

Blessed John Soreth and Liège: A Collection of Sermons from 1451

Not every prophet lives to see his words come true. In the fifteenth century, Savonarola's "*gladius domini super terram cito et velociter*" comes to mind, but the peril of French invasion was in view when Fra Girolamo uttered his prophecy. Savonarola's welcome of the French invasion as an occasion to transform the city of Florence is well known, as is the ultimate fate of his virtuous republic. In the case of Blessed John Soreth and Liège, we have a different example: a prophecy of disaster in a time of peace, and a prophet who tried to prevent its being fulfilled.

This paper will examine the attitudes expressed by Soreth in his sermons preached in Liège in 1451 and his actions during the sack of that city in 1468. Soreth had made Liège his base of operations while prior general of the Carmelite Order, and his one collection of surviving sermons delivered there shows that he was very familiar with the life of the city. He was not pleased by what he saw. Indeed, he predicted that the wrath of God would descend upon the city as a punishment for both individual and institutional wrongdoing. In 1468, Charles the Rash, with a cruelty outstanding even for a duke of Burgundy, conquered and sacked Liège and burned it to the ground. Soreth was in Liège at the time; but rather than rejoicing at the fall of a city he had compared to Sodom, or cooperating with the Burgundians, he helped the papal legate in his valiant and unsuccessful attempts to make peace.

The sermons on which this study is based come to us through MS. 6.G.2 of the Bibliothèque du Grand Séminaire, Liège. This volume is a manuscript of 184 folios on paper in a late fifteenth-century hand headed, "Chy comencent sermons moult beaulz fais et constitues par Jehan Suret karme docteur en theologie a Lyge." A later notation at the top of the first page reveals that the manuscript was once part of the collection of the Liège convent of Crosiers (Crutched Friars). This is hardly surprising: the Crosier and Carmelite convents were near neighbors,¹ and when the convents of Liège were dissolved during the Revolution, the library of the Crosiers was divided between the City and the Seminary.² The hand is firm and regular, similar to Liégeois notarial hand of the late fifteenth century, and the scribe uses standard abbreviations in both French and Latin. Twice the scribe has left out biblical names, evidently because he did not understand them.³ This evidence would seem to point to a layman with a legal education, who knew Latin but was unfamiliar with Scripture or theology.

The manuscript contains forty-nine sermons, all in French, about equal in length. All but one begin with a title announcing the theme and often the text, either in Latin or in French. From these titles and texts, as well as from indications within the sermons, it is clear that at least the first forty-three sermons are a series delivered during Lent.⁴ The next three are on the same theme, but

¹ About 150 meters separated them; today the rue des Carmes and the rue des Croisiers are parallel streets two blocks apart.

² J. Stiennon, "Introduction à l'étude des scriptoria des Croisiers de Liège et de Huy au XVe siècle" *Les manuscrits des Croisiers de Huy, Liège et Cuyk au XVe siècle* (Liège: Maison Desoer, 1951) [Bibliotheca Universitatis Leodiensis, publications, no. 5], pp. 29-30.

³ Liège, Bibliothèque du Grand Séminaire, MS. 6.G.2 (hereafter cited as "MS"), ff. 114v, 145. On f. 56 Methuselah becomes two men, "Methus" and "Sale." In quotations below, abbreviations are silently expanded.

⁴ During the Lenten season before Palm Sunday, only the first Sunday of Lent is omitted from the sequence; the sermon for Palm Sunday ("Florie Pasque") is out of order, and is summarized rather than reproduced in full, and there is apparently no sermon for Tuesday in Holy Week, for Good Friday, for Holy Saturday, or for Easter itself. Otherwise all the days of Lent are represented in order.

