DUTCH MARTYRS

VOLUME 1

Faithful unto Death

Eight Dutch martyrs, from Jan de Bakker to Frans van der Lugt

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Revelation 2:10

WIM KAMPHORST

DUTCH MARTYRS · VOLUME 1

Faithful unto Death

Eight Dutch martyrs, from Jan de Bakker to Frans van der Lugt

WIM KAMPHORST

Contents

Introduction: faithful unto death **2**

Jan de Bakker: the priest who was to leave no memory **7**

Anneken Jans: a testament for a boy who could not yet read **24**

Elisabeth Dirks: the teacher who named no names **40**

Dirk Willems: the man who walked back across the ice **54**

Robert Regout: the professor who put law above power **68**

Bastiaan Jan Ader: the minister who handed out addresses **83**

Nico Kluiters: shepherd of the shepherds **97**

Frans van der Lugt: the priest who stayed in Homs **115**

Afterword **133**

Faithful unto Death. Dutch martyrs, volume 1

© 2026 Wim Kamphorst
Stichting (F)Luister Nederland

Translated from the Dutch edition. Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or made public without prior written permission from the author.

The sources consulted are listed after each chapter. Stories known only from a person's own testimony or from later tradition, or that cannot be verified, are marked as such in the text and in the overview at the end of each chapter.

This book can be read and downloaded free of charge at whispermagazine.org.

Introduction: faithful unto death

On September 15, 1525, a court clerk in The Hague is said to have declared that no "memorie" should remain of a condemned priest. No memory, no name, no grave. Five hundred years later, the town of Woerden held a whole program around the life of that priest, Jan de Bakker. In January 1549, a few men found a New Testament in Latin in a house in Leeuwarden, and they thought they had caught the wife of Menno Simons. In January 2014, an old Dutch Jesuit in the besieged city of Homs, in Syria, asked the world for food.

All three were killed. For the first two, the sources say why: for what they believed. For the third, no one knows who killed him or why. What we do know is that he could have left, and he stayed.

The last book of the Bible contains a letter to the church in Smyrna. In it Jesus says: *Do not fear any of those things which you are about to suffer. Indeed, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and you will have tribulation ten days. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life* (Revelation 2:10).

This is the first volume of a series about Dutch men and women who were killed for their faith, or for what their faith led them to do. In this I follow the example of Roberts Liardon, who in his book series

God's Generals described the lives of preachers, with their calling, their strength and their weak sides.

Five hundred years

The first of the eight people in this book was strangled and burned in The Hague in 1525, at about twenty-six years old. The last was shot dead at the Jesuit house in Homs in 2014, at the age of seventy-five.

Between them stand a woman from Den Briel who wrote a testament for her little son Esaias in a cell in Rotterdam. A former beguine in Leeuwarden who understood Latin and gave her judges not a single name. A man from Asperen who let people gather in his house, and of whom it is told that he walked back across the ice to save his pursuer. A Jesuit and professor of international law who, in the first weeks of the German occupation, wrote down what an occupying power may and may not do, and who died in Dachau. A minister of the Hervormde Kerk (the Dutch Reformed Church) from Nieuw-Beerta who opened his parsonage to people in hiding and was executed by firing squad near Rhenen. And a Jesuit from Delft who became the priest of a village in Lebanon and was kidnapped on his way there.

They belonged to very different churches. Jan de Bakker was a Roman Catholic priest who married and preached against the trade in indulgences; Lutherans and Reformed Christians both recognize themselves in him. Anneken Jans, Elisabeth Dirks and Dirk Willems belonged to the Anabaptists, the movement from which the Mennonites came (in the Netherlands they are called doopsgezinden). Bastiaan Jan Ader was a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. Robert Regout, Nico Kluiters and Frans van der Lugt were Roman Catholic priests, all three of them Jesuits. They would have dis-

agreed with one another about many things. Even so, I put them here side by side.

Who is a martyr?

In the Roman Catholic Church, a martyr is someone who is killed out of hatred for the faith. Whether that was so in the case of Nico Kluiters has been under investigation by a church court in Beirut since 2022. According to Katholiek Nieuwsblad, a Dutch Catholic weekly, the process for Frans van der Lugt has been at a standstill since that year. Bastiaan Jan Ader was shot as a reprisal for an attack he had nothing to do with. He was in prison because of what his faith had led him to do.

In this book I use the word more broadly. Here a martyr is someone who was killed for his or her faith, or because that faith made them stay where it was dangerous. Where a church is still forming its judgment, I do not get ahead of it.

Christians against Christians

The first four people in this book were killed by other Christians. Jan de Bakker was interrogated by theologians from Leuven. The sentence against Dirk Willems was signed by seven men from his own small town. In those years, the death penalty for rebaptism was the law.

I find that hard to write down. The men who condemned them believed they were protecting the church against a danger that could cost souls. I do not have to excuse their judgment to acknowledge that. I do not want to make this a settling of scores. Around the commemoration of Jan de Bakker in 1925, some Protestant writers lashed out fiercely at Catholics. I will not repeat that.

Something else happened too. According to the American church historian Rex Butler, Mennonites gave Pope Benedict XVI a framed picture of Dirk Willems on the ice in 2007. The church of Asperen, where according to tradition he was held prisoner in the tower, is now a Dutch Reformed church. That congregation supports the plans for a memorial to him.

Facts first

Martyr stories often grow more beautiful in the retelling. They were written down to give fellow believers courage. That is why I keep two kinds of sources apart.

The first kind comes from people of the time. We know the sentence against Dirk Willems from a copy that the town secretary of Asperen certified in 1606. Gnapheus, who was in prison with Jan de Bakker, wrote an account that appeared in 1529. The testament of Anneken Jans was printed in the very year of her death.

The second kind are the later martyr books of the Anabaptists: *Het Offer des Heeren* (The Sacrifice of the Lord), first printed in 1562, and the *Martyrs Mirror* (Martelaersspiegel) of Thieleman van Braght from 1660. Without those books we would know almost nothing about these people. But they were written by fellow believers, sometimes more than a century later, and they tell things that are found nowhere else. Van Braght had the story of Dirk Willems on the ice from trustworthy persons, without names. For the baker who is said to have taken in the little son of Anneken Jans, I have found no document from her time.

For the people of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, much comes from one side. What we know of the resistance work of Bastiaan Jan Ader is largely found in the book his widow published in 1947. About the death of Nico Kluiters, Time magazine and his own

order tell different things. Who shot Frans van der Lugt has never been established.

Where sources contradict each other, I say so. Stories that come only from a martyr book, a person's own testimony or the person's own church, I tell as well, with their origin. After each chapter there is a short overview of what is certain and what is only told, with the sources. I write briefly about the violence. Their lives deserve more room than their deaths.

How you can read this book

Each chapter stands on its own. The order is the order of time, from 1525 to 2014.

Most readers of this book will never stand before a judge because of their faith. The choices of these people often began in ordinary ways. Dirk Willems opened his door. Elisabeth Dirks kept silent about her friends. Bastiaan Jan Ader said yes to a Jewish acquaintance from Amsterdam who wanted to go into hiding. Frans van der Lugt did not go along when the United Nations took civilians out of the old city of Homs.

Read it with a question at the back of your mind. What did God ask of them, and what does He ask of you?

Jan de Bakker: the priest who was to leave no memory

On September 15, 1525, a high scaffold stood on the Binnenhof in The Hague, right in front of the Ridderzaal (the Hall of Knights). Many people had come. The regent of the Netherlands, Margaret of Austria, was also in town. The stadholder of Holland and the councilors sat on purple chairs, so that everyone could see who was sitting there. Three abbots sat with them. On the scaffold stood a young priest from Woerden, and a clergyman publicly stripped him of his priesthood.

A Franciscan friar gave the sermon at that ceremony. That is how Willem de Volder tells it, the man who later wrote down what had happened to Jan. The priest's vestments were pulled off him. What Jan said then has been preserved: "Godlof; nu lijk ik meer op een Christenmensch dan toen ik dat pak aanhad!" (Praise God; now I look more like a Christian than when I had that costume on!) Then he was dressed in a yellow robe and a fool's cap was put on his head.

From the Binnenhof he was taken to the Groene Zoodje, a stone place of execution next to the Gevangenpoort, the old prison gate. There he was tied to a stake, strangled and burned.

At that execution, words were spoken that almost everyone who later wrote about him has repeated. The court clerk, a man named Sandelijn, is said to have declared that no "memorie" (memory) of this heretic should remain. No memory, no name, no grave.

It turned out differently. Five hundred years later, in 2025, Woerden, the town where he was born, organized a whole program around his life. In the Petruskerk, where his father was sexton, there is a stained glass window that shows him preaching with an open Bible. The Lutheran church in Woerden stands on a street that bears his name.

His name was Jan Janszoon. History knows him as Jan de Bakker, or in Latin as Johannes Pistorius Woerdensis. He was about twenty-six when he died, not yet twenty-seven, Van der Aa writes. In the old reference works and in Woerden itself, he is called the first person in the northern Netherlands to be executed for his faith.

It began at the church of Woerden.

The sexton's son

Jan was born around the middle of 1499 in Woerden. His father was called Jan Dirkszoon and was the sexton of the church in the little town, the Petruskerk, which was still Roman Catholic at the time. The Stadsmuseum Woerden (the town museum) adds that his father was also a brickmaker.

The writers do not agree about the nickname "de Bakker" (the baker). Van der Aa wrote in 1854 that Jan later earned his living as a baker. Others think of his father's brickworks. In any case, the Latin Pistorius means baker.

His father had a plan for him. Jan stood out early for his gifts, and so he was to become a priest. He was a good student and could sing

beautifully. He helped his father in the church, as sexton and as an assistant at the services.

For his education Jan went to Utrecht, to the school of the Brethren of the Common Life, the Hieronymus School. The rector was Johannes Rhodius, better known in Utrecht as Hinne Rode.

Under Hinne Rode, Jan came to know the teaching of Jesus in a way that was new to him. That is how Van der Aa put it. Before long, teacher and pupil were both suspected of Lutheran sympathies.

The rumor reached Woerden. When it came to the father's ears, he brought his son back home. Jan had to help with the sexton's work, so that the doubts about him would fade.

You may wonder what a father was supposed to do in those days. He worked for the church his son was beginning to question. He wanted the best for Jan, and in his eyes the best was a safe place in that church.

A letter for Erasmus

The father then sent Jan to Leuven, at that time the only university in the Netherlands. He gave him a letter of recommendation to Erasmus, the famous scholar. Jan came into contact with him. How close that contact was, we do not know.

Jan stayed in Leuven for about three years. In 1522 he was ordained a priest in Utrecht. It happened under pressure from his father, and according to Van der Aa against Jan's own wishes. Willem de Volder later mentions it with a touch of mockery: Jan became a pastor because his father was a sexton, not because he was called.

I pause here for a moment, because it says something about how he acted later. Jan had not sought his ordination. But he did take it

seriously. As a priest he began to preach, and what he had learned in Utrecht came back in those sermons.

Locked up in the castle of Woerden

In Woerden, Jan helped the pastor, taught the young and preached against abuses in the church. The people liked to listen to him.

Those sermons did not go unnoticed. The clergy in Utrecht summoned him to appear, but he did not come. He saw a trap in it, Van der Aa writes. So they went to the Hof van Holland (the Court of Holland). The Court ordered the castellan to lock him up in the castle of Woerden.

He did not stay there long. The citizens of Woerden did not want one of their own to disappear into a dungeon without a hearing. They spoke up for him, and he was released.

To escape his enemies he chose a time of exile. Van der Aa and the German biography by Alberdingk Thijm both tell it: Jan went to Wittenberg, the city of Martin Luther. Van der Aa writes that he visited Luther there. After about three months he was back, and according to Van der Aa stronger in his convictions than when he left.

Once again the Inquisition had him in its sights. An order came: Jan had to make a pilgrimage to Rome and stay away for three years. He did not go. He traveled through the region to persuade people and to support believers, and so he became known as the foremost champion of Luther's ideas in this area.

A woman in Woerden

There is a story that during this time Jan was for a while the pastor in Jacobswoude, a village near Woerden. The Museum de Gevangenpoort (the prison museum in The Hague) tells it that way. Van der

Aa writes that some claim the lord of Warmond placed him there as pastor, and that he returned to Woerden because the inhabitants had promised him a higher salary.

What is certain is that Jan did something forbidden to a priest. He married. His wife was older than he was and shared his convictions. The Stadsmuseum Woerden calls her Jacoba, a neighbor, and says they married in secret in 1524.

To support himself, Jan worked with his hands. He settled in Woerden as an ordinary citizen with a trade. He became a baker, and Van der Aa thinks he hoped to be recognized less quickly that way. A priest at the oven, married to the woman next door: in a small town that could not stay hidden for long.

What exactly did he believe? Nothing written by him has survived. The Stadsmuseum Woerden sums it up like this: the Bible stands at the center, a priest may marry, and every believer is a priest. For the church of Rome, those were unacceptable ideas.

The indulgence seller

The last straw was money. An indulgence seller came to Woerden. He sold letters that promised remission of punishment for sins, in exchange for payment. In those years it was a thriving trade.

Jan turned against it. He did so in the confessional, Van der Aa writes: he exposed the fraud and called for true repentance and faith in Christ. He would not take money from those who confessed to him. They came to him in great numbers. According to the German biography, he preached against the indulgence trade of the clergy in Woerden. The parish priest of Woerden was beside himself with rage at this and became his enemy.

This is eight years after Luther's theses in Wittenberg. Here a young priest stands in a small town in Holland and says, in effect, the same thing: forgiveness is not for sale. He must have known what it could cost him. He had already faced the Inquisition once.

Would you have said it? In a small town where everyone knows you, with a wife at home you were not allowed to marry?

May 1525

In May 1525 Jan was arrested again, this time on the orders of the regent Margaret of Austria, who ruled the Netherlands on behalf of Emperor Charles V. He was seized in secret. Four court officers took him to The Hague.

The Inquisition was still young in the Netherlands. Emperor Charles V had established it in 1522, and Ruard Tapper was one of his inquisitors, appointed with the blessing of Pope Adrian VI. The church of Luther was not yet a church. In the eyes of the authorities, anyone who appealed to Luther was a danger to public order and to the salvation of souls at the same time.

In The Hague he was put in the Gevangenpoort, then the state prison of Holland. At first he was held in the Ridderkamer, a cell for prisoners of rank. When he admitted during the interrogations that he rejected the teaching of the church, he was moved to a bare cell. There he was held with ten vagrants and a great many lice, the Gevangenpoort says. The German biography speaks of ten common criminals. Theun de Vries writes that many like-minded people were held in that front gate, among them a beguine (a lay sister who lived in a religious community without taking vows). It was a place full of people who thought as he did, and it stank.

A thin wooden partition

One of his fellow prisoners was Willem de Volder, who later became known by the Latin name Gnapheus. He was a humanist, a man of books and language. He was in the cell next to Jan's. Between them stood a thin wooden partition.

Through that partition Jan told him what had been said at the interrogations. Gnapheus wrote it down in secret. He survived his imprisonment, fled, and had his account printed in Latin in Strasbourg in 1529. More than a century later it was published again in Leiden, and in 1652 it appeared in Dutch, under the title *De eerste Hollandsche martelaer* (The first martyr of Holland).

He wrote it as a drama in four acts, with a sharp pen for the persecutors. When you read it, you hear a friend who wants to honor his friend. I tell what is in it as it has been handed down, and I say plainly that it is a single voice.

Not one line of Jan's own has survived. No letter to his wife, no sermon, no song, no note in the margin of a book. Everything we have of his voice comes through a wooden wall, by way of the ear and pen of another prisoner, and later through Van der Aa, who summarized it in 1854. That makes his story fragile. It also makes it remarkable, because no one other than Gnapheus listened in those weeks. A prisoner who listened and wrote down what the man next to him said: that is how Jan de Bakker was kept.

Ten whores or one wife

The interrogators were heavyweights. Van der Aa names three theologians from Leuven: Nicolaas Copinus van Bergen, Godschalk Rosemond and Ruard Tapper. Gnapheus describes the inquisitor Van Bergen with his assistants, and later a heresy court presided over by Joost Lauwerens, president of the Great Council of Meche-

len. The writer Theun de Vries says of Tapper that he has the death of Pistorius on his conscience.

According to the Museum de Gevangenpoort, the interrogations took place in the hall that is now the Ridderzaal. The charge concerned the rejection of church rites and customs. A major point was his marriage. Jan admitted that he had married in secret.

After that he made a written statement. Church customs that did not go against the Bible, he wrote, were necessary and praiseworthy. It was an attempt to keep room to maneuver. His opponents used it as a trap. They examined which customs he did consider contrary to the Bible, and so fasting, the sacraments, the church and the Lord's Supper came up on the table.

A short exchange about the marriage has come down to us, quoted by the church historian Bremmer in the words of the time. The interrogator is said to have told him he would rather Jan had kept company with ten whores than with one wife of his own. Jan answered with a question of his own. If a priest wants to leave that whoring behind and would rather live honestly with his wife, is he then a heretic?

At one point Lauwerens made a joke about it. Jan would choose the stake, he said, to get rid of a wife who was already getting on in years. Jan asked him whether a judge and president was allowed to use such foul and ungodly language. That is how it stands in Gnapheus.

