

STIJN CARPENTIER

Migrants and the Anonymity of the Metropolis

Catholic Initiatives for Turkish and Moroccan Labour Migrants in Urban Brussels, 1964–1985

Thanks to increasing public interest in the histories of north African and Turkish labour migrants in western Europe, a variety of historical novels, popular histories, TV documentaries and long-form magazine articles have shed light on the unique and perhaps surprising connections between local Catholics and Muslim migrants.¹ Some of these connections are explicitly religious in nature, for instance, churches that accommodated Muslim prayer and parish buildings that became the first mosques.² Others testify to a social and political commitment to migrants: bishops taking a stand in immigration policy debates, parish churches hosting hunger strikes for regularisation, activist priests working in factories to criticise inhumane labour conditions or laypeople founding a wide array of charitable organisations.³ In current historiography, however, such local Catholic initiatives are often downplayed as anecdotal to larger histories of solidarity movements, progressive thought and migrant activism or even dismissed as forms of paternalistic charity. In recent scholarship on migrant activism in the wake of 1968, for instance, activist priests supporting the cause are glossed over, while attention is focused on trade unions, student associations and left-wing ideological groups.⁴ Likewise, in the literature on migrant hunger strikes in churches as a contentious strategy for regularisation in the 1970s, it is rarely considered that the involvement of the parish priest or the setting of the local church could have added a dimension of meaning.⁵ Lastly, even scholarship on the Catholic Church's attitudes towards migration often marginalises the initiatives of local faith-based actors, prioritising the Vatican's broader theologi-

- 1 *Angéline Escafré-Dublet*, *Le père Ghys et l'action sociale en direction des immigrés*, in: Musée de l'histoire de l'immigration, Paris 2016, URL: <<https://www.histoire-immigration.fr/l-echo-des-archives/les-cahiers-nord-africains>> [3.6.2024]; *Emin Batman*, *Expo: Between Tompouce and Baklava*, Amsterdam 2023; *Kinderen van de migratie*, in: VRT canvas, 2021, URL: <<https://www.vrt.be/vrtmax/a-z/kinderen-van-de-migratie/>> [3.6.2024]; Bonner Akademie für Forschung und Lehre praktischer Politik (ed.), *Integrationserfahrungen im Ruhrgebiet. Erfolgsfaktoren und Innovationspotenziale*, Bonn 2017.
- 2 Cf. *Moskeevereniging en Islamitisch-Cultureel Centrum: de eerste moskee in Antwerpen*, in: Felixarchief, 2021, URL: <<https://www.antwerpen.be/nl/info/moskeevereniging-en-islamitisch-cultureel-centrum-de-eerste-moskee-in-antwerpen>> [21.1.2024].
- 3 Cf. *Philippe Hanus*, «Crevons la faim. Joyeux Noël!», in: *hommes & migrations. Revue française de référence sur les dynamiques migratoires*, 2020, no. 1330, pp. 19–24; 50 jaar gastarbeiders in de stad Utrecht. Kerken, 2020, URL: <<https://50jaargastarbeidersutrecht.nl/50-jaar-gastarbeiders/Religie/Kerken>> [21.1.2024]; *Emilio Platti* (ed.), *Les quarante ans du Centre El Kalima*, Brussels 2019.
- 4 Cf. *Wendy Pojmann* (ed.), *Migration and Activism in Europe since 1945*, Basingstoke 2008; *Simon Goeke*, «Wir sind alle Fremdarbeiter!«. Gewerkschaften, migrantische Kämpfe und soziale Bewegungen in Westdeutschland 1960–1980, Paderborn 2020.
- 5 Cf. *Mazyar Khoojinian*, *La campagne de régularisation des travailleurs clandestins en Belgique (1974–1976): acteurs institutionnels et pratiques administratives*, in: *C@hiers du CRHiDI*, 2023, no. 46, pp. 1–21; *Jane Freedman*, *The French »Sans-Papiers« Movement: An Unfinished Struggle*, in: *Pojmann*, *Migration and Activism in Europe since 1945*, pp. 81–97.

cal approaches.⁶ As a result, we are left with enticing stories of local activism but without a clear understanding of why and how Catholic actors related, often in pioneering roles, to Moroccan and Turkish migrant communities in western Europe.

Neighbouring bodies of research nevertheless hint at the merits of a deeper study of Catholic actors as progressive, activist agents in a local setting. First, there is a growing acknowledgement that Catholic actors have been sidelined too easily in research on post-war progressive thinking and, particularly, on the 1968 movement.⁷ In this connection, Jay Corrin refers to a Catholic new left which, roused by the social teachings of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), interacted with popular ideologies of the secular new left such as Marxist socialist humanism and reformulated them within their own religious framework.⁸ Apart from those intellectual circles, a larger base of Catholic believers also felt encouraged by the Council's renewal of the lay apostolate and, as Péter Apor, Rebecca Clifford, and Nigel Townson argue, pushed for new social initiatives to reiterate the salience of their religious identity in their surroundings.⁹ Regarding this process of re-imagining, Alana Harris emphasises that Catholic actors quickly adapted to new social vocabularies, breaking with traditional forms of charity, paternalism and moralising to embrace self-development, agency, social justice and human rights.¹⁰ These new discursive principles also came into fruition in Catholic thinking on migration, integration and intercultural and interfaith dialogue. This created ideal conditions for a wave of Catholic-inspired migrant care in the 1970s.¹¹ Second, in attempts to unravel the connection between Catholic social engagement and migration, the field is moving towards the study of local articulations, particularly in urban settings. The theologian Chris Baker argues that the urban public sphere as a mirror of changing social realities forces religious engagements and identities to adapt to their surroundings.¹² Putting this theory into practice, the volume edited by Sven Sterken and Eva Weyns shows that during the post-war decades processes of urba-

6 Cf. *Peter Phan*, *Embracing, Protecting, and Loving the Stranger: A Roman Catholic Theology of Migration*, in: *Elaine Padilla/Peter Phan* (ed.), *Theology of Migration in the Abrahamic Religions*, New York 2014, pp. 77–110; *Jan de Volder*, *Ik was vreemdeling en gij hebt mij ontvangen. De Kerk in Vlaanderen en de migratie, 1960–2020*, in: *Gilke Gunst/Stijn Latré* (eds.), *De Kerk in Vlaanderen*, Kalmthout 2022, pp. 216–226.

7 Cf. *Gerd-Rainer Horn/Emmanuel Gerard* (eds.), *Left Catholicism 1943–1955. Catholics and Society in Western Europe at the Point of Liberation*, Leuven 2001; *Emma Bell*, *Disruptive Religion: The Case of the Catholic Worker-Priests (1943–1954)*, in: *Journal of Management, Spirituality & Religion*, 2007, pp. 432–442; *Bart Latré*, *Strijd en Inkeer*, Leuven 2011.

8 *Jay Corrin*, *Catholic Progressives in England after Vatican II*, Indiana 2012, pp. 173–214.

9 *Péter Apor/Rebecca Clifford/Nigel Townson*, *Faith*, in: *Robert Gildea/James Mark/Anette Warring* (eds.), *Europe's 1968. Voices of Revolt*, Oxford 2013, pp. 211–235.

10 *Alana Harris*, *The Summer of '68—Beyond the Secularization Thesis*, in: *Alana Harris* (ed.), *The Schism of '68. Catholicism, Contraception and Humanae Vitae in Europe, 1945–1975*, Cham 2018, pp. 10–14. Cf. also *Apor/Clifford/Townson*, *Faith*, pp. 213 f.

11 Cf. *Arkadiusz Modrzejewski/Rafał Raczyński*, *Labour Migrants in the Light of Personalistic Philosophy and Social Doctrine of Karol Wojtyła – John Paul II*, in: *European Journal of Science and Theology* 16, 2020, no. 4, pp. 89–99; *Arno Demeulemeester*, *Katholieke solidariteit met Noord-Afrikaanse en Turkse gastarbeiders*. Master Thesis, Leuven 2021.

12 *Chris Baker*, *The Contagion of the Sacred and the Right to the City*, in: *Jane Garnett/Alana Harris* (eds.), *Rescripting Religion in the City*, London 2013, pp. 97–99 and 101.

nisation indeed challenged the traditional Catholic entanglement of community and neighbourhood, forcing believers to reimagine religion in the city.¹³ Apor, Clifford and Townson cite this shifting sense of community and urbanity as a driving force for religious activism in the wake of 1968. Moreover, they recognise Catholic spaces such as church buildings and parish properties as integral to the activist toolkit. They were not only convenient facilities but also symbolic and powerful places to be reimagined as sanctuaries, thereby dismantling hierarchical barriers and fostering new connections between communities.¹⁴ Connecting this to the migration movements of the 1960s, Dale Irvin argues that cityscapes not only hosted encounters between Catholic and migrant communities but also shaped how each party imagined the other.¹⁵ In studying these urban encounters, the experiences of north African and Turkish migrants merit separate consideration, since they were shaped not only by the multifaceted relations between Christianity and Islam but also by postcolonial legacies, home country politics and ideals of Third World solidarity.¹⁶

By bringing these bodies of literature together, this contribution aims to analyse why and how Catholic actors formed connections with Moroccan and Turkish migrant communities and to what extent modern urbanity played a transformative role in this. To that end, it focusses on three pioneering migrant care initiatives in Brussels, each with its own affiliation to the Church, its own relation to Brussels' urban space, and its distinct form of social thought and activism. First, the centre for migrant social security *Bruxelles Accueil – Porte Ouverte* (BAPO) emerged from the engagement of a laywoman concerned with the loss of community in the city's old centre and grew to be a central node in Brussels' migrant care sector. The second case, *Foyer des Jeunes* in Brussels' north region, was established by a redemptorist father as a safe haven for local youth but quickly expanded to be an advocate for Moroccan and Turkish children in precarious neighbourhoods. The third and final space of activism draws the attention to the activism of several parish priests whose interventions made them respected voices in the political debate and the anti-racist movement, and who transformed their churches into safe havens for migrants and refugees in the urban centre. To present these cases, this analysis relies on the largely unstudied archives of BAPO, Foyer, and the Brussels vicariate, supplemented by oral history interviews with pioneers of these organisations. Additional sources

13 Sven Sterken/Eva Weyns (eds.), *Territories of Faith. Religion, Urban Planning and Demographic Change in Post-War Europe*, Leuven 2022.