carry no indication of their occasion; then comes another set of three on the same text,⁵ evidently delivered to celebrate the anniversary of the dedication of a church. The last is a sermon for the feast of the Invention (Finding) of the Holy Cross (3 May). Because the earlier sermons are in sequence, it is possible to date them exactly. In place of a sermon for Thursday in the second week of Lent comes one headed “De Nostre Dame en marche,” that is, the Feast of the Annunciation, 25 March. There is no sermon on the Gospel text for Thursday in the second week of Lent: the story of Dives and Lazarus, a favorite of medieval preachers. Therefore we may safely assume that that day fell on 25 March in that year, making Easter 25 April. This is the latest possible date for Easter, and it has occurred only ten times since the tenth century.⁶ In Soreth’s lifetime it happened only once, in 1451. Dating the sermons to 1451 may also elucidate the six sermons before the last one. Since in 1451 the feast of the Invention of the Cross coincided with Monday in the second week of Easter, they may have been delivered during Easter week.⁷

In 1451, Liège was enjoying an unusual period of relative peace. The disorders of the fourteenth century had culminated in the crushing of the city’s forces by the prince-bishop John “the Pitiless” of Bavaria in 1408. Thus ended a period of democracy and civic independence.⁸ John’s absolute rule, however, lasted less than seven years before he resigned to take up a secular career. John of Heynsberg, who reigned from 1419 to 1455, reestablished the city’s political institutions on the basis of a more restricted suffrage. During his reign, Liège remained relatively free of the civil strife that had characterized the fourteenth century, if only relatively. The 1420s saw a brief and unsuccessful war against Philip of Burgundy, and in 1431-32 the guilds of the city rebelled against the attempt of one family to impose a dictatorship.⁹ For the most part, however, the second quarter of the fifteenth century was a period of economic growth and social stability. The industries which were to make the city’s fortune in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—coal and iron—were beginning to grow;¹⁰ in spite of the need to pacify brigands in the countryside and the distant echoes of the rivalry of France and Burgundy, it was easy to believe that prosperity had come to stay.

In the spring of 1451, John Soreth was vicar general of the Carmelite Order, having been appointed the previous year by Pope Nicholas V. If his epitaph is to be believed, he was born in 1394,¹¹ in Caen. Having joined the Order, he studied at Paris, where he graduated master in

⁵ “In domo tua oportet me manere,” Luke 19:5. This is from the Gospel reading for the anniversary of the dedication of a church.

⁶ H. Grotefend, *Taschenbuch der Zeitrechnung*, 6th ed. (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1928), pp. 34-35.

⁷ It is clear at any rate that nos. 44 and 45 were delivered on Wednesday and Tuesday respectively, following a sermon on Monday which is mentioned but not reproduced. Nos. 46, 47, and 48 are apparently not in order, but do form a series. More than one of them could have been given on one day.

⁸ For the events of the fourteenth century, see Fernand Vercauteren, *Luttes sociales à Liège au XIIIe siècle* (Brussels: La renaissance du livre, 1946).

⁹ For this period see Godefroid Kurth, *La cité de Liège au moyen âge*, vol. 3 (Brussels: Dewit, 1910), pp. 91-127.

¹⁰ See Jean Lejeune, *La formation du capitalisme moderne dans la principauté de Liège au XVIe siècle* (Liège: Faculté de philosophie et lettres, 1939), p. 129, and Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique*, vol. 2 (Brussels: Maurice Lamertin, 1922), pp. 288-290.

¹¹ The epitaph is given as part of a biographical sketch in Cosme de Villiers de Saint Etienne, *Bibliotheca Carmelitana notis criticis et dissertationibus illustrata*, vol. 2 (Orléans, 1752; repr. ed. Gabriel Wessels, Rome, 1927), pp. 99-100, and in Daniel a Virgine Maria, *Speculum Carmelitanum*, vol. 2, part 2 (Antwerp, 1680), pp. 597-615. Benoît-Marie de la Croix in “La réforme du bienheureux Jean Soreth” *Etudes Carmelitaines* 19 (1934), p. 189, calls this date uncertain, but gives no reason for his belief. Other biographical sketches of Soreth may be found in P. Santi Mattei, *Vita del Beato Giovanni Soreth, XXIV^o generale dell’ordine carmelitano* (Rome: Cuggiani Santini e Co., 1874); Marcus Reuver, “Prima biographia B. Johannis Soreth” *Carmelus* 5 (1958) pp. 73-99; Gondulf Meesters, “Johannes Soreth und sein Werk” in *Karmel: Gesetz und Geheimnis*, ed. Adalbert Deckert (Cologne: Wienand Verlag, 1959), pp. 56-68.

