

Jacques and Leopold Wiener's 1852 Tribute to C. R. A. Van Bommel, Bishop of Liège



Figure 1 Jacques and Leopold Wiener's medal struck in commemoration of the death of Cornelius Antoine Richard van Bommel, Bishop of Liège from 1829 to 1852.

The focus of this article is on a 19th century medal produced by the famed Belgian engraver-medalist Jacques Wiener and his younger brother Leopold. The medal was produced to commemorate Cornelius Richard Antoine Van Bommel, the bishop of Liège, shortly after his death in 1852 (Figure 1). Van Bommel was born into a world and time when French revolutionary zeal would spill across borders, affecting much of Europe for decades to come. It would likewise come to shape the events of Van Bommel's ecclesiastical life, placing him in a role and position perhaps somewhat unanticipated in its prominence and influence. Jacques Wiener, in conjunction with brother Leopold, produced only a handful of such large diameter medals in his body of work – implying that the impact of the personages and places so honored merited such grand commemoration. Why then did these two well-known engraver-medalists honor this man in this manner? The medal prompts even its most casual viewer with a number of questions: The medal's cryptic, congested, and highly abbreviated Latin legends seem to be almost intentionally uncommunicative – even to a 19th century audience more receptive to the language than that of the 21st century. Why? To whom were these enigmatic acclamations directed? To what events or characteristics do they draw attention? The reverse depicts the interior of an otherwise unidentified church; what significance did this anonymous monument play in the life and death of this bishop? The intent of this article is to investigate the historical backdrop for the medal, answer what questions we can, and pose others for future research. So, let us journey back in time to examine Belgian history from the Napoleonic era through the mid-nineteenth century to ascertain how it leads us to this medallic memorial.

The Historical Background - Liège and Belgium

Liège, in its various religious and political manifestations, was ruled locally by its prince-bishops from the 10th century onward, and maintained a state of semi-autonomy despite nominal oversight from various overlords including the Hapsburgs. It declared brief independence as the Republic of Liège in 1789, followed by the perhaps inevitable Hapsburg invasion in 1791 in response. Revolutionary France invaded Liège in 1794, dispensing with Hapsburg control but at the expense of oppression and exploitation, along with a certain amount of devastation and plunder, including the destruction of the cathedral of St. Lambert. The secular ideals of the occupying French were hostile to the idea of rule by a prince-bishop; a Concordat signed in 1801 between Napoleon Bonaparte and Pope Pius VII eliminated this form of local government. The Concordat included the redrawing of diocesan lines, resulting in the transfer of part of the Liège diocesan territory to the nearby diocese of Cologne. One of the Concordat's consequences was that the last prince-bishop of Liège, Bishop François Antoine Marie Constantin de Méan et de Beaurieux resigned *as bishop* on 26 November 1801.

Though no longer bishop, de Mean did not however concede his sovereign rights over the principality, later seeking redress at the Congress of Vienna, but to no avail. This Congress, convened in 1814-5, was charged with the goal of repairing the disarray and sovereign damage caused by the Napoleonic ravaging of Europe. Of its myriad provisions, the Congress ultimately determined that so-called South Netherlands and Liège should be united with the northern Netherlands to form a new "United Kingdom of the Netherlands" under William of Orange (ultimately as King William I) - despite notable objections arising from the South Netherlands. The people of South Netherlands, or Belgians, were naturally aggrieved at the lack of self-determination provided to them. When King William's modified Dutch "Fundamental Law" was presented to Belgian notables for ratification, it was soundly defeated despite the significant lobbying and pressure applied to the contrary. King William blatantly revised the votes, re-categorizing them as he saw fit, then resulting in an apparent pro-ratification final vote (Edmundson 372-373).

Natural cultural tensions existed within this "united" kingdom – notably language and religion. Northern Netherlands was deeply Calvinist and Southern Netherlands very Catholic. King William and his ministers were clearly biased in their rule of the united kingdom. Plans to host the seat of the government alternately in The Hague and Brussels never really materialized. All Ministries were located in The Hague. Ministers, diplomats, and military leaders were overwhelmingly Dutch (Edmundson 378). The heavy Dutch debt on the other hand was equally shared. King William, though well intentioned regarding the welfare of the overall kingdom, was autocratic and could be stubborn and overbearing particularly in the face of opposition, thereby aggravating these natural tensions – at least from a Belgian point of view. An 1815 decree greatly limited the freedom of the press, censoring criticism of the government and the production of political pamphlets (Edmundson 383). Through decrees in 1819 and 1822, he sought to impose the Dutch language in French-speaking Flanders, thus potentially limiting the aspirations and careers of young Flemish (Edmundson 383). He resisted calls from liberals to transfer some powers to government ministries. His Calvinist and French Revolution inspired philosophies of guaranteed equal protection to every religious creed and the enjoyment of the same civil and political rights to every subject of the king were perceived by the Catholics of Southern Netherlands as

