

God Comes Along by Bus. The Chapel Truck Action of the Eastern Priests Relief Organization, 1950-1970

Dios viaja en autobús. La campaña de camiones-capilla de la Organización de Socorro a Sacerdotes Orientales, 1950-1970

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RESUMEN

Como consecuencia de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, doce millones de alemanes se vieron obligados a buscar refugio en otro lugar en su país. Su suerte atrajo la atención de organizaciones caritativas católicas, como la Organización de Socorro a Sacerdotes Orientales, que les proporcionó ayuda material y espiritual a través de una flota de capillas móviles. En este artículo se afirma que esta acción fue una forma genuinamente *moderna* del trabajo misionero, en el sentido de que tanto su método como mensaje fueron hijos de su tiempo: viviendo en una cultura de la movilidad generalizada y de comunicación de masas, la palabra de una iglesia triunfalista se extendió reclamando su superioridad moral sobre otras visiones del mundo, en particular sobre el comunismo. Por otra parte, los camiones capilla anticiparon un cambio de paradigma fundamental en el cuidado pastoral, llevando la iglesia a las personas en contra de lo que sucedía habitualmente.

ABSTRACT

In the aftermath of World War II, twelve million Germans were forced to seek refuge elsewhere in their country. Their sort attracted the attention of Catholic charities such as the Eastern Priests Relief Organization, which provided material and spiritual assistance through a fleet of mobile chapels. This paper claims that this action was a genuinely *modern* form of missionary work in the sense that both its method and message were a child of its time: dwelling on a culture of generalized mobility and mass communication, it spread the word of a triumphalist church claiming moral superiority over other world views, in particular communism. Moreover, the chapel trucks anticipated a fundamental paradigm shift in pastoral care, bringing the church to the people rather than the other way around.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Organización de Socorro a Sacerdotes Orientales/Ayuda a la Iglesia Necesitada; misión; capillas móviles; diáspora alemana; guerra fría.

KEYWORDS

Eastern Priests Relief Organization/Aid to the Church in Need; missionary work; mobile chapels; (German) diaspora; Cold War.



Fig. 01. Portraits of expelled German families, published in EPRO's magazine *Echo der Liefde* 3 (1954): 10-11.

te ontlasten. Opnieuw dreunden de «vluchtelingen» binnen de pastorievelden door veldkruis. In een raanzel tempo werden de vluchtelingen naar 't Westen gelogen. Bestijns hield aan. Het hieldertempot en de andere din vluchtelingen kouten geld. Dit geld moest natuurlijk uit trekken worden aan andere doeleinden. Eikemaal pasten de communiatie agens in het Westen hun taktiek aan. De sakt en een half miljoen verlaten en de twee miljoen vluchtelingen uit de Sovjetunie, die sinds jaar en dag in het Westen verwoelden, greakten enkele maanden lang te vergeet. Onder dese momemant's, die reeds te lang en teverleeting wachten, werd de reeds propaganda setid. De Westen om dese loeren als bo-



In deze keuken-slaap-woonkamer tellen ze zeven personen... en straks komt vader!

THE GERMAN DIASPORA IN THE AFTERMATH OF WORLD WAR II

Of all the post war conferences discussing the future of Germany after World War II, the one at Potsdam had the farthest reaching consequences on the humanitarian plane. Article twelve of the agreements stipulated that «The Three Governments (...) recognize that the transfer to Germany of German populations, or elements thereof, remaining in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, will have to be undertaken. They agree that any transfers that take place should be effected in an orderly and humane manner»¹. Legitimizing the forced expulsion of Germans from Central Europe, the conference set in motion approximately twelve million Germans across the British and American zones. The resulting demographic shift put a heavy burden on Germany's stability as most expellees were poor and socially isolated. Moreover, an estimated six millions Catholics established themselves in regions where no Holy Mass had been read since Reformation. Many of them were taken care of by Catholic charities, the most important of which was the *Pontificia Commissione di Assistenza* or «Vatican Relief».

In the eyes of the German government and the occupying forces, this aid formed a welcome stabilizing factor while the Catholic leadership realized that the intellectual and spiritual starvation of the refugees

might lead to total apathy in religious matters. Thus, in order to keep the German flock in the Church, an emergency strategy was needed. On top of this, there was a structural shortage of priests; in the Soviet Zone for example, the number of refugees was estimated at two million while there were only 660 Catholic priests – one third of them over seventy years old². Hence the phenomenon of *ruck-sack priests*: carrying with them a chasuble, a chalice, a paten and a missal, these clerics travelled great distances, flirting with exhaustion and reading mass in the most improvised and miserable of settings (Fig. 01).

