

The Church and the family in Belgium, 1850-1914

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INTRODUCTION

What is the attitude and what are the positions adopted by the Catholic Church in Belgium vis-à-vis the family between the middle of the nineteenth century and World War I? The question is important for several reasons. Between 1750 and 1950, the family underwent impressive changes (Ariès, 1960; Burguière, 1986). The Church occupied an exceptional, and contested, place within the conjugal and familial domain (Goody, 1983; Guerreau-Jalabert, 1981; Duby, 1981 and 1988; Flandrin, 1983). Belgium assumed a special position regarding religious matters as a result of its profound religious roots – there were large numbers of members of clergy and religious orders, the Christian education prevailed, the institutional and associative network were strong, political transmissions were powerful –, and its fierce opposition (Aubert, 1980).

Belgian historiography has only recently shown a slight interest in the relations between the Church and the family. An analysis (Gevers, 1995) of the Belgian bishops' pastoral letters observes that the family figured as a recurrent theme, reaffirming the Church's dual character of divine institution and pillar of society, accentuating the reciprocal duties and demands of affection uniting its members. But beyond this massive, fundamental basis, it shows shifts in the episcopal discourse, used as a weapon in the struggle against modernity. A first period, covering the decades 1830 to 1870, focused on the task of Christian education, notably in a context of increasing secularisation and a more or less open scholastic war. The chronology of the episcopal interventions is particularly enlightening in this regard. The second period accentuates family life as such, the spiritual life underlying it and the rules of daily life favouring it. This time it was a question of struggling against another form of modernisation and laicisation, clearly socialist. The third period started with the publication of Cardinal Mercier's letter in 1909 which was devoted to the life of the couple and accentuated self-control of sexuality in the light of familial morality. It concretised the Church's new focus of attention, passing from the public to the private sphere, but without renouncing to public action.

In the subsequent debates provoked by the publication of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, Jean Stengers (1971) tried to determine the Church's attitude towards contraception in marriage, immediately turning our attention to the turn of the century. After a long re-examination of practices and doctrines, he was able to show that *"before 1909, the condemnation of contraception, regardless of the force with which it was pronounced, had stood as a principle of moral theology essentially taught in manuals"*. The opposition of the Belgian Church to the neo-Malthusian current at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, although quite insignificant, still had to change this basic datum and transform the moral position taken into a *"solemn announcement of the magisterium to all the faithful"*, whether by the grace and personal charisma of Cardinal Mercier, or by the convictions and intense work of Father Vermeersch, first in Belgium, later in Rome.

Naturally, the object of the following paragraphs is not to re-examine these analyses, but rather to situate the documents in their overall ecclesiastical context, focusing the attention on the family circle as such. My argument will be developed in three phases, following the structure of the Roman Catholic Church and inspired by the interactions invigorating its functioning. Initially, we will examine the general context of the viewpoints of the Catholic Church adopted by some of its influential members, on the one hand by analysing certain Holy See texts dealing directly or indirectly with the couple and the family and, on the other hand, by attempting to grasp the attitude of the masters of spirituality and the moralists, whose important influence is exercised either on the hierarchy itself, or the clergy, or the family, - in any case within the Catholic bourgeoisie. In a second section, we shall deal directly with the bishops. We will try to determine their conception of family functions, the roles in it and means appropriate for becoming the ideal type. A third phase will lead us out of the episcopal palaces to the heart of the 'Christian people', into the world of educators, in search of the concrete values in the education books derived from the Catholic action. We strive each time to show the different levels of speech and the particular emphases they reveal.

1. THE ECCLESIASTICAL CONTEXT

The family and the couple have been present in the Church's teachings ever since its first writings, whether in the Gospels or the often cited letters of the apostle Paul. The Magisterium's attention is focused on marriage, where family and sexuality meet. The Council of Trent finally fixed a doctrine in this matter and is considered to be 'classical'. But this essential step stopped neither reflection nor solemn declarations, no more than it did shifts in emphasis. This was particularly the case in the nineteenth century, when opposition between Ca-

tholic partisans of the City of God and liberal defenders of the State's independence intensified throughout Europe.

As for spiritual masters and moralists, they progressively introduced new dimensions to these reflections, whether it was a matter of *affectio*, of *dilectio* or, if one dare pronounce the word, *love*.

1.1. The position of the Holy See

Between 1830 and 1914, one text calls our attention: the Encyclical *Arcanum divinae Sapientiae* on Christian marriage (Leo XIII, 1880).

Leo XIII situated the domestic society, based on marriage, within the context of the mission entrusted to the Church by Christ himself: restoration of the society. The primary function of the family is clearly stated: it should participate in the order of society as a whole. That of marriage is just as clear: procreation, but also – developments on divorce indicate this unequivocally – contributing to defending the global social order. The roles of the actors in the family unit, spouses and children, are expressed in terms of duty and hierarchisation. For the husband and father authority and charity, for the wife and children obedience. Education should be ensured equally, but differently, by the father and mother. The importance of the Church's contribution is reaffirmed and reformulated, particularly concerning women's position: for example, the equality of spouses, the guarantee of liberty of marriage or the dignity of the wife and mother. The Church's jurisdiction, guarantor of these achievements, becomes more imperative in the eyes of the Roman pontiff, rising up against anyone challenging it, – central objective of the text – notably by divorce, the consequences of which are presented as apocalyptic for society, for the family and its members. For the Holy Father, by divorce: "*reciprocal affection is weakened, infidelity receives encouragement, protection and education of children are compromised;... dignity of women is diminished and lowered for she stands in danger of being abandoned after having served man's passion*". Briefly, it is an open road to "*an even deeper depravity of private and public habits*" and the Church cannot but oppose it with all its strength.

No doubt this argumentation would be less efficient if it was not taken over by the emergence of a new current of spirituality, i.e. devotion to the *Holy Family*, consecrated by the same Leo XIII. The Catholic restoration after the French Revolution took form through the creation of several congregations, associations and societies, a certain number under the Holy Family's patronage, even if they were essentially involved in helping the poor, in the education of children and in personal spirituality. These religious orders were accompanied by a pious association, which expanded in France through the

impetus of Pierre-Bienvenu Noailles, vicar of Bordeaux. In 1820, he founded a certain number of groups, federated under the title "Association of the Holy Family".

