

Reimagining Religious Life and Social Apostolate

The Case of the *Auxiliaires de l’Apostolat*

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Abstract Throughout the 20th century, the *auxiliaires de l’Apostolat* shaped a new form of apostolate: being active as lay women in the modern world, while pursuing a life towards religious perfection. The life and position of these women was an often hard-to-understand identity in church and society, requiring them to constantly negotiate their own identity vis-à-vis institutional normative frameworks. The present contribution recounts their search for canonical recognition between 1928 and the early 1960s, and the breakthrough that comes during the Second Vatican Council.

Keywords *Auxiliaires de l’Apostolat*. Lay Apostolate. Catholic (lay) women. Second Vatican Council. Lumen Gentium.

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1 Introduction

Il n'est pas normale que 'Rome' continue d'ignorer - du moins de manière officielle - un 'fait d'Eglise' aussi important que celui de deux cents Evêques qui ont des Auxiliaires de l'Apostolat.¹

Dixit a number of unnamed Cardinals on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, reflecting on the fact that a group of lay women, called the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*, had not yet received any form of canonical recognition, despite their importance - by 1962, some 200 bishops worldwide had already called *auxiliaires*.² Moreover, the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* were not the only group to occupy this position at the time; they were part of a broader emergence of lay initiatives the members of which wanted to live a perfect life according to the evangelical counsels, albeit one that takes place 'in the world'. Without being religious people or secular institutes, there was simply no framework within Canon Law for such groups. For many of them, this canonical void demanded a decades-long commitment to receiving recognition of some sort.

The case of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* is a compelling one when examined against this background. Established in 1917 and supported by bishops and theologians, they were determined to receive this aforementioned recognition. Unfortunately, as the paraphrase of the Cardinals with which we started illustrates, there would still be no breakthrough by the start of the Second Vatican Council. Some Cardinals dared to express their hope that the Council would bring about change in this regard - in hindsight this was not unreasonable, given that certain unnamed authors behind the texts were well aware of the vocation of the *auxiliaires*, their importance, and their objective to recognize themselves in ecclesiastical documents. The present contribution develops the case of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* in three major phases: their establishment and early development in the 1920s and 1930s, their search for canonical recognition between 1928 and the early 1960s, and the breakthrough that came during the Second Vatican Council with the integration of their identity into the Church's self-understanding in *Lumen Gentium* 41.

Research on the history of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* is framed within multiple research fields. First, it contributes to research on the role played by women within the Catholic Church in the twentieth

1 Vulhopp, *Note sur une Éventuelle Intégration Plus Définie des Auxiliaires de l'Apostolat dans l'Église Universelle*, 26 May 1962.

2 It is estimated that some 350 bishops worldwide called a total number of over 3,500 *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* between 1917 and 2007. Zélis, "Service Sociale et Vie Consacrée", 673.

century. In recent years, greater attention has been paid to both female religious³ and to the female laity. In addition, the upcoming role of the laity and religious have received substantial attention⁴ – two themes that are also relevant to the history of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*. Second, it relates to research on the Second Vatican Council⁵ and on the role played by women in specific. The ways in which women have contributed to the Council have not sufficiently been highlighted, even though women undeniably adopted important roles; some women, for example, were clearly publicly involved in the conciliar work as lay auditors, but women also directly and indirectly influenced the conciliar process behind the scenes.⁶ The present contribution will demonstrate how approaching Vatican II from the female point of view can yield new insights into Vatican II as a whole, given that the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* contributed to the Council.

2 “Notre ‘Cercle’ d’Apôtres Sociales”: the *Auxiliaires de l’Apostolat*’s Origins and Development

Most sister congregations were apostolic in nineteenth and twentieth century Belgium and, therefore, they were active in the world, engaging in education, health care, penitentiary care or youth care, among others.⁷ Moreover, lay women would also engage themselves socially outside of this ecclesiastical structure in the early twentieth century. They were called ‘social workers’,⁸ an umbrella term used to refer to women who taught, worked as nurses, or who took up an executive position in women’s movements. According to Ria Christens, their discourse would often be similar to that of the apostolic spirituality of certain women’s congregations during the Interbellum.⁹ Certain lay women also remained celibate, especially since this allowed them to remain more autonomous.¹⁰

3 See for instance Mangion, *Catholic Nuns and Sisters in a Secular Age*.

4 See for instance Minvielle, *L’Apostolat des Laïcs à la Veille du Concile*; Dumons, *Femmes et Catholicisme en Europe*.

5 For an overview of the current state of research on Vatican II, see Gaillardetz, *The Cambridge Companion to Vatican II*; Clifford, Faggioli, *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, Roy-Lysencourt, *Bibliographie du concile Vatican II*.

6 See for instance Heyder, Muschiol, *Katholikinnen und das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil*; Desmazières, “Généalogie d’un ‘Silence’ Conciliaire”.

