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## *A Social Scientist in the Service of the Workers* **Georges Ceslas Rutten (1875–1952)**

BERTRAND-JULIAAN DE CLERCQ

### A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

From his earliest days, Georges Rutten proved to be a wunderkind, exceptionally gifted in many ways. He was born in 1875 in Dendermonde, a city in the Belgian province of Flanders. His father was a high-ranking civil servant and his mother was descended from a middle-class French family of Ghent. The famous architect Victor Horta was his uncle. He completed his secondary school education at the age of 15 and entered the Order shortly before his sixteenth birthday.

At the beginning of his theological studies, along with his older confrere Jules Perquy (see below), Rutten asked for permission to combine the theology programme with studies in social science at the university. Their superiors refused the proposal. Therefore the two brothers addressed their request to the Master of the Order, who then gave them the necessary permission. Rutten was ordained priest at the age of 23.

While preparing his doctoral thesis in social sciences, and in view of his study of the situation of the workers in the Belgian coal industry, the young Rutten judged it necessary to go down the mines. Once again he met with refusal from his superiors: 'The mission of a friar preacher is to preach and certainly not to go digging up coal...'. But once again he was able to obtain permission from the Master of the Order. Later he would sometimes refer to Fr Rutten as a worker-priest *avant la lettre*. He published his doctoral thesis in 1900, under the title *Nos grèves houillères et l'action socialiste* (Our Strikes in the Mines and Socialist Action).

After four years of meticulous planning, in 1904 Georges Rutten founded the *Secrétariat général des organisations professionnelles chrétiennes* (General Secretariat of Christian Professional Organisations), embryo of the subsequent *Syndicat général chrétien* (General Christian Union), founded in 1912, and later the *Ligue des travailleurs chrétiens* (League of Christian Workers), founded in 1921. He would long remain their director and *éminence grise*.

During the First World War, in 1915, Cardinal Mercier sent Georges Rutten – who at that time risked imprisonment from the occupying Germans