Not all the judges were equally harsh. The lord of Warmond and the Frisian jurist Bucho Aytta, both councilors in the Court of Holland, are described more kindly by Gnapheus. They restrained the persecutors. Of Tapper and Rosemond he says the opposite: cunning and hostile. Tapper also heard Jan's confession, and Gnapheus tells that this confession did not improve Jan's position but made it worse.

According to the German biography, which relies here on Gnapheus, the interrogations lasted three days. Because he would not recant, he then spent four days in a dark hole underground. The Stadsmuseum Woerden writes that he was tortured.

What Jan himself said, Van der Aa summarizes, and I pass it on as he writes it. He wanted to hold to what stands in the Bible, as explained by the Holy Spirit. A Christian may not force anyone to believe by violence. You win people with love and with the Word of God, he said, not with prison, blows or fire. He complained about priests who committed whoring daily and were forgiven for it. He himself had tried to restrain himself, he admitted, but he could not master his natural urges. That was why he had married in secret, without witnesses, so as to give no offense.

Read the sentence about prison, blows and fire once more. It is 1525. There is no freedom of religion, not a word that resembles it, and a priest tells three professors from Leuven that you do not bring people to faith by force. He says it before a hall that will have him burned within weeks.

Whatever the judges said, Jan held to his conviction. He was sentenced to the stake.

A father in the prison

Then comes the moment in this story that moves me most.

Jan's father came to visit him in prison. The same man who had once brought him back from Utrecht and pushed him toward the priesthood. The same sexton who had given his life to the service of the church. According to Van der Aa, the father encouraged his son. The German biography, relying on Gnapheus, says that the old man declared himself willing to give up his son, as Abraham was willing to offer his son.

Somewhere between Utrecht and The Hague, the father had changed. How that happened, no source tells us. We see only the beginning and the end. A father who wanted to protect his son against new ideas, and a father who in the end let him go, for God's sake.

Do you know someone who had to think about something for a long time, and then still came to stand beside the very person he first wanted to stop?

Meanwhile, in the cell, Jan went on doing what he had always done. According to Gnapheus, he preached every day to his fellow prisoners, the vagrants and the thieves. The account says nothing about his wife. Where she was in those weeks, we do not know.

At the Groene Zoodje

On September 15, 1525, the sentence was carried out. According to the Gevangenpoort, it was the first public execution of a heretic in Holland, and many spectators came.

On the scaffold in front of the Ridderzaal, Jan's priesthood was taken from him, as I described at the beginning. He wore the yellow robe and the fool's cap. On the way he passed the prison where other believers were held. He spoke words of encouragement to them, Van der Aa tells, and they answered with joy and clapped their hands. According to the account of Gnapheus, his fellow prisoners sang hymns as he was led away. At the Groene Zoodje he was tied to the stake. The executioner strangled him and burned his body on a pile of peat and branches.

The sources do not agree about his last words. Van der Aa gives a short confession. Jan is said to have declared that he was a sinner who deserved death, and that Jesus Christ was his Lord and Savior. The German biography says that he died patiently and joyfully.

I tell this day as briefly as I can, because it is not a day to make beautiful. Jan died for what he believed, at the age of twenty-six, while the regent of the Netherlands was in the city.

The men who condemned him were Christians too. They believed they were protecting the church against a danger that could cost souls. I do not have to excuse their judgment to acknowledge that. The sorrow of this history is that Christians killed one another for their faith, and in this century it would happen often. Two years later, in the same city, Wendelmoet Claesdochter from Monnikendam stood trial. Another volume in this series is about her.

No memory

There, by that stake, the clerk Sandelijn is said to have spoken the words about the memory that was not to remain. Jan de Bakker had to disappear.

The first thing to contradict that was a little book, written in a cell and printed in Strasbourg. Gnapheus made sure there would be a memory after all, already in 1529. Four years after he had heard it from Jan through the wall, it lay there in print. His account found its way, in German, into the martyr stories of Rabus. A century later it was republished and translated in Leiden. Its title says what Jan was for Holland: the first.

Gnapheus himself built a new life after his flight. He eventually became mayor of Norden in East Frisia and died there on September 29, 1568. Almost forty years lie between his account of 1529 and his death.

Then came the historians. In 1750, in his *Vaderlandsche historie* (History of the Fatherland), Jan Wagenaar called him the first person in Holland to be strangled and burned for heresy. Van der Aa wrote

in 1854 that a painted portrait of him hung in the consistory room of the Lutheran church in Woerden. Around the same time, a print of his martyrdom appeared, which is now in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Bakhuizen van den Brink, the nineteenth-century historian of the Inquisition, called him, in one of his essays, "den edelen pastoor van Woerden" (the noble pastor of Woerden).

Was he a Lutheran? He probably did not call himself that. Theun de Vries writes that he proclaimed Lutheran ideas, and the Lutheran church in Woerden honors him. The Reformed church historian Bremmer places him among the so-called sacramentarians, Dutch believers who rejected the Catholic teaching on the Lord's Supper and were closer to Zwingli than to Luther. A website about Woerden counts him among the Modern Devotion, the movement of simplicity and the imitation of Christ from which the Brethren of the Common Life also came. Several churches recognize themselves in him. Perhaps that mainly shows that he lived before those divisions existed. According to Van der Aa, he himself said nothing other than that he wanted to hold to what stood in the Bible. He had not been given the time to find a name for his church.

Four hundred years later

In 1925 a national committee was formed for the four hundredth anniversary of his death. The minister J.W. Gunst, who wrote a biography for the occasion, and the Reverend K.H.E. Gravemeijer were among the initiators. Sermons and radio talks were given. Not everything from that time was mild. The historian Jan-Willem Hueting shows that some Protestant writers lashed out fiercely at Catholics then. On September 15, 1925, the Reverend Westmijse gave a radio speech in which he complained about the silence of the Catholics. The station cut off the broadcast, and Westmijse had his text printed afterward. Others wrote more calmly and called for

tolerance. At the windows in The Hague, a new tone was heard: the story of the martyr was linked there with the freedom of the whole country.

The committee wanted a lasting remembrance, a "memorie", that very word of the clerk. It became two stained glass windows by the glass artist Max Nauta. In 1926 the first was placed in the Petruskerk in Woerden. It shows Jan at an open-air sermon, with an open Bible, the town of Woerden in the background and a dove as an image of the Holy Spirit. Two monks at the edge point ahead to his fate. His trial and his death are not in it. It was the young artist's first commission. The second window went into the Grote Kerk in The Hague, in 1930 according to Hueting, in 1936 according to the Stadsmuseum Woerden. It was Nauta's main work. He worked on it for two and a half years, and it is built from about fifty thousand small pieces of glass. Jan stands there among his judges and accusers, surrounded by believers and Geuzen (the Dutch rebels against Spanish rule), with William of Orange among them. Here too you see no torture and no fire. The blood of the martyrs drips onto an altar, and a cross of rays of light forms the heart of the window.

And in 2025, five hundred years after that day on the Binnenhof, Woerden held lectures in the Petruskerk and in the Lutheran church, organized a walk through the old town center and put his story on the stage.

A window in the Petruskerk

The church where his father was sexton is still standing. Light falls through a window of colored glass. There is no stake on it and no fire. There is a young man in the open air, with a Bible lying open, and people around him who are listening.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): birth in Woerden around 1499; his father Jan Dirkszoon, sexton; school under Hinne Rode (Johannes Rhodius) in Utrecht; study in Leuven and contact with Erasmus through his father; ordination as a priest in Utrecht in 1522; a first arrest and release; a short stay in Wittenberg; the order to go to Rome, which he ignored; his marriage as a priest; his work as a baker; his opposition to the indulgence trade; arrest in May 1525 on the orders of Margaret of Austria; imprisonment in the Gevangenpoort, first in the Ridderkamer and then with ten other prisoners; Ruard Tapper as one of his judges; his father's visit and support; degradation, strangling and burning in The Hague on September 15, 1525; the account of his fellow prisoner Gnapheus (1529); the stained glass windows by Max Nauta and the commemorations of 1925 and 2025.

Only from one source or from the account of his fellow prisoner: the three days of interrogation and four days in a dark hole; his father's words about Abraham; his daily sermons in the cell and the singing of his fellow prisoners; the exchange about ten whores and one wife; the remark of Lauwerens about his wife and Jan's answer; the written statement that was used against him; the confession to Tapper; the kinder councilors Van Warmond and Bucho Aytta; his words at the degradation ("Godlof; nu lijk ik meer op een Christenmensch…"), the Franciscan friar, the purple chairs and the three abbots; the names Copinus, Rosemond and Lovering or Lauwerens; the name Jacoba and the secret marriage in 1524 (only the Stadsmuseum Woerden); the words of the clerk Sandelijn about the "memorie" (though repeated by almost all later writers); his statement before the judges according to Van der Aa (only the Bible, no compulsion in faith, the secret marriage out of inability to abstain); the walk past the prison where fellow believers clapped (Van der

Aa); his last confession according to Van der Aa; the portrait in the Lutheran church; the cell with the wooden partition and the secret writing down by Gnapheus (Bakhuizen van den Brink, following Gnapheus); that Jan's exchange with Bremmer's inquisitor was put as a counter-question (Bremmer gives the sixteenth-century text).

Only from later literature or local tradition: that the lord of Warmond sent Jan as pastor to Jacobswoude and that he came back for a higher salary (Van der Aa, "some claim"); the beguine among the fellow prisoners (Theun de Vries); the details of the windows by Nauta, the radio speech of Westmijse and the role of Gunst and Gravemeijer (Hueting, Locus 2019).

Unconfirmed: the origin of the nickname (his own bakery or his father's brickworks); Erasmus as his teacher; a meeting with Luther; his time as pastor in Jacobswoude; the date May 1523 for the first arrest and the night of May 9, 1525 (only Wikipedia); torture (only the Stadsmuseum Woerden); the words "Death, where is your victory?" as his last words (it appears on the internet, but I have not found an old source); the fate of his wife after his death (Wikipedia says that she recanted and ended her life in a convent, but I have not found a source for that); the execution together with the cooper Willem Dirksz of Utrecht (only Theun de Vries); the year of the window in The Hague (1930 according to Hueting, 1936 according to the Stadsmuseum Woerden); whether Jan really met Luther (Van der Aa says yes, others find no proof); the place of execution: Theun de Vries names Woerden in the text and The Hague in the caption, while the other sources are unanimous about The Hague.

About the source of Gnapheus: According to Bakhuizen van den Brink, Gnapheus wrote the account four years later from his secret notes and gave it the form of a drama in four acts. Bakhuizen van den Brink points out that Jan and Gnapheus were held in different dungeons between the interrogations, so that not everything

Gnapheus records as conversation can have been said literally that way. The Museum Gevangenpoort speaks of a cell with ten vagrants, the account of Gnapheus of a cell next to Jan's; both can be true at different moments.

Interpretation: whether he was a Lutheran, a sacramentarian or an heir of the Modern Devotion differs from writer to writer. Almost the only eyewitness of his imprisonment was a kindred spirit who wrote to honor him. His account is valuable, but one-sided.

Sources for this chapter

1. A.J. van der Aa, Biographisch woordenboek der Nederlanden, deel 2 (1854), via DBNL
2. J. Alberdingk Thijm, "Bakker, Jan de", Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie 1 (1875)
3. Museum de Gevangenpoort, Jan de Bakker
4. Stadsmuseum Woerden, flyer "De wereld van Jan de Bakker" (2025)
5. Jan-Willem Hueting, "Nationaal historisch besef en de herdenking van een protestantse martelaar", Locus (2019)
6. R.H. Bremmer, Uit de geboortegeschiedenis van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (1977)
7. Theun de Vries, Ketters (1982), via DBNL
8. Jan Wagenaar, Vaderlandsche historie, deel 4 (1750), via DBNL
9. A.J. van der Aa, Biographisch woordenboek, deel 8, lemma Gnapheus, via DBNL
10. STCN, Gnapheus, Historia Joannis Pistorii Woerdenatis martyrii (Leiden 1659)
11. Rijksmuseum, Marteldood van Jan de Bakker, 1525 (prent, 1854-1856)
12. Het Verhaal van Woerden, verhaal 11

13. R.C. Bakhuizen van den Brink, “Gnaphaeus’ verhaal van het proces van Jan de Backer” (1850), in: Studiën en schetsen over vaderlandsche geschiedenis en letteren, vol. 5, via DBNL
14. Wikipedia (English), Jan de Bakker (only as a starting point)

Anneken Jans: a testament for a boy who could not yet read

Sometime in the winter of 1539, a woman sat in prison in Rotterdam, knowing that she would die. She had a little son. His name was Esaias, and he was still very small. For him she wrote a letter, or had it written down, that he would only be able to read years later.

The words of that letter have been preserved. They were printed in the very year of her death, in a small booklet. Later they found their way into *Het Offer des Heeren* (The Sacrifice of the Lord), the first great collection of Anabaptist martyr writings from the Netherlands. There, above the letter, stands a heading that says it all in a few lines: "Hier begint het Testament dat Anneken Esaias haren Sone bestelt heeft." (Here begins the Testament that Anneken Esaias delivered to her Son.) After that come a date, January 24, 1539, and a place, Rotterdam. The *Martyrs Mirror* (Martelaersspiegel) even adds a time: nine o'clock in the morning. She wrote the letter when she was ready to die.

Anneken Jans became one of the best-known women of the early Anabaptist movement. Her testament was copied, reprinted and read aloud for centuries. A song was attributed to her that was

sung in the years around Münster. In the *Martyrs Mirror* of 1685, her story was given an etching by Jan Luyken. And around her last hour grew a story about a baker and a child that almost every Anabaptist reader knows.

How much of it is true? That question runs through this chapter. The answer is less complete than I would like, and I will keep saying where the sources stop. About one thing I do not have to doubt: the letter exists. You can still read it.

It began in Den Briel.

A daughter of Esaias

Anneken was born around 1509 or 1510 in Den Briel, the little town on the island of Voorne-Putten at the mouth of the Maas river. We do not know the exact year. It has been worked out backward from later statements of her age. She came from a family of some standing.

Her name is sometimes confusing. In *Het Offer des Heeren* she is called Anneken Esaias, and in some reference works Anneke Esaiasdochter (daughter of Esaias). That points to her father, who must have been named Esaias. The name Jans or Jansz, by which she is best known, belonged to her husband. Later she was also simply called Anneken van Rotterdam, after the city where she died. Anabaptists often named their martyrs after the place of their death.

Her husband was called Arent, sometimes Adriaan, Jansz. An article in the Rotterdamsch Jaarboekje (the Rotterdam yearbook) of 1918 calls him a barber in the Coppoenstraat in Den Briel. By that the article means a surgeon, a healer. A Dutch database of women writers gives him the family name Van der Lint. About the marriage itself, when and where it took place, I have found nothing.

A house in the Coppoenstraat

In the 1530s a wave went through the Netherlands that set many people in motion. After Luther, many had begun to read the Bible for themselves. Some of them came to the conviction that baptism belonged to someone who believed for himself. A child could not do that yet. So they had themselves baptized again as adults. Their opponents called them Anabaptists, rebaptizers. They themselves spoke of brothers and sisters.

Around Christmas 1533, two Anabaptist preachers preached in Den Briel. One of them was Jan Beukelsz, the tailor from Leiden. His name will come back later in this chapter. Shortly afterward, in 1534, the couple was baptized. The man who baptized them was called Meyndert van Emden. Anneken was about twenty-four at the time.

The barber's house became a place where the new believers gathered. It did not last long. On September 17, 1534, a sentence of banishment was pronounced in Den Briel, and the small congregation was persecuted and scattered. Arent fled to England. Anneken stayed behind at first.

Let me pause for a moment at that baptizer, Meyndert van Emden. The article of 1918 calls him one of the most radical men of those years. He was involved in plans to take Amsterdam by force. So Anneken was baptized into the current that would later be called the Münsterites. I have to be honest about that, and the next section is about it.

The year of Münster

In the spring of 1534, a baker from Haarlem, Jan Matthijsz, went to the German city of Münster. A group of Anabaptists had taken power there. Matthijsz took the lead. Anyone who would not be baptized had to leave the city. Private property was abolished.

Around Easter 1534 he was killed during a sortie against the troops of the bishop who were besieging the city.

His successor was that same Jan Beukelsz, whom we know as Jan van Leiden (John of Leiden). He had himself crowned king and introduced polygamy, appealing to the Old Testament. From Münster, Amsterdam was named as the city for a second kingdom. In June 1535 Münster fell. Most of the men in the city were killed. In January 1536 three leaders were executed, and their bodies were hung in iron cages from the church tower.

It was in those years that Anneken was baptized. Anyone who counts her among the Münsterites for that reason goes too fast. As far as is known, she never lived there, and there is not a single indication that she ever took up a weapon.

It helps to know that the Anabaptist movement consisted of different streams. There were groups that wanted to hasten the end of time by force. There were also groups that rejected all violence from the start. After the fall of Münster, many Anabaptists in the Netherlands chose a quiet, nonresistant way. Around 1540 Menno Simons would gather a large part of them, and the Mennonites are named after him. The doopsgezinden (the Dutch Mennonites) stand in that line.

After Münster, Anneken chose a different leader: David Joris from Delft. In those years Menno Simons also rose to prominence, the man who would later give his name to a whole family of churches.