Elsewhere, associations of families devoted to the Holy Family were organised in 1861 in Clermont, in 1862 in Lyon, to "restore Christian society by sanctifying the family". This time the emphasis was on daily family life, i.e. the ordinary and popular life every Christian family could identify with. The association stressed prayer in family and in parish life by setting up a truly familial pastorate. It also emphasised special training for parents and children. The movement took considerable scope, reached Scotland, Italy, the Near East and Belgium and distinguished itself through several publications. For example, *The Holy Family* was published in Liège in 1874 and in 1875, a new review – *The Holy Family. An ascetic review* – was created and subsisted until the twentieth century. It regularly published exhortations on family life. In the volume of the year 1882, we find, for example, a series of articles evoking *St Joseph and Christian marriage, or nuptial benediction, the virginal contract, etc.* The first paragraph of the first article clearly shows the motives of these publications. For the anonymous author, "it is certain that the sanctity of marriage is one of the most indispensable bases of Christian society;... it is no less certain that alteration of this sanctity is a characteristic of our time;... and finally, there are quite specific grounds for conferring a special patronage on St Joseph in this area". By spreading this devotion and the model it supported, redemptorists played an altogether essential role.

Leo XIII was quite anxious to restore the Christian principles in society by devotion to the Holy Family, mainstay of domestic virtues which in turn induced social virtues. He first showed his support for the movement in a letter to Cardinal Bausa, Archbishop of Florence, dated November 20, 1890. He then decreed on June 16, 1892, in his letter *Neminem fugit* that "the cult of piety rendered to the Holy Family should be observed without introducing any innovation". He attached great importance to the benefits accruing from devotion and Holy Family associations: progress in charity, saintliness of morals and piety (Noye, 1964, 92). This pontifical recognition gave the movement a decisive impulse, marked by a series of publications, both reviews and synthetic works. For example, A. de Chevance's book, published in Paris in 1899, entitled *Nazareth or the family of God in humanity*, dealt with both the clergy, educator par excellence, and the family members enrolled in the Archconfraternity.

Almost forty years later, the Encyclical *Casti Connubii* confirmed the crystallisation of the Church's doctrine on family matters (Pius XI, 1930). The emphasis was indeed on the obligation of procreation (Stengers, 1971), but this was an occasion for a real treatise on marriage and the family and in some way crowned an almost secular evolution. There is a review of the classical doctrine,

based on the Encyclical *Arcanum* of Leo XIII published in 1880, followed by a reminder of the goals of marriage, the necessity of hierarchisation of the family and the sacramental character of conjugal union. Divorce, extra-marital relations and, above all, any attack on a couples' fertility, either through contraception or abortion, were condemned, whether for "medical, social or eugenic" reasons. The emancipation of women, at least within the family context, also appeared in this catalogue of errors, even though equality of rights, both between spouses and on the civil level, was reaffirmed. The legitimate, self-controlled character of conjugal relations was also recognised, insofar as "there are, in the use of matrimonial law as well as in marriage itself, secondary ends - like mutual aid, reciprocal love and the remedy for concupiscence - which spouses are not at all forbidden from having in mind, as long as the intrinsic nature of this act is safeguarded, and the subordination to its first end safeguarded as well." (Pius XI, 1930, 278). So, in general, the image seems to be almost stilled; the world goes on turning; the Church has not followed. Apart from a few nuances, especially in matters of conjugal sexuality, Pius IX might have read the text of his far removed successor without shock.

Other texts from the Holy See also deal with the family and the couple, but in a more indirect manner. The Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, again by Leo XIII, dwells on the question repeatedly. For instance, his "defense and elucidation" of private property (Leo XIII, 1891, 27) gives him the opportunity to recall the duties of fathers, and their aspirations in raising children, educating them and seeing to their future, but also the absolute character of paternal authority. A little further on, among employers' duties, appear the obligation to avoid everything that might "weaken the family spirit" or morality of workers. "Masters are further forbidden from giving them work... at odds with their age or gender" (Leo XIII, 1891, 35). The protection of women and children is moreover a possible sector of State intervention (Leo XIII, 1891, 53).

All things considered, the image of the ecclesiastical preoccupations emerging from these various documents is limited. The family appears as a stake in a powerplay between civil society and the Church, particularly in matrimonial matters, unless divorce or declining birth rates cause reactions. The domestic society shown therein is hierarchical, non-egalitarian, patriarchal, composed of reciprocal but differentiated duties, of self- and others-control. In other words, it appears as a bourgeois society, even if some elements of the vocabulary seem to open other perspectives. This may be the case when there is mention of the natural affection between parents and children, or couples.

But if we want to breathe life into this formal framework, we have to seek complementary information. Without eliminating norms, moralists and spiritualists focussed on other factors.

1.2. Moralists and spiritualists

Moral reflection involves the mass of the population less palpably; yet, it influences the higher social strata and nourishes pastoral action, as well as the Magisterium's thought. It accompanies the Magisterium's action, sometimes preceding it, and can only clearly be understood in the long term. We analyse it through the reflections of three religious figures whose writings have had a particular resonance: two bishops, François de Sales and Alphonsus Liguori, and a professor, the Dominican Antonin Gilbert Sertillanges.

1.2.1. François de Sales

Saint François de Sales incontestably appears as a forerunner (Bordes and Hennequin, 1994), who exercised considerable subsequent influence, especially by introducing the notion of love in reflections on marriage. In his *Introduction to devout life* he dedicated two chapters to conjugal life and conjugal spirituality, one entitled *Advice for married people*, the other *The honesty of the nuptial bed*. For Saint François de Sales "*marriage is a grand sacrament, I declare, in Jesus Christ and in his Church; it is honourable for all, in all, meaning in whole and in part*". For the apologist, mutual love is the very basis of marriage, but this love must be surpassed. It is not just human love but equivalent to the Church's love for its Saviour. In this context, the first effect of love is "*the indissoluble union*" of hearts. The second is fidelity; the third "*the production and legitimate nurture of children*". Further on, he adds "*love and fidelity joined together always engender privacy and confidence; this is why men and women saints used many reciprocal caresses in their marriage, caresses that were really loving but chaste, tender but sincere*". Among the duty of spouses, it is also incumbent that "*with children come into the world and beginning to reason, fathers and mothers should take great care to impress the fear of God into their hearts*". Most particularly for women, the house is their domain. Yet, it goes without saying "*that mutual support for one another should be so great that they should never argue with one another, so that no dissension or debate ever be seen*". The bulk of the classical doctrine, of the classical morals and of the classical spirituality of marriage and family is contained in these few lines, which, all things considered, are no more than a tiny portion of an important work.

1.2.2. Alphonsus Liguori

A century later, Alphonsus Liguori follows the same spiritual alignment, even if his formulations are more traditional, as some statements from his works testify.