7 Suenens, Marcéls, “Vrouwelijke Religieuze Instituten”, 848.

8 Baers, Letter to Mgr. Mercier, 3 June 1920.

9 Christens, *Sociaal Geëngageerd en Ongehuwd*, 65, 72, 75.

10 Christens, *Sociaal Geëngageerd en Ongehuwd*, 77-81; Duriez, “Introduction”, 16.

The 1920s and 1930s marked the development of Christian social women's organizations in Belgium. *Standsgedenken*¹¹ prevailed in this period, resulting in the creation of different autonomous women's organizations for every social group, such as rural or working-class people, in order to reach these groups.¹² There was a growing need for homogenously trained female executives with the emergence of such organizations. Such training was deployed during the First World War, and eventually led to the establishment of two schools in 1920: the *Katholieke Sociale Normaalschool* and the *École normale sociale catholique*, founded by Maria Baers and Victoire Cappe.¹³

In this context, members of the women's organization *Œuvres sociales féminines chrétiennes* (OSFC) noticed that their members wanted to participate in the apostolate in 1917, but feared that they would not be able to comply perfectly with the evangelical counsels outside monastery walls.¹⁴ Social work and apostolic congregations were competing, in a sense, to win over young women with a vocation.¹⁵ This worried the OSFC's management, who believed that there was a need for apostles who were in touch with different social milieus. There was a need for *ouvrières d'élite* above all, as the working class in particular was out of touch with religion and would benefit from an apostle who knew and worked within their environment. As a solution, they wished to start up a group – initially referred to as *le Cercle* – to offer young women an alternative to entering a convent. In a document dated 7 October 1917, they indicated to Archbishop Mercier of Mechelen how they saw the functioning of *le Cercle*.¹⁶ It is unclear exactly who drafted the document, since it was not signed, but one can assume that it came from their leaders, general secretaries Maria Baers and Victoire Cappe, because it was written from the OSFC's point of view. On 28 March 1918, a few months after the draft of the OSFC's proposal, another group of the *Cercle* came together in Antwerp – which was part of the Archdiocese at that time.¹⁷

By 8th December 1918, an initial version of the statutes was finalized. Here, they write:

11 *Standsgedenken* is an untranslatable term. It is the notion that there are clear distinctions between different societal groups, for instance the working class, farmers, middle class...

12 Christens, *Sociaal Geëngageerd en Ongehuwd*, 68-9, 81.

13 Christens, *Sociaal Geëngageerd en Ongehuwd*, 68-9; Zélis, "Service Sociale et Vie Consacrée", 662; Cappe, Letter to Mgr. Mercier, 5 December 1920.

14 Project Description, 7 October 1917; Harmignie, *Bref Historique de l'Association des Auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*, s.d.

15 Zélis, "Service Sociale et Vie Consacrée", 663.

16 Project Description, 7 October 1917.

17 Vulhopp, Letter to Mgr. Mercier, 24 July 1920.

Le Cercle a pour but de grouper et d'aider les jeunes filles et les veuves, résolues à tendre à la perfection, par la pratique des conseils évangéliques, tout en vivant dans le monde, d'une manière analogue à celle des prêtres du clergé séculier, pour y travailler en union intime avec les évêques et sous leur dépendance immédiate à l'extension du règne de Dieu à faire pénétrer l'esprit de N[otre] S[eigneur] J[ésus] C[hrist] dans toute la vie sociale, particulièrement parmi les ouvriers et ouvrières par les oeuvres sociales chrétiennes [...].¹⁸

In the years that followed, the Archbishop would work together with the women to formally organize this *Cercle*.¹⁹ The group started to grow and different women from different walks of life gradually entered, according to Pierre Harmignie's account from 1926. In response, the idea arose not to become an organization with one well-defined task, but instead to let the women be at the disposal of the bishop so that they could be mobilized wherever they were needed. Mercier agreed and saw lots of commonalities between the *Cercle* and secular priests - more specifically with the Amis de Jésus, a society of secular priests actively living the three vows in their diocesan activities which took shape under Mercier's lead between 1911 and 1923.²⁰ He gave the women their name, *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*, as they were literally assisting the bishop in his apostolate. The *auxiliaires* drafted new statutes in 1921 in order to let their statutes correspond with this new vision.²¹

The first assembly of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* was organized in 1921. During this meeting, a group picture was taken - perhaps the only picture of the *auxiliaires* convening in this way.²² In addition to approximately thirty women, Cardinal Mercier and Pierre Harmignie, who helped establish the group, were also present. Only Victoire Cappe and Maria Baers can be clearly recognized; unfortunately, no list with names has been preserved. However, we do know the names of certain women who were involved in those early days through some early documents, for instance Louise Colen with whom Victoire Cappe had corresponded about the *Cercle*, and in whose archives the group picture was found. There was also the

18 Statutes of 'le Cercle', 1918.

19 Baers, Letter to Mgr. Mercier, 26 November 1920; Cappe, *Note Envoyée à l'É[vêque] avec les Statuts*, November 1920; Baers, *Note Envoyée à Son Éminence avec les Statuts du Cercle*, 26 November 1920.