A song about trumpets

A song is attributed to Anneken Jans that in English is called the Trumpet Song. It is a fierce song. It uses images from the Bible about God's judgment, and it calls for vengeance on the persecutors. The Anabaptist scholar Gerald Mast and a history textbook connect it

with the expectations that were alive in the Münster years. Among Anabaptist songs, such a call for vengeance is rare.

When she wrote it is not certain. What is certain is that David Joris had it printed after her death, together with her testament. The article of 1918 reports that only one copy of that print still exists, in Hamburg. Joris also included the song in a small spiritual songbook, of which one copy is kept in The Hague.

There is a second song that is often attributed to her, with the first line "Een groote vreught" (A great joy). According to the Dutch song scholar Wieder, who examined the original print of 1539, a different song stood next to her testament there. "Een groote vreught" does not appear in the editions of *Het Offer des Heeren* from before 1570. It was probably written by the man who compiled the 1570 collection. Whoever reads that song as her own words is therefore probably reading a later voice.

How do you look at a woman who sang a song of vengeance and then wrote a gentle letter to her child? I do not know exactly. Perhaps she changed. Perhaps both things were in her at the same time, as with so many people. The sources leave it open, and I leave it open too.

A letter from England

In 1536 Arent came back from England for a short time. According to an American sermon about her life, which draws on the martyr book and on the literature, he was not pleased with how closely his wife was now connected with David Joris. He went back. Anneken later followed him to England.

From England she wrote a letter to Joris. According to the article of 1918, he received it around December 1, 1536. It was the first of a series of letters that Joris himself later mentioned in a report of a

debate in Strasbourg in 1538. In it he admitted that her words had weighed in his conviction that God was calling him as a prophet.

David Joris is a difficult figure. He rejected the violence of Münster and put the emphasis on what had to happen inside a person. But he saw himself as a special envoy of God, and Menno Simons later distanced himself sharply from him.

What is certain: in the years after Münster, Anneken belonged to the circle around Joris, who had his congregation in Delft. She was a Davidjorist (a follower of David Joris), as the article of 1918 puts it. She was not a Mennonite, as later martyr books liked to see her.

A child named Esaias

Her son was born in England. She named him Esaias, the same name her father must have carried. Exactly when he was born, I do not know. A Canadian Mennonite magazine writes that he was fifteen months old when she traveled back, an American sermon speaks of about eighteen months.

After that, Arent falls silent in the record. According to some authors he died in England. Another writer suspects he was killed in the persecution of Anabaptists that began there in November and December 1538. I have not been able to confirm either with a source from that time.

What I do know: at the end of 1538, Anneken made the journey back to Holland. She took her little son with her. She traveled together with another woman, Christina Michiel Barentsdochter from Leuven. Christina was the wife of a physician, Matthijs van der Donck. According to the article of 1918, she and her husband had been baptized in 1534, in their own house on the Steenstraat in Leuven.

In England, an order against the Anabaptists was issued in those weeks. Believers who had been baptized as adults were driven out of the country in the middle of winter and had to flee wherever they could. Some ended up in Delft. There they were recognized. On January 7, 1539, according to the account of Twisck, which is included in the *Martyrs Mirror*, sixteen men were beheaded with the sword and fifteen women were drowned. That was a few weeks before Anneken's death, in the city she was heading for.

Why did Anneken go back, with a small child, to a country where Anabaptists were being hunted? The article of 1918 says she wanted to go to Delft, where she apparently hoped to meet Joris. We know nothing more about her reasons.

A song on the road to Rotterdam

She did not get far. In December 1538 Anneken and Christina were arrested. According to the article of 1918, this happened on the way from IJsselmonde to Rotterdam, just as they were about to board the barge to Delft.

About the cause, there is a story that keeps coming back in the martyr tradition. A fellow traveler is said to have heard the two women singing an Anabaptist hymn. He waited for a moment, and then reported them. The history textbook adds cautiously that this is how it was told later.

What followed was an interrogation in Rotterdam. According to the article of 1918, it gave the authorities important information about the congregation in Delft. At the beginning of January 1539, almost the whole Delft circle around Joris was arrested. Joris himself escaped. In Delft, twenty-nine people were executed in those months, among them six women.

I do not know what was said in that interrogation room, or how. The record is not known to me, and I am not going to guess. Anyone who has ever been afraid knows how little control a person has over himself. Let us leave it there.

Rotterdam, January 1539

On January 23, 1539, the sentence was pronounced. Anneken and Christina were to be drowned. Anneken was about thirty.

The sources do not fully agree about the day of the execution. The caption under the etching in the *Martyrs Mirror* of 1685 gives January 23. The heading above her testament in *Het Offer des Heeren* and in the *Martyrs Mirror* gives January 24, nine o'clock in the morning, as the moment when she gave the testament to her son. Most modern authors keep to January 24.

I do not want to say more about her death than what is written. She was drowned in Rotterdam, together with Christina from Leuven. In the caption under Luyken's etching, the two women are named together, with the words "verdronken tot Rotterdam" (drowned at Rotterdam). Christina's name is often forgotten in the retellings. She belongs here.

Drowning was a bitter punishment for Anabaptists. An American minister points out that the baptism of infants also served as a civil registration for taxes and military service, so that rebaptizing adults undermined public order. Those who had themselves baptized again were put to death by water. He sees a bitter irony in that. Whether the judges meant it that way, the sources do not say.

In the *Martyrs Mirror*, there is no more about her end than that she sealed her testimony with her blood and was received among the witnesses of God who let themselves be offered up.

A narrow way for a little boy

The testament is the heart of her story. How exactly it came about, we do not know. Some say she wrote it in the night before her death, others on the day itself. It went with her son, or with someone who was going to take care of him.

Almost every line of the testament rests on a passage from the Bible. In the English edition they stand in the margin, dozens of them, from Genesis to Revelation. It is not learning for learning's sake. A woman who knows she will not raise her son gives him what she herself has: the words she lived on, set in a row, so that he could look them up later himself.

She begins with a reference to the book of Proverbs and asks Esaias to accept her instruction. Then she says where she herself is going: the way of the prophets, the apostles and the martyrs. They drank the cup of suffering. It is the way Christ walked, and it leads to the living fountain.

She names a whole row of witnesses from the Bible who went before her: the royal priests, the souls under the altar in Revelation, the twenty-four elders, the people in Ezekiel who received the mark on their foreheads. Whoever wants to enter the heavenly Zion, she writes, must first suffer. Christ went before, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

She asks him to walk the narrow way. Life comes only through the narrow gate. She uses an image from the second book of Esdras: a city on a narrow place, with fire on one side and water on the other. There is no side path. Whoever strays perishes. And she warns him about the crowd, which walks the broad road to destruction.

Whoever reads that hears the words of Jesus about the two ways: *Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it* (Matthew 7:14).

Join the small, poor, despised flock, she writes. Where you hear about the cross, there is Christ.

Then the letter turns practical. Fear God alone, keep His commandments and write them on your heart. "Take the fear of the Lord to be your father," she says, "and wisdom shall be the mother of your understanding." Sanctify your body, confess Christ, do not be afraid of people, and rather give your life than the truth. For the body you lose, God prepares a better body.

Keep yourself apart from the world, she writes. Strive for righteousness even to death, put on the armor of God and set your heart on things above. Pray as a true disciple. Make your whole life holy and do everything to the praise of God. Love your neighbor, give bread to the hungry, clothe the naked, share what you have left with those who fear God.

She ends with a blessing and a prayer. Her son must live according to the gospel, and the God of peace must sanctify his soul and his body. The last line is a prayer: "O holy Father, sanctify the son of Thy handmaiden." That is how the *Martyrs Mirror* has it, in the English translation I read.

Anneken wrote it for a child who could not read a letter, and who would probably not remember her face. A Mennonite writer on martyr mothers observes that this letter was probably Esaias's only memory of her.

What would you write down, if you could leave one letter to someone you would never see grow up?

The line about the fear of the Lord as father and wisdom as mother kept circulating. Maeyken van Deventer repeated it thirty-four years later to her own children, in a farewell letter that is also in the *Martyrs Mirror*. An imprisoned mother in 1573 borrowed the words of an imprisoned mother from 1539.

It strikes me what is not in the letter. No vengeance. No judgment on the people who had condemned her. The fierce song about trumpets and the gentle testament lie far apart. Perhaps between the two lay a road she had walked herself. I cannot prove it. I can only read what she gave her child at the end.

A baker in the crowd

Now the story that everyone who grew up with the *Martyrs Mirror* knows. I tell it as it has been handed down.

On the way to the place of execution, Anneken is said to have held up her child and asked who would raise him. She offered money for it, or her possessions. A baker stepped forward, a poor man who had six children of his own. He took the boy, and the letter with him. Later the baker is said to have become rich. An American sermon adds that he used Anneken's money to expand his business and built two breweries. And Esaias is said to have become mayor of Rotterdam as an adult, in the city that had killed his mother.

A second story is attached to it. The man who had reported the women is said to have drowned on the way to the execution when a bridge gave way under him.

I have found no document from that time that names the baker, or a mayor Esaias who was the son of Anneken. The article of 1918 mentions the baker and the office of mayor as something well known, but gives no archival source. Until it is found, this remains tradition from the martyr books, and the bridge is probably a legend.

I understand why the story lasted. It gives a mother who lost everything one more act of care. Jan Luyken made an etching of it in 1685: a woman on the way to her death handing her child out of her arms. Once you have seen that print, you do not forget it. A print from a century and a half later is something different from a witness, but the letter is older than the print and comes from her own hand.

From a small booklet to the Martyrs Mirror

What can be followed well is the road her words traveled. Still in 1539, the year of her death, her testament appeared as a separate booklet. David Joris had it printed with the trumpet song and a letter about the martyrs of Delft. After that, Dirk van Borne in Deventer printed the testament again, probably before 1545, this time without the song. Van Borne printed more writings by Joris and was imprisoned for it in 1545.

In 1562 the testament was included in the oldest known edition of *Het Offer des Heeren*. That collection was reprinted many times in the years that followed. By that road it reached the *Martyrs Mirror* of Thieleman van Braght in 1660 and 1685, the great martyr book of the doopsgezinden.

Something remarkable happened along the way. The Davidjorist Anneken became, in the later books, a Mennonite martyr in the line of Menno Simons. The historian of 1918 pointed out that she did not belong there. Before 1540, the Mennonites were found in only a few regions. So her words were kept by a community that had little time for her own leader. The testament evidently spoke to them as well. The narrow way, the small flock, the cross: they recognized that.

And so the testament lived on. More than four hundred years later, it is still read in Mennonite churches in America and quoted in sermons.

What lies in Hamburg

I have tried to find out what is certain about Anneken Jans. It is little, and most of it was only dug up in the twentieth century from archives and old prints. Her year of birth is an estimate. The fate of her husband is unknown. About her son after January 1539, we know almost nothing that stands outside the martyr tradition.

What remains is a woman who was baptized in a restless movement, who has a fierce song to her name, who followed a disputed leader, and who at the end wrote a letter that survived for centuries. It is not a smooth saint's life. I think that is why it comes closer.

In a library in Hamburg, according to the article of 1918, lies the only known copy of the booklet that Joris had printed in 1539. A small booklet, with at the top the name of a woman from Den Briel, and beneath it a letter to a boy who could not yet read.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): birth in Den Briel around 1509 or 1510 (year uncertain); the name Anneken Esaias or Esaiasdochter; her husband Arent (Adriaan) Jansz, barber; baptism in 1534 by Meyndert van Emden; her husband's flight to England; her connection with David Joris and her letter to him from late 1536; the birth of her son Esaias in England; the return journey at the end of 1538 with Christina Michiel Barentsdochter from Leuven; the arrest in December 1538; the sentence and death by drowning in Rotterdam in January 1539, together with Christina; the testament to her

son, printed in 1539 and included in *Het Offer des Heeren* (1562) and the *Martyrs Mirror*; the etching by Jan Luyken (1685).

Only from the testament itself and from the martyr books: the content of the testament (I read the English version from the *Martyrs Mirror* and summaries, not the Dutch original); the time of nine o'clock in the morning on January 24; the line about the fear of the Lord as father and wisdom as mother, which Maeyken van Deventer repeated in 1573; the words about sealing it with her blood.

Only from later martyr books and retellings: the fellow traveler who heard the women singing and reported them, and his brief hesitation; the baker who took in her son (according to one textbook a poor baker with six children); the baker's wealth and his breweries; the office of mayor of Rotterdam for Esaias; the betrayer who drowned when a bridge gave way.

Unconfirmed: whether the song the women sang was her own trumpet song (a guess from 1918: "Perhaps it was her own trumpet song that she was singing"); the exact day of the execution (January 23 according to the etching in the *Martyrs Mirror* and one sermon, January 24 according to *Het Offer des Heeren* and most modern authors); how and when her husband died; the age of Esaias at her death (fifteen or eighteen months according to two modern sources); the dating of the trumpet song; that the song "Een groote vreught" is hers (according to Wieder probably by the compiler of 1570); the number of those executed in Delft (twenty-nine, among them six women according to the Rotterdamsch Jaarboekje; thirty-one on January 7, 1539, among them fifteen women, according to Twisck, besides twenty-seven in 1538); the suspicion from 1918 that Anneken's bond with Joris was more than spiritual, and the harsh tone in which that writer called her "overwrought" (no proof, I have not adopted it).

Interpretation: the idea that drowning was a deliberate irony for people who had been rebaptized comes from a modern sermon (Joel Miller) and not from a source of 1539. Anneken was baptized in the radical current around Münster, but there is no indication that she herself supported or used violence. After Münster she followed David Joris, who rejected violence. Later martyr books made her a Mennonite in the line of Menno Simons; historically she was a Davidjorist.

Sources for this chapter

1. Het Offer des Heeren (reprint 1904 of the 1570 edition), DBNL
2. Het Offer des Heeren, inhoud, DBNL
3. Het Offer des Heeren, introduction, DBNL
4. Rotterdamsch Jaarboekje 1918, p. 17
5. Rotterdamsch Jaarboekje 1918, p. 18
6. Rotterdamsch Jaarboekje 1918, p. 19
7. Rotterdamsch Jaarboekje 1918, p. 20
8. Rotterdamsch Jaarboekje 1918, titelblad van het testament
9. Rotterdamsch Jaarboekje 1918, p. 23
10. Van Duyse, Het oude Nederlandsche lied, commentaar, DBNL
11. Jan Luyken, Anneken Jans uyt den Briel (1685), Sacrifiles, Universiteit van Bologna
12. Shewrote, Radboud Universiteit: Anneke Esaiasdr.
13. McKay e.a., Individuals in Society: Anna Jansz of Rotterdam
14. Joel Miller, Anna Jansz of Rotterdam, Anabaptist World
15. Canadian Mennonite, on Anna Jansz
16. Review of L. Panhuysen, De beloofde stad (BMGN)
17. Executed Today, 24 januari 2015
18. Thieleman J. van Braght, Martyrs Mirror, Anna van Rotterdam (1539), English translation

19. “Oh, that it had pleased the Lord that I might have brought you up”: Motherhood in the Martyrs’ Mirror, Anabaptist Historians (2021)

Elisabeth Dirks: the teacher who named no names

On January 15, 1549, a house was searched in Leeuwarden, the capital of the province of Friesland. The men who came in found a book. It was a New Testament in Latin. For them, that was enough. A woman with a Latin Bible in the house was, in their eyes, no ordinary woman. They said they had caught the teacher. And they asked where her husband was: Menno Simons, the teacher.

She had no husband. She would say so herself a few days later, before the councillors of the Hof van Friesland (the Court of Friesland). But the question says a lot. The men who arrested her thought they had someone important in their hands. They thought this woman was the key to a whole circle of Anabaptists in Friesland. They wanted names.

They did not get them.

In the books this woman is called Elisabeth Dirks, or Lijsbeth Dirksdochter. In the oldest accounts she is simply called Elisabeth. She was interrogated, tortured and drowned in Leeuwarden in 1549, because she was an Anabaptist and refused to say with whom she

shared her faith. More than four hundred years later, reference works call her a teacher, perhaps even the first deaconess of the Mennonites. About her life before that January day we know almost nothing for certain. About the weeks after it, we know a surprising amount.

How we know that is a story in itself.

Three layers of paper

Whoever reads about Elisabeth is really reading three kinds of texts mixed together. I want to separate them for a moment, because it makes the story more honest.

The oldest layer is a text in *Het Offer des Heeren* (The Sacrifice of the Lord), a Mennonite martyr book first published in 1562. It contains a piece titled "Dit is de Belijdinge van een teeder Meysken, geheeten Elisabeth." (This is the Confession of a tender Maiden, named Elisabeth.) It tells how she was taken prisoner and what she said to her judges. It is not an official record of the Court. It is a text that circulated among Anabaptists to give each other courage. We do not know who wrote it down. But it stands close to the events: at most thirteen years later, it lay printed on the table.

The second layer is the *Martyrs Mirror* (Martelaersspiegel) of Thieleman van Braght from 1660. Van Braght took over the interrogation and also passed on the torture and the sentence.

The third layer comes from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Mennonite historians, among them Antje Brons in East Frisia, wrote life stories in which Elisabeth was given a childhood, a convent, an escape and a friend. Christian Neff summed this up in 1956 in the Mennonite Encyclopedia.

The piece from the first layer begins, like many of those texts, with the arrest.