In treatise XVIII of his *Abrégé* (Liguori, 1896, 301-356), he examines the sacrament of marriage and looks at engagement, marriage and separation of spouses. But he essentially concentrates “on the matter, form and ministry of the sacrament of marriage”. He adopts the central teachings of the Council of Trent, unless he mentions (still in Latin in the edition of 1896) his “*de usu licito matrimonii*”. The nature and the definite Christian tone of relations between spouses or between parents and children are not put into question. At best we find a reminder of these reciprocal duties in treatise VII, concerning the 4th Commandment – Honour thy father and thy mother – (Liguori, 1896, v.I, 274-279). Again the approach is particularly traditional, but also taking the literary genre itself into account. For St. Alphonsus, “*children owe their parents love, respect and obedience*”. The Neapolitan saint then examines how children “*sin grievously*” against love, respect and obedience. The first case gives us some idea of the views adopted, for

“children sin grievously against the love they owe their parents: 1. when they dislike them; 2. when they wish them great harm, and in this case they sin against both justice and piety; 3. when they use unjust means to prevent them from writing their will; 4. when they sadden them seriously without legitimate reason; 5. when they refuse to help them in case of temporal need, and above all when they neglect to administer them the last sacraments.”

Parents are held responsible for the education, especially the religious education, and the nurture of their children, whereas brothers have, reciprocally, an nutritional obligation, coupled with an obligation to dower their sisters. In short, there is hardly any sign of emotional attachment, and maybe there is even a great mistrust vis-à-vis intense family ties, in any case for anyone who has taken vows or entered into religious life.

The essential is obviously not here, but in two very clear-cut positions.

In the introduction to his *Abrégé* (Liguori, 1896), the editor, Father Joseph Frassinetti, prior of Saint Sabina in Genoa, cited verbatim by the Abbé P. Fourez, dean of Châtelet and translator of the work, stresses some “*moral principles particularly worthy of attention*”, notably:

“In things regarding the 6th commandment <You shall not commit adultery> and spouses’ duties and rights, the confessor should not make demands nor permit accusations except insofar as the common sentiment of theologians judges it necessary. Thus he should not inquire into aggravating circumstances; and, speaking frankly, it is not even suitable that he permits the accusation. Nor should he lend his ear needlessly to detailed confessions, whether general or particular, in this area.”

He adds immediately:

“He should not judge sins according to the malice theologians recognise in them, but according to the malice those committing them suppose them to have... An action, a word or thought cannot have any other culpability before God than what the sinner is conscious of.”

In short, one should avoid to make the confessor discover “*an evil he is ignorant of*”, or appear too rigorous. The risk in this case is to discourage someone on his path to sanctity and to obtain opposite results.

Besides, according to Alphonsus Liguori everyone is called to sanctity. He wrote:

“some people say: God does not want all saints! This a great error: ‘God wants us to become saints’, says Saint Paul. Yes, God wants us all to be saints, everyone according to his condition: the religious as religious, layman as layman, married people as married people, merchant as merchant, soldier as soldier, and so, for all the other walks of life” (Liguori, 1879, 79).

The Italian bishop’s benevolence is thus anything but mediocre and unchallenging. His multiform approach, in his ascetic, dogmatic and pastoral works, did gradually have an important influence, at least in Belgium, both for the clergy or the faithful.

For the first group, seminary instruction was fundamental (Demeulemeester, 1939). The evolution in the nineteenth century is very enlightening in this regard. Judging by the catalogues of ecclesiastical libraries, including Louvain’s, at the end of the eighteenth century, the work of Saint Alphonsus was hardly known. For that matter, the low level of priests’ training prevented them from actually feeling that need. A marked severity, impregnated with Jansenism, was an essential part of moral theology, hence discouraging the faithful and gradually distancing them from the Church. The French Revolution would accidentally modify this situation by bringing members of the Dutch clergy into contact with Liguorian theology, either through French emigrants or through their own emigration towards the United Provinces or the German States. The bishop’s beatification, in 1816, constituted a new impetus for the spread of his theology. Two competing editions of his *Théologie morale* were published, in 1821 and 1822, in Malines and Antwerp. Yet the old orientations disappeared only gradually with the reduction of the influence of seminary professors formed in eighteenth century schools. The 1820’s and the multiplication of editions further confirmed that the winds of moral theology were turning. From the mid 1840’s, the works of Alphonsus Liguori were taught in Malines, although with a good many precautions and reticences.

This was also the case in Tournai in 1833, in Liège in 1834, in Ghent and in Bruges. The opening of Redemptorist houses accentuated the dynamics, as did the reorientation of most religious congregations. The position taken by the new Catholic University of Louvain crowned the movement. As the future Cardinal Van Roey (1908) pointed out, *“During a good part of the nineteenth century, our moral science continued to be inspired by the rigourist principles which had prevailed in the preceding century. Yet, little by little, it managed to free itself and moved closer to the doctrines of Saint Alphonsus Liguori, who had halted Jansenist tendencies in Italy.”*

For the faithful, it were missions run by the Redemptorists that played a key role (Demeulemeester, 1941; Gregoire, 1966). Yet they also affected the priests who were called on to help for the mass confessions, and hence found themselves introduced to the precepts of Saint Alphonsus. These missions were major enterprises, mobilising the masses and criss-crossing a diocese. The Liège situation was both exemplary and exceptional. Between 1832, i.e. the arrival of the first Redemptorist fathers in the diocese, and 1852, the end of Monseigneur Van Bommel’s episcopate, no less than 312 missions were preached in the parishes of the diocese of Liège. Each of them represented a major effort, by its length, usually from ten to twelve days, and by the vast means employed, usually four or even five or six priests, sometimes assisted by non-Redemptorist confessors. Data related by Kersten’s *Journal historique et littéraire* allow us to measure their immediate impact: thousands of parishioners were present and confessed. Classical schemas were gradually set up. They adapted Liguorian practices, often impregnated with a very meridional sensibility, to Belgian realities (Gregoire, 1966). They were all based on preaching three major sermons a day: the first, a half-hour each morning; the other three-quarters of an hour during high Mass; the last and longest, an hour and a quarter, during the evening, so that people working during the day could attend. The themes of gatherings were numerous, but often directly concerned the couple and the family. This was the case, in a very direct way, regarding the duties of parents and children, but also, in a more collateral way, for loving one’s neighbour, impurity, bad company, drunkenness, keeping the Sabbath. All of this was in the perspective of salvation, sin and death. Lastly the missions were punctuated with high points intended to strike the imagination and sensibilities: opening and closing ceremonies, consecration to the Blessed Virgin, planting the missionary cross, solemn atonement for *“insults to the Blessed Sacrament”*. Naturally, we might wonder about the long term results of these grandiose events, usually requested by the local clergy. The fact remains that they brought the faithful into direct and forceful contact with the ecclesiastical perception of life and the family, within a context of appeal to sanctity.