theology in 1438,¹² and gained the doctorate in 1441.¹³ In 1440 he was prior provincial of Francia, the province that included Liège, and in 1442 he was commissioned to deal with a schism that divided the province of Lower Germany.¹⁴ On 1 November 1451, shortly after giving the sermons in this collection, the general chapter of the Order at Avignon confirmed the pope's selection and elected Soreth prior general.¹⁵

Soreth's visits to Liège, both before and after his election as prior general, can in part be dated from notations in the accounts of the Liège convent.¹⁶ The earliest such notation is dated 21 June 1440 and records a visitation by Soreth as prior provincial of Francia and his checking of the convent's books. It is apparently in Soreth's own hand; at least it bears his signature: "J. Soreth," the ornamental *J* and *S* interlaced, followed by a heart.¹⁷ Soreth's other official "visitations" of the convent came in 1446, 1448, 1450, 1451, 1453, 1454, 1459, and 1463.¹⁸ He resided in the convent at other times; these are only the occasions on which he officially audited the accounts. Jacques Thielens claims Liège as Soreth's "habitual residence," a conclusion in which he is followed by other historians.¹⁹

The convent in Liège was one of the first to accept the reform which Soreth initiated as soon as he took office as general.²⁰ His reform represented a return to the standards of the rule, which had been relaxed over the preceding century, with renewed emphasis on both the active and the contemplative sides of the Carmelite vocation.²¹ The first province to feel the force of Soreth's zeal for reform was the nearby province of Lower Germany, where reform centered at Meus in Holland, but soon the reform spread as Soreth traveled continually across Europe.

Liège was also the base for the other great work of Soreth's life, the foundation of the Carmelite sisters. This began when a group of beguines in Guelders adopted a form of the Carmelite rule and habit in 1452, followed by others in Limburg and Brabant. The convent in Liège was founded in 1457 by a group of local women. It was apparently the first regular female convent to be founded in the city. During Soreth's lifetime, convents were founded in various parts of the Low Countries and in Brittany.²²

Soreth was also known in his own lifetime and after his death as a preacher. The earliest biography of Soreth, by a contemporary and companion, records the emotion he aroused in his audience:

¹² Meesters, p. 56; de la Croix, p. 189; Reuver, p. 80 n. 2

¹³ *Bibliotheca Carmelitana*, 2, p. 99; Santi Mattei, p. 17.

¹⁴ *Bibliotheca Carmelitana*, 2, p. 99; Meesters, p. 56; Reuver, p. 83 n. 9. Santi Mattei (p. 25) says he was provincial of Lower Germany, but this is apparently a confusion.

¹⁵ See above references; Santi Mattei, p. 27; Reuver, p. 79 n. 1.

¹⁶ The Carmelite convent in Liège, located in the heart of a populous quarter known as the "Isle," had been founded before 1265 (Thielens, pp. 49-50; Adrianus Staring, "Notes on a List of Carmelite Houses in Medieval France" *Carmelus* 11 [1964], p. 158.). At one time or another, it supplied five auxiliary bishops for the bishops of Liège (Thielens, p. 51.).

¹⁷ Archives de l'Etat, Liège, Clergé régulier, Carmes, reg. 129, p. 14.

¹⁸ Reuver, p. 89 n. 18, gives a full list of dates and citations. He cites register 129 by folio number, but in fact the register is (exceptionally) numbered by pages.

¹⁹ Jacques Thielens, "Le couvent des carmes chaussés à Liège" *Bulletin de la société d'art et d'histoire du diocèse de Liège* 43 (1963), p. 52; Meesters, p. 60; Reuver, *loc. cit.*, "suum conventum praedictum Leodii."

²⁰ Santi Mattei, p. 44.