20 See in particular Lambert, *Mgr Georges Lemaître et les 'Amis de Jésus'*.

21 Harmignie, *Bref Historique de l'Association des Auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*, s.d.

22 Picture of Mgr. Mercier, Pierre Harmignie, and ca. 30 women with note on the back, 1921.

Antwerp *Cercle* led by Tilla Vulhopp. In 1920, Vulhopp delivered a list of eight members – herself included – to Cardinal Mercier.²³ Moreover, the aforementioned *École normale sociale catholique*, not coincidentally founded by Maria Baers and Victoire Cappe, was a true recruitment pool for new *auxiliaires* according to Guy Zélis. 281 of the in total 1,199 students became *auxiliaires* between 1922 and 1939.²⁴ This should come as no surprise, given that these students were the perfect target audience for a social apostolate. The aforementioned concern that young social workers would be drawn to apostolic congregations turned out to be a realistic concern: the initiators of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* mentioned that someone had left or considered leaving the school or the *Cercle* on multiple occasions.²⁵

3 The *Auxiliaires*' Pursuit for Recognition Within the Universal Church

After Cardinal Mercier's death on 23 January 1926, the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* would continue to work under the auspices of the new Archbishop Van Roey. In 1927, Victoire Cappe died, and in 1931, Maria Baers lost her leadership position after a debate on the kind of leadership that the *auxiliaires* envisioned.²⁶ Tilla Vulhopp would come to the forefront. In the decades that followed, and up until the 1970s, she would correspond extensively with Archbishop Van Roey and with other prominent figures like Gerard Philips, Albert Dondeyne, and Giovanni Battista Dellepiane.²⁷ Many of these, Dondeyne and Philips in particular, would later play a role during and in the reception of the Second Vatican Council in the search for the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*'s place in the Church. Their activities would be shaped by their theological knowledge and by these contacts; incidentally, these contacts could be very direct, in the case of Philips whose niece Marie-Thérèse Knapien was an *auxiliaire de l'Apostolat* as well for example.²⁸

²³ Vulhopp, Letter to Mgr. Mercier, 24 July 1920.

²⁴ Zélis, "Service Sociale et Vie Consacrée", 670-2.

²⁵ For instance Baers, Letter to Mgr. Mercier, 3 June 1920; Vulhopp, Letter to Mgr. Mercier, 24 July 1920.

²⁶ Baers, Letter to Mgr. Van Roey, 11 March 1927; Baers, Letter to Mgr. Van Roey, 25 December 1927; *Élection du Conseil des Auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*, 1931.

²⁷ Correspondence can be found in for instance: Archives Cardinal Van Roey (Mechelen: Archdiocesan Archives); Archives Albert Dondeyne (1916-2005), Box 6.3 Auxiliaires de l'Apostolat/Medewerksters van het Apostolaat (Leuven: KU Leuven University Archives); Conciliar Archives of Gerard Philips (Leuven: KU Leuven Centre for the Study of the Second Vatican Council).

²⁸ Tshibangu Tshishiku, *Le Concile Vatican II et l'Église Africaine*.

Vulhopp and Mgr. Van Roey would try to acquire an approbation from the Sacred Congregation of the Council. Mgr. Caillot, the Bishop of Grenoble who had set up a local organization of the *auxiliaires* with the same statutes, took the same steps.²⁹ It would take several years of corresponding, at least one visit of Tilla Vulhopp to Rome, and multiple updates on the statutes, but the extensive output of documents perfectly illustrates how this process impacted the *auxiliaires'* identity formation. Multiple issues became prevalent. Firstly, it turned out to be difficult to let a novel phenomenon like the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* fit in the existing structures of Canon Law. Secondly, while striving to fit in, the *auxiliaires* gradually had to change some terminology in their statutes. 'Vœux' (vows) in particular presented a problem, given that it implied a specific organizational structure that did not correspond with the rest of the statutes. Thirdly, the *auxiliaires* developed a clear understanding of their own identity and the concessions that they were or were not willing to make to protect this identity during this lengthy process. For decades, they would primarily have to define themselves towards the outside world as what they are not; it was only during the Second Vatican Council that they would start to recognize themselves in ecclesiastical documents.³⁰

In 1928, Van Roey explicitly asked the Congregation of the Council not to approve the *auxiliaires* as a religious institute, but rather as a pious association, and to allow them to make public vows.³¹ The *auxiliaires* argued that even though their way of life presupposed that they strived for perfection, they still needed a more flexible organization than a religious congregation and it was still necessary that they could make public vows in order to be committed to the service of the Church.³² In 1931, and after Tilla Vulhopp personally met Cardinal Serafini, the Prefect of the Congregation of the Council, she learned that these aspects of the organization were problematic. Although the Congregation of the Council was in favor of their direct dependency upon the bishop and the lack of particularism in their spirituality, there were certain issues which needed further clarification – their vows being one of the most essential, as mentioned previously.³³ In her account of this meeting, Vulhopp does not explicitly

29 Note Envoyée à Mgr. Heylen, 15 November 1929.

30 Certain *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* have expressed this during conversations with us, and on the website of the *auxiliaires* of the diocese of Mechelen, *Lumen Gentium* 41 and *Ad Gentes* 41 are cited (n.n., *Evêque*. <https://auxibxl.org/index.php/eveque>). We will demonstrate how the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* functioned as a source of inspiration for *Lumen Gentium* 41 elsewhere in this article.

31 Van Roey, Letter, 10 October 1928.

32 Note Envoyée à Mgr. Heylen, 15 November 1929.

33 Vulhopp, Letter to Mgr. Van Roey, 14 October 1931.

share the opinion of the Congregation of the Council with respect to the vows, but instead stresses that if you look at the definition of public vows, then it becomes clear that those of the *auxiliaires* are public as well, since the bishop has the authority of the Church to accept them. However, doubts arose within the Congregation of the Council about whether or not the bishop had the authority to accept public vows outside of a religious congregation without first having consulted the Holy See, according to the existing Canon Law. In response, Vulhopp referred to the Amis de Jésus who received an approbation as a pious association and were allowed to take public vows in a similar way to the *auxiliaires*, which meant that if Canon Law did not explicitly foresee public vows for a pious association, then it should not prohibit it either.³⁴ However, even though Cardinal Mercier wanted the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* to mirror the Amis de Jésus, their trajectory of recognition cannot be compared all that easily, because of the latter being an association of secular priests.

