can read:

One need not possess the gift of prophecy to venture to predict that, with German and Russian ideologies proving to run parallel, the war, if unleashed in full force, will end in a final battle between Christianity and the modern paganism of National Socialism and Bolshevism. But will all the human suffering and anguish, with which all-out war scourges humanity, be sufficient to expiate more than a century of social sin, so that God's justice is satisfied and His mercy is once again accessible to the whole Christian world?⁶⁶

Despite the insecurity of the future and the bleak foresight of a war, the Society did find comfort in the idea that a war would make its work 'more useful, more significant, and

⁶³ MSVP September 1930, 27-28.

⁶⁴ The only instance I could find was a short statement of the Society: 'We have to make the people aware that they cannot expect from bolshevism nor national-socialism any political or economic improvements or rights, and that it is the Church which has always cared for the poor' (MSVP July 1932, 149). In general, Catholics rejected all 'isms' as forms of modern paganism. However, as Tine Van Osselaer notes, there were some clear similarities between the ideals of the Catholic Action and the totalitarian movements, such as their desire to permeate all aspects of life, and their exaltation of obedience, discipline, and authority (Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, 198-200).

⁶⁵ MSVP September 1939, 190; October 1939, 210; December 1939, 251; 256-257; January 1940, 3.

⁶⁶ MSVP March 1940, 65.

more difficult', and therefore also 'its merit greater for the restoration of Gods honor'.⁶⁷ When the war finally reached Belgium in May, the Society declared it its duty to offer the people 'peace and love', and to come to the aid of those in need. Convinced that the war heralded a time of atonement, it optimistically insisted that 'this hard, though time the sun of love, born from Christ himself, will dawn on the world'.⁶⁸

Unlike during the First World War, when aid to the population largely became the monopoly of the National Help and Food Committee, the Vincentians were indeed able to play a more significant role in distributing help during the Second World War. The Society now followed the example of the Ladies by actively taking part in the networks of Catholic social works, specifically Caritas Belgica, which now significantly widened its field of action. National president of the Belgian Society, Paul Charles, even became the president of the French division of Caritas' *Verbond der Werken voor Hulpbetoon en der Medico-Sociale Diensten* (Association of Works for the Distribution of Aid and of Medical and Social Services). This Association coordinated the distribution of aid on a local level via parochial secretariats, in turn comprised of representatives of the Society, the Ladies, and other Catholic charitable organizations.⁶⁹ In addition, both the Ladies and the Society willingly coordinated their action with *Winterhulp* (Winter Aid), which was the Belgian umbrella organization for wartime relief, and which was of opinion that the existing private social works should be given the opportunity to continue their work.⁷⁰ Winter Aid distributed subsidies to the Vincentian organizations, which then allocated the money to the local conferences which acquired goods such as coals, bread, blankets, and medicine for their families in need. In turn, the conferences reported back to Winter Help which goods they had bought with the subsidies, how many families were helped, and what further needed.⁷¹ Working together with Winter Aid did mean that the organizations were to respect its rules, including the legal stipulation that all fundraising campaigns should be approved by Winter Aid. For some of the local conferences of the Society, it was difficult to let go of their independence, however, and sometimes this led to conflict. The head of Winter Aid, Paul Heyman, at times had to

⁶⁷ MSVP March 1940, 66.

⁶⁸ MSVP May 1940, 109.

⁶⁹ Dhaene and Wynants, 'Achteruitgang en Crisis', 123.

⁷⁰ Letter from Paul Heymans to Msgr. van Eynde, president of Caritas Catholica Belgica, January 4th, 1941. ASVPHRB 15.5/1 Relatie en samenwerking met andere religieuze en socio-caritatieve organisaties: Caritas Catholica (1940-1956).

⁷¹ ASVPA 1.6.6/1;2;3 Samenwerking met andere religieuze of socio-culturele organisaties: Winterhulp (1940-1946); ASVPHRB 15.5/20 Relatie en samenwerking met andere religieuze en socio-caritatieve organisaties: Winterhulp (1940-1945); ASVPHRB 15.5/21.1 Relatie en samenwerking met andere religieuze en socio-caritatieve organisaties: Andere (1939-1950); ASVPA 1.6.7 Samenwerking met andere religieuze of socio-culturele organisaties: Briefwisseling met en lijsten van andere katholieke organisaties (1939-1945).

contact president of the Belgian Society, Paul Charles, to address local breaches of the rules, for example when the conference of Wetteren attempted to organize a fundraising without the approval of Winter Aid.⁷²

In general, however, both the Society and the Ladies were able to reap the benefits of working together with each other, the coordinating institutions, and the other Catholic social organizations active in Belgium during the war. Not only did they take up an important role in the distribution of aid, but they also displayed much ardor in providing the population with moral entertainment and festivities to distract from the crisis, all the while continuing to offer a listening ear and spiritual guidance during the home visits. As such, the Second World War indeed proved to be an opportunity for the Vincentians to display their social purpose and relevance, with the Ladies even reaching a record in membership numbers with 2702 visiting Ladies in 1944 compared to 1541 in 1931.⁷³ The Society was also able to gain members (approximately 1000 in comparison to 1939, for a total of 10513 in 1945), which was a drastic improvement compared to the situation during the First World War.⁷⁴ This gave the Society optimism and motivated the organization to make plans for the after-war before it had ended. Its leaders were aware that the recent progress of the Society was an effect of the war, and they resolved to make the structure of the organization more efficient, as well as to focus on providing social services (secretariats) within the framework of the parishes.⁷⁵

⁷² Letter from Paul Heymans to Paul Charles, s.d. ASVPHRB 15.5/20 Relatie en samenwerking met andere religieuze en socio-caritatieve organisaties: Winterhulp (1940-1945). This local resistance is also noted in Dhaene and Wynants, 'Achteruitgang en Crisis', 123.

⁷³ Comparison of the numbers in DLSVPB JV.

⁷⁴ Dhaene and Wynants, 'Achteruitgang en Crisis', 126.

⁷⁵ ASVPHRB 13.8. Specifieke beleidsvraagstukken: 'Wat met de Vincentianen na de Tweede Wereldoorlog?' Coördinatiecomité werkzaam binnen de Hoofdraad (1944-1945).

Chapter 2

Old and new target audiences

The interbellum was a period of great societal changes, of passionate dreams and expectations, as well as of painful crises and deep disappointments. The First World War had scarred Europe, and in Belgium as elsewhere, the post-war years were about physical and mental recovery. These scars were visible in the destruction of infrastructure and homes, in the emptiness left by the many people – soldiers and citizens alike – who had lost their lives, and in the even greater number of war-invalids, whose visible and invisible disabilities required care.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, the 1920s were a time of great optimism. The expansion of social legislation, including for example the eight-hour workday and paid vacation, and the introduction of single male suffrage was considered a great achievement by the democratic politicians, in particular the socialists, who considered it the culmination of a long struggle for social justice. The 1930s nevertheless caused a reality check and reduced confidence in the democratic project. The economic crisis confronted society with the volatility of its material progress and opened the political door to a new generation of political theorists and activists who professed the need for *new* solutions to old issues. This trend was visible not only in the emergence of third-wayism in the form of extreme right and fascist movements, but also in the development of uncompromising attitudes within the traditional political groups. Among socialists, the voices calling for the establishment of a communist society grew louder after the creation of the Soviet-Union in 1922, and Hendrik De Man's neo-socialist solution of the 1930s caused confusion among the older guards. Among Catholics, the inter-war period was dominated by the Catholic Action movement, which embodied an antipolitical effort to bring about the reign of Christ on earth and proved fertile ground for the development of clerico-fascist movements. This chapter examines the ways in which the Vincentians dealt with these turbulent times and how they tried to reconcile their original purpose with a work field that had been altered significantly.

The first subchapter focusses on the Vincentian's relationship with the workers, who up until the war had constituted the main target audience of their charity. Now that poverty was no longer considered endemic to wage labor, the Vincentians sought new ways to maintain their connection with and influence on the workers, for example via the expansion of their social services, which they portrayed as a modern form of relief

⁷⁶ On the debates about the care for war victims, see: De Picker, 'Nation's Compensation for War Wounds'.

par excellence. Since hunger, disease, and misery still remained widespread among the lower classes, the Vincentians also continued their home visits to families who were confronted with a combination of difficulties, in particular sickness, unemployment, and a large number of children. At the same time, the Vincentians rediscovered the shamefaced poor as a ‘special’ type of indigent and developed a distinct relationship with them, which forms the topic of the second subchapter. Because of the war, the number of shamefaced poor had increased drastically, and these people were often unable or unwilling to reap the benefits of the new social legislation nor of the expansion of social organizations. The Vincentians discovered in them a vast opportunity for spiritual gratification by guiding these poor towards redemptive suffering and by developing their own virtues of humility, respect, and discretion while doing so. Lastly, the third subchapter delves deeper into the Vincentians’ outspoken concern for youth during the inter-war period. Keeping in mind that ‘whomever had the youth, has the future’, they devoted much effort to attracting youth to their own ranks. More broadly, the Vincentians’ apprehension about the moral state of the younger generations combined with a general anxiety about the future of society motivated them to significantly expand their works for youth. By promoting Catholic education, social organizations, entertainment, and leisure activities, they hoped to contribute to the embedding of youth within the Catholic quest for the establishment of a religious modernity.

1.1. Towards a new relationship with the workers

Since their establishment, the Vincentian organizations occupied themselves with providing material and moral relief to the poor via the home visit and various auxiliary works. This category of ‘poor’ included a great variety of people in need, including the sick, the elderly, the unemployed, the shamefaced poor, and workers. Throughout the nineteenth century, the latter type of indigent formed the focal point of the Vincentian’s attention. After all, for most of the nineteenth century, poverty was endemic to the life of the wage worker.⁷⁷ After the First World War, however, the living conditions of the working classes improved significantly. Not only did purchasing power increase, but the working classes could also count on increased social support via the numerous workers’ organizations across the ideological spectrum, as well as from the expansion of public social provisions. In combination with the introduction of universal male suffrage in 1893, this steady development of a system of social security created space for the emancipation of the working class. Thanks to the workers’ organization and expanding legislative protection of the workers, their dependence on private charitable and

⁷⁷ Lis, *Social Change and the Labouring Poor*, 127.

philanthropic institutions decreased significantly.⁷⁸

For the Vincentians, these developments created somewhat of an identity crisis because their main target group was not as receptive to their help as they once were. Especially the Society apparently found it hard to let go of the workers because the working class stood at the spill of sociopolitical debates since the early nineteenth century. Refocusing attention away from the workers, then, also meant foregoing an important means to exert moral influence on society and contribute to the establishment of a Christian modernity. This motivated the Society to alter its definition of poverty to exclude the precondition of material necessity, so that when targeting workers, the focus came to be almost exclusively on *moral poverty*. The Ladies, on the other hand, seemed to have been less affected by outside criticism and considered it a logical consequence of the increased living standards of the working class that their attention should shift to other categories of poor in society. Nevertheless, poverty was far from eradicated among the workers, and the Ladies, too, continued to visit workers that were confronted with illness, unemployment, and/or were unable to profit from governmental aid or support from a workers' association. In addition to workers, both the Ladies and the Society increasingly focused on marginalized people in need, such as the shamefaced poor, the unemployed, the disabled, the elderly, and so on.

Interestingly, the Vincentians' observation that the workers often were no longer in a constant state of indigence created a shift in their discourses, whereby workers were now often treated as a different category than the poor. In other words, the Vincentians now referred to workers almost exclusively as 'workers' (French: 'travailleur(s)' or 'ouvrier((è)s)', Dutch: 'arbeid(st)er(s)' or 'werkman(-vrouw)'/ 'werklieden') or used the term 'poor' as an adjective ('poor workers'), while before, the term 'poor' was often used interchangeably with the term 'worker'. This change demonstrates the extent to which the social sphere was reorganized after the First World War, in particular the effects of the workers' associations and governmental social policies on creating opportunities for the emancipation of workers. In turn, these steps in the emancipation of the working class meant that as workers became less dependent on private institutions for their survival, they became less receptive to the aid and guidance offered by the Vincentians. As a consequence, the local conferences of the Society noted, many workers felt embarrassed by the visits of its members and refused to open their doors to welcome them.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, the Vincentians strongly felt that the workers still needed their help, even if they no longer suffered from poverty in the same way as before the war.

⁷⁸ See Chapter 1 of Part III.

⁷⁹ APJB 12.2.1.504 Brieven over de aantrekkelijkheid van het Genootschap na de oorlog en brieven van de conferenties over hun werking (1925-1926).

Therefore, the Vincentians presented themselves as the true advocates of the needs of the working class from the mid-1920s onwards. In their eyes, the emancipation of the workers remained incomplete, for example because many still did not enjoy a fair wage, because their prosperity remained vulnerable (e.g. during the crisis of the early 1930s), because many still lived in slums, and because workers were still considered instruments by their employers rather than partners. For this, the Vincentians blamed the greed of the nineteenth-century industrialists. The lack of social consciousness and compassion of the latter, they argued, had resulted in excessive inequality, which fostered hatred from the lower classes towards the rich and created a fertile ground for socialist ideas to spread. As such, the Vincentians were understanding of the frustrations of the workers, and they did have sympathy for the socialist cause. However, they also considered socialism an aberrance which was driven by destructiveness, fueled by the lower classes' lust for revenge.⁸⁰ However understandable this was to the Vincentians, they maintained that socialism created a false, unattainable ideal of social equality, and only 'the path that leads to Christ' could provide real solutions.⁸¹ According to the Vincentians, the socialists' efforts to destroy the social order could only lead to the degeneration of society, while the Catholic Church proposed a reconstruction of society through the reform and improvement of the people who were part of it so that, in turn, the social relationships between them could ameliorate.⁸²

The Vincentians, like many of the Catholic elites, remained convinced that, fundamentally, material progress was not possible without moral reform. As such, they believed that the increased prosperity among the working classes even had adverse effects on their overall wellbeing, because these improvements had not taken place concomitantly with a moral elevation of the workers.⁸³ According to the Vincentians, the material progress of the workers had created a false sense of security among them, and they failed to realize that what they had gained did not have a sound foundation. Moreover, this 'sudden transition of the former poor into a well-off condition' led the workers to a state of 'intoxication' in which they lost their 'healthy understanding of reality',⁸⁴ and in which they 'animalized' and 'returned to paganism'.⁸⁵ In turn, this disequilibrium resulted in the persistence of immoral behavior that negatively affected

⁸⁰ MSVP August 1925, 240; December 1925, 378-381; MSVP May 1926, 156-157; DLSVPA JV 1924, 15-16; DLSVPB JV 1932, 5; 1933, 5.

⁸¹ MSVP May 1922, 75-76; MSVP April 1934, 88.

⁸² MSVP May 1922, 74-80.

⁸³ MSVP March 1921, 42; March 1926; SVP, *Het Bezoek der Armen en het Genootschap van S. Vincentius a Paulo door een Conferentievoorzitter* (Bruges, 1923), 95-97; SVPHRB JV 1924, 25; DLSVPA JV 1924, 16; 1927, 21.

⁸⁴ MSVP April 1923, 60-61.

⁸⁵ MSVP December 1928, 339.

the physical health of the worker and vice versa, for example alcohol abuse and the workers' pursuit of pleasure in the form of 'bad cinema, pernicious theatrical performances and dangerous lectures' or 'the F-trinity: Film, Foxtrot and Football'.⁸⁶ The Society even expressed concern about the consequences of the introduction of the eight-hour-workday as it meant that workers had more free time and were more likely to come into contact with immoral pastimes.⁸⁷ To combat this moral degeneration or 'moral poverty' of the workers in modern society, the Vincentians proposed an alternative approach that did not require the distribution of material alms, but that still allowed them to conduct home visits to the workers. Instead of providing bread or clothing as a means to open the door to the homes of the workers, the Vincentians tried to adapt their services to the changed needs of the workers.

As they had done since their establishment, the Vincentian organizations offered the families they visited something they thought was useful and desirable to them, and that simultaneously opened the door to moralization. For most of the nineteenth century, this 'something' had been in the form of basic necessities like food, clothing, and coal. By the late nineteenth century, under the influence of the social question and the drastic expansion of the social organizational field, the Vincentians offered the families under their care a combination of goods and services. These goods were comprised of the traditional basic necessities and supplemented with the more flexible 'omnibus-ticket', while the Vincentians' services focused on promoting temperance and foresight among the poor families via, for example, saving funds and mutual aid societies, but also via Catholic initiatives which centered around religious instruction, such as retreats and evening schools. At that time, the Vincentians' offer of goods still functioned as the primary means to be welcomed into the homes of the poor, so that, aside from receiving personalized moral guidance, they could be convinced to engage in the Catholic social organizations promoted by the Vincentians. Interestingly, during the inter-war period, the increased welfare of the workers meant that services came to be the main 'something' that the Vincentians could offer the workers they visited. Therefore, engaging in the Vincentians' services, which always had an essential moralizing component, could no longer solely be a *condition* to receive help, but these services should now be intrinsically attractive enough to the workers so that they could be considered a *gift*. As such, the Vincentians looked for ways to combine utility and moralization in the services they provided to the workers. This search was of particular importance to the Society, which remained highly attached to its influence on the working class as a means to

⁸⁶ MSVP April 1922, 55; May 1927, 146; October 1927, 290-293; September 1927, 264; February 1928, 61-64; May 1928, 133; March 1934, 72; November 1936, 262; DLSVPB JV 1924, 16; 1927, 22-23; DLSVPA JV 1924, 16.

⁸⁷ MSVP September 1922, 143-144.

contribute to the rechristening of society.

