

A Champion of Ethics in the World of Professional Sport: Antoon Van Clé O.Praem. (1891-1955)

Introduction

On May 1, 2011, the 75th anniversary of Sporta vzw (non profit organization) was celebrated. Sporta vzw puts itself, since its creation in 1947, at the service of the Belgian sports community by promoting healthy sports and to contend with abuses and excesses within sport itself. Sporta vzw organises mobile campaigns, conferences, and lectures, and oversees several publications, including *Sporta* magazine. The Norbertine, Antoon Van Clé (1891-1955) was the founder. He was one of the first people in Belgium to concern himself systematically with the spiritual needs of the professional cyclists. Quickly, he surrounded himself with collaborators to take the wellbeing of professional sportsmen of all disciplines to heart. In 1943, a sort of Sporta council (Sportabestuur) was convened for a meeting; from 1947 onwards, this association was called "Sporta" (an abbreviation of Sports Apostolate). Father Van Clé began to more actively help sportsmen, to defend their rights, and to assist them socially and morally. In 1949, local sections and regional activities were initiated. Van Clé introduced a monthly magazine, drawing attention to the excesses and abuses within the world of sport, such as the commercialization of the Tour de France. After Van Clé's death in 1955, Sporta was expanded with Sporta Pilgrimages and Sporta Youthcamps, while study and information services, a social service and a fair play club were founded. Through these sport camps and youth holidays, Sporta nowadays reaches 15,000 youngsters annually. Until this very day, Sporta continues to safeguard the values of the world of sport: promoting fair play, engaging in the fight against drugs, and liberating sports from exaggerated commercialization.

In this contribution, we will draw attention to the figure of this almost forgotten Norbertine, including his original apostolate among the professional cyclists, and we will contextualize this apostolate within the broader attitude of the official Roman Catholic Church toward professional sport.

Who was Van Clé?¹

Cornelius Josephus Van Clé originated from a well-to-do family and was born on July 15, 1891 in Meerhout-Zittaart in the Antwerp Campines, the son of local headmaster Jozef Van Clé (1862-1934) and Elizabeth Vennekens (1861-1945). He was the eldest child of six and received a strict education, with an emphasis placed on respect, humility, exemplarity, and attentiveness.

In 1910, he completed grammar school with magnificent results at the Saint-Aloysius College of Geel. He was also a member of Algemeen Katholiek Vlaams Studentenverbond (AKVS) [General Catholic Flemish Student Union], where he attracted attention with his responsible character. The slogan "Everything for Flanders, Flanders for Christ" ("Alles voor Vlaanderen, Vlaanderen voor Christus") of the AKVS clearly pointed out that this Student Union contextualized the emancipation of Flanders into a Christian perspective.

Within the family of Van Clé, there were a lot of vocations to the priesthood and the monastic life. On September 15, 1910, Cornelius Josephus entered the Abbey of the Norbertines at Tongerlo, where he took simple vows and received his religious name, Antoon, in honour of Saint Anthony of Padua.

The First World War became a decisive moment in his formation: during the first months, he served as a stretcher-bearer at the Battle of the Yser, and afterwards he served in a hospital to take care of soldiers with typhoid fever. Van Clé was declared unfit for further military service due to noise-induced deafness, an injury he got during the bombardment of Nieuwpoort in 1915. The same disease smashed to pieces his dream of becoming a Missionary of Scheut (Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, CICM). Later on, he could be recognized by the characteristic horn protruding from his ear. Nonetheless, Father Antoon revealed himself as an intermediary for the correspondence of soldiers with their families via a smuggling route during the war. Van Clé was a collaborator and the initiator of pro-Flemish magazines such as *Ons Vaderland*, *Belgische Standaard* and *De Vlaamse Stem*, and he

¹ A. CAUWELS, *Een man van gisteren voor morgen*, Leuven, 1982; D. CLAES, *Antoon van Clé, stichter en bezieler van Sporta*, Tongerlo, 2005; W. DEKKERS, *Pater Antoon van Clé*, Tongerlo, 1998; W.C.A. DEKKERS, 'Clé, Cornelius Josephus Alphonsus', in: *Nationaal Biografisch Woordenboek*, Brussel, vol. 7 (1977), col. 148-155; W. VAN DONINCK, *Pater Antoon van Clé, zijn leven en zijn werk*, Gent, 1973.