1.2.3. Father Sertillanges

The Dominican Antonin Gilbert (Dalmase) Sertillanges represents the final outcome of a process and a good example of its promulgation, given its reception by both clergy and laity. Born in Clermond-Ferrand on November 16, 1863, he joined the Dominicans in 1883, was ordained priest in 1888, and became secretary of the *Revue Thomiste*. Regarded as too progressive, he was shunted on to a siding before becoming professor of moral theology at the *Institut Catholique de Paris*, where he taught until 1920. At the same time, he enjoyed a brilliant writing career, marked by many successful books and hundreds of articles and lectures. His influence is attested by the presence of his books in many libraries. Moreover, the candidates for admission to Catholic social schools during the 1920's and 1930's were questioned on his work (Zelis, 2001, 445). His most widely known book is undoubtedly his study of intellectual life (Sertillanges, 1921), recently republished in English in 1998. But he also published a small volume on the relationship between Christianity and feminism (1908) and another on Christian love (1919), directly concerning the couple and family.

Introducing the latter, he distinguishes love as tendency, love as passion and love as will, constituting a sort of hierarchy moving upward from natural needs which provoke complaisance toward the effect of sensual goods which cause desire, then towards reason. Six chapters concentrate on the couple and the family in a very balanced way, distinguishing love from marriage relationships (15 pages), love in marriage (19 pages), paternal love (17 pages) maternal love (16 pages), brotherly love (17 pages) and children's (15 pages). Naturally, references to the Sacred Scriptures are numerous, but the object is no longer defining or justifying rules, but pointing out a foundation.

For Sertillanges, *"the family begins with the union of two beings who, by fusing both people and resources together, seek to realise their own lives fully and surpass themselves to the advantage of other lives. Love must fill these two roles"* (1919, 170). This involves the duty *"of finding oneself in the other"*, implying *"preferring one another"*, *"mutual adoption of lives"*, *"reciprocal education"* in life, devotion *"till death"*, *"exact mutual society"*, *"assiduity at a common table"*, *"faithful cohabitation"*, *"moral intimacy"*, *"accepting differences"*, *"character surveillance"*. And besides, *"love, being charity in the religious soul, esteem in thought, tenderness at heart, well governed dedication in outer activity... has no reason not to be passionately generous in the senses"* (Sertillanges, 1919, 180), as long as it is subordinated to the ends of marriage, meaning transmission of life. This said, he does not hesitate in affirming that *"love which is neither demanded by the ends of marriage, nor excluded as formal deviation,... Christian morality confides to reason and good will... under the aegis of a large principle of indulgence"*. Of course, this is all regulated by a distribution of tasks between man and woman, she being

equal “*regarding last ends*”, naturally subordinating herself to him. As for the gap between this ideal and the weaknesses or human realities, again God’s love will provide.

From the status of spouses to that of father and mother, it’s only a matter of time before the “*the river of life flows on*”. The father first captures our attention. “*In charge of transmitting and perfecting through education the image of God we are made in*” (194), in a world filled in with the idea of paternity (192-193), his love is both “*providence*” and “*authority*”. He sees to care of body and soul, with tenderness and justice, without shirking correction. The image emerging from our author’s pen is a gardener who “*waters and prunes*” (200). But, again, he cannot take up this mission without incorporating it into divine love and prayer. As for the mother, her role is introduced by reference to the Virgin Mary and the word “*veneration*” (207), which does not prevent difference and change of level. For Sertillanges, if “*the mother’s love is, like the father’s, creative love. It is maybe with less power and less initiative; on the contrary, it is with more intimacy*” (209). Her role of material, intellectual, moral and religious “*progenitor*” is eminent and determines the child’s future, whatever her environment; it is incumbent upon her, as far as possible, to take care of this first training. She “*lives the life*” of her children, while the father lives “*his own life*”. Briefly “*the father’s love is nearer to reason; the mother’s is nearer to nature... and both are necessary*” (215).

On different levels, either love between siblings or between children and parents imposes attitudes, behaviour, a state of mind or soul, which refer to the family itself and to its foundation, God’s love. Yet fraternal love often proves more confident, relaxed and unconstrained than filial love, since “*siblings are the symbol and most fundamental case of equal relationships in our entire lives*” (237). Even if this filial love is necessarily less absolute than parental love, the latter being essentially a gift, the former is unable to return what it has received..

Briefly, for our Dominican, “*love enters the family, burning warmest in the home; communication between lives is nowhere as intimate; without this, no individual would blossom fully and there would be no point of departure for expansion*” (257). The tone of familial and conjugal relations is profoundly modified, the conjugal union valorised, just as equality between man and woman was (Sertillanges, 1908, 245-277), although it was accompanied by many precautions.

Between the seventeenth and the twentieth century, emphases change, the familial or conjugal ideal becomes more and more refined and demanding, measured by the real or supposed difficulties encountered by matrimonial and familial institutions. From Alphonsus Liguori to Sertillanges, many shifts occurred, from hierarchy to relationship, from inequality to a form of partnership,

with the distinctiveness and clear complementarity of roles and functions.

From theological circles and officialities, from moral reflection and spiritual impulses to the daily life of the faithful, there was more than one step to take. The Redemptorist missions hastened to accomplish this and Sertillanges strived to do so, at least for a bourgeois and literate public. Given the general context of the institutional positions adopted by the papacy and given the evolution of moral reflection, many Belgian bishops tried to transpose principles and reflection into behavioural advice.

2. THE BELGIAN BISHOPS AND THE FAMILY

When bishops mentioned the family, they usually did so within a wider context than the family unit. Yet the universal Church carried little weight as an explicit reference: the Encyclical *Arcanum* of Leo XIII was only passed on by the bishop of Ghent; the same pontiff's brief on the association of the Holy Family became the object of a common pastoral letter from the Belgian bishops, but only later (1895) and rather formally.

Indeed, other themes, often but not exclusively, with a national connotation, intervened. This was certainly the case for Christian education as a major duty of parents. An analysis of the pastoral letters of the Belgian bishops (Delcuve, 1965) shows the importance and permanence of this theme. There is an evident link with the school question, which divided Belgium several times during the nineteenth century, even if that link is far from being exclusive. The family as a guarantee for order and individual and social virtues is also very present. Finally, the theme of lamenting an ancient and ideal past is one of the important elements on the scenery.

