

Alphons Ariëns, priest and social pioneer

In 1958 Cardinal Bernard Alfrink, then archbishop of Utrecht commenced the process of beatification for Alphons Ariëns, a Catholic social pioneer, little known outside his native Netherlands. Here Hub Crijns, a theologian who is the vice-chairman of the Alphons Ariëns Committee and a consultant to the SOBRIËTAS FOUNDATION, a Catholic Temperance Society in the Netherlands, together with Paul Wennekes, a deacon of the diocese of 's-Hertogenbosch and staff member of the diocese for the area of Church and Society, introduce this far-sighted social pioneer.

After the Reformation, Catholics became second class citizens in the Netherlands. It was not until the nineteenth century that Catholics recovered their full rights as citizens and only in 1853 did the Dutch State again allow the appointment of Catholic bishops. This was the beginning of an immense process of social and political emancipation of Dutch Catholics which continued until roughly the Second World War. The nineteenth century saw drastic social changes. Like the rest of Europe, though somewhat later, the Netherlands developed from an agricultural nation into an industrial society, with all the social problems that entailed. It was just at that time that Alfons Ariëns, the first and greatest social pioneer of the Catholic Church in the Netherlands, developed his astonishing spectrum of activities.

Alphonse Marie Auguste Joseph Ariëns was born in 1860 in Utrecht. His father was a lawyer; his mother came from an Amsterdam mercantile family; in short, they belonged to the small Catholic elite of that era. The Ariëns family had ten children and Alphons was number five. His parents were socially active. His father was one of the founding members of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Utrecht and his mother gave practical help to poor families in Utrecht. At the early age of ten, Ariëns was sent to boarding school. Afterwards he entered the archdiocesan seminary, was ordained deacon and then priest in 1882 before continuing his studies in Rome where he gained a doctorate in theology in 1885. His four years in Rome shaped his personality, both as a scholar and in his sense of society. He preferred to live in the poorer quarters of Rome and stayed in Sicily where he studied the life of workers in the sulphur mines. In Turin he visited Don Bosco who inspired him to develop similar initiatives in his later life. During his stay in Italy he became a member of the Franciscan Third Order. After returning from his studies in Italy, Ariëns was appointed in 1886 a parish curate in the city of Enschede in the east of the country.

Enschede in 1886

In 1886 the city of Enschede was booming. It was one of the very first cities of the Netherlands to undergo the industrial revolution. Many textile mass production factories were established in Enschede and the once quiet provincial town doubled in population in only a few years. Ariëns was the first priest to realise that the traditional pastoral methods were no longer effective in the changed social situation. He made a systematic study of the living and employment conditions of the workers and, fifty years before Father Jozef Cardijn, he was already implementing the famous *See, Judge, Act* methodology. Ariëns worked day and night.

His work as a priest was exceptional in those days when the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) had yet to be written and he was criticised for his work and methods by some of his colleagues. He visited as many families as possible, in their homes. He talked to people on the street. He was to be found on the many building sites of the city, in the factories, in the parish

church and (rarely) in the presbytery. And in the evenings there were the many, many meetings. After returning home he read a great number of newspapers, magazines and brochures. He also wrote a lot, always under the pressure of time because, as he states, he was at his most creative under pressure. Whilst writing he found the mental space to leaf through study books on many and varied subjects. In this very busy pastoral and social work Ariëns was active principally on three fronts.

The world of labour

Factories life was miserable: working days lasted up to twelve hours, for almost no pay. Women and child labour was common. During the significant 1890 strike Ariëns came to realize that self-organisation was the best answer — firstly for men, later for youth, and finally also for women. In 1889 he founded in Enschede a regional Catholic Labour Union named after Saint Joseph. This Labour Union would grow into the *Katholieke Arbeidersbeweging* (the National Catholic Labour Union of the Netherlands). In 1893 Ariëns launched the first magazine for Catholic workers, *De Katholieke Werkman* (The Catholic Worker). Later, he integrated this union into an ecumenical union because he noticed that employers tried to foment division between Catholic and Protestant workers. In the end, however, this experiment was prohibited by the archbishop of Utrecht. At the same time Ariëns initiated the first co-operative textile factory called *De Eendracht* (Concord or Union), but this first attempt at self-determination by workers ended in failure which brought Ariëns very close to bankruptcy.