²¹ See de la Croix, pp. 188-192; M. Arts, "The Work of John Soreth" *The Sword* 15 (1952), pp. 457-466.

²² Reuver, pp. 94-97. See also Adrianus Staring, "The Carmelite Sisters in the Netherlands" *Carmelus* 10(1963) fasc. 1, pp. 56-92.

Once he preached in Liège about the blood of Christ poured out in love for our sake on the altar of the Cross, when he so enflamed his hearers that tears fell on the cheeks of both men and women, wetting their clothes and flowing onto the pavement of the church.²³

Some of the sermons in this collection might have provoked such a violent emotional response; certainly most appear to have been delivered with great feeling. They deal less, however, with contemplation of the passion of Christ than with the practical moral and spiritual lives of the congregation. Sermons 44 and 45 are the most theoretical, dealing with the “fires of charity”; nos. 46-48 discuss the problem of penance and the state of grace. The first forty-three sermons, all the ones given during Lent, are, on the other hand, pointed directly at Soreth’s audience. They deal first of all with sin, then with confession, and finally with the virtues of receiving the Eucharist. The topics of the sermons are not random, but proceed along a definite plan, preparing the listeners for the reception of the sacraments at Easter.

In the sermons dealing with sin, Soreth reproves first of all the sins of merchants. Sermons 25 through 31, as well as 33 and 34, deal specifically with economic questions, especially with usury. The first of these uses trade mainly as a metaphor, but no. 26 attacks the question straight on. Since goods need to be carried from place to place, Soreth says, there must be merchants, but the life of a merchant is spiritually dangerous: Dame Avarice waits for him. Merchants should only work to support their wives and children, and to give to the poor, not in order to gain “grans estas.”²⁴ He enumerates the many sins of merchants: breaking the Sabbath and feasts, charging more than a just price, speculating on the resale of goods, swearing false oaths, using false weights and measures, selling fraudulently in dark places, cheating in negotiation, selling tainted food and drugs, speculation in exchange rates, and taking long trips without their wives, so that the marriage debt is not paid.²⁵

All through the following week, and into the next, Soreth elaborates many of these points, and devotes much space to a sin not on the list in no. 26 but very much on the minds of his hearers: usury. These sermons frequently include the device of questions and answers:

—Well, father, here’s Hubin to whom I lent 100 florins. I don’t want to ask anything from him of the gains he may make, but if he keeps it 10 years, I want 200.

—That’s usury.²⁶

The detail of questions and answers on trade, and especially on usury, has the ring of real questions which Soreth may well have encountered as a preacher and confessor. His frequent references to mercantile and business life enable us to identify his intended audience as middle-class lay people. In none of the sermons does he discuss clerical or monastic life.²⁷ In his sermon for the feast of the Annunciation he discusses the Virgin Mary as an exemplar for women, but never for religious: all his points assume that the women he is addressing are, or will one day be, married. Socially, his audience falls into the broad category of the comfortable bourgeoisie. Once

²³ “Apud Leodium etiam quadam vice predicavit de sanguine Christi ex amore in ara crucis propter nos effuso, ubi auditores in tantum efflamavit, quod lacrimae tam virorum quam mulierum copiose per maxillas descendentes, eorum vestes irrigabunt et per pavementum ecclesiae diffluebant.” Reuver, p. 88.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, f. 85v.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, ff. 85v-90.

²⁶ “Ha sire vechy Hubin a qui jay baillie .C. florins je ne lui veul riens demander de quelque gaingne quil en fache mais siles tient .x. ans je veul avoir ij^c. —Cest usure.” *Ibid.*, f. 109v; “Hubin” (Hubert) was a common Liégeois name.