CLERGYMEN ON WHEELS

On Christmas Day of 1947, after a visit to Germany, the young Premonstratensian Werenfried van Straaten wrote an article under the title «Peace on Earth? No Room at the Inn»³. Drawing on the fact that a human disaster was taking place not even a hundred kilometres away, he urged his fellow Catholics to donate food and clothing. In his conclusion, he called for action: «We must go East (...) Trucks must be staffed with priests and filled with gifts (...) and make a tour from village to village across the vast districts. We must celebrate mass, preach and distribute with hands plenty of what the love of the Christian West has brought together»⁴. Although the war wounds were still gaping, Van



Fig. 02. Celebration of the mass at one of the chapel trucks. Date and location unknown.

Straaten's appeal triggered an impressive wave of generosity, especially amongst the country people and traditional-minded Catholics in Belgium and Holland. Van Straaten therefore set up a structure through which material and financial aid could be sent to Germany. The organization, called *Oostpriesterhulp* (Eastern Priests Relief Organization, EPRO) grew at an extraordinary pace and established its headquarters in the seminary for expelled clergy at Königstein, near Frankfurt⁵.

With his typical drive, Father Van Straaten devised a pragmatic solution to the logistic and pastoral challenges in the German diaspora. In the first place, to facilitate their work, he literally put the clergy on wheels. Under the banner *Ein Fahrzeug für Gott* (A Vehicle for God), he provided them with motorcycles and cars funded by fellow Catholics abroad. A next step in this mobile apostolate were the *Kapellenwagen* (chapel trucks), converted trailer coaches bought from the Dutch railways⁶. 14 m. long and 2 m. wide, these trailers contained separated areas for storing goods, worshipping and living. The chapel area could be opened up by means of two large doors that together formed a sort of altarpiece (Fig. 02). Further, a tenth-cloth could be attached to the sides, offering a shelter for approximately a hundred worshippers (Fig. 03). Thus, the chapel-truck action resolved three problems at once: the short-

tage of space for worshipping, the transportation of gifts and the shortage of priests.

Van Straaten's idea to motorize the clergy fits in a *tradition* of integrating modern means of transportation to the benefit of missionary work. For example, at the start of the century, the Church Extension Society of America sent priests into tiny frontier towns to celebrate Mass and distribute the Eucharist from the back of three railroad cars⁷. During World War I, the Belgian Army had two chapel cars moving along the frontline⁸. In Germany, the MIVA (*Missions-Verkehrs-Arbeitsgemeinschaft*), founded by the *flying friar* Paul Schulte, put a fleet of planes and motor cars at the disposal of missionary workers in Africa. After World War II, it also provided German priests with motorized vehicles⁹. Still in Germany, in 1955, *Kirche Unterwegs* was founded as an evangelical *Wagenmission*, bringing the Gospel to the people by means of converted coaches equipped with audio and projection equipment¹⁰.

EPRO's Chapel Truck Mission kicked off in 1950 with two prototypes. A year later, there were already twelve trucks on the road, and by 1954 an additional fifteen smaller vans were acquired for follow-up missions¹¹. All this was made possible through gifts and donations, mainly from Holland and Belgium. For example, three chapel trucks were paid for by farmer communities from Limburg, while the catholic youth



Fig. 03. Chapel truck in Belgium, 1951.

movement of Deinze (nearby Ghent) financed a truck of its own, baptized St. Popo in honour of its patron. Such acts of unselfishness were extensively covered in both the local press and EPRO's bi-monthly bulletin, *Echo der Liefde* (The Mirror). Published in seven languages, this magazine formed the cornerstone of EPRO's propaganda machine, bearing the typical characteristics of this type of publications: an insistent tone, heroic accounts of recent achievements, catchwords in large characters and dramatic images documenting the miserable fate of fellow Catholics¹² (Fig. 04). The periodical reflected Van Straaten's gift for capturing the general public's imagination – the most notorious instance being his epithet *Bacon Priest* which became a household name in Flanders¹³. With a readership of almost 700.000, he headed, as he pleased to state, one of the largest parishes of the Catholic world.