A. Van Clé at the Sporta Pilgrimage in Diest
(Tongerlo, Archives of the Abbey).

wrote for *De Meerhoutenaar aan den IJzer*, a local war magazine. Van Clé posthumously received a certificate of appreciation for his generous deeds during the First World War.

In 1918, he took his solemn vows as a Canon Regular of Prémontré in Great Britain and returned to the Abbey of Tongerlo. Two years later, after completing his studies in theology, he was ordained a priest in Namur. Over the course of the following decade, he devoted himself, among other things, to the cause of students by organizing Eucharistic days. These were stopped by order of the authorities due to their highly distinct Flemish political message. Besides this, he did apostolate work among the working youth (KAJ: Katholieke Arbeiders Jeugd), 'displaced youngsters' and the Caritas movement, and, above all, within the temperance movement. Between 1928 and 1933, he organized the Ruysbroeck movement, which brought into focus the spiritual and cultural formation of university students and seminarians. Van Clé also published in several journals.

In 1936, his apostolate changed course when he decided to talk to a cycling coach during his regular cycling trips. Later on, he also addressed the milieu of boxing, athletics, weightlifting and wrestling. The Archbishop of Malines, Cardinal Jozef Van Roey, supported Van Clé's sport apostolate, and on December 13, 1943, the initiative led to the foundation of the 'National Committee for the Moral Encouragement of All Sportsmen' (Nationaal Comité voor de Zedelijke Opbeuring van Alle Sportmannen), called "Sporta" from 1944 onwards. This expression was suggested by Romain Maes (1912-1983)², who had already qualified the cyclists as Van Clé's 'sport apostles' in 1936. Besides Van Clé as the 'chief apostle', the central administration consisted of a general chairman, a treasurer and a secretary; every Flemish province had its own chairman. Two years later, after the magazine *Sporta-zon* had appeared in the light of the formation of its leaders, Sporta was officially erected as a non-profit organisation. Sporta's constitution was signed on October 5, 1946 and its statutes were published on February 15, 1947 in the Belgian Official Gazette (*Staatsblad*). The national committee was then abolished. To avoid being considered a Catholic association with a political-ideological agenda, the founder stated expressly that he wanted to be independent of the organized Catholic Action movement. In July 1947, the first issue of the monthly magazine, *Sportakerel*, appeared, in which Van Clé wrote, between 1952 and 1955, an unfinished series of articles on the origins, goal, meaning and method of his sport apostolate. On May 19, 1955, Van Clé suddenly died at the age of 64 in the railway station of Brussels North.

The Apostolate among the cyclists³

Sports journalist Pol Jacquemyns (1896-1977) wrote in his memoirs that Van Clé aimed to establish "a kind of spiritual confraternity of

² The Cyclist Romain Maes won the Tour de France in 1935 and became a national hero. In the 1936 edition, he was not well prepared and soon had to leave the 'Tour'. The media as well as the official Belgian Cycling Union considered him as a traitor. During that difficult period, Van Clé met Romain Maes. On Maes, see D. VANYSAKER, art. 'Maes, Romanus Julianus (Romain)', in: *Nationaal Biografisch Woordenboek*, Brussels, vol. 18 (2007), col. 645-648.