14 Apor/Clifford/Townson, *Faith*, pp. 225–227. Cf. also Sven Sterken/Eva Weyns, Introduction: *Faith and Its Territories*, in: *id.*, *Territories of Faith*, pp. 9–34, here: pp. 9–12.

15 Dale T. Irvin, *The Church, Migration and Global (In)Difference: They End in the City*, in: Darren J. Dias/Jaroslav Z. Skira/Michael S. Attridge/Gerard Mannion (eds.), *The Church, Migration and Global (In)Difference*, Cham 2021, pp. 3–23, here: pp. 3–7 and 20–23.

16 Cf. Elena Maestri/Annemarie Profanter, Introduction, in: *id.* (eds.), *Migration and Integration Challenges of Muslim Immigrants in Europe. Debating Policies and Cultural Approaches*, Cham 2021, pp. 1–21, here: pp. 4 f.; Heinz Fassmann/Wiebke Sievers, Introduction, in: Michael Bomes/*id.* (eds.), *Migration from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe. Past Developments, Current Status and Future Potentials*, Amsterdam 2014, pp. 15–26, here: pp. 19–21; Robin Hardy, *Europe, or the »Original West,« Muslims, and Migration: The Peculiar History of France and West Africans with Broader Implications*, in: *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 11, 2020, pp. 381–391.

were found in private collections and in the archives of the Brussels vicariate and the Belgian branch of Caritas Catholica.

In terms of structure, this article chronologically traces the evolution of the Catholic actors across three distinct periods, each with its own thematic focus. The first section delves into the entanglement between Catholic progressive thought and the modernising urban sphere in the late 1960s. It argues that efforts to reinforce religious engagement in the city led Catholic actors to discover the precarious position of Moroccan and Turkish labour migrants. Accordingly, their imaginaries of the other were linked to how they understood the disruptive dynamics of urbanisation, and their care focused on providing a respite from the hostile environment of the city centre. The second section turns to the early 1970s and analyses how Brussels' Catholic actors connected to the larger wave of migrant protests that surged across western Europe. It shows that local parish priests navigated this activist space in the same manner as other committed actors, causing Catholic activism, new left activism and migrant activism to intertwine. These connections led a Brussels church to host a migrant hunger strike, attracting a wave of attention and prompting the 1974 Belgian recruitment stop. The section unpacks how the local priest and church shaped this pivotal event more than hitherto realised. The third and final section analyses how the Catholic initiatives repositioned themselves amidst a shift in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the migration question figured prominently on the political and public agenda. It looks at how BAPO, Foyer and the vicariate both professionalised and simultaneously felt compelled to reformulate their understanding of the other. In a similar vein, they were forced to adapt their Catholic identity if they wanted to occupy a place in an integration sector that was growing increasingly secular, politicised and competitive under neoliberal policies.

I. Brussels, Catholic urban engagement and migration, 1964–1970

In the 1960s, Brussels was a changing city, competing to be the most modern with the likes of Paris, London and Berlin. Ever since the inter-war period, rigorous city planning pursued the goal of making Brussels the buzzing capital of Belgium's economy, politics and culture. Key to this goal was a renewed train network that would connect the country through Brussels, making the capital a true hub. This project, interrupted by the German occupation, was re-imagined for the post-war era, and the construction of a tunnel under the city began in 1952. Simultaneously, Brussels was being prepared for modern mobility, and city streets were rebuilt to accommodate cars.¹⁷ When, one year later, the Belgian capital won the competition to host the 1958 world's fair, the construction efforts further intensified. Although most of the work took place at the Heysel expo site, about five kilometres north of the city centre, Brussels had to prepare a warm and smooth welcome for the expected international travellers. New tram lines, renovated city hotels, and better

17 Thierry Demey, *Brussels. Capital of Europe*, Brussels 2007, pp. 117–120; Jozef Lievens/Nicole Brasseur/Albert Martens, *De grote stad: een geplande chaos? De Noordwijk van krot tot Manhattan*, Leuven 1975, pp. 9 f.; Toon Toelen, *De grote en kleine geschiedenis van de kassei*, Brussels 2004.

connections to the surrounding airports were only a few examples of the building projects that were to secure Brussels' new status as the »crossroads of the West«.¹⁸ Additionally, the growing political role of Brussels on the European stage changed the city. When the EEC was established by the Treaty of Rome in 1958, Brussels offered itself as a neutral and accessible site for European policy-making. The Belgian state furthermore showed willingness to invest in the modernisation of the capital, promising a future-proof haven for politicians, expatriates and travellers. Not only did this rekindle the construction frenzy in the city centre, it also drove policies to turn Brussels into a modern metropolis. During the 1960s, the capital came to fulfil its new role as bastion of modernisation, finance and politics, with a strong focus on trade and tertiary services. Tall office buildings and busy highways characterised the cityscape, while central Brussels gradually discarded its role as a residential centre.¹⁹

This form of urbanisation had a profound effect on Brussels' social fabric because it challenged the Catholic traditional neighbourhood that had long been the norm. First, local parishes were losing significant parts of their membership as the middle class came to prefer life outside of the centre and the remaining working class was harder to attract, if not outspokenly anti-clerical.²⁰ Additionally, the role of the urban neighbourhood was changing rapidly and the traditional local parishes, sluggish and pre-occupied with internal competition, lost their footing. Already in the late 1950s, a group of intellectual priests inspired by the emergent field of urban sociology sought to re-draw the Brussels parish map, but their attempts were stymied by a lack of agreement and cooperation.²¹ It was nevertheless clear that change was long overdue, and in 1962 the archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels split into three territorial vicariates, including a bilingual vicariate for Brussels. It was tasked to adapt to the social realities of Brussels' capital region so that Catholicism could reassert its moral and social authority in the inner city. To that end, encouraged by the social teachings of the Second Vatican Council, the vicariate organised yearly congresses at the Berlaymont site to discuss the various challenges that the rapid urbanisation of Brussels provoked.²² These congresses, which began in 1965, emphasised the wellbeing of the city's inhabitants, because renewed awareness of poverty in the late 1960s demanded sensitivity to precarity at the heart of the metropolis. As such, socially engaged priests and deacons, together with dedicated laypeople, started to methodically analyse and define urban problems.

18 Gery Leloutre, *La transformation moderne de Bruxelles. Processus d'agencement de l'espace urbain, 1949–1979*, Brussels 2020; *id.*, *Brusselisation, Both an Urban Phenomenon and a Historical Milestone*, in: *The Low Countries*, 22.6.2022, URL: <<https://www.the-low-countries.com/article/brusselisation>> [5.1.2024].

19 *Lievens/Brasseur/Martens*, *De grote stad*, pp. 15–17.

20 Eva Weyns/Sven Sterken, *Rethinking the Urban Parish: François Houtart, the Centre de Recherches Socio-Religieuses and the 1958 Pastoral Plan for Brussels*, in: *id.*, *Territories of Faith*, pp. 157–190.

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 172 f. and 189.

22 *Ibid.*, pp. 187 f.; *Els Minne*, *From Slums to Community: The Urban Turn of Catholicism in Post-War Brussels (1950–1975)*, in: *Journal of Urban History*, 2023, DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.1177/00961442231207026>> [1.7.2024].