intolerance toward them. A clearly Catholic-oriented ordinance of 1819 limited religious processions to no more than two per year. In 1825, a royal decree establishing the state-run Collegium Philosophicum in Louvain and shutting down religious schools in general particularly incensed the growing Catholic opposition. All candidates for the priesthood were thenceforward required to attend a two-year course of study in what we would now call the “Liberal Arts” prior to attending seminary. The teachers at this college were royally appointed. The net effect of this decree was that young men began seeking foreign seminaries for study, a practice that was quickly made illegal by yet another decree forcing all youth to attend either the Collegium Philosophicum or a state-run high school. King William effectively shut down access to the priesthood, and in response, the Catholic bishops refused to ordain any seminarian who attended the Collegium, resulting in a stalemate. By 1827, William was forced to reach out to Pope Leo XII for arbitration. This reluctant initiative resulted in the Concordat of 1829 (Edmundson 381), the chief provisions of which included the Pope reserving the right to name his bishops (though King William was given the right of objection), and attendance at the Collegium was made optional. Rome later simply annulled the Collegium and said bishops would take their instruction on educating seminarians only from Rome (Edmundson 382).

The generally intolerable situation culminated in “the Union”, an association of Catholics and Liberals - despite their fundamental differences in philosophy - coalescing about the ideas of liberty of worship, liberty of education, and freedom of the press (Edmundson 384). A motion in the States General to repeal the oppressive press law was defeated; the Belgians then united in defeating the decennial budget, forcing the finance minister to present and operate on only an annual budget. The war of words and actions continued to escalate, all against the backdrop of a fresh revolution in nearby France, culminating in a riot in Brussels on 25 August 1830. Grievances were drafted. The King essentially refused to parley, though he sent his son on a mission of enquiry to Brussels. Troops amassed outside Brussels, but did not enter the city. The relative stalemate provided a brief window for the revolutionary fervor to spread to other parts of Belgium. The King made a speech to the States General on 13 September vowing to maintain order but also asking the States General whether changes to the Fundamental Law, and the relation between the two peoples should be modified. The King’s speech prompted a mob takeover of the Brussels city hall. Dutch troops advanced into the city on 23 September but were held in check by the stiff resistance encountered. The Dutch troops retreated on 26 September, the victory then igniting a national revolt. A provisional government was established. King William appealed to the so-called Great Powers for assistance in quelling the unrest. Their response was to impose an armistice and intervene only in the pursuit of a settlement separating the two regions. The Belgians declared independence on 18 November. On 30 January 1831, the Great Powers Conference issued a protocol defining Holland’s borders at their 1790 extents, the remaining United Kingdom territory being given to the Belgians. The Belgian Congress and Great Powers Conference continued to argue over borders and who was acceptable as a monarch. Leopold, of the House of Saxe-Coburg, was elected king by the Congress and took his oath on 21 July 1831. The Dutch king invaded Belgium shortly thereafter on 2 August. William soundly defeated the Belgian troops, but upon hearing that French troops were arriving at Leopold’s invitation, he concluded an armistice. A new treaty was conclusively argued in November, to some level of dissatisfaction among all parties, which provided Belgium recognition as a sovereign state. King William refused to sign, leading to turmoil, blockades of Dutch

ports and trade by the Great Powers, military skirmishes, and so forth. This situation continued to fester until the signing of treaties in 1839 and 1842.

Van Bommel

Against this dynamic backdrop, Cornelius Richard Antoine Van Bommel was born into an “ancient and honorable” (Capitaine 109-110) family in the Dutch city of Leyden on 5 April 1790. The young Cornelius Van Bommel spent his early childhood educated by his mother and a refugee French cleric. His mother died in 1803, followed by his father in 1805, leaving him orphaned. After the death of his mother he enrolled at the College of Willinghegge for six years, a school run by French priests having fled persecution in their homeland, and seven years of seminary at Borghe. Upon completing this course of study, and against his extended family’s wishes, Van Bommel decided to take vows and was ordained as a priest on 8 June 1816. Van Bommel’s grace and easy conversational manner soon had him accepted into high society in The Hague, Amsterdam, and Brussels – making connections with those destined for roles of power. He was even introduced into court where King William treated him kindly. In these formative years, Van Bommel initiated the idea of starting a so-called minor seminary in Haegeveld to educate boys who were considering the priesthood, the priestly ranks in the united kingdom having been thinned due to years of revolutionary fervor and persecution. This school operated for eight years until the 1825 royal decree that closed religious schools and brought all the remaining educational institutions under the control of the state.