³ TONGERLO, Archives of the Abbey, Section A, 19.056 (Van Clé, A.), especially 15 a (Box 103); Diaries of Van Clé and 15b (Box 107): *Sport en spel in de opvoeding* and *Het Sportprobleem*; A. PITTOORS, 'Voor de renners, door de renners en onder de renners'. *Het wielerafpostolaat van Antoon van Clé (1936-1955) en zijn morele visie op sport*,

sportsmen, morally and socially left to their fate". The Norbertine started during the thirties of the twentieth century to be interested more and more in competitive cycling, and especially in the person of the cyclists. He was aware of the perception among the public that the cyclists were nothing but stupid and empty-minded musclemen. It was as if athletes such as Romain Maes – who had been unanimously abused after he threw in the towel at the Tour de France in 1936 – could not have any problems, no emotions, and should only focus on pushing his pedals. This undeserved and prejudiced perception extremely surprised Van Clé. It incited him to his specific apostolate among the cyclists, characterized by three objectives, as we have learned from his diaries from the summer of 1936 until December 1943.

First of all, he wanted to reunite the cyclists so that they could talk with each other and with him about profound subjects. At the same time, Van Clé could satisfy their religious needs and their 'hunger of the soul'. The susceptibility of the cyclists to the Word of God became clear on several pilgrimages. These fraternal gatherings, or recollections, increased throughout the years in size and frequency. The most important 'organising cities' were, besides the Abbey of Tongerlo itself, Dendermonde, Steenbrugge, Kortrijk, Hasselt, and Heverlee or Korbeek-Lo. Later on, pilgrimages took place in Wallonia and the Netherlands. With the help of an extensive mailing list, Van Clé invited more and more cyclists, who defied severe weather to be present. The program of such a day was a mixture of relaxation (a game of football and dinning together) and reflection (group or private conversations). Nothing was taboo or compulsory. Van Clé was very cautious, with respect for each individual's character and openness concerning their private matters. In that way, he enjoyed the confidence of many of the cyclists – Sylveer Maes (1909-1966), Romain Maes, Edward Vissers (1912-1994), Émile Masson (1915-2011), Albéric Schotte (1919-2004), Stan Ockers (1920-1956), Raymond Impanis (1925-2010) and Rik Van Steenberghe (1924-2003), to mention a few.

gekaderd in de bredere kerkelijke standpunten (Masterthesis KU Leuven), Leuven, 2010; D. VANYSACKER, *Vlaamse wielerkoppen: 150 jaar drama en heroïek*, Leuven, Davidsfonds, 2011, pp. 150-156; H. VERBRUGGEN en M. DEN HOLLANDER, "Apostolaat binnen de sport: Ontstaan en werking van Sporta", in: M. D'HOKER, R. RENSON and J. TOLLENEER (red.), *Voor lichaam en geest: katholieken, lichamelijke opvoeding en sport in de 19^e en 20^e eeuw*, Leuven, KADOC, 1994, pp. 178-199.

Secondly, Van Clé wanted to polish up their image and straighten out public opinion. An extensive advertising campaign of his actions, conferences and sport evenings in the press would come in useful. But the relationship between the Norbertine and the youngsters in the press was not that good. His connection with Karel Steyaert (1882-1961), also known as Karel Van Wijnendaele, who was at that time also the coach of the Belgian cyclists in the Tour de France, was problematic at best⁴. In spite of his personal insistence to cooperate and the ever-increasing activities of Van Clé, there was not one word – over a three year period – of it published in *Sportwereld*, the newspaper of Steyaert. It was only as a result of the second pilgrimage to Beauraing in 1939 that Steyaert changed his attitude. Nevertheless, the relationship between these two strong personalities continued to be tense. A Walloon journalist, Paul Beving, argued in favour of Van Clé's sport apostolate from the beginning. In his *Les Sports*, he even suggested to organise Walloon fraternal gatherings, although he often got personally enraged by the farcical behaviour of the cyclists and their love of money.