The world of the family

Living conditions were atrocious. Most workers lived in one-room ‘houses’ with hardly any furniture. Workers had only one extra set of clothes and the washing and drying took three days in the cramped conditions. Stoves were heated with peat or wood which was gathered by the children who were too young to work in the factory. There was no water, no sewage, no toilet. Dirt and stench permeated everywhere, and vermin and disease spread likewise. Alcoholism and violence were common in families. Ariëns became especially active in the battle against alcoholism. He founded the Union of the Holy Cross for Men, the Union of Mary for women and the Union of Anna for parents. The members of the Union of Mary were sent out two by two to family homes of families and traced out a deal of social misery. To help the women of Enschede a catering school and needlework training was introduced. Later on, in 1899, these three unions would be integrated into the one *Sobriëtas* (Temperance) *Union* for everybody. Next, he tried to improve living conditions. He supported the construction of better houses and started a housing association for his people. During his years in Enschede he witnessed the construction of the first series of houses for ‘his’ workers.

The Associations

In Turin Ariëns had observed the work of Don Bosco and in Germany he came to know Adolph Kolping. Ariëns has learnt that if there could be no common life at home because of the vicious circle of unemployment, alcoholism, hunger and disease, the establishment of community houses created other possibilities. These became place to get warm, to meet others to eat together, to learn to read and write, to follow courses. Ariëns promoted the cultural development of workers, introduced music and literature into their lives. Very soon such a community house was opened in Enschede and later on in many other Dutch cities. In 1894 he started the Royal Leo Brass Band in honour of Pope Leo XIII who had published the revolutionary encyclical *Rerum Novarum* only three years before.

In politics Alphons Ariëns was ill at ease. Actually he was too honest, too much a pastor, not enough of a strategist to be at home in politics. Sometimes he was almost naive, having too much faith in others. He left politics to his collaborators, his dean, or his model and mentor, the great Catholic politician of the day, Dr. Schaepman. His life through he would regularly find himself the victim of his good faith in others, be it in his union work, or in church life, or in politics. Besides that he was sometimes impatient, initiating yet another project before the previous one had had a chance to bed down.

Ariëns remained a curate in Enschede for seventeen years. In 1901 he was appointed parish priest in the agricultural village of Steenderen. Some say he was rusticated in order to be rid of him, but Ariëns himself was happy with this appointment because he could leave behind an extremely hectic time and devote much more of his energy to the spiritual guidance of the many for whom he managed to find the time. In Steenderen he got a chance to learn about the situation of the agricultural workers, who found themselves in a very weak social position in relation to the farmers. He also managed to considerably improve the working conditions of municipality labourers. In Steenderen Ariëns founded another Union of Mary which promoted the active involvement of women in concrete social work. In his opinion this work was not a task exclusive to consecrated religious but was a responsibility for all, including lay women, a view which was not left undisputed.

As a token of recognition Ariëns was in 1903 appointed to be a member of a government commission which, after several ferocious strikes, was charged with investigating the situation of railway workers. In 1908 Ariëns was transferred to a parish in Maarssen, a village close to the central city of Utrecht. In Maarssen Ariëns founded the first *Caritas* organisation in the Netherlands. In view of his profound concern with the position of women, Ariëns was asked to assist in the establishment of a National Catholic Women's Union which was eventually established in 1912.

In 1919 Ariëns, in further recognition of all his work, was privy chamberlain to the papal household. Two years later Ariëns became one of the co-founders of the Geert Grote Association, named after the famous medieval Dutch deacon and theologian who founded the *Devotio Moderna* of the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life. The object of this association was the publication of books and brochures for wider circles in society. Ariëns was also involved in the attempt to establish the first Catholic University in the Netherlands since mediaeval times. These efforts bore fruit in 1923 with the foundation of the University in the city of Nijmegen. Ariëns retired in 1926 and only two years later, on August 7th 1928, he died at the age of 68. He has been a priest for 46 years. On his gravestone we read just the two words: *Ariëns, priester*

In 1958 the then archbishop of Utrecht, Bernard Cardinal Alfrink initiated the process of beatification. Because of a change in procedure in respect of beatifications, the preliminary investigation had to be repeated from 2005 to 2008. The process is underway and we await the recognition of a miracle. But whether beatified or not, Ariëns will be always remembered as the towering personality he was, despite his shortcomings and the failures he had to endure. He was a pioneer, a sharp analyst of the social situation of his days, a visionary. For many who are active in diaconal work and social engagement he remains an inspiring example.

Translated by Paul Wennekes and Gail Schmitz