One of the most important forms of aid the Vincentians offered the workers during the inter-war period was that of ‘social service’, either during the home visit or via the organizations’ social secretariats.⁸⁸ Since the 1850s, several of the Society’s Central Councils had set up social secretariats where the poor could get information about public social assistance and helpful Catholic social initiatives. They could also turn to the secretariats with very personal inquiries (e.g. tracking missing loved ones). These secretariats proved to be very popular and, in tandem with the expansion of public social assistance and the social organizational field, they were flooded with inquiries during the inter-war period, as exemplified by their extensive archives.⁸⁹ In 1936-1938, the yearly reports from the Antwerp division also mentioned a similar type of secretariat that was ‘able to render real services and proved to be more and more necessary’ and to which the Ladies turned to ‘for the most diverse needs’. More concrete, this secretariat collected and distributed requests for help and information from those in need, comforted them while awaiting a visit from the Ladies, and conveyed their dossiers to the assigned visiting Ladies who were also given additional information about helpful institutions they could refer their families to.⁹⁰

However useful the secretariats were to the workers, the home visit remained the Vincentians’ primary means of action and patronage its purpose. Because the workers were often no longer interested in receiving tickets for essential goods, the Vincentians replaced this offer with that of ‘social service’ at home. This entailed that the Society and the Ladies provided the workers with information about social legislation and workers’ organizations during their visits, thereby expanding the function of the secretariats to become an integral part of the visit. By providing a social service, the Vincentians inscribed their work in the broader trends of Catholic social engagement as well. During the Malines congress of 1936, social services and medico-social assistance were defended as the most important modern method of social assistance. During the discussions on the subject, president of the General Council of the Society in Paris stated that the alms distributed by the organization gradually had to be replaced by social services.⁹¹ In this context, it is noteworthy that the organization of this Malines congress and the active involvement of the Vincentians held significant symbolic importance. In this context, it is noteworthy that the organization of the Malines Congress and the participation of the Vincentians in it were of significant symbolic importance. The

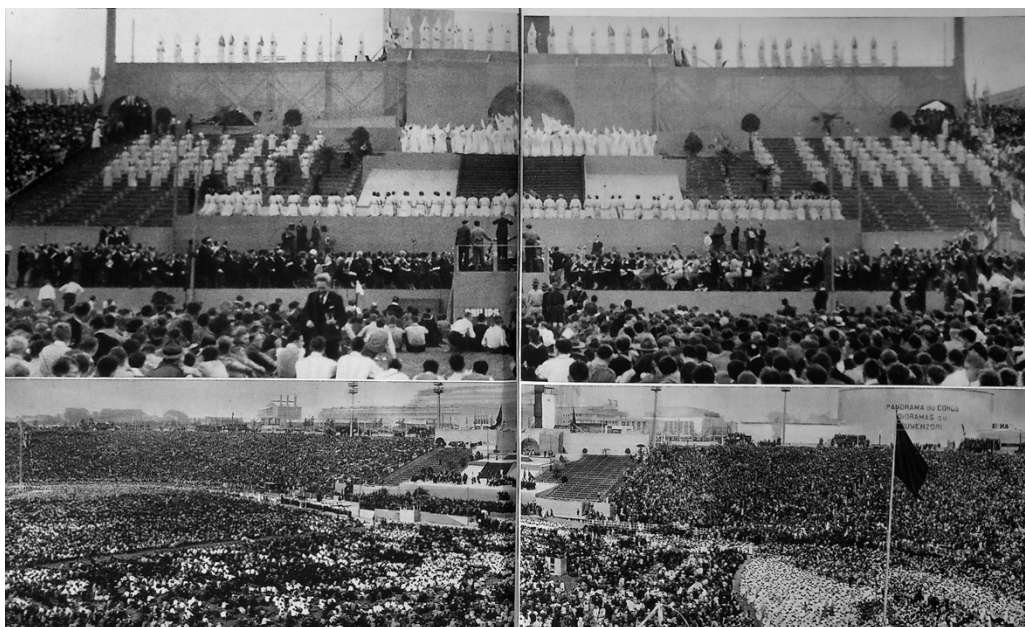
⁸⁸ See also: Dumons, ‘De l’Œuvre Charitable’.

⁸⁹ See for example: ASVPG 2.5.6.1 Een chronologisch overzicht van het sociaal hulpbetoon. Ingevulde formulieren, briefwisseling en krantenknipsels (1899-1947).

⁹⁰ DLSVPA JV 1936, 4; 1938, 4.

⁹¹ A. Meunier, Albert S. J. Muller, and Is Maus ed., *Actes du VI^e Congrès Catholique de Malines, Tome VI: L’Assistance Charitable et l’Hygiène Sociale – La Moralité Publique* (Brussels, 1937), 123.

congress was a true mass event, with the organizers boasting about gathering over 200 000 participants. It featured elaborate religious processions, theatrical performances, and collective prayers.⁹² The congress was part of the Catholic offensive strategy during the interwar period, and the Vincentians enthusiastically eagerly participated. On this occasion, the Ladies were granted not only the opportunity to participate in the discussions but also to contribute to the organization of the congress. Marie-Thérèse van den Steen de Jehay (1859-1941), the general chairwoman of the Ladies in Belgium and the spouse of Ernest Vermeulen de Mianoy (a member of the Society), served as vice-chairwoman alongside Alphonse Halfants (1871-1959), the general president of the Belgian Society, in the section titled ‘charitable assistance and social hygiene’. During this congress, the social significance of charity was strongly underscored – both as a religious principle that should shape social relations in society and as a practice deemed indispensable as a complement to other forms of social assistance.⁹³



The Malines congress of 1936: a mass event

⁹² L. Arras e.a. eds., *VI^e Congrès van Mechelen, MCMXXXVI* (Brussels, 1936).

⁹³ See the various discussions in A. Meunier, Albert S. J. Muller, and Is Maus ed., *Actes du VI^e Congrès Catholique de Malines, Tome VI: L'Assistance Charitable et l'Hygiène Sociale – La Moralité Publique* (Brussels, 1937). The publication of repertoires of social assistance, like *Belgique Charitable*, was related to this.

On the one hand, this social service was something that the workers appreciated more than bread tickets, but on the other, it was also a means for the Vincentians to exert a moral influence on the workers during the visit. After all, the Vincentians only referred the workers to Catholic social organizations, of which they believed they contributed to their moral re-education.⁹⁴ Of course, such an endeavor required much knowledge from the part of the visitor, who now had to be able to efficiently guide the families they visited towards the correct channels to receive governmental support (pensions, unemployment benefits, disability allowances,...) as well as to the diverse offer of Catholic social organizations that could help these families achieve more financial stability (saving funds, mutual aid societies, syndicates,...), the various Catholic vocational schools for adults that could provide them with professional education, the Catholic patronages and schools for youth and children, as well as the many associations and retreats that centered around religious practice (e.g. the Association of Christian Mothers, the Work of Workers' Retreats, the Association of Saint Francis Xavierius,...). As such, the Vincentian visitors were expected to continuously educate themselves and each other about the plethora of Catholic organizations and institutions for the moral and material betterment of the working class. As president J. Quoidbach of the conference of Saint Hubert (in the Belgian province of Luxembourg) noted during the discussions at the Malines congress, the social service offered by the visitor should be interpreted in a broad sense, as a continuation of the Vincentian patronage. The visitor had to take responsibility for the needs of the poor and show initiative, all the while maintaining humility and discretion.⁹⁵

The Ladies held the belief that to streamline referrals, active participation in several Catholic umbrella organizations formed in the 1930s was advantageous, in particular *Caritas Catholica*, created by the episcopate as an umbrella organization for the social and medical Catholic works.⁹⁶ In contrast, the Society maintained its conviction that the organization could operate more efficiently without the additional bureaucracy and associated costs that such a commitment would entail, although it eventually yielded during the Second World War.⁹⁷ Another way for the Ladies of Charity to educate its

⁹⁴ See for example: MSVP October 1921, 152; June 1922, 95-96; June 1925, 173-175; July 1930, 21; SVP, *De Geest van S. Vincentiusgenootschap en de Ware Verhouding der Conferentiën tot de Liefdadigheid en tot de Sociale Werken. Voordracht van E. H. F. Cap* (Brugge, 1924), 14-15; DLSVPA JV 1934, 7.

⁹⁵ A. Meunier, Albert S. J. Muller, and Is Maus ed., *Actes du VI^e Congrès Catholique de Malines, Tome VI: L'Assistance Charitable et l'Hygiène Sociale – La Moralité Publique* (Brussels, 1937), 123.

⁹⁶ DLSVPB JV 1933, 4; 1935, 5-6; 1936, 4; DLSVPA JV 1935, 3-4; 1936, 1-2.

⁹⁷ Alphonse Halflants, president of the Belgian General Council, explained that, although the episcopate had encouraged all charitable and hygienist works to participate in *Caritas Catholica*, he considered it impractical for the Society. The conferences were already facing challenges in collecting sufficient resources, and the additional cost would adversely affect the assistance provided to the poor. Nevertheless, Halflants

members on the needs of the workers and on the good work of the Catholic institutions was through excursions. For example, the secretariat of the Antwerp division organized a study circle that investigated the issues that were of importance to the lower classes, in particular the workers, so that the Ladies could adapt their approach accordingly. In 1936, this study circle organized an excursion with all the Antwerp Ladies that commenced at a factory of baked goods where they assessed the working conditions of female factory workers, followed by a visit to the center of the JOC (a Catholic Action organization that promoted the apostolate of workers towards workers), continuing with the inauguration of a new playground where Catholic monitors took care of workers' children during the holidays, and ending with a tour of an institution where 'abnormal' children received adjusted education. By educating themselves, the Ladies believed that they could 'reach the maximum in their mission of charity', and the example of the Antwerp division was praised by the other divisions as well.⁹⁸

While the Vincentians were convinced that working together with other Catholic organizations and institutions, whether directly or through referral, was beneficial to the moral elevation of the working class, they remained highly concerned about the deterioration of the family and wished to combat this firsthand. Two elements were of particular importance in this battle for the Christian family: the degenerative effect of socialism and the seductions of immoral entertainment. Socialism, for starters, remained the number one enemy of the Vincentians, and they considered it an evil ideology that led good families to stray from God, thereby destroying the family as the fundament of society. Interestingly, during the period between the late nineteenth century and the First World War, the Vincentians thought that the men of the working families were most at risk of falling into the trap of socialism and they appealed to women to exert their moral influence to keep them on the Christian path. During the inter-war period, however, the Vincentians became more anxious about women being misguided by pagan ideologies, which they considered a direct attack on the Christian family. In 1922, for example, the Society explained this issue as follows:

With their free love, their voluntary consent to motherhood, their equality of sexes, their emancipation of woman and her absolute independence from the man, and with all their other nonsense, they work for one cause, and that is: to take us back twenty centuries; to revive the disorder, abominations, and infamy of ancient paganism, and thus destroy the benefits brought to society

encouraged members with sufficient means to individually engage with Caritas Catholica (A. Meunier, Albert S. J. Muller, and Is Maus ed., *Actes du VI^e Congrès Catholique de Malines, Tome VI: L'Assistance Charitable et l'Hygiène Sociale – La Moralité Publique* (Brussels, 1937), 131). See also: Dhaene and Wynants, 'Achteruitgang en Crisis', 116; 119; 121-122.

⁹⁸ DLSVPA JV 1936, 2-4; 1938, 4; DLSVPB JV 1936, 14-16.

*by the Christian arrangement of the home.*⁹⁹

Ten years later, the Ladies proclaimed that their enemies continued to try and corrupt women, whose ‘characteristic virtues: piety, persuasive kindness, devotion, directly oppose their abominable enterprise of dechristianization’.¹⁰⁰ The ‘anticonception propaganda’, too, was something the Ladies vehemently condemned.¹⁰¹ As such, the Vincentians did not consider women’s emancipation as progress, quite the opposite. They were not alone in this; the stigmatization of women’s work, especially in the factories, strongly increased during the inter-war years, and the idealization of the mother at the hearth reached its height. A direct link was established in these discourses between women’s work in industry, the degeneration of the family, and social unrest. Especially Catholics loudly proclaimed this standpoint, hence their (failed) efforts to restrict married women’s work during the crisis of the early 1930s. In the eyes of the Vincentians and other Catholics, the solution to this problem lay in keeping women at their hearth, and if necessary, they could apply themselves to cottage industry there. That cottage industry was associated with low wages, long workdays, and child labor, was considered of secondary importance to women fulfilling their familial role in the Christian family.¹⁰²

In this battle against socialism and the degeneration of the Christian family, the Vincentians could employ various instruments. At the top of the list remained exerting moral influence during the home visit. The Society explained that even without offering them material goods or social service, the workers’ families often were still welcoming of a listening ear from a Vincentian friend, and that building good, trusting relationships with their local communities could provide the visitor with plenty opportunities to advise the workers’ families, who often did not know any better.¹⁰³ During the home visits, the Vincentians urged the members of the families to participate in the working men’s or housewives circles for joint religious instruction, or to take part in the family nights they organized to bring together and teach mothers, fathers, and children about their familial duties.¹⁰⁴ In addition, the Vincentians considered the distribution of good press and reading material one of the most powerful tools at their disposal. The ‘apostolate through

⁹⁹ MSVP June 1922, 91.

¹⁰⁰ DLSVPB JV 1932, 4-5.

¹⁰¹ DLSVPA JV 1924, 16.

¹⁰² Gubin and Valérie Piette, ‘Mères au Travail’, 43; Marissal, *Moeders en Vaders*, 22; 28-29; Jacques, *Les Féministes Belges*, 122. See also the discussions held during the Malines congresses (A. Meunier, Albert S. J. Muller, and Is Maus ed., *Actes du VI^e Congrès Catholique de Malines, Tome VI: L’Assistance Charitable et l’Hygiène Sociale – La Moralité Publique* (Brussels, 1937)).

¹⁰³ SVP, *Het Bezoek der Armen en het Genootschap van S. Vincentius a Paulo door een Conferentievoorzitter* (Bruges, 1923), 8-11; MSVP April 1924, 123-127.

¹⁰⁴ MSVP March 1933, 60.

press' was a difficult one, however, since the enemies' propaganda was 'clever and attractive'.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the Vincentians were prepared to spend a more significant part of their budgets on the distribution of Catholic reading material, which could range from newspapers to short devotional texts and informative books. Often, they bought subscriptions to Catholic magazines for the workers' families and admonish them not to bring bad press into their homes.¹⁰⁶ As the Ladies explained, material and moral prosperity went hand in hand, and for good morality to prosper, intelligence was needed as well. Therefore, good press could educate the workers on good morals and help them defend their beliefs against the 'sophisms of the factory'. Moreover, a well-educated worker was considered more likely to make the right decision during the elections, and good press therefore directly contributed to maintaining Catholic values in society via political channels.¹⁰⁷ This way, the Vincentians inscribed themselves in the overarching Catholic 'Offensive Movement' (*Offensiefbeweging*) which aimed at rechristening society by use of propaganda, dispersed via traditional as well as modern means of communication.¹⁰⁸

That workers exerted a good influence on each other was important to the Vincentians as well. In line with the Catholic Action ideals, which promoted religious apostolate within social groups of the same class and/or gender (i.e. women to women, worker to worker, youth to youth,...), the Vincentians set out to convince the members of these groups propagate Christian morality within their communities. As such, they incorporated the strategies of Catholic Action, while at the same time staying true to their mission to promote cross-class understanding and harmony through their own work with the lower classes. To promote this type of apostolate, the Vincentians urged the members of the families they visited to join their designated Catholic Action organization, or simply to spread the Catholic message in their environment in an informal manner, although they preferred the first option.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, the Society,

¹⁰⁵ DLSVPB JV 1937, 15. On 'hostile reading material' and the benefits of apostolate through press, see also: MSVP September 1921, 141; September 1925, 269-270; February 1926, 62-63; July 1926, 216-218; January 1927, 23-24; February 1928, 62-63; April 1929, 119-123; September 1930, 29-32; September 1931, 23-26; August 1934, 188; April 1935, 82; June 1936, 144; July 1937, 165-168; February 1940, 32; SVP, *Het Bezoek der Armen en het Genootschap van S. Vincentius a Paulo door een Conferentievoorzitter* (Bruges, 1923), 51-52; SVPHRB JV 1924, 14; 21; DLSVPA JV 1927, 20-24; 1935, 8; DLSVPB JV 1932, 8; 1936, 6; 1937, 15.

¹⁰⁶ Popular magazines were for example *Zonnelandje*, *Het Goede Zaad*, *Gazet van Antwerpen*, *De Christene Vrouw*, *Ons Volk*, *De Ster*, *De Waarheid*, *Le Bien Public*.

¹⁰⁷ DLSVPA JV 1927, 20-21.

¹⁰⁸ The Dhaene, 'De Offensiefbeweging in Vlaanderen'.