Instead, other lay groups were in a similar situation and were, therefore, better bases of comparison.³⁵ One comparator is the Congregation of the Franciscan Tertiary Social Reign of the Sacred Heart, founded by Agostino Gemelli and of Armida Barelli in 1919.³⁶ In 1931, Vulhopp and Gemelli corresponded on the issue, given that they were both waiting on a decision from the Congregation of the Council.³⁷ The *auxiliaires* were also supported by the Jesuit Joseph Creusen,³⁸ who was a well-known advocate for this new sort of group.³⁹ As mentioned previously, the OSFC leaders were concerned about young women choosing to enter an apostolic congregation, instead of living a life within society, prior to the foundation of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* in 1922. There was hope that the framework of the *auxiliaires* would be a suitable alternative for these women, but the mere existence of the framework was not always enough as it turned out. In 1932, the *auxiliaires* risked losing a member – ‘mademoiselle B.’ – because she wanted to live a perfect life and believed that this was not possible as an *auxiliaire*. She, therefore, preferred to enter

34 Vulhopp, Letter to Mgr. Van Roey, 14 October 1931.

35 Teinturier, “Catholic Education in France in the Interwar Period”, 364-5.

36 It exceeds the scope of this article to elaborate on Gemelli’s role in the development of secular institutes, but it is important to note that *Provida Mater Ecclesia* is partially based on his thoughts. See for instance: Gemelli, *Gli Istituti Secolari*; Ciccarelli, *Padre Gemelli e gli Istituti Secolari*.

37 Gemelli, Letter to Tilla Vulhopp, 26 October 1931.

38 Joseph Creusen (1880-1960) was a Belgian Jesuit priest and professor of canon law. Carpentier, “In Memoriam: le Père Joseph Creusen”.

39 Vulhopp, Letter to Maurice Claeys Bouuaert and reply, 28 June 1932; Teinturier, “Catholic Education in France in the Interwar Period”, 365.

the congregation of the *Filles du Cœur de Marie*.⁴⁰ Utterly relevant in this passage is that this episode is a clear reflection of the more widespread conviction that the vocation to the perfect life could only come to completion within religious life; this is a conviction around which Vatican II would mark a turning point. In a letter about them possibly losing a member to religious life, Vulhopp sharply states that the *auxiliaires* are not a religious institute, but that certain canonists would like to put them in that box.⁴¹

In November 1932, Archbishop Van Roey was informed that it was necessary for the Congregation of the Council to reformulate the statutes such that the *auxiliaires* did not take public, but rather private vows, and that these vows had no legal effect, in order to receive an approbation.⁴² By 1934, the requirements were even stricter, when Serafini sent Van Roey a list with suggestions for the statutes of the *auxiliaires*. The list mainly focusses on the word ‘vœux’ (vows), which had to be replaced with ‘promesses’ (oaths).⁴³ This goes beyond the initial request to formulate it as private instead of public vows; it entirely rejects the view that the *auxiliaires* could or were even allowed to make vows. The statutes were updated, while stressing that although they were no longer called vows, the oaths were still given to God.⁴⁴

Elles [les promesses] ne sont pas de simples résolutions [...]. Ce sont de vrais engagements, des promesses qui lient. Elles sont faites à Dieu, entre les mains de l’Evêque. [...], il semble résulter que la substitution du mot promesse à celui de voeu ait pour intention de distinguer les engagements des Auxiliaires de ceux des religieuses, mais non de nier qu’ils soient des promesses faites à Dieu.⁴⁵

New statutes were issued by approximately 1936 that referred to ‘donations’ and ‘engagements’.⁴⁶ These statutes would remain valid until at least the 1950s, with only minor corrections.⁴⁷ In 1947, the ap-

40 Vulhopp, Letter to Maurice Claeys Bouuaert and reply, 28 June 1932.

41 Vulhopp, Letter to Maurice Claeys Bouuaert and reply, 28 June 1932.

42 Joliet, Letter to Mgr. Van Roey, 25 November 1932.

43 Serafini, Letter to Mgr. Van Roey, 15 March 1934; Sacred Congregation of the Council, *Erezione dell’Associazione delle ‘Auxiliaires de l’Apostolat’*, s.d. [15 March 1934].

44 *Statuts de l’Association des Auxiliaires de l’Apostolat*, with edits, s.d. [edits ca. 1934]; *Questions Concernant l’Interpretation à Donner au Texte Modifié des Statuts*, s.d. [ca. 1934].

45 *Questions Concernant l’Interpretation à Donner au Texte Modifié des Statuts*, s.d. [ca. 1934].

46 *Statuts des Auxiliaires de l’Apostolat*, with edits, s.d. [original ca. 1936].

