

A Commentator on the Church's Social Teaching:
Jules Constant Van Gestel (1899–1978)

BERTRAND-JULIAAN DE CLERCQ

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY

Jules Van Gestel was born in 1899 at Turnhout, a town in the Flemish countryside, into a family of traders. After his secondary education at the Jesuit school in his native city he entered the Dominicans in 1917. He was ordained priest in 1923. At first he spent some years in urban pastoral work in Antwerp, but in view of the ministry for which he was preparing himself, he wanted to complete his studies in philosophy and theology at the Dominican studium generale of the province of Belgium with two years of study at the *École Supérieure pour travailleurs* (Higher Institute of Formation for Workers), founded by, among others, Fr Georges Ceslas Rutten (see the article on Rutten in this book). At the request of Fr Rutten, he continued his studies at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences in Louvain, where he wrote a doctoral thesis on religious socialism (1932).

In the meantime Van Gestel had already become a lecturer at the Dominican studium generale where he taught a practical course under the title of 'Sacred Rhetoric' (*l'éloquence sacrée*) for 12 years starting in 1927, and a few years later he took over the course on social science. For three years he also taught a course in social ethics for the philosophy section of the Dominican studium. From 1930 to 1936 he was sub-editor of the Dominican magazine *Kultuurleven* (Cultural life). In this same period he would play a major role in the development of Catholic institutions for the higher education of women. He was rector of the high school of Antwerp from 1937 to 1940.

In 1937 Van Gestel also succeeded his confrère Rutten as an 'extraordinary' professor at the University of Louvain. The statutes of this Catholic university prohibited all members of religious orders from receiving the title (as well as the associated honours) of 'ordinary' professors (an ordinary professor has a higher rank than an extraordinary one), and he would have to wait until the moment when the first lay people took up official responsibilities in the university before this discrimination would be abolished and he could become a full member of the academic body. In the long course of his academic