

MONS. WILLY ONCLIN
DOCTOR HONORIS CAUSA
DE LA UNIVERSIDAD DE NAVARRA (1905-1989)

L. DE FLEURQUIN

On a quiet Saturday morning, the 15th of July 1989, Monsignor Willy Onclin died after two weeks of confinement in bed at his home Heverlee-Leuven. Born in Hamont (Limburg) on the 22nd of February 1905, he was sent to the College of Our Lady at Tongeren before he started his philosophical and theological studies in 1923 at the Major Seminaries of his diocese in St. Truiden and Liège. On the 7th of April 1929 he was ordained by the Most Reverend L. Kerkhofs, Bishop of Liège. It is not surprising that the very talented and promising young priest from the Belgian Dutch-speaking province of Limburg, which would become the new diocese of Hasselt in 1967, was asked to consider a further juridical training at the Catholic University of Leuven, which he enthusiastically accepted. He became a Doctor in Canon Law in 1932 and he finished his training in civil law with a Doctor's degree in 1934.

After a brief period as professor in the Seminary of his diocese Liège (1932-1934), the Reverend W. Onclin started in 1937 to teach at Leuven in the Department for Political and Social Sciences. Shortly afterwards, in 1938, he obtained the degree of Magister in Canon Law. His brilliant dissertation *De territoriali vel personali legis indole* was awarded an interuniversity-prize one year later. Finally, a supplementary study of Canon Law at the Rota Romana in Italy and of Civil Law at the Akademie für Deutsches Recht in Germany constituted an ideal preparation to take over the courses and academic charges of his older colleague and world-wide celebrity Professor Alphonse Van Hove.

Between 1938 and the year of his retirement 1975, he acquainted several hundred canon lawyers in the History of Canon Law, the study of the Sources of Canon Law, Marriage Law, Church and State, and Theology of Canon Law. Teaching in Latin, Dutch, French and English, he did not hesitate to open discussions with his students, who came from a variety of different cultures and very specific ecclesiastical situations all over the world. Still today many of his alumni hold principal responsibilities both in the Universal Church and in particular Churches of the five continents. They certainly will never forget his deep familiarity with the history of Canon Law, the convincing clarity of his expositions and his sincere concern in the serving function of law in the community of faithful.

In addition to his many courses in the Faculty of Canon Law, Professor W. Onclin taught in Dutch and in French for more than thirty years in the Faculty of Canon Law: Introduction into the History of Civil Law, Introduction into the Sources of Law, Constitutional Law and Administrative Law. Thousands of lawyers from Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia owe to him their basic insights in legislation, techniques of interpretation, judicial law-making and the answering of juridical problems in general. Teaching was his passion and therefore throughout his entire life he strongly, but thankfully, declined every promotion or other ecclesiastical office, which could have endangered his teaching and his close relationship with the Catholic University of Leuven.

But the real significance of Msgr. W. Onclin reaches beyond all this. Shortly after the announcement of the Second Vatican Council in January 1959, this outstanding canon lawyer from Leuven was called to Rome to participate in the preparatory work for the Council itself. His excellent knowledge of Latin, daily used at that time not only in official and written documents but in all oral discussions of the preparatory Commissions, gave him the possibility to play a prominent part in many assemblies.

During the four sessions of the Second Vatican Council itself, which took place between the 11th of October 1962 and the 8th of December 1965, the name and reputation of Msgr. Onclin became more and more known for his highly insightful opinions and advices, drafts and schemes. They were of great value to the Bishops of Belgium and to many Bishops of other countries in order to arrive at the best possible documents. Especially in the commission with competence for the office

of Bishops and the government of dioceses, Msgr. Onclin left ineffaceable traces. His name remains associated for ever with the Decree *Christus Dominus*.

However, the real significance of Msgr. Onclin is linked with the long and fascinating process of redaction of the new Code of Canon Law after the Council. The abundant harvest of theological ideas and new visions had to be given strength and continuity by equilibrated juridical norms and structures in the Church. On the 17th of November, when the work really started and a few days before a solemn meeting of Pope Paul VI with the Cardinal-members and consultors of the Pontifical Commission responsible for the revision of the law and the redaction of the new Code, Msgr. W. Onclin was appointed assistant-secretary.

Since that day, this sixty year old canon lawyer from Leuven invested all of his energy and stamina in the long and extremely hard labour of Code-redaction. For more than seventeen years, the intensity of life and work seemed unbelievable for all who did not know Msgr. Onclin day after day: the countless flights to Rome for hundreds of meetings in commissions and working-groups, the attentive study of more than one thousand seven hundred canons in their successive versions, the personal redaction of several parts of the Code and in particular of the project for a Fundamental Law of the Church, the reading and summarizing of innumerable - sometimes opposite - suggestions and critical remarks from consulted Bishops and Conferences of Bishops all over the world, the preparation of interim-reports for the subsequent sessions of the Synod of Bishops, and undoubtedly many other expressions of disinterested dedication to help the redaction process onwards.

Realizing this life-work, Msgr. Onclin's name and reputation became well known all over the world. It is not surprising at all that Pope John-Paul II expressed his sincere appreciation and gratitude for the excellent work of Msgr. Onclin in the Apostolic Constitution *Sacrae Disciplinae Leges*, with which the new Code of Canon Law became promulgated in January 1983: «Sed placet etiam commemorare ... dilectum filium Vilelmum Onclin, sacerdotem, qui assidua diligentique cura ad felicem operis exitum valde contulit, ...».

Being very concerned with the life and dynamism of law in the Church, Msgr. Onclin helped to establish and sustain the *Consociatio*

Internationalis Studio Iuris Canonici Promovendo, an international association of canon lawyers to encourage the study and cultivation of the science of canon law.

At Leuven, he was a member of the redaction for the review dealing with theology and canon law, the *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*. He was a prolific writer; he published many articles from 1932 until 1984, his very first and his last contained within the afore-mentioned review.

In 1967, he became a Doctor Honoris Causa of the Universidad de Navarra in Pamplona, Spain. Furthermore, in 1975, Pope Paul VI bestowed upon him one of the highest titles possible for a priest, the distinction of Protonotarius Apotolicus.

Msgr. Onclin was a very talented and highly cultivated jurist, who was simultaneously a good and loyal servant of the Church. The Catholic University of Leuven has truly lost an excellent professor, renowned throughout the world. Monsignor Willy Onclin's very fruitful and highly productive life stands undoubtedly as a constant invitation for his friends and colleagues within the Church to continue the dynamic development of Canon Law.