At this point Belgian history and Van Bommel’s life began to intertwine more intimately. Van Bommel, drawing on a level of stubbornness perhaps equal to that of King William, refused to recognize the decree, necessitating the provincial governor to intervene and personally notify the students of the school’s closure. Despite the insolence, the Dutch king consequently offered Van Bommel the regency of the state-run Collegium Philosophicum (Capitaine 113), but Van Bommel refused it. This watershed event propelled Van Bommel directly into the eye of the political storm as he vigorously sought to defend the freedom to teach seminarians independent of the state. Although Van Bommel privately withdrew to Haegeveld, he maintained contact with King William, the king’s ministers, and other politically prominent persons. As Belgian opposition strengthened, the Dutch king began increasingly to rely on Van Bommel for advice on religious matters and charged him with delicate missions in Brussels. Van Bommel appears to have used these opportunities to further the rapprochement between the otherwise philosophically incompatible Liberal faction and the clerical Catholic faction, uniting them in a focused common cause. A measure of the good standing Van Bommel maintained with King William is that on 12 January 1829 King William nominated Van Bommel as the bishop of Liège (Capitaine 115). Despite his oath of allegiance to the King, Van Bommel used his new office to encourage the communication of Belgian grievances, and later admitted in 1838 to publishing (illegal) pamphlets under a pseudonym in September and October 1829 (Van Bommel Trois). In these, he cites common cause with the Liberals, and the harm inflicted by the state’s closure of his seminary and the right to teach.

By January 1830, the Court at the Hague was becoming suspicious of Van Bommel's activities and motivations. He was called into conference with the King. Although the details of the discussion are unknown, it coincided with a subsequent pastoral letter in which Van Bommel appears to try to dissociate the Catholic grievances from those of the ever-building separatist movement. As a result, Van Bommel seems to have simultaneously angered the separatist movement and decreased the already minimal level of trust the King's ministers placed in him. The momentum of the Belgian revolution accelerated in the background. Van Bommel, in his next mandement of 6 November 1830 (Van Bommel Mandements 73), and despite his Dutch upbringing and 1829 oath in support of the Dutch king, renounces his former benefactor, extols the virtues of - and threw his support behind - the separatist movement (Capitaine 123) which 12 days later would declare Belgian independence.

Though nominated as bishop in January 1829, Van Bommel was not appointed until 18 May 1829, his ordination as Bishop of Liège did not take place until 15 November 1829 (Cheney), and he did not move to Liège until 2 February 1830 (Capitaine 127). Van Bommel immediately set about to understand the needs of his diocese and counter the detrimental effects of various political policies over the preceding years. One of his first priorities was to replenish the depleted ranks of the clergy, starting with re-establishing the diocesan seminary system in order to educate the next generation of prelates. Van Bommel was particularly committed to the education of youth – from primary education, to secondary, and college. He likewise set about restructuring and clarifying the episcopal organization within his diocese. This included reorganizing and allocating deaneries, increasing the number of parishes, building new churches and chapels, and enlarging and/or repairing other churches. He subsequently concentrated on nurturing the church's role – through emphasis on improved preaching, the creation of a multitude of organizations to address various practical and religious needs of the Catholic laity, and always keeping an eye on education.

In December of 1851, Van Bommel experienced the first symptoms of "lung disease" which would ultimately prove fatal (Capitaine 143). The disease progressed rapidly, and he died in the evening of 7 April (Guioth 122). He lay in state from the 9th through the 13th of April, followed by his burial procession to the Cathedral of St. Paul the next day. O. J. Thimister suggests an estimated 100,000 people passed through the great hall of the bishop's palace to pay their last respects during those five days (Thimister Histoire 447), a figure not inconsistent with the 60,000 souvenir cards printed to mark the death (Figures 2 and 3) and intended for distribution to the children of the diocese. Not since the Fête-Dieu of 1846 had such a grand procession been seen in the city, with well-wishers attending from throughout the diocese (Capitaine 143). He was interred in a vault below the Cathedral of St. Paul on 15 April in the presence of local religious and civil authorities. The vault was covered with a stone reading: "Hic inclusum quiescit corpus Rmi [reverendissimi] in Christo, Patris et Domini Domini Cornelii Richardi Antonii Van Bommel, dum vivebat annis viginti duobus et quatuor mensibus Episcopi Leodiensis, nati Lugduni Batavorum 5^a aprilis 1790 vita functi Leodii 7^a aprilis 1852 RIP"¹ (Capitaine 144). The homage to

¹ "Enclosed herein lay the body of the most reverend father and lord in Christ Cornelius Richard Anthony Van Bommel, twenty two years and four months the Bishop of Liège, born in Leyden 5 April 1790, life completed in Liège 7 April 1852. Rest in Peace."

Van Bommel's life and death was completed with a solemn funeral Mass held in Liège cathedral on 12 May 1852.



Figure 2 One of the 60,000 souvenir funeral cards printed for distribution to the children of the diocese; in Dutch. Image is a lithograph after a daguerreotype by Alphonse Plumier (1819-1877) who operated studios in Liège, Brussels, and Antwerp. One of Plumier's specialties was the "portrait after death at home".