"Had been a beguine"

The title of the confession in *Het Offer des Heeren* contains one small biographical detail. Elisabeth was "een Bagijnken geweest", she had been a beguine. Beguines were women who lived a religious life together, often without the strict vows of nuns. The title says nothing more about it.

The introduction to a later edition of the same martyr book has one more short sentence: "Elisabeth van Leeuwarden verstaat Latijn." (Elisabeth of Leeuwarden understands Latin.) That fits with the Latin Testament found in her house. A woman who could read Latin had learned it somewhere. In her time, a religious community was one of the few places where a girl could learn it.

Her youth is worked out at length in the later literature. This is how it is told. As a child she was taken to the convent of Tienge, near Leer in East Frisia, just across today's border with Germany. Around the age of twelve she heard that a heretic had been burned because he rejected the sacraments. That would not let her go. She was given a Bible and read it, and she began to doubt more and more what the church taught.

She was locked up for a year on suspicion of heresy. The nuns asked for her release, and after that she remained under strict supervision. In the end she escaped, disguised as a milkmaid. In Leer she found shelter with a Mennonite family and joined the brethren. According to the German Wikipedia, her family probably came from Groothusen, also in East Frisia.

It is a strong story. It explains the Latin, the beguine of the old title and the Latin Bible. But I have to say where it comes from. It is not in

Het Offer des Heeren and not in the *Martyrs Mirror*. The Mennonite Encyclopedia names Antje Brons as one of its sources, and Brons wrote more than three hundred years after Elisabeth's death. I have not found an older source for the convent near Leer. It may be that Brons knew a tradition in East Frisia. It may also be that the story grew around that one sentence: she had been a beguine.

Do you recognize that, wanting a story about a hero to be more beautiful than it is? I recognize it in myself. Elisabeth does not need it. What the oldest source says about her is enough.

Leeuwarden, a city that had seen it before

When Elisabeth lived in Leeuwarden, the city already knew executions of Anabaptists. Sikke Frerichs had been put to death there in 1531. According to the Blokhuispoort, the former prison complex of Leeuwarden, both the first and the last Mennonite martyr of the Netherlands were executed in this city.

In April 1535, radical Anabaptists had occupied the Oldeklooster, a monastery near Bolsward. After it was retaken, many of them were killed, among them dozens of women who were drowned. From then on, anyone in Friesland who had himself baptized again ran great danger.

In that city, fifteen years after Oldeklooster, Elisabeth lived. According to the Mennonite Encyclopedia, she lived there quietly, in the house of a Mennonite woman named Hadewijck. The story of Hadewijck's husband has been preserved. At the execution of Sikke Frerichs he had to beat the drum, so that Frerichs could not address the bystanders. He had known Frerichs as a friend. He said aloud that he was shocked and that he felt for Frerichs, and then he fled. No one ever heard of him again.

So the two women lived together and kept quiet. Elisabeth is said to have spent much time with Menno Simons. That is why, according to this story, her arresters took her for his wife. Hadewijck is not mentioned in the account of the arrest.

"Where is your husband?"

Back to January 15, 1549. The account in *Het Offer des Heeren* gives the date precisely, and adds that the year is counted from New Year's Day. She was taken prisoner in her house. A Latin Testament was found. The men said they had the teacher, and they asked about her husband, Menno Simons.

In those years, Menno Simons was the best-known leader of the peaceful Anabaptists in the Netherlands. He had been a Roman Catholic priest before he joined the Anabaptists. The Mennonites are named after him. This chapter is not about him. What matters is that the authorities were looking for him and thought this woman knew him. That she was his wife was not true. Later writers concluded from the question that she worked closely with him. The source says only that her interrogators thought so.

According to the Mennonite Encyclopedia, Hadewijck was also arrested that day. She escaped, and she is said to have grown old in Emden.

Elisabeth was first taken to the town hall. The next day two court officers took her to the Blokhuis, the prison of Leeuwarden.

Yes, yes, no, no

Before the councillors she first had to swear an oath. The question was simple: did she have a husband? She refused the oath. Mennonites did not swear oaths, because they took the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount literally. In the margin of the old account,

the references are given, to Matthew and James. There Jesus said: *But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'* (Matthew 5:37).

She said that her word had to be yes or no, and that she had no husband.

It seems a small point. For the judges it was not. A suspect who refuses to swear refuses the foundation of the court. For Elisabeth it was not a small point either. If her word could not be trusted without an oath, what was her faith worth? I find it striking that with the very first question she showed how she would keep on answering: briefly, honestly, and without giving anything she could not give.

About her faith, yes; about her friends, no

The councillors told her what they thought of her. She was a teacher who had misled many people. They wanted to know who her friends were. They asked about her parents. Here she answered with the commandment to honor father and mother. What she suffered for the name of Christ, she said, was a disgrace to her friends, and she wanted to spare them that. In the old account, friends also means your family and your circle.

The gentlemen let the question about her parents rest for a moment. Then they wanted to know whom she had taught. At that she asked them to question her about her faith, and about that she was glad to speak. They wanted to frighten her so that she would talk, they said. Elisabeth prayed at that moment, so it says, that God would guard her tongue. She did not want to betray her brother and not be the cause of his death.

She drew a sharp line. What she believed was hers, and anyone could ask about it. Who her friends were was not hers to give away.

When they asked who had been present at her baptism, she quoted a word from the Gospel of John, from the questioning of Jesus before the high priest: ask those who have heard. The gentlemen said she was comparing herself to Christ. No, she answered. She called herself the offscouring of the house of the Lord, a word Paul uses of himself in his letter to the Corinthians.

The house of God and the bread of the Lord

Then came the questions about doctrine, and those she answered at length. Almost every time she answered with texts from the Bible.

Was their church the house of God? No, she said, and she referred to the second letter to the Corinthians, where it says that believers themselves are the temple of the living God. What did she think of the Mass? She did not care for their Mass, she said, but she accepted what agreed with God's Word. When she was asked about the most holy sacrament, she said she had never read in the Bible about a holy sacrament, but she had read about the Lord's Supper.

The councillors told her to be silent, because the devil was speaking through her. She answered that the servant is not greater than his lord. They accused her of pride. She spoke boldly, she said.

Then they asked what Christ gave His disciples. She asked in return whether it was flesh or bread. Bread, they said. Had Christ not been sitting at the table? And who, then, would have eaten His flesh? It seems a small argument, but in that room it was about the very core of the Mass. She stood empty-handed before learned men, and she asked them a question they could not simply brush aside.

She denied that she had been baptized again. She had been baptized once, she said, upon her faith. Her baptism as a baby did not count as baptism for her, because baptism belongs to those who believe. Then she was asked whether she thought that children who

had been baptized were damned. God forbid that she should judge children, was her answer.

Did she think that baptism saved her? No, she answered. All the water in the sea could not save her. Salvation was in Christ, and she was called to love God and her neighbor.

I notice that I fall silent for a moment at that sentence. The judges saw her baptism as the core of her crime. She saw her baptism as obedience, not as her salvation. Her salvation lay somewhere else.

Could priests forgive sins? Christ alone is the priest through whom sins are forgiven, she said, and she named the letter to the Hebrews. The gentlemen held up to her the words of James, about the elders who anoint a sick person and pray for him. She believed James, she said. She asked them whether they counted themselves part of that congregation.

Finally the gentlemen said that the Holy Spirit had already saved her, so that she needed no confession or sacrament. She admitted that she was breaking the commandment of the pope, which the emperor had confirmed. She would only be sorry if someone showed her that she had broken God's commandments.

With that the first interrogation was over. This is how it stands in the confession from *Het Offer des Heeren*, the oldest account. What happened after that I know only from the *Martyrs Mirror*.

Screws in the Blokhuis

Because she named no names, she was taken to the torture chamber. The gentlemen said they had treated her kindly until now and that it would be different if she did not confess. The procurator general gave the order: Master Hans, seize her.

Master Hans was the executioner. He said she would confess on her own. She was silent. Then he put screws on her thumbs and fingers, until blood came out from under her nails. She cried out that she could not bear it. The gentlemen promised her relief if she confessed. She prayed to the Lord for help, as His handmaiden. The gentlemen said she should confess instead of calling on God.

After that, so it says, the Lord took the pain away. She told the gentlemen that they might as well go on asking her, because she no longer felt any pain.

They asked again whether she would confess. No. Then they put screws on her shins. She begged them not to put her to shame. No man had ever touched her bare body. The procurator general assured her, addressing her as Miss Elisabeth, that they would not treat her dishonorably.

She fainted. The gentlemen thought she was dead. When she came to, she said that she was alive. The screws were removed. The gentlemen now begged her to talk. That is how you treat children, she said.

She had not named a single name. She gave them nothing that could harm her brothers or anyone else. That is how it stood in the account her friends made.

I do not know exactly what happened in that room, and neither do you. We have only the words of people who wanted to preserve her story. Whether the pain really went away as she said, no historian can check. I believe it along with her. What is certain is that the judges got nothing. No account says that other people were arrested after her interrogation because she had given their names.

What do you do when someone asks you to betray the people you pray with? Most of us will never have to answer that question. Elisabeth had to, with screws on her hands.

"Seal it with my death"

A final interrogation followed. She was asked whether she would recant what she had confessed earlier. It was the last chance the gentlemen gave her. Recanting could have saved her life, or at least brought a quicker death. In the English translation of the *Martyrs Mirror*, her answer reads: "No, my lords, but I will seal it with my death." No, gentlemen, I will seal it with my death.

The gentlemen now said they would not torture her again. They asked her to say of her own free will who had baptized her. She refused. She had already said so, she answered: she would not confess that.

The sentence was short. She was condemned to be drowned in a sack. With that, so it says in the account, she offered her body to God.

Here it becomes difficult, and I think you should know that. According to the *Martyrs Mirror*, the sentence was pronounced on March 27, 1549. Many books and websites turn that into the day of her death.

The Mennonite Encyclopedia says something different. It states that she was drowned on May 27, 1549, and that Van Braght was mistaken with March. The Blokhuispoort, which bases itself on a modern martyr book by Willem Westerbeke from 2019, keeps both dates: on March 27 she heard her sentence, on May 27 she was drowned.

Which source from 1549 lies behind that date in May, I have not been able to find. So it is certain that she died in the spring of 1549

in Leeuwarden. Whether that was on March 27 or May 27, I do not dare say with certainty. If it was May, she spent more than four months in the Blokhuis. Two of them after her sentence.

A woman who taught

In the oldest source, Elisabeth is called a teacher by her enemies. We know nothing more about her work in the Mennonite circle. We do not know whom she taught, how many people there were, or where they met. She kept silent about it, and so we do not know either.

Later writers gave this a title. The Mennonite Encyclopedia cautiously calls her perhaps the first Mennonite deaconess. The German Wikipedia writes that she is said to be the first woman who taught in a Mennonite congregation. Those are interpretations, not facts from 1549. But they do show how her story was read later: as the story of a woman who knew the Bible and helped others understand it.

Her own answers in the interrogation show why she was given that name. She knew her Bible. She could answer the questions of learned councillors with texts she knew by heart. Before the council sat a woman who understood Latin and gave the judges answers from the Bible.

A song in the Ausbund

Elisabeth's story was soon being sung. A song was made about her death that was included in the songbook that went with *Het Offer des Heeren*. The website literatuurgeschiedenis.org mentions a song from 1549 about a certain Elisabeth from Leeuwarden, who refused to say under oath whether she was married. Mennonites sang such songs to encourage one another, often without the poet adding his name.

The song traveled far. It was translated and included in the *Ausbund*, the oldest Anabaptist hymnal. There it stands as hymn number 13. So people far outside Friesland sang about a woman from Leeuwarden of whom we do not even know for certain what her name was.

There is one more trace. A songbook from Hoorn of 1618 is said to contain a song that she herself is said to have written. Which song that is has never been established, according to the Mennonite Encyclopedia. So I leave it at this one sentence.

A Testament in Latin

The story of Elisabeth Dirks is largely a story of what we do not know. Her year of birth is missing. Her parents are missing, because she did not name them. Her pupils are missing, because she did not name them either. Even the day of her death is not entirely certain.

But that silence was her choice. Most of what we miss about her is missing because she kept it to herself under the screws. The gaps in her life story are the people she protected.

What remains is what she did want to say. That she had been baptized once, upon her faith. That her word was yes or no. That all the water in the sea could not save her, and that her salvation lay in Christ.

And one image remains from that first January day. A few men in a house in Leeuwarden, with a book in their hands that was proof enough for them. A Testament in Latin, lying open on the table of a woman who could read it.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): Elisabeth was a Mennonite woman in Leeuwarden; she was taken prisoner on January 15,

1549; a Latin Testament was found with her and her interrogators thought she was the wife of Menno Simons; she refused the oath and named no names; she was sentenced to death by drowning and died in the spring of 1549 in Leeuwarden; a song was made about her death that appears in *Het Offer des Heeren* and in the *Ausbund* (no. 13).

Only from the faith account of her fellow believers: the words of the interrogation (the oath, the commandment to honor her parents, yes yes and no no, the offscouring, the Lord's Supper, the bread, the children, the water of the sea, Hebrews and James, the refusal to recant) come from the confession in *Het Offer des Heeren* (from 1562) and the *Martyrs Mirror* (1660), not from an official record of the Court; that she had been a beguine is in the title of the oldest confession.

Only from the Martyrs Mirror (1660): the torture with thumbscrews and leg screws by Master Hans, the order of the procurator general, the words about her nakedness and honor, the pain going away, the fainting, the "that is how you treat children", the last question about her baptizer, and the sentence of March 27. I read the English translation of the *Martyrs Mirror* and summaries of the oldest confession, not the Dutch original. Whether the torture is also in *Het Offer des Heeren*, I have not been able to check.

Only from the later literature (nineteenth and twentieth centuries): the convent of Tienge near Leer, the confinement of a year and the escape as a milkmaid; her family from Groothusen (German Wikipedia, "probably"); the stay with Hadewijck, her escape and her old age in Emden; the story of Hadewijck's husband and the drum at the execution of Sikke Frerichs; her much time with Menno Simons; the song that Elisabeth herself is said to have written (1618); the surname Dirks or Dirksdochter, which does not appear in the oldest accounts.

Disputed: the day of her death. The *Martyrs Mirror* gives March 27, 1549 as the date of the sentence; the Mennonite Encyclopedia and the Blokhuispoort give May 27, 1549 as the date of the drowning. I have not seen the archival source for May 27 myself. The song about her death has twenty-one stanzas according to the Mennonite Encyclopedia, thirty-eight according to the German Wikipedia.

Interpretation: that she was a teacher is what her interrogators said. That she was the first Mennonite deaconess or the first woman teacher in a Mennonite congregation is a later interpretation. Whether the pain really went away when she called on God is a question of faith; I believe it along with her.

Sources for this chapter

1. Het Offer des Heeren, inhoudsopgave (DBNL)
2. Het Offer des Heeren, introduction to the edition (DBNL)
3. The Sacrifice of the Lord (1580), p. 54: de belijdenis van Elisabeth (Source Library)
4. Martyrs Mirror, Elizabeth, A.D. 1549 (homecomers.org)
5. Christian Neff, "Elisabeth Dirks (d. 1549)", Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online
6. Blokhuispoort, "Elisabeth, 1549"
7. Literatuurgeschiedenis.org, "Leven en sterven voor het geloof"
8. Christian History Institute, "Tortured to betray friends, Elizabeth Dirks refused"
9. Wikipedia (Duits), "Elisabeth Dirks"

Dirk Willems: the man who walked back across the ice

In the winter, so it has been told for centuries, a rope of knotted rags hung along the wall of the castle of Asperen. A prisoner let himself down by it. Below him the water lay frozen.

Dirk Willems ran. Behind him came the thief-catcher, a man whose job was to seize fugitives. Dirk got across the ice. His pursuer did not. The ice broke under him, and he fell into the cold water and cried for help.

Dirk heard him. Ahead of him lay the shore, freedom, a life. Behind him a man who wanted to catch him was drowning. He turned around. He walked back across that same ice and pulled his pursuer out of the water.

In doing so he saved his life. And the man took him back to his cell.

That is how the *Martyrs Mirror* (Martelaersspiegel) tells it, the great Mennonite martyr book of Thieleman Jansz. van Braght from 1660. Mennonites and Amish in America and Canada have known this story from childhood. They have painted it and cast it in bronze. In his own Asperen, a street has been named after him.

There is also another document, and it lies coldly next to the story. On May 16, 1569, seven men in Asperen put their names under a sentence concerning a fellow townsman. He had confessed, it says, without having been tortured or put in irons. He had been baptized again as a young man. He had held meetings in his house and let people be baptized. And he held to his conviction. The sentence condemned him to death by fire. There is not a word in it about ice.

Both belong to Dirk Willems. The one tells what he did, the other what it cost him. I will keep saying which of the two you are reading.

It began, as far as we know, in Rotterdam.

A town on the Linge

About his youth we know almost nothing. No year of birth, no names of parents, no trade. He came from Asperen, a small town on the Linge river, and he also lived there. That is what the Mennonite encyclopedia GAMEO and all later retellings say. In that time, Willems simply meant: son of Willem. Thousands of people had that name.

The authors of the book that the Historische Vereniging Oud Asperen (the local historical society) published about him in 2025 portray him as a man in the prime of life. A family man and someone with standing in his community, but not an elder. According to them he was a simple man who struggled with the changes of his time. They begin their story with the Iconoclastic Fury (the Beeldenstorm) of 1566.