The family model emerging from all these texts may appear classic; still, it involves some original touches which may be more than a concession to a hollow-sounding institutional speech.

As Mgr. Belin (1886), Bishop of Namur indicated, the family is the basis of society; hence the quality of social life depends on the quality of family life. For him, the father is at the heart of the family life, of the family system, in the first place: he is presented as a real image of God, as a head of family. Educating his children in both social life and religious life is his task. The mother should be considered as his companion and aid, just as she becomes, by the grace of maternal love, her sons' strongest supporter. Love is moreover her greatest quality, since she is described as tender, devoted, persevering both for her husband and children. The children are themselves the fruit of love, of the intimate union of their parents, accepting dependence and submission towards them. Respect, honour, confidence and consideration towards parents are the

concretisation; the harmony of sentiments and mutual love the natural consequences. The explicit model of this family life is the family of Nazareth. The bishop of Namur assigned many priorities to this sanctified family: charity, order, economy, work, prudence, restraint, all of this punctuated by morning and evening prayers, paternal benediction, and the observance of Sundays and holy days. In short, the relationships found at the very heart of this familial system have their source in reciprocal love, hope and the desire for happiness. Yet they are associated with a struggle against "*overly natural affections*": restraint and mutual respect constitute the indispensable bases of a lasting love.

Each bishop introduced into this schema personal emphases which appeared to him the most important or most coherent for his purposes. As for actors in the familial system, it is striking to see that the father is not always mentioned, maybe because his place is obvious, or because he is only acting as a member of a parental couple. Dealing with the education of youth, Mgr Boussen, bishop of Bruges (Boussen, 1839), underlines parental obligation and the primary role of the mother, especially when it concerns religion. Mgr. Gravez, bishop of Namur (1871), is in complete agreement with this, insisting on her responsibility and maternal role, noting that if the father is not a stranger to the primary education, he essentially has to support the mother by his authority and example. The father and mother always retain their authority and are both "*images and representatives*" of God, together forming a true "*mirror the children look at themselves in and strive to reflect*". Similarly, Mgr Malou, bishop of Bruges (1852), insists on the importance of the parents' example, but particularly underlines the love and respect of the mother for her child, seen as "*the adoptive child of God himself*". Mgr. Bracq, bishop of Ghent (1867 and 1876) gives a more qualified picture. The father is presented as king and chief, even if the qualities of good and mild may temper an indispensable firmness. At home, he encourages good and prevents evil. His relations with his wife are marked by love and respect. For the wife, he represents wisdom, goodness, foresight, submission, respect, patience and mildness. According to him, she only lives for God and her husband and fully assumes her maternal role, "*all powerful for good*", correcting out of love, punishing with calmness. The image of children is at least ambivalent. Of course, they represent the culmination of the conjugal relation and, without them, there is no family. But this "*sacred trust*" (Gravez, 1871) confided to parents represents a heavy responsibility. On the one hand, the child has to be truly affectionate, devout, obedient, avoiding afflicting his parents (Gravez, 1871), loving, respectful, helpful and obedient "*towards his parents till the end of his days*" (Bracq, 1867). On the other hand, it is incumbent upon his parents to educate, to correct, or even to punish him. And the bishops call the parents' attention to the importance of religious education (Labis, 1852), supervising encounters (Labis, 1840), readings, images that "*offend piety*" (Labis, 1852). Presented in this manner, education aims not

only at *"enlightening the spirit"* (Labis, 1840), but above all at forming hearts and regulating morals, or, as Mgr. Malou wrote (1852), at forming a *"virtuous man and excellent Christian"* by at once developing the body, the intelligence and *"grace"*. In this programme, correction is essential for all authors and has inevitably an influence on parent-children relationships: one must avoid *"excessive affections"* (Gravez, 1871) and struggle against *"overly natural affection"* (Belin, 1886), which prompt to turn a blind eye to childrens' defects, or at least to attenuate them, for fear of offending them (Gravez, 1871).

Familial relations first of all embody mutual duties (Bracq, 1867), even if they are tinged with affection, mixed with respect and restraint, in a context of authority and hierarchy. Husband-wife relations get much less attention than parent-children relations, except for the preparation of the marriage, where the bishops unanimously condemn marriage for money or passion (Labis, 1959; de Montpellier, 1867).

In the Belgian bishops' language, it is only in the last decade of the nineteenth century that affection becomes the central tone in familial and conjugal relations (Waffelaert, 1896) and that the marriage's goal - procreation - and its sacramental status were energetically reminded of (Doutreloux, 1891).

Some years later, on February 11, 1909, when Cardinal Mercier published a pastoral letter on the duties of conjugal life, a new step was taken, and in two directions, both traditional and new, not just in Belgium, but throughout the Church, to the point of directly inspiring the Encyclical *Casti Connubii* of Pius XI in 1930.

First of all he pointed out, within the context of the general demographic situation, the considerable decline in birth rates perceptible in France from 1800 and later also in Belgium. This decline in birth rate was according to him due to a considerable increase in abortions, following action by strong propaganda, to the point of provoking court interventions and condemnation of these contraceptive teachings.

Taking on the language of change in perception of conjugal duties and the education of children, the archbishop of Malines recalls that marriage is not a private contract that two spouses *"engage in totally freely, in order to exchange their affections or unite their interests, only to separate the day they judge suitable and convenient"*. It is a sacrament and both a religious and national institution. For Christians, founding a family is to provide *"the Church of Christ the natural organ for transmission of his vitality"*. A little further on, he recalls that *"the primordial raison d'être of the spouses' union is founding a family, procreating children they have the honour and obligation of raising in the faith and Christian morality"*. For the Prelate, this implies that the first effect of marriage *"is a duty spouses cannot elude unless they agree, in altogether exceptional circumstances, to realise a*

higher ideal in mutually consensual, voluntary continence". Thus marriage is in no way a union whose goal is physical love or interest. Yet, he very clearly affirms that "*the attraction of sexual intercourse is legitimate and spouses are not forbidden from pursuing it. It is a sort of providential salary for accepting the burdens of paternity and the often agonising and painful tasks of maternity*". Temperance still remains a marriage obligation but man cannot be a slave to his impulses and should be capable of mastering them. Finally, in his fight for the large family, against Malthusianism, the Cardinal concludes that only Christian morality unites respect for conjugal honesty with a doctrine of real progress.

From "political" texts on education until the taking into account of the intimate life of couples, even within the scope of an institutional tougher stance as far as contraception is concerned (Stengers, 1971), a clear evolution emerges, probably due more to the prelate's personality than to a radical institutional innovation.