It is within the context of these endeavours that Catholic actors in the late 1960s encountered Moroccan and Turkish labour migrants in their neighbourhoods. To them, migration was a relatively new phenomenon, given that Brussels had not been a major receiving hub for the migrations of the 1950s. Moreover, the handful of Catholic initiatives that did already exist were often limited to European, Christian communities.²³ After the signing of the bilateral accords with Morocco and Turkey in 1964, however, Brussels rapidly became the most important migration hub for three reasons. First, the Belgian economy no longer needed underground miners but instead sought foreign workers to man its Fordist manufacturing lines. Therefore, the emphasis shifted from the mining regions of Limburg and Wallonia to the factories in the urban agglomerations of Ghent, Antwerp and particularly Brussels.²⁴ Second, as the mining sector struggled to turn a profit and had to lay off employees, many former miners relocated to the city. For them, Brussels was often the most promising option thanks to the many opportunities in manufacturing and construction, but also because the Francophone city was easier to adapt to than its Flemish-speaking counterparts. Third and last, Brussels was pivotal to the system of irregular migration in the late 1960s for the very reason that by then the capital had become the »crossroads of the West«. Irregular migrants, often young labourers from north Africa and Turkey, entered the country with a tourist visa in hopes of finding employment. They knew Brussels' main station to be the most promising point of arrival, where scouts were always on the lookout for low-skilled labour with promises of stable employment and housing.²⁵ In consequence, the migrant population in Brussels exploded by 1970. The capital was home to more than a quarter of the foreign population in Belgium and to more than half of all Moroccan immigrants in the country.²⁶

The following section discusses how, at the end of the 1960s, these dynamics of a quickly changing urban sphere, a renewed social sensitivity among Catholic actors and a more visible migrant presence became organically intertwined. It does so by tracing the origins of two Catholic organisations, Bruxelles Accueil – Porte Ouverte (BAPO) and the Foyer des Jeunes, arguing that they were founded on the complex fault line between Catholicism and the modern urban centre. Only subsequently, due to their proactive repositioning in the neighbourhood, did they become aware of migrants' social precarity and pivoted to providing comprehensive migrant care. In this process, their understanding of the local urban sphere and of the social and

23 Cf. *Anne Morelli*, *L'Appel à la main d'œuvre Italienne pour les charbonnages et sa prise en charge à son arrivée en Belgique dans l'immédiat après-guerre*, in: *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis/Revue Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine* 19, 1988, pp. 83–130.

24 *Rustam Khan*, *Apartheid in Schaarbeek: Belgian Migrant Labor and Human Rights in Europe's Carbon Transition, 1945–1973*, Cambridge 2023, pp. 9 f. and 15–20.

25 *Lofth Slimane*, *L'immigration clandestine de main-d'œuvre dans la région bruxelloise*, Brussels 1995, pp. 85–88; *Tom Naegels*, *Nieuw België. Een migratiegeschiedenis 1944–1978*, Tiel 2021, p. 263.

26 These official numbers do not account for irregular migration, meaning that the actual numbers were probably higher. The same applies to the national total, with approximately 40,000 Moroccan nationals and 20,000 Turkish nationals registered as immigrated residents in the 1960s. Nationaal instituut voor de statistiek, *Bevolking: algemene volkstelling op 31 december 1970, deel 4: Bevolking naar nationaliteit*, Brussels 1974, pp. 11–13.

moral issues to which it gave rise came to figure as the pivotal facet of how they understood the other. In other words, it was the urban sphere, problem-ridden and characterised by hostility, that determined Catholic actors' imaginaries of migrants and hence their rationale in pioneering migrant care in Brussels.

First, the origins of BAPO offer an exemplary case of how individual Catholic social engagement began with the urban question and almost coincidentally discovered migration as a social topic in the process. The organisation grew out of the initiative of Marie-Rose Degive, a laywoman from the Uccle district who previously had been in charge of the Brussels marriage school, which provided counselling to Catholic couples. This engagement came to an end in late August 1969, however, and it was in touring Brussels churches to remove promotional material for the marriage school that Degive was confronted with the declining role of the Church in the inner city. Her visits prompted many reflections, which she shared with the Brussels vicariate in a letter aptly titled »Une promenade dans Bruxelles«. ²⁷ In her writing, she confirmed that local churches hardly knew how to adapt to the city's shifting demographics. As the middle class was leaving the city centre, local priests found it difficult to connect to the new communities in their neighbourhood. The priests themselves had confided to Degive their troubles in establishing connections with the inhabitants of their parishes and were under the impression that forms of community and social coherence were being undermined by the individualistic tendencies inherent to urban modernity. Emphasising the apparent contrast between social coherence and urban modernisation, Marie-Rose Degive's letter concluded with a call to »restore the church of Brussels in its village dimension«, in order to battle »l'anonymat«, a rising degree of anonymity that was eating away at the social fabric. ²⁸

Her letter was far from anecdotal, and particularly with its reference to urban anonymity it derived from a larger body of Catholic thinking on the effects of urbanisation. ²⁹ Generally understood as a loss of community, connections and neighbourly care, anonymity was a shorthand for the pitfalls of modern individualism, consumerism and capitalism, all of which flourished in western Europe's metropolises. In Paris, for instance, these negative dynamics moved the worker priest Maurice Ducreux to devote his life to the study of modern urbanism, seeking solutions in a mix of Catholic and left-activist worldviews. ³⁰ In a similar vein, research endeavours in Catholic city planning were also underway in the southern Dutch cities of Eindhoven and Roermond, again with a focus on restoring the city's social dimension. ³¹ Following this trend, the Brussels vicariate's 1969 Berlaymont congress attempted to define the effects of modernisation on Brussels specifically.

27 Marie-Rose Degive, *Une promenade dans Bruxelles*, 8.9.1969, KADOC Leuven, Archief Arthur van der Taelen (AvdT), box 452/2.

28 Ibid., pp. 1 f.

29 Cf. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City. Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, Princeton 2013 (first published 1965), pp. 47–55.

30 Maryvonne Prévot, *Catholicisme social et urbanisme. Maurice Ducreux (1924–1985) et la fabrique de la Cité*, Rennes 2019, pp. 70–78 and 105–110.

31 Joks Janssen, *Religiously Inspired Urbanism: Catholicism and the Planning of the Southern Dutch Provincial Cities Eindhoven and Roermond, c. 1900 to 1960*, in *Urban History* 43, 2015, pp. 135–157, here: pp. 143–146.

The congress argued that capitalism's individualist competitiveness had unravelled Brussels' social fabric, while the advent of mass communication had caused a sensory overload that further distracted people from their own surroundings and, ultimately, cultivated social indifference.³² Moreover, secularisation was believed to impact the city much faster than it did Belgian rural spaces »because churches no longer featured as the city's skyline« and because traditional Church authority was challenged by new capitalist and materialist ideologies that arrived in the wake of international trade and global politics.³³ To counteract this, the vicariate drew from Vatican II's social teachings to reimagine the role of local priests, calling for a Catholic social engagement that »opposes what is seemingly unchallenged and obvious in modernity«.³⁴ This new engagement was to be rooted in the acknowledgement rather than the denial of Brussels' changing urban space. To that end, several members of the vicariate joined the call of Marie-Rose Degive and created Bruxelles Accueil – Porte Ouverte in December 1971 as a twofold initiative. First, it was a point of contact for spiritual and moral assistance by a local priest, meant to be more approachable and inviting than a church. Second, it served as a social antenna in the city centre, scanning the city landscape to aid Brussels' new demographic, whether they were middle-class employees, workers, tourists, travellers, students, expatriates or labour migrants.³⁵

Only then, in the years after its opening, did BAPO discover that the needs of this last group, the labour migrants, were the most pressing by far. Some of their issues were known neighbourhood ills, like small and unhygienic accommodations or the unsafe conditions in the busy city streets. These issues, however, seemed to affect migrants more negatively. BAPO, as an approachable primary resource, received many requests for healthcare by migrants, evidence that the city's pollution and other dangers were taking a toll on their health. Such problems were amplified by the precarious financial situation of many migrants, who were prone to wage exploitation and the first victims of growing unemployment. Through its work in Brussels central station, BAPO moreover learnt of the malicious practices of scouts who duped arriving migrants with false promises of employment and labour permits. Lastly, migrants' testimonies laid bare widespread problems of discrimination, exclusion and loneliness, which could quickly lead to mental health issues or substance abuse.³⁶ Having learnt of these problems, BAPO increasingly dedicated time and resources to migration dynamics in the city centre, becoming a well-known primary support provider for labour migrants in Brussels. By 1973, the number of aid requests from migrants had grown to 1,043 cases in a single year, accounting for well over half of BAPO's interventions.³⁷

32 Mens en Kerk in de Stad: I. Vrijheid en verantwoordelijkheid, 1.1970, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 128; Mens en Kerk in de Stad: II. Pluralisme en Massacommunicatie, 1.1970, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 128.

33 Mens en Kerk in de Stad: IV. Sekularisatie, 1.1970, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 128.

34 Ibid.

35 Degive, *Une promenade dans Bruxelles*, pp. 2 f.: »de redonner à l'église de Bruxelles sa dimension ville«; *id.*, lettre à Arthur van der Taelen, 18.9.1969, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 452/2.