¹⁰⁹ During the inter-war period, urging the visited to take part in Catholic Action organizations became a standard practice both for the Ladies and the Society, and this imperative was therefore repeated throughout their sources of this time.

adamant on maintaining influence on the workers, opened its own ranks to workers and created workers' conferences within the framework of the Society itself already from the early twenties onwards. These conferences formed an addition to the Society's working men's circles, in which men were engaged in joint religious practice, listened to moral advice, and were urged to share their struggles and help each other overcome them. In the workers' conferences too, the focus lay on self-sanctification and fraternal support on the path towards it, but the workers also took part in providing material relief and moral instruction to the poor.¹¹⁰

A last element in the Vincentians' work with the workers that I would like to discuss here, is their continued concern for the quality of their homes. Like in the period between the late nineteenth century and the First World War, the Vincentians thought that having a pleasant home for the father to return to after work and for the mother to raise her children in was of essential importance to restore the Christian family. Back then, the Vincentians' focus was especially on the responsibility of the mother to make the home clean, orderly, and pious (i.e. by decorating the house with religious paraphernalia). In the inter-war period, however, the Vincentians also took part in the anti-slum movement, presenting themselves as the defenders of the workers' needs vis-à-vis the property owners and the factory bosses. In the eyes of the Vincentians, the increased financial prosperity of the workers was of little use if they continued to be confounded in unsanitary, low-quality homes. Even worse, bad living conditions, they believed, also negatively affected the morality of the family. The Ladies, for example, stated that bad living conditions not only generate disease, but also created a 'dangerous promiscuity'. 'There where the sexes are shamefully close to each other', they stated in 1927, 'sin has no more secrets for the most tender age. Many children are, for this reason, prematurely acquainted with sexual matters. When the housing, this indispensable framework of the familial life, is reduced to the dimensions of a slum, this is to say to 1, 2 or 3 small rooms, most often without air nor light, for a family of more than 3 children, cleanliness and decency become practically impossible'. Either the family members spent as much time outside the house as a consequence of these conditions, which was detrimental to the health of the family life and had a negative effect on natality, or, even worse, they chose to accept it and lived like animals. Conversely, in places where slums had successfully been (partially) removed, the Ladies claimed, immediately had a positive effect on criminality, alcoholism, criminality, moral deprivation, and the hatred between classes.¹¹¹ This opinion was shared by the Society, and the improvement of the homes of the workers and the poor became an important issue to the local conferences. So, in

¹¹⁰ See for example: MSVP July 1926, 222-224; November 1926, 326. The Society's working men's conferences were also applauded by the Ladies: DLSVPA JV 1924, 12.

¹¹¹ DLSVPA JV 1927, 13-14.

order to further this battle against the slums, the Vincentians engaged in organizations such as the ‘national league against the slums’, which grouped several other organizations working towards the same goal, and they called upon the state to apply more means to this cause. In addition, they helped workers’ families acquire credits to purchase new homes, sometimes directly providing financial means to this end or even, in the case of the Society, building houses for the workers and poor themselves.¹¹² Related to this, both the Society and the Ladies contributed to the creation of city-gardens where the families could grow their own vegetables, which allowed them to escape the slums and work on their physical and moral wellbeing in the outdoors.¹¹³

Although the Vincentians were able to find means through which they could continue to assist the workers in both a material and moral sense without the need for alms in the form of basic necessities, they still remained attached to their traditional way of working. Their increased efforts in providing a social service and other non-material sources of (moral) aid to the workers were an addition to their already existing charitable practices, and the greatest part of the organizations’ expenses still went to the purchase of basic necessities for the poor. Incidentally, this did not include the shamefaced poor, because as we will see in the next subchapter, this category of poor usually received discreet financial groups. Instead, the information provided in the organizations’ published reports and in the visitation questionnaires indicate that they focused strongly on poor individuals and families that were confronted with multiple difficulties. These included workers’ families with a very large number of children, the unemployed, the handicapped (‘cripple’, ‘mutilated’, ‘paralyzed’, ‘blind’, ‘mentally retarded’ or ‘abnormal’,...), the chronically sick, the elderly, and single mothers (widows or women that were left by their husbands). With regards to these groups, the Vincentians continued in much of the same vein as before, meaning that they conducted home visits during which they provided material relief in the form of clothing, furniture, food, and medicine, and they tried to convince those who were in need of medical or specialized care to admit themselves into institutions such as homes for the elderly, schools for ‘abnormal children’, or institutions for people with a mental or physical handicap.¹¹⁴

Looking at the visitation reports and the letters of the poor requesting help of the Society, it appears that ‘regular’ workers’ families with no other problems than low

¹¹² The topic of the shortage of houses was mentioned in many of the Vincentian’s sources of the interbellum. See for example: MSVP October 1921, 153-154; November 1923, 171-175; January 1925, 13-21; December 1928, 327; March 1932, 52-55; March 1934, 67; March 1936, 67; October 1938, 220-221; SVP, *Het Bezoek der Armen en het Genootschap van S. Vincentius a Paulo door een Conferentievoorzitter* (Bruges, 1923), 44-46; DLSVPA JV 1927, 13-19; 1934, 6; 1927, 14; 17; DLSVPB JV 1932, 10-11; 1933, 5.

¹¹³ MSVP October 1921, 153-154; SVPHRB JV 1924, 15; DLSVPB JV 1931, 13.

¹¹⁴ ASVP Conferentie Geraardsbergen 1.4 Inlichtingsbladen, notities, briefwisseling; ASVPA 1.5.1 Inlichtingen betreffende behoeftigen. Brieven, lijsten, notities, briefjes met hulpaanvragen (1926-1945).

wages (no illnesses, no exceptionally large number of kids,...) were mostly denied during the inter-war period.¹¹⁵ Some conferences noted that some types of low-wage workers, like miners, could still benefit from material assistance, but in general, the Vincentians no longer considered real indigence or misery as endemic to wage labor. With so many new social protections in place and an ever-expanding offer of social organizations for workers, they figured that the average worker should be able to avoid indigence or was otherwise best helped by social service and moral instruction to promote temperance. Thus, it is not rare to find in these archives emotional letters written by poor workers asking for help and seeing 'denied' written underneath them. Often, they did not ask for much, like the woman who, in the midst of the crisis of the early thirties, pleaded to the conference of St. Geraardsbergen for clothing and shoes for her husband so that he could go to the funeral of his aunt, while also describing the suffering and hunger of her family of five.¹¹⁶

However, many letters were answered positively as well, and it is equally possible to find many letters of the poor expressing gratitude for the help they received. What stands out is that the question who to help remained a question to be answered on a case-by-case basis and in consultation with the other conference members. These decisions were sometimes difficult to make, especially when there were kids involved. For example, the conference of St. Geraardsbergen received a letter from a pastor in the winter of 1929 asking to pay a visit to a family which had just gotten their tenth child. Although the father and mother had their 'faults', the pastor said, the children were at great danger 'for body and soul'. Some time later, the family was visited by a member who wrote a long report on the family's 'black misery'. According to the visitor, their plight was caused to a large extent by the father's drinking and aggressiveness. The visitor described how the father abused the mother, beating her and locking her outside in the dead of winter, while the many kids ran bare footed in the mud because their father had wasted his meagre salary. When the kids went to beg for food from the farmers nearby, they were scolded and chased away, and the mother declared that she would rather have her children die of privation than hear such insults. Impressed with the mother's self-worth, the visitor wrote that even though her heart was weak and she suffered anemia, it was still a heart with moral fortitude, self-worth, and honesty. Perhaps to sway the other members in favor of helping the family, he also noted that the father had lately bettered his ways a bit.

In reports such as these, in which the visitors extensively described their visits and

¹¹⁵ ASVP Conferentie Geraardsbergen 1.4 Inlichtingsbladen, notities, briefwisseling; ASVPA 1.5.1 Inlichtingen betreffende behoeftigen. Brieven, lijsten, notities, briefjes met hulpaanvragen (1926-1945); ASVPHRB 14.11 Tussenkomst van de Hoofdraad voor individuele armen (1936-1986); ABRB 7.1.2 Inlichtingsformulier over de bezochte families (1930-1944).

¹¹⁶ ASVP Conferentie Geraardsbergen 1.4 Inlichtingsbladen, notities, briefwisseling

their impressions of the character of the poor, their living situation, and their physical state, their compassion for the poor families and their astonishment at the misery in these homes were obvious. Struck by the sight of hungry children, one visitor noted that 'luckily they do not realize the extent of their misery'. Indeed, even though many worker's families were gradually able to enjoy more prosperity during the inter-war period, they were still highly sensitive to crises, their homes were still often inadequate, and sickness and a lack of medical care were still extremely common. In this sense, many of the Ladies and Society's conferences continued to receive plenty requests for help, so much so that they refused requests for help of people who were clearly in need, especially during the early 1930s.

Beste ^u Mienheer Lijve Bant
 die werdt nu den Woensdag begraven
 mijn
 Anvaort Beste Grooten
 Mheer Petrus De Blomden en
 syne Vrouw Heertelant
 Idegem Blijdries Voersene
 Gelief zoo goed te zijn van et
 mij een kaartje te sturen of gij
 mij kunt helpen
 duisent maal dank
 op voorhand
 Geweiger
 geweert
 16/6/32

Letter from someone requesting help to the conference of Sint Geraardsbergen, denied in 1932

1.2. *The superior suffering of the shamefaced poor*

While the Vincentians' relationship with the workers changed during the inter-war period, they rediscovered another type of poor that would quickly gain much importance in their work: the shamefaced poor. This category of poor had also been on the Vincentians' radar since the mid-nineteenth century, so they had already built experience with the shamefaced poor.¹¹⁷ This category of poor was defined as people who were once well-of but had lost their wealth as a consequence of economic crises, sickness, death of the main provider, or war. After the First World War, the shamefaced poor started to take up a much larger portion of the families visited by the Vincentians. On the one hand, this development took place because the Vincentians searched for a target audience that allowed them to practice their charity in the traditional way, meaning that they could perform home visits, distribute material alms, and provide moral and spiritual support. On the other, the Vincentians also claimed that the number of shamefaced poor had increased significantly after the war, and that their needs were greater than ever.

It was indeed the case that the war had changed the socio-economic status of many people; some had been able to gain wealth on the black market or by collaborating with the German occupier, while others had lost their resources because of the material destruction created by the war and/or the skyrocketing prices on the black market, which was often the only way to acquire basic necessities during the war. Already during the war, charitable and philanthropic organizations became aware of the existence of impoverished (petty) bourgeoisie and middle class, and several initiatives were set up to provide them with financial means and food without them having to undergo the shame of standing in line for soup with the lower classes. In her book on food consumption during the First World War, historian Diane De Keyzer, for example, describes several of these initiatives, mostly non-Catholic, which supported the shamefaced poor with financial help or more discrete aid in the form of food. Discrete in the sense that instead of having to stand in line and consume the food on site, the shamefaced poor could pick up the food and eat it at home. Interestingly, the language used to describe the food also changed in function of this target audience, with the French word 'soupe' (soup) being replaced by the fancier word 'potage' (in archaic English this translates to 'pottage').¹¹⁸

According to the Vincentians, the problem of poverty gone through an important change because of the war. While the prosperity of workers had increased drastically, the former middle class and petty bourgeoisie were often confronted with impoverishment, and therefore, in the eyes of the Vincentians, poverty in general had

¹¹⁷ See Chapter 2 of Part I.

¹¹⁸ De Keyzer, *Nieuwe Meesters, Magere Tijden*, 278-280. See also: De Maeyer, Heyrman and Quaghebeur, 'Een Glorierijk Verleden', 300-301.

not become less of a problem but had shifted to other socio-economic categories of people. At the same time, the Vincentians stated that these shamefaced poor were confronted with a lack of support from the rest of society. They were not organized in social organizations like the workers, and they could not count on the same level of assistance from the government and private charitable/philanthropic institutions, in addition to often being too ashamed to apply for help. As such, the Vincentians created a subdivision in the category of poor to highlight the difference between shamefaced poor and ‘regular’ poor: the shamefaced poor were *impoverished*, and therefore their poverty was *new*, not passed down along generations, nor endemic to their socio-economic position. Incidentally, during the interbellum, the term ‘new poor’ also made its entrance in the Vincentians’ texts because they thought this term was less offensive to the impoverished and because they thought there should be no shame in poverty, itself an indication of the great tact with which the Vincentians treated these poor.¹¹⁹ highlighted the aspect of shame, albeit less explicitly. In the subsequent years, these various terms were employed interchangeably, although ‘shamefaced poor’ remained the preferred label. I believe this preference was not coincidental because the Vincentians consistently underscored the notion that the poverty of the shamefaced poor carried more weight than the endemic poverty experienced by nineteenth-century workers. Therefore, a crucial element in this qualitative difference in experiencing poverty was the sense of shame, evident in the Vincentians’ continued use of the term ‘shamefaced poor’.

As such, the Vincentians painted a picture of the shamefaced poor as *victims* of crisis or sickness and of a lack of social support. Their poverty was not their own fault, not the result of a sinful lifestyle, a lack of foresight or intemperance; their poverty was caused by *force majeure*. As members of the upper classes themselves, the Vincentians related to the suffering of the shamefaced poor, and they were appalled at the lack of support these impoverished received. In 1921, when the shamefaced poor started to be rediscovered as a valuable charitable outlet, the Society declared that had Ozanam still been alive, he would have been more compassionate to the faith of the shamefaced poor than the current legislators and statesmen.¹²⁰ In the eyes of the Vincentians, the suffering of the shamefaced poor stood in stark contrast to the ‘shameless luxury and crazy rush

¹¹⁹ MSVP March 1921, 39; October 1921, 151-152; SVP, *Het Bezoek der Armen en het Genootschap van S. Vincentius a Paulo door een Conferentievoorzitter* (Bruges, 1923), 96; SVP, *De Geest van S. Vincentiusgenootschap en de Ware Verhouding der Conferentiën tot de Liefdadigheid en tot de Sociale Werken. Voordracht van E. H. F. Cap* (Brugge, 1924), 10; SVP, *L'Œuvre des Nouveaux Pauvres (S. Jean Népomucène). Rapport Fait à la Réunion Extraordinaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul de Belgique le 6 Septembre 1924 par le Baron Verhaegen* (Ghent, 1924), 2.

¹²⁰ MSVP October 1921, 152.

towards pleasure in many workers' families'.¹²¹ Because the poverty of the shamefaced poor remained hidden and they did not ask for help, moreover, the Vincentians believed that their material condition was often even worse than that of the nineteenth-century poor had been.¹²² Not only were the physical circumstances of the shamefaced poor dire, they were also confronted with greater psychological and moral suffering. Their memories of a better past, their shame, and the absence of a space where they could voice their frustrations (like a social organization), resulted in them suffering silently and retreating into hidden misery.¹²³ Often, the Vincentians stressed, one could not even tell that these people were suffering. They clung to their old lives and kept their honor high, so they presented themselves to the outside world as if nothing was going on, dressing in their old clothes, keeping the insides of their homes hidden from view, and generally trying to maintain face.¹²⁴

Thus, the moral suffering of the shamefaced poor did not result from a loss of faith, but a consequence of their shame and regret. The Vincentians painted a picture of the shamefaced poor as morally pure people, fellow members of the *domesticos fidei*. Their troubles were material and psychological, and they usually did not require conversion, although they could be helped to develop their faith better.¹²⁵ The idea that the shamefaced poor were morally pure was another way for the Vincentians to highlight the difference between them and the workers, the latter being believed to be increasingly tempted by socialism and other pagan ideologies. As such, the Vincentians considered good morality and adherence to Catholic faith an intrinsic part of being a shamefaced poor, thereby creating a definition of the shamefaced poor that, on the one hand, excluded impoverished people who were non-Catholic, and that, on the other hand, justified the time and means they spent on the shamefaced poor. These elements combined – shame, silence, great physical suffering, moral purity – the Vincentians declared, meant that the shamefaced poor could be considered a superior type of poor

¹²¹ SVP, *L'Œuvre des Nouveaux Pauvres (S. Jean Népomucène). Rapport Fait à la Réunion Extraordinaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul de Belgique le 6 Septembre 1924 par le Baron Verhaegen* (Ghent, 1924), 1.

¹²² SVP, *L'Œuvre des Nouveaux Pauvres (S. Jean Népomucène). Rapport Fait à la Réunion Extraordinaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul de Belgique le 6 Septembre 1924 par le Baron Verhaegen* (Ghent, 1924), 2;

¹²³ SVP, *L'Œuvre des Nouveaux Pauvres (S. Jean Népomucène). Rapport Fait à la Réunion Extraordinaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul de Belgique le 6 Septembre 1924 par le Baron Verhaegen* (Ghent, 1924), 2.

¹²⁴ MSVP September 1927, 276; December 1937, 274; May 1939, 107-108; DLSVP, *Vereeniging der Dames van Liefde van St-Vincentius a Paulo te Antwerpen* (Antwerp, 1934), 7-8.

¹²⁵ This can be deduced from the various examples of shamefaced poor in the reports of the organizations' work (visit reports, yearly reports,...), which almost always mention the good morality and piety of the shamefaced individuals that were helped.

that allowed for the practice of superior charity. ‘There we finally have the ‘King of the poor’’, the Society’s instruction manual for the poor visit of 1923 proclaimed, ‘whom the members of the Society of Saint Vincent can visit more often at the foot of the Tabernacle, to implore the prosperity of the works of the Society and the salvation of its members’.¹²⁶

The image and definition of the shamefaced poor created by the Vincentians presented them as the archetype of deserving and worthy poor, and their efforts to help these impoverished reflected their admiration for them. Indeed, the Vincentians provided exceptional, adapted aid to the shamefaced poor, both with regards to the types of material aid and the way this aid was delivered. The first step was to get into contact with the shamefaced poor. This was challenging, because the feelings of shame prevented the shamefaced poor of asking for help directly and they tried to hide their poverty. Therefore, the Vincentians relied on information being passed to them by third parties, such as the parish priests or friends of the organization who knew of the shamefaced poor, or they had to go look for them by going door to door in the area of their local conferences.¹²⁷ Shamefaced poor asking for help directly apparently was a rare occurrence, although the sources do indicate that this happened more frequently from the 1930s onwards, presumably because of the effects of the economic crisis and/or because the Vincentians’ work with the shamefaced poor became more widely known.¹²⁸

After obtaining some general information on the circumstances of the shamefaced poor, the Vincentians paid them a visit. Unlike when visiting other types of poor, they conducted these visits alone and not in pairs. The reason for this was that the Vincentians believed that discretion was extremely important to the shamefaced poor, and this way the visitor avoided inciting even more shame. In addition, only experienced and skillful visitors were selected by the organizations to conduct these visits, and not seldomly it was the president of the local conference who performed at least the first visit. This practice, too, was meant to convey respect to the shamefaced poor.¹²⁹ During the visit, then, the Vincentians first determined whether or not the visited could actually be considered shamefaced poor. For one, there had to be some kind of proof that these were

¹²⁶ SVP, *Het Bezoek der Armen en het Genootschap van S. Vincentius a Paulo door een Conferentievoorzitter* (Bruges, 1923), 96.