Exact knowledge of the institutional or spiritual transmission of these statements and evolutions is essential for measuring their influence. Unfortunately, it is lacking. The decanal or parochial network is poorly known for the nineteenth century, or even for the beginning of the twentieth century. Let us nonetheless have a look at some sermons delivered by Monseigneur Gravez, bishop of Namur, during his pastoral visits (van der Stegen de Schrieck, 1977).

The family does not occupy a very important place, except a few remarks on family roles. For the bishop, men and women have radically different roles. The woman's domain is at the heart of the family, where she distinguishes herself by discretion, self-sacrifice and submission. Modesty and decency are terms typifying her. Yet this does not seem to prevent her from exercising a certain ascendancy over her husband nor, *a fortiori*, from playing a major educational role, especially in religion. Quite logically, the husband is turned towards the outside world and participates in various aspects of social life, without, as father, neglecting his responsibilities in the choice of teachers for his children. The will to reaffirm the woman's dignity is constantly present too, but the couple as such is never mentioned in his sermons. Children are only mentioned when Gravez addresses the parents, reminding them of their educational duty, giving an overall perception of the family which is much less qualified than the pastoral letters. But this is due to the literary genre.

Hence we must turn to other sources to try and see how the Catholic world interpreted these directives.

Between the declarations or positions adopted by the episcopate and the emphases introduced by the Catholic world, there may be more than a nuance. In fact, for nineteenth century Belgium, it is clear how essential the theme of the family was. The para-educational effort developed from the 1860's onwards

took concrete form with the publication of education manuals on various topics, ranging from *savoir-vivre* to hygiene, including home economics or moral education (Capitani, 1992).

3. THE BELGIAN CATHOLIC WORLD AND THE FAMILY

From this point of view, the popularity of moral and familial education manuals is an unmistakable sign. Between 1850 and 1914, more than 70 take the theme of the family up by means of philosophy, theology, behaviour, teaching or education properly speaking. The ecclesiastical authors were plentiful, and those situating themselves in a Christian perspective even more, especially after the creation of the League of Familial Education in 1899. Yet some lay authors contributed too, e.g. the schoolmaster Octors in 1908. Their analysis shows the models promoted, the reference values, even if the essential is usually implicitly expressed.

For a good number of these manuals, the family is approached by means of reciprocal "*duties*". The first to be mentioned are incontestably duties towards parents, placed very high on the scale of values, right after duty to God. The 4th commandment: "*Honour your father and your mother*", as for Alphonsus Liguori and as in the Napoleonic civil code, served as a guide here. But the manuals amplify, comment and concretise these rules. A little manual from the first half of the century was republished in Mons in 1876. The author, Simon Buqcellos, pseudonym of Simon Bloquel, a prolific writer, active in Paris in the 1840's, proposes a certain number of precepts therein (10-11):

- "1. Be respectful, submissive, grateful, attached and devoted to your father, your mother and your benefactors.
2. Your father and your mother hold the place of God on earth for you; they have reared you and see to your education... how could you not love them?
3. You will show yourself submissive towards them by obeying them promptly and doing good heartedly whatever they ask you; You will stand guilty, you will afflict them and you will act against your duties and your own interests, if ever you murmur or resist their orders...
5. You will prove your gratitude to them, your affection and your friendship, in caring for them in their infirmity.
7. Do exactly everything they tell you; submit yourself to punishments they inflict on you without murmuring; listen to their advice attentively; take advantage of their lessons and use all the means you have to correct the faults they find in you".

In short, the children's duties towards their parents are: first obedience, then respect, and finally devotion, attachment and gratitude. They go hand in hand with a deep affection "*which, after the sentiment one feels for God, should occupy the first place in the heart*" (Benard, 1851, 7). Yet, this love should be constantly exemplified in action.

But even obedience can evolve. In 1864, a schoolmistress could talk about "*unlimited*" obedience and "*perfect*" submission (L'Olivier, 1864, 14). Twenty years later, a reverend Jesuit father showed no hesitation in denouncing this form of obedience and advocating a "*liberal, spontaneous obedience, that ennobles and elevates*" (Felix, 1886, 48). This takes nothing away from its indispensable character, both natural and divine, fruit "*of Christianity alone*", as the Abbé Stolz affirms (1893, 122 and 126). In fact, we had to wait until after the First World War to see this highly appraised obedience lose ground to a new arrival: confidence (Renault, 1921, 128).

Parents' duties towards their children should be the exact counterpart of children's obligations towards their parents. Yet this is not really the case. Notwithstanding, for Catholic authors these duties are considered to be divinely instituted. As J. Renault writes (1908, 5): "*When God, blessing the indissoluble and sweet union of marriage, slides open the azure skies and has a frail and tiny blond head descend to earth, it's a duty too, grave and ineluctable, added to the parents*". And the first among them is education, meaning "*developing, ennobling and sanctifying, in some sort, their spirits and hearts*" (Parisot, 1888, 191). Moreover, Simon (1905, 8) recalls that: "*little children will be men later; these little children are the living images of God; these images are physically and morally in the state of rough drafts; we are the artisans in charge of their completion, of making them resemble the divine model even more.*"

The Gospel is called for help (Kurze, 1905, 8); God and divine judgement are invoked (Renault, 1908, 6). The mother's role in this area is unequivocally reaffirmed, she is "*at once, devoted and heroic, loving and virtuous, tender and strong, wise and prudent, never forgetting that her children belong first to God*", at least according to Abbé Nysten (D.G., 1904, 38).

Parents' behaviour will naturally be determinant for the success of the educational enterprise. Parental mutual understanding appears to be particularly central for behavioural patterns. For Abbé Simon (1905, 41), "*strength is in unity*" and "*agreement between father, mother and things children are asked to do is an essential point.*"

Then parental authority intervenes in all its rigour. If we compare the quasi-silence of manuals published between 1850 and 1914 on this topic with the loquacity of the manuals of the interwar period, this was hardly a theme in the nineteenth century. This is incontestably due to the fact that authority was hardly a subject of debate until World War I. Abbé Simon, who dwells on this,

sets the tone (Simon, 1901, 16; 1909, 25; 1903, 9-10), comforted by the remarks of Father Felix (1886, 13, 17, 23, 24). The ascendancy of parents “*commanding children’s obedience and respect*” comes to them directly from God. They cannot renounce it and should do everything to conserve it, notably:

“Maintain great correctness in demeanour, so children never see a contradiction between their parents’ way of acting and the orders they give; avoid being overly familiar with children in language, in recreations enjoyed as a family; always act towards children with equal firmness; never punish when one is not absolutely certain of the child’s guilt; rely more on authority than sentimentality with little children; command with moderation... Discipline should be an iron bar covered with velvet.”

