

## BLACKFRIARS

### THE SIXTH MALINES CONGRESS

THE Bishops of Belgium have recently made public the convocation of the Sixth Malines Congress. It will comprise three days of lectures and discussion, will be held in the archiepiscopal city, and will be brought to a close by a great demonstration in which tens of thousands of the faithful will participate; but, in view of the fact that Malines is not extensive enough to hold this concourse, the demonstration itself will take place in Brussels, upon the high plateau of Koekelberg which is dominated by the national Basilica of the Sacred Heart. As far as one can judge beforehand, this demonstration will surpass anything that has hitherto been seen even in Belgium, where the popular temperament loves to show itself in enormous public gatherings with processions, local choirs, and hundreds of banners.

It can be maintained without any exaggeration that the religious history of Belgium has been moulded by these Congresses of Malines, an account of which is given in an interesting book by Professor M. Defourny. In the Congresses of 1863, 1864 and 1867 the Catholics of Belgium assembled their forces together and laid the foundations of their corporate public action. It was about 1840 that the Liberal Party in Belgium began to evolve into an anti-clerical party, and the Catholics saw themselves under the necessity of defending their rights in the political field and in public life. Thanks to M. Edouard Ducpétiaux, who was the moving spirit in these earlier Congresses and remains one of the greatest glories of Catholic social action and the courageous precursor of social reforms, these Congresses effected the concentration of the Catholic forces and inaugurated their fruitful operation in public life. Already at that time M. Ducpétiaux had propounded the social problem, but his untimely death did not allow him time to rally his compatriots to his own way of thinking. After his demise there were no more Congresses for the time being. But towards the end of the last century the social question began to become acute: socialism provoked some disturbances; at

## THE SIXTH MALINES CONGRESS

Liège, under the inspiration of Mgr. Doutreloux and Abbé Pothier, was formed the *Ecole Sociale* which has remained justly celebrated in the history of the social movement and received official consecration of its ideas in the *Rerum Novarum*. It was at Liège, during the Congresses of 1886, 1887 and 1890, that this School came before the public eye, and it was there that the interested Catholics, gathered from many different countries, began to elaborate that Catholic social teaching which Pope Leo XIII was soon to expound in his famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891).

At the Congress of 1891, held at Malines, it was Catholic science especially which was given the place of honour; it was there that the future Cardinal Mercier developed his project for a revival of Thomism, and Professor J. Van den Heuvel proposed the foundation of a "School of Political and Social Sciences in the Faculty of Law of the (Catholic) University" of Louvain. Those who are acquainted with university life at Louvain and its international ramifications will know that these two initiatives, actually realized as a direct result of the Congress of 1901, have proved singularly happy and have shed new lustre on the venerable Alma Mater of Louvain.

The fifth Congress, held at Malines in 1909, was in some sort a recapitulation of the activities of the previous century. It passed in review all the Catholic undertakings, embodying them in no less than two hundred and fifty reports; it was, in fact, a panorama of Catholic Belgium at the time.

Even this summary account of the past Catholic Congresses shows conclusively that they have determined the history of Catholic life in Belgium. In them Catholic thought has been set forth and crystallized; in them Catholic action has been planned; and in them all the important initiatives, in the press, in teaching, in political and social action, have been taken and brought to fruition.

Yet if the Bishops of Belgium have decided to revive the splendid tradition of Catholic Congresses, they were not merely moved by a remembrance of the past; they were moved rather by the pressure of present circumstances and by the menace of a future which seems to bear a grudge

## BLACKFRIARS

against the very foundations of Christian civilization. Indeed we are living in the midst of an evolution—or perhaps one should say a revolution—which has shaken the whole of the ancient framework; a new world is being constructed under our very eyes, what time the old world crumbles away. The Church, which is of all times and knows that she is called to bring to fruition the labour of the centuries, cannot remain a stranger to this evolution; she must assume the direction of it, not in order to dominate it but in order to serve it, and to safeguard civilization and the immortal souls of men. That is why the Belgian bishops have convoked this Congress. Catholic teaching will be examined under all its aspects in order to call forth its vitality, its dynamic qualities, its actual value for present needs; all forms of Catholic action and apostolate will be reviewed and collated with a view to their efficiency and to a more fruitful interaction and co-ordination of energies. Priests and laymen, students and men of action, the generation of yesterday and of to-morrow, Flemings and Walloons, Belgians and foreigners, all will be gathered together “*in uno spiritu unanimes,*” and that spirit will be none other than the desire to serve each one in his degree the great cause of Christ and of His Church, which is after all the cause of humanity and true culture.

This Congress will be divided into two distinct parts, the one Flemish and the other French, but the two linguistic groups will follow a single programme. Each of them will be divided into ten sections, in which the doctrinal and apostolic value of Catholicism will be examined in relation to all the various spheres of modern life. Thus the ten sections will comprise the following: (1) Religious Life; (2) Catholic Action; (3) Education and Teaching; (4) The Family and Public Morals; (5) Social and Professional Life; (6) Public Life; (7) Culture; (8) Assistance of the Poor and Hygiene; (9) Press, Films, and Radio; (10) Colonies and the Missions. It has been arranged that reports shall be forthcoming from each section, the material and aim of which reports have been examined and fixed some months ago by study committees. Never before has there been so intense and comprehensive a collaboration of the Catholic

## THE SIXTH MALINES CONGRESS

intellectual leaders of Belgium in company with the delegates of other countries. Moreover, side by side with these sectional meetings, there will be general gatherings at the end of each study day. The celebrated Choir of St. Rombaut, under the direction of Canon Van Nuffel, and Catholic speakers of various countries will help to make these general gatherings a notable manifestation of Catholic thought and culture.

At the time of writing the immediate propaganda for the Congress has been set in motion, whilst the study committees have already concluded their allotted task. In every parish a crusade of prayer has been begun and local committees have been formed; the Catholic community as a whole has to be roused and set in motion. Without wishing to play the prophet we may predict that this Sixth Congress will surpass all its predecessors as well by the numbers who will participate in it as by the extent of its programme. At the same time we are not of the number of those who believe in the intrinsic efficacy of great numbers as such. However imposing it may be in that way, the Congress will effect nothing if it does not succeed in concentrating all these Catholic forces upon a definite programme. Without aiming to fasten down the Catholic mind to ready-made formulas or to canalize vital activities in grooves too narrow and rigid, it will have to elaborate a doctrinal synthesis and a Catholic "common front" which will be, in the immediate future, the guarantee of unity in thought and action and, in the more distant future, the guarantee of their practical triumph. To be successful the Congress must prove fruitful, not in 1936 but rather in 1950; it must inaugurate a new era, foreshadowed indeed in the general title of its programme: *Catholicism and the New Age*.

From their beginning the Malines Congresses have had an international scope and their radiations have made themselves felt far outside the narrow frontiers of Belgium. That is the mission, as history shows, of this little country overflowing with life and vibrant with activity. She is set at the crossroads of the civilizations of western Europe; she has a past rich with Catholic traditions; she is in communion with

## BLACKFRIARS

the ages of faith; she has been and still is what someone has called a "laboratory of social experiments"; and she is at the present time a land of experiments, singularly happy experiments, in various forms of Catholic Action.

We venture to hope that our confrères in other countries will be present in their numbers at this Congress, and we offer to them, and especially to our English friends, a most cordial welcome.

G. VAN GESTEL, O.P.,  
*Secretary of the First Section  
of the Sixth Malines Congress.*

*(Translated by Hilary J. Carpenter, O.P.)*