



Kasteel van Loppem

STICHTING JEAN VAN CALOEN

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A little conservation project

The cell of Maria van Caloen

Looking at the outside, the praying chapel of Loppem castle is a clearly recognizable part of the neo-Gothic building. This was also the wish of Charles van Caloen (1815-1896) and Savina de Gourcy Serainchamps (1825-1912), who commissioned the building. The single nave prayer room on the first floor is two storeys high and has a wooden barrel vault. The eye is drawn to the apse that has a damask motif painted on the wall with stained-glass windows above it that were designed by Jean Baptiste Bethune. They represent the patron saints of the castle

owners and their children. In the prayer room there are *obiits* (or funeral hatchments) of deceased relatives, paintings with religious subjects, Stations of the Cross, candelabras, furniture, etc. The number of relics in the two alcoves is particularly impressive. The red beret (or biretta), as well as two zucchetos of Popes Pius IX (pontif. 1846-1878) and Pius XII (pontif. 1939-1958) can be considered as second class relics. Among all these devotional items, our attention was drawn to a model of a monastic cell.



Maria van Caloen, destined for a religious life

The eldest of the five children of Charles van Caloen and his wife Savina was Baroness Maria van Caloen (1848-1925). She was born on 1 June 1848 in the Caloen's townhouse at Dijver 11 (now the College of Europe) in Bruges and was baptized in the nearby Church of Our Lady. Her first communion took place on 21 June 1859 in the convent chapel of the Hemels

-daele Institute, where she attended school for two years. She was then home-schooled by a French and English teacher. Maria went to boarding school in Normandy and later in Paris, together with her sister Savina.

On 31 October 1869, the van Caloen couple, together with their children Maria, Savina and Ernest, left Loppem castle for a journey to Rome.¹ They travelled to Italy via Germany and on the way visited Verona, Padua, Venice and... the battlefield at Castelfidardo. The latter was a true place of pilgrimage for the Ultramontans, including the van Caloens. After all, it was there, barely nine years before, on 18 September 1860, that whilst trying to unify Italy, the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia had defeated the pope's army. The sacred ground was steeped in the blood of the defenders of the Church. They had given their lives as martyrs for the successor of Saint Peter.

Once in Rome, the family from Bruges attended the inaugural ceremony of the First Vatican Council in St. Peter's Basilica on 8 December. An even more important event for the deeply religious family followed a few days later: on 11 December, ten year old Ernest van Caloen received confirmation in the chapel of the Belgian Pontifical College.² His sponsor was a good friend of his parents, the Rt. Rev. Faict, bishop of Bruges, who was in Rome at the time because of the Vatican Council. Ernest's godfather was another family friendly, Monsignor Nardi.³ That wasn't nothing, but the 'moment supreme' of



Savina van Caloen with her daughters Maria (right) and Savina (left)
Undated photo (around 1860?), from the red photo album
Loppem Castle, Jean van Caloen Foundation



Maria and Ernest, the eldest and youngest of the five children of Charles and Savina van Caloen

Undated photo (1867 or 1868), from the red photo album

h. 10,3 x w. 6,2 cm

Loppem Castle, Jean van Caloen Foundation

the trip to Rome was yet to come: on 15 December 1869, at 7 am, Ernest van Caloen received his first communion from the hands of Pope Pius IX, in his private chapel (!), in the presence of his father and ... Mons. Nardi. In his bedroom, the Holy Father handed the boy a cameo with the image of Our Lady. His mother Savina was bedridden that day and since women were not admitted to the Papal Chapel, the daughters went to a church to pray for their younger brother. Everyone was together in spirit. It is not known how long the family stayed in Rome. A candle kept in the chapel of Loppem castle bearing the inscription 'ROMA / 2 FEBRAIO / 1870', shows that they were still in the Eternal City at Candlemas. They probably started their return journey shortly afterwards, this time via France.

Charles van Caloen and his children Maria and Ernest arrived in Loppem on 10 March 1870. Felled by illness, the two Savinas spent 14 days rehabilitating in Nice and would only return home by 25 March.