47 *Statuts des Auxiliaires de l’Apostolat*, with edits, 1955.

ostolic constitution *Provida Mater Ecclesia* offered an opportunity for the *auxiliaires* to finally receive recognition because it recognized secular institutes. However, the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* did not fit in the framework of a secular institute, according to Lille's Bishop Achille Liénart, and would have to change their statutes if they wanted to fit in. Liénart plead against this, since this would mean that they would have to repeal certain elements that the *auxiliaires* deemed necessary to defining their identity, their dependency upon the bishop for instance. According to Liénart, the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* were merely an association of the faithful.⁴⁸ The Congregation of the Council would also conclude that the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* could not fall into the category of secular institutes, given that they lacked an institutional structure.⁴⁹

Despite some canonical opening-up and the *auxiliaires'* efforts to update the statutes according to the Congregation of the Council's suggestions, the *auxiliaires* had still not received recognition – a standstill that would continue throughout the 1950s. In the 1955 edition of the statutes, article 1 still refers to them as

des jeunes filles ou des veuves qui, voulant faire d'elles-mêmes un don total à Dieu, demandent et obtiennent d'être consacrées par leur Evêque à servir, dans sa dépendance immédiate et absolue, l'apostolat de l'Eglise au milieu du monde.⁵⁰

The use of such a lengthy description, with no mention of any sort of organization, suggests that they had still not found an institutional framework into which they could fit. The next decade saw a shift in this understanding. Two movements were illustrative of this that seemingly converged in 1957. On the one hand, there was a growing awareness for the laity that they too could walk a path to perfection. This led, among other things, to the celebration of the First Day for the Universal Sanctification in 1957, an initiative of the Italian priest Guglielmo Gianquinta and his *Pro Sanctitate* movement. Equally, this universal call to holiness became more and more central in the work of theologians, in Gustave Thils' lengthy *Sainteté chrétienne* for example.⁵¹ On the other hand, also on the side of religious life, it became increasingly clear that the state of perfection did not belong to them exclusively. This was also highlighted by Pope Pius XII, who

48 Liénart, *La Constitution Provida Mater Ecclesia et les Auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*, s.d. [1947 or later].

49 Vulhopp, *Note sur la Nature de la Vocation d'Auxiliaire de l'Apostolat*, s.d. [1947 or later].

50 *Statuts des Auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*, with edits, 1955.

51 Thils, *Sainteté Chrétienne*.

made it clear that the life of perfection was not reserved only for the religious orders and those who belonged to secular institutes alone, but could be pursued by lay faithful too in his inaugural address to the Congress on the States of Perfection on December 11, 1957:

Nous pensons en ce moment à tant d'hommes et de femmes de toutes conditions, qui assument dans le monde moderne les professions et les charges les plus variées et qui, par amour de Dieu et pour le servir dans le prochain, lui consacrent leur personne et toute leur activité. Ils s'engagent à la pratique des conseils évangéliques par des vœux privés et secrets connus de Dieu seul, et se font guider, pour ce qui regarde la soumission de l'obéissance et la pauvreté, par des personnes, que l'Église a jugées aptes à cette fin et à qui elle a confié la charge de diriger les autres dans l'exercice de la perfection. Aucun des éléments constitutifs de la perfection chrétienne et d'une tendance effective à son acquisition ne fait défaut chez ces hommes et ces femmes. Ils y participent donc vraiment, bien qu'ils ne soient engagés dans aucun état juridique ou canonique de perfection.⁵²

4 **Vatican II: A Pivotal Point in the Understanding of the Universal Call to Holiness**

The difficult path that the *auxiliaires* had taken to define themselves within the structures of the Catholic Church converged in the Second Vatican Council. The approximately 2,500 Council Fathers gathered in Rome included a clear reflection on the nature of the 'People of God', laity, and religious life included in the context of its general reflection on Catholic self-understanding and its relationship to modernity. However, this is not to say that the reflection on women and their possible contribution in this reflection was self-evident. As becomes clear from the historiography of the Second Vatican Council, the conciliar processes' main actors were the Council Fathers and the *periti*, the group of theological experts who assisted the bishops in working out the conciliar schemata. The possible role played by women like the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*, who were at the crossroads of the laity and religious life, was much more limited; this contributed to a more general conciliar 'silence' on the topic of women.⁵³ Their direct influence on the council's proceedings should be sought among the lay auditors. This function was created from the second conciliar period onwards so that lay people could also follow the debates,

⁵² Pius XII, "Sous la Maternelle Protection", 36.

⁵³ Cf. Desmazières, "Généalogie d'un 'Silence' Conciliaire".

contributing to the revising of schemata where deemed necessary. However, after the appointment of the first thirteen male lay auditors in 1963, women would only be admitted to the conciliar aula in the council's third period. There were both women religious and women laity among these initial 18 women. Perhaps one of the most famous in the first group was Sister of Loretto Mary Luke Tobin, president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. In the second group was the Australian Rosemary Goldie, who had made a name for herself as secretary to the Permanent Committee for the International Conferences for the Lay Apostolate (COPECIAL).⁵⁴ Although the lay auditors did not act as representatives of organizations, but rather operated in a personal capacity, they were mostly associated with the main (umbrella) organizations for the lay apostolate, in particular with those connected to the *Conférence des Organisations Internationales Catholiques* (OIC) or the work of COPECIAL. As such, they often played an important role even prior to the laity's official participation in the council. Many other women would continue to play this indirect role throughout the entire duration, as Regina Heyder and Gisela Muschiol have made clear for the German context in an exemplary way.⁵⁵ Similarly, Tilla Vulhopp delivered a speech to the members of the Preparatory Commission on Lay Apostolate in which she explained the who, what, and how of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*.⁵⁶ This lengthy and detailed speech was necessary because the lay auditor Rosemary Goldie had previously incorrectly described *auxiliaires* as consecrated virgins, which in turn prompted Vulhopp to write a letter to Gerard Philips to have this sentence corrected.⁵⁷ Both directly and indirectly, the council's view on the role and the apostolate of (lay) women can be found scattered throughout its documents, mainly in *Lumen Gentium*, *Perfectae Caritatis*, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, and *Gaudium et Spes*.