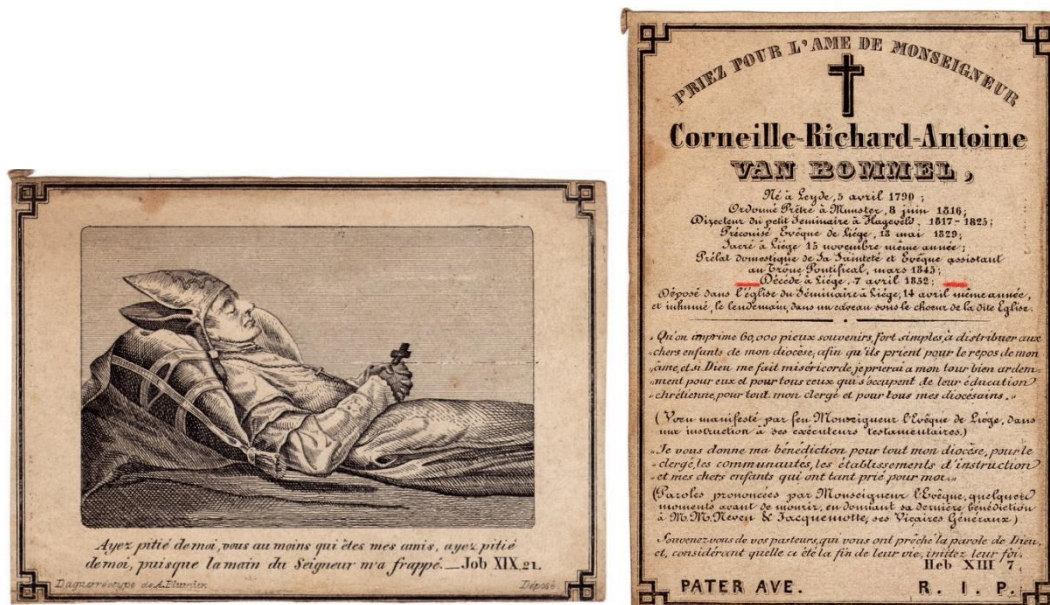


Figure 3 Another example of the 60,000 souvenir funeral cards printed for distribution to the children of the diocese; in French. A 3rd variety, printed by Simonau & Toovey, exhibits a portrait on the recto, the same

biographical information on the top portion of the verso but with Latin and French excerpts from an address of Pope Pius IX to the Cathedral Chapter on 29 April 1852.

The Medal

Some 12 days following Van Bommel's death, the 19 April 1852 issue of *Le Moniteur Belgie Journal Officiel* contains the following entry (Le Moniteur Belgie Journal Officiel 1133):

"Mr. J Wiener, originator of beautiful medals representing the major public monuments in Belgium, has been commissioned with engraving a commemorative medal of the late Mgr Van Bommel, bishop of Liège, which will portray, on the one side, the portrait of the prelate and the reverse composition recalling the principal acts of the prelate's pastoral career. The medal will be 30 lignes in diameter, the dimension of the admirable 1846 Jubilee medal by the same artist. A subscription list for the new medal is filed in the Journal de Bruxelles office."

Thus, less than two weeks after Van Bommel's death and four days after his burial, the medal was announced, describing basic features that we recognize in the finished product with the exception of a diameter smaller than that of the struck medals². Although a speculative conclusion at best, it seems likely that the commission of the medal was made prior to Van Bommel's death, given the temporal proximity of the announcement to his date of death and the completeness of the fundamental design as described. However, it is not clear who specifically initiated or commissioned the medal's production. On 2 September 1852, the Belgian Government provided a level of support - as part of its "Subscriptions. Encouragements for Artistic Publications", 300 francs were provided for a "Medaille représentant Mgr Van Bommel" (Représentants 63).

The medal is relatively large – 74mm in diameter, with an approximate weight range of 178 to 184 grams. Its legends are in Latin – consistent with the Catholic Church "vernacular" of the time and neatly avoiding any contentious debate regarding preferences for either French or Dutch legends – both of which would have some degree of merit. Although Latin would have been familiar to Catholics insofar as hearing the rote elements of weekly Mass in Latin and various other prayers, they would largely not have been fluent in the language. The highly abbreviated nature of the Latin legends (particularly on the medal's reverse) would seem to have been intelligible only to a learned clerical audience, which likely gives us a clue as to the source of the commission. The reverse legends are likewise "dense" in that a large amount of information is being conveyed (if perhaps not widely understood), necessitating the abbreviations. One may interpret this as the priority having been placed on the completeness of the

² It is curious that this feature of the medal is in error. The traditional French ligne is 1/12th of a French inch or slightly greater than 2.25mm in length. Thirty lignes thus corresponds to approximately 67.7mm. The final medal however is 74mm in diameter, or just under 33 lignes. Using the slightly later "metric" French ligne at slightly greater than 2.29 millimeters would correspond to 32.3 lignes. The referenced 1846 Jubilee medal has a diameter of 74mm or 33 lignes.

laudatory content over its readability by a non-clerical audience – again perhaps pointing to a clerical source for the commission³.