The trip to Rome certainly left a deep impression on both parents and children. Even more than before, they all became ardent defenders of the pope and the Church. Back home, 22-year-old Maria van Caloen heeded the call that she had heard since childhood, opting for a life of prayer and seclusion inside convent walls. She chose the Order of Carmelites, a strict mendicant order which professes collective poverty and in which the sisters are dependent on their own work



Maria van Caloen
Undated photo (around 1867-1868?),
from the green photo album
h. 10,4 x w. 6,4 cm
Loppem Castle, Jean van Caloen
Foundation

and almsgiving for their maintenance. The contrast with the wealthy environment of the van Caloen family could not have been greater.

On 24 July 1870 she entered the Carmelite convent in Brussels (rue des Quatres Bras). After mass in the chapel of the family castle, led by the Loppem chaplain, Steelant, Maria took her leave of her sister, brothers, the staff and the castle grounds. With her parents she travelled to Brussels via Halle where her uncle

Louis van Caloen (1817-1912), a Jesuit, awaited them. At the Marian sanctuary they begged Our Lady for protection and mercy. In the afternoon, they continued their way to Brussels. At the same time, the remaining van Caloen children went from Loppem to Ver-Assebroek, the other Marian sanctuary in the Bruges region, to entrust their sister Maria to the Mother of God.⁴

After her postulancy, Maria became a novice on 25 August

1870 in the presence of her family. Albert and Ernest served as altar boys. Maria, clad in a white, silk gown adorned with three pieces of Bruges lace, became Jesus' bride and took her place in the middle of the chapel's choir. After the ceremony she received her habit and a bridal crown of orange blossoms. She left her worldly name behind and went on to live as 'Sœur Marie-Joseph du Sacré-Cœur'. On 25 August 1871, she took solemn vows in the chapter room of the convent.



Portrait of Maria van Caloen, just before entering the Carmelite order

Fritz Hickmann, 1870

Oil painting on canvas, h. 79 x w. 65 cm

Loppem Castle, Jean van Caloen Foundation

© Oswald Pauwels, 2001

The next day, the family was present in the chapel for a glorious celebration. Sœur Marie-Joseph du Sacré-Cœur remained, as the rule required, in the convent when she took her black veil. From that moment on, she distanced herself definitively from the outside world.

Due to the construction of the megalomaniac Palace of Justice of Brussels, the convent was expropriated. With the help of land purchased by Charles van Caloen, the community of nuns found a new location in Uccle (rue Vanderkindere) where the new convent known as 'Carmel du Sacré-Cœur' was inaugurated on 2 August 1881.⁵ The patrons Charles and Savina van Caloen, as well as their granddaughter Maria Gillès de Pélichy, were present at this special occasion. Maria took her niece under her veil and turned to Christ with the words "My Jesus, I give her to you! Take her!..." (*"Mon Jésus, je vous la donne! Prenez la!..."*) The young Maria Gillès also chose the monastic life but died during her novitiate with the White Sisters of Africa in Algiers on 18 September 1899.

On 4 August, two days after the inauguration of the convent in Uccle, two new bells were also consecrated. The patrons of the larger bell were Baron Charles van Caloen and Viscountess Mathilde Vilain XIII. The patrons of the second bell were Baroness Savina van Caloen, *née* Countess de Gourcy Serainchamps, and Senator Léon van Ockerhout.⁶ Maria's parents also donated the choir stalls, decorated with the Caloen – de Gourcy coats of

arms, whilst Léon van Ockerhout financed the statues of Our Lady of Victories (or Victory) and of St. Joseph, which were placed above the gates in the church.

The convent church was consecrated on 17 July 1882 by the Rt. Rev. van den Branden de Reeth, auxiliary bishop of Mechelen.

Sœur Marie-Joseph du Sacré-Cœur was sub-prioress from 1890 to 1896. She described her life at the convent as follows: "To love, to remain silent, to suffer, to act against my liking to accomplish the will of God, accommodating myself to that of my fellow human; behold my fate, too happy to bear the cross God gives me with his own hands in the course of his Providence" (*"Aimer, se taire, souffrir, agir contre mon goût pour accomplir la volonté de Dieu, m'accommodant à celle du prochain; voilà mon partage, trop heureuse de porter la croix que Dieu me donne de ses propres mains dans le cours de sa Providence"*).