¹²⁷ MSVP September 1927, 276; December 1937, 274; May 1939, 107-108; ASVPA 1.5.2 “Schamele armen”. Briefwisseling i.v.m. hulpverlening, verzoeken om ondersteuning en leningen; DLSVPB JV, 1931, 13; DLSVPA JV 1927, 5-6.

¹²⁸ See for example in: ASVPA 1.5.2 “Schamele armen”. Briefwisseling i.v.m. hulpverlening, verzoeken om ondersteuning en leningen.

¹²⁹ SVP, *Het Bezoek der Armen en het Genootschap van S. Vincentius a Paulo door een Conferentievoorzitter* (Bruges, 1923), 24; SVP, *L’Œuvre des Nouveaux Pauvres (S. Jean Népomucène). Rapport Fait à la Réunion Extraordinaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul de Belgique le 6 Septembre 1924 par le Baron Verhaegen* (Ghent, 1924), 3-4.

people who had once been financially comfortable. This proof could be in the form of information gathered from external sources, such as trustworthy people (from the elite) vouching for them, confirmation of old employers, or even statements from the bank. Physical remnants of the former life of the shamefaced poor, such as nice furniture, could also serve as proof, and the Vincentians noted that these poor often clung to a few pieces of old furniture and clothing as tangible memories of better times. However, many shamefaced poor had also been forced by necessity to sell their old belongings, and based on the visit reports of the Vincentians, it seems to me that they often accepted shamefaced poor based on their word.¹³⁰ Aside from assessing the material situation of the shamefaced poor, their moral state was also of importance when determining whether they belonged to this category. After all, the Vincentians considered religious faith and practice as intrinsic characteristics of the shamefaced poor, and they made few exceptions in this regard.¹³¹

After having conducted the first home visit and having determined that they were dealing with shamefaced poor, the Vincentians returned to provide them with material and moral alms. These material alms were often given in the form of money, which drastically differed from the regular food tickets they gave to other categories of poor. Again, this decision was made to protect the honor of the shamefaced poor and to not further increase their shame.¹³² Nevertheless, it was not uncommon for the Vincentians to bring them clothing and furniture as well.¹³³ Also of importance in this respect were the Vincentians efforts to help the shamefaced poor regain employment by providing them with professional re-education or actively seeking employment for them via the Vincentians' networks, at least if the cause of their poverty did not lie in illness or age.¹³⁴ Even though the Vincentians considered having good morals as a necessary characteristic of the shamefaced poor, they believed that administering moral alms to them was often even more important than providing material relief. Contrary to their

¹³⁰ ASVPA 1.5.2 "Schamele armen". Briefwisseling i.v.m. hulpverlening, verzoeken om ondersteuning en leningen.

¹³¹ When speaking of 'real shamefaced poor' in the reports of their visits, the Vincentians always mentioned their Christian faith and morals (ASVPA 1.5.2 "Schamele armen". Briefwisseling i.v.m. hulpverlening, verzoeken om ondersteuning en leningen). I found only one example of a shamefaced poor woman who had neglected her religious duties for over forty years and was led to the right path again by the Ladies, which they declared a 'miracle' (DLSVPB JV 1932, 7).

¹³² MSVP May 1925, 157; December 1936, 271.

¹³³ See for example: MSVP November 1934, 255. The expense reports of conferences specialized in shamefaced poor (from both organizations) usually also mention diverse goods in addition to monetary alms.

¹³⁴ SVP, *L'Œuvre des Nouveaux Pauvres (S. Jean Népomucène). Rapport Fait à la Réunion Extraordinaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul de Belgique le 6 Septembre 1924 par le Baron Verhaegen* (Ghent, 1924), 6; DLSVP, *Vereeniging der Dames van Liefde van St-Vincentius a Paulo te Antwerpen* (Antwerp, 1934), 7-8.

work with the workers, the goal of this moral guidance was not to proselytize or combat socialist ideas. Instead, moral guidance of the shamefaced poor entailed relieving their shame and working towards resignation, ultimately opening the door to redemptive suffering. As I explained in more detail in Part I,¹³⁵ redemptive suffering entailed offering one's suffering to God, thereby coming closer to walking in the footsteps of Christ and contributing to the remission of one's own sins as well as those of others. In turn, this sacrifice gave meaning to the suffering of the poor and made it lighter burden to bear. According to the Vincentians, the shamefaced poor were well suited to practice redemptive suffering. After all, the Society claimed, Christ himself had been a (voluntary) shamefaced poor who had 'chosen to be born in a stable, and lie in a trough, and who did not hesitate to identify Himself with the hungry, with the outcasts, with the shabbily clothed, with the sick, with the condemned in dungeons and galleys: whatever you did for them, you did it for me!'.¹³⁶ Therefore, the Vincentians encouraged the shamefaced poor to take His example and offer their suffering to God and to the rest of society. An essential aspect in this transformation of the suffering of the shamefaced poor, was to teach them a different way to deal with their shame. Shame was not a bad thing in itself, on the contrary, the virtue of *verecundia* (modesty, bashfulness, respect, knowing one's place) comprised an element of shame. However, the Vincentians stressed that the state of poverty, so strongly valued in Catholic faith, should never incite shame, and teaching the shamefaced poor the worth of poverty in turn contributed to the salvation of their visitor.¹³⁷

As such, the specific characteristics of the shamefaced poor (their silent suffering and shame, their good morality, and their potential for redemptive suffering) provided the Vincentians with the opportunity to practice charity with a deep spiritual value for the shamefaced poor themselves, the Vincentians, as well as society as a whole. This meant that the Vincentians main priority was to relieve the most urgent physical suffering and to comfort them with genuine compassion. The material alms received by the shamefaced poor were not substantial, however. The Vincentians regretted that giving out monetary alms to them weighed heavily on their budgets, while their income had significantly decreased immediately after the war and due to the crisis of the early 1930s.¹³⁸ One conference specialized in shamefaced poor, for example, noted that the syndicates calculated that the budget of a household of four persons should minimally be 885 francs per month, while this conference only foresaw 360 francs a household of

¹³⁵ See Chapter 2 of Part I.

¹³⁶ MSVP March 1938, 59.

¹³⁷ SVP, *L'Œuvre des Nouveaux Pauvres (S. Jean Népomucène). Rapport Fait à la Réunion Extraordinaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul de Belgique le 6 Septembre 1924 par le Baron Verhaegen* (Ghent, 1924), 7.

¹³⁸ MSVP April 1931, 15-16; DLSVPB JV 1937, 9.

the same size.¹³⁹ As such, the Vincentians only provided meager material support, just enough to prevent the shamefaced poor from ending up on the street. This was not necessarily remarkable because the Vincentians had always prioritized moral instruction of the poor and considered the distribution of material alms a means to this end and not a goal *an sich*. However, it is noteworthy that the Vincentians therefore did not set out to restore the shamefaced poor in their former social position, despite acknowledging that the shamefaced poor were people like them (read: members of the elite).¹⁴⁰ Sometimes, the Vincentians even encountered shamefaced poor that were ex-members of their organizations!¹⁴¹

Nowhere in the sources have I found any indication that the Vincentians attempted to restore the status of the shamefaced poor, much less a case in which the shamefaced poor was able to regain their former wealth thanks to the Vincentians (or at all, for that matter). This is interesting because the Vincentians have often been described in historical research as protectors of the status quo, and specifically of the elite.¹⁴² Moreover, charitable aid to the shamefaced poor specifically has also been described as an attempt to *prevent* downward social mobility, an opinion expressed for example by Dutch social historian Marco Van Leeuwen.¹⁴³ Yet, if maintaining the power of the elite was the Vincentians' main goal, they could have decided to only focus on shamefaced poor and helped them more actively restore their former status and wealth. Instead, the Vincentians generally provided relief to a diversified collection of poor (aside from the few specialized conferences), and while they did try to help them find a new occupation if they were still able to work (which they usually were not), this service was not reserved for the shamefaced poor ether. The sources do indicate a strong sense of familiarity, respect, and mutual understanding between the Vincentians and the shamefaced poor, but this did not translate into an urge to try and restore the latter's former wealth and

¹³⁹ SVP, *L'Œuvre des Nouveaux Pauvres (S. Jean Népomucène). Rapport Fait à la Réunion Extraordinaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul de Belgique le 6 Septembre 1924 par le Baron Verhaegen* (Ghent, 1924).

¹⁴⁰ MSVP April 1927, 125; October 1927, 304-305.

¹⁴¹ There were several examples of (ex-)members being helped as shamefaced poor during the war. In 1942, a family was helped of which the father used to be 'maybe the most industrious Vincentian', but was taken prisoner of war and could not find a steady job afterwards. This family was not regularly visited to avoid causing them shame, but received a one-time monetary gift for the occasion of the birth of their fourth child. In 1943, an ex-member of the Society was helped with his medical bills because he had lost all his money setting up a painter's business with a partner who had scammed him and had gotten 'lead disease' because of this work. In 1944, a member of an Antwerp conference of the Society submitted a request to the Work of the New Poor for funds to help a mr. De Ley, the secretary of the Conference of Kiel. ASVPA 1.5.2 "Schamele armen". Briefwisseling i.v.m. hulpverlening, verzoeken om ondersteuning en leningen.

¹⁴² See the introduction of this book.

¹⁴³ Van Leeuwen, *Bijstand in Amsterdam*, 6.

states. Quite the opposite, as the monetary alms they provided for the shamefaced poor were very meager.¹⁴⁴ In their work with the shamefaced poor especially, the Vincentians were highly occupied with spiritual gratification through the promotion of redemptive suffering, and eagerly seized the opportunity to work on their own self-sanctification. The few letters with requests for help from the shamefaced poor themselves indicate that they were highly aware of the image the Vincentians had of them and what their visitors wanted to hear: they made clear that they once had wealth but had lost it due to external circumstances, they expressed the wish to go back to work (if they could still do so) and emphasized that they did not want to receive regular charity, they highlighted their piety and offered their prayers to the Vincentians, and, in one case, they vowed to offer their suffering to God.¹⁴⁵

Precisely because of this potential for redemptive suffering, but also simply because the shamefaced poor allowed the Vincentians to practice charity in their own, traditional way, the Society and the Ladies dedicated much of their time and resources to the shamefaced poor and created specific initiatives as well as specialized conferences to help them. A few of these specialized conferences had a long history already, the Society's conference of St. Amand in Geel going back to the mid-nineteenth century for example, but most were created during the inter-war period.¹⁴⁶ In addition, during the inter-war period, the Vincentians' dedication motivated them to work together, despite cooperation between the men of the Society and the Ladies had generally avoided doing so up until then. In 1921, the Society created the 'Œuvre des Nouveaux Pauvres' (Work of the New Poor), the driving force behind it being baron Pierre Verhaegen, son of Arthur Verhaegen (see Part II). Technically, this work functioned as a conference which was assisted by Ladies, but the latter did not participate in the weekly gatherings. In providing relief, the Ladies and the men of the Society worked side-by-side, dividing the shamefaced families amongst each other (but visiting them alone, of course), and sharing information about their progress. Incidentally, during the presentation of this work at the 1924 extraordinary reunion of the Society's conferences, baron Verhaegen shared his opinion on this new charitable cooperation between both organizations. In his words,

¹⁴⁴ The *Œuvre des Pauvres Honteux* purposely provided a smaller budget to the shamefaced poor than the syndicated did the workers. According to the Vincentians (in 1924), the syndicates estimated the minimal budget of a household of four to be 885 fr. per month, while the Work only foresaw up to 360 fr. per month for a household of the same size and did not intervene unless their total income was lower (*L'Œuvre des Nouveaux Pauvres (S. Jean Népomucène). Rapport Fait à la Réunion Extraordinaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul de Belgique le 6 Septembre 1924 par le Baron Verhaegen* (Ghent, 1924), 4).

¹⁴⁵ ASVPA 1.5.2 "Schamele armen". Briefwisseling i.v.m. hulpverlening, verzoeken om ondersteuning en leningen; SVP ASVPHRB 14.11 Tussenkomst van de Hoofdraad voor individuele armen (1936-1986).

¹⁴⁶ Especially the Ladies had many specialized conferences (for example, Helmet, Saint-Pierre, Saint-Marie, Nivelles, Notre Dame de l'Annonciation, Wijngene), but the Society also had a few (for example, Sacre-Cœur, Saint Népomucène).

‘malevolent spirits have claimed to see in this [the exclusion of women from the Society] some kind of backward anti-feminism. But why not believe, rather, that we wanted, as in the Gospel, was to leave “the best part to Mary”?’¹⁴⁷

Of course, that was not the real reason; the (French leadership of the) Society had always stated that the organizations had to remain separated, but this remark did speak volumes about the newfound appreciation for women’s charitable efforts, especially with regards to the shamefaced poor, to which many conferences of the Ladies were very dedicated.¹⁴⁸ The shame, modesty, and silent suffering of the shamefaced poor offered the Vincentian visitors the opportunity to practice virtues such as compassion, discretion, and tact like no other target audience, and therefore to deepen and refine their charitable practice. These virtues were strongly associated with women, and so the Society once again took the opportunity to learn from them as well. Not without reason, the conference of the Work of the New Poor was named after Saint John of Nepomuk, the patron saint of the Seal of the Confessional, the martyr of the secret, and the apostle of compassion, who had been the confessional of the Queen of Bohemia in the fourteenth century. Indeed, the Vincentians’ work with the shamefaced poor allowed them to return to the spiritual essence and traditional practices of the organizations, thereby opening the door to self-sanctification and the opportunity to follow the example of pious figures in the history of Catholicism.

1.3. *Who has the youth, has the future*

During the inter-war period, the Vincentian organizations embarked on a quest for renewal. Being confronted with a loss of function during the First World War, with a significantly altered socio-economic situation due to the more protection and prosperity of the workers’ population, and with increased ideological conflict, the Vincentians sought to find ways to maintain social relevancy while at the same time staying true to the identity and spiritual goals of their organizations. With regards to the Vincentians’ identity construction, this entailed a pronounced alignment with the Catholic Action movement which, in the eyes of the Vincentians, was but an extension of the ideas they had preached since their beginnings. Also, the Vincentians actively appropriated the label of modernness as a means to emphasize the social utility and benefits of their work

¹⁴⁷ SVP, *L’Œuvre des Nouveaux Pauvres (S. Jean Népomucène). Rapport Fait à la Réunion Extraordinaire des Conférences de S. Vincent de Paul de Belgique le 6 Septembre 1924 par le Baron Verhaegen* (Ghent, 1924), 4. On the Work of the New Poor, see also: MSVP March 1925, 66-69.

¹⁴⁸ The 1934 manual of the Ladies also mentioned that the Ladies had a special mission towards the shamefaced poor. DLSVP, *Vereeniging der Dames van Liefde van St-Vincentius a Paulo te Antwerpen* (Antwerp, 1934), 7.

within this altered context. This modernness, in their view, was expressed in the adaptability and future-orientedness of Vincentian charity. As such, the Vincentians did not consider it necessary to fundamentally redirect their organizations because they felt that the social and spiritual basis of their work was timeless, meaning that their ideas did not have to be changed but instead needed to be revalued with respect to the needs of present society.

In practice, this idea translated into an adaptation of the goods and services offered by the Vincentians (e.g. more focus on social service for the workers), a refocus on target groups other than workers (e.g. shamefaced poor and marginals), as well as a stronger emphasis on their work with and for youth. This last element was of particular importance because, as the Society constantly repeated, youth was the future, and who had the youth therefore had the future.¹⁴⁹ As such, the Vincentians believed that the success of their efforts to contribute to the shaping of modern society, which they wanted to build on a foundation of Christian morality, to an important extent depended on their ability to influence and engage the younger generations. With regards to the youth themselves, the Vincentians were convinced that what they had to offer them in terms of spiritual knowledge and guidance was of great value as well. Thus, this relationship between the Vincentians and youth was composed of three elements: what youth could mean to the organizations through participation, what the organizations could offer participating youth, and what the organizations could provide to non-participating youth, for example the children of the families they visited.

