

## Interview with Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb: links between the Western Christian Democrats and their counterparts in the European dictatorships (Sanem, 9 July 2002)

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[Étienne Deschamps] During the period of the dictatorships, did the Christian Democrat parties of Western Europe maintain official or regular contact with their opposite numbers in Spain and Portugal? If so, what are your recollections of this contact?

[Charles-Ferdinand Nothomb] With regard to the problem of the Christian Democrat parties of Europe and other non-democratic countries in Europe — I mentioned just now the European countries which did not belong to the Council of Europe. There were certainly delegations, but I would say that instinctively we were strongly anti-Communist yet reluctant to reject them out of hand. We would meet delegations and sometimes it was very difficult. They would complain about all they had to endure, demanding that we condemn everything outright. And we would say: ‘Yes, that may be so, but you must be reasonable.’ That memory spans about 15 years, and we might come back to that in a moment with respect to the role of Christian Democrat parties regarding Eastern bloc countries. You asked about Spain and Portugal and I can give you a clear answer for Spain because I remember the names. The European Christian Democratic Union had a Spanish section. It had three groups, one consisting of the former Christian Democrat party which had supported the Republic and was led by Gil-Robles. His son was President of the European Parliament until recently and now chairs the European Movement, of which I am a member. Robles senior, so to speak, had been a minister in the Republic and was flying the flag to say that, yes, there were Christian Democrat political forces in Madrid. Then there was the Basque Nationalist Party and the Democratic Union of Catalonia, both of which had also opposed Franco since the Civil War. We met the three groups together, under the name of the Christian Democratic Team of the Spanish State. They provided us with a regular source of news, so that when democracy was restored in Spain and preparations were made for the first elections, we opened in Brussels — more exactly the Christian Socialist Party (PSC) opened — an office for the Spanish Christian Democrats involved in the campaign, targeting in particular the Spanish community in Belgium, which represented a significant minority. Their leader was Ruiz Jimenez, an eminent academic who was friendly, intelligent and fair-minded. But he suffered a crushing defeat in the elections, perhaps because he was too clever, too elitist, etc. After the election the various parties, in particular the Christian Democrats, merged with another group to form the People’s Party. I was in the Basque country recently and I inquired what had become of them. I was told: ‘The European People’s Party union has expelled the Basque Nationalist Party, which is currently running the Basque country.’ Mr Aznar’s People’s Party said: ‘No, there is only one Spain and that is us, so the others can’t be part of the team.’ When I went to see the representative of the Democratic Party of Catalonia recently, I caught a glimpse of the history of this Democratic Union of Catalonia. Mr Canelas, their representative, was the only Christian Democrat member of parliament elected in Catalonia in the disastrous first election. He is now Catalonia’s mediator, a highly respected person there. The Democratic Union played an essential part in finding the right balance between the Spanish institutions during the transitional period, particularly in establishing relations between Spain and Catalonia, but this was not reflected in popular support, which went to the regional Catalan parties rather than the Christian Democrat Party, which had represented Catalonia for quite a long time and had struck a balance with the government in Madrid. I would often say to myself — which only goes to show how often we are mistaken — ‘There will be no end to it in Spain.’ We do things, partly out of friendship, partly to be polite, and also because one has to do something. We did not think things would work out, but those who kept faith were right. It is the same with the Eastern bloc countries. When Wilfried Martens and I took over the leadership of the Flemish Christian People’s Party (CVP) and the PSC, respectively, we as Christian Democrats very soon had to decide how to respond to the invitations we received to visit Eastern European countries. The approach adopted by Belgium’s Socialist parties seemed presumptuous and irresponsible. They would appear in public with the Communist leaders and spend their holidays in dachas. They fraternised with them. So for several years we wondered whether we should go and see what was going on, whether we should meet people. We went to Poland on our first visit. After the Gomulka revolution, the Diet, their parliament, had become more democratic and two Catholic parties, Znak and Pacs, had been allowed in, defending different positions. We decided we should go and see them, but for that we needed to be invited, so we accepted the invitation of the Democratic Union or the National Union — they were organisations typical of the Communist regimes which claimed not to be Soviet but People’s Republics — or indeed the Union of Parties. In the Polish parliament there was the Communist Party, the Peasants’