For the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*, however, one passage in the final, fifth chapter of *Lumen Gentium* seems to be the key to self-understanding:

Besides these already named, there are also lay faithful, chosen of God and called by the bishop. These lay faithful spend themselves completely in apostolic labours, working the Lord's field with much success. (*Lumen Gentium* 41)

54 Minvielle, *L'Apostolat des Laïcs à la Veille du Concile*.

55 Heyder, Muschiol, *Katholikinnen und das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil*.

56 *Note sur la Forme de 'Vie Apostolique' des Auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*, s.d. [1961].

57 Vulhopp, Letter to Mgr. Philips, 23 March 1961; Vulhopp, *Note pour la commission pour l'Apostolat des Laïcs*, s.d.; Goldie, *Quelques Réflexions au Sujet d'une Vie Consacrée à Dieu 'dans le Monde'*, s.d. [1958 or later].

As its redaction history makes clear, it seems that this passage finally seemed to provide a form of recognition to the lay faithful such as that of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*.⁵⁸ The passage owed its existence in part to the work of several Belgians, who were all too familiar with this specific calling.⁵⁹ The origins of this chapter have to be sought in the context of the broader shift from a juridical to a sacramental understanding of the Church during the Second Vatican Council. This shift occurred during the first period of the Council in 1962 primarily and had led, among others, to the development of a new draft of the schema on the church during the first intersession. The preparatory schema was abandoned and a new schema on the Church in four chapters was being worked out by a subcommittee of the Doctrinal Commission. This so-called subcommittee of 'seven' that included André-Marie Charue, bishop of Namur, eventually opted to work further on a Belgian project that had been established with the contribution of both Philips and Thils. Their choice was accepted at the meeting of the full Doctrinal Commission on March 5. The schema would consist of four chapters, including – as the last chapter – a revision of the preparatory chapter *De statibus perfectionis evangelicae adquirendae*. This work was carried out by a mixed subcommittee comprised of members of both the Doctrinal Commission and the Commission for the Religious between 6-8 March 1963, and resulted in the chapter *De iis qui consilia evangelica profitentur*. As Famerée has also indicated, the schema was thoroughly revised at the instigation of the Belgians.⁶⁰ This was inspired by the desire to open up the narrow focus on religious life in order to emphasize the universal call to holiness. Cardinal Suenens, member of the Coordinating Commission, would also call for this in his intervention in this commission on 28 March 1963.⁶¹

The tension mainly came to the surface during the meeting of the Doctrinal Commission on 27-28 May 1963, to which the Belgians came well prepared: Charue, with the help of Thils, Philips, and Congar, had already initiated the work to write some additional

58 It is beyond the scope of this contribution to elaborate a detailed analysis of the redaction of this phrase. Material to conduct such an analysis can be found in the conciliar archives of André-Marie Charue, Gerard Philips, and Gustave Thils: Declerck, *Inventaire des Papiers Conciliaires de Mgr. A.-M. Charue*; Declerck, Verschooten, *Inventaire des Papiers Conciliaires de Monseigneur Gérard Philips*; Soetens, *Concile Vatican II et Église Contemporaine*. Equally insightful in this regard is Famerée's description of Thils' contribution to the redaction of the *De Ecclesia*: Famerée, "Gustave Thils et le De Ecclesia".

59 On the role of the Belgians at the council, often referred to as the 'squadra belga', see in particular Declerck, *Vatican II*, 1-36.

60 Famerée, "Gustave Thils et le De Ecclesia", 574.

61 *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vatican II* (hereafter AS), Vol. V, pars 1, Relatio Cardinal Leon Joseph Suenens, 463-4.

paragraphs that would reflect the universal call to holiness, thereby complementing the specific focus on the religious. However, at Ottaviani's request, the schema could only be revised slightly in the absence of the members of the religious, and only proposals that would not alter the substance of the text could be accepted. In so doing, a decision was taken to revise the text and to put it in a broader context of the universal call to holiness. This task was given to a special subcommittee comprised of Bishops Charue, Marcos McGrath, Ancietus Fernandez, taking Philips, Bernhard Häring, and Marie-Rosaire Gagnebet respectively as their *periti*. A thoroughly reworked schema on the universal call to holiness was the result, relying on the work the Belgians had begun at the beginning of May, called *De vocatione generali ad sanctitatem in Ecclesia*. Included in this text, at Charue's request, were also "des laïcs qui se dévouent totalement à l'oeuvre des évêques".⁶² The integrated text was approved at the Coordinating Commission meeting of 4 July, as the fifth chapter of the schema on the Church; paragraph 30 referred to God-elected lay faithful that fully commit themselves to apostolic works and are called by the Bishop. In the accompanying footnote, and using an authoritative reference to Pius XII's "Sous la maternelle protection" speech, the fact that although these lay faithful do not hold the canonical status of perfection, they do not lack its constitutive elements was added.⁶³