According to Father Felix (1886, 13), Catholicism added authority by “*making itself believed, making itself respected*”, and finally “*making itself obeyed*”, thanks to the basis of divine sovereignty and the episcopal support provided to the father. For this authority is “*naturally*” paternal. The mother hardly finds a place here. She is situated more in the domain of love and she tempers the exercise of authority (Colomme, 1901, 28), an authority one must strive to interiorize (Renault, 1907, 10) and which cannot be done by force. This ambivalence vis-à-vis stern discipline remains perceptible a long time. This is because authority, of a divine and of a natural order, remains a central value whose disappearance or simple bracketing is seen as generating multiple evils. To cite Father Felix again (1886, 26): “*If paternal force is not exercised in childhood: Woe to the society! Woe to the family! Woe to everyone! The world will witness the most desolate spectacle... a generation believing in nothing... respecting nothing... obeying nothing!*”

In the domain of sentiment as well as of religious practices, the father’s action, just as the mother’s, is essential, though totally different. As the Abbé Simon writes (1909, 50), every edifice needs foundations and religion, this “*drawing near the things of God and the need to communicate with him*” is certainly the fundament of education and family life, and it finds shape in religious practices. Yet, both children’s religious initiation and progressive entry into religious practice falls to the mother. She is responsible for the religious decoration of the house (Cramer, 1875, 67), the presence of holy pictures, crucifixes and statues of the Blessed Virgin. She should initiate the child into making the sign of the cross, into praying in the morning, evening and before and after meals, into devotion to the saints and assisting at daily mass. Prayer is moreover perceived as particularly important (Herbe, 1909, 138), as is the sentiment of a constant presence of God, not only a panoptical supervisor and severe judge, but a loving father too.

It is to the mother then that these religious authors ultimately confide responsibility for the very fundamentals of family life and the moral preservation of those living with her and under her protection. This responsibility, this burden, this duty is all the more important since, for all these authors, clerics or laymen, independent or recognised interpreters of the Catholic world, the essential task of education consists in helping the child to become a good Christian *“the same as engendering the spiritual and moral life in him and, in some way, co-operating in God’s work”* (Stolz, 1893, 13). Hence, Catholicism appears as both the means and the end of education and family life.

The familial system proposed by these manuals, whose audience was both bourgeois and scholarly, incontestably overlaps the Church’s teaching in episcopal addresses or moralists’ reflections. Even if, again, literary genre obliges, there are other emphases. Whereas the bishops mainly underlined parents’ duties, manual writers dwelt on children’s duties. What is emerging is an ideal of restraint and self-control, where relations are tinged with a grave love, where responsibilities are well distributed between father and mother, parents and children, where traditional hierarchies are reinforced by authority, justified by religion and for religion, humanized by mutual respect and reciprocal affection. Of course what is proposed is of the prescriptive order and not of the descriptive. Yet these manuals participated in the grand training and management project of the Belgian Catholic world launched during the end of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century.

CONCLUSIONS

What can we learn from the nineteenth century Belgian Catholic Church’s position with respect of the couple and the family and its recontextualization?

First of all, undoubtedly, there was a great coherence between the various actors identified and studied. The bishops transmit the opinion of the Holy See, even in the very particular context of liberal Belgium. Moralists fit into the same context, but add a dimension to the normative construction: affection, gradually evolving towards love, even if the word takes on quite different connotations. Educators adapted the message to an evolving society, and thus to a changing public. The Magisterium, moralists and bishops influenced the content of education manuals while the interaction between the Magisterium and moral reflection reacted to solicitations and challenges from society as a whole.

Subsequently, despite this Church-Society interaction and a transformed vocabulary, there was at least, continuity. For the clerics and their spokesmen,

beyond a theological or canonical substratum, the family, the “*domestic society*” was hierarchised. There was the father’s authority, the mother’s subordinated assistance and filial piety. The system in place was one of order, but it was also a network of duties: parents towards children, children towards parents, couples or brothers and sisters in relation to one another. As for its objective, it sought the greater glory of God, by the number of children – but this was only mentioned later and without specifying an ideal number – their religious education, prayer and respect for familial, social and ecclesiastical obligations.

Finally, in an unexpected way this developed, changed, and there were even possibilities for overtures. Equality in the dignity of religious and laic vocations, successive accentuating of rules and spirit, insistence on equality of family members, highlighting of the mother’s role, modification of vocabulary and criteria for valorising relations and familial “*sentiment*”, or relationships between spouses, – even if self-control and reason remain essential, to the detriment of passion, always rejected –, substitution of confidence and persuasion for training and correction, all of these amounting to shock and possibilities of transformation.

Yet, many questions remain, notably about the relationship of these interpretations with reality or, further, the fundamental one, the distinction in the ecclesiastical discourse between the elements potentially constituting the Christian message and those in this discourse simply, because they are in style or belong to the dominant ideology.

On this level, the Church, the Catholic world and their interpretations of the family and couple seem to have registered some definite successes as well as some bitter defeats, all the while giving the impression of laying some building stones. On the success side, the models of familial and sexual roles are certainly worth mentioning. The behaviour proposed for the “*good*” father and “*good*” mother was widespread and predominant at least until the 1950’s, or even 1960’s, perhaps because they were, for a good part at least, but certainly not totally, appropriate for the functioning of the bourgeois family, to whom most of the texts were addressed. On the failure side, we are surely talking about the goals of marriage and the family, whether in terms of procreation or indissolubility. Despite the most solemn statements, and maybe because of modifications in confessional practices, less and less inquisitorial, the birth rate kept declining during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and attention turned more and more towards what was only a very secondary objective of marriage, the couple’s happiness. Also the divorce rate was beginning to rise, damaging another essential point in the Catholic marriage doctrine. As for the building stones, they touch essentially on the relationship between members of a couple and that uniting members of a family. For the first relationship,

if we look at the equality of partners and a differentiation of roles, responsibilities and rights, in our view unfavourable to women, it is nonetheless true that women's dignity, admittedly usually as mother, is constantly reaffirmed and had long term consequences. Moreover, love, even if it is not really a matter of passion, introduces a new variable liable to overturn the edifice. For the second relationship, if authority, discipline, hierarchy and self-control remain central values, completely in step with the society of the nineteenth as well as the beginning of the twentieth century, love, again, even if it is often identified with softness, even if it is often considered perverted, introduces an opening for sentiments.

