

Belgium : Cardinal cancels talk over death threats



The controversial Cardinal Gustaaf Joos, was forced into cancelling a talk that he was preparing to give to the Chrétien Belgique group in Brussels after receiving emailed death threats, *The Sprout* has learnt. The cardinal, a mild-mannered parish priest and moral theologian elevated to the red cap by Pope John Paul II in October 2003, had become famous for his outspoken views in January after giving an interview with P-Magazine, a Flemish Maxim style lads' mag.

His statements were aimed at the sacred cows of modern secular Belgium - homosexuality, democracy and so on. After dismissing the vast majority of homosexuals as "perverts" he went on to condemn parliamentary democracy as a "joke".

"Democracy? Politics? Don't make me laugh," he scoffed. "It's all well and good but it's a joke. On what basis are people voting? Not on reason, but on the values of the media. It is the most sympathetic, not the most sensible, who is victorious in politics. Whether he is an oaf or a decent man is irrelevant. As a result, there are a lot of airheads in politics." Warming to his theme he went on, "I find it strange that a snottish 18 year old has the same vote as a father of seven. One has no responsibilities whatsoever; the other provides for tomorrow's citizens."

He then went on to support the oldest profession and the possibility of married priests.

These comments prompted the Belgian Government Quango, the Centre for Equal Opportunities and Opposition to Racism, (the same organisation attempting to legally close down the Vlams Blok) to make a legal complaint which is still crawling through the Belgian legal system. Their problem with the Cardinal was that he refused to apologise and kow tow to their demands that he retract. According to their website, "The case was made worse by the fact that the

cardinal stood by his comments, not apologizing and repeating them elsewhere in the media and in front of cameras".

When contacted by *The Sprout*, their press office had no idea what was happening with the case and the legal office did not appear to care. "We do not know what is happening or when it will happen, it is just a complaint. It was apparently just a good piece of PR for the Centre.

However as the fuss died down, the Cardinal was not about to shut up. He agreed to speak at a meeting of staunchly conservative Catholic group, Belgique et Chrétienté. The meeting was set for the 13th May in Brussels. It was titled "Christian obligations to respect and family values to defend" and would no doubt have been a repeat of his beliefs on contentious matters such as gay adoption. The meeting was prefigured by reports on the State news agency Belga describing the meeting as an extreme right meeting and the Cardinal himself as the author of homophobic and anti-semitic remarks. The Cardinal was questioned by local TV about his speech. His response was that "he had given his word to attend, so he would attend".

Yet on the day of the meeting he cancelled, claiming that he had received death threats - which were to be carried out if he had turned up. The Cardinal, an 80 year old with no internet connections receives his email via his next door neighbour in the Parish of Landskouter near Ghent. The number of people knowing this form of communication is very limited. He was frightened off. Though the "menace de morts" were reported to the police nothing has been done.

Though the views of the Cardinal are undoubtedly controversial, the mark of a free society is that of tolerance to views that people find challenging, the organiser of the conference, Alain Escada, a known right winger, claimed that this was the latest attempt by the left to "muzzle Catholics". He went on to say that he felt that the level of "left wing censorship" had reached epidemic proportions in Belgium.