The discussion on this fifth chapter on the general call to holiness in the Church was central to the second period and was debated by the Council between 25-31 October, 1963. Crucially within this discussion - but not resolved by the council at the time - was the question of whether or not one chapter on universal holiness would remain, with the integration of religious life, or if it had to become two separate chapters. Once again, it would be Charue and Philips who would play a significant role in charting the way forward. They were appointed vice-president⁶⁴ and joint-secretary of the Doctrinal Commission respectively on 2 December 1963; as such, they would guide this schema through the second intersession. After a preparatory meeting of the subcommittee appointed to oversee this chapter on 3 December 1963, their actual work started on 27 January 1964 and would be closed on 1 February 1964. Preparing this work, Charue had held conversations with Paul Philippe, secretary of the Congregation for the Religious on 23 January, during which he had invoked

⁶² Declerck, Soetens, *Carnets Conciliaires de l'Évêque de Namur A.-M. Charue*, 128.

⁶³ AS, Vol. II, pars 1, 270: "Missionis autem et gratiae episcopalis articipes sunt inferioris quoque ordinis ministri, immo latiore sensu etiam a Deo electi laici, qui, ut plene se dedant apostolatus operibus, ab Episcopo vocantur".

⁶⁴ Charue's appointment would partially be based on his work Charue, *Le Clergé Diocésain*.

the example of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* to make the argument that there had always been individuals who had committed themselves to the Church's apostolate, and that it was time to take a step further to recognize them.⁶⁵ It is in this same context that a tension arose over the use of examples from apostolic times in order to argue in favor of religious life as a separate statute. While Daniélou would use women saints and the apostles as examples hereof, Charue and Thils would instead emphasize how this related to an individual exercise of holiness. Moreover, as Charue argues:

ce sont des cas de personnes consacrées au service de l'Église et dont on attend une vie sainte, comme nous le disons pour nos prêtres et nos auxiliaires de l'Apostolat.⁶⁶

That the example of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* played a role in the redaction may be equally clear from the subsequent discussion on the chapter in the Doctrinal Committee on 13 March 1964, for which Charue noted down:

Le texte sur les 'Auxiliaires' est attaqué par Mgr Doumith, qui ne comprend pas. Mgr Philips répond diplomatiquement qu'il a employé des expressions générales pour recouvrir les divers cas possibles. Cela passe.⁶⁷

As such, a big hurdle was cleared for the passage's integration in the schema on the Church. The larger discussion, on the separation of the chapter into two separate chapters, was once again deferred to the Council Fathers who voted in favor of such a divide on 30 September with an approval of 1,505 *placet*, 698 *non-placet*, and 7 invalid votes. The passage dealing with these specific lay faithful from the former paragraph 30, now paragraph 41, had not undergone much modification.⁶⁸ Chapter V itself got a 1,856 *placet*, 17 *non placet*, and 302 *iuxta modum* vote. The Doctrinal Commission's task involved further revision of the chapter along the modi, more specifically of the work by Charue, Šeper, Philips, and Tromp; their work being accepted on 17 November and becoming part of *Lumen Gentium* as promulgated on 21 November 1964.

⁶⁵ Declerck, Soetens, *Carnets Conciliaires de l'Évêque de Namur A.-M. Charue*, 141.

⁶⁶ Declerck, Soetens, *Carnets Conciliaires de l'Évêque de Namur A.-M. Charue*, 142.

⁶⁷ Declerck, Soetens, *Carnets Conciliaires de l'Évêque de Namur A.-M. Charue*, 173. Three days later, Charue would bring up the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* during his audience with Pope Paul VI: "Je lui parle des Auxiliaires, qu'on aurait dit rattachées aux Religieux. Il ne sait pas".

⁶⁸ AS, Vol. III, pars 1, 296.

Even though chapter five generally had a wide reception, especially in the emerging new ecclesial movements, the specific meaning of the phrase that incorporated the apostolate such as that of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* often remained neglected. In his commentary on *Lumen Gentium*, Gerard Philips, who was well-aware of this apostolate and the redaction of this constitution, noted that this chapter on the universal call to holiness was needed to point out that all faithful have access to the fulness of spiritual life, either through the particular practice of the evangelical counsels or not.⁶⁹ He pointed out that the constitution added that this is “undertaken by many Christians, either privately or in a Church-approved condition or state of life (LG39)”.⁷⁰

Referring to the phrase included in paragraph 41, concerning the lay faithful who are fully committed to apostolic life, he specified that (I) they are chosen by God (and that this is thus truly an authentic vocation in the Church); (II) they are called by the bishop and are thus taking part in his mission; (III) that it concerns a total personal commitment; (IV) and that they are much like any lay faithful work in the world, but with an explicit apostolic engagement.⁷¹ Recognizing this vocation’s uniqueness, and describing it in such terms that it is fitting for the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*, Philips clarifies that at the time of the Council that this way of life was not yet widely known about, remained in its origins even ‘somewhat out of the public eye’, and was thus viewed with suspicion by some bishops. With its elaboration in *Lumen Gentium*, however, justice was done to at least acknowledge this calling to perfection.

