

## Transformation in the Belgian Church

# Parish networks and the role of laity

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*The Catholic Church in Belgium is undergoing profound transitions that are seen in its merging parishes, renewed pastoral roles and a growing presence of the laity. The metropolitan archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels, Mgr. Luc Terlinden, speaks of a "Church in transformation", focused on drawing closer to the concrete life of the faithful and more attentive to the societal and existential peripheries which Pope Francis often spoke of.*

The parish landscape is changing considerably in Belgium, with a "profound reorganization" being determined by an ever increasing, consistent participation of laity and decreasing numbers of priests. The new landscape reflects the integration of parishes into larger entities, with parish priests increasingly called upon to collaborate with committed lay people on many tasks and responsibilities. The 2024 *Annual Report of the Catholic Church in Belgium* offers a "snapshot" and qualitative overview of Church life and these evolving changes.

### The "numbers"

There are 3,528 parishes in Belgium, with each diocese now committed to establishing "bonds of collaboration between parishes within pastoral units". By late 2024, 427 pastoral units had been created, out of a target goal of 507. Ninety parishes were also abolished in 2024 by episcopal decrees. The Report lists 1,678 diocesan priests in Belgium (of whom only 909 are in active mission and 383 are from other dioceses outside the region). There are also 1,685 religious priests, although only 315 were actively working in parishes at the time of the report.

The Belgian church instead now counts a large number of non-ordained lay people in pastoral ministry, with 956 appointed by bishops to work in parishes or pastoral units; 403 lay people have similarly been appointed to pastoral care in the charitable sector (hospitals, nursing homes, and providing assistance to those with special needs); and 391 others appointed to work in services for the dioceses. An additional 2,708 others – many volunteers -- have been entrusted with diocesan pastoral care (presiding over moments of prayer, funerals, and other pastoral roles), together with 191 pastoral animators in formation. Alongside these committed lay people there are another 108,728 parish volunteers and an additional 2,527 volunteers working in health care institutions.

## **The "mission"**

What emerges from the Belgian report is a picture of a Church that, although immersed in profound reorganization, aims to "be close to believers at crucial moments of their lives", where they are. Baptism, communion, confirmation, marriage, family life, death and mourning: "these crucial moments in people's lives," reads the Report's introduction, "also become moments of grace when they are accompanied by care, faith, kindness and pastoral solidarity within a warm religious community." For this reason, parishes, dioceses, religious communities, and new communities are implementing initiatives at all ages, from the youngest to the oldest. They vary in format: weekend getaways; support for married couples, especially those in crisis; weekend faith formation for families; the "mourning café" where family members of the deceased can share and find support; retreats focused on personal spiritual growth; and more.

In short, the Church in Belgium is abandoning "a purely territorial approach to focus on places where the life of faith is dynamic," says the Report. These past and future mergers also significantly impact the role of the pastor, who is becoming more mobile and having a changed relationship with the faithful. In a way, he is becoming more missionary.

## **Pope Francis' indication**

"The Church is going through a profound transformation ... adapting to social developments and its changing role in a secularized society", writes Msgr. Luc Terlinden, president of the Belgium Bishops' Conference. A "management reform" has been ongoing now for several years with numerous consequences, including those tied to "traditional definitions of priestly roles and the faithful".

Aware of multiple challenges ahead, Bishop Terlinden adds, "the Church is trying to adapt step by step in order to meet new expectations on the part of the faithful and find her rightful place in today's society. During his visit to Belgium, Pope Francis reminded us that *this* is the place of an 'outward-focused Church', one attentive to the social, human and existential peripheries in order to be concretely present there."