Leopold Wiener's obverse depicts the bust of the late bishop facing left. Clockwise around the perimeter, inside a border of 133 beads, the legend reads:

C.R. A. VAN BOMMEL EPISC. LEOD. SS. DD. PRAEL. DOM. ET. SOL. PONT. ASSIST. LUGD. BAT.
NAT. MDCCXC OBIIT MDCCCLII LAUDIBUS CLARUS.

The full, unabbreviated Latin legend (Dirks 122-123) is:

CORNELIUS RICHARDUS ANTONIUS VAN BOMMEL EPISCOPUS LEODIENSIS SANCTISSIMI DOMINI
NOSTRI PRAELATUS DOMESTICUS ET SOLIO PONTIFICIO ASSISTENS LUGDUNUM BATAVORUM
NATUS MDCCXC OBIIT MDCCCLII LAUDIBUS CLARUS

In English, this translates as:

Cornelius Richard Antoine Van Bommel Bishop of Liège Domestic Prelate of Our Most Holy Lord
and Assistant to the Pontifical Throne Leyden Born 1790 Died 1852 Famous for the Praises Given
Him

Under the bust the die is signed LEOPOLD WIENER F, for LEOPOLD WIENER FECIT, or again in English –
Made by Leopold Wiener.

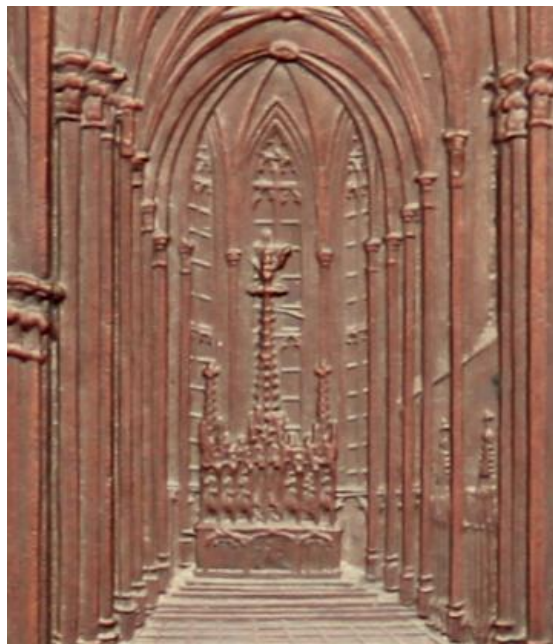
The obverse legend is largely comprised of statements of fact. The “domestic prelate” and “assistant to the pontifical throne” titles are honorifics relative to the organizational structure of the 19th century Catholic Church. These two titles were conferred on Van Bommel by Pope Gregory XVI during Van Bommel's first trip to Rome in 1845 (Merckx 125). The obverse legend concludes by noting his 1790 birth in the Dutch city of Leyden (Lugdunum Batavorum), and his death in 1852, along with the acclamation *Laudibus Clarus*, or roughly “famous for the praises given him”.

The medal's reverse is more subjective and laudatory, requiring a more in-depth study of its information. The central motif of the medal is the perspective view of the interior of St. Paul's Cathedral in Liège – although interestingly, the medal is actually silent regarding the specific church depicted. St. Paul's was not originally built as a cathedral. Rather, the destruction of the erstwhile Cathedral of St. Lambert - as a result of the late 18th century French invasion - necessitated the transference of the Bishop's “cathedra” (chair) to a different church. Article I of Bishop (1802 – 1808) Jean Evangéliste Zaepffel's first pastoral letter dated 29 November 1802, notes that the “old Cathedral Church of the Diocese of Liège under the title of St Lambert, being destroyed, the one-time Collegial Church of St. Paul is chosen to replace it.” (Liège 124)

³ Mgr Hubert-Joseph Jacquemotte, long an associate of Van Bommel, recipient of the title “chamberlain of honor” to the Pope - secured for him by Van Bommel from Pope Pius IX, heavily involved with the restoration effort at St. Paul's, and the writer and speaker of Van Bommel's funeral oration would be a leading candidate.

The *Nécrologe Liégeois* notes that the reverse depicts “the interior of the cathedral of Liege as it will be after the restorations.” (Capitaine 181). On 3 February 1848, the Cathedral Chapter presented to Bishop Van Bommel extracts from deliberations at the 3 August 1847 meeting in which 4000 francs were pledged towards developing plans with the Royal Commission of Monuments for a restoration of the cathedral (Thimister Essai 155-6). Various architects were consulted, each suggesting variations on a partial restoration. Van Bommel and the Chapter wanted to respect the past but bring the cathedral to a more consistent and uniform state (Thimister Histoire 446). Van Bommel then initiated what would become a decades-long restoration effort in 1851 (Thimister Histoire 446) addressing both the interior and exterior of the cathedral.