Analysis of this prescriptive literature and the interpretations presented can certainly be complemented with a study of associative life, particularly intense in Belgium, especially in the Catholic world, insofar as the distance from the masses of the faithful was further reduced. Two examples, among others, suffice to convince us. Parallel to or in collaboration with the Saint Vincent de Paul Conferences, two charities were especially dedicated to the family: the Association of Saint Jean François Regis, and then, considerably later, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the Association of Ladies of Saint Jean François Regis. Both fought against cohabitation and illegitimacy in underprivileged areas. Studying the spirituality of the Holy Family Archconfraternity as well as its members' and, as far as demographic sources permit the approach, the application of its principles, especially regarding birth rates, would itself cast a ready-made bridge between historical demography and the history of the family.

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De Kerk en het gezin in België, 1850-1914

PAUL SERVAIS

SAMENVATTING

Het gezin en de katholieke Kerk in België: welke modellen? Dit is een pertinente vraag vanuit tenminste twee gezichtspunten. Enerzijds vormt het gezin de hoeksteen van de maatschappij, en deze wijzigt grondig tussen de achttiende en de twintigste eeuw. Anderzijds maakt de katholieke Kerk van het gezin, op verschillende manieren, een belangrijk element van haar discours, en ook dat evolueert.

In het eerste deel van het artikel wordt de algemene kerkelijke context in deze materie besproken. Eerst worden de standpunten van het kerkelijk leergezag onder de aandacht gebracht, meer bepaald via de encycliek *Arcanum Divinae Sapientiae* over het christelijk huwelijk (Leo XIII, 1880), en vervolgens via de encycliek *Casti Connubii* (Pius XI, 1930). Deze laatste bevestigt de kristallisatie van de kerkelijke doctrine inzake familiemateries. Deze werd hersteld in het kader van de nieuwe spiritualiteit van de Heilige Familie en gesteund door andere standpunten uit Rome, meer bepaald met *Rerum Novarum*. Vervolgens staan we stil bij de beschouwingen van enkele moralisten, vertrekkende van François de Sales tot Antonin Dalmase Sertillanges via Alphonse de Liguori, die elk, op hun niveau, een sterke invloed uitoefenen op de Belgische Kerk en haar gedrag ten opzichte van het koppel en het gezin.

De pastorale initiatieven van de Belgische bisschoppen worden in het tweede deel besproken. Voor de bisschoppen is het gezin – uiteraard – een essentieel element van de maatschappelijke structuur: opgebouwd rond een almachtige vader, gericht op natuurlijke vroomheid, gesitueerd in een huiselijk kader, zelf heiligmakend, en gekenmerkt door relaties die hun oorsprong vinden in wederzijdse liefde, hoop en het verlangen naar geluk. De klemtonen liggen op de opvoedingsplicht van de ouders, de gehoorzaamheid van de kinderen, en de verschillende, maar even belangrijke, bijdragen van de vader en de moeder. Kardinaal Mercier levert in dit geheel een bijzondere bijdrage wanneer hij op 11 februari 1909 een pastorale brief over de plichten van het huwelijksleven publiceert, waarin hij een heel klassieke opvatting van het gezin herbevestigt en de echtelijke relaties legitimeert.

Het verband tussen de pastorale initiatieven en wat het publiek van getrouwen bereikt, kan door middel van de preken worden onderzocht. Maar dit is slechts zelden een succesvolle weg. De opvoedingshandboeken, daarentegen, die vanaf de jaren 1860 op grote schaal worden verspreid, bieden een globaal beeld van het geseculariseerd onderwijs. Het derde deel van het artikel analyseert een deel van deze bronnen, en bevestigt zowel de samenhang binnen

de katholieke wereld op het terrein van het gezin als de evolutie in het discours, waarvan de klemtonen geleidelijk verschuiven van regels naar geest, van plichten naar affectie.

L'Eglise et la famille en Belgique, 1850-1914

PAUL SERVAIS

RÉSUMÉ

La famille et l'Eglise catholique en Belgique au XIXe siècle: quels modèles ? La question est pertinente à deux points de vue au moins. D'une part, la famille constitue une des pierres angulaires de la société et elle se modifie profondément entre le XVIIIe et le XXe siècle; d'autre part, l'Eglise catholique fait de la famille, sous différents aspects, un élément important de son discours, et celui-ci évolue.

Une première partie de cet article rappelle le contexte ecclésial global en la matière. Ce sont d'abord les prises de positions du Magistère qui retiennent l'attention, plus particulièrement l'encyclique *Arcanum divinae Sapientiae* sur le mariage chrétien (Léon XIII, 1880), puis l'encyclique *Casti Connubii* (Pie XI, 1930), qui confirme la cristallisation de la doctrine de l'Eglise en matière familiale, resituée cependant dans le cadre de l'émergence de la nouvelle spiritualité, celle de la Sainte Famille, et confortée par d'autres prises de position de Rome, notamment avec *Rerum Novarum*. Les réflexions de plusieurs moralistes retiennent ensuite l'attention, de François de Sales à Antonin Dalmase Sertillanges en passant par Alphonse de Liguori, qui tous, à un titre ou à une autre, exercent une forte influence sur l'Eglise de Belgique et son attitude vis-à-vis du couple d'abord, de la famille en elle-même ensuite.

Les propositions pastorales des évêques belges sont examinées dans une deuxième partie. Pour les évêques, la famille, sans surprise, est un élément essentiel de l'édifice social, rassemblée autour d'un père tout-puissant, orientée à une piété naturelle, située dans un cadre domestique lui-même sanctifié, caractérisée par des relations qui trouvent leur source dans l'amour réciproque, l'espoir et le désir de bonheur. Les accents portent sur le devoir d'éducation des parents, celui d'obéissance des enfants, l'apport différent, mais également important du père et de la mère. Les qualités de ces derniers sont d'ailleurs clairement différenciées. Le Cardinal Mercier apporte à l'ensemble une tonalité toute particulière, lorsqu'il publie, le 11 février 1909, une lettre pastorale sur les devoirs de la vie conjugale, où il réaffirme une conception très classique de la famille, tout en constatant la légitimité des relations conjugales en elles-mêmes.

Le lien entre ses propositions pastorales et ce qui atteint réellement le peuple des fidèles pourrait être fait par le biais des sermons. C'est une voie rarement concluante. Par contre les manuels d'éducation, qui se multiplient à partir des années 1860, offrent une vue globale d'un enseignement sécularisé. La troisième partie de l'article en analyse un certain nombre, qui confirment à la

fois la cohérence des acteurs du monde catholique dans le domaine de la famille et l'évolution d'un discours dont les accents passent progressivement des règles à l'esprit, des devoirs à l'affection.