5 Conclusions

The implicit recognition of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* in *Lumen Gentium* may not be so visible to the outside observer, but it meant a breakthrough in the experienced tensions around one’s own and common identity for these and other lay believers. The reference to this experience of identity in the conciliar constitution enabled the transition of this women’s vocation from a non-institutionalized belonging to an integration to the core of conciliar doctrine and ecclesiology. The Council seems to be a pivotal point playing out on three levels when it comes to the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*.

⁶⁹ Philips, *Dogmatiese Constitutie over de Kerk Lumen Gentium*, 2: 69.

⁷⁰ Philips, *Dogmatiese Constitutie over de Kerk Lumen Gentium*, 2: 99-102. It should be noted that while Philips pays attention to the state of life of this particular group of lay people, Labourdette simply omits this phrase in his commentary on the chapter. Labourdette, “La Sainteté”, 1112-15.

⁷¹ Philips, *Dogmatiese Constitutie over de Kerk Lumen Gentium*, 2: 99-102.

The first level concerns their position within the Catholic Church. It may be clear how the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* originated in the archdiocese of Mechelen and, thanks in part to Archbishop Mercier, found a clear embedding there. Thanks to the work of some of these women – Maria Baers, Victoire Cappe, and Tilla Vulhopp have been mentioned in specific in this contribution – this form of apostolate also spread to other dioceses, where it responded to a need among lay faithful to strive towards religious perfection, while still being allowed to live their day-to-day life in the everyday world. However, the upward trajectory of these women in the local church contrasts with their recognition in the universal Church. The difficult path for recognition by the Sacred Congregation of the Council ultimately resulted in a standstill where one's own identity could only be maintained within the framework of the local diocese and by the grace of each individual bishop's understanding of this apostolate, proper or otherwise.

This brings us to the second level, that of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat's* agency. At the forefront of this is how these women, starting from the first group, shaped this new form of apostolate themselves. In terms of self-definition, they acted on the one hand to make clear *ex negativo* what they were not. As the reference to Vulhopp's intervention towards Philips during the conciliar preparation made clear, they were very straightforward in this regard; equally, and on the other hand, they gave shape to positive self-definition by, among other things, co-writing their own statutes. However, to live that definition to its fullest – especially compared to the situation of the *Amis de Jésus* – was less evident and required more negotiation. In line with other studies on women in Catholicism, the aspect of gender might be an explicatory factor here. Their agency in the experience of the apostolate is a particular issue. As the statutes indicate, they participate in the local bishop's mission and are sent by him to live out the apostolate in their own milieu. At the same time, it is clear how many of these women fulfilled this mission in the (professional) context for which they were trained, were already professionally active prior to becoming an *auxiliaire*, and in which they could make full use of their capacities. The mission allowed them to take agency in society while understanding this as part of a broader path to religious perfection.

Finally, the Second Vatican Council's developments, allowed for the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* and others to overcome one of the core dichotomies that was being experienced: that between lay apostolate and religious life. While they risked losing *auxiliaires* who were convinced that, as lay people, they could not follow the evangelical counsels and should therefore go for the religious life, especially in the early years, paragraph 41 in *Lumen Gentium's* fifth chapter removed all doubt surrounding this matter. This development had not been evident, even during the council. Ultimately, the elaboration of

this chapter and paragraph was the result of the tension that there would be in the schema on the Church between the chapter on the laity and a chapter on the state of perfection, understood by some as exclusively religious life. The example of the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat*, among others, put forward by Belgian Bishop Charue and theologians like Philips and Thils, pushed to frame this last chapter more broadly as a general call to holiness, eventually being attributed its own, separate chapter. This is an aspiration the *auxiliaires de l'Apostolat* that had been gradually taking shape for years. The Council, thus, offered both a consolidation of their long trajectory, as well as offered them a new beginning:

Given that this time, in the history of the Church, is marked by a revalorization of the lay person in the Church, it seems more essential than ever for the *auxiliaire* to be delivered unreservedly to God's love, in total availability for the salvation of people, that lay world and in the conditions of life of a lay person. She seeks to be ever more faithful to that life of prayer to which she is called, and without which there can be no talk of an apostolic life in the true sense.⁷²

72 *Verslag 1965-1966*, 10 September 1966. "Vermits deze tijd, in de geschiedenis van de Kerk, gekenmerkt is door een revalorisatie van de leek in de Kerk, lijkt het de medewerkster essentiëler dan ooit, midden in die lekenwereld en in de levensvoorwaarden van een leek, zonder voorbehoud aan Gods liefde geleverd te zijn, in totale beschikbaarheid voor het heil van de mensen. Zij tracht steeds getrouwer te zijn aan dat leven van gebed waartoe ze geroepen is, en zonder hetwelk er geen spraak kan zijn van een apostolisch leven in de ware zin".

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Diocesan Archives (Namur), Collection Q33 Louise Colen

Picture of Mgr. Mercier, Pierre Harmignie and ca. 30 women with note on the back (1921).

KU Leuven Centre for the Study of the Second Vatican Council (Leuven), Conciliar Archives of Gerard Philips

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Box 6.3 Auxiliaires de l'Apostolat/Medewerksters van het Apostolaat.

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