

*at Club,*  
(October 14, 1919.)

## German Occupation of Belgium

CARDINAL MERCIER

*Mr. Chairman, Your Grace, and Gentlemen;*—I have spent the whole day in touch with your beloved people of Toronto; with the Empire Club, with the University of Toronto, with the various women's organizations of the city, with the children in the Cathedral and now this night with this select society representing all that is distinguished in your city. I feel gratefully honored by the compliments you have paid to me and thankfully honored at the freedom of your magnificent city which has been given me. What a contrast between those long sorrowful years of the past when at each moment we were under the oppression of a foreign foe! I could not take a step in my own diocese without being required to exhibit a passport to go from one place to another in my own country. I felt during those four years the humiliation of being oppressed by a power which I knew to be unjust and cruel. We Belgians have behind us always the remembrance of the injustice of the invasion and the cruelties of the Germans in the first month of their occupying Belgium, and we have always the prospect of new calamities over our people on the day of to-morrow.

Well, before the experience I had never supposed that moral sufferings could be so acute; still, we had to support it for four years. After those four years, what a contrast between those years which no tongue could describe and the welcome you gave to us, your friendship, your good hearts, your sympathy, not only from yourselves, but from the whole population of your city and of all the places where I have been since I came out of my country. I thank God for the comfort you have given me.

Also, here in your midst I know I am in a country of liberty and of courage. You are at last on the way to being

\*Cardinal Mercier's stand for the rights of his compatriots in Belgium against the oppression of the German Government is too well-known to need any comment.

a great and independent nation of Canada. You are giving the world a splendid example. I have said this before in your city, but, repeat it because the fact is striking above all others. From less than half a million inhabitants in your city you had sixty thousand volunteers, more than ten per cent. I think that even in countries where they had conscription they did not attain to that percentage. And here, all volunteers! And volunteers, not for your interest; you had no interest at all in the war, if I speak of physical, material, economic interests. You went into the war with that magnanimity only for the ideal of Christian civilization.

I would like to say this night something to you about the resistance of the Belgian nation to the oppression of the German occupying force. If any here had a doubt about the existence of the Supernatural Power I would beg to be allowed to state before you some facts of our experiences. A great number of our priests had been imprisoned either in Belgium or in Germany, of course without any crime, only because they proved themselves patriotic. They passed months or years in prison. At the end of the war a great many of them came home; and I remember one of them, he was a parish priest in Brussels. He went into my room, his cassock, his overcoat, were stained filthy; and he fell into my arms saying, "Your Eminence, I have been in touch with the Supernatural. I have felt in my soul a strength of which I had no knowledge before. I have suffered from cold, I have been humiliated by the guards of my prison, I have been deprived of all the consolation of a priest; but I have been happy. And if now I were asked whether I would have been spared by the Germans, I should answer No, I prefer to have been in prison, and I bless God for my sufferings as for one of the best days of my life."

My own private secretary was put in prison for two years; and at the end of the war, when he came back, he said he passed in his cell the most beautiful days of his life. All the priests who have been in prison say "If we have to go again we shall be ready to go through the same experiences." It is a very remarkable fact; all our priests were in the same condition of mind.

Still that spirit of resistance, of interior life reacting against oppression, was not confined to the priest. The imprisoned men and women were also helped in their sufferings. The whole nation resisted as one man. Before the

war, the question had been raised in Belgium whether the people, composed as our nation is from different races, Flemish and Walloon, who often were quarreling and disputing with each other,—whether such people would have one soul. Does it exist, one Belgian soul? The discussion was agitated in the papers and in pamphlets, but on the second of August, 1914, the question was practically solved; because at that moment all the citizens, Catholic and Non-Catholic, Liberals, Conservatives, Socialists, Militarists, anti-Militarists, who had quarreled so much before the war,—at that moment all stood up as one man to say to the foe asking free way through our Belgium, "No! You shall not pass!"