²⁷ Sermon no. 13 is about priests, but entirely from the layman’s point of view: “Dez honneurs que on doit az prestres.”

he refers specifically to an artisanal trade, shoemaking,²⁸ and once he alludes to the possibility of having the patronage of an ecclesiastical benefice within one's "seigneurie."²⁹ His attacks on "bad customs" imply that he regards his hearers to some extent responsible for the political and legal system under which they live. This picture is entirely consistent with the "petty-bourgeois democracy" of late medieval Liège, where substantial burghers, notaries, and lawyers shared the government of the city with a host of varied guildsmen, in Vercauteren's phrase, "petits patrons et petit propriétaires."³⁰

This is a milieu with which Soreth is familiar. He mentions Liège landmarks, such as the churches of Saint-Lambert and Saint-Pierre. He frequently calls attention to what he regards as particular sins in "this city." First among these are always "fausses marchandises et usures," followed by lechery, gluttony, and violence. The violence he decries has been noted by historians; many parts of the countryside around Liège had become nests of brigands by the mid-fifteenth century.³¹ The impunity with which they operated aroused Soreth's astonished ire:

Look at these violators of women and kidnapers of girls, and fornicators. And when someone accuses them of kidnapping the wife or daughter of a citizen, they say that it is the law of the land. And by my faith if that is the law of the land it is very evil!³²

It is not only individual sinners or judges who incur Soreth's condemnation, but laws and customs as well. He constantly reminds his hearers to be rid of "malvais coustumes": this can mean simply "bad habits," but at least some of the time it refers to the legal customs of the city. One clear example comes in sermon no. 27. Soreth is praising merchants who give credit to the poor without demanding interest. The guilds of Liège are not like that, he says:

The guilds of Liège do not do this; they make statutes for their guilds against God, reason, and charity, as the shoemakers have, that no one can extend credit to the poor for a pair of shoes, and all the time the *caureurs* or tanners give them the leather on credit.³³

The roundest condemnation of the evil customs of Liège comes in Soreth's most violently prophetic sermon, no. 16. He begins with the Gospel text for the day, Matthew 21:33-46, the parable of the Vineyard. He briefly retells the story, then turns to his audience:

²⁸ MS, f. 90v.

²⁹ Ibid., f. 36.

³⁰ Vercauteren, p. 104.

³¹ See Kurth, pp. 120-125, for some examples.

³² "Regarde ces violeurs de femmes et voleurs de filles et les fornicateurs. Et quant on leur blame quilz ont emble ou desrobe la femme ou fille dunc bourgeois ils dient que cest la loy du pais. Et par ma foi se cest la loi du pais elle est tres male." MS, f. 19v.

³³ "Che ne font point les mestiers de Liege qui contre Dieu, raison et carite font estatus en leur mestiers. Comme les corbesiers que nul ne puet aux povres croire unc paire de solers et toutes voies les caureurs ou tanneurs leur croient bien le cuir." Ibid., f. 90v.

Our Lord was not speaking only to the Jews, but to us, for our instruction: I put you in the world, which is the vineyard; you are the laborers and vinedressers, among you teachers, justices, judges, governors, who should tend the vineyard. That is to chastise, admonish, and correct the worldly and the evil, and to correct and amend the defects of laws, customs, and statutes.³⁴

If they do not listen, he says, then the same will be true of them as of the workers in the parable: *Malos male perdet*—"He will bring those wretches to a bad end."

"Regarde moy chite de Liege," says Soreth, God is preparing his punishment.³⁵ As John saw death on a pale horse, and Hell following after, so death is coming to you. The Liégeois must profit by the example of their neighbors in France, where the English so recently wielded the scourge of God.³⁶ In Liège, he says, the rich devour the poor, while others lend at usury. Some are idle, doing no work but wearing long swords; they cannot be brought to justice because of "privileges:" "Oh God! What privileges, that forbid the good to do good and maintain the wicked in their wickedness!"³⁷ Even the "clerics" only use their knowledge to deceive others and to "imagine how other people's grain can be in their granary or money in their purse."³⁸