Wiener’s depiction of the cathedral in its post-restoration form differs from the contemporary configuration primarily with regard to the main, or high, altar⁴. Thimister’s *Essai historique sur l’église de Saint Paul, ci-devant collégiale, aujourd’hui cathédrale de Liège* engraving of the choir and main (high) altar shows the altar in its pre-1864 form – which would have been in-place at the time of this medal’s design. This original altar obstructed the view of the apse windows; in 1864 a temporary altar was installed (Thimister Essai 190-3). The final (and current) main altar was dedicated on April 11, 1881 (Thimister Histoire 502). The anticipated altar configuration portrayed on the medal differs somewhat from the final implemented version; compare Figure 4 Wiener’s rendering of the high altar of St. Paul’s Figures 4, 5, 6, and 7.



⁴ The other prominent feature of Wiener’s interior view, the pulpit (or “chaire de verité”), was installed in 1843 (Thimister 527).

Figure 4 Wiener's rendering of the high altar of St. Paul's. Note the tall central spire flanked by two shorter spires, the eight niches – six of which are filled with statuary, and the suggested decorative structural elements in the altar's base.

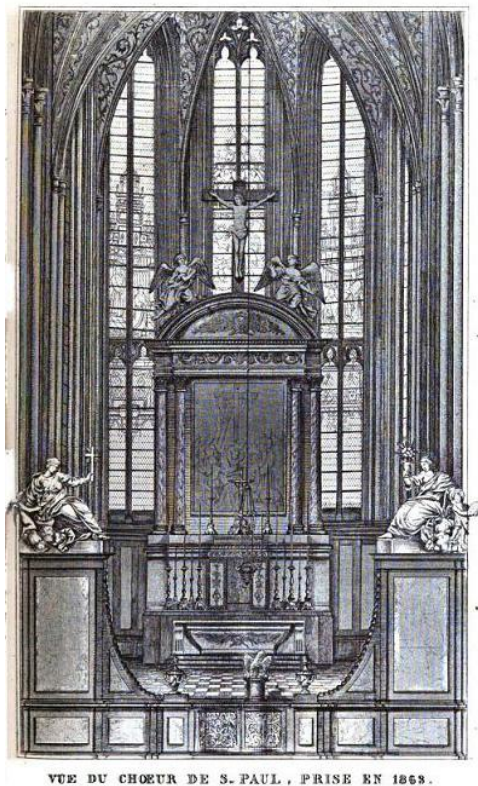


Figure 5 An engraving of the original, pre-1864 altar configuration as found in Thimister's *Essai historique sur l'église de Saint Paul, ci-devant collégiale, aujourd'hui cathédrale de Liège* .



Figure 6 A view circa 1870 of the main altar showing the temporary altar which was retained until 1881.

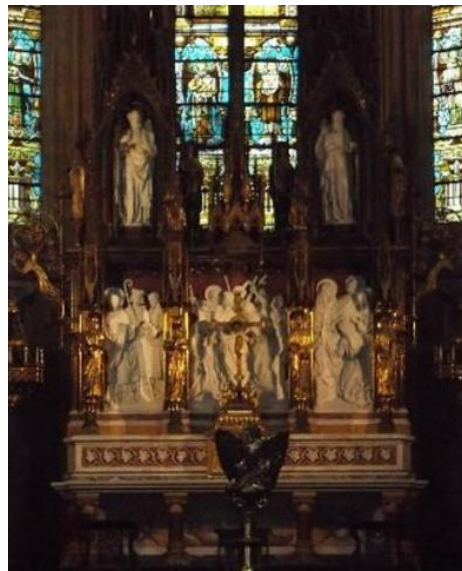


Figure 7 A contemporary image of the altar installed in 1881. Note that the two flanking spires are viewed against the inter-window masonry rather than obstructing the views of the windows themselves. (courtesy Tripadvisor)

Consistent with Jacques Wiener's approach to engraving his architectural images from an existing engraving or lithograph, the author assumes that he did likewise for this rendering of the interior of St. Paul's. However, the specific source image used has as yet eluded discovery.

The reverse legends surrounding the interior view of St. Paul's are divided into five distinct areas of the medal; the *Nécrologe Liégeois* notes that these reverse legends "recall the main facts of the career of the prelate" (Capitaine 181). So, of a lifetime of activity and accomplishment, the "main facts" selected are as follows:

Around the top perimeter, the abbreviated Latin legend reads:

ECCLES. LIBERTAT. IN CLERICIS INSTITUEND. PROPUGNATOR.

The equivalent, unabbreviated Latin (Dirks 122-123) is:

ECCLESIAE LIBERTATIS IN CLERICIS INSTITUENDIS PROPUGNATOR

Or, in English:

Advocate for the freedom of the church to instruct clergy

Van Bommel's zeal - or intransigence (depending on one's point of view) - was clearly a driving force in both his religious and public life. Having this legend at the most prominent position of the medal's reverse is perhaps fitting, given that this contentious matter was the springboard for his perhaps unexpectedly public role in the early days of the Belgian nation.