Thirdly, Van Clé made an effort to decrease the difficulties and abuses with which sport, and especially cycling, had to cope. His vision on this subject was clearly expressed in his tract, *Het Sportprobleem* ('The Sport Problem'), published in 1949. Van Clé based his study on a dissertation in theology by a Hungarian Franciscan, László Mihály Fodor (1917-1960), dating from 1947 and considered the most systematic and detailed Catholic work on sport in those days⁵. Van Clé warned about the diverse demons of the sport of cycling. First of all, he meant the dangers of exaggeration, excessive training, megalomania, the absence of spiritual education and study, indecency, discrimination, hurting comments by speakers during a race, the press looking for sensation, hostile fans and "dangerous houses and women". Secondly, he criticised external elements such as commerce, publicity by which sport was only considered as a show, boasting at interviews and sport evenings, exaggerated tributes, sensational articles, the creation of stars, the chasing of records, a

⁴ On Steyaert, journalist, as well as ideator and organizer of the famous Flemish Classic 'Ronde van Vlaanderen' since 1913, see D. VANYSACKER, art. 'Wijnendaele, Karel van, pseudonym voor Steyaert, Carolus Ludovicus, wielrenner, pionier van de Vlaamse sportjournalistiek', in: *Nationaal Biografisch Woordenboek*, Brussels, vol. 19 (2009), col. 1067-1077.

⁵ *Christiana cultura corporis cum speciali respectu ad modernum sport: natura et moralitas* (Pontificium Athenaeum Antonianum. Facultas theologica. Theses ad lauream, vol. 32), Cluj, 1947, 142 pp.

misplaced stress upon the financial aspect of sport (among others, book-makers), mixed sports (such sports have much ground in common with love), and sport for women (as a kind of exhibition of the flesh!). To conclude, Van Clé denounced false prophets such as materialism, sensuality and disillusionment. His vision can be explained with his own words: "We applaud whole-heartedly a moderate playing of sport, and we are convinced that sport, under capable guidance and conceived in its correct meaning, can and should be a valuable part of physical education". Between the disillusionment, Van Clé also mentioned, from 1954 onwards, pills, "little bombs" and drugs.

Van Clé's pastoral practices should be contextualized within the overture from the Catholic Church towards competitive sport and physical exercises, which originated during the pontificate of Pius X (1903-1914). Under Pius XI (1922-1939) and Pius XII (1939-1958), the Church gave sport its place within the education of the youth. Catholic Action, instigated first and foremost by the Church, was embodied by the initiatives of Van Clé during the 1930s and 1940s. His apostolate was a tool to give young sportsmen, especially those originating from lower social classes, a Catholic education. The aim was the formation of independent, responsible, and men with high moral principles, whose behaviour and way of life would in turn be adopted by the crowd. It was the task of the Church to purge the world of sports by means of the Catholic Action movement.

Concerning sport, the Church based itself particularly on Paul, who wrote in his First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 6: 9-12): "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies."⁶ There was no difference at the time of Van Clé. As we read in the passage of Cardinal Van Roey's Lenten Letter of 1942, which was quoted by Van Clé in his tract, *Sport en spel in de opvoeding*: "Far from being hostile towards physical education, physical exercises and sport competitions, the Church applauds everything that leads to the conservation and the development of the physical health, the muscular strength, liveness of the limbs, especially of the youth, provided that the order of ranking of

⁶ L. KENIS, "'Wat jij ook doet, doet alles ter ere Gods'. Kerkelijke en theologische opvattingen over sport", in: M. D'HOKER, R. RENSON and J. TOLLENEER (red.), *Voor lichaam en geest* (see note 3), pp. 12-41.

values is taken care of and that at the same time and increasingly the noble capacities of the Soul are exercised"⁷.

The official Church doctrine concerning sport⁸

The Church' interest in sports and her ideas about sport have varied throughout history, keeping pace with changes in culture and society. As we are especially interested in the modern sports, which emerged at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, potential sources have to be searched within this period.