Life at a convent meant that Maria van Caloen no longer had physical contact with her family, apart from those few festive highlights in monastic life. Following Cardinal Schiaffino's visit to the monastery in 1888, Joseph van Caloen (1853-1932), who in the meantime had become a Benedictine and was known as Dom Gérard, was nevertheless able to meet his sister. She was grateful that he was allowed to bless her and her cell. On 27 May 1897, the feast of the Ascension, Sœur Marie-Joseph du Sacré-Cœur had a vision in which her father,

who had died the year before, appeared to her. Coincidentally, a few days before her death in 1925, unsuspecting that this would be the last time she would meet her brother, she was again visited by Joseph who celebrated Mass for her and from whom she received the Holy Communion. Three days after his departure, Maria suffered a stroke that left her paralysed on her right side. After three days, her condition improved for a few hours until she caught a respiratory infection. Maria van Caloen died in her convent cell in Uccle on 7 October 1925, aged 77.

Model of a convent cell: a form of recreation, meditation and a memento for the home front

The model has the following dimensions: h. 16.2 cm, w. 17.7 cm and d. 13 cm. The base and three walls are made of a wooden panel. With the exception of the base, the outsides are covered in wall-paper. The front consists of a glass plate which allows a view inside. The top of the model is covered with frosted glass, creating a certain ambiance. The right side wall has a window with glass panes, also in plain glass. The interior is, as one would expect of a Carmelite cell, extremely sober. A door, a bed with a large crucifix above it, a chair, a writing desk/book case, a few images of saints on the wall to stimulate personal devotion. Everything is made of paper and cardboard, the whip on the wall is made of string, there is a feather in the 'inkwell'. In the centre of the

cell is a Carmelite, praying from her missal. Her face and hands are made of wax, the torso and limbs are pieces of wood. This is similar to stake Madonnas where only the head and hands are sculpted whilst wooden slats under the dress suggest the shape of the body. The habit and scapular, as well as the cloak and veil are made of textiles, as in real life, in the simplest of materials. Only the red lips and pronounced eyebrows give the nun a somewhat frivolous appearance.

Such models of a nun's cell with a figure in habit are typical of women's convents. They were a form of leisure, but also a meditation exercise. They were sent to the family as a (tactile) memento. Un-



Model of the cell of Maria van Caloen

Maria van Caloen, 1871-1881

Wood, wax, textiles, string, paper, glass, h. 16.2 cm, w. 17.7 cm, d. 13 cm

Loppem Castle, Jean van Caloen Foundation

doubtedly, this souvenir of their eldest daughter was given a place of honour in the chapel of Loppem castle where the family went every day if not for mass, then at least for a moment of prayer or meditation. Thus, despite the distance, they were one with their daughter/elder sister.