The chapel truck missions were well prepared and followed a fixed scenario. Lasting from mid-April to mid-October, the trucks halted twice a week in a different settlement. The trucks were staffed by a driver (himself often a *Heimatvertriebene* [Expellee]) and two priests (one German, one foreign), in general members of the regular orders. At its peak, during the 1954 season, 164 missionaries from nineteen orders drove 26 trucks, holding 7.000 sermons and distributing 250 tons of relief goods along the way (Fig. 05). The arrival of

the imposing, red-painted trucks formed a welcome distraction in the isolated towns and was generally greeted with enthusiasm. After meeting with the local dignitaries, the missionaries broke the ice by dispensing sweets to the children, playing football with them or letting them climb into the driver's seat. Armed with a list of all Catholic families in the area, both priests then set out for visits at home. This intense contact allowed a close monitoring of the religious zeal, which was registered in great detail on statistical forms and sent to the headquarter as resource material for future missions. On Sundays, Holy Mass was celebrated in any available church or parish hall. Recorded sounds of bells would then be broadcast from loudspeakers on the roof of the truck, where the priests would wait for the procession to pick them up and accompany them to the church. Upon departure, later that day, the trucks were decorated with flowers and garlands while children would run along with the vehicle until it speeded up. This atmosphere of joy illustrates an important side-effect of these missions: it boosted the pride and self-consciousness of the Catholic minorities as for a couple days at least they had formed the centre of attention, confirmed in their hopes that the Church had not given up on them.

In a 1952 report, EPRO congratulated itself with the success of the chapel truck action¹⁴. The fact that several dioceses asked for a second or third chapel truck in



Fig. 06. Blessing of the Chapel truck fleet prior to departure in Königstein. Date unknown.

their circumscription was seen as proof of its efficiency. Moreover, Pope Pius XII himself had expressed his approval and enthusiasm in a letter to the German episcopacy¹⁵. In fact, however, this letter was also meant to stifle slumbering criticism from other charities such as the venerable *Bonifatius Werk*. Its director stated that EPRO's actions were arbitrary and ill-considered, while others claimed that its large turnout had first and foremost to do with the novelty and spectacle of the trucks and the free distribution of food and clothing¹⁶. As a matter of fact, towards the mid-1950s, the expellees too started to benefit from the German *Wirtschaftswunder* (Economic Boom): most found employment while the increasing standard of living became clear, for example, in the great number of churches that arose everywhere. The focus of the chapel truck action shifted accordingly: as it appeared that a growing number of people were leaving the Church, the action concerned no longer only the rootless expellees but *all* German Catholics. Consequently, sustaining adherence to the church became the new challenge¹⁷. To this effect, the missions now halted longer in one place in order to allow a more in-depth approach. The chapel truck action thus became a particular type of *Volksmission*, complementary to the existing pastoral care in specific areas. Finally, in 1970 the campaign was officially ceased. Some trucks were kept for promotional goals while the rest was shipped to

Latin America, the organization's new field of operation under the more generic name Aid to the Church in Need¹⁸.

A MOTORIZED CRUSADE

For Father Van Straaten, the chapel truck action formed only a first step towards a far greater goal. Stating that «looking back, the expulsion [of the Germans, ss] can be acknowledged as God's instrument to alter the condition of the Diaspora», he made clear that in his view, the re-establishing of a Catholic supremacy in the protestant territories constituted no less than a divine order¹⁹. The chapel-trucks flawlessly embodied the corresponding and much-desired image of a tenacious, united and modern church. Indeed, as Van Straaten stated: «Around these vans blows the spirit of the Universal Church. They are the epiphany of a great, bold Christianity baffling the Protestants with speechless admiration and quickening the heart of even the most solitary Catholic reprobates with regained Christian pride»²⁰.

With the rise of the Cold War, Van Straaten's self-imposed duty to safeguard Europe's moral integrity evolved into an unremitting polemic against communism. Here too, the chapel trucks had a role to play as the spontaneous big-heartedness generated by the chapel trucks had proved, according to Van Straaten, that



Fig. 07. Exodus of the chapel trucks from Königstein. Father Van Straaten is seeing the vehicles off, 18 April 1955. Note the photographer to the right.

communism had no monopoly on virtues such as solidarity and charity. These ideological undertones turn explain to a certain extent why this action was staged with such care. The blessing of the vehicles in Königstein on Easter Day for example resembled much the departure of a motorized crusade and was recorded in numerous photographs, published with ominous captions such as «These churches on wheels must fill even the worst enemy of faith with awe»²¹ (Fig. 06-08). Such heroism and techno-morphic imagery added to mythologizing the chapel trucks as the harbingers of a modern form of Catholicism.