36 BAPO, *Statistiques 1973, 2.1974*, BAPO, Archive rapports annuels.

37 Ibid.

It was thus that in the early 1970s BAPO and the vicariate discovered labour migrants as a distinct social group in the city centre. Previously, they had categorised migrants among a larger group of underprivileged people, »les plus défavorisées«, along with people in poverty, unsupported senior citizens, former delinquents and those suffering from addiction.³⁸ Key aspects to this categorisation were not the particularities of each subgroup but rather the structural dynamics of underprivilege and social exclusion that they faced, inevitably pushing them to the margins of society. However, now that BAPO had gained an insight in the challenges faced by migrant communities, their situation was found to be sufficiently distinctive to justify a dedicated approach. In fact, BAPO came to think of migrants as the most precarious group in the city centre and the first to be alienated by the urban anonymity.³⁹ The public's indifference towards the migrants' situation was after all strengthened by their demographic concentration in Brussels' poorer districts. In previous years, the notion of ghettoisation had already been frequently applied to neighbourhoods abandoned by the upper middle class and now struggling with poverty, insecurity and pollution. With the discovery of new migration dynamics, however, accounts of ghettoisation focused on the presence of labour migrants in Brussels and the unfavourable spatial dynamics that defined their isolation. Ghettoisation was understood as a major setback for Moroccan and Turkish people in particular. Language issues and cultural distance already made it harder for them to connect to Brussels' social fabric, while their concentration in troubled districts pushed them to society's margins. Additionally, the vicariate was concerned that the dynamics of urban life, tending towards isolation and marginalisation, impaired their capacity to construct social networks, practice and enrich their culture, or continue their religious life.⁴⁰ Moroccan and Turkish migrants came to be portrayed as uprooted people, detached from their familiar surroundings and left to their fate in an indifferent or actively hostile metropolis. The imagery and visual language of the sources is remarkable, with frequent references to ghetto districts as a kind of »zoo humaine« displaying the full range of social issues or depicting Moroccan and Turkish migrants as mice running into the trap that is Brussels.⁴¹

38 La présence chrétienne à Bruxelles, 9.1972, Archief AvdT, box 123.

39 À propos des statistiques, 1974, BAPO, Archive rapports annuels.

40 Stadssociologie en Pastoraal: bijlage demografie, 1.1970, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 124; Sociale Morfologie St Gillis, 1.1971, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 124.

41 Note finale du groupe de travail sur la présence chrétienne à Bruxelles, 30.4.1974, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 123;



Image 1: Example of the visual language depicting migrants as mice in a trap. Roland, *Onthaal en Solidariteit gastarbeiders*, in: *Kontakt*, 1969, no. 12, S. 1.

As awareness of the difficulties of migrant labourers in the city grew, Catholic actors discovered Moroccan and Turkish youth in the city centre. Already in the summer of 1968, a group of volunteers led by the redemptorist priest Paul Steels offered activities for young people in Brussels' north quarter, helping them to spend the summer vacation in a meaningful way.⁴² Come September, the activities of the group expanded to include homework support and basic lessons in French or Dutch. Spurred on by the initial success of this scheme, the group sought to establish itself as a recognised non-profit organisation named »le Foyer des Jeunes«. To obtain official recognition, they were expected to formulate a rationale for their activities with migrant children in the city. As with BAPO, Foyer's discourse relied heavily on the conjunction between migration and urban dynamics, drawing on urban sociology and pedagogy. Brussels' north district, Foyer argued, had become an »urban jungle« unfit for young people.⁴³ They asserted that housing opportunities were limited to old, small and unhygienic buildings unfit for family life and forcing the children outside.⁴⁴ Yet at the same time, the district lacked suitable squares, greens or playgrounds. Youngsters instead flocked to the streets where, Foyer concluded, they encountered the city's frantic traffic, petty crime and discri-

⁴² Nieuw 69: Dokumentatiemap Trefklup, 15.2.1969, Foyer, Archief 1968–1980.

⁴³ Paul Steels, Archief 1968–1980: Tweede generatie immigranten, Brussels 2010, pp. 3 and 5 f.

⁴⁴ Jeugdtehuis V.Z.W.: verslag van het werkjaar 1969, 1.3.1970, Foyer, box 68, pp. 2 f.

mination. Additionally, Foyer argued that parents were ill-equipped to help their children adapt to their new surroundings due to their own poor language skills and the financial and social issues which preoccupied them.⁴⁵ From this, Paul Steels concluded that Foyer must act as a second home for migrant children, offering them a safe place to spend evenings and weekends. To them, Foyer became a refuge from the city in every possible sense.

What really set Foyer apart, however, was its particular engagement with the dynamics of migration and, subsequently, the role of culture and religion in the upbringing of migrant children. Foyer assumed that life in the urban north quarter must be even more of a shock to migrant children brought up in the rural regions of Turkey and Morocco.⁴⁶ In nothing could they recognise the culture of their home country, nor could they familiarise themselves with the local customs of a neighbourhood that Belgians had abandoned. Even in the local schools, the chances for fruitful exchanges diminished because they were now increasingly populated by migrant children. Foyer, much like BAPO and the vicariate, realised that this ghettoisation completed the isolation of the Moroccan and Turkish second generation.⁴⁷ To remedy this situation, Foyer believed it would be good to have migrant youth experience Belgian culture. It threw together short vacation camps in Flanders' rural areas during which, apart from the usual pastimes, Brussels migrant children were introduced to Belgian Catholic households and played with local youth.⁴⁸ In addition to this goal of fostering intercultural exchange, Paul Steels also found it important to prevent immigrated children from becoming »alienated from their own culture, [...] and to solve the painful problem of the ignorance of the youngest children of their mother tongue.« Accordingly, Foyer offered Arabic language courses, most likely taught using the Qur'an or with a religious perspective.⁴⁹ This might seem surprising for an organisation run by a Redemptorist brother, but in the light of Vatican II and particularly the 1965 encyclical on the relations of the Church with non-Christian religions, many Catholic actors believed that reconnecting migrant youth with Islam was highly advisable.⁵⁰ It counteracted the mechanisms of cultural uprootedness that they suffered and, moreover, was essential should they ever return to their home country. In a similar vein, Saturday evenings were Arabic club nights, enabling members to experience their roots through Arabic music, food and drink.⁵¹ Lastly, Foyer conducted its own research to learn, through frequent short visits or extended interviews, what parents thought about the future of their offspring in Belgium.⁵² Through these interventions, Foyer presented itself as a cultural mediator for migrant children, preparing uprooted youth for either prospect: returning to their (or their parents') home country or building a future in Belgium.

45 Ibid., p. 7.

46 Ibid., pp. 8 f.

47 Ibid., 12 f.

48 Ibid., p. 14; *Paul Steels/H. Eikelboom*, Omdat er voor hen geen plaats was, in: *De Open Poort*, December 1971, pp. 9–10.

49 Ibid.; *Sociale animatie onder Marokkaanse arbeiders*, in: *Kerk en Leven*, 29.11.1973, 6; Interview Bashir M'Rabet, 10.5.2023.

50 *Verslag van het werkjaar 1969*, pp. 5 f.; *Paul VI*, *Nostra Aetate*, Rome 1965.

51 *Verslag van het werkjaar 1969*, p. 9.

52 Ibid., pp. 9 f.



Image 2: One of the drawings published by Foyer. Ali, *Mon Foyer*, in: Steels, *Archief 1968–1980*, p. 173.

The urban neighbourhood played a significant role as complicating factor in Foyer's perspectives on migrant challenges, even more so than it did for BAPO. Brussels' north quarter was not only unsafe and unaccommodating, it was also a neighbourhood at the brink of being razed to the ground in favour of large construction projects. The so-called Manhattanplan, first approved in 1967, aimed to modernise the area with its own world trade centre, an array of office buildings and two new connections to major highways.⁵³ It would clear an area of about 53 hectares and force the expropriation of an estimated 15,000 residents, many of whom were labour migrant families.⁵⁴ Foyer feared that this would only further uproot migrant children, who would again be forced to move and adapt at the whim of economic decisions. The youth organisation thus became an activist voice in Brussels' spatial politics, campaigning for sustainable housing and living policies in the north quarter. It hoped to mobilise city priests, their parishes and local residents to join forces and spark an outcry against the expropriations, just as had happened in the 1969 »Bataille des Marolles« to save a district in the city's south.⁵⁵ To influence public opinion, Foyer asked children to draw their neighbourhood, and their colourful pictures featuring bulldozers, construction sites, grey office buildings and heaps of

53 Jozef Lievens/Nicole Brasseur/Albert Martens, »Rénovation« du quartier de la gare du Nord dans la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, Brussels 1975, pp. 54 f.