.One might protest against such a prophecy of doom, says Soreth, that the current prosperity of Liège only proves God's favor; but when God punished "ta suer Saudomme" she had plenty of wealth.³⁹ Besides, the abundance of ill-governed rich and idle could be dangerous: "The mad dog bites his master as soon as another."⁴⁰ No one, he says, can control these disorderly mobs. And no one dares to testify against the powerful, nor can priests even refuse the Sacrament to public sinners for fear they will be manhandled. Nor can those who eat up the goods of hospitals point to the many hospitals and great churches of Liège.⁴¹ The temple of Jerusalem was greater than Saint-Lambert and all the churches of Liège, and God destroyed that. No, indeed, God's judgment will come "like a thief."⁴²

When God wants to punish a city, says Soreth, he takes away the good angel that protects it, and puts it "in the hands of his executioners."⁴³ Already in 1451 Philip of Burgundy was pressing prince-bishop John of Heysberg and reducing him to political impotence. In 1455, he forced Heysberg to resign, and replaced him with his own nephew, Louis de Bourbon, aged eighteen. Louis brought Liège firmly into the Burgundian sphere of influence and by the threat of his uncle's arms tried to introduce absolute rule to the city.

It was the beginning of the end. The citizens of Liège, used to the laissez-faire rule of Heysberg, rebelled against Louis's attacks on their ancient civic liberties. They revolted openly in 1460; for the next eight years they attacked the bishop while he replied with interdicts and

³⁴ "Ne le disoit point nostre Seigneur aus juis seulement mais a nous et pour nostre introduction: Je vous ay mis ou monde qui est la vingne; vous estes les laboureurs et vigneron entre vous docteurs, justichiers, juges, gouverneurs qui la vigne devez retailler. Cest castier reprendre et corriger les mondains, les malvais, les deffaultes de lois des coustumes et estatus corriger et amender." Ibid., f. 48.

³⁵ Ibid., f. 48

³⁶ Ibid., ff. 49-49v.

³⁷ "He Dieu et quels privileges qui deffendent les bons a bien faire et maintiennent le malvais en leur malvaisetes!" Ibid., f. 50.

³⁸ "ymaginer comment le ble daultroi pora estre en leur grenier ou largent en leur bourse." Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., f. 50v.

⁴⁰ "Ausy tost mort le chien esragie son maistre que unc aultre."

⁴¹ Ibid., f. 51.

⁴² Ibid., f. 51v.

⁴³ "en la main de ses bouriaulz" Ibid., f. 49.

Burgundian armies. The city militia were defeated at Montenaeken in 1465 and at Brusthem in 1467. In 1468, duke Charles took the city by storm. Thousands perished by drowning, fire, and sword, or of exposure in the winter that followed. Charles ordered the walls and bridges demolished, and called in workmen from surrounding cities to level every house not owned by the Church. The political institutions of Liège were abolished; a portion of the city itself was annexed to the duchy of Brabant. The prophecy of seventeen years earlier had come true.

During this time, John Soreth was frequently in Liège. His activities there were not limited to reform of the Carmelite friars and the founding of the convent of sisters. He also took an active role in the developments leading up to the sack. At two points of crisis, in 1462 and in 1468, he emerged as an intermediary trying to bring peace and save the city.

Soreth and the Carmelites were well placed to act as mediators. While closely tied to the life of the city by their ministry, they were also close to the bishop. Louis and his Burgundian relatives had supported Soreth's reform and the foundation of the Carmelite sisters.⁴⁴ When Louis first placed the city under interdict in 1461-63, the Carmelites, along with most of the city's clergy, observed it. The Franciscans and Dominicans, having defied the interdict—"propter terrorem civium" as one chronicler put it⁴⁵—had to ask for absolution after the interdict was lifted by the papal legate.⁴⁶

On this occasion, Soreth had urged the city to make peace. He addressed a session of the Estates of the principality at Maestricht in January 1462, urging a compromise over the issues that divided the bishop and his subjects.⁴⁷ Neither the bishop nor the leaders of the city would accept the terms until the issue was decided by the legate. Soreth, however, gained a reputation as a partisan of the bishop, and suffered physical attack from his enemies in Liège.⁴⁸