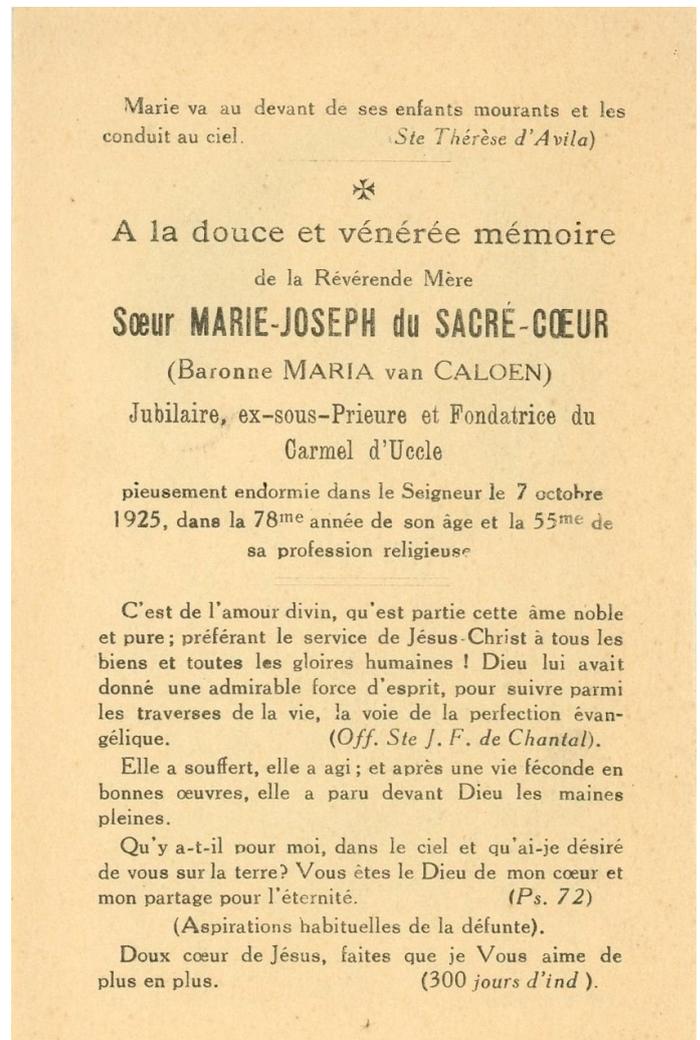
Meanwhile, after 140 years, this delicate trinket was showing signs of damage and was therefore carefully restored in early 2022. Among all the valuable works of art in the castle, the model of Maria's cell at the convent is hardly noticeable. A little bit like her life, secluded in the anonymity of convent life.

The model was given a more visible place in the chapel for the visitors.

Benoît Kervyn de Volkaersbeke



Maria van Caloen as Carmelite, in her old age
Undated photo, from the green photo album
h. 8,8 x w. 5,7 cm
Loppem Castle, Jean van Caloen Foundation



Mortuary card of sister Marie-Joseph du Sacré-Cœur
October 7th 1925
h. 11,6 x b. 7,0 cm
Loppem Castle, Jean van Caloen Foundation

Notes

1. Sons Joseph and Albert van Caloen stayed in Belgium for their studies.
2. The Belgian Pontifical College, founded in 1844, offers Belgian bishops the opportunity to have a number of seminarians follow their training in Rome. They stay at the College and study at one of the Pontifical Universities. The most famous student of the Belgian Pontifical College was a certain Karol Wojtyła, who later became Pope John Paul II. Between 1997 and 2008, the rector of the Belgian College was the West-Fleming Rt. Rev. Johan Bonny, who is now Bishop of Antwerp. Belgian bishops reside at the College when they stay in Rome.
3. Mons. Francesco Nardi (1808-1877) was a professor of canon law in Padua, auditor of the *Rota* and secretary of *the Congregation of Bishops and Regulars*. Since 1860 in particular, the prelate, who was an intimate friend of Pope Pius IX, was a close friend of the van Caloen family. Almost every year he spent a few days at Loppem castle where “la chambre de Mgr. Nardi” awaited him. The prelate became a key figure between the van Caloens and the pope, whom they truly revered.
4. In the church of Mary Immaculate in Ver-Assebroek, a miraculous statue of the Virgin Mary has been venerated since the 18th century. After his successful eye operation, Charles van Caloen and his family went on a pilgrimage there and donated a silver heart containing his portrait and a lock of hair to the Mother of God.
5. The veneration of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was approved by Pope Pius IX in 1856. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, this resulted in an unprecedented peak in devotion, as is evidenced by the countless Sacred Heart statues and several churches (including the Church of the Sacred Heart in Bruges, the former church of the Jesuits) and other educational institutions, convents and hospitals bearing that name. The most famous of them all is the Sacré-Cœur basilica in Montmartre that was consecrated in 1891.
6. Léon van Ockerhout (1829-1919) is the father of Marie-Thérèse (1858-1940), wife of Albert van Caloen (1856-1933). The latter is the brother of Sœur Marie-Joseph du Sacré-Cœur. In Bruges Léon van Ockerhout lived in an imposing town house in the Vlamingstraat (St James’ parish); in the summer he stayed at his castle Emmaüs in Loppem. He donated the land for the construction of the St. Andrew’s Abbey Zevenkerken and for the Priory of Our Lady of Bethany in Loppem.

Sources

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