That year the Netherlands went up in flames. Churches were emptied, statues smashed. King Philip II sent the Duke of Alba with an army, and from 1567 he ruled harshly. A special court condemned hundreds of people to death. The American historians John Oyer

and Robert Kreider explicitly place the case of Dirk Willems in those years under Alba.

For Anabaptists it was a dangerous time to stand out. Rebaptism had long carried the death penalty, and Alba did not let that law sleep.

A house of Pieter Willems

One thing from his younger years is certain, because it is in his own sentence. He had been rebaptized in Rotterdam, in the house of a certain Pieter Willems. Who that Pieter was, the sentence does not say. Whether he was family, given the same surname, we do not know.

In the sixteenth century, rebaptism was a serious step. Anyone who had been baptized as a child in the church and had himself baptized again as an adult was saying that infant baptism was not a real baptism. For the government and the church of that time, that was heresy. The Anabaptists, as they were called, wanted a church of people who had chosen Christ for themselves. Later they would be called doopsgezinden or Mennonites. They refused to take up the sword, even to defend themselves.

Dirk Willems chose that. How old he was, who baptized him and what convinced him has not come down to us. We know only that he did it, still young, in a house in another city. That was no adventure. Anyone who had himself baptized knew what he was putting his signature to.

An open door

Back in Asperen, it did not stop with his own faith. The sentence says it plainly: in his house people came together in meetings with

forbidden teaching, and in that same house several people were rebaptized.

How many people that was is not stated. Nor who led the meetings or who baptized. Perhaps Dirk himself was the leader, perhaps he only opened his door. The sentence says that he allowed it.

It sounds so ordinary. A house, a few neighbors, a Bible, someone telling. That is how many churches have begun, then and now. But in Asperen such an evening could cost you your life, and everyone who came in knew that. So he did not do this by accident. Time after time he opened the door, knowing what it carried.

Would you open your door, if you knew what it carried?

What began in that house did not disappear with him. Newer research, to which the local historical society refers, shows that Mennonites lived in Asperen until well into the eighteenth century.

The rope of rags

Sometime in 1569, Dirk was taken prisoner in Asperen. Exactly when, we do not know. Nor who reported him. According to local tradition the town held him in the castle of Asperen, an old noble house that served as a prison. The historical society calls it Waddestein. Little of it remains, but along a stretch of moat there is still water.

There the story is set that made him famous. Van Braght writes that he has it from trustworthy persons. He names no names. So I say it once here, and then I go on telling: historians have not been able to check it. It is not in the sentence and not in any document from 1569.

Dirk made a rope of rags that he knotted together. He let himself down along the wall. It was winter, very probably the winter before

that spring of 1569, and the water in the moat lay frozen. He ran across the ice. A guard, the thief-catcher of Van Braght, set out after him.

The moat ran out into a larger, deep water, still called the Hondegat in Asperen. An American visitor who saw it on the spot wrote that in some places it was more than thirty feet deep. Dirk got across. His pursuer broke through.

Oyer and Kreider add that, because of the meager prison food, Dirk was lighter than the guard. It is an explanation after the fact, and a good one. It is not in the old text.

What Dirk thought then, we do not know. Van Braght does not say either. He tells what Dirk did. He turned around, went back onto the dangerous ice, and helped the man out.

Jesus said: *Love your enemies* (Matthew 5:44). Most people who read that never get the chance to do it so literally. What would you have done, with freedom under your feet and a man screaming behind you?

The burgomaster and the oath

The thief-catcher wanted to let Dirk go. That is what the source says. He had just been pulled out of the icy water by the man he was supposed to catch. But the burgomaster came up and reminded him of his oath. Then the man seized Dirk after all and took him back.

A man who had just been given his life back, and a promise to his superiors. According to the story, that promise weighed heavier. Whether he regretted it later, no one says. I wonder about it, nothing more. The name of the burgomaster has not been preserved. Nor has the name of the thief-catcher.

What Dirk said when they brought him back has not come down to us.

One thing strikes me. Anabaptists in general refused to swear an oath, because they took Jesus' words about swearing literally (Matthew 5:34). An oath sent Dirk back to the cell, the oath of a man who perhaps could never have done otherwise himself. So in this story two people stand opposite each other who both wanted to remain faithful to what they had promised. Only they had not promised to the same Lord.

Above the bells

After his return, according to tradition, Dirk was no longer locked up in the castle but in the tower of the church of Asperen. Oyer and Kreider describe a small room with heavy bars, high in the tower, above the bells. In the tower there is still a wooden block in which prisoners were held fast by their legs. Whether Dirk sat in it too, even they do not know. They write: probably.

The church is still standing. It was Roman Catholic then and is now Reformed (hervormd). The minister of the present congregation said in 2025 that his congregation also has members who were themselves rebaptized and believe in adult baptism, although the church as a whole baptizes children. He said that he wants to learn from history and seeks unity among believers. He calls Dirk Willems someone who was willing to die for his faith. The Reformed congregation supports the plans for a memorial. That moves me. A church that was once his prison now wants to preserve his name.

How long he was held is unclear. Van Braght speaks of severe imprisonment and great trials, without a length of time. About those weeks in the tower we know nothing. No letter, no message, no word of his has been preserved.

May 16, 1569

On that date seven judges put their names under the sentence: Cornelis Goverts, Jan van Stege Jans, Adriaen Gerritts, Adriaen Jans, Lucas Rutgers, Jan Jans and Jan Roefelofs. The text of the sentence, as Van Braght prints it, is matter-of-fact. Dirk Willems, born in Asperen, had confessed without torture. He had been rebaptized in Rotterdam at the house of Pieter Willems. He had allowed meetings and forbidden teaching in his house, and people had been rebaptized there. And he held to his opinion. For that last point, his obstinate persistence as the judges called it, he had to die.

The punishment was death by fire, until death followed. All his goods were confiscated for the benefit of the king.

Read the words once more. The sentence mentions no violence against authority, no rebellion, no theft. Only a baptism, an open house and a conviction he would not give up. He had confessed without torture. No one had forced him to say who he was. He said it himself.

The death penalty for rebaptism was the law in those years, and these seven men applied it. I do not know the rest of their lives. Perhaps some did it reluctantly, perhaps not. I do not want to condemn them here. They were Christians who believed they were protecting the church, and they did something that in my view should never have happened in the name of Jesus.

My Lord, my God

According to the usual sources, Dirk was burned the same day, May 16, 1569, outside Asperen on the Leerdam side. About that day Van Braght gives a few more sentences, which he takes from accounts by people who were there. They are the only words attributed to Dirk Willems, and he spoke them to God.

A strong east wind was blowing. It blew the fire away from his upper body, so that it took a long time before he died. Dirk cried out to God. More than seventy times, Van Braght writes, he cried: my Lord, my God. The wind carried his voice so far that they heard him in nearby Leerdam.

The bailiff, who was present on horseback at the execution, could not bear to watch. He turned his horse and told the executioner to make a quick end of it. What the executioner did then, the writer did not know.

Dirk died, so it ends, steadfast, and he commended his soul into the hands of God.

Van Braght's introduction calls him a faithful brother and follower of Jesus Christ. He closes with words from the New Testament, which the lord in the parable of the talents says to his servant: *Well done, good and faithful servant* (Matthew 25:23).

These details too we know only from the *Martyrs Mirror*. No other account from 1569 has been found. The bailiff who turned away, like the burgomaster, has remained without a name. More than seventy times: someone listened and counted.

The book that preserved him

Without one book we would not even know about Dirk Willems. Thieleman Jansz. van Braght, a Mennonite minister, published the *Martyrs Mirror* in 1660. He gathered in it the stories of Anabaptists who had been put to death for their faith, from the first centuries to his own time. For each story he used what he found: letters, sentences, songs, what people had passed on to one another.

For Dirk Willems he had two things. A copy of the sentence, with the seven names. And a story that circulated in the congregations,

about a prisoner and a frozen moat. He wrote down both and made clear which of the two came from which source. I find that honest of him. He could have let the ice disappear into the sentence, or the sentence into the ice.

What a town secretary copied in 1606

Why can we actually read the sentence? Below the text in Van Braght there is a short note. The copy had been taken from the registers of the town of Asperen. The town secretary certified it on October 15, 1606.

Thirty-seven years after Dirk's death, then, someone asked for a copy, and an official put his statement under it. Who asked for it is not stated. It seems likely that it was someone who collected martyr stories. That is how the sentence found its way into the Mennonite books, and through Van Braght to us.

I have not found the original. Whether the registers of Asperen from 1569 still exist, and whether the 1606 copy is kept anywhere, I could not establish. That would be a fine piece of work for an archival researcher.

There is a hint that the ice story is older than Van Braght. A Dutch literary dictionary from 1952 connects a poem by the poet Tollens about Dirk Willems with a Mennonite martyr book of 1631. If that is right, the story was already in print thirty years before Van Braght. I have not been able to see that edition myself. In the older Mennonite martyr book, *Het Offer des Heeren* (The Sacrifice of the Lord), I did not find him.

I believe there is a core of truth in the ice story. It lived in Asperen and among the Anabaptists, it is simple, and it makes no one a hero except Dirk himself. A court also did not write down in a sentence

what had happened in the prison. That it is not in there therefore proves nothing.

An etching from 1685

In 1685 a second edition of the *Martyrs Mirror* appeared, now under the title *Het bloedig tooneel* (The bloody theater), in two large volumes. The Amsterdam artist Jan Luyken made etchings for it. One of those etchings, in volume two on page 387, shows Dirk Willems on the ice next to the man who has broken through. The print bears the inscription Ao 1569. The Rijksmuseum keeps a copy under the title: Dirk Willemsz. saves his pursuer from the ice near Asperen, 1569.

I think that one print has done more for his name than all the text. The *Martyrs Mirror* remained in use among Mennonites in America, and writers there call this very picture one of the best known in the book. According to the American church historian Rex Butler, Mennonites gave Pope Benedict XVI a framed picture of the rescue, after Luyken's example, in October 2007. In 1992 Heinz Gaugel painted the scene in a large circular panorama, Behalt, which can be seen at a heritage center in Ohio. In 2018 a bronze statue of the rescue was unveiled at the Mennonite open-air museum in Steinbach, in Canada.

In the Netherlands it stayed quieter. The literary dictionary of 1952 sums up his story in one sentence: he "saved the life of his pursuer who had fallen through the ice", but was still put to death as a heretic. Tollens wrote a poem about it. Beyond that, it was mainly Mennonites who knew his name.

Back in Asperen

In Asperen there is a Dirk Willemsstraat. A little further on lies water from the old moat. It is now a small park, next to a playground and houses. A large sign with his story used to stand there, but it disappeared in 2019 when the town cut down trees there. Mennonite tour groups that visit Asperen often come to the Hondegat. The church gives guided tours there.

According to Theo Witjes, chairman of the Historische Vereniging Oud Asperen, many residents were almost ashamed when the statue in Canada was unveiled. People on the other side of the ocean knew their history better than they did themselves. He also says that not much has changed in Asperen since 1569. The society wrote a book about Dirk, in Dutch and English, which appeared in August 2025. The proceeds go toward a statue that is to stand in the moat, at the place of the story. A theater group from the village is working on a play, which could be performed in 2026 or 2027.

I like that it is happening this way. For almost four hundred and fifty years the story was told mostly far away, in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Manitoba. Now it is coming back to the village where it happened.

The hand above the hole in the ice

What do we really know about Dirk Willems? Little. A place where he lived. A baptism in Rotterdam. A house where people gathered. A sentence with seven names and a date. A death by fire.

And then the ice. The story that is not in the official record, but lives in the memory of the people who came after him. I cannot prove it. I cannot strike it out either. A man who died for his faith becomes, in the memory of his people, someone who pulled his enemy out of the water. That says a lot about what his people recognized in him.

He did not walk up onto the shore. He took the way back.

On the etching by Jan Luyken, Dirk still stands on the ice, by the hole, next to the man who came to get him. The free shore lies behind him.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): Dirk Willems came from Asperen and was put to death there as an Anabaptist in 1569; the date May 16, 1569; the etching by Jan Luyken in *Het bloedig tooneel* (1685, volume II, p. 387); his fame among Mennonites and Amish, the statue in Steinbach (2018) and the Dirk Willemsstraat in Asperen.

Only from the Martyrs Mirror (Van Braght), on the authority of witnesses not named: the escape, the rescue of the thief-catcher from the ice and the burgomaster who reminded him of his oath; the east wind, the cry to God (more than seventy times) that is said to have been heard in Leerdam, and the bailiff who turned away. Van Braght calls Dirk in his introduction a faithful brother and follower of Jesus Christ; the words from Matthew 25:23 are his closing, not the words of Dirk.

From the sentence, but known only through a copy of 1606 in Van Braght: the rebaptism in Rotterdam at the house of Pieter Willems; the meetings and baptisms in his house; the confession without torture; the punishment by fire and the confiscation; the names of the seven judges.

From the recent book of the Historische Vereniging Oud Asperen (2025), through a review in Anabaptist World: the portrait of Dirk as a family man and respected man in his community, not an elder, and the link with the Iconoclastic Fury of 1566. I have not read the book itself.

Unconfirmed: the place of the escape (Hondegat) and the imprisonment in the castle and afterward in the church tower (local tradition, Oyer and Kreider write "probably"); the rope of rags; that he was lighter because of the prison food (an explanation by Oyer and Kreider, not by Van Braght); that the water is more than thirty feet deep in some places (a visitor from America); that the escape fell in the winter of 1568 to 1569 (derived from the date of the sentence); that the execution was on the same day as the sentence.

Where the sources differ:

- *Length of the imprisonment.* Van Braght gives no length. GAMEO writes that he was held for several more months. An American article from 2015 (Sam Millen) speaks of four days between the return and the fire, without citing a source; it places the escape in May 1569. If the escape was in winter and the sentence in May, a longer period seems most likely.
- *The castle.* The historical society says French troops destroyed it in 1672; Millen names the French period around 1800, with dynamite.

Interpretation: the original of the sentence and the copy of 1606 have not been found. The ice story may already have appeared in a Mennonite martyr book of 1631; I have not been able to check that. Dirk Willems wrote nothing himself, as far as is known: no letter, no confession, no song. The only words attributed to him are the words of the cry in the fire, and those come through witnesses in Van Braght. Whether God spoke through him in that, or was near him there, is a question of faith. I believe He heard him.

Sources for this chapter

1. GAMEO, "Dirk Willemsz (d. 1569)" (Nanne van der Zijpp, 1956)

2. Martyrs Mirror, “Dirk Willems, A.D. 1569” (homecomers.org)
3. Martyrs Mirror, “Dirk Willems” (radicalreformation.com)
4. Rijksmuseum, Jan Luyken, “Dirk Willemsz. redt zijn vervolger uit het ijs bij Asperen, 1569” (1685)
5. John S. Oyer en Robert Kreider, “Compassion for the Enemy” (Goshen College, archief Mennonite Quarterly Review)
6. Letterkundig woordenboek voor Noord en Zuid (1952), via DBNL
7. Anabaptist World, “Dutch town seeks Dirk Willems martyr statue” (25 september 2025)
8. Anabaptist World, “Dirk Willems (re)discovered” (12 oktober 2015)
9. St. James Lancaster, Forum: Dirk Willems
10. Rex Butler, on the Martelaersspiegel (Baptist History Homepage)
11. Wikipedia (Engels), “Dirk Willems”
12. Christian-history.org, “Dirk Willems” (from the Martelaersspiegel)
13. Bible.com, Mattheüs 5:44 (NKJV)
14. Bible.com, Mattheüs 25:23 (NKJV)

Robert Regout: the professor who put law above power

In September 1941 the Dutch Jesuit Peter van Gestel arrived at the Dachau concentration camp, near Munich. New prisoners were kept apart behind a fence of wire netting. The prisoners mockingly called that place the "Novitiate," after the house where young members of a religious order spend their first years. No one was allowed to go there.

The next day someone was standing at the wire anyway. A man in the striped camp uniform, who had made his way there unseen. It was Robert Regout, priest, Jesuit, professor of international law from Nijmegen, and Van Gestel's best friend. He pushed a small package through the wire. Inside was a pipe with tobacco. And in the pipe, in a scrap of thin paper, was something you could barely see: a very small particle of a host, the bread of the Mass.

That is how Van Gestel told it himself, in 1947, in an account for his fellow Jesuits in America. He stood there, on the other side of the wire. No one else wrote it down.

Anyone who passed on a host in Dachau knew what it could cost. Robert Regout had already been a prisoner for more than a year. He would not leave the camp alive. Fifteen months later he died, forty-six years old. He was not a resistance fighter with weapons or forged papers. He was a scholar who, in the first weeks of the occupation, had written down what an occupier may and may not do. That was enough.

Where that man came from, you only see when you go back to a house in Maastricht.

A house on the Stationsstraat

Robert Hubert Willem Regout was born on January 18, 1896, in Maastricht, a city in Limburg, the far south of the Netherlands. According to the Oorlogsgravenstichting (the Dutch War Graves Foundation), the house where he was born stood on the Stationsstraat in Wyck, the part of the city on the east bank of the river Maas, and he was baptized in the Sint-Martinuskerk (St. Martin's Church) there.