In spite of the efforts of the legate to make peace, the party in Liège opposed to Louis and his Burgundian connection still hoped for the support of Louis XI of France, and maintained their revolt. The city was once again placed under interdict, the promised help from France did not come, and the extremists only pushed their city to a disastrous defeat at Montenaeken. The city was then forced to sign the humiliating treaty of Saint-Trond, which only inflamed the radicals further. The mob executed one of the signers of the treaty; for the next three years the city was the prey of factions and disorder.⁴⁹ Soreth was in Liège part of this time. He was one of a delegation sent by the churches of Liège to the bishop to arrange to lift the interdict, and to send envoys to Rome to confirm the treaty and to try to pacify the various factions.⁵⁰

The reply came in the beginning of 1468. The college of cardinals refused to confirm the treaty of Saint-Trond as prejudicial to the rights of the Church, but Pope Paul II sent a legate to bring about a reconciliation. Onufrius de Santa Croce, bishop of Tricaria, had worked with the earlier legate, Peter Ferri, in his mission of 1463,⁵¹ and so understood the difficult problems of Liège. His mission, however, was to be no more successful.

⁴⁴ Reuver, pp. 87 n. 14 and pp. 95-97.

⁴⁵ Jean de Looz, *Chronicon rerum gestarum* in P. F. X. De Ram, ed., *Documents relatifs aux troubles du pays de Liège sous les princes-évêques Louis de Bourbon et Jean de Horne, 1455-1505* (Brussels: Commission royale d'histoire, 1844), p. 13.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁴⁷ Kurth, pp. 182-83; Reuver, pp. 86-87.

⁴⁸ Reuver, p. 87 n. 14.

⁴⁹ Kurth, pp. 204-267.

⁵⁰ Jean de Looz in *Documents*, pp. 36-37.

⁵¹ Stanislaus Bormans, ed., *Mémoire du légat Onufrius sur les affaires de Liège (1468)* (Brussels: Académie royale de Belgique, 1885) pp. ii-iv.

Onufrius, shortly before his death in 1471, wrote an account of the failure of his mission in an attempt to justify himself before both the pope and the victorious Burgundians, who accused him of being too favorable to the rebellious city.⁵² According to this account, any hope for peace was doomed from the beginning. The citizens welcomed the legate, who lifted the interdict; he then secured from Louis, who had fled the city, an assurance that he would return and rule in peace. But Charles of Burgundy would not agree, and Louis chose to obey his powerful cousin. Exiles returning to Liège once again urged an alliance with France against Burgundy; the people marched out to war only to find that the king and the duke had joined forces. Each time during that summer and autumn that peace appeared imminent either the intransigence of the city or the implacable anger of the duke destroyed all hope. When Onufrius tried to prevent Charles from executing his terrible vengeance, the Burgundians took him prisoner and held him while they devastated the city.⁵³

Once again Soreth tried to make peace. He had been in Brittany in the spring,⁵⁴ but returned to Liège by the autumn, when he attended a meeting of clergy and citizens at the monastery of Saint-Jacques on 10 September. He had with him two other Carmelites, both theologians, one a Breton, the other Liégeois.⁵⁵ The latter was probably the “Robertus” elsewhere referred to;⁵⁶ one historian has supposed that he was in fact Hubert Leonardi, an advisor of Louis de Bourbon and later auxiliary bishop of Liège.⁵⁷ From the time of this meeting, says Onufrius, they acted as his interpreters. Soreth himself interpreted the legate’s speech that day, reminding the people of the danger that they faced, being absolutely defenseless against a prince who had already defeated them three times, as Onufrius says, “prudenter. . .et efficaciter in sua lingua omnia bona suadente.”⁵⁸

“Robertus” continued to act frequently as interpreter for Onufrius, and traveled with him as a chaplain. Soreth also accompanied him on at least one mission to negotiate with Louis, at that time at Tongres. On this mission he acted as interpreter.⁵⁹ The mission failed, since Louis was still unwilling to defy his cousin, who would on no account leave Liège unpunished. In the end a force of Liège militia brought both Louis and Onufrius back from Tongres. By now it was October, and the doom of Liège was near at hand. Soreth continued to help the legate; upon hearing from a convent of nuns in Huy of the Burgundian plans, he sent the news on to Onufrius.⁶⁰ By this time, however, there was nothing that could be done.