During the inter-war period, the Vincentians embarked on a quest to attract youth to their ranks as a means to safeguard the future of their organizations, as well as to introduce vitality and renewal. The timing of this new focus on youth was not coincidental, as the battle for youth erupted like never before after the First World War. This cult of youth was particularly strong on the right side of the political spectrum, where conservative Catholics and advocates of far-right ideologies attempted to reform the moral basis and social structure of modern society via their influence on youth. Indeed, the inter-war period was one of mass movements and of political conflicts, not seldomly taken to the streets, and influence over youth was a powerful instrument in the battle for modernity. At the same time, in the domain of cultural imagination, youth was increasingly equated with strength, vitality, and power. Again, these ideas were in large part propagandized by Catholic and far-right movements, who shared a disillusionment with regards to liberal democracy, criticized socialist ideals, and generally felt that

¹⁴⁹ The expressions 'youth has the future' and 'who has the youth, has the future' were constantly used by the Society when speaking about their relationship or work with youth during the inter-war period. I did not encounter these expressions in the Vincentians before the First World War. See for example MSVP July 1922, 103-104; May 1923, 74; February 1924, 52-53; July 1925, 206; October 1928, 268-272; September 1929, 262-269; June 1930, 7-9; December 1935, 277-281; January 1937, 10-11.

society was (in danger of) sinking into degeneration. Youth, in this respect, symbolized purity, untainted by decadence and perverse ideals like the older generations, and therefore offered a path towards societal regeneration.¹⁵⁰

In this sense, the Vincentians believed that young people were still malleable in their beliefs, and the grip of socialism on youth was often considered less strong than on adult workers. As such, the Vincentians' work with youth was also driven by their disillusionment with the workers, who had not only become less dependent on private charity but had also become less inclined to practice and propagate Catholic rituals and beliefs. Even though the population of Belgium, workers and otherwise, predominantly remained Catholic, the observance of liturgy declined significantly, in turn fostering the perception that the process of dechristianization was unfolding at an unprecedented rate. Religion in the lives of many retreated more into the private sphere, and this was of course a development regretted by the Vincentians, the Catholic Action movement and other Catholic political and social forces alike, who perceived it as a 'crisis of culture'.¹⁵¹ In this sense, rallying up youth behind the Catholic cause offered a hopeful perspective on the future, and it is not surprising that the offensive, combative Catholic movements of the inter-war period centered much of their attention on youth.

The Ladies, too, worried about the attractiveness of their organization to youth, but this issue was seldomly addressed before the 1930s.¹⁵² In 1932, however, the yearly report of the Brussels' Ladies noted that young people were needed 'not only to prevent the world from ending, but to prevent it from sleeping and from losing itself in routine'. Therefore, it was important that the organization actively sought the admission of young women and that, to this end, the local conferences which only visited the elderly also 'modernize a bit the categories of our proteges'.¹⁵³ Apparently, the custom had grown in some localities to leave the poor families to the Society while the Ladies focused on the

¹⁵⁰ See Chapter 1 of Part II.

¹⁵¹ Depaepe and Simon, 'The Conquest of Youth', 38-40; Delforge, 'Profil d'une Fédération Jociste Féminine', 146; Tihon, 'La Belgique', 547-549.

¹⁵² The 1924 report of the Ladies of Bruges already noted that youth did not appreciate the work enough because they were unfamiliar with it. The lack of coherence between the works of the Ladies was an important reason for this according to the report (ODPMBr JV 1924, 7).

¹⁵³ DLSVPB JV 1932, 4. Incidentally, after the Second World War, president of the Belgian Society Paul Charles sent a letter to the president of the Ladies which was published in the Society's monthly bulletin. Here, Charles expressed regret about the fact that in some parishes, families with children were reserved for the Society, while the Ladies could only visit the elderly and single women, which apparently frustrated these Ladies. He stated that both organizations in fact had the right to adopt any family they wanted to support, and the Ladies should be able to make their own decisions in this regard. In general, Charles said, it made no difference to the families and the quality of the care they received which organization helped them. Furthermore, he wished to see the Ladies take up a more important role in the families with children, even if they were already helped by the Society. MSVP February – April 1949, 11-12.

elderly and single women, but the Ladies noted that this practice was in fact not supported by their manual and that it hindered a livelier and more varied apostolate. In 1935 the importance of attracting youth was underlined again at the international congress of the Ladies of Charity in Budapest, where the charitable education of young people was the central theme.¹⁵⁴ So, throughout the 1930s, several local conferences of Ladies happily reported that they had been able to gain new, young members, which they considered a 'comforting sign of vitality', and the wish to expand this practice was expressed regularly. Sometimes, these young women were grouped in a special subdivision or even in a separate conference, but often they worked side by side with the more experienced visiting Ladies.¹⁵⁵ In 1936, the Ladies decided to streamline the work of the young visitors by grouping them under the banner of 'Louise de Marillac', an organization created by the Parisian Daughters of Charity with the goal of supporting their work and that of the Ladies of Charity. In Belgium, the conferences of Louise de Marillac were presided by a visiting Lady who was to maintain the relationships between both organizations. The report concluded that 'Youth is the age of sunny dreams, of great thoughts, of vast and generous projects. A highly placed ideal, truer than a vulgar ideal, will thus orient the activity of young people by providing them with a purpose'.¹⁵⁶

In order to further their connection with Belgium's Catholic youth and the Catholic organizational sphere in general, the Ladies also began to create ties with the Catholic Action movement during the 1930s in a similar vein as the Society had done already in the early 1920s. On the one hand, this entailed a moral alignment with Catholic Action that stressed the Ladies' fidelity to the pope, the ecclesial authorities, and the greater project of establishing a Christian society.¹⁵⁷ On the other hand, the Ladies worked to establish a productive exchange with Catholic Action organizations. The Ladies made sure to encourage the children of the families they visited to join the Catholic Action movement, for example the *Jeunesse Ouvrier Catholique (féminin)*. Like the Society, the Ladies invited the (female) presidents of such organizations to speak at their general meetings and explain the benefits of promoting participation among the youth visited by the Ladies.¹⁵⁸ In addition, Cardinal Van Roey expressed the wish in 1934 that the Ladies would not only promote adherence to the Catholic Action organizations among their visited families, but that the Ladies themselves would take part in them on an individual

¹⁵⁴ DLSVPB JV 1934, 5.

¹⁵⁵ DLSVPA JV 1927, 5; 1929, 5; 1934, 3; 7; 1935, 5; 8; 1938, 3-4; DLSVPB JV 1931, 10; 1932, 8; 1933, 17; 1934, 15; 1935, 10; 1938, 12; 1941, 7; 1942, 5; 7. From 1936 onwards, the local conferences began reporting their membership numbers of Ladies and young girls separately, some of them having more young girls as members than 'regular' members.

¹⁵⁶ DLSVPB JV 1936, 5; 7-8; 11; 1937, 5; 1942, 13.

¹⁵⁷ DLSVPB JV 1931, 4-5; 1933, 15; 1934, 4; 1935, 17; 1937, 4; DLSVPA JV 1934, 1-2; 1935, 2.

¹⁵⁸ DLSVPA JV 1929, 9

basis as well, for example by taking up coordinating roles in youth organizations or by participating in those for adult women.¹⁵⁹

It is hard to determine to what degree the Ladies answered to this call, but at the least, these exchanges show that it was important to the Ladies to maintain a strong relationship with the rest of the Catholic organizational field. In this respect, it is also noteworthy that in 1933, the Ladies joined the *Office Catholique d'Hygiène et d'Assistance* (Catholic Service for Hygiene and Assistance), better known as *Caritas Catholica Belgica* (from 1937 onwards), with the express purpose of obeying the pope's instruction to unify the Catholic works.¹⁶⁰ This new service, which also had an international component, was founded in 1932 and served as an umbrella confederation for all types of Catholic social service organizations. The goal of Caritas Catholica was to support Catholic social services and keep them independent from the state, as well as to foster cooperation and information exchange between them and set up joint initiatives. Even though the workings of Caritas Catholic remained limited until the late 1930's, it was able to play an important role in the distribution of aid during the Second World War. The Society, on the other hand, continued to emphasize its independence and refused to join the corporation throughout the 1930's. Only during the war would the organization change its course and actively collaborate with Caritas Catholica.¹⁶¹

Indeed, while the Ladies sought to strengthen their organization and promote its attractiveness to young women through a stronger link with the Catholic organizational field, the Society tried to forge its own path and refused to participate in umbrella organizations. Maintaining relevancy and attracting new members in a booming Catholic organizational field was not a sinecure, however, because the Society was confronted with competition from the many Catholic Action organizations for young and adult men. Those for young men, like the JOC, ACBJ, and JVKA, had already gained a significant following during the 1920s. In 1930, another organization was added to the list: the *Katholieke Studentenactie* (Catholic Student Action, KSA). Moreover, in 1935 and 1936 two new Catholic Action organizations for adult men were established in Flanders and Wallonia: the *Mannenverbond voor Katholieke Actie* (Men's League for Catholic Action, MVKA) and the *Action Catholique des Hommes* (Catholic Action for Men, ACH). For the Ladies, this competition was less of a problem because the female counterparts of the Catholic Action organization for young men were more limited in size. In addition, the first Catholic Action organization for adult women was only created in 1937 in the diocese of Bruges: the *Vrouwenverbond voor Katholieke Actie* (Women's

¹⁵⁹ DLSVPA JV 1934, 2.

¹⁶⁰ DLSVPB JV 1933, 4; DLSVPA JV 1934, 2.

¹⁶¹ Dhaene and Wynants, 'Achteruitgang en Crisis', 116; 119; 121-122.

League for Catholic Action, VVKA).¹⁶² Indeed, as Tine Van Osselaer noted, the Catholic Action movement was oriented primarily towards men, and its male organizations strongly promoted a Catholic masculinity, while at the same time explicitly excluding women.¹⁶³

This limited offer of organizations for young and adult lay Catholic women looking for a means for social and spiritual action seems to have played in the advantage of the Ladies of Charity, who were able to increase their membership number throughout the inter-war period.¹⁶⁴ For the Society, however, the more extensive offer of Catholic Action organizations for both young and adult men created difficulties in the recruitment of new members. At first, rather than seeing the Catholic Action movement as direct competition, the Society at first wished to establish cooperation and mutual exchange with these organizations. After all, the Society stated, the essence of Catholic Action was a dedication to lay apostolic action in the social sphere, and the ideas of the Society about the duties of the faithful and the role of religion in society therefore perfectly aligned with, and even preceded those of Catholic Action,¹⁶⁵ even if, in the late 1930s, the Society did acknowledge that there was a difference between the general spirit of Catholic action and the actual Catholic Action movement.¹⁶⁶

Seeing as the Catholic Action organizations were intended for the masses, moreover, while the Society largely remained an organization for the elites, the Society considered them complementary. Entering the 1930s, however, the Society's anxiety about its inability to attract sufficient new, young members increased, and it became clear that Catholic young men of all social backgrounds tended to prefer the Catholic Action organizations or other new, alternative associations over the antiquated Society. Indeed, at the various conferences for youth movements held during this time, the Society was not even discussed.¹⁶⁷ That the Society claimed that it 'strives towards RADICALISM [original emphasis]' and that Ozanam was a 'revolutionary' and a 'world reformer' did little to change that.¹⁶⁸ This recruitment competition between the Society and the Catholic Action organizations to an important extent stemmed from their different

¹⁶² Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, diss., 138-140; Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, 176-177; Defoort, 'Le Courant Réactionnaire', 91-94.

¹⁶³ Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, diss., 155.

¹⁶⁴ About the male-centeredness of the Catholic Action movement, see: Van Osselaer, *The Pious Sex*, 185-221.

¹⁶⁵ MSVP November 1924, 328; October 1928, 268-269; September 1929, 262-269; November 1929, 321-326; November 1930, 16; January 1932, 17; June 1933, 140; August – September – October 1933, 170-171; 227-228; 235; April 1934, 81-83; June 1934, 158-159; April 1935, 85-87; July 1936, 149; December 1936, 282-284.

¹⁶⁶ MSVP February 1937, 43-45.

¹⁶⁷ MSVP June 1930, 7.

¹⁶⁸ MSVP May 1934, 107.

conceptualization and operationalization of the purpose of the organizations. On the one hand, the Catholic Action organizations were explicitly focused on the mission to 'restore everything in Christ', and while the Vincentians also aligned themselves with a broader, social purpose and were dedicated to rechristening society, the purpose of the Vincentian organizations nevertheless remained highly personal and focused on the process of self-sanctification.¹⁶⁹ Among youth in particular, the offensive and militant energy of the Catholic Action movement proved highly attractive, and better suited to channel the enthusiasm of Catholic youth than the more restrained, inwardly focused, and traditional Catholic lay organizations like those of the Vincentians. The Catholic Action movement became synonymous to renewal and action, and although the Society tried to present itself as the original source of lay Catholic social engagement, and therefore as a forerunner of Catholic Action, the Belgian youth was not so easily convinced.¹⁷⁰

With regards to their activities, too, the Catholic Action organizations displayed much flexibility, engaging their members in study days, processions, retreats, congresses, and so on, which fostered the idea among them that they were a part of a grand and noble project.¹⁷¹ Compared to this, the Vincentians' charity through home visits was apparently unable to generate the same excitement, especially among younger generations of men who felt an urge towards social action. Indeed, the Society was very aware that the average age of its members continued to become older as time progressed, and local conferences regularly complained about the difficulty of attracting new, young members.¹⁷² While at first, the Society felt optimistic about the possibilities offered by cooperation with the Catholic Action organizations, it soon became clear that these exchanges did not result in increasing membership numbers. Therefore, the Society's strategy to attract youth relied heavily on its members' efforts to bring in their sons, nephews, and other young men of their direct environment, on help from the parish priests who spread word about the local conference of the Society, as well as on the propaganda they made in schools and colleges.¹⁷³

Throughout the inter-war period, the Society in general reported quite negatively on

¹⁶⁹ See also Gerard, *In de Schaduw van het Interbellum*, 157.

¹⁷⁰ See also Dhaene and Wynants: 'Achteruitgang en Crisis', 100.

¹⁷¹ Defoort, 'Le Courant Réactionnaire', 91-93.

¹⁷² MSVP April 1923, 56; November 1923, December 1926, 364; July 1928, 191; August 1928, 219; September 1928, 244; 251-252; October 1928, 280; March 1933, 53-54; April 1937, 81-82; February 1940, 39-45; May 1940, 111; 169; APJB 12.2.1.504 Brieven over de aantrekkelijkheid van het Genootschap na de oorlog en brieven van de conferenties over hun werking (1925-1926); SVPHRB JV 1924, 4-5.

¹⁷³ MSVP June 1921, 95-96; September 1924, 259; September 1926, 267; November 1925, 349; SVPHRB JV 1924, 4-5; February 1926, 158-159; September 1926, 280; January 1927, 3; November 1929, 325; July 1933, 154-155; November-December 1933, 288; November 1935, 254; March 1937, 53; December 1939, 253-254; February 1940, 39-45.

its ability to attract new, young members. Yet, this did not mean that it was completely unsuccessful in this mission. Some conferences were happy to announce that their ranks were being supplemented by young men and several new conferences for youth were established.¹⁷⁴ Indeed, there is no indication that the Society was less successful in recruiting youth than the Ladies were. However, these small successes were not sufficient in the eyes of the Society, and during the inter-war period, the organization became obsessed with the issue. As such, the Society seemed rather uninterested in potential members who were not young, and it focused most of its attention on youth instead of diversifying its recruitment pools.¹⁷⁵ Unlike the Ladies, the Society attached an existential value to rejuvenating its ranks, to such an extent that its members believed that failing in this mission meant that the organization would lose its societal legitimacy and eventually die out.

To the Society, the presence of young people among its members formed an integral aspect of the organization's identity. Ozanam, the main founder of the Society, was a young student when, in 1833, he created the organization together with several other Catholic students who were dismayed by the stigmatization of religion at the Sorbonne University in Paris. As such, the Society was founded by and for students who were willing to practice charity together, to mutually support each other in developing their faith, and to work towards self-sanctification. Throughout its existence, the Society had praised Ozanam for his ingenuity and foresight. First, for his promotion of lay apostolate, which the Society considered of great importance to counter processes of secularization, then, towards the late nineteenth century, for his early efforts to remedy class-conflict and his ideas about social morality and justice (considered a precursor to the social doctrine of the Church), and now, during the inter-war period, for his understanding of the importance of youth in keeping Catholic spirituality and practice alive. Of course, these different aspects of Ozanam's innovation were praised to varying degrees in all periods, but I find it striking that specific aspects were put to the fore more strongly in tandem with the prevailing socio-political issues of the moment. Strikingly, the Society began striving for the beatification and canonization of Ozanam during the late nineteenth century, at which time the proposal entailed appointing him 'patron of all the associations of charity of the Catholic world',¹⁷⁶ while later, during the inter-war period, the proposal changed to elevating Ozanam to be the 'patron of the Catholic Youth'.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ MSVP November 1925, 342; January 1937, 31; August 1939, 178.

¹⁷⁵ The Society made some effort to establish workers' conferences, but not much. See for example: MSVP February 1940, 44

¹⁷⁶ DLSVPA JV 1913, 4.

¹⁷⁷ See for example MSVP August 1926, 240; November 1938, 246. Incidentally, the procedure for the beatification of Ozanam was started in 1925 after he was believed to have interceded in curing a Brazilian

Thus, the Society made much effort to emphasize its connection to youth, referring to the history and identity of the organization to back up this claim. The issue of attracting youth did not only have to do with the past, however, but also with the present and the future. After all, the time when the Society was a student organization had long been passed, and it was not until after the First World War when the question of attracting youth became such a source of anxiety. During the late 1920s and the 1930s, while the mobilization of youth became a primary component of all ideological and religious movements, especially those on the right side of the political spectrum, the Society was afraid that it would lose its societal influence (and relevance) if it failed to shape the moral values of the youth and provide them with a means for meaningful social action. Endlessly, the Society repeated that youth was the future and that therefore, who had the youth had the future, meaning that establishing a qualitative connection with youth was of essential importance to being able to contribute to the moral foundation of modern society.