Party, the Democratic Party, which was supposedly liberal — I don't know whether it included small freeholders — but, anyway, all these parties were controlled by the Communist Party. So there were two small groups, Znak and Paks, which we went to see and we were encouraged by these contacts in Poland. They told us that it was marvellous that we wanted to visit, offering them a degree of hope, and as for the Communists, they knew that we knew and that we knew them. So we would be very welcome. We consequently went to these countries, at the invitation of the National Democratic Union in one country, the Union of Political Forces in another — not the Communist Party, never — on party visits. I should say that when political parties from Western Europe visited the People's Republics, one suddenly became very grand. Here we were just part of parliamentary democracy and in the pecking order we came behind the ministers and the President of the National Assembly. But there, being the leader of a party meant you were someone all-powerful — though I don't think it affected our attitude — in a position to meet even the most senior people in those countries. To keep things in perspective, Belgium has a population of 10 million, of which less than half are French-speakers and the Christian Socialists account for less than a third of that half, but they nevertheless treated us as if we were the King of Persia or the Tsar of Russia. Each time, we would wonder: 'Can we go there? What should we do? What will the others say?' We met some very interesting people, including Communist leaders who seemed sincere in the criticism they voiced. Of course, many of our conversations took an anti-Soviet, anti-Russian turn, but not anti-Communist, rather Communism as we saw it. We got to know a lot of people and I think it was useful. However, I have to admit that after 1989 — by which time I was President of the Chamber of Deputies — when we received the visit of the leaders of the new democratically elected parties, some of them said that we had been to Prague or Bucharest and made a big show, while at that time they were in prison. And that was upsetting. I explained our motives to them, but even so it was not entirely clear. Our approach did have negative side effects. On one occasion I met Mr Ceausescu and the next day the front page of the main Communist paper in Bucharest had a photograph of me with Ceausescu. The caption read: 'The Belgian Christian Democrats lend their support ...' I should have refused to allow a photograph. One consequence was that when I was President of the Chamber in Belgium, after 1989, and a Communist leader from Romania visited the Belgian parliament, I refused to let the media in. I told them that I did not want the man bragging about how well he had been received by the President of the Belgian Chamber. Of course it is not quite the same and it certainly did not have the same effect. We developed links with the established parties, including in East Germany, with the CDU there. They told us: 'You know, thanks to us we are still building churches here. We have this small liberty and have secured that one.' It was difficult to know what to think. I believe that whenever we are faced by dictatorships we adopt certain attitudes: some collaborate, trying to limit the damage; others collaborate unashamedly; others still remain silent or resist heroically. From the outside it is very difficult to judge any of them. So I never did. My most powerful memories are of Poland and Spain, which are basically the two great Catholic countries in the east and the south. When there were the events in Romania, in 1989 — I remember very clearly, it all happened at the end of December. In early January, the French National Assembly sent Laurent Fabius, I think, who was the first to visit Bucharest. The Belgian Parliament was indignant at the idea that they had beaten us to it. So off we went, in a Belgian army jet. When we arrived there was nothing going on. We met the Peasants' Party, which was a big affair with all these old gentlemen who had been in prison since 1940, so they had spent 30 years there — goodness, when I think of their bravery and perseverance — and then there was a whole host of other parties, because almost anyone joins a party when an election is in the offing. I think there were four green parties. But for me it was a fine memory, because we had an all-party delegation from the Belgian parliament. I remember there was a green MP, though I can't remember which one, and there was Nelly Maes from the Flemish People's Union party. Then all the Romanian parties — I think there were 21 — came to see us, and they wanted to see the whole group. I recall the Belgian greens confronted with four green parties and rather at a loss to know which one was closest to them. So they were very cautious. Above all I remember Nelly Maes, who was a key People's Union figure, enthusiastically explaining Belgium's democratic system. I thought: 'Just for that it was worth the trip.' The old parties, which had maintained links and resurfaced quite legitimately, had been very courageous and determined. We should perhaps have done more for them, but then we didn't know much about what was going on and we also lacked the resources to confront the dictatorships.