In fact, this ideological turn comes as no surprise as it was simply embedded in EPRO's DNA from the start. Its initial English name, namely *Iron Curtain Church Relief*, provocatively embodied the organization's primary *raison d'être*: transgressing, or even tearing down, the ideological frontier between East and West. Yet Van Straaten had to wait until 1991 before being able to kick off a chapel truck mission in Prague. Its reception was way remote from the triumph he had anticipated however. The brand new, custom-made coach was perceived by the locals as a Western oddity rather than a bringer of faith and hope, and was greeted with the greatest indifference²². The anti-climax in Prague illustrated how for a long time, EPRO had been in two minds: one the one hand, it had shown an extraordinary capacity to trans-

form a pastoral and logistical problem into a captivating project which left no one untouched. Yet the superior and triumphalist discourse in which it was embedded revealed views on religion and society that were ill adapted to the post-conciliar spirit with its emphasis on community building and mutual understanding rather than fervent proselytization.

CONCLUSION

Social mobility —that is, for professional or private rather than political reasons— formed a persistent characteristic of post war society, also in Germany. This had important consequences for the Catholic Church. As several sociologists of religion pointed out, building churches in great number or creating new parishes by splitting up those that had become too large failed to acknowledge the growing and structural dissociation between places of residence, work and leisure²³. The neighbourhood was no longer the dynamic centre of urban society; one could now easily be part of a community without sharing the same physical territory. Conversely, physical proximity no longer automatically produced social cohesion. Such findings undermined the age-old, territorially oriented approach to pastoral care. It became clear that one should no longer expect the people to come to the church, but that the church should come to the people. Hence the idea of providing



Fig. 08. A convoy of chapel trucks on the autobahn on their way to Königstein, 1951.

places of worship at the crossroads of flows of people such as train stations, airports, ski resorts, camping sites and even Mediterranean beaches. Flexible, ephemeral and elementary in their conception, such churches did away with the idea that true worshipping required a monumental structure firmly rooted in the ground. It could be argued that EPRO put into practice this idea long before it became almost a doctrine in the context of Vatican II. Indeed, the chapel trucks anticipated a fundamental paradigm shift in pastoral care which would reach its most outspoken emanation in the *Inflatable Church* by Hans Walter Müller in 1969²⁴. Made out of plastic and conceived to be transported to where it was needed, it would have fitted in the luggage of the *ruck-sack priests*, enabling them to fully accomplish their mission, in other words: to literally bring the church closer to the people.

CREDITS OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 01. Photographs © Martien Coppens.

Fig. 02-03, 06-08. Photographer unknown. *Aid to the Church in Need*, historical archives, Königstein. Used with permission.

Fig. 04. *Echo der Liefde* 10 (1956): 2-3.

Fig. 05. *Expulsus* 1 (1954): 3.

NOTES

(1) On the Potsdam Agreement and the refugee problem, see Raymond M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane. The Expulsion of*

the Germans after the Second World War (New York/London: Yale University Press, 2012). For the text of the *Agreement*, see www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Potsdam_Agreement.html. Retrieved October 7, 2013.

(2) Josph Huijgen, «The Church in Peril», *The Furrow* 4 (1951): 247.

(3) Werenfried van Straaten, «Vrede op Aarde? Geen plaats in de herberg», *Toren* 12 (1947): 501-508.

(4) Werenfried van Straaten, *Oostpriesterhulp* (Tongerlo: s.e., 1953), 54–55. Original quote: «Met kolonnes van hulpbe-ton moeten wij oostwaarts gaan. Vrachtauto's moeten wij bemannen met priesters en barstensvol laden met liefdesgaven. Zo moeten we ons ter beschikking stellen van de zwervende rug-zakpriesters (...) In de Duitse diaspora met hen van dorp tot dorp rondrijden door hun onmetelijke districten. We moeten het misoffer opdragen, preken en met volle handen uitdelen wat de liefde van het Christelijke Westen bijeenbracht». Translation by the author.

(5) Today the organization is called «Aid to the Church in Need» (www.acn-intl.org). The findings in this paper are based on research effectuated in the archives of Aid to the Church in Need in Königstein during the Summer of 2013. I wish to thank Mr. Frider Mari, its archivist, and Mr. Mark von Riedemann, head of public relations, for their generous support and assistance during my stay at ACN. Further research was carried out at the Documentation Center for Religion and Society (KADOC) at Leuven University and the archives of the diocese of Antwerp. Secondary sources on ACN are rare and have been mostly published by the organization itself or authors closely related to it. The following publications are useful: Linus Hauser, «Kapellenwagen und Fahrzeuge Gottes. Milieukatholische Erfahrungen», in *Europassion. Kirche - Konflikte -*

Menschenrechte, ed. Franz-Josef Bäumer et al. (Bad Schussenried: Hess Verlag, 2006), 195-221; Michael Hirschfeld, *Katholisches Milieu und Vertriebene. Eine Fallstudie am Beispiel des Oldenburger Landes 1945-1965* (Köln/Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2002), 254-263.