Youth at the Malines congress of 1936: 'Inspired and disciplined, the youth stands ready for the construction of the new times'

boy. Eventually, Ozanam was beatified in 1997 on World Youth Day, but his canonization remains pending. As such, the strong emphasis on Ozanam's value for youth continued after the Second World War as well.

That the Society was very concerned about this matter was exemplified by the introduction of a new column in its monthly magazine in 1928, which was entirely dedicated to ‘the Society of Saint Vincent and the youth’. In this column and elsewhere, the Society made it abundantly clear that youthful members were of essential importance to introduce vitality and rejuvenation in the organization, to keep the meetings exciting and colorful, and to bring the fire back into its charitable work.¹⁷⁸ The Society maintained that its values and practices were perfectly aligned with those of Catholic Action, and its attachment to the old-school home visits or its focus on self-sanctification could therefore not be the source of the issue. Instead, the Society believed that the issue mainly had to do with a lack of visibility and publicity of the organization, combined with insufficient efforts to make young men feel welcomed and heard. Therefore, in a practical sense, the strategy that was proposed to achieve visibility and a welcoming atmosphere entailed that the Society had to spend more energy towards disseminating propaganda about the organization among youth, for example in the form of articles and pamphlets, or by members speaking in front of schools, colleges, and organizations for Catholic youth, in particular those of Catholic Action.¹⁷⁹ In addition to spreading information about the organization, the Society tried to reform the conferences and the structure of the meetings to make them more attractive to youth, for example by directly addressing young members during the meetings and allowing them to speak, by creating separate conferences for youth (either within schools and Catholic Action organizations or as part of the Society’s local conference), and by giving them the option to decide on their own action terrain.¹⁸⁰

The Society persisted that in essence, despite the important changes which had taken place in society since its establishment, the organization’s dedication to charity and self-sanctification was in accordance with the timeless truths of the Catholic belief system, and that its practices remained flexible enough to be adapted to the needs of modern society as well as to channel the energy of youth towards love and compassion. Indeed,

¹⁷⁸ MSVP July 1922, 105; September 1922, 142; February 1924, 52-53; September 1924, 261; November 1924, 334-335; February 1926, 53-54; July 1928, 213-215; September 1928, 259; November 1929, 348; January 1930, 6-7; April 1930, 11-13; May 1930, 5-7; June 1930, 4; July 1930, 19-20; April 1933, 80-82; August – September – October 1933, 193-194; 210-211; 227; June 1935, 123-125; March 1936, 68-69; June 1936, 131-137; *Het Bezoek der Armen en het Genootschap van S. Vincentius a Paulo door een Conferentievoorzitter* (Bruges, 1923), 34.

¹⁷⁹ *Het Bezoek der Armen en het Genootschap van S. Vincentius a Paulo door een Conferentievoorzitter* (Bruges, 1923), 7-8; MSVP February 1924, 59; September 1924, 259; September 1925, 176-177; 282; September 1926, 280; November 1926, 323; July 1927, 212; SVPHRB JV 1924, 4-5.

¹⁸⁰ MSVP August 1925, 234; February 1926, 53-54; September 1928, 257-264; March 1933, 53-55; April 1933, 83-84; January 1930, 19; April 1930, 13-14; June 1930, 8-9; March 1933, 54-55; June 1936, 128-129; September 1938, 198-200; SVP, *Conseils sur la Formation des Conférences dans les Établissements d’Éducation* (Paris, 1928).

engaging youth was not only considered important for the survival of the Society, but the other way around as well, the Society believed that its function of forming a pious and socially active elite continued to be highly relevant and that this function should therefore extend to the younger generations. After all, the Society claimed, ‘charity with youth has an outspoken educational component; it aspires to teach the well-educated youth how to practice virtue in all its forms, what stands in its way and what fosters it’.¹⁸¹

In this regard, the Society made clear that its efforts to attract youth should not be mistaken for a desire to compete with mass movements. The goal was not to bring in as many young people as possible, but to continue to form and socially activate the elites. After all, following the vision of Ozanam, not everyone could or should become a Vincentian. Rather, the organization was meant for members of the upper classes to learn how to love the other (read: the poor and the workers) and each other, thereby gaining a social consciousness that would contribute to the eradication of animosity between the different social classes and the establishment of social harmony based on Christian morality. Seeing as the Vincentians considered the elites as the rightful leaders of society, this moralization and education of the young elite through the practice of charity was of essential importance to guarantee the formation of qualified leaders of tomorrow. Incidentally, this idea was shared by pope Pius XI, who stated that ‘if the leaders of the youth believe that they lead that youth to the right path, without incorporating them in the works of Christian charity, they are mistaken’.¹⁸² This support from the pope was encouraging to the Society, even though recruiting youth remained difficult throughout the inter-war period and the Society regretted that Catholic youth organizations, especially those of the Catholic Action movement, were increasingly disinterested towards the Vincentian work. This was exemplified for example by the lack of attention this work received during the various Catholic youth congresses that took place during this period.¹⁸³

However strenuous to recruit youth, the young people that did join the organization were abundantly praised by the Society. These young Vincentians were commended for being courageous, tireless, and without fear, venturing as far as needed into the ‘red suburbs’ to help people and spread the faith. They were optimistic and energetic, not encumbered by ‘hateful pessimism’ about the bad times in which they lived. They were innovative and modernized the organization by introducing new strategies and new fields of activity, for example by setting up theaters for the lower classes, by working together with them in shared vegetable garden initiatives, by teaching religious

¹⁸¹ MSVP December 1927, 357.

¹⁸² MSVP September 1928, 249; 257; January 1929, 14; November 1929, 231-322; 326; June 1930, 7; September 1930, 24; November 1937, 245.

¹⁸³ MSVP October 1928, 268.

education and catechism to children, and even by organizing a hair dressing salon to gather funds for the organization.¹⁸⁴ In return, the Society offered these young, socially conscious members the opportunity to develop meaningful friendships and find mentors. Through the practice of home visits, they discovered what poverty actually entailed, in turn fostering gratitude for what they had and motivating them to take action to help solve the social question. In short, becoming a member of the Society offered the young elites a chance to apply the means with which they were gifted to the benefit of others, to strengthen their faith, and come closer to God as well as their fellow human beings.¹⁸⁵ As such, the relationship between the older and younger Vincentians was presented as one of mutual inspiration and dedication to the cause that provided advantages for both.

With regards to the state of the youth in general, the Ladies and the Society expressed a shared concern for the moral state of the younger generations, especially those of the working classes, and they believed that their organizations could make a significant contribution to the solution to this problem. The primary threats towards the morality of youth identified by the Vincentians were a lack of proper, Catholic education and the seduction of immoral entertainment. Of course, the concern about the education of children and youth was not new. The Vincentians had for example taken on an active role the School War of the 1880s, obligating the families receiving their help to send their children to Catholic schools if they wanted to continue to receive assistance. In the decades that followed, this issue remained important to the Vincentians, and even though they were often a bit more lenient than during the height of the School War, they continued to exert pressure on the families under their care to send their offspring to Catholic schools, to engage them in Catholic youth organizations and in the patronages (co-)organized by the Vincentians, and if possible, to make sure they started working for Catholic owned businesses when leaving school.¹⁸⁶ In addition, the children and youth of the families under the Vincentians' care were expected to participate in catechism and observe liturgy in the Church, in particular Sunday Mass.¹⁸⁷ To motivate youth to participate in liturgy, the Society even organized competitions during which these devoted youth could win prizes for their knowledge about liturgical subject

¹⁸⁴ MSVP February 1924, 52-53; May 1930, 3-7; April 1933, 80-82; June 1936, 128-129.

¹⁸⁵ MSVP October 1921, 154-155; July 1922, 103-105; June 1923, 95-96; February 1924, 59; March 1924, 72; June 1924, 173-174; November 1924, 325-328; September 1925, 176-177; 294-296; February 1926, 158-159; December 1927, 357-358; July 1929, 215; September 1929, 268-269; January 1932, 19; August – September – October 1933, 193; March 1933, 56-58; April 1933, 80-82; May 1934, 107; February 1939, 31-36; December 1939, 253-254; SVP, *Het Bezoek der Armen en het Genootschap van S. Vincentius a Paulo door een Conferentievoorzitter* (Bruges, 1923), 7; SVP, *Conseils sur la Formation des Conférences dans les Établissements d'Éducation* (Paris, 1928), 5-7.

¹⁸⁶ MSVP June 1925, 163-165; October 1925, 293-296; May 1926, 157; May 1930, 7-11.

¹⁸⁷ MSVP October 1924, 320; November 1924, 352.

matters.¹⁸⁸ The army barracks, too, were considered dangerous to the morality of young soldier by the Vincentians. Therefore, they created retreats and circles for these soldiers of which the purpose was to prepare youth for life in the army, to keep the faith alive among the new recruits, protect them from the immoral influence of their foul-mouthed colleagues, and offer them a space where they could find mutual support.¹⁸⁹

In part, the broad concern with the morality of the youth during the inter-war period had to do with the central role allocated to youth in sociopolitical movements, especially those on the right side of the spectrum. Youth, in this perspective, formed a source of power and action, of renewal and innovation, of vitality and strength. However, there was also a flip side to this glorification of youth. If the younger generations were seduced by the ‘wrong’ ideas, they could easily be perceived a threat to the future of society. While Catholics still maintained a quasi-hegemony on educational institutions in Belgium, this anxiety about the morality of youth increased drastically. The Society, for example, lamented in 1931 that ‘the big difference between the past and now is that, a hundred years ago, the working class was in general [...] still attached to the ancestral faith, but was in great material distress, while now that material need has decreased [...], many of them already live outside of the faith, and among the young a generation is growing up which completely escapes the beneficent influence of the faith’.¹⁹⁰ In his research on education during the inter-war period, Marc Depaepe notes in this regard that during this age of massification and emancipation, the educational sphere was characterized by an authoritarian style of educational behavior, driven by the wish to conserve the accepted Catholic ideology as well as by anxiety about the possible collapse of Western society as a consequence. This educational style was strict, focused on obedience, and centered around the preservation of Catholic morality in order to combat the ‘crisis of culture’.¹⁹¹

The Vincentians echoed these ideas with strong conviction, and they declared that the moral elevation of the working-class youth should be a priority in the present day and age.¹⁹² In their view, the morality and the future of youth were threatened more than ever because of the rise of neo-pagan sociopolitical ideas, the infectious spread of socialism in the factories, the popularity of the materialistic ‘cult of the body’ and the obsession with sports at the cost of piety, as well as the omnipresence of immoral entertainment in the form of theater, film, and radio. These problems, so they claimed,

¹⁸⁸ MSVP January 1925, 29-30.

¹⁸⁹ MSVP July 1923, 105; November 1923, 166-167; September 1925, 176-177; 280-28; SVP, *De Geest van S. Vincentiusgenootschap en de Ware Verhouding der Conferentiën tot de Liefdadigheid en tot de Sociale Werken. Voordracht van E. H. F. Cap* (Brugge, 1924), 11; 113.

¹⁹⁰ MSVP February 1931, 9.

¹⁹¹ Depaepe and Simon, ‘The Conquest of Youth’, 39-40; 55-57.

¹⁹² MSVP July 1930, 20-21; October 1935, 223; July 1937, 163.

were especially visible in the cities, and they regretted that so many young people fled the countryside only to fall into the trap of modern, degenerate city life.¹⁹³ In the eyes of the Vincentians, it was therefore of utmost importance that the children of the families they visited not only attended Catholic schools, subjected to Catholic patronages, and engaged in Catholic social organizations in addition to participating in liturgical rites, but that their pastime activities were monitored closely as well. Preferably, these children and young people joined the scouts, attended Catholic summer camps and retreats, participated in pilgrimages, and so on. Here, they received the opportunity to do fun and educational activities, while at the same time engaging in religious apostolate. Some of these initiatives were directly financially supported by the local conferences of the Ladies and the Society, which exemplifies the value they attached to them.¹⁹⁴

Moreover, the Vincentians attached much importance to providing youth with good reading material, and the organizations' 'moral book pharmacies' were supplemented with many books aimed directly for youth. In general, the apostolate through press had gotten a strong impulse during the inter-war period and was mainly directed at the working population, where good press was believed to be a powerful tool in rechristening the masses. To this end, the Vincentians, in particular the Society, made a great contribution to the establishment of popular libraries ('volksbibliotheken') all over the country.¹⁹⁵ With regards to youth, the distribution of good books fit well within the Catholic moralization and education offense, and the Vincentians, in particular the Society, eagerly participated in this trend. As they saw it, the quality of the reading material of youth could complement or completely undo the work of the schools, and the press apostolate towards youth was therefore an indispensable contribution to this educational effort.¹⁹⁶ Not only did good books teach youth important moral values, but it also provided them with a source of entertainment other than frivolous novels, radio, films, or theater, the increasing popularity of which was anxiously observed by many Catholics.¹⁹⁷ Bearing in mind pope Leo XIII's warning that 'bad lecture is a slow-

¹⁹³ MSVP March 1927, 73-74; September 1927, 276-276; July 1927, 290-293; September 1928, 244-245; December 1928, 328-330; June 1929, 170-171; September 1929, 268-267; October 1931, 25-26; June 1932, 127; November 1935, 253; April 1937, 79-80; May 1937, 115.

¹⁹⁴ SVP, *De Geest van S. Vincentiusgenootschap en de Ware Verhouding der Conferentiën tot de Liefdadigheid en tot de Sociale Werken. Voordracht van E. H. F. Cap* (Brugge, 1924), 13; SVPHRB JV 1924, 15; MSVP May 1926, 131; May 1926, 154-155; February 1934, 32-33; March 1936, 68-69; June 1936, 131-137; February 1939, 125-126.

¹⁹⁵ This was a recurring theme in MSVP.

¹⁹⁶ DLSVPA JV 1913, 16; 1921, 10; SVP, *De Geest van S. Vincentiusgenootschap en de Ware Verhouding der Conferentiën tot de Liefdadigheid en tot de Sociale Werken. Voordracht van E. H. F. Cap* (Brugge, 1924), 12; MSVP February 1926, 62-63.

¹⁹⁷ Incidentally, rather than opposing all films, the Society proposed the creation of a Catholic film theater to provide people with moral entertainment (MSVP March 1929, 81-82).

working poison, which the young person drinks and which sooner or later will make its wicked, murderous effects felt and corrupts mind and heart',¹⁹⁸ the Ladies and the Society provided the worker and poor families with all kinds of books that should contribute to the morality, strength, and resilience of youth.¹⁹⁹

To make sure that Belgium's youth was swaddled in Catholic educational and organizational life, that it was kept away from immoral and obscene influences, and that it read only uplifting, Catholic books, the Vincentians counted on the cooperation of the parents. However, seeing as many worker families were no longer dependent on private charity for their material wellbeing, the threat of abandonment was not as effective as it used to be. For this reason, the Society declared that 'it is our duty to ensure that the boys or girls, from the families visited, become members of said institutions. We must insist, persevere until they belong, and then watch, keep watching, that they remain good members. We must keep them for the Church, that is our duty, our solemn duty'.²⁰⁰ Indeed, the plethora of Catholic institutions and organizations for the workers' youth and the efforts of the Vincentians and other Catholics to make sure these young people were completely imbued with Catholic morality betrays the distrust they felt towards the adult workers' population. Indeed, the Society believed that many parents were not at all concerned with the morality and activities of their children as long as they contributed to the household by bringing in a salary or performing domestic labor.²⁰¹ Therefore, in line with their adherence to the utility of patronage, the Vincentians considered it a religious as well as societal duty to intervene and in part substitute this parental role by closely surveilling these young people and maintaining a good, mentor-like relationship with them.²⁰²

This way, the Vincentians tried to establish a strong influence on youth, which, after all, had the future, but they approached the issue very differently depending on the social background of these young people. While working-class youth was surveilled in all aspects of their educational and social life, the youth of the upper classes was invited to

¹⁹⁸ MSVP February 1926, 62.

¹⁹⁹ These books, part of the *Moreele Boekenapotheek* ('Moral Book Apothecary') from 1938 onwards, could be explicitly aimed at moral self-education, with titles such as 'The civilized boy' (Toth Tihamer), 'The boy with character' (idem), 'Pure juvenile maturity' (idem), 'The little lord' (Burnet), 'The Catholic girl' (Dr. Kreuser), but they also included immersive novels about knighthood and friendship with a moralizing plot explicitly based on Catholic teachings, for example 'The good Dascie' (Em. Lacombe), 'How everything turned out well' (Smits), 'Two youthful heroes' (Odilon Zurkinden), 'How Freddy eventually received a title' (Van Valkenburg). See MSVP January 1932, 23; November 1938; September 1939, 262-264, annex between pages 198-199.

²⁰⁰ MSVP October 1931, 24.

²⁰¹ MSVP May 1929, 151-152; October 1931, 20-21; August 1935, 188; DLSVPB JV 1934, 11-12. This was not a new issue: DLSVPA JV 1908, 29-30.

²⁰² This was MSVP November 1927, 332; May 1930, 7-11; January 1937, 10-11.

join the Vincentians in their work. As such, the Vincentians tried to maintain not only Catholic morality among youth, but also perpetuated social difference, which formed an essential part of their world view and self-legitimation, through their work with and for youth. In addition to the Vincentians' dedication to helping the shamefaced poor, this moralization of youth (whether from the upper or lower classes) constituted an important field of action for them during the inter-war period which allowed them to regain a sense of societal relevance. This issue of maintaining an influential role in the public sphere was important to both organizations, but more so to the Society, which struggled to recover its membership numbers and found it difficult to make peace with its outdated image. While the Ladies considered working together with and for youth as but an expansion of their existing fields of activity, the Society attached existential value to the matter. To the Society, the inability to attract young members was equated to losing the original spirit of the organization and to the prospect of dying out. By constantly reiterating the importance of youth to the organization, while at the same time dealing with an outdated image and encountering much resistance when trying to recruit youth, the Society, I believe, inadvertently created a fertile ground for criticism and internal dissatisfaction. At the same time, its strong dedication to reforming the morality of the working-class youth was a difficult task in a time during which the offer of material support in return for displaying desired behavior had lost much of its appeal, and during which competing ideologies were able to gather mass support and mobilize large segments of Belgium's youth.