54 Albert Martens, *Le plan Manhattan ou que crèvent les expulsés?*, Brussels 1975, pp. 69–73 and 79.

55 Cf. A. Demol, *Monsieur Pol: Vlaamse Pater midden gastarbeiders te Brussel*, in: *Het Laatste Nieuws*, 8.9.1969; *Un Foyer de Jeunes pas Banal*, in: *Le Patriote Illustré*, 2.11.1969, p. 2691; Olivier Chatelan, *L'espace urbain, de la théologie à la lutte: Jacques van der Biest et la paroisse des Marolles à Bruxelles au tournant des années 1960–1970*, in: *Histoire, Monde et Cultures Religieuses*, 2016, no. 37, pp. 67–82.

rubble and trash were picked up by various journals and featured in an exhibition in Brussels' international press centre.⁵⁶ Despite this publicity, the initiative did not generate a unified mobilisation of the neighbourhood's inhabitants, and the demolition continued. In fact, Foyer itself had to move four times in as many years, inhabiting a decaying brewery, a run-down parish school, two hotels formerly used for sex work and an abandoned photochemical factory.⁵⁷

The development of BAPO and Foyer between 1968 and 1973 clarifies two facets of their emerging engagement with migrants. First, it is not so much a story of an innovative commitment towards the new topic of migrants' residency as one of continuity amidst the troubled relations between Catholic actors and the quickly changing environment in metropolitan Brussels. Marie-Rose Degive and the vicariate were trying to make the city a more welcoming place, restoring its village feel, and gradually forged links with labour migrants. Similarly, Paul Steels sought to protect children from the hardships of urban life by offering leisure activities and in so doing discovered broader social and cultural issues effecting migrant communities. It was because Catholic actors were trying to redefine their social and community roles in the city that they discovered migrant families and their troubles. This continuity is perhaps most visible in their imaginaries of labour migrants, notably those from Moroccan and Turkish backgrounds. BAPO and Foyer portrayed them as uprooted people, rendered invisible by anonymity and victimised by a hostile urban space and its modernist and capitalist ideologies. Second, their engagement was strongly embedded in a local framework, with the parish and its neighbourhood as the focus for activities. BAPO was closely associated with the church of Saint Nicholas in the city centre, while Foyer focused almost exclusively on the north quarter. Similarly, other neighbourhoods and communes saw smaller initiatives come and go. The White Sisters set up a modest *service des étrangers* in Evere, the Christian women workers' movement organised prenatal care in Molenbeek, and lay sister Roza Schoofs conducted studies on urban migrant housing and education in Schaerbeek.⁵⁸ In Uccle, Fr Charles de Raikem joined forces with Moroccan neighbours to start a small French-Arabic language school, and churches all over Brussels hosted occasional Muslim prayer groups.⁵⁹ Organisations akin to those in Brussels also sprouted in other Belgian city centres, with Fr Foucaert arranging social services for migrants in Aalst and the Jesuit Frans Martens launching the Antwerp Centre for Foreign Workers.⁶⁰ Due to their local focus, these initiatives

56 T. Stuckens, Afbraak Noordkwartier tentoongesteld: Kinderen tekenen dood van een wijk, in De Standaard, 29.3.1974; Steels, Archief 1968–1980, p. 2.

57 Steels, Archief 1968–1980, pp. 1–3; Steels/Eikelboom, Omdat er voor hen geen plaats was.

58 Heymans, Jongerenhuis en vreemdelingen in Brussel centrum, 12.1970, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 452/1; Hajar Oulad Ben Taïb, La prise en charge des femmes immigrées marocaines par Vie Féminine via les consultations de nourrissons à Molenbeek-Saint-Jean de 1964 à 1974, in: C@hiers du CRHIDI 46, 2023.

59 Reflectiedag voor het probleem van de vreemdelingen in België, 26.4.1967, KADOC, 12.1969, KADOC, Archief Caritas Catholica: Internationaal Hulpbetoon, box 321.5.

60 Arno Demeulemeester, Katholieke solidariteit met Noord-Afrikaanse en Turkse gastarbeiders: Een casestudy op basis van de Sociale Dienst voor Gastarbeiders te Aalst, 1974–1979. Master Thesis, Leuven 2021, pp. 20–26; Piet Janssen/Karl Rutten, CBW 20: een verslag van 20 jaar migrantenwerk aangevuld met enkele impressies, Antwerpen 1992, pp. 7 f.

rarely cooperated and did not form a unified Catholic field of migrant services, as evidenced by the repeated failure of the vicariate to compile an exhaustive list of all initiatives in Brussels.⁶¹

Yet another reason why no dedicated field could develop in the early 1970s is that the larger sector of social assistance and poor relief explicitly evolved away from a targeted approach. In the 1960s, a rediscovery of poverty in Belgium's affluent society had shaken Catholic milieus and forced them to rethink their attitude. A new discourse sought to understand how many forms of precarity could be brought back to a shared experience of structural underprivilege and social exclusion.⁶² The real danger of poverty was not a lack of means per se but rather structural deprivation, defined as the absence of social contacts and social mobility. Through this focus on structure, the individual poor person, with its specific characteristics and background, disappeared from view, and a larger class of underprivileged people, a so-called subproletariat, came to the fore.⁶³ To remedy poverty, then, was not simply to provide material support but rather to enable this subproletariat as a whole to become emancipated and reintegrated through structural measures. Therefore, little room remained for migration as a subtopic, and categorical initiatives were forced to adapt their strategy and discourse. A telling example is the discontinuation of the annual »Pro Migrantibus« (PM) offertories by the Belgian bishops. Since they began in 1961, these offertories were meant to finance, first, the activities of the papal council for migration and, second, initiatives in the mining regions for migrants' pastoral care.⁶⁴ At the decade's end, however, PM followed the shifting migration dynamics and reoriented its scope towards socio-economic support for migrants in the city. Because of this change, it suddenly came to compete with the recently established collection »welzijnszorg« (WZZ), which used its funds to dismantle structures of poverty rather than to support specific recipients. Its founder, Caritas Catholica Belgium, argued that a systemic approach would increase the public's willingness to donate. It also cited the unease in public opinion towards irregular migration as a possible hindrance, as evidenced by the annually declining proceeds of PM.⁶⁵ Much against the wishes of the Belgian bishops, WZZ became the sole annual collection for poverty relief by 1969, and the specific focus on migrant issues fully disappeared in its public campaign.⁶⁶ Categorical initiatives like BAPO

61 Pastoraal voor vreemdelingen in Brussel, 4.1974, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 452/1.

62 Rapport Caritas Internationaal Hulpbetoon: Annex 1-3, 1968, KADOC, Archief Caritas Catholica: Internationaal Hulpbetoon, box 321.5; Dossier opheffing dienst emigratie-integratie, 1971, KADOC, Archief Caritas Catholica: Internationaal Hulpbetoon, box 321.5.5.

63 Axelle BRODIEZ-DOLINO, Wresinski and ATD Fourth World, 1957 to 2017: From Knowledge to Recognition, in: *Bruno Tardieu* (ed.), *Rethinking Our World from the Perspective of Poverty* with Joseph Wresinski, Paris 2020, pp. 77–90.

64 Nota Migratiediensten Pro Migrantibus, December 1969, KADOC, Archief Caritas Catholica: Internationaal Hulpbetoon, box 321.4.3.

65 Campagne d'Avent à remplacer la collecte Pro Migrantibus, 4.12.1969, KADOC, Archief Caritas Catholica: Internationaal Hulpbetoon, box 321.4.4; *Cuvellier*, lettre à Huvette: evaluation Vivre Ensemble 1970–1971, 27.4.1972, KADOC, Archief Caritas Catholica: Internationaal Hulpbetoon, box 13.

66 Cf. Conceptflyer Welzijnszorg, May 1969, KADOC, Archief Caritas Catholica: Internationaal Hulpbetoon, box 4.4.

and Foyer continued to receive some funding, but it was clear that their specialised focus on migrants was out of tune with larger poverty relief efforts.

II. Catholic connections with migrant activism, 1970–1974

Yet change was in the air when, in the early 1970s, Moroccan and Turkish irregular migrants started to express their indignation with Belgium's migration policies (or lack thereof). Irregular immigration had become uncontrollable, limiting the government's opportunities to balance the labour market and prevent widespread unemployment among migrants. Nor did it succeed in exerting any control over migrants' employers, causing unsafe working conditions and exploitative practices to become commonplace.⁶⁷ In protesting against these injustices, migrant workers found new allies among the social activists of 1968, including students and professors but also Maoist and Trotskyist groups.⁶⁸ Furthermore, they were inspired by unrest in France and Germany, where migrant workers stood at the forefront of protests for better conditions and wages.⁶⁹ And so, between 1969 and 1973, migrants in Belgium came to participate in a wave of wildcat strikes, which were as much a comment on lacking trade union support as they were an outcry for better wages and working conditions.⁷⁰ Gradually, as the strikes spread throughout various regions and sectors, and as small advances were made, the more fundamental concerns of migrant militants came to the fore. They stressed that a continuous insecurity defined their lives in Belgium, as they could not rely on social services, did not enjoy job security, could not defend themselves in court and had no means of political participation.⁷¹ Moreover, the Belgian immigration authorities were known to conduct arbitrary checks and forced repatriations without any opportunity for legal redress.⁷² Therefore, the strikers demanded a distinct legal status for foreign workers in Belgium, which would grant them social and economic security and protect them from exploitation and arbitrary expulsions. Their actions successfully drew the public's attention to their precarious situation, and migration-related obstacles and discrimination gradually came to be understood as a major social issue in Belgium.

It was in the wake of these developments that the Catholic Church started to publicly weigh in and mobilise on the migration question. In March 1973, spurred on by the strikes domestically and abroad, the Belgian bishops published a pastoral

67 *Naegels*, *Nieuw België*, pp. 260–264.

68 *Ibid.*, 323 f.; *Khoojinian*, *La campagne de régularisation*, pp. 5 f.

69 *Goeke*, »Wir sind alle Fremdarbeiter!«, pp. 87–99; *Mazyar Khoojinian*, *Les ouvriers mineurs turcs en grève au charbonnage de la Petite Bacnure et l'insubordination ouvrière des «années 68»*, *Analyse de IHOES*, no. 187, 18.7.2018.

70 Cf. *Verslag Nationaal Bureau ACV*, 20.1.1970, KADOC, Archief bestuursorganen van het ACV, 64; *Ad Knotter*, *Undermining the »Polder Model«: Workers' Militancy and Trade Union Leadership in Four Dutch Wildcat Strikes, 1963–1970*, in: *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* 44, 2023, pp. 43–61.