In fact, the pontiffs throughout the 20th century have shown a special interest in sports, even if some of their discourses were only for a specific occasion. Throughout the years, a sort of Church "doctrine" regarding sports that is capable of interpreting sporting phenomena has emerged, little by little, in the light of the faith and in connection to the general ethical principles of the natural and supernatural orders. Yet, this set of teachings has never been developed to the point of reaching a mature and organic synthesis in an official Church document.

These discourses manifest an enlightened perception of the evident value that sports play within a modern culture that has been shaped by rapid change in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, the subsequent changes in the customs and lifestyles of the masses, as well as the frantic quest by man to affirm his own subjectivity and individual freedom.

Regarding the sporting phenomena, the popes have outlined a unique synthesis, founded upon and guided by principles of the moral order, pertaining to the physical well-being and the supernatural purpose of the

⁷ "Verre van vijandig te staan tegenover lichamelijke opvoeding, lichaams oefeningen en sportwedstrijden, juicht de Kerk alles toe wat van aard is om de lichamelijke gezondheid, de spierkracht, de lenigheid der ledematen, vooral bij de jeugd, te onderhouden en te ontwikkelen, op voorwaarde dat de rangorde der waarden in acht genomen wordt en terzelfdertijd en in ruimere mate de edele vermogens van de ziel geoefend", TONGERLO, Archives of the Abbey, Section A, 19.056 (Van Clé, A.), 15b (Box 107).

⁸ This part is based, among others, on G. PINTO, *Lo sport negli insegnamenti pontifici da Pio X a Paolo VI*, Rome, 1964; E. DE PANFILIS, *Tempo libero, turismo e sport: La risposta della Chiesa*, Rome, 1986; C. RINALDI, *Giovanni Paolo II e lo sport*, Rome, 1990; G.B. GANDOLFO and L. VASSALLO, *Lo sport nei documenti pontifici*, Brescia, 1994; C. MAZZA, "Sport as viewed from the Church's Magisterium", in: *The World of Sport Today: A Field of Christian Mission. International Seminar, Vatican, 11-12 November 2005*, Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006, pp. 55-73. See also A. CAUWELS, *Toespraken van de pausen over sport en toerisme*, Tongerlo, 1982.

human person. They have noted the physical, psychological and spiritual benefits that come from the practice of sport, while, at the same time, they have underlined the risks and related dangers that derive from serious distortions of fundamental ethical norms. The Interwar Period is especially important for the attitude of the Vatican toward the excesses of sports in the context of the totalitarian ideologies of Nazism and Fascism. Research within the Archives of the Vatican Segreteria di Stato (Sezione per i rapporti con gli stati), and within the Archivio Segreto Vaticano (Archives of the Nunciature of Munich, Berlin and of the Nunciature in Italy) gives us a better insight in this matter⁹.

While studying the attitude of the popes toward modern sports, the Second World War has to be seen as a milestone. Before that period, the pontiffs generally pointed to the dangers of excessive sporting activities that distort the harmonious development of body and mind, and lead to the negligence of the observation of the Lord's Day. The attitude of the popes toward the sport of cycling and the bike is also very interesting in this context. Whereas cycling was first seen as a profane and pagan activity, the bike was at first considered to be the vehicle of the Devil. A particular hot topic during the years preceding the First World War, and still later on, was the question if clergy were permitted or not to use the bike. Ethical concerns over the perception of sweating parish priests with a rolled up soutane coincided with theological discussions on modernism. The personal papers of Giuseppe Melchiorre Sarto, the future Pope Pius X, are sources of particular interest here¹⁰.

Immediately following the Second World War, the Church firmly adopted sport as a tool of apostolate. Within the context of the reconstruction of the western world, Pius XII promoted sport as a precious instrument for the "formation of the complete man and the perfect Christian who thinks and acts according to reason enlightened by the faith". The emphasis is placed on the value of the body, its role within God's plan and its auxiliary function with regard to the soul. In this light, one has to understand the recuperation by the Church and by the Italian

⁹ See D. VANYSACKER, "'For the Glory of God or for the Glory of the Nation?': The Attitude of the Holy See toward Sport during the Inter War Period (1919-1939)", to appear in the Acts of the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (Chicago, 2013).

