

A small word to share with you the news of the celebration that took place in Aalst on Sunday 19th March 2017. This was a joint celebration by representatives of the four congregations founded by Canon Constant William Van Crombrughe. Srs. Agnès Charles, Emma Portael and Marie-Antoinette Beel represented the DMJ on the organising committee. The Eucharist was arranged for 11am in the chapel of the college where the Founder was director in Aalst, now a Jesuit school. Approximately 20 DMJ attended, some travelling on the minibus booked by Sr. Marie Therese van Krunkelsven and others travelling by car. Srs. Marie Antoinette Beel, Emma Portael and Myriam Ravijts, who live in Aalst, were on home territory and needed very little travelling to reach the chapel. Srs. Margaret Mary Fox, Nora McCarthy and Margaret Mary Davis travelled from Ireland for the celebration; Sr. Sheila Moloney came from England and there were three members of the CLT present- Srs. Helen, Annette and Marie Claire. There were many friends and long term colleagues of the DMJ in attendance- some of whom ministered with the sisters many years ago in Brazil (e.g. Marie Jeanne, Micheline Dusart). Our two sister congregations were represented- Sr. Marie Luc De Mey is the congregational leader of the Sisters of St Joseph. She and some of her community travelled from Bruges. Unfortunately Sr. Marie-Augustine, congregation leader of the Sisters of Mary and Joseph of Erpe Mere was unable to attend owing to illness and she delegated Zuster Gerada to represent her. There was a good representation of our Josephite brothers with Fr. Jacob Beya their current Superior General present as well as the last Superior General, Fr. Robert Hamilton, Fr. Paul Janssens and Br. Michael Powell, Fr. Aidan Peter Rossiter and several others. The directors of the Josephite schools were also there. The Chapel was soon full.



The liturgy had been very well prepared and it showed. In front of the altar was a portrait of our Founder on



one side and the icon of the Founder written by Annette on the other side. Attention was paid to the different languages. There was an interflow of Flemish and French with some English and one of the Congolese languages. The prayer of the founder was prayed in Flemish, French and English. The Credo, Gloria etc. were sung in Latin and all the congregation joined in.



The Bishop of Ghent, Mgr. Luc Van Looy, was the main celebrant and the Papal Nuncio Mgr. Augustine Kasajja (by happy coincidence from Uganda) honoured us with his presence. In the opening procession the three leaders of the women's congregations processed to the altar bearing the constitutions of their respective congregations. These were placed on the altar. Then there was a short historical overview of which parts were read in turn by each of the

leaders in their own language. The whole text is attached.

The scripture readings were; 2 Samuel 7. 4-5a; 12-14a.16.

Gospel: Luke 2 41-51a.

The Bishop gave the homily in all three languages emphasising the call to be Mother/Father to those with whom we work. He also talked about searching for those who are lost as Mary and Joseph searched for Jesus...and sometimes we will find them in the Father's house. Another emphasis was that we do not just look back at the past but also look to the future.

The prayers of the faithful were in the different languages. A representative of the congregations had been earlier invited to write a prayer on a particular theme. We had been invited to compose an intercession on the Charism. Sr. Annette prayed the following on behalf of all of us:

On this historic occasion, we, the inheritors of the vision and spirit of Canon Constant Willian Van Crombrugghe, honour his legacy. We pray that we may live in this, our moment in history, as true instruments of God's mercy, radiating through our lives a spirit of joy, simplicity and compassion. May those who have gone before us intercede for each of our four religious families as we gather here today.

The response to the Intercessions was sung; Ubi Caritas.

As well as the traditional Latin we joined in the catchy, rhythmic Congolese music: Yamba yamba yamba Yahweh e. Even the least musical of us joined in the clapping.

After communion we all prayed the Founder's prayer divided between the three languages but with the freedom to use our chosen language throughout.

The liturgy was very inclusive and honoured the Founder and all four congregations. Following the closing procession we were invited to make our way to the school for refreshments, passing by the house of Colette De Brant on the way.

There was plenty of conversation in the following hours as we shared savoury and sweet treats and lots of sparkling wine. There were some portraits of the founder and early Superiors General adorning the walls and a power point presentation which showed previous congregational gatherings ran in the background.

The dignitaries, friends, sisters and priests all remained and socialised in a very warm cordial atmosphere.

We were very conscious of two other congregation celebrations- one in Cape Coast marking the bicentenary in true African style and the other in Middlesbrough in thanksgiving for the contribution of the DMJs there - a gathering inevitably overshadowed by the recent death of Sr. Anne Jordan who was so much part of the place. We are also aware of a large gathering of DMJ and Josephites who met in Ventura, California on March 6th to honour the bicentenary.

In Aalst the emphasis was that we are beginning a year of celebrations. Let us keep that in mind... each day of this year is a celebration and we have no doubt there will be many Jubilee blessings that will come our way- in God's good time. How could there not- with all the heavenly host who are praying for us??





Mgr. Kasajja and Sr. Helen



Desserts served!!