(6) Apart from the archival sources mentioned above, the following contemporary accounts have been useful in reconstructing the chapel truck action: Ludwig Barbian, *Im Herrgotts-Auto auf den Strassen der Diaspora* (München: Christ unterwegs, 1953); Christoph Christl, «Missionsfahrt mit dem Kapellenwagen Madonna», *Klemens-Blätter* 7-8 (1951): 156-163; Hans Hoorenbeek, «Meine persönliche Erinnerungen an meine Zeit bei der Ostpriesterhilfe», unpublished manuscript, ACN Archives, Königstein, 128 p.

(7) www.catholicextension.org/about-us/our-history. Retrieved on 13 October 2013.

(8) Pierre Lebrun, *Le Temps des églises mobiles. L'architecture religieuse des Trente Glorieuses* (Gollion: Infolio, 2011), 13. This is the only image we were able to find of these frontline chapels so far.

(9) On the aims and methods of the Bonifatius Werk, see Paul Wwinner, *Construire des églises: les dimensions des paroisses et les contradictions de l'apostolat dans les villes* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1957), 164-177. See also www.bonifatiuswerk.de.

(10) Cf. www.kircheunterwegs.de. Retrieved 7 October 2013.

(11) Each chapel truck bore the name of a saint or Biblical character. The Hirtenwagen and Bonifatiuswagen were operational as from 1950; the Emmauswagen, Franziskuswagen, Passionwagen, Magnifikatwagen, Madonnawagen, Assumptwagen and the Engelenwagen started their first tour in March 1951; the fleet was completed with the Samaritawagen, St Poppowagen and Herr Jesu-wagen a couple of months later. The Norbertuswagen remained in the Netherlands for promotional use.

(12) *Echo der Liefde* (Echo of Love), published under various titles in sixteen countries since 1954. The textual and visual discourse in this newsletter has been analyzed in Nele Cornelis, «Ontstaan en groei van Oostpriesterhulp en Bouworde, 1948-1960/1961: een doorlichting van de organisaties en een analyse van de propaganda van Oostpriesterhulp» (Masters' thesis, Ghent University, 1993).

(13) The nickname *Bacon priest* relates to the early days of

EPRO, when Van Straaten once asked the farmers' wives that had come to listen to his testimony to donate a «not-too-small piece of bacon» out of the chimney and present it over the next few days at the presbytery. It appeared that at the end of that week, more than a ton had been collected. See Joanna Bogle, *Father Werenfried, A Life* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001), 30.

(14) «Bericht über die Kapellenwagenmission 1952», ACN Archives, Königstein, Kapellenwagenmission, box 3.

(15) Letter by Pope Pius XII, 11/10/1954. Copy in ACN archives, Kapellenwagenmission, box 5.

(16) Hirschfeld, *Katholisches Milieu und Vertriebene*, 258. On the divergence of views between the Bonifatiuswerk and EPRO, see ACN archives, Kapellenwagenmission, box 5.

(17) Cornelis, Nele, «Ontstaan en groei van Oostpriesterhulp en Bouworde», 38-42.

(18) Aid to the Church in Need, *press communiqué*, 23/01/1971, ACN Archives, Königstein, Kapellenwagenmission, box 4.

(19) Cited in Cornelis, «Ontstaan en groei van Oostpriesterhulp en Bouworde», 38. Original text: «Die Vertreibung jedoch wird ruckschauend als Werkzeug erkannt, dessen God sich bediente, um die Diasporasituation zu verändern [sic]». Translation by the author.

(20) Van Straaten, Oostpriesterhulp, 55. Original text: «Rond deze Kapelwagens waait de geest van de Wereldkerk. Ze zijn al de epifanie van een groots, doortastend kristendom, dat de protestanten slaat met verstomming en bewondering en dat het hart van de meest vereenzaamde katholieke verworpingen sneller doet kloppen van herwonnen kristelijke fierheid». Translation by the author.

(21) Hauser, «Kapellenwagen und Fahrzeuge Gottes», 203. Original text: «Diese Kirche auf Rädern müssen selbst dem ärgsten Glaubensfeind Achtung abnötigen». Translation by the author.

(22) Raf Sauviller, «De Kapellekensbaan. Met Oostpriesterhulp naar Tsjechoslovakije», *Panorama/De Post* 28 (1991): 48-52.

(23) I have discussed this phenomenon and its repercussion on pastoral policies in Belgium in a previous paper. See Sven Sterken, «A House for God or a Home for his People? The Domus Dei Church Building Programme in the Belgian Archdiocese, 1952-1981», *Architectural History* (2013): 391-429.

(24) Lebrun, *Le Temps des églises mobiles*, 264-270.