71 »Statuut voor de Gastarbeider«, 1975, KADOC, Archief Vormingsdienst van het ACV, 256.

72 *Naegels*, *Nieuw België*, pp. 215–219.

letter on the problems of immigrants in Belgium.⁷³ They emphasised the particular impact of social ills on migrant labourers and their families, often more so than on underprivileged Belgians.⁷⁴ The letter implicitly rejected an all too generalised approach to precarity, stressing instead how migrants' experiences with bad housing conditions, unemployment, and structural poverty were considerably worsened by legal and social insecurity and by a lack of specific provision.⁷⁵ In an accompanying letter addressed at migrant populations, the bishops furthermore acknowledged that xenophobic sentiments, latent and explicit, considerably added to the already difficult psychological and social obstacles faced by migrants.⁷⁶ The bishops accordingly opted for a categorical and targeted approach to migrant precarity and, to this end, pledged their support for a distinct legal status.⁷⁷ In tandem with this legal solution on a nationwide basis, their intervention had a clear local component, calling for neighbourly care and compassion as countermeasures to the isolating dynamics of urban ghettoisation. Although this message was to be heeded by Christians everywhere, Brussels city centre was singled out with particular urgency.⁷⁸

This is not to say that Brussels' Catholic actors had until then remained unaffected by the surge of migrant protests in the early 1970s, quite the opposite. While the bishops still portrayed migrant labourers as passive victims, individual priests and organisations in Brussels had come to know the leaders of the migrant protests and discovered their agency. They formed new alliances which had the potential of being truly transformative, as in the case of Jean-Pierre Dupont, a priest in Brussels' Schaerbeek district. In 1970, in response to the rapid growth of the Moroccan population in his parish, he formed a »groupe Belgo-Immigré«, which was to encourage migrant participation in local politics with the aim of improving their socially difficult situation.⁷⁹ Through this initiative, his network grew locally but also on a national and international scale. By 1973, he made connections with several of the larger groups behind the strikes, among them most notably the French »Mouvement des Travailleurs Arabes« (MTA). This was a collective of Arab students, labourers, trade unionists and former politicians which, as later turned out, had previously been active in hunger strikes in Paris churches.⁸⁰ In their pursuit of better living conditions in Belgium, the collective held demonstrations in north Brussels and, with the backing of Fr Dupont, began to occupy churches in December 1973.⁸¹ In the

73 Belgische Bisschoppenconferentie, Pastorale verklaring van de Bisschoppen over de problemen van de immigranten in België, March 1973, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 452/1.

74 Ibid., p. 3.

75 Ibid., pp. 3–5 and 9–11.

76 Belgische Bisschoppenconferentie, Brief aan de immigranten, March 1974, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 452/1.

77 Belgische Bisschoppenconferentie, Pastorale verklaring, pp. 11 and 14 f.

78 Ibid., 11.

79 Mohamed Benzaouia, Regard »autochtone« sur l'immigration marocaine, in: Bruxelles en mouvements, 2015, no. 277, URL: <<https://www.ieb.be/Regard-autochtone-sur-l-immigration-marocaine>> [3.6.2024].

80 Ibid.; Mazyar Khooinian, La campagne de régularisation, p. 5; Hanus, »Crevons la faim. Joyeux Noël!«, p. 20.

81 Pierre Arnould/Luc Uytendaele, Problèmes urbaines Belgo-Immigrés, 23.9.1974, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 51; Résolument du côté des pauvres, in: De Zondag, 12.1.1974, pp. 3–4.

first months of 1974, their actions seemed to provoke little response except some pushback from the local municipality and police.

On 22 March 1974, a small faction of activists upped the stakes and launched a hunger strike in the church of Saint-Jean-et-Nicolas in Schaerbeek, again with the support of Fr Dupont.⁸² Both church and priest were of particular significance, and for several reasons their role went well beyond their willingness to provide sanctuary. First, the strike was the product of a longer process of establishing connections in the Schaerbeek neighbourhood, based on the aforementioned »groupe Belgo-Immigré«. Testimony to the importance of these pre-existing local ties can be found in the promptness with which Fr Dupont was able to convene a diverse support group for the strike, comprising Catholic laypeople as well as university professors, leftist Maoist militants, progressive Jews and local Spanish, Greek and Moroccan communities.⁸³ Second, the hunger strike was reminiscent of, if not immediately linked to, the wave of hunger strikes for regularisation that had engulfed France. Starting in Valence in December 1972, local migrants would seek refuge in Catholic churches run by priests known to have been active in the wake of 1968 and launch hunger strikes to underscore their demand for papers.⁸⁴ It is most likely, as several historians have argued, that the strikers in Schaerbeek had immediate connections through the MTA with French strikers, copying their approach, rationale and playbook.⁸⁵ Less noted, however, is that the same is true for Fr Dupont, who tapped into the well-established network between Belgian and French activist priests and their longer tradition of social engagement, including the post-war worker-priest movement.⁸⁶ Inspired by their subversive approach to religion, Dupont adopted their strategy of a multifaceted *comité de soutien* and, more importantly, was pushed to take a stand in the media. Migrants and priest alike were thus connected to a larger movement of international action which inspired them to define distinct roles, both in conjunction with each other and vis-à-vis the state. Third, the dynamic was as much the result of as the next step in a longer process of Catholic actors redefining their significance in western European urban neighbourhoods.⁸⁷ As such, Fr Dupont did not present himself as an authoritative spiritual voice but rather as a mediator between various local stakeholders, enabling their voices to be heard in favour of social change.⁸⁸ Likewise, the spatial role of the church building in the

82 Jean-Pierre Dupont, Communiqué de presse, 1.4.1974, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 452/1.

83 Benzaoûia, Regard »autochtone« sur l'immigration marocaine; Naegels, Nieuw België, p. 323.

84 Cf. Gilles Verbunt, Au service des immigrés, des prêtres qui font de la politique, in Études 11, 1974, no. 341, pp. 577–585.

85 Naegels, Nieuw België, p. 323; Gregory Mauzé/Youri Lou Vertongen, 1974. Migrants et syndicats se mobilisent en Belgique, in: Plein Droit, 2017, no. 115, pp. 32–36, here: pp. 35 f.; Rabah Aissaoui, Le discours du Mouvement des travailleurs arabes (MTA) dans les années 1970 en France. Mobilisation et mémoire du combat anticolonial, in: hommes & migrations, 2006, no. 1263, pp. 105–119.

86 Cf. Charles Suaud, Prêtres et ouvriers. Une double fidélité mise à l'épreuve, 1944–1969, Paris 2004.

87 Minne, From Slums to Community, pp. 22 f.; Prévoit, Catholicisme social et urbanisme.

88 Jean-Pierre Dupont, Pétition qui sera adressé aux autorités, 2.4.1974, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 452/1; Id., Communiqué de presse.

neighbourhood was rearticulated, moving from its traditional liturgical function to that of a safe haven for precarious inhabitants and an icon of social activism.

As the strike developed, Fr Dupont came even more prominently to the fore, presenting himself as a representative of the Schaerbeek neighbourhood and its pressing social needs and taking a stand on the difficult topic of migration from the perspective of human rights.⁸⁹ The church of Saint-Jean-et-Nicolas remained a bastion of refuge even though the local municipality called for the strike to cease and police twice tried to gain entrance. Far from the momentum subsiding, two more hunger strikes erupted in the vicinity, including at the church of Saint-Jean-Baptiste-au-Béguinage, further drawing the attention of both media and politicians.⁹⁰ The national government, however, was unwilling to grant the strikers either work permits or regularisation and on 1 April issued a warrant for the arrest and immediate repatriation of all strikers, breaching the principle of church sanctuary.⁹¹ Fr Dupont promptly announced a press conference to condemn the government's illicit intervention while calling for a coalition against the arbitrary enforcement of immigration policies.⁹² His calls were widely heard and various organisations now also took a stand, most notably the trade unions.⁹³ In the months after the hunger strike, it became increasingly clear that a new approach was long overdue, and on 22 July 1974 the Belgian government issued a recruitment stop for low-skilled non-EEA workers. Simultaneously, it announced a regularisation campaign for irregular workers who had been active in Belgium before the 1 April, the end date of the hunger strike.⁹⁴ While the administrative side of this regularisation process fell to the trade unions, the process equally relied on raising awareness among eligible workers, often by local church communities following the example of Fr Dupont.⁹⁵ With about 8,000 regularisations by the end of the year and with the recruitment stop in place, the local hunger strike in the church of Saint-Jean-et-Nicolas had a considerable effect on Belgium's migration history.

III. Catholic approaches to integration, 1975–1985

Fr Dupont acted largely on his own initiative, with no formal support from the Church hierarchy. The Belgian bishops felt uneasy about the provocative protest and the unlikely coalition between a priest and, among others, Maoist activists. Yet they could hardly criticise Dupont for his commitment, as the Belgian delegation to

89 *Id.*, Justice aux immigrés dits clandestins, April 1974, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 452/1.

90 *Khoojinian*, La campagne de régularisation, pp. 18 f.

91 *Dupont*, Communiqué de presse.