¹⁰ D. VANYSACKER, "Véhicule moderniste ou instrument d'apostolat? Le dilemme de Giuseppe Melchiorre Sarto / Pie X envers l'utilisation de la bicyclette par le clergé (1894-1908)", in: *La papauté contemporaine (XIXe-XXe siècles)*, Louvain-La-Neuve, 2009, pp. 245-255.

Democrazia Cristiana of the Giro d'Italia after the War, and the view of the national hero, Gino Bartali (1914-2000), as the new Christian Knight. The personal and ideological ties between Pius XII, the Italian Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi (1881-1954), and the members of the Azione Cattolica – Bartali and Vincenzo Torriani (1919-1996), the organizer of the Giro –, were more than accidental¹¹. The inquiry concerning the ultimate meaning for the Church was expressly made by Pius XII. In an address to Roman athletes on May 20, 1945, Pius XII applied St. Paul's exhortation, "Whether you eat or drink, whatever it is that you do, do it all for the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31), to all physical activity; this consequently included sports. In fact, he boldly exclaimed: "How can the Church not be interested in sport?" By this rhetorical question he intended to dispel the lurking opinions that rejected the idea that the Church could have any interest whatsoever in the practice of sports.

It was an interest that, since that day, only increased – especially with Popes Paul VI and John Paul II.

Conclusion

Within the archives of the Abbey of Tongerlo, we find the diaries, correspondences, writings and notes of Antoon Van Clé (1891-1955)¹². This Norbertine began a special apostolate among the cyclists from 1936 onwards. After a few years, he also worked for boxers, weightlifters, wrestlers and other athletes. His aim was to do away with the perception that sportsmen were nothing more than stupid and empty-minded musclemen. He organized pilgrimages and retreats with them, engaged in a lot of networking and published continuously on his work. Van Clé got the support of Cardinal Jozef Van Roey, and in 1943, founded the predecessor of Sporta vzw, a trade union for sportsmen. Van Clé's pastoral

¹¹ See e.g. S. PIVATO, *Sia lodato Bartali. Ideologia, cultura e miti dello sport cattolico (1936-1948)*, Rome, 1996.

¹² TONGERLO, Archives of the Abbey, Section A, 19.056 (Van Clé, A.) contains: 1a (Box 85): personalia; 2 (Box 86): Death and Funeral; 4a and 4b (Box 86): preparatory documents W. Dekkers (*Pater Antoon van Clé*, 1998) and inventory Sporta Archives; 6 (Box 88): papers and notes by W. Dekkers; 8a and 8b (Box 88): typed copy and duplicate monograph W. Dekkers; 9 (Box 88): Published monograph by W. Dekkers (1998); 10 (Box 88): article from *Nationaal Biografisch Woordenboek* from 1977; 11 (Boxes 89-91, 95 and 96): Sporta Archives; 15a (Box 103): Diaries of Van Clé; and 15b (Box 107): *Sport en spel in de opvoeding* and *Het Sportprobleem*.

activities have to be contextualized within the overture of the Catholic Church toward sport and physical exercise that had begun under the pontificate of Pius X. Under Pius XI and especially under Pius XII, the Church gave sport its deserved place within the education of the youth. Catholic Action, given priority by the Church, was embodied by the initiatives of Van Clé. It was a way to give these young sportsmen, who often emanated from lower social ranks, a Catholic education. The goal was to train autonomous, responsible men with high moral standards, whose behaviour and way of life could be adopted by the crowd. Van Clé's apostolate was based on the opinion that it was the task of the Church to purge the world of sports by means of the Catholic Action movement.

Sint-Michielsstraat 4 – bus 3101

Dries VANYSACKER

B-3000 Leuven