Then we felt that patriotism is not a conviction; it is not an idea of the speculative mind of man; it is a profound reality of the soul by which all the faculties of the soul, all the tendencies of the soul, are concentrated on one object and subordinated to one haven, the liberty of the country. At that moment we felt that patriotism is the source of unity, the source of energy, giving to the soul the spirit of self-sacrifice; and for the future of the world that spirit of self-sacrifice is superior to temporal interests will be, I hope, one of the main factors of moral progress in humanity. That spirit of self-sacrifice was revealed by your own boys in the trenches; it was revealed by your valiant boys at Ypres, Lens, Amiens, and all the trenches where your boys were; they were there defending the same principle of a moral civilization.

During the occupation of Belgium our workmen gave a great example of patriotism and self-sacrifice. In 1916, the Germans ordered that all workmen who were idle had to be engaged for work in Germany. Many of our workmen, in fact, were idle; because the Germans had made them idle, and constrained them to be idle. They had robbed us of the machinery of our factories, prohibited to the municipalities public work for our workmen. They damned them to idleness so as to have the pretext to say, "Here they are, idle, come home with us. You cannot work here. We shall send you into our country and give you work there." I wrote that to Von Bissing, and he could never deny the fact. We had the proof that in many municipalities where they were supposed to give work to workmen on the roads or railroads they were prevented by the Germans from giving work to our workmen; so, forced to be idle they were constrained to go and work for them in Germany.

The Germans offered the poor workmen very attractive

conditions of work. They said, "If you will sign an engagement for working for six months or one year you will get high salaries. You will have free holidays from time to time to visit your families, and you will be treated as ourselves. If you refuse, you will have prison or hard labor in Germany against your will." Well, we had exactly 70,000 workmen who refused to sign this engagement. My beloved city of Malines had 1300 of these workmen who refused to sign and leave their wives and children exposed to the worst conditions of living. And the beautiful thing is that the wives themselves and the mothers, persuaded their husbands and sons to refuse to sign.

I have been witness to wonderful spectacles. They had taken the workmen as slaves, by force, and forced them to go in the train to be taken away as slaves in Germany. The women, wives and mothers, went to the station to say adieu to their men, their children or husbands. They were repelled from the station; they could not approach it. What did they do? They left the station and they ran to the embankment of the railroad on both sides, and when the train was going through they shouted to their men in Walloon, "Don't sign, don't sign."

I have given this afternoon at a meeting of the ladies an example of a young girl which I am sure will interest you and, I may say, move you. She was a young girl, 19 years old, nearly 20; and she was engaged before the war. She sent her fiancé to the battle, the first battle in Belgium, Liege,—the first place of resistance to the Germans. (And by the way, General Leman, who commanded, is a non-Catholic. I think, he is not even a believer. Still he has, as many of you have in your country, a very great respect for religion. I knew him before the war. I had intimate conversation with him and he said to me once, being in my room, "I have no faith, but I know, of course, as a minister of the Church you have faith. Before I go, give me your blessing." And that general, first man of our country, knelt to receive the blessing from a priest. That is a very loyal man. However, the fact seems to me very natural. It is common here but it is not so common in Europe.)

Well, now, this girl sent her fiancé to battle. In Liege, he was wounded. The young girl nursed her fiancé until he recovered and then engaged him to go through the line and to join with our army again. He did so. As he enquired

about her safety his girl said, "Do not be worried about me. I shall find a way to serve my country as you do." She engaged herself in Secret Service work for the nation—and most of these Secret Service organizations were composed of women. When, some months afterwards, the military authorities seized the group in which she was engaged, (it was seized in France in a department of the north of France) she escaped, and some days afterwards she reorganized a new group in which she was the chief agent. Still, after some months she was arrested and taken to undergo trial before the court martial. The German officer interrogated her and said, "If you will give the names of your comrades you will be free; we will put you at liberty. If you refuse, you are to be shot." And this girl said immediately, "Is it possible that an officer lowers himself to put to me such a question? I shall show you what honor is if you don't know. I shall show you how a Belgian girl can die for her King and her country."