92 *Jean-Pierre Dupont*, Pétition qui sera adressé aux autorités, 2.4.1974, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 452/1; *id.*, Justice aux immigrés dits clandestins, 4.1974, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 452/1; *Khoojinian*, La campagne de régularisation, pp. 7 f.

93 Brief aan het nationaal bureau, 2.12.1974, Amsab-ISG, Archief ABVV, 144.01036–40; Verslag Nationaal Bureau ACV, 17.12.1974, KADOC, Archief bestuursorganen van het ACV, 67; *Mazyar Khoojinian*, Le rôle des organisations syndicales dans la régularisation des clandestins de 1974–1975, in: *Les Cahiers du Fil Rouge*, 2014, no. 20, pp. 39–40.

94 *Khoojinian*, La campagne de régularisation, p. 18.

95 *Mauzé/Vertongen*, 1974, pp. 35 f.; *Khoojinian*, Le rôle des organisations syndicales.

Vatican II had joined its French counterpart in pleading for precisely this kind of Catholic social engagement and activism.⁹⁶ The bishops were caught between two fires and therefore kept their comments to a minimum.⁹⁷ Similarly, several actors within the Brussels vicariat provided support behind the scenes, but the unit itself did not intervene, possibly out of caution not to be seen to act too politically.⁹⁸ A similarly discreet attitude was adopted by Foyer and BAPO which, with their fundraising efforts in mind, refrained from taking a political stand in the larger migration policy debate. Additionally, the field of Catholic welfare provision in Brussels was generally still territorially divided, so that parish priests and organisations preferred to support the cause from the sidelines to avoid appearing intrusive or disrespectful of parish autonomy.⁹⁹ This does not imply, however, that they regarded the events of 1974 as inconsequential to them – quite the contrary. The hunger strike and the subsequent migration stop were, after all, the culmination points of a larger paradigm shift from regarding migrants as temporary guest workers to acknowledging that the settlement of migrants was a social phenomenon that would significantly impact the future.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, thanks to the wave of migrant strikes in the early 1970s and the disruptive 1974 hunger strike, labour migration became a topic of public debate in Belgium, more prominent than ever in press and politics. At the centre of this heightened attention lay Brussels, the country's prime migration hub and therefore the first city forced to address questions of migrant precarity, diversity and integration.

For the Brussels local care initiatives, with Foyer and BAPO at the forefront, this heightened sensitivity to migration was as much a confirmation of their relevance as it was a call to pivot quickly to the new social dynamics of urban migration. Both Foyer and BAPO were therefore formally recognised as caregivers and received more structural funding from 1974 onwards on the condition that they further professionalised their services. BAPO came to function as a concierge for referrals and administrative aid, increasing the accessibility of social security structures. The organisation was open to all but was well known for being most attentive to the problems of non-Belgian residents in Brussels.¹⁰¹ Foyer, in turn, was already recog-

96 *Dries Bosschaert*, *A Brave New World: Albert Dondeyne's Christian Humanism in the University and Society*, in: *Trajecta* 24, 2015, pp. 309–331, here: pp. 314–316; *id.*, *The Anthropological Turn, Christian Humanism, and Vatican II: Louvain Theologians Preparing the Path for »Gaudium et spes« (1942–1965)*, Leuven 2019, pp. 103–106 and 410–413.

97 Regarding the difficult position of the Catholic Church vis-à-vis the hunger strikes in France and Belgium, cf. *Gilles Verbunt*, *Au service des immigrés, des prêtres qui font de la politique*, in: *Études*, 1974, no. 341, pp. 577–586, here: pp. 577–579.

98 *Justitia et Pax* vers un statut juridique pour les immigrés, 1975, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 452/2; *Bernard Olivier*, *Les chrétiens face à problèmes urbaines*, 11.5.1974, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 51.

99 Interview with Johan Leman, 3.5.2023.

100 In recent years, historiography has moved away from understanding the Belgian recruitment stop as a sudden tipping point, instead emphasizing a longer, continuous process. Nevertheless, the events of 1974 prompted both governmental and non-governmental institutions to adjust their policies. Cf. *Sylvain Laurens*, »1974« et la fermeture des frontières, *Analyse critique d'une décision érigée en turning-point*, in: *Politix*, 2008, no. 82, pp. 69–94; *Naegels*, *Nieuw België*, pp. 158–164 and 334 f.

101 Interview with Marie-Paule Moreau, 31.1.2023.

nised as a non-profit for youth work in 1969 but was not granted financial means at the time because its activities, classified as social prevention work, were judged ineligible.¹⁰² By 1974, however, it was evident that adequate care for future generations was necessary, and the flourishing centre was fully recognised as a youth organisation by the ministry for Francophone culture.¹⁰³ Strengthened in their functioning, both initiatives were able to expand their operations and outreach significantly, so that by 1978 BAPO counted some 2,600 interventions annually and Foyer provided activities for around 1,000 children, of which 350 were permanent members who »called Foyer their home outside of school and bed hours«.¹⁰⁴

In addition to this pressure to professionalise and expand, migrant care initiatives were expected to help facilitate a meaningful social and cultural coexistence of migrants and nationals. In Belgium, methods of integration took preference over assimilation as civil society actors and new social movements quickly and explicitly distinguished their approach from French and German models of protectionism and repatriation. The Belgian bishops, for their part, already subscribed to integration in their 1973 pastoral letter, while both the Christian and socialist trade unions resolutely opted for integrative strategies in the wake of the 1974 regularisation campaign.¹⁰⁵ This evolution towards a rationale of integration was hardly disruptive for BAPO and Foyer, who were already pioneers in understanding the situation of migrants. Additionally, to determine what exactly integration meant to them, they could rely on the Catholic principle of personalism, which had gained a renewed importance in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.¹⁰⁶ This theological social teaching underscored the importance of the unique identity, freedom and culture of each person as a prerequisite for harmonious social connections.¹⁰⁷ In other words, it is the individual process of social, cultural and spiritual self-development that enables people to meaningfully participate in and (re-)integrate into society. While personalism originally applied to civic participation in general, it was easily adaptable to dynamics of migrant integration and connected seamlessly to Catholic teachings on pluralism and interreligious and intercultural dialogue.¹⁰⁸

102 Jeugdtehuis V.Z.W.: verslag van het werkjaar 1969, 1.3.1970, Foyer, Folder 68, p. 3.

103 Ministère de la culture Française, Reclassement Maison des Jeunes, 15.1.1974, Foyer, Folder 70.

104 Bruxelles Accueil: Accueil des étrangers 1977–1978, BAPO, Archive rapports annuels; *Paul Steels*, Foyer 1968–1978: Tien jaar poging tot jeugdzorg onder migranten, Brussels 1978, pp. 2 f. and 20 f.

105 Belgische Bisschoppenconferentie, Pastorale verklaring, pp. 1–3; *Stijn Carpentier*, Von Innen, zusammen und alleine. Mobilisierung und Integration marokkanischer und türkeistämmiger Arbeitsmigrant*innen in die belgischen Gewerkschaften nach dem Anwerbestopp (1974–1985), in: *Simon Goeke/Caner Tekin* (eds.), Migration, soziale Bewegungen und Selbstorganisation. Gewerkschaftliche und urbane Kämpfe von und für Migrant*innen seit den 1960er Jahren, Cologne 2024 (forthcoming).

106 *John Borelli*, Interreligious Dialogue at Vatican II, in: *Catherine E. Clifford/Massimo Faggioli*, The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II, Oxford 2023, pp. 300–320.

107 *Juan Manuel Burgos*, An Introduction to Personalism, Washington DC 2018, pp. 8 and 49–51; *Thomas Rourke/Rosita A. Chazarreta Rourke*, A Theory of Personalism, Lanham 2006, pp. 65–67.

108 *Dries Deweer*, The Political Theory of Personalism: Maritain and Mounier on Personhood and Citizenship, in: *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 74, 2013, pp. 108–126; *Modrzejewski/Raczyński*, Labour Migrants in the Light of Personalistic Philosophy and Social Doctrine of Karol Wojtyła.

Moreover, its emphasis on self-emancipation served as a tool to rectify colonial legacies in Catholic social teachings and move away from the paternalist and patronising attitudes that had long defined the Church's attitude towards non-European peoples.¹⁰⁹ For BAPO and Foyer, personalism thus offered a pragmatic path away from assimilation or paternalism and towards more cooperative methods for fostering integration through mutual solidarity.¹¹⁰

While the call for professionalisation and the new focus on integration were thus features of continuity for BAPO and Foyer, they nevertheless necessitated a reimagining of the migrant as a precarious subject. Precisely because of the focus on self-development, migrants could no longer be cast as victims or passive actors. Instead, BAPO and particularly Foyer now reappraised them as underprivileged but nevertheless resilient enough to improve their situation. In their own role as categorical welfare providers, BAPO and Foyer imagined themselves as facilitators of this process.¹¹¹ As before, they focused on alleviating the aggravating effects of urban life on migrant precarity. Concretely, BAPO focused on supporting migrants in their efforts to find their place in Brussels, bolstering their independence and self-reliance. To this end, it doubled down on its function as a centre for referral rather than intervention and supported applicants in navigating Brussels' social and charitable services, local politics and sociocultural opportunities.¹¹² This practice further expanded the sizeable network of BAPO, thereby raising the organisation's profile as a point of reference for Belgian government bodies and city services in dealing with migration-specific issues in Brussels. Furthermore, Marie-Rose Degive was convinced that interreligious dialogue would foster integration and, together with the missionary Charles Dekkers of the White Fathers, in 1978 founded the »El Kalima« centre to promote the favourable effects of multiconfessional community prayers in local churches and marriages between Christians and Muslims.¹¹³ The Brussels vicariate, in turn, was committed to the dignity of migrants and launched a task force against xenophobia to draft appropriate anti-discrimination measures. Hoping for the support of the bishops, the vicariate planned a wider campaign to condemn xenophobia and to lift the stigma of Brussels as the centre of all migration-related problems.¹¹⁴ Foyer, finally, was concerned for the future of the second generation and spent considerable resources on the development of a holistic approach to the integration of migrant youth.¹¹⁵ Although the centre no longer spoke of »ghettos«, instead preferring the more neutral »foreigner neighbourhood«,

109 Elizabeth Foster, *African Catholic. Decolonization and the Transformation of the Church*, Cambridge/London 2019, pp. 61–68.