Conclusion

Manly strength is used up aimlessly, girlish purity and motherly surrender are trampled upon. Sexuality governs mutual life and is a fire that affects everything. The higher things of the soul are made subservient to the lowest instincts; youth sold, and forced into maturity. And all this festers at the bottom of the absolute power of money, of heartless external progress, of limitless overestimation of material and the physical. And as a bleak background to this scene accumulate the showers of international tampering, of rotten politics, of monstrous methods of trade and finance; armaments, war, peoples, racial and class hatred.

*Our time is in need.*²⁰³

The interwar period was a very turbulent time for the Vincentians, just as it was for the rest of the population. The First World War had dealt a heavy blow to both the Ladies and the Society, who had failed to secure a significant role for themselves in providing relief during this time of great need and moreover faced a loss of resources and members. After the war, the Vincentians' field of work changed drastically. The introduction of broad social reforms reflected a generally positive attitude towards state intervention in the social sphere, a matter that had been highly debated until then. In addition, the expansion and subsidization of the social organizational field and the economic boom of the second half of the 1920s meant that the living conditions of the working class drastically improved. For the Vincentians, this not only meant that the workers became increasingly less dependent on their services, and that they therefore had to search for new target audiences, but also that the social utility of charity was increasingly scrutinized.

Especially the Society was very sensitive to criticism, which often came from within its own ranks. The organization's texts consistently emphasized that there would always be poor, and that the Vincentian work would therefore never lose its purpose. Nevertheless, the idea grew that the traditional target group of the Vincentians, the

²⁰³ MSVP January 1937, 15.

workers, often no longer needed the material alms offered by the visitors, and even worse, that they did not *want* it anymore (although the crisis of the 1930s offered some solace in this regard). In response, both organizations sought to confirm their continued usefulness by targeting new groups that still needed social support, including people with disabilities, the long-term unemployed, and abandoned women. Especially the category of the shamefaced poor developed into the preferred recipients of the Vincentians' charity during the 1920s, as they believed that these marginalized poor were ideal for acts of pure charity. The shamefaced poor, to who's suffering the Vincentians attributed a different, more profound quality than that of the workers, allowed the visitor to develop his or her personal qualities more deeply and work more substantially on self-sanctification. Moreover, through their work with the shamefaced poor, they had the opportunity to guide these silent sufferers on the path to a socially serving, redemptive suffering, thereby contributing to the salvation of the broader community through small acts of love – which was what being a Vincentian was all about.

Even though adult workers were no longer the primary target for practicing pure charity through home visits, the Vincentians believed that there was still much work to be done with this category, even more than before. The Society and the Ladies were very concerned about moral degeneration among the workers, which was fueled by socialist ideology and undermined the foundations of society, particularly faith, family, and property. Therefore, according to the Vincentians, there was still moral poverty among the workers, and thus a field for the Vincentians to work in. Since material alms had lost much of their appeal for the workers, they focused on developing a social service in the form of information. In this way, the Vincentians presented themselves to the workers not as the source of material aid, but as intermediaries in obtaining that aid. This allowed them to maintain personal contact with the workers and thus continue their moral influence.

This moral influence remained desperately needed in the eyes of the Vincentians, because sustainable material progress was not possible without a moral foundation, and the organizations therefore continued to position themselves as the guardians and propagators of Christian morality. In this regard they could also continue to count on the support of the ecclesial authorities and Rome. Pius X regularly confirmed the usefulness of Vincentian charity, and the Vincentians also managed to defend the value of their work at the Belgian Catholic Congress of 1937. This strengthened them in their self-appointed role as interpreters of the interests of the lower classes. Indeed, the Society and the Ladies portrayed themselves as the protectors and representatives of the people. Thanks to their contact with the people through their charitable work, the Vincentians were convinced that they were well informed about the issues that concerned them and the problems they encountered. They believed that the lower classes were often victims

of their own ignorance and tendency toward self-destructive behavior, and that they were therefore more susceptible to the evil influence of socialism. Nevertheless, they also showed understanding for the frustrations among the population, who, according to them, were victims of the excesses of modern society, created by selfish individualism and unbridled pursuit of profit. Against this bleak analysis of current modern society, as well as against the socialist and extreme right-wing ideals, the Vincentians continued to position an alternative modernity grounded in Christian values and norms.

Despite the Vincentian's combative language, something of an existential crisis occurred within the Society. While the Ladies continued their work in much of the same vein as before, their male counterparts increasingly believed that the organization's future depended on its ability to rejuvenate its ranks. This sentiment was largely due to the fact that Catholic youth, especially boys, had become very active in the militant Catholic action, but instead of engaging in charity, they preferred the new Catholic Action organizations. Initially, the Society tried to position itself as not only part of Catholic Action, but even as the direct forerunner of this movement, just as they had done during the late nineteenth century development of social Catholicism. Later in the interbellum, the Society reluctantly admitted that its own work and mission were indeed different than those of the Catholic Action organizations, but that Vincentian charity did retain a special function in forming the young elite through membership, and the younger generations of the lower classes through patronage work. After all, the hope for a better future lay in the hands of the youth, the Vincentians continually emphasized, because young people (young men in particular) were still flexible in their ideas, were energetic and virile, and had the strength to turn the tide of modernity.

Even though the appeal of the Society had visibly declined among socially engaged Catholic (young) men, there was no straightforward downward trend in membership during the 1920s and 1930s, and the organization did succeed in creating a platform for youth within many conferences. Perhaps the loss of members compared to the pre-war situation was not an unambiguous failure, because it is also imaginable that the post-war identity crisis within the organization somewhat purified its ranks of less convinced members. The membership numbers of the Ladies even showed an upward trend during these years, and both organizations were able to play a role in distributing aid to the affected population during the Second World War. Rather than indulging in self-pity, the Vincentians demonstrated that they still wanted to actively participate in the struggle for modernity. More explicitly than ever, they expressed their desire to contribute to the establishment of the Kingdom of Christ, presenting it as an ideological third way compared to liberalism and socialism (and later also fascism). To emphasize their contribution, they did not hesitate to label the nature, means, and goals of their own organizations as modern, thereby aligning themselves with the broader Catholic quest for a profound transformation of society according to the Christian vision.

Historical research on charity has generally paid very little attention to this period, a disinterest that seems to imply that the age of charity had indeed finally come to an end after the war. In the book on the history of the Society in Belgium, the authors also seem to share a negative judgment about the direction in which the organization was heading. According to this interpretation, the interwar period was a time of ‘loss of function’, of spiritual emptiness, and of marginality within the Catholic organizational world for the Society.²⁰⁴ The discourse of the Vincentians did indeed betray a deep cultural pessimism, and in the case of the Society, a lot of self-criticism, but the flip side was a continued commitment to change. Regardless of whether we can deem this commitment useful, desired, or even sincere in hindsight, its reconstruction provides insight into the confrontation between new and old visions of the future, and the (sometimes challenging) processes of internal reflection, renewal, and restoration that result from these visions. There was still a place for charity during the interwar period, even if the Vincentians had to rethink their strategies. More so than before, the transformations that took place in the sociopolitical sphere incited the Vincentians to emphasize the moral and spiritual value of their work and detach it from temporal circumstances.

²⁰⁴ De Maeyer, ‘In Amore et Fraternitate’, 197-200; Bousset and Delmer, ‘La Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul à Bruxelles’, 256-260; De Maeyer, Heyrman and Quaghebeur, ‘Een Glorierijk Verleden’, 296-301.

Final reflections

We are marching, they say, towards new times? Nevertheless, history has never been but a recommencement. The future will, very likely, be similar to the past.¹

A hundred years after their establishment in the early 1840s, the Belgian Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and the Ladies of Charity were still performing home visits to the poor and practicing self-sanctification. Not without a struggle, Vincentian charity was largely able to withstand the pressures of the liberal efforts towards secularization, the ever more influential socialist workers' movement, the advent of Christian democracy, the fierce competition of Catholic Action organizations, and the challenges posed by two world wars. The durability of the Vincentian organizations, which lasted long after the first 100 years covered in this book, attested to their profound dedication to the practice of their religious faith via lay apostolate, to being socially engaged and forming meaningful relationship with the less fortunate, as well as to exerting a moral influence on the upper and lower classes alike using non-political action. For many Vincentians, this commitment lasted many years, decades, or sometimes almost an entire lifetime. Not seldomly, membership of the Vincentian organizations was passed on from parent to child, and it was considered good practice of the visitors to regularly take their offspring with them during their rounds.²

Simultaneously, the Belgian context emerged as an exceptionally fertile environment for the development of a thriving network of Catholic social initiatives. In a predominantly Catholic nation, with minimal influence from Protestantism, Catholics successfully established a significant social presence for the Church and religious entities. Crucial to this achievement was the Catholic integration of the concept of freedom during the crucial decades after the country's independence, paving the way for a substantial role and autonomy for religious organizations and institutions within the social sphere, encompassing social assistance and education. Throughout this period, the Vincentian organizations maintained their position as some of the main and certainly the longest active outlets for the charitable fervor of the Catholic lay elites in Belgium, making use of the opportunities presented by this context and adapting to its evolving

¹ DLSVPA JV 1921, 14.

² Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*.

dynamics, while at the same time guarding their original spirit.

This spirit had its origins in the vision of the romantic Catholics of the early to mid-nineteenth-century revival, most notably Frédéric Ozanam, who integrated optimism about the possible role for Catholicism in modern society, a strong sacrificial ethos, and a pronounced dedication to social activism via the practice of religious virtues. The practice of charity constituted an evident outlet for this spiritual and social zeal, and the format of the seventeenth-century *Charités* created by Vincent de Paul provided a fitting source of inspiration. Thus, the Vincentians embarked upon a lay apostolic mission to restore the social and spiritual bonds in society which they believed had been destroyed by the Revolution. These included the bonds between the rich and the poor, which they felt were increasingly tainted by distrust and even hatred, as well as those between humanity and God. In the eyes of the Vincentians, it was up to the Catholic elites to take the first step towards class reconciliation and the establishment of a Christian society. They were to do so by showing the poor genuine compassion, establishing brotherly relationships with them, and guiding them towards religious faith and morality, but also by committing to a continuous, joint effort towards religious self-development. Thus, the action-oriented spirituality of the Vincentians was characterized by a triple goal of elevating oneself, the poor, and society as a whole.

This triple goal remained a constant in the Vincentians' ideas and practices, and so did their attachment to the practice of the charitable poor visit, to which they allocated a deep symbolical meaning in addition to many practical uses and advantages. Indeed, the poor visit remained at the heart of Vincentian charity, and the many auxiliary works created by the organizations were set up in a complimentary way. On a personal level, the poor visit offered the visitor an opportunity to practice his or her devotion, humility, respect, and selflessness. The Vincentians' dedication to seeking out and providing aid and guidance to people living in poverty in their own homes was relatively unique in the Belgian field of social assistance. Because of this, the Vincentians were convinced that their experience with visiting the poor provided them with an equally unique, collectively accumulated knowledge on the nature of poverty and the needs of the poor. Interestingly, at no point in the period studied here, did the Vincentians systematically collect or analyze the information they gathered about the people they visited nor their living spaces, and the questionnaires they used (if they used any) seemed to have functioned more like suggestions for inquiries.³ Conversely, they spent much time in their publications describing the misery and immorality they encountered behind closed

³ I deduct this from the fact that the questionnaires were very seldomly completely filled in, usually containing not much more than the names and the birth dates of the families that were visited. It remained common throughout the period under study for the Vincentians to write down their observations on loose papers and in notebooks, which were rarely kept in the archives.

doors, often with great emotion and not seldomly using poetic language – which stood in stark contrast to the dry recapitulations of the actual aid distributed by the visitors and the organizations’ finances. These observations reveal the Vincentians desire to maintain the flexible and personalized nature of their visits, but also suggests a certain protectiveness, or even possessiveness, over their ‘special’ relationship with the poor families they visited, whose suffering could only be communicated to the public in a way that was interpreted according to the Vincentians’ moral perspective on social issues.

In its conception of poverty as a social phenomenon, this framework presented inequality and poverty a natural part of life as created by God. As all aspects of this divine plan, poverty had its utility: it offered the poor a route to salvation through resignation, and it provided the rich an opportunity for salvation through the practice of charity. On the level of society, the spiritual effect of the charitable exchange allowed God’s Love to flow among the people, believers or not, thereby contributing to the redemption of a sinful society. In the eyes of the Vincentians (like most Catholics), the Revolution and its secular heritage had destroyed the role of religion as the indisputable moral foundation for the social, economic, and political order of society, resulting in degeneration and the proliferation of sin. In turn, this had destroyed the social bonds which formed the fabric of society, allowing selfishness, hatred, and jealousy to fester. Particularly problematic was the growing estrangement between the poor and the rich which stood in the way of social harmony. With unwavering conviction, the Vincentians professed that charity was necessary to correct these wrongs, not only in the form of almsgiving, but as a guiding, moral principle of society. In the Vincentian organizations, the rich dedicated themselves to joint spiritual and moral self-development, and because the elites were the natural leaders of society, such a dedication to personal growth would automatically translate to a more profound social awareness and thus a better treatment of the lower classes. At the same time, the material alms distributed by the visitors could alleviate the most urgent suffering, but more importantly, the Vincentians’ patronage of the visited could help them achieve a more comfortable and meaningful life. To this end, patronage of the poor had a dual function: to teach the poor useful life skills which would allow them to take their life into their own hands, and to instill them with religious faith and foster resignation about the things that could not be changed.

As Matthieu Brejon de Lavergnée aptly noted in his study of the French Society, the fraternal structure, spiritual principles, and social aims of the organization thus mirrored the ideal of a Christian society to which they tried to contribute.⁴ Collectivity, cooperation, and fraternity were guiding principles of the Vincentians’ relationship with each other and with the poor. In their ideal of a Christian society, the individual was

⁴ Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*, 576.

subordinate to the community and to the Church, and in the same vein, the individual Vincentian was to put him or herself to the service of the organization, to the poor, and to God. In line with these principles, the Ladies and the Society put much emphasis on humility and on joint decision making. In the same vein, the Vincentian organizations had presidents (at various levels), but their roles were constructed in the service of maintaining the original spirit of the organizations and keeping the members on the right track. It is noteworthy that this focus on the collective on the part of the Vincentians was very prominent in the image construction of the organizations and therefore also in their sources, which, in turn, manifested itself in the primary focus on the organizational level rather than the individual Vincentians in this book.

The Vincentians' humility and their servitude to the community of members, to the poor families they visited, and to their societal ideal, should not be confused with submissiveness or unassumingness. Humility was understood mostly in the sense of discretion, referring to the ideal of self-abnegation when helping the other. In other words, the charitable gift reached its potential only when given quietly and without pride. Thus, humility as understood by the Vincentians was not necessarily at odds with their self-confirmation as examples for others, both rich and poor. During the nineteenth century, taking up such an exemplary role became increasingly important to the Vincentians. Among the men of the Society, this relative abandonment of discretion happened already in the first decades after the organization's establishment in Belgium, making way for the assumption of a public role for its members as embodying the ideal of the Catholic militant fighting against immorality and the enemies of the Church. The Ladies, whose expectation of humility was characterized by an additional, gendered element, did not explicitly advance their exemplary role in their publications until the late nineteenth century in junction with the development of a Catholic feminism. From then on, the Ladies, no less than their male counterparts and sometimes even more unabashedly, were prepared to guide and control the poor with a firm hand, as well as present themselves as the shining example for women of the lower classes.

As the Vincentians took on this exemplary role, their morally superior attitude and paternalist approach of the poor became increasingly striking and served as the main argument in the criticism of charity. Both liberals and socialists accused Catholics of using charity as a vehicle to expand their own power in society and control over the lower classes, at the expense of the actual well-being of the poor. This criticism itself was driven by a mixture of genuine concern for the poor, hostility toward Catholics, and a desire to expand one's own power. Liberals themselves did not shy away from dealing with the poor in a paternalistic manner either, even if this constituted an 'enlightened' paternalism, and their various forms of social action had a clear anti-Catholic component. Nevertheless, the secular criticism of charity, and specifically of the Vincentians, has left a strong imprint on later historiography. As highlighted at various

points in this book, the ideas and practices of the Vincentians were often interpreted by historians within the framework of social control, which drew attention to the power of the giver and the subordination of the receiver in the charitable exchange, the function of charity in maintaining the status quo of social inequality, and the (Catholic) elite's drive for self-affirmation.