On the last day of October, duke Charles entered Liège along with the city’s supposed ally, Louis XI. On 3 November, his soldiers began to burn, loot, and pillage. Somewhere between four and five thousand persons were killed.⁶¹ The chronicler Jean de Looz uttered this judgment on the event:

So they believed in Huy, and in some other places as well, and it could well be true, of the Liégeois that they had justly brought on themselves the punishment of God, which Titus and Vespasian are said to have brought to the unfaithful Jews. And thus

⁵² Kurth, pp. 370-73.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 269-352.

⁵⁴ Reuver, p. 95.

⁵⁵ Bormans, p. 55.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 36 et passim.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 167

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 55

⁵⁹ Ibid., pp. 81-82

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 117

⁶¹ Kurth, p. 334.

God often humbles the proud, in order that while punishing them he may exalt the poor and humble. Thus it is easy to gather from the foregoing tragedy that the insolence, injustice, and arrogance of the Liégeois can have moved heaven itself. At their insolence even the good Lord who looks patiently for their reform appeared to be moved in the end by wrath and to have given the wicked with the innocent, and the good with the evil, over to obvious reprobation, and to have cast them into the horrible ruin of death.⁶²

What Soreth thought of the event is not recorded; but still he had one more part to play in the drama. Although Charles had ordered his soldiers to spare the churches, they did not observe this rule. In one church, the sacred vessels had been profaned, and the hosts were thrown on the ground. Soreth, it is said, made his way through the armed mob of soldiers “periculo mortis,” gathered up the sacred species, and took them back to his own convent.⁶³ The church in question is not identified. There were two parish churches about equidistant from the Carmelite convent, Saint-Martin-en-Ile and Saint-Nicolas-au-Treit. We do know that the first of these was devastated by the Burgundians.⁶⁴

Soreth remained in the devastated city that winter. The sisters of the Carmelite convent he had helped to found fled to Maestricht, whence some resettled in Vilvoorde, while others returned to Liège.⁶⁵ Soreth’s work kept him traveling as he had before; he died in Angers in 1471. His reputation for sanctity grew after his death, not the least in Liège; among the miracles recorded in *Speculum Carmelitanum* (1680), one is said to have taken place there.⁶⁶

Jean de Looz’s judgment on the destruction of Liège was very similar to Soreth’s prediction. If Soreth had any conviction, however, that his own prophecy was being fulfilled, it did not stop him from trying to save Liège from the destruction into which its leaders seemed determined to draw it. In the case of John Soreth and Liège, we see an example of the use of the prophetic mode designed, as Soreth’s words and deeds clearly show, to prevent rather than to bring about the predicted evil.

⁶² “Idem fiebat in Huyo, nec non in aliis nonnullis locis, ita quod dici verisimile posset, de Leodiensibus punitionem Dei iudicio fuisse suptam, qualem Titus et Vespasianus de perfidis Judaeis sumpsisse olim describuntur. Itaque sic Deus nunquam superbos humiliat, ut interea illis punitis pauperes exaltare possit. Quod ex praedicta tragoedia facile deprehenditur, ubi Leodiensium insolentia, iniustitia ac arrogantia coelum ipse pulsasse videtur. Ad quorum petulentiam ipse bonus Deus patientissime eorum emendationem expectans, tandem in ira provocatus cum nocentibus etiam innocentes et cum malis bonos in reprobationem dedisse visus est sensim, et projecisse in dirum mortis exitium.” Jean de Looz in *Documents*, p. 61.

⁶³ Reuver, p. 89.

⁶⁴ Léon Lahaye, “La paroisse Saint-Martin-en-Ile à Liège” *Bulletin de la société d’art et d’histoire du diocèse de Liège* 25 (1934), p. 104.

⁶⁵ Reuver, pp. 96-97.

⁶⁶ *Speculum Carmelitanum*, 2, p. 604; Santi Mattei, pp. 75-76.