110 Steels, Foyer 1968–1978, pp. 20–40; Interview with Marie-Paule Moreau, 31.1.2023; Interview with Francis Hayat, 3.3.2013.

111 Steels, Foyer 1968–1978, pp. 38–41.

112 BAPO, *Statistiques* 1976, 2.1974, BAPO, *Archive rapports annuels*; Interview with Marie-Paule Moreau, 31.1.2023; Interview with Francis Hayat, 3.3.2013.

113 Emilio Platti, Editorial, in *id.* (ed.), *Les quarante ans du Centre El Kalima*, Brussels 2019, pp. 4–5.

114 Arthur vander Taelen, campagne: je suis pas raciste, mais ..., 6.10.1980, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 183.

115 Cf. Steels, Foyer 1968–1978, pp. 20–40; Eugeen Roosens/Johan Leman/Marcelo Suarez-Orozco et al., *Tweede generatie immigrantenjongeren. Sociaal-culturele determinanten van hun slagen of mislukken*, Brussels 1986.

it continued to argue that the social and cultural isolation of migrant families in suburban Brussels must be overcome.¹¹⁶ To this end, Foyer strengthened its promotion of social mobility, for instance by making higher education more accessible. Simultaneously, it professionalised in order to be better equipped to deal with youth delinquency, child neglect and substance abuse in the north quarter.¹¹⁷ Thus, even with the new goal of integrating migrants, urban life in Brussels city remained a focal point for Catholic actors and the challenges they sought to tackle.

Finally, the most significant changes to BAPO and Foyer were prompted by the expanding migrant care sector. The years after 1974 saw a surge in initiatives aimed at migrants. For the Catholic organisations, this entailed greater opportunities for collaboration and visibility than before, but it also necessitated defining and delineating their services to validate their relevance within the growing sector. This positioning exercise became all the more crucial as the field came under scrutiny from local and national policymakers as questions of migration and integration became politicised in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Thanks to its broad and unique network, BAPO successfully consolidated its position as first point of response and referral centre, preserving its neutral position while securing reliable government funding in addition to the donations it regularly received.¹¹⁸ Foyer, meanwhile, which had been expanding with new branches and projects, was constantly in need of funding.¹¹⁹ It sought to establish itself as an activist voice in Brussels and was successful in publicising its activities, notably with a visit from King Baudouin in 1978.¹²⁰ Under the leadership of Johan Leman, a Dominican friar and anthropologist, since 1981, the centre fully embraced its public role, publishing studies on the Moroccan and Turkish communities in Brussels and raising its voice in political debates as the unofficial representative of the Molenbeek district.¹²¹

Concluding remarks

Throughout the 1980s, public debate on the presence of migrants in Belgium grew ever more tense, with Brussels once again at the centre of the discussion. In times of recession, migrant poverty and unemployment were especially visible in the urban centre, and district majors started to problematise the high concentration of non-European migrants in their municipalities. The vocabulary they used echoed xenophobic and far-right discourses, signalling to migrant populations that they were no longer welcome. To publicise their discontent and stir the debate, they organised so-called urban safaris, provoking the idea that their municipalities were

116 Steels, *Foyer 1968–1978*, pp. 32 and 34–37.

117 *Ibid.*, pp. 42–48.

118 Cf. *Bruxelles Accueil – Porte Ouverte 1987–1988, 1988*, BAPO, *Archive rapports annuels*, pp. 3–5.

119 *Annexe au carnet de reconnaissance*, 17.12.1977, Foyer, box 71; Interview with Johan Leman 3.5.2023; Interview with Bashir M'Rabet, 10.5.2023.

120 *J. Teuwen*, *En toen kwam de Koning*, in: *Kerk en Leven*, 21.12.1978.

121 Interview with Johan Leman 3.5.2023.

gradually turning into north Africa.¹²² In response, the Catholic field in Brussels aligned with other civil society actors to denounce xenophobia and advocate for tolerance, yet despite their efforts it became evident that a sense of unease towards migrant communities had surfaced in the city as well as in society at large.¹²³ With tensions running high, the political response was not long in coming, and top-down interventions from policymakers on both local and national levels sought to streamline and formalise the migrant care sector. They prescribed methods for the integration of migrants and forced existing services to adapt accordingly, subjecting them to a project-based subsidy system as a measure of control.¹²⁴

This restructuring of the sector saw many initiatives struggle, but the long-established Catholic organisations withstood the pressure and even thrived. BAPO enjoyed relative stability as a recognised social service but nevertheless still adapted and expanded to remain in touch with neighbourhood needs. It linked to numerous initiatives for refugees and migrants and established Brussels' first social translation service.¹²⁵ For its part, Foyer was consistently successful in securing project subsidies. In no small part, thanks to its prominent presence in the Molenbeek neighbourhood, it was given the opportunity to run innovative projects on bicultural education and professional re-orientation, anti-racism and sport as a tool for neighbourhood cohesion.¹²⁶ When the semi-governmental Brussels centre for migrant workers went bankrupt in 1985, Foyer took over as a touchstone for the Flemish government's migrant policy in Brussels, and five years later it was appointed as a regional integration centre, further embedding its social and political relevance.¹²⁷ Finally, Brussels' activist parish churches, notably Saint-Jean-Baptiste-au-Béguinage, remained places of sanctuary and political contention. Since 1974, they have hosted approximately a dozen more occupations and protests in favour of migrant and refugee rights, most recently in the summer of 2021.¹²⁸

By tracing the evolution of these Catholic initiatives from small neighbourhood projects to professionalised nodes in a formal migrant care sector, this article offers several insights. First, it shows that Catholic actors did not address the issue of migrant precarity in a reflex of traditional charity but rather discovered it in their attempts to reconfigure senses of community, urban space and Catholic progressive thought in the late 1960s. In this larger process of meaning-making, they projected their understanding of the modernising city and its dynamics of social isolation on to the migrant other, intricately connecting both issues. Second, the analysis argues

122 *Serge Jaumain/Joost Vaesen*, Roger Nols: un bourgmestre (in)déboulonnable?, in: *Brussels Studies*, 2022, no. 168, URL: <<https://journals.openedition.org/brussels/6055>> [3.6.2024].

123 *Campagne urbaine contre la xénophobie*, 1984, KADOC, Archief AvdT, box 83.

124 *VOCOM Jaarverslag 1984*, 1.1985, Amsab-ISG, Archief VOCOM, 286.1.1; *Lode van Loock/Veerle Hobin*, Dossier Migratie in 1983, in: *Bareel* 7, 1984, no. 25, pp. 3–19.

125 Interview with Marie-Paule Moreau, 31.1.2023; *Brussel Onthaal vzw: Jaarverslag 2010, 2011*, URL: <<https://www.sociaalvertaalbureau.be/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Jaarverslag-2010-NLVO.pdf>> [21.1.2024].

126 Foyer, *Het onthaalcentrum Foyer: pilootprojecten*, Brussels 1984, pp 2 f., 12–14 and 18–23.

127 Interview with Johan Leman, 3.5.2023.

128 *Anne Vanrenterghem*, Al een week strijden hongerstakers om regularisatie in Brussel, in: *VRT NWS*, 1.6.2021. URL: <<https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2021/06/01/hongerstakers-mahdi/>> [14.2.2024].

that this approach, rather than limiting the scope of these projects, connected them with wider movements in Catholic urbanism in western European migration hubs. For instance, thanks to the manifold activist connections of its parish priest, a Brussels church continued the wave of migrant hunger strikes that had begun in France. Meanwhile, neighbourhood initiatives have adopted and adapted social vocabularies of agency and self-reliance from a new surge in Catholic social activism and continue to plead their case for constructive migrant integration. In the 1980s, as the settlement of Moroccan and Turkish migrants in Belgium became a contentious topic, this combination of local embeddedness and international expertise enabled them to professionalise and crystallise their operations in the politicised migrant care sector. Today, BAPO, Foyer and the north quarter churches are still among the leading Catholic initiatives for migrants and refugees in western European urban centres, continually reimagining what it means to be Catholic and socially committed in the modern, rapidly changing metropolis.