Srs. Marie José, Margaret Davis, Cécile, Marie

A short historical overview

Today we are making a formal start to our celebration of two hundred years of apostolic work carried out by 4 small religious congregations who owe their existence largely to Constant Van Crombrugghe.

In this our bicentenary year we are celebrating the apostolic achievements of our sisters and brothers in 4 different religious families and giving thanks to God for their lives of dedication and service to the building up of God's kingdom. From the very beginning our religious families have had the support and collaboration of lay men and women who during 200 years have shared our apostolic vision to make the love of God a reality in our world. It is then as one great family that we celebrate our bicentenary.

The true significance of our celebrations this year is to be found in sacred scripture. In his prayer to the Father on the night before he died (John 17) Jesus prays for all those down through the ages who will continue His work of making God's love known. Jesus shares with his followers the glory He has received from the Father and in them He is glorified.

As we look back over the 200 years of apostolic endeavour by our 4 religious families we can say with Mary "The Lord has done great things for us".

Our starting point is here in the town of Aalst and in this College of St. Joseph.

We must not forget that Van Crombrugghe was not alone in making his first foundations in 1817. In many ways he had two lay co-founders. Van Crombrugghe always acknowledged Colette de Brandt, who lived in Aalst close to the College, as a co-founder of the small community of pious women who started a lace making school for poor girls here in Aalst on March 6th 1817. This foundation was to evolve into three congregations of religious sisters.

Living in the College of Aalst at that time was a devout young man called Willem vanden Bossche. He was impressed by success of the small group of pious women under the guidance of Colette de Brandt and discussed with Van Crombrugghe the possibility of making a similar foundation in Geraardsbergen. On the 1st of May Willem vanden Bossche and Jozef Vanderkinderen settled in Geraardsbergen and opened a weaving school. In our bicentennial year we should give thanks to God for these two co-founders

We must not forget our humble origins. The first members of the foundation in Aalst were devout working class women who were working in the infirmary and in the linen room in the College. Despite their lack of learning these women were able to teach young girls the art of lacemaking. Their school flourished and their community grew in numbers so that in 1818 the Founder was able to send 2 sisters from Aalst to Geraardsbergen to start another successful lace making school for girls.

It was the same story with brothers in Geraardsbergen. They were without much academic learning but their work amongst the poor flourished.

Looked at from a human point of view these small religious communities whose members were ordinary working class men and women would have little chance survival especially because for the first 13 years of their existence they had to overcome many difficulties imposed on them by the Dutch Regime which almost brought their existence to an end.

The story of these years is to be found in three important chronicles; the *Kleine Geschiedenis wegens ons Klooster der Zusters van Maria en Jozef*, the *Nota over de Stichting van het Instituut van de Zusters van de Heilige Jozef* and the *Dagboek of Willem vanden Bossche*.

To ignore the remarkable story of these early years is to run the risk of failing to glorify God for the marvels He performed through the first generation of our sisters and brothers. As so often in Sacred Scripture we see how God chooses the weak and lowly to perform his wonders.

The 1st foundations were a lacemaking school and a weaving school for impoverished boys and girls in Aalst and Geraardsbergen. Sunday schools were soon established. At this time great deal of this apostolic work was carried out with the help and support of the laity.

In the years after Belgium became independent in 1830 there was a rapid increase in foundations accompanied by an explosion of apostolic activity. Small apostolic communities were established throughout Flanders in Rooborst, Halle, Mouscron, Meerbeke, Maldegem, Bellegem, Wakken, Brugge, to mention but a few.

The evolution of the sisters into 3 separate religious families, for whatever reason, may well have given impetus to this rapid development of apostolic activity. There was an increasing diversification of the apostolic work carried out by the 4 religious families for example cholera victims were nursed in Geraardsbergen. Orphanages and homes for the elderly and infirm were established. A home for young unmarried mothers was established for in Bruges.

With the establishment of religious freedom in education came the need for schools and colleges to educate the children of the middle class. All 4 religious families established schools and colleges for middleclass children. Schools and communities were founded also in Mechelen, Brussels, and Leuven to mention but a few.

At the time of Van Crombrugghe's death in 1865 the humble foundations in Aalst and Geraardsbergen had developed into an extraordinary mosaic of apostolic activity at the service of poor and rich alike.

The years following the death of the Founder witness the spread of this apostolic activity to England and beyond. The story of the internationalisation of 3 of our religious families was told during the Symposium of 2005. Of particular importance are the foundations made in Africa in the last century. Today, for 2 of our religious families the centre of their apostolic activity is changing and will change again in the future as they intensify their apostolic work in Africa where they increase their efforts to care for the poor and provide schools for the young people.

In this our bicentennial year perhaps we ought to see the history of our religious families not first and foremost as a story of the foundation of communities and schools neither as the story of prelates, priests and superior generals but rather as the 200 year history of our sisters and brothers

together with their lay collaborators whose dedication and service, despite their faults and failings, enabled them to become instruments of the loving kindness of our God.
In them God has been glorified.

As we look back over 200 years we can but glorify God saying
We praise you,
We glorify you,
We give you thanks for your great glory. Amen

Fr. Robert Hamilton cj