The name Regout meant a great deal in Limburg. The family owned factories and produced Catholic politicians. His father, Louis Regout, later became minister of Waterstaat, the ministry for water management and public works. An uncle, also called Robert, was minister of Justice in the same cabinet. Uri Nooteboom, who in 1944 was the first to write an obituary of him, simply called it a very distinguished family. A Jesuit later added that it was a very wealthy family.

Robert went to the gymnasium, the classical grammar school, of the Sint-Willibrorduscollege in Katwijk aan de Rijn. Around the age of eighteen he chose the Society of Jesus, the order of the Jesuits. A boy with that background could have taken a different road, into the

factory or into politics. Why he chose the monastery is not stated in any of the sources I have been able to read. So I leave it open.

Law in Leiden

The Jesuits gave him a long training: philosophy, theology, and also something unusual for a priest. He studied law in Leiden. According to the legal scholar Henri de Waele, who wrote an article about him in 2005, that was roughly from 1921 to 1924. There he came under the influence of Willem van Eysinga, professor of international law. International law is the law between countries: treaties, war and peace, the question of what states may do to one another.

Part of his training took place in England. Van Gestel later wrote that English Jesuits still remembered him from his final year of training at St. Beuno's, in Wales, and from his visits to London. It was there that Van Gestel got to know him.

On August 15, 1927, Robert Regout was ordained a priest.

When may a country go to war?

A year earlier, in 1926, he had published his first article, in the Catholic journal Studiën. More than forty would follow. From 1929 on he gave lectures and commentary on the radio. He advised the Rooms-Katholieke Staatspartij (the Roman Catholic State Party) and was active in the Rooms-Katholieke Vredesbond (the Roman Catholic Peace League). On May 23, 1937, he gave a speech at a wreath-laying at the statue of Hugo de Groot (Hugo Grotius) in Delft, the man who once gave international law its first shape.

Meanwhile, for years and alongside all his other duties, he worked on a doctoral thesis. It appeared in 1934 in Paris, in French. In English the title would read: The doctrine of the just war, from Augustine to the present day, according to Catholic theologians and canon

lawyers. His supervisor was the Leiden professor Ben Telders. His conclusion, says De Waele, was that this old doctrine could still be used in his own time, if you took modern reality into account.

The subject says something about the man. He wanted to know when violence between nations can be defended, and when it cannot. He believed that law could hold between countries too, that there are limits which even the strongest may not cross. In a pamphlet from 1936 about the League of Nations he wrote that the failure lay less in the rules than in the attitude of the countries. According to a Jesuit who wrote about him in 2006, Regout saw a line of growing awareness of justice all over the world.

Have you ever believed something that the times you lived in went right against? In the 1930s Regout saw countries break treaties and armies grow. He kept writing about law.

The moderator of Nijmegen

In Nijmegen he became moderator of the students at the Catholic university, today's Radboud University. In this he succeeded Father C. Hoogeweegen. A moderator was a spiritual guide, roughly what is now called a student chaplain. The university paper Vox wrote in 2015 that he was popular with the students, a source of inspiration in student life.

Uri Nooteboom, who knew him as a young staff member of the university, drew his portrait in 1944 for the newspaper. A cool, clear mind, he wrote, with a quiet distinction. His calm brought peace to Nijmegen student life. He carried his priesthood with simplicity. And he was optimistic about the future, even when the war had already begun. Nooteboom also names a weakness, without passing judgment: Regout would not take Hermann Rauschning's book about Hitler, *Gespräche mit Hitler* (*Conversations with Hitler*),

seriously. He held on to the idea that the Germans in occupied territory were less bad than the rumors said.

On September 18, 1939, the Sint-Radboudstichting (the St. Radboud Foundation, which ran the university) appointed him extraordinary professor of international law. He remained moderator. In 1939 he traveled to a congress of Pax Romana, an international Catholic student movement, in Ljubljana. In 1940 a congress in America followed. He often traveled to Paris, to the Jesuit Yves de la Brière, and to The Hague, for international work for peace.

On February 28, 1940, he gave his inaugural lecture, the opening address of a new professor. The title was a question: "Is there ground for confidence in the future of international law?" By then Europe had been at war for half a year. The Netherlands was still neutral. International law, he said according to De Waele, is still in its infancy. One sentence from that lecture comes back later on a bronze plaque.

In those same days, shortly before the invasion, he spoke once more in the great hall about the neutrality of the Netherlands, as a national and a European interest. Nooteboom writes that German troops invaded the country a few hours later. It was May 10.

What an occupier may do

After five days the Dutch army surrendered. What was beginning, no one yet knew. Many people thought they had to fall in line.

Regout thought differently. According to De Waele, in the weeks after the surrender he traveled through the country and called on people to hold on to the law and not to go along with the occupier. The Vriendenkring Robert Regout (the Robert Regout Circle of Friends) and the Oorlogsgravenstichting write that he advised universities on what position to take. In the first days after May 10 he tried to

get leaders to take a correct stand, and he stayed firm in this. In a lecture for young people in 1940 he told them they could make a difference, and that defeatism led nowhere.

He also did what he did best. He wrote an article: "The legal situation in occupied territory." He took as his starting point the Hague Convention of 1907, which sets out the rules for occupation. His point was simple, and unpleasant for the occupier. An occupying power has rights, but also duties. Law stands above power.

He did not write it as someone who wanted to challenge the occupier. According to De Waele, it also said that the Dutch must keep strictly to their obligations toward the occupier, as far as the law imposed them. He expressed confidence in the return of the Queen. And he wrote that Dutch people on Dutch soil kept their national and religious convictions.

The article made an impact. In June 1940 an issue of Studiën containing the article had to be pulled from sale, according to the Circle of Friends, and it was immediately reprinted by various newspapers and magazines. The editors of Studiën still regard the publication today as their first act of resistance. In August 1941 the occupier silenced the journal. A look back quoted by the journal Streven gave as the reason that the Catholic information was "too clear and too competent for the Germans."

You can ask whether it was wise. Regout was a lawyer; he knew how an occupier thinks. He wrote it anyway.

A bicycle for Saturday

On June 29, 1940, the Gestapo, the German secret state police, came to his house on the Molenstraat in Nijmegen. He was not there. According to De Waele and Vox, the Germans suspected him of contact with the German Jesuit Friedrich Muckermann. The archivist

of the Dutch Jesuits said in 2015 that Regout did not belong to that network.

Regout returned to Nijmegen. According to Nooteboom, he had seen this coming and was prepared for it. On July 3, 1940, he reported to the Gestapo himself. He was locked up in Arnhem. He was forty-four years old and had given his inaugural lecture only four months earlier.

Nooteboom preserved a small detail. The last thing Regout asked was whether his bicycle could be repaired, because he wanted to go to The Hague on Saturday. So he expected to come back. The detail appears only in that one obituary. I tell it because it is so ordinary.

In the archives of the NIOD (the Dutch Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies) there is a letter from around August 21, 1940. In it Wilhelm Harster, the head of the German security service in the Netherlands, quoted passages from Regout's article. He judged that Regout had attacked National Socialism and its form of state in the sharpest possible way. The decision was made: Regout would stay in custody. He was moved to Berlin, to the prison on the Alexanderplatz.

There someone made a drawing of him, Nooteboom wrote. He does not say who the artist was. He describes what he saw in it: a sorrowful line around a mouth that had always been resolute. There was no trial. He was never convicted of anything.

Number 26,750

In July 1941 Robert Regout was taken to Dachau. Clergy from many countries of Europe were held there. Titus Brandsma, a Carmelite and professor from Nijmegen, died in that same camp in 1942. According to Vox, Regout was given the number 26,750.

He probably worked in the transport detail, Vox writes, based on conversations with the archivist of the Jesuits. It counted as one of the most feared places to work. Later he worked on the camp plantation.

Van Gestel, who arrived in September 1941, later said that the period before 1943 was in many ways the worst. The SS wanted to break the prisoners' self-respect. German priests were held in Block 26, which had a small chapel. The other clergy were in Blocks 28 and 30, and only at the end of December 1942 did they also move to Block 26. For Regout that was too late.

In 1942 three or four Jesuits came together on Sunday mornings to talk about their faith. It was small and quiet, and according to Van Gestel it gave them a purpose. Regout was one of the few who took part in those first months. Later, in Block 26, the imprisoned priests would even celebrate Mass in secret. Hosts were smuggled in inside eyeglass cases and cigarette tins, and one Jesuit divided a single host into more than twenty particles. How Regout got hold of the particle in the pipe, Van Gestel does not say. That it was possible says enough about what was going on beneath the surface in that camp.

A Polish priest

Vox tells one more story from Dachau. In April 1942 Regout saw a dying Polish priest. He helped him to his feet and asked whether he could be taken to the infirmary. A guard smashed the Pole's head against the wall. When Regout asked why, he was kicked in the groin so hard that he himself had to go to the infirmary.

This story comes from one source, the 2015 article in Vox. I have not found it anywhere else. It fits with what others said about him. Nooteboom writes that Regout was a support and an example to

his fellow prisoners, and that his heroism was quiet and almost unnoticed. In a letter of thanks, to which the archivist of the Jesuits referred in 2015, a cellmate called him a true pastor. And the archivist said in 2015 that Regout stayed optimistic despite prison.

Nooteboom also noted how Regout prayed. Every day he prayed the Our Father, and at the line *And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one* (Matthew 6:13) he gave his own interpretation. He prayed it as: "do not try us beyond our strength." Nooteboom wrote down the petition itself in the Catholic wording Regout knew, which uses "bekoring" (enticement) instead of "verzoeking" (temptation), the word Protestants use.

I keep coming back to that line. Here a man in a concentration camp is not praying for release, nor for strength to bear everything. He is asking God not to make the load heavier than he can carry. What would you pray, if you knew there was nowhere you could go?

The eighteenth of December 1942

In December 1942 Regout was ill. Van Gestel later wrote that he died of liver and heart trouble; Vox and the Oorlogsgravenstichting say exhaustion. De Waele speaks of cruel and humiliating treatment. These are probably different words for the same worn-out body.

On December 18 he wrote a letter to Piet van Gestel, a fellow Jesuit in the camp. Everything suggests that this is the same Van Gestel as the friend at the wire, but the sources do not say so in as many words. He called him "Off.," short for officer. The Circle of Friends has scanned and transcribed the handwritten text. At the top it says it was to stay strictly confidential as long as he lived. It is his spiritual testament.

In that letter he accepts that he must give his life, if God asks it. He does so, he writes, "with great joy for Faith and Fatherland." In

this he is thinking especially of the students and professors of the university in Nijmegen. He asks his fellow Jesuits to forgive him for his bad example, especially for carelessness in his spiritual life. He calls the Society of Jesus the greatest blessing of his life and thanks the order for its trust. He thinks of his mother and his family, and he hopes that the younger generation will keep the religious traditions of the family. He thinks of his many friends.

The tone is not gloomy. He writes himself that he is anything but gloomy, and he uses a Latin expression of Paul, cupio dissolvi: I long to depart and be with Christ. He also intends to get better, partly for the sake of two men who are caring for him. One of them nurses him; the other is a fellow prisoner. Of one of them he says that he fights for him like a mother for her child. And he asks for the prayers of Catholic and Protestant brothers and colleagues.

That last line moves me. In the Netherlands of that time, Catholics and Protestants often lived in separate worlds. Here a Jesuit from Maastricht, on his sickbed in Dachau, asked for the prayers of both.

An ordinary death

Robert Regout died on December 28, 1942. He was forty-six and had been a prisoner for almost two and a half years. The register of the Oorlogsgravenstichting gives December 29; the biography on the same page, De Waele, Vox, Streven and Nooteboom give the 28th.

In 1947 Van Gestel wrote briefly that they lost Regout in December 1942. He called him and the other Jesuits who died in Dachau unspectacular, modern martyrs, people whom the order should invoke rather than pray for. Their bodies were broken, he wrote, but their spirit had won. According to the Circle of Friends, a fellow priest at the deathbed said it was an ordinary, serene and happy death. Who that priest was is not stated.

Ten days earlier he had written that he gave his life with joy. It is the only thing we know for certain about what was going on inside him in those last days, and it comes from himself.

He did not come back

In Nijmegen life under the occupation went on. Only after the liberation of the city, in the autumn of 1944, could anyone write about him openly. On November 3, 1944, the first obituary, by Uri Nooteboom, appeared in the newspaper De Gelderlander. Nooteboom was a young staff member of the university and a journalist. He himself was killed near Den Bosch on May 5, 1945. About the end of Regout he writes briefly. After more than two years the hope of freedom proved vain. Regout had not come back.

Ben Telders, Regout's thesis supervisor, died in 1945 in Bergen-Belsen. Two men who had thought together about law between nations both perished in German camps. In his article De Waele calls Regout a martyr for international law. The chair of international law in Nijmegen was filled again in 1948, by L.J.C. Beaufort.

In Maastricht his name is on a memorial stone in the family grave at the Algemene Begraafplaats (the General Cemetery). In the baptistery of the Sint-Martinuskerk in Wyck, where he was baptized, hangs a portrait of him. In Nijmegen there is a plaque, and in several towns a street is named after him. Not yet in Maastricht, writes the Oorlogsgravenstichting.

His file stayed untouched for a long time. After 1945 the Russians took the Gestapo archives to Moscow. The document about Regout lay there largely unexamined. In 2002 the papers came back to Nijmegen. In that year friends and admirers founded the Vriendenkring Robert Regout. They hung a portrait of him in the Molen-

straatkerk, next to that of Titus Brandsma. In 2004 a biography appeared, edited by Marc Lindeijer and A. Welle.

Since 2006 there has been a Robert Regout Lecture every year around May 4 and 5 (the days on which the Netherlands remembers its war dead and celebrates its liberation), for students and professors. The first was given on May 15, 2006, by the government minister Piet Hein Donner, the next on May 9, 2007, by Jan Pronk, and on March 28, 2008, by General Dick Berlijn. The question every lecture asks is the same: how can academics, students and professors, help establish justice and truth in the world? In a piece from 2006 a Jesuit wrote that Regout could become a new Dutch saint. Whether a process for this is under way, I have not been able to establish.

A plaque of twelve kilos

In September 2015 a bronze plaque made by the Nijmegen artist Cor Litjens was to be placed in Dachau. According to Vox it weighed about twelve kilos, some twenty-six pounds. The artist based the relief on the portrait in the Molenstraatkerk. He reversed light and dark so that the priest could wear a white collar. On the face, he said, mildness shines.

The text on the plaque comes from the inaugural lecture of February 1940: to help establish justice and truth in this world, with the use of all his strength. The archivist called it a plea in 2015. Professor Sebastiaan Roes of the Circle of Friends was to hang the plaque in Dachau at the end of September, without much ceremony. There had been a long discussion about money and about the design before it came to that.

Robert Regout hid no one in his home and carried no weapons. He wrote an article about what an occupier may do. He reported him-

self when they came looking for him. In the camp he passed a friend a pipe and a crumb of bread through the wire.

And so bronze bearing his name came to Dachau, to the place where he had been number 26,750.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): born on January 18, 1896, in Maastricht into the Regout family; father Louis Regout, later a minister; Jesuit and priest (ordained 1927); law studies in Leiden; professor of international law and student moderator in Nijmegen (1939-1940); inaugural lecture on February 28, 1940; the article "The legal situation in occupied territory" (1940); the Gestapo at his door on June 29, 1940, and his voluntary surrender on July 3, 1940; imprisonment in Arnhem and Berlin; in Dachau from July 1941; death in Dachau at the end of December 1942.

Only from own testimony or a single contemporary: the pipe and the host at the wire (Van Gestel only); the spiritual testament of December 18, 1942 (Regout's own letter, kept by the Circle of Friends); the bicycle for Saturday, the drawing in Berlin, his interpretation of the Our Father, his optimism and his blind spot about Rauschning (Nooteboom only); the words of the fellow priest at the deathbed (the Circle of Friends only, without a name); the letter from the cellmate (Vox only, via the archivist of the Jesuits).

Unconfirmed: the kick from a guard after helping a dying Polish priest, the prisoner number and his work in the transport detail and on the plantation (Vox only, 2015); the house of his birth on the Stationsstraat and his baptism in the Sint-Martinuskerk (the Oorlogsgravenstichting only); a possible canonization.

Where the sources differ:

- *Date of death.* December 28 according to almost all sources, December 29 according to the register of the Oorlogsgravenstichting.
- *Reason for the arrest.* Formally a suspicion of contact with Friedrich Muckermann; the German security service held him because of his article. No trial was ever held.
- *Cause of his death.* Exhaustion (Vox, Oorlogsgravenstichting), liver and heart trouble (Van Gestel), cruel treatment (De Waele).
- *Publication of the article.* Late May (De Waele), June 7 (Vox) or June 1940 (Circle of Friends); according to the Circle of Friends and Streven, the June issue of Studiën was held back.
- *His attitude.* De Waele, the Circle of Friends and the Oorlogsgravenstichting describe a call to resist cooperation; De Waele also quotes, in English translation, sentences in which he argues for strict compliance with obligations toward the occupier, as far as the law imposed them. I have mentioned both. De Waele gives his quotations only in translation; I have retold them, not copied them word for word.
- *The lecture of May 7, 1940.* Nooteboom gives May 7 and at the same time writes that the invasion began a few hours later; the invasion was on May 10. In the chapter I therefore write that it was shortly before the invasion.
- *Years of study in Leiden.* Roughly 1921 to 1924 according to De Waele; elsewhere in the same article he gives roughly 1926.
- *Appointment as professor.* September 18, 1939 according to Nooteboom and the Circle of Friends (1939); De Waele gives 1940, with acceptance in February 1940.