Around the bottom perimeter the abbreviated Latin legend reads:

RELIGIOSAR. FAMILIAR. PIAR. SODALITAT. OMNIGEN. BONOR. OP. FAUTOR.

The equivalent, unabbreviated Latin (Dirks 122-123) is:

RELIGIOSARUM FAMILIARUM PIARUM SODALITATUM OMNIGENERIS BONORUM OPERUM
FAUTOR

Or, in English:

Supporter of pious religious societies and associations and good works of all types

The organizations supported by Van Bommel spanned the spectrum from the religious to the practical, each filling some perceived void in the local, largely Catholic, society. He gave special protection to various religious orders operating in the diocese, including Jesuits, Redemptorists (who would assist greatly at the Fête-Dieu as noted by Wiener's 1846 medal), and Trappists among others (Capitaine 139). Once the re-organization of the diocese was completed, Van Bommel turned his attention to, among other priorities, the support and founding of a number of religious organizations and charities operating in the diocese (starting as early as 1831), including: the Association for the Propagation of the Faith; The Association for the Extirpation of Blasphemy; the House of Refuge (providing assistance to women leaving prison or having lived "in debauchery"; a sanctuary for young girls temporarily out of service employment; Maeseyck Hospice which taught deaf, blind, and mute; the Society of St. Vincent de Paul; the Society of St. Francis of Regis; the House of Mercy and House of Beauregard which worked with poor and neglected children; the Société maternelle which was a kindergarten-type school under the auspices

of the bishop; and the Association of the Holy Family – a particular favorite of Van Bommel. (Capitaine 140)

In the left field the abbreviated Latin legend reads:

DE JUVENTUTE

RITE RELIGIOSEQ.

INFORMANDA. DE SALUTE ANIMAR.

PROCURANDA INDEF. SOLLICITUS.

The full, unabbreviated Latin (Dirks 122-123) is:

DE JUVENTUTE

RITE RELIGIOSEQUE

INFORMANDA. DE SALUTE ANIMARUM

PROCURANDA INDEFESSUS SOLLICITUS

Or, in English:

Tirelessly working for the youth to be educated solemnly and with reverence and for the salvation of souls

“The instruction of youth said a writer was the idol to which Van Bommel had devoted his life and devoted his talents.” – an unattributed quote (Capitaine 130) which neatly summarizes Van Bommel’s passion for education - at least when it was provided via the Catholic Church. Taking advantage of the educational freedoms offered by the 1831 Belgian constitution, starting in that year he brought in the *frères des écoles chrétiennes*, or La Salle congregation, to establish primary schools in the diocese, and somewhat later opened evening schools for workers to attend. Van Bommel established two secondary schools in the diocese – St. Trond and St. Roch (Capitaine 129) in 1843 and 1844 respectively. He clashed with the civil authorities in Liege on the role of clergy at the public secondary schools – a reflection of the larger cultural struggle at the time over the role of church and state in education that would bedevil Belgium for the rest of the 19th century. Van Bommel also actively supported the establishment of the Catholic University of Louvain, in addition to Jesuit Colleges in Liège and Namur, and various Catholic institutions in other dioceses of Belgium.

In the right field the abbreviated Latin legend reads:

DECORIS ECCLESIAE.

CULTUSQ. SS. EUCH. ET B.V.M. AC

DISCIPLINAE CLERICALIS

PROMOTOR.

The full, unabbreviated Latin (Dirks 122-123) is:

DECORIS ECCLESiarUM

CULTUSQUE SACRO SANCTAE EUCHARISTIAE ET BEATAE VIRGO MARIAE AC

DISCIPLINAE CLERICALIS

PROMOTOR

Or, in English:

Promoter for the beauty of churches and of the worship of the Holy Eucharist and also of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of clerical education

Van Bommel focused on the restoration and expansion of individual churches in the diocese, even donating his own monies to help fund the cause (Capitaine 147). The structures of the diocese had suffered various degrees of neglect, particularly during the French and Dutch periods. The churches assisted included St. Croix, St. Martin, St. Pholien, and St. Paul all in Liège.

Besides his focus on the re-establishment of religious secondary schooling and seminaries to ensure a steady supply of priests for the diocese, Van Bommel also worked to provide what we might now call “continuing education” for his prelates. The art, if you will, of preaching was particularly emphasized. “[H]e gave special attention to preaching and the study of sacred eloquence in seminaries. He not only set an example by making a systematic course of instruction, preaching in all the parishes of Liège and many churches in the diocese, ...and hired several preachers of great merit to be heard...both for the edification of the faithful as to stimulate the zeal of priests. (Capitaine 137)” These speakers included the then well-known clerics Victor-Auguste Dechamps, Félix-Antoine-Philibert Dupanloup, Pierre-Louis Parisi, Xavier de Ravignan, Mr Brunet Coquereau Soimier, and others (Thimister Essai 154). Many of these speakers participated in the 1846 Fête-Dieu in Liège and their names can be found on the Wiener brothers’ medal commemorating that event (Ross 20-23).