The association between the Vincentians and social control, while not entirely incorrect, warrants some additional nuance. The motivations of benefactors were manifold and complex. They were driven by both individual and collective desires and interests, as well as by a complex combination of religious, political, and social considerations. The Vincentians did indeed lean towards a conservative stance, manifested in the pursuit of a broad role for private Catholic organizations and institutions in the social sphere. This attitude was also visible in their acceptance of social inequality and the assertion of a leading role for the elite. Furthermore, the Vincentians explicitly advocated resignation during their work with the poor, demanded that the poor fulfill their religious duties and engage in Catholic social works, and promoted traditional family roles inspired by Christian morality among the lower classes. The Vincentians moralized, proselytized, controlled, and disciplined the poor, trying to mold them to the ideal of the devout, hardworking, thrifty, and family-oriented laborer. Thus, the Vincentians did indeed exert a form of social control and discipline, a tendency strengthened by their commitment to putting their charity in the service of establishing a Christian society. However, engagement in Vincentian organizations was also driven by other motivations, and historical research into the motivations or charitable actors equally stressed the opportunities for networking, social mobility, and, in particular in the case of women, participation in the public sphere that came with membership of charitable organizations.

Even though these were the motivations most associated with the Vincentians' charitable engagement in historical literature, neither social control, social ambition, nor the combination of both could fully explain the engagement of the Vincentians. Many Vincentians did display significant dedication to the poor, driven not only by the desire to contribute to a Christian society but also, and interconnectedly, by a sincere concern for their well-being. It is challenging to imagine that the Vincentians invested so much effort in visiting, talking to, and educating the poor, in raising financial resources and distributing material aid, and in weekly meetings to discuss the state of poor families, without accepting genuine compassion and helpfulness as legitimate underlying motivations. Throughout the first century of their existence, the Society and the Ladies continued to emphasize that the poor deserved love and respect. Many of their reports on visits to the poor attested to the personal bonds they built with the families they visited, the joy their visits sometimes brought to the people living in poverty themselves, and the satisfaction they felt when they could alleviate hunger and suffering, help

someone find employment, or provide a peaceful, Christian death to a poor individual nearing the end of their life. In this sense, Vincentian charity continued to succeed in sensitizing the elite to social issues. The alms distributed by the Vincentians were no more than a drop in the ocean in the face of the deep poverty affecting large segments of the population, a fact that has often been cited in historical research to demonstrate the inefficiency of traditional charity and the ulterior, disciplining motivations of the charitable visitors. The insufficiency of their alms was not denied by the Vincentians themselves either, to the contrary. After all, the meaningful interactions with the poor, not the distribution of alms, remained the *raison d'être* of the organizations throughout the first century in their existence.

In turn, the analysis of the Vincentians sources (which indirectly or sometimes directly contained the voice of the poor) indicated that the beneficiaries of Vincentian charity not seldomly valued these interactions and gained comfort from the visits, that the Vincentians were at times able to play a genuinely positive role in their lives, and that families living in poverty were able to make pragmatic use of the various services offered by the Vincentians. Of course, the people dealing with poverty who invited the Vincentian visitors into their homes did not merely undergo the visit. Creating a meaningful interaction meant that the beneficiaries were invited and expected to be active participants in the charitable exchange, which provided them with a sense of agency and influence. A typical characteristic of Vincentian charity during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century was a constant oscillation between – or rather, an intimate intertwining of – sensitivity to the needs of the poor and a patronizing attitude, between love and suspicion. This attitude resulted in an ambiguous relationship with the poor. They had to be honored as the personification of Christ and at the same time instructed like children. And while the moral, faithful poor represented the greatest possible treasure, the immoral, non-believing (especially when socialist) poor instilled deep fear. Precisely this complex relationship between the Vincentians and their beneficiaries was an important driver of change in the ideas and practices of the former.

There were many occasions during which the visited were to exert influence on and redirect the charitable exchange with the Vincentians, for example by requesting specific material aid and services, at times even refusing assistance unless the Vincentians adapted their approach. The most striking example of when this happened was during the inter-war period, when the workers' increased living standards allowed them to leverage the visitors into developing a more expansive social service. More indirectly, too, the various popular protests and revolts, as well as the increasing discontent among the workers and the growing influence of socialism did not leave the Vincentians unaffected and motivated them to create a wide offer of mutual aid societies as a supplement to the home visits. Thus, the needs of the people living in poverty did matter

to the Vincentians, and they made attempts to integrate the types of social assistance valued by their beneficiaries into the framework of Vincentian charity. It is relevant in this regard to note that the social control interpretation of charity was premised on the idea that charity served to maintain the status quo, and by extension drew disproportionate attention to continuity in the Vincentians' ideas and practices. However, this view fails to take into account that in reality, rather than maintain the status quo, the Vincentians wanted to establish social harmony, and they were very adamant on the fact that society was far removed from this ideal (which remained the case throughout the period studied). As such, they wanted to maintain the status quo in so far as they believed that social inequality and hierarchy were unavoidable and necessary conditions of human society, but they continuously condemned the presence of social misery and the lack of good relationships between the classes. At the same time, the causes to which they attributed societal imbalance and degeneration changed over time, and therefore so did the concrete solutions proposed by the Vincentians to counter these developments.

It is easy to overlook change in the Vincentians' work, their identities, and their view of society, however, as they continuously sought to maintain as much as possible the original foundation and practices of the Society and the Ladies. Undoubtedly, the prominent emphasis on preservation in the Vincentians' discourses significantly contributed to the perception in historical research that Vincentian charity was resistant to change. However, as revealed in this book, the Vincentians were also incredibly concerned with maintaining social relevancy, and the dynamics of their ideas and practices were closely connected to the broader societal transformations and conflicts which took place during the period studied here. The lay character of the organizations was of great importance in this regard, because as people living in the world rather than in contemplative seclusion, the Vincentians were deeply aware of the developments in the social and sociopolitical spheres. For many of them, membership in the Vincentian organizations was only one of multiple ways in which they put their social and religious engagement into practice. As lay people, the Vincentians' identity construction as charitable men and women mirrored their roles in the public sphere as members of the Catholic elites. In Belgium, the Catholic elites and the Church were exceptionally influential in shaping not only its field of social assistance, but also more broadly, its sociopolitical debates and their outcomes, even the country's development of a cultural identity. The Vincentians were more often than not a part of this influential elite. Their strong desire to exert a moral influence on the poor, to contribute to the reconstruction of modern society, to engage as many of their peers as possible in this project, was a demonstration of their deep-rooted desire to extend the effects of their work far beyond temporarily relieving the misery of poor families. To this end, they engaged the Vincentian organizations and works in the vast networks of Catholic social organizations

and institutions, and by the late nineteenth century even going so far as to explicitly advance Catholic electoral interests via their charitable works.

Indeed, for most of the nineteenth century, the Vincentians' goals and ideals were widely shared among Belgium's Catholics, and membership was considered a useful and enriching way to practice their beliefs, both in the religious and the ideological sense, which were heavily intertwined. The Vincentians' attachment to practicing the patronage of their beneficiaries and the paternalist attitude with which they approached them, for example, fit well into the spirit of the times. Even though by the late nineteenth century a relatively coherent Catholic social project developed which even included a democratic element, only few Catholics believed that the worker himself knew what was best for him. The new scientific insights into the structural causes of poverty and social misery during this period were smoothly blended into this approach, providing additional justification for the Catholics' mission to instruct. It is telling, then, that the popularity of Vincentian charity did not diminish because of these developments, to the contrary. It was only in the interwar period that the moralizing and paternalist attitude of the Vincentians truly came under pressure. This happened not because the Catholic elites or the Church had revised the legitimacy of paternalism, but because of the pressure exerted by the people living in poverty. Confronted with increasing difficulty in finding people living in poverty who were receptive to their patronage, the Vincentians sought solace among the shamefaced poor, whose need for guidance was almost entirely limited to their spiritual and psychological needs.

Thus, driven by the desire to remain socially relevant, the Vincentians regularly adjusted their work and approach to the poor, but not at the expense of their original spiritual purpose and social goals. I contend that the source of the remarkable continuity present in Vincentian charity was therefore so much not the result of the Vincentians' desire to maintain the status quo, as it was the consequence of the ultimately religious purpose of the organizations. The Vincentians were first and foremost apostles, not social workers, but this religious motivation has been underappreciated in much of the historical research dealing with the history of charity. Yet, it constituted an important reason why both organizations managed to maintain their membership (fairly) well, despite their adherence to their traditional way of working. The significant degree of continuity in Vincentian ideas and practices, and their persistent adherence to the simple, deeply spiritual nature of home visits, was indeed attractive to a significant segment of the Catholic elite in a country that, a hundred years after its independence, still counted a vast majority of believers. In this sense, this observation speaks more to the enduring importance of religion and religious expression than to the elite's desire for social control. It is noteworthy that the fear of losing relevance only really set in among the Vincentians in the interwar period, when they were confronted with competition from the Catholic Action movement (although the predominantly male character of this

movement meant that this sentiment was felt much more intensely by the members of the Society than by the Ladies). Indeed, Catholic Action gave new meaning to religiously inspired social engagement which posed a threat to the appeal of charity. As a twentieth-century revival movement, it aimed to mobilize the laity for the re-Christianization of society in a way that transcended political and social differences. While charity played a significant role in this movement, it was not the central or guiding principle.

The purpose of this exposition of the motivations, ideals, and practices of the Vincentians is not to endlessly nuance, but to understand Vincentian charity in Belgium as a product of both social convictions and religious beliefs, of a quest for social order as well as profound social change, and of the zeal of individuals who sought belonging, meaning, and fulfilment in their lives. The Belgian context was truly exceptional with regards to the broad playing field it allowed the Vincentians. The opportunity offered by this context to actively and visibly engage in the social and socio-political spheres also created tensions between the social goals and spiritual purpose of the Vincentians and a continuous reassessment of the relationship between both. I would argue that even the constant reiteration of the original spirit of the organizations constituted an example of this dynamic. Despite many continuities in the ideas and practices of the Vincentians, they regularly showed themselves dynamic, innovative, and exceptionally sensitive to current societal debates and the sentiments of the population. In the way they positioned themselves in the field of social assistance, they adapted the concrete social and sociopolitical justifications for their work in line with the broader Catholic efforts to restore and expand the role of religion in society. Similarly, they adjusted their specific moralizing missions according to the main issues plaguing the lower classes as identified by Catholic thinkers, politicians, scientists, and by the elites in general. To assist in their mission, they created an ever-expanding network of auxiliary works centered around the home visits, and the nature of these initiatives equally reflected the Vincentians' position towards the main issues of social and political contention in Belgium.

This brings me to the broader question of the relationship between Vincentian charity and modernity, and to the utility of an open conceptualization of modernity to answer it. In the introduction of this book, I put forward a theoretical framework rooted in Schmucl Eisenstadt's concept of multiple modernities, which was based on the premise that modern society could have multiple outcomes at any given time, that these results were continuously contested, and that these dynamics of contestation and change formed the basic characteristic of modernity. The aim was to engage with the history of the Vincentian organizations in Belgium in a manner that acknowledged their self-historicization and recognized their potential for dynamism in light of societal transformation. Thus, it became apparent from the study that the Vincentian organizations found themselves right on the main fault lines that shaped modern society, namely the conflict between religion and secularization and those surrounding the social

question(s). As active participants in these conflicts (socio-political engagement was more than explicit political activism), the Vincentians conceptualized themselves as militants in the struggle for a Catholic version of modern society. Therefore, Vincentian charity in Belgium was deeply entwined with the broader social, socio-political and cultural conflicts and transformations that shaped modern society. The Vincentians demonstrated a keen awareness of this modern context, its shortcomings, its potential, and its irreversibility.

It is interesting to compare these insights on the Belgian Vincentians' relationship with the modern context with those presented by Brejon de Lavergnée, who equally reflected on this issue in his study of the Society in France. In the last chapter of his book, Brejon de Lavergnée provided a nuanced interpretation of the French Vincentians' motivations and aims when performing charity. In this, he stressed the fundamentally religious nature of the Society's ideas and practices, which went hand in hand with a rejection of the Revolution and its heritage. Indeed, like the Vincentians in Belgium, the French Vincentians were dedicated to bringing about a Christian society through charity, which they presented as a valid alternative to the liberal conception of modernity. The historian decided that precisely because of its dedication to founding society on God, the nature of nineteenth century Vincentian charity was antimodern. Yet, he did seem to struggle with rhyming the Society's urge for societal renewal with this interpretation, eventually concluding that there was also an element of paradoxical, 'antimodern modernity' present in Vincentian charity.⁵ I would however argue that analytically, it is not conducive to disengage the Vincentians' religious purpose and social goals, as both emerged and changed in mutual relation. Not the internal contradiction of the Vincentians, but the (implicit) definition of modernity used by the historian is the factor that creates paradoxicality. Brejon de Lavergnée equated antimodern and anti-Revolutionary thinking, thereby *a priori* excluding the possibility that any form of religious resistance to the heritage of the Revolution could be considered modern.

Thus, I contend that replacing normative conceptions of modernity with an open definition creates more room for the assessment of the self-historicization of the Vincentians, thereby allowing to solve apparent paradoxes in the interpretation of their ideas, objectives, and practices. In this respect, it is important not to be misled by the high degree of continuity in the thinking and practices of the Vincentians or other Catholic actors active in the social sphere. Continuity, otherworldliness, and eternity are typical features of religious discourse, providing believers with stability. However, religious beliefs and expressions also exhibit discontinuities and adapt to new contexts (as they still do). In this sense, a long-term perspective and extensive contextualization

⁵ Brejon de Lavergnée, *La Société de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul*, 575-579; 594-595.

are highly illuminating in the study of religion during modernity.⁶ Certainly, the Belgian context was uniquely conducive to this undertaking because of the enduring, extensive opportunities it allowed for religious engagement in the social and political spheres. However, I believe that in the broader sense, too, deconstructing normative assumptions about the nature of religious beliefs and practices in modern history not only propels but also deepens our understanding of the topic, adding layers of nuance to the analysis. Attention to the complexity of the goals and motivations of religious actors in relation to their practices, while considering their self-historicization and remaining receptive to their dynamic potential, enhances the historian's sensitivity to unspoken assumptions in current-day interpretations of the past. In this sense, adopting a more nuanced approach to Vincentian charity does not necessarily require presenting an apology. The intent of this book was certainly not to construct an 'alternative' history of the Vincentians or to in some way redeem Vincentian charity. Likewise, my initial objective did not involve the deconstruction of the concept of modernity through an examination of the history of Vincentian charity. Instead, this book was driven by the question how the Vincentians constructed, justified, and enacted their social objectives and spiritual mission during a period of great societal transformations in Belgian history. With regret, I have left many stones unturned, and I would like to advocate for further study of these multifaceted organizations and their sources, which provide a unique insight into the convictions and social engagement of the Catholic elites during the nineteenth to mid-twentieth century.

⁶ See also Hellemans' very interesting speech: Hellemans, *Religieuze Modernisering*.

Annexes

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List of abbreviations

AJBV	Archief Jezüieten - Belgische en Vlaamse Provincie <i>Archive Jesuits – Belgium and Flanders</i>
ALV	Archief Lammens – Verhaegen <i>Archive Lammens – Verhaegen</i>
APJB	Archief Pieter Jan Broekx <i>Archive Pieter Jan Broekx</i>
AKVB	Archief Kamer van Volksvertegenwoordigers België <i>Archive Chamber of Representatives Belgium</i>
(A)SVP	(Archief) Sint Vincentius a Paulogenootschap <i>(Archive) Society of Saint Vincent de Paul</i>
(A)SVPA	(Archief) Sint Vincentius a Paulogenootschap Antwerpen <i>Archive Society of Saint Vincent de Paul Antwerp</i>
(A)SVPG	(Archief) Sint Vincentius a Paulogenootschap Gent <i>Archive Society of Saint Vincent de Paul Ghent</i>
(A)SVPHRB	(Archief) Sint Vincentius a Paulogenootschap Hoofdraad België <i>Archive Society of Saint Vincent de Paul General Council Belgium</i>
AWK	Archief Wederzijds Hulpbetoon (Voormalig Dames van Liefde van Sint-Vincentius a Paulo) <i>Archive Mutual Assitance (Formerly Ladies of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul)</i>
BAB	Bisschoppelijk Archief Brugge <i>Episcopal Archive Bruges</i>
DLSVP	Dames van Liefde van Sint Vincentius a Paulo <i>Ladies of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul</i>
DLSVPA	Dames van Liefde van Sint Vincentius a Paulo Antwerpen <i>Ladies of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul Antwerp</i>
DLSVPAr	Dames van Liefde van Sint Vincentius a Paulo Arlon <i>Ladies of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul Arlon</i>
DLSVPB	Dames van Liefde van Sint Vincentius a Paulo Brussel <i>Ladies of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul Brussels</i>
DLSVPBr	Dames van Liefde van Sint Vincentius a Paulo Brugge <i>Ladies of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul Bruges</i>
DLSVPK	Dames van Liefde van Sint Vincentius a Paulo Kortrijk <i>Ladies of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul Courtrai</i>
DLSVPST	Dames van Liefde van Sint Vincentius a Paulo Sint-Truiden

	<i>Ladies of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul Saint Trond</i>
JV	Jaarverslag <i>Year report</i>
KADOC	Documentatie- en Onderzoekscentrum voor Religie, Cultuur en Samenleving
MSVP	Maandschrift Sint Vincentius a Paulogenootschap <i>Monthly Bulletin Society of Saint Vincent de Paul</i>
ODPM	Œuvre des Pauvres Malades <i>Work of the Poor Sick</i>
ODPMG	Œuvre des Pauvres Malades Gent <i>Work of the Poor Sick Ghent</i>
ODPMBr	Œuvre des Pauvres Malades Brugge <i>Work of the Poor Sick Bruges</i>
SVP	Sint Vincentius a Paulogenootschap <i>Society of Saint Vincent de Paul</i>
SVPL	Sint Vincentius a Paulogenootschap Luik <i>Society of Saint Vincent de Paul Liège</i>

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