Interpretation: the names of two men whom Regout mentions in his testament are on the website of the Circle of Friends. I have not included them, because I do not know whether they are still

alive. The plaque in Dachau had not yet been hung when the 2015 source was written; I have not been able to check whether that has happened.

Sources for this chapter

1. Oorlogsgravenstichting, Robertus Hubertus Wilhelmus Regout
2. Peter van Gestel S.J., "Jesuits in the Bonds of Dachau", Woodstock Letters 76 (1947)
3. Uri Nooteboom, In memoriam, De Gelderlander 3 november 1944 (via Vriendenkring Robert Regout)
4. Henri de Waele, "Commemorating Robert Regout (1896-1942)", Journal of the History of International Law 7 (2005)
5. Vox (Radboud Universiteit), 24 september 2015
6. Marc Lindeijer, "Robert Regout S.J. (1896-1942)", Streven, oktober 2006 (via DBNL)
7. "Regout", jezuïetenuitgave 2006 (via DBNL)
8. Vriendenkring Robert Regout, Leven
9. Vriendenkring Robert Regout, Testament
10. Vriendenkring Robert Regout, startpagina

Bastiaan Jan Ader: the minister who handed out addresses

On November 22, 1944, people in Veenendaal buried six men they did not know. Two days earlier the men had been shot dead in the woods between Rhenen and Veenendaal and left lying there, in the rain. The German occupier had picked them out as a reprisal, because two days before their death a German officer had been shot at. The six had nothing to do with it. They were already in prison.

One of them was thirty-four years old. He carried a Bible full of notes, a hymnbook with his wife's name in it, and a few letters. According to the account his wife wrote later, those things helped to identify him when he was reburied soon afterward. His name was Bastiaan Jan Ader. He was a minister of the Hervormde Kerk (the Dutch Reformed Church) in Nieuw-Beerta, a village in the east of the province of Groningen, right next to the German border.

Sixteen days before that morning in the woods, his second son had been born. He never saw him.

In his village most people knew him as their dominee, their minister. In the resistance he was called Domie. From his parsonage,

shelter was found for Jews who were being hunted, for other people in hiding and for airmen who had been shot down. Yad Vashem, the Holocaust remembrance center in Jerusalem, estimates that he and his wife, with the help of many others, brought between two hundred and three hundred people to safety.

He was not killed for a confession of faith. He was killed for what his faith made him do. That is why he is in this book.

It began on the coast, among the greenhouses of the Westland.

A boy from 's-Gravenzande

Bastiaan Jan Ader was born on December 30, 1909, in 's-Gravenzande, a town in the Westland, the greenhouse district near The Hague. Most sources give that date, as does the title of an article about him in the local history journal *Oud Rhenen*. One source gives December 29.

Little is known about his youth. A memorial website about war graves says that he finished secondary school at seventeen and then studied theology in Utrecht for five years. That he studied in Utrecht comes up in two texts on that site.

In September 1935 he married Johanna Adriana Appels from Driebergen. She was born on May 19, 1906, three years before him. Later everyone in the resistance would call her Tante Jo, Aunt Jo.

By bicycle to Palestine

There is one story from his young years that I like to tell. On June 5, 1936, Ader is said to have set off by bicycle for Palestine, the land of the Bible. On the way he caught typhoid. He recovered and came back on November 20, by way of Cairo, Greece and Italy. The journey had cost about a thousand guilders. He earned that amount back by giving talks about what he had seen.

The story is on one memorial website, and I have not found it anywhere else. If you believe it, you see a young man who wanted to see the land of the Bible with his own eyes and was willing to give a lot for it. Eight years later he would die for the descendants of the people who lived there when Jesus walked its roads.

A parsonage on the edge of Groningen

In October 1938 Bastiaan Jan Ader became minister of the Hervormde congregation in Nieuw-Beerta. The same memorial website says that many people in his congregation had turned their backs on the church. Some of them had become communists. Ader tried to win them back.

The parsonage stood next to the church. The house no longer exists. It was later demolished. The church itself is still there: a plain hall church from 1856, built to replace a church from the seventeenth century.

In 1942 their first son was born in Winschoten. He was given his father's name. According to the account on the page about Jo Ader-Appels, in the first years the occupation changed little in their life in Nieuw-Beerta. The village was far from Amsterdam. The war seemed to arrive there more slowly.

A question from Amsterdam

That changed because of one question. A Jewish acquaintance from Amsterdam, Lilly Johanna Samuëls, asked whether she could go into hiding with the Aders. It began with her. So the memorial website says, which for this part draws on Jo's book.

Lilly's story does not end well. After a while she and a friend went back to Amsterdam. There they were arrested. They were taken by

way of Westerbork, the transit camp in the province of Drenthe, to Auschwitz.

I name her here because she was the beginning. Helping people usually begins with one face you know, and one question you cannot turn down. What would you have done if that letter had come through your door? And what if you knew it could cost you your life?

From then on the parsonage was a hiding place. It sheltered Jews, other people in hiding and Allied airmen who had come down. According to the memorial website, for a time eight people were hiding in the house. Together with trusted elders from the congregation, Ader built hiding places and secret passages in the house. The Aders distributed ration cards, which people in hiding needed to get food.

A tall man on the train

One of the people who ended up in the parsonage wrote about it herself. Johanna-Ruth Dobschiner, Hansie, was born in Berlin in 1925 into an Orthodox Jewish family with Dutch roots. In the late 1930s the family moved to Amsterdam. Her brothers Werner and Manfred were picked up in 1941 and died, one in Buchenwald, the other in Mauthausen.

On April 9, 1943, German soldiers came for her parents. Hansie was hiding upstairs. Her mother asked whether she could check the gas and the electricity, and so walked closer to the place where her daughter was hidden. There she embraced her. It was the last time they saw each other. The parents were taken to the Hollandsche Schouwburg, a theater used as an assembly point, and then deported. Hansie left the house the next morning and fled to the

nursery across the square, where the director let her in. Her parents did not survive the war.

A caretaker at the hospital told her she had to go into hiding, and that a man would come to fetch her. On September 8, 1943, he was there. It was Domie. He took her with him, by train and by bicycle, past police checks, to Nieuw-Beerta. In her book she calls him "Daddy Long-Legs," after the tall man he was.

In the parsonage she found a Bible in the minister's bookcase. She knew the Old Testament. The New she had never read. She began to read, and as she told it later herself: with the help of Tante Jo and Domie she came to faith in Jesus as her Savior. She writes that she learned there much that she had never heard at the Jewish boys' school. At the moment it dawned on her, she cried it out in Hebrew: Joshua Hamoschiach. Jesus the Messiah.

Later Ader took her to Limburg, in the south, where she stayed in hiding until the south was liberated at the end of 1944. She stayed with farmers there, guided by someone she called Uncle Henk. Afterward she lived with a family named Heemskerk, and the mother there became her Moeke, her mother. After catechism classes she made a public profession of faith and was baptized. In 1945 she returned to Amsterdam. Former colleagues saw her as a traitor to her people, and in the end she left. In 1947 she moved to Glasgow. She married, had two children, and wrote down her memories mainly for them. The book appeared in Dutch as *Te mogen leven* and in English as *Selected to Live*, and later in many languages.

All this we know from her own book and from a summary of it by someone who has looked closely into her story. It is a testimony, not a court record. But it is the testimony of someone who was there herself.

I need to add something. That a Jewish woman in hiding became a Christian in a minister's house is a sensitive matter for many Jewish readers. Hansie described it herself in this way, as her own choice. I leave it with her words.

Domie, or Van Zaanen

Ader worked in the resistance under a false name. Exactly which name is not entirely clear. One memorial website writes Van Zaanen; another source writes Van Zaan. In his own circle they called him Domie, the Groningen form of dominee.

According to the memorial website he worked within the LO, the Landelijke Organisatie voor Hulp aan Onderduikers (the National Organization for Help to People in Hiding). That organization found addresses and arranged ration cards and transport. The Dutch public broadcaster NOS wrote in 2016 that he set up an underground organization that found shelter for Jews all over the Netherlands.

What he did for this we know mainly from his wife's book, *Een Groninger pastorie in de storm* (A Groningen Parsonage in the Storm). He traveled through the country, mostly by bicycle and by train, often in work clothes and in disguise. He gave hundreds of people addresses where they could hide. When the alarm sounded because danger was close, the guests vanished and all traces were wiped away. Domie himself slipped through the bushes to a little door in the big Groningen barn next to the parsonage. He was never found there. The couple would have been shot if they had been discovered.

Most people in his own congregation, writes one of those who retold the story, did not know what their minister did during the

week. On Sundays he preached. During the week he handed out addresses.

I find that a strong picture, and I think it is true. Still, almost all of it comes from one book, written by his widow shortly after the war. She based it on the diary she kept in those years. That makes it valuable. It also makes it a story from one side.

A plan for Westerbork

In 1944 Ader was working on something bigger. He had built up a network of resistance people, and he made a plan to free Jews from the Westerbork camp, the transit camp in Drenthe. From there the trains left for the east.

What that plan looked like is not stated in any of the sources I have been able to read. One source says the plan was carried out. Another says that his arrest put an end to it.

In the same period he was betrayed. How and by whom, the stories differ: someone from the village, a former catechism pupil, a contact somewhere in Holland. According to one of those texts he had to go into hiding himself in April 1944. The people hiding in the parsonage had to find other addresses quickly.

According to Jo's story, the Grüne Polizei, the German uniformed police, raided the parsonage. People who were hidden there were found. They were taken to Germany and were never seen again. The officers searched the house and took what they could. Jo had to live somewhere else with their two small boys.

Haarlem, summer 1944

In the summer of 1944 Bastiaan Jan Ader was arrested in Haarlem. One of the stories says he walked into a trap. He was taken to Amsterdam and locked up in the Huis van Bewaring, the jail on the

Weteringschans. According to one of those who retold the story, drawing on Jo's book, he was abused there in body and mind.

Meanwhile Jo was somewhere else, pregnant with their second child, with a little son of two.

Letters on toilet paper

From the Weteringschans Ader wrote letters to his wife. He wrote them with a small pencil on rolls of toilet paper. Policemen he trusted smuggled them out. So it says in the review of her book.

The sources agree on what was in them. They showed a deep faith and a great trust that God would take care of his family. A selection of the letters is in Jo's book. I have not been able to open that book, so I cannot quote them. I would like to. A man who writes to his wife on toilet paper in a cell, and writes to her about God, deserves to be heard in his own words.

What the sources do tell is how he spent his last days. His contacts in the police had let him know that liberation was near. He spent his days reading the Bible and praying with other prisoners. In his hymnbook he had marked one hymn. The sources do not say which. The EO broadcast *Nederland Zingt* tells the story of the Aders at Hymn 466, which begins with the line *Als God mijn God maar voor mij is, wie is er dan mij tegen* (If God is my God and is for me, who then is against me). Whether that was the hymn he underlined, I do not know.

The policemen who carried the letters out took a risk themselves. Even in a prison of the occupier there were people who chose a small act of humanity. We do not know their names.

On November 4, 1944, a second son was born in the Ader family. His father was in a cell at that moment.

Sixteen days later his father was dead. That number comes up in several sources, including the NOS. Bastiaan Jan Ader never saw his second son.

How the news of the birth reached him, or whether it reached him, I do not know. The sources do not say.

A hill near Rhenen

On November 18, 1944, a German officer was shot at. The occupier often answered such attacks with reprisals: prisoners who were already in custody were picked out and killed. That is what happened now. Six men were chosen. According to the review of Jo's book, three came from a prison in Utrecht and three from the Weteringschans in Amsterdam.

On November 20, 1944, they were taken to a wooded hill, the Schupse bos near Rhenen. One of the memorial texts gives the place as the crossing of the Oude Veense Grindweg and the Veenendaalsestraatweg, near Veenendaal. There they were shot by a firing squad. Bastiaan Jan Ader was thirty-four years old.

He died with five others, and their names belong here too: Pieter Julius ter Beek (23), Victor Alexandre Guillaume van den Bergh (26), Thomas Jan Lambrechtsen van Ritthem (22), Philip de Leeuw (30) and Jan Johannes van der Munnik (20).

You sometimes hear that Ader was executed in Haarlem. In Haarlem he was arrested. All the sources I have read place his death in the woods between Rhenen and Veenendaal.

The bodies were left lying there, in the rain. People from Veenendaal found them and buried them two days later in the local cemetery. At the end of November Ader was reburied with family in Driebergen, the town his wife came from. There they found in his

pocket the Bible with his notes, the hymnbook and the letters. After the war he was given a grave at the Nationaal Ereveld Loenen, the national war cemetery at Loenen, section E, number 52. He still lies there.

A book from 1947

Jo Ader-Appels was left with two small boys. In 1947 she published *Een Groninger pastorie in de storm*, based on the diary she had kept during the war. The book was reprinted thirteen times and translated into German and Finnish. In 2017 an English translation appeared, *House of Defiance*. Most of what we know about the day-to-day side of the resistance work comes from this book.

She outlived her husband by fifty years and died on July 31, 1994, in Nieuw-Beerta. She received the Verzetsherdenkingskruis (the Resistance Commemorative Cross) and was made a Knight in the Order of Orange-Nassau. In the archive of the Wiener Holocaust Library in London there are letters from her from the 1950s, about the publication of her memoirs in Germany and England. An Ader Foundation was set up, which still has ties with the church congregation in the Reiderland, the region around Nieuw-Beerta.

On November 22, 1967, exactly twenty-three years after his burial in Veenendaal, Yad Vashem recognized Bastiaan Jan Ader and Johanna Adriana Ader-Appels as Righteous Among the Nations. That recognition is given to people who saved Jews without seeking anything for themselves. On the Avenue of the Righteous in Jerusalem a tree stands for them, with a plaque bearing their names and their country.

The figure of two hundred to three hundred people saved comes from Yad Vashem itself, based on its own research. It covers everyone who was helped through their network, with the efforts of

many. No exact count exists. People who had been in hiding during the war later collected money for a forest in Israel in memory of Ader. It has about eleven hundred trees, the NOS wrote in 2016.

A marble stone beside the pulpit

In the church of Nieuw-Beerta, beside the pulpit, hangs a marble memorial stone for Dominee Ader. There is a corner in the church that remembers him and his wife. In the north of the country a train runs that bears his name.

The parsonage is no longer there. The little door to the barn exists only in his wife's book.

I searched for a long time for words of his own. A sermon, a saying, a sentence from a letter. I did not find them, at least not in sources I could open. What I did find are the traces of what he did: addresses, ration cards, a train, a bicycle. A Jewish girl who walked with him to a village in Groningen on September 8, 1943. A Bible full of notes. A hymnbook with an underlined hymn. Rolls of toilet paper in his handwriting.

Perhaps that says enough. He was a minister who preached on Sundays and during the week kept the door of his house open for people who had nowhere else to go.

In a cemetery in Veenendaal in November 1944 lay six men whom no one there knew. One of them had a Bible and a hymnbook in his pocket, and a few letters. The people who buried him did not know who he was. They gave him a grave.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): born in 's-Gravenzande at the end of December 1909; married Johanna Adriana Appels in 1935; minister in Nieuw-Beerta from 1938; the parsonage as

a hiding place for Jews, other people in hiding and airmen; a network that found hiding addresses across the country; a plan to free Jews from Westerbork; arrest in the summer of 1944 in Haarlem; imprisonment in the Weteringschans; birth of his second son on November 4, 1944; execution by firing squad on November 20, 1944, near Rhenen/Veenendaal as a reprisal, together with five others; burial in Veenendaal, Driebergen and finally at the Ereveld Loenen; Jo Ader-Appels' book from 1947; recognition by Yad Vashem on November 22, 1967, with an estimate of 200 to 300 people saved; the memorial stone in the church of Nieuw-Beerta.

Only from own testimony: the journeys by bicycle and train in disguise, the alarm and the little door to the barn (from his wife's book); the elders who helped build hiding places; the letters on toilet paper, smuggled out by policemen, and their content; the abuse in prison; the last days with Bible and prayer; the identification by Bible, hymnbook and letters; the raid by the Grüne Polizei on the parsonage; the story of Lilly Samuëls; the meeting, the hiding and the conversion of Hansie Dobschiner, her mother who embraced her, and the words Joshua Hamoschiach (from her own book, via a summary on a website, not the book itself).

Unconfirmed: the bicycle journey to Palestine in 1936 (one memorial website); the length of his studies and the winning back of communist church members; that he worked in the LO; who betrayed him (someone from the village, a former catechism pupil or a contact elsewhere); that he walked into a trap; where the six executed men came from (three from Utrecht, three from Amsterdam); whether the marked hymn was Hymn 466.