Another example took place in Luxembourg, in September, 1914. For two months the Germans thought that by terrorizing our people we would be prepared for the future annexation to Germany. I can find no explanation for their cruelties but that by shooting innocent people, burning houses, churches, and hospitals, they had in view the terrorizing of the people to make it more easy to annex them. In coming to a certain village they arrested twenty-one hostages and forced them to go into a church where they had to pass the night. In that church was the curate of the parish. In the morning the curate asked the military authorities if he could be allowed to go around in the village to visit the young boys of his club. He was a director of a club of young boys. He went into the village from home to home and proposed to twenty young boys of from seventeen to eighteen years to offer with him their liberty and their lives to save the fathers and mothers of families who were threatened with death. Those twenty young boys accepted the proposition and the twenty-one went to the military authorities and offered themselves to save the chiefs of the families of the village. The military authorities could not understand the moral grandeur of that offer, and they refused. Seven of those fathers were killed; the others were saved.

A proposition of the same kind happened in my city of Malines at the moment of the deportation of which I have spoken. The priests of my city, nineteen priests, said to me,

"It is unjust. We are democratic people; we feel it is unjust that the German oppression falls only upon the workmen. We would like to offer ourselves to take the place of nineteen of the workmen." I said, "Beautiful! I accept your proposition. I will write to the Governor, Von Bissing, and ask that he make place for you." I sent a letter from the nineteen priests with my request that the proposition would be accepted by the authorities. It was refused, but the act in itself deserves to be recorded and kept in the history of our country.

One or two examples more and I will not abuse your patience longer. I quote you a fact concerning a priest seventy-three years of age. Some weeks before I left for the United States I received a visit from a brave workman, a man of about thirty to thirty-three years old, married, having two or three little children; and he said, "Your Eminence, I bring you a little sum of money, (about \$20) which I have saved and I beg you to employ that sum for a funeral of a parish priest of my village." I said, "My dear man, why, what is the reason of it?" He said, "Well, I will tell you. I am here, living. When the Germans entered Louvain, after having burned our University, after having burned our Commercial School, having robbed us of all our scientific instruments in our laboratories, they took hostages and forced all the hostages to come together at a place near the station. The hostages were there, drawn up in two ranks, and it was decided that one man in seven would be shot." (In other places they had shot each fourth, each fifth.)

The seventh man was this man who came to me. Behind him was this old parish priest, seventy-three years old, and this priest had said, putting his hand on the shoulder of the young man, "I am an old man; I am nearly at the end of my life; I have done my service and I have retired. I am through, take my place and I will take yours." The young man said, "No father; I cannot accept. You are exceedingly good, but I cannot accept." The priest insisted; and finally took the place of the young man, who went behind to the rear rank. The priest was killed and the man was saved. Remember the words of our Lord, "Nothing is greater than for a man to offer his life for another." Nothing is more conforming with the ideas of a priest than giving his life for the salvation of his flock, and this poor workman thankfully had saved a hundred francs to commemorate the heroism of his priest.

I finish with the last example. We had in Antwerp seven men, six laymen and a priest, condemned to death for having organized secret service information for our allies. I knew one of them, it was a layman, his name was Von Bergen. He had been a diplomat in China and had offered his services to England. He had come into Belgium secretly. He came to me and I said, "My dear, have you reflected on what you are doing? If the war lasts some time more I fear for your life." "Oh," he said, "I know; I have offered my life either in the army or in the service of the government. I give service here in occupied Belgium; I have decided and I accept the consequences of my decision." So they were put in prison, sentenced to death.

The day before the execution the German authorities had given to the prisoners the opportunity of uniting with their families, and there in the prison they had their supper. The soldier who served every guest at the table said he never supposed that men facing death could be so unconcerned, so cheerful. When the supper was over they were forced to go back into their cells. The parish priest, a Flemish priest, had in his cell with him a brother of the Christian schools, and one of our seminarians. They spent the night partly in prayers, partly in singing songs; and during the whole night had affectionate friendly conversations together. In the morning, at six o'clock, the priest was allowed to say his Mass. He said Mass, his last Mass, gave the Communion to his companions in captivity; and then they went to the place of execution. The soldiers came with bandages to bandage their eyes. They went first to the priest, who refused and said, "I do not fear to look death in the face." Then the others refused, too. Then the priest took out of his pocket a crucifix, lifted up his crucifix and said to his companions, "My dear companions, be courageous; this same moment we shall meet together in heaven. Courage! Vive la Belgique!" At that moment a bullet struck him in the heart; he fell, and his companions fell beside him. I may ask you if in all history you know more magnificent examples of charity and heroism?