

Prologue



I was born on a small farm in Flanders four years before the outbreak of the Second World War. There was nothing special about my background to suggest that I would ever play a role of any significance. But historians have shown that seminal movements often have their origins among the peasantry. Indeed, it is said that my country has long been ruled by people from the countryside. If that is true, then I am one of them. I grew up in a poor, rather old-fashioned world. The history of my family is the story of those ‘little people’ so typical of Flanders. My forebears worked as farm labourers or in cottage industries on piece wages, living a life of poverty. An exception to this was my oldest known ancestor, Jacob Martens, who was a bailiff in his commune from 1602 to 1618. But most of my ancestors belonged to the working class, had many children and lived in anonymity.

The fact that I became a politician nonetheless and devoted my life to public service can be attributed to the philosophers and politicians who, after the war, laid the foundations for the European society of my youth. My own political awakening was the result of their influence. Philosophers like Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier and Paul Ricœur gave the West a new intellectual climate. They established the foundations of Europe as we now know it. This new intellectual climate brought forth politicians of exceptional stature, individuals marked by a war that had transformed Western Europe into a heap of rubble. They included Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman, Alcide de Gasperi and Jean Monnet. These philosophers and politicians remained a constant source of inspiration for me during my entire time in politics.

The philosophy of Jacques Maritain, for instance, centres on the human person. Humans should, first and foremost, become more human(e). The process of humanisation unfolds, for Maritain, according to the Christian vision, as opposed to the atheistic humanism of socialism/communism and fascism. It is only through a synthesis of two distinct yet never entirely separable orders that one can achieve an ‘integral’ humanism. Emmanuel Mounier believed there would be a renaissance, a rebirth of person and community. He strove not for the emer-

gence of a new type of person (unlike in fascist and communist ideologies), but for a restoration of the absolute value of the human person. Like Maritain's, his thinking is Christian, but he leaves room for believers of other faiths as well as for unbelievers. Mounier was an inspiration for and friend of Paul Ricœur (1913–2005), who in turn strongly influenced my political engagement. This primarily French strand of personalism had its German counterpart in the work of Max Scheler and Romano Guardini.

Christian Democratic parties, which after the Second World War replaced the confessional Catholic and Protestant parties that were strongly influenced by the churches, took their inspiration from this philosophy of personalism. Various elements of Maritain's and Mounier's philosophy constitute an integral part of Christian Democracy: the integration of the spiritual or transcendental into its vision of humanity; the role of religion, and of Christianity in particular, as the final end or goal of existence; the primacy of community over the subsidiary, decentralised state; societal pluralism; the personal and social significance of labour and private property; and so on. Moreover, Christian Democracy shares the criticisms of Western rationalistic culture, materialism and unbridled capitalism expressed by the personalist thinkers.

Luctor et emergo

My aim in this book is to record how I put this inspiration into political practice: from my early days as a student leader to my time as a Flemish radical, then as President of the Christian Democratic youth movement, party President of the Flemish Christian Democrats, Prime Minister of Belgium, President of the European People's Party and chair of its group in the European Parliament.

After twenty five years of growing prosperity and political equilibrium, even Belgium, my own country, has been going through a serious crisis now for eighteen months. In this book I want to show how complex, but also how inspiring it is to lead a country that intersects Latin and Germanic cultures. Our two Christian Democratic parties have also always been at the forefront in Belgium in finding solutions that were acceptable to both French and Flemish speakers. Unfortunately, during a hard and painful period in opposition (1999–2007) the two parties have grown apart. Among many people this has provoked a nationalistic response. The futility of this has been demonstrated in recent months for the whole world to see. It has had a profound effect on me. But I am striving to the best of my ability to bring about a new rapprochement between the Christian Democrats of the north and the south. If this were to succeed, the Belgian impasse would immediately be resolved.

I hesitated to write these memoirs. It has been an exciting but all-absorbing pursuit. Every life story is a series of successes and failures. We like to remember the successes. We tend to shut out failures. Yet the two are closely intertwined. A failure sharpens the desire for battle and many a victory has been born of setbacks. *Luctor et emergo*; I struggle and I overcome. Incidentally, this is the motto of the province of Zeeuws Vlaanderen (Zealandic Flanders), not far from my native village Sleidinge. I struggle and if necessary I go against the flow. But if political life is completely governed by pragmatic concerns and *managed*, if indifference and cynicism gain the upper hand and human solidarity disappears, then personal courage is needed in order to continue to stand firm. It takes a great deal of patience and trust to endure everything, to believe in everything, to hope for everything and to persevere in everything.

I have read too many memoirs not to realise that it is a dangerous genre. The writer can choose to dredge up memories and anecdotes, as gifted speakers sometimes do in after-dinner speeches, with the principal intention of charming the audience. Some memoirs are a kind of self-glorification; others an attempt to have the last word. While some seem to have the novel as their source of inspiration, others attach everlasting value to diary notes. My own goal in this book is to give politically aware citizens in Europe – the ‘value-added seekers’ – a personal testimony and to share my experiences of more than half a century of political life at both the national and European levels.

Is this ambition aiming too high? After all, the brain works very selectively and usually becomes more feeble as the years go by. Even though I have forgotten some things, my memory of the past is crystal clear when I am confronted with parliamentary archives or tape recordings of speeches and interviews. I then relive these events, as it were: I remember the feelings I had as I stood there on the podium and all kinds of details come into my mind, and I am taken back to the events of that period. For this intensive work I have had the assistance of a long-time observer as well as young academics who have done their theses on areas of my political activity.

This teamwork of youthful knowledge and elderly experience has many times led to heated discussions, with the principal concern being to keep as close as possible to the historical truth, insofar as it actually exists. The writing of my memoirs has in this respect been an exciting journey through my own life. By reviewing documents, pictures and sound bites, I was continually confronted with my pronouncements and opinions from years ago. Even though they may have evolved since, I have nevertheless taken care to reproduce my words and deeds from those days as accurately and as truthfully as possible.

My entire life, my entire political career, has consisted in bringing people together or reconciling them in the spirit of Christian Democracy. I leave it to the reader to decide from my life story whether I have succeeded in this. As far as I

am concerned, I can testify that I always acted according to my conscience, persistently and with a deep faith.

I dedicate these memoirs to my children Chris, Anne, Sarah, Sophie and Simon, and to my grandsons, Alexander and Lucas, as well as to all those who strive to know what political commitment can mean in the life of a man.

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