In the bottom field the abbreviated Latin legend reads:

FELICI BENE MERENTIS

MEMORIAE.

J. WIENER F.

The full, unabbreviated Latin is:

FELICI BENE MERENTIS

MEMORIAE.

JACQUES WIENER FECIT

Or, in English:

In blessed remembrance of the well-deserving

Jacques Wiener made this

The medal exhibits a number of characteristic features stemming from its engraving and striking:

- On the obverse border, the (presumably) last bead to be punched slightly overlaps the first bead just above the “P” of “PONT”
- The period after the “A” of “C.R.A.” is very lightly punched
- The “E” of the ligatured “AE” appears to be hand-engraved
- On the obverse the “B” of “BAT” has been re-punched
- On the reverse there is a slight gouge in the reverse die in the center of the cathedral floor – resulting in a small raised bump
- The “A” of the ligatured “AE” of “MEMORIAE” appears to be hand-engraved
- The “C” of “AC” in the right reverse field has been re-punched over an earlier, erroneous letter “E”
- Engraved striated lines appear in the most distant archway just to the left of the right field.

The *Nécrologe Liégeois* also states that only “a small number of examples” were struck (Capitaine 181), and that the list of subscribers and dies were deposited in the diocesan archives. In addition, the *Le Moniteur Belgie Journal Officiel* article provides additional information and corroborates the intended repository of the dies and subscription lists:

“The price of a silver example is 65 francs; that of bronze is 10 francs per copy. The list of subscribers and the dies of the medal will be deposited in the archives of Liège bishopric after the number of subscribed examples has been struck.”

Christian Dury, the archivist at the diocese of Liège, graciously assisted the author by scouring the diocesan archives multiple times and even making inquiries to the current bishop of Liège Mgr Jean-Pierre Delville; however, neither the subscription lists nor the dies have been located. Therefore, we are left with no benchmark for what size mintage corresponds to “a small number of examples.” It is illuminating, however, to learn that the medal was available for purchase in silver (as well as bronze) at the cited prices. Examples of extant medals struck in silver are unknown to the author.

Shortly after the *Le Moniteur* article, the Easter 1853 *Messkatalog: Verzeichniss der Bücher, Zeitschriften u. Landkarten* was published in Leipzig by the firm Avenarius & Mendelssohn. This particular catalogue offered five medals engraved by Jacques and/or Leopold Wiener, including the Van Bommel medal. The medal is offered only in bronze at a price of 2 Thalers, 20 Silbergroschen, double that of the Aachen and Cologne Cathedral medals also offered. The catalogue also acknowledges that the medals were being

offered by way of the F.C. Eisen firm in Cologne. That the medal was offered for sale indicates that overall sales were not merely limited to the initial subscription list, but that either 1) extra specimens were struck and kept in inventory for the retail market, or 2) the dies were in fact retained (not deposited with the diocesan archives) and used to strike additional specimens based on demand.

Jacques Wiener exhibited two cases containing thirty medals at the Exposition Universelle held in Paris from 15 May through 15 November 1855. In his first case, the fourth medal is listed as “l’intérieur de l’église Saint-Paul, à Liège”, which is the 1852 Van Bommel medal (Universelle 54). Unfortunately, Wiener failed to either medal or gain an honorable mention for his wares (Bonaparte 713-4).

Conclusion

Thimister quotes an unnamed Belgian bishop-to-be as saying “the history of this prelate would be the history of Belgium” during Van Bommel’s almost quarter century as bishop (Thimister Histoire 448). Van Bommel’s devotion to the exercise of his office left him a legacy of respect, but little affection, from his contemporary Catholic flock (Capitaine 148-152). His overt willingness to blur the line between the exercise of temporal and spiritual authority stirred debate at the time; the liberal press was critical particularly in the immediate aftermath of his death. Nonetheless, the death of this important figure in Belgian history and society prompted many tributes - the publishing of memoirs, a multitude of engravings and lithographs, sculpted busts, and lastly, as noted by Capitaine, our “médaille du grande module”. The medal is clearly laudatory in tone and content, and oriented to an audience of Van Bommel’s ecclesiastical peers and subordinates. Despite the contextual understanding of this medal with respect to Van Bommel’s actions in office, we are still left with a number of frustratingly open questions regarding this medal - the means by which it was commissioned, the source image utilized for the reverse, the location of the subscription list (and the subsequent ability to estimate the mintage), and potential existence of silver specimens are all areas requiring additional research.

With this, we close out our brief examination. Readers having additional insight or comments regarding this medal are welcome to contact the author through www.academia.edu.

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