Where the sources differ:

- *Date of the arrest.* June 22, July 22 or later in the summer; one site gives the end of 1944, after a provocation by a policeman

on the way to Haarlem. That last claim does not fit the rest and appears nowhere else.
- *False name.* Van Zaanen or Van Zaan.
- *Day of birth.* December 30 (most sources) or December 29.
- *The plan for Westerbork.* One source says the plan was carried out, another that his arrest put an end to it.
- *The raid on the parsonage.* According to a review of Jo's book this happened in 1944; who the hidden people were and exactly when, I did not find in a second source.
- *Hansie Dobschiner's hiding after Nieuw-Beerta.* My source speaks of Limburg and a hunger winter; the south of the country was already liberated in the fall of 1944. I followed the version that she stayed there until the liberation.
- *The tree-planting ceremony in Jerusalem.* 1967 according to most sources, 1964 according to one source about Jo.
- *Place of death.* Haarlem is sometimes named; that is the place of his arrest.

Interpretation: the article by Ad J. de Jong in *Oud Rhenen* (2007), the book by Jo Ader-Appels and the file at Yad Vashem I could not inspect; they may contain more, also about his own words. The forest in Israel is a memorial that made the news in 2016, partly because of the place where it lies; that is a separate matter which I have not worked out further here. I leave out the names of Ader's sons, because I do not know whether they are still alive.

Sources for this chapter

1. Ad J. de Jong, "Ds. Bastiaan Jan Ader geb. 30-12-1909, gefussileerd bij Rhenen 20-11-1944", Oud Rhenen 26 (2007), Universiteit Utrecht Repository
2. Yad Vashem, Righteous Among the Nations: Ader, Bastiaan Jan & Johanna Adriana (Appels)

3. WW2 Gravestone, Bastiaan Jan Ader
4. WW2 Gravestone, Ader-Appels, Johanna Adriana en haar man Bastiaan Ader
5. WW2 Gravestone, Bastiaan Jan Ader (tweede pagina)
6. WW2 Gravestone, Jo Ader-Appels en Bastiaan Jan Ader
7. TracesOfWar, Ader, Bastiaan Jan
8. Christian Courier, Stan de Jong, "The parsonage that became a sanctuary", 12 juni 2017
9. Sense de Jong, "Domie and Hansie"
10. NOS, "Zoon verzetsheld komt in actie voor verdreven Palestijnen", November 18, 2016
11. EO Nederland Zingt, Gezang 466
12. Visit Groningen, Kerk Nieuw-Beerta
13. Protestantse gemeente De Dollert, Yad Vashem 2018
14. EHRI Portal, Correspondence with Ader-Appels, Johanna Adriana (Wiener Holocaust Library)
15. Zochrot, article on Ader's son and his father

Nico Kluiters: shepherd of the shepherds

On December 28, 1982, Nico Kluiters sat down to write his Christmas letter. He was in Barqa, a Christian village in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, and for weeks he had not been able to call anyone. Air strikes had been carried out on the Syrian army. Then came the revenge. Travel was no longer possible. Hundreds of Christians in the region were kidnapped, and a few of them were murdered. A priest was badly beaten. A bishop and two vicars were abducted and later released.

He could have left. In his letter he described the choice before him: "to take flight, or to try to keep up our courage." He stayed. He wrote that this year he felt more than ever a missionary, someone who gives himself completely to the people entrusted to him, even when it costs effort and loneliness. And he wrote that he felt God's nearness and was grateful to be exactly there. We know these words from his own letters, which the Dutch Jesuits later published.

Two years and three months later he was dead. A Dutch priest from Delft, who had first wanted to be an artist, was kidnapped on a road in Lebanon. His body lay at the bottom of a ravine. In Barqa his

portrait hangs in people's homes, and since 2022 a church tribunal in Beirut has been examining whether he died for his faith.

It began in a dairy shop.

A dairy shop in Delft

Nicolaas Kluiters, called Nico, was born on May 25, 1940, in Delft, an old city between The Hague and Rotterdam. His parents had a dairy shop, and the family was Catholic, according to the biography the Jesuits published about him.

In Delft stood the Stanislascollege, a Jesuit school. Nico knew the priests there. It is the place where later, in November 2014, a small chapel was dedicated to him.

As a boy he drew a lot. He had talent for it, and it did not stay a hobby. He went to the Koninklijke Academie van Beeldende Kunsten (the Royal Academy of Art) in The Hague and afterward taught drawing and painting at schools. It looked as if he would become an artist.

But he was searching. According to Federico Lombardi, the Jesuit who wrote a long article about him in the journal La Civiltà Cattolica, in those years he went to Taizé, the ecumenical brotherhood in France. He came into contact with the Little Brothers of Charles de Foucauld, who live among poor people. He worked with the ragpickers of Abbé Pierre in France. And he came to know a Benedictine monastery from the inside.

They were all places where prayer and poverty lay close together. Out of that search came a decision. In 1965, at twenty-five, he applied to the novitiate of the Dutch Jesuits.

He did not give up his art for it. Lombardi writes that Nico himself saw it this way: he felt called to become a "painter of men," just as

Jesus once called fishermen to become fishers of men. Even after his ordination he remained an artist. In a passage from the French biography by Carole Dagher, quoted in a Dutch review, it says that he let go of art in order to make beauty together with people, following the example of Abbé Pierre.

His novice master, the Jesuit Piet van Breemen, later called him unconventional. According to Thom Sicking, the Jesuit who put together his file for beatification, in the turbulent years after the Second Vatican Council Nico did not simply go along with everything that was changing. In that time many priests and members of religious orders left their orders. Nico stayed.

A mission field called Lebanon

Why Lebanon? Lombardi explains. The Dutch Jesuits were used to sending missionaries to Indonesia, the former Dutch colony. At the end of the 1950s that was no longer possible. The superior general in Rome therefore sent the Dutchmen who offered themselves for the missions to the Middle East, to the mostly French Jesuits who were already working there. In 1958 the first group of five left. One of them was Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, who would later become the worldwide leader of the Jesuits.

Nico wanted to go on mission early. After about a year of novitiate in the Netherlands he was sent in 1966 to Bikfaya, in the mountains of Lebanon. There he finished his novitiate and began to learn Arabic. It did not come easily. Jan Stuyt, a fellow Jesuit who reviews his biography, writes that some parents later had their child baptized by someone else because they could not understand Nico's Arabic well. Years later he spoke the language with the accent of the north.

From 1968 to 1970 he studied social work in Beirut. In doing so he looked above all at the lives of ordinary, poor people. After that came philosophy in France and theology in Beirut.

In the summer of 1973 he was ordained a priest in Amsterdam. He went back to Lebanon and ended up in Taanayel, a place in the Bekaa Valley where the Jesuits had a community. From that house he went out into the villages.

The Bekaa is a high plain about a hundred sixty kilometers long, some nine hundred meters above sea level, wedged between two mountain ranges. Nico was assigned the northern part. In the north live mainly Shiite Muslims, with a Christian village here and there. That is where he went to work, among poor Christians. In 1974 and 1975 he began with catechesis and with training catechists, young people who passed on the faith in their own villages.

A testament for Christmas

One of those young people was named Ghassibé Keyrouz, from the village of Nabha. Nico had trained him himself. They were teacher and pupil, and friends.

In April 1975 civil war broke out in Lebanon. It would last fifteen years. At the end of that year Nico had to go abroad for what the Jesuits call the third year, a final period of formation. His superior had decided it. Before he left, he took Ghassibé to the Jesuit college in Jamhour, near Beirut.

Just before Christmas 1975 Ghassibé left for his village. On the way he was killed. In his room in Jamhour someone found a testament. In it he asked his mother and his sisters not to grieve too much. He forgave those who had killed him, with his whole heart. And he asked that his blood might be offered for peace in Lebanon. Nico

heard the news in Europe. According to Lombardi he carried his friend's legacy with him for the rest of his life.

I keep coming back to that testament. A young man in a country that has just gone to war writes on paper that he forgives his murderers, before there is anyone who has harmed him. And his teacher would die in the same way almost ten years later, not far from the same place. That is how Lombardi writes it in the Italian version of his article.

Shepherd of the shepherds

In 1976 the Syrian army occupied the Bekaa. It became relatively quieter there, though it remained dangerous.

That year he gave an interview to the yearbook of the Italian Jesuits. In it he spoke about social justice as something that belongs at the heart of the service of faith, and he referred to the Second Vatican Council and to the recently held general assembly of his order. And he described himself with an image that stayed with him: he had really become a shepherd of the shepherds. The shepherds in the mountains searched for days for one lost sheep and slept beside their animals. Nico drove them around in his car.

It is a small sentence, but it says a lot about how he worked. He was a catechist, a social worker and a priest all at once, and he lived with the people he served. According to Sicking, for years he had no home of his own. He lived with families in the villages, ate and slept with them. In time he spoke Arabic with the accent of the north, Sicking told the news agency AsiaNews.

The distances were great. He covered hundreds of kilometers a week, on roads where kidnapping and murder were no exception. He gave catechesis, held Bible evenings, baptized children and pre-

pared them for their first communion. And he visited priests in the area who had received little training and lived in great poverty.

"Our own house has been shot at"

In 1980 he wrote home about what he saw around him. There were kidnappings, murders and roadblocks. There was often no electricity. And he wrote the short sentence: "Our own house has been shot at." According to his Christmas letter that year, this was the house in Taanayel.

At Christmas that year Zahlé, the capital of the region, had been under siege for weeks by Syrian troops and their allies. The telephone often failed. Nico celebrated midnight Mass in two of his parishes. He described full churches, elaborately built Nativity scenes at the front, loud singing, hours of hearing confessions and many communions. He was living in the middle of the violence, he wrote, and at the same time he called Christmas night a great feast. The peace he saw in the believers, he connected with the Child, with Mary and Joseph, with the ox and the donkey and the shepherds.

What do you do when danger stands a few kilometers away every day? You can think about it on a safe couch in the Netherlands. Nico had to decide it in a car on a Lebanese mountain road, and then once more, and then again.

A village with two churches

In 1981 the Maronite archbishop of Zahlé, Georges Iskandar, asked him to become parish priest of Barqa. The Maronites are an Eastern church united with Rome. Barqa was a village of about seventeen hundred people in the north of the Bekaa. It lay between Chlifa, Aynata and Nabha, in an otherwise Shiite area.

The village was divided. There were two churches, on two sides of the village, and two parts of the village had long lived side by side without much contact. Families who had quarreled each went to their own church. Nico had a school built between those two churches. According to Sicking that school brought the two halves of the village back together. He brought sisters of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts to Barqa to run the school. They also cared for families, women, children, the sick and the elderly, and helped out in a small pharmacy.

There was more. A road to the fields above the village. Water pipes, reservoirs and irrigation canals, so that farmers could plant fruit trees instead of growing hashish. He wanted the people in the village to be able to go on living there instead of leaving. A sewing workshop where women found work, in cooperation with a factory in Beirut. When it turned out the women had no transport, he arranged a bus that ran every day, Stuyt writes. A small clinic, supported by the Order of Malta, for the whole region. On a hill he built a church for the summer, when the shepherds were high in the mountains with their animals. Later came a house for the priest, a parish hall and a room for visiting priests. According to the Dutch Jesuits, part of the money came from the Netherlands. He wanted all of it to be open to everyone.

He became a man of authority, in spiritual matters and in ordinary ones. He said Mass in Hermel for the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld. Those who mention him in the village now say "aboena Nicolas," our father Nicolas.

There is one story going around that I have found only with the Dutch Jesuits. When the roof of the church was to be poured, Nico ran into Palestinian fighters. He talked with them, and afterward the roof could be poured. What was said, I do not know.

The Way of the Cross in Barqa

Since 1980, every year on Good Friday Nico walked a Way of the Cross with the people of Barqa, outdoors, past stations set in the landscape. The whole population took part, in costume. It was a Way of the Cross in real life, with people from the village in the roles of the Passion story. In that same year an official reconciliation between two opponents was made in the village. Lombardi mentions it in the same breath as the Way of the Cross.

A prayer for such a Way of the Cross, attributed to him in the edition of his texts, asks a question of whoever prays it: "Do you too dare to believe that I have come to bring Love into this world?" It sounds like the voice of Jesus Himself. His fellow Jesuits call Nico a Good Friday person.

In a note from 1984 Nico described what he saw as the miracle of his vocation. People who had fought against each other had changed into people who were building their future together. That is how both Lombardi and AsiaNews quote him. He added that people are fragile.

The work for peace also had another side. According to Sicking, his influence in the region made him a nuisance to political parties that could not gain a foothold in Barqa. AsiaNews names pro-Syrian, leftist and Shiite groups. Nico knew his life was threatened. In 1983 he described the conditions: villages being cut off, the danger of kidnapping, no telephone since 1975, often no electricity and no water. He wrote that only faith enabled him "to work with all my heart for a better world."

Longing for peace

I read his Christmas letter of 1983 and keep snagging on one sentence: he had never understood so well what it means to long for

peace. It was a year of explosions, fighting, shelling, quarrels between the parties themselves, murders and kidnappings.

And then he wrote about the Child in the manger. The peace the Christmas story speaks of, he believed, is not something people can make themselves. He saw something growing in the hearts of the believers that had to do with the peace of the Child, and he recalled Jesus telling His followers not to be afraid. Bethlehem he called a place where Jesus was badly received and where a new world was nevertheless born. In the same way, he wrote, faith grows through suffering and patience. He wondered whether the few thousand Catholics of the Eastern rite in the Bekaa, surrounded by an old, hostile Islam, face a similar challenge. He thanked God that He had led him to Lebanon.

In his diaries he kept asking God what He wanted from him. One of the questions quoted from those notes reads: "Must I go when it is so dangerous?" Another: "Lord, are You pleased with what I am doing now?" He wrote the questions down and stayed.

Sudan or Barqa

At the end of 1984 Nico left Barqa for a time of reflection. He took a five-week course on the spirituality of Ignatius in Rome. There he spoke with the superior general, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, whom he knew from his student days in Beirut and with whom he had a good bond. Nico considered whether his mission in Barqa might be finished. He offered himself for a new mission in Sudan.

How the decision was made after that, the sources tell slightly differently. Sicking writes that Nico decided to go back to Barqa to strengthen his work. AsiaNews writes that Kolvenbach asked him to go back. Lombardi says that his superiors in Rome decided it.

What the sources have in common: he went back, and he knew what that could cost.

Sicking compared his choice with that of the monks of Tibhirine in Algeria, who stayed with the people they were there for, although Islamist violence threatened their lives. Those monks were beatified in 2018.

His mother wrote that she had already accepted everything at the moment she agreed to his work in that region. Lombardi quotes her letter.

March 14, 1985

On March 1, 1985, Nico was back in Taanayel. The next day he drove to Barqa. On March 13 he spent the night with the Franciscan sisters in Hermel. He had an appointment in Barqa with the head of the Order of Malta.

On March 14 he drove back to Barqa in a hurry. According to Sicking he took the road through Nabha and Qaddâm, a road he had advised others not to take. It was the same region where his pupil Ghassibé had died. He was stopped.

According to the Dutch Jesuits he was stopped at one of the checkpoints he passed every day. He was shot in the leg. Four armed men from an Islamic organization took him to a cave, where they tortured and killed him.

The weekly Time wrote something different on April 15, 1985. A few days after the kidnapping his car was found, with a note from an organization no one had heard of before. According to Time, an autopsy showed that he had been strangled shortly after his abduction. The police thought of robbers, not of a known Islamic group.

I cannot reconcile these two accounts, and I do not have to. Time wrote a month later, with what the Lebanese police thought at the time. Thom Sicking carried out the preliminary investigation for the order, and the order is also the party that wants his beatification. Both deserve to be heard.

A gorge ninety-seven meters deep

For days people searched for him. On April 1, 1985, his body was found at the bottom of a gorge ninety-seven meters deep, more than three hundred feet, not far from Nabha. Time wrote that a farmer found him. According to the Dutch Jesuits, vultures showed the spot. The doctor who examined the body said, according to the Jesuits, that in ten years of war he had never seen a body so badly mutilated. I write no more about it than that.

Nico Kluiters was forty-four years old.

Time called him the first of seventeen Westerners kidnapped in Lebanon in fourteen months to be found dead. For the world press he was a hostage. In Barqa he was their parish priest.

On Wednesday, April 3, 1985, in Holy Week, he was buried in the chapel of the Consolata in Taanayel. The women of Barqa were there. The men were not: it was too dangerous to come. In Barqa, after his death, a prayer in Arabic was found that he had written. According to Lombardi he offered his life in it, for his Muslim brothers and for all people, and prayed for liberation and unity.

"For his faith"

In October 1988 Peter-Hans Kolvenbach wrote about him in the Dutch magazine De Heraut. He called Nico a brother "who was murdered for his faith with cruel and incomprehensible hatred." According to Lombardi he also wrote that Nico had not sought

martyrdom. According to AsiaNews, Kolvenbach said that his death was no surprise. He saw it as the fruit of a long time of ripening, of a choice Nico had made again, year after year.

Whether Nico was really killed for his faith is exactly the question now on the table. On Saturday, January 22, 2022, Bishop César Essayan opened the process that may lead to his beatification, in the Jesuits' Church of St. Joseph in Beirut. Everyone involved took an oath. Thom Sicking, a Dutch Jesuit who lives in Lebanon, is vice-postulator. He gathered the testimonies and put the file together. He said that a beatification is meant above all to give believers an example, priests in Lebanon in particular. Calling on the deceased in prayer he considers of secondary importance. The same day the bishop celebrated a Mass for the people of Barqa, almost all of whom already call him a saint.

I think it is important to say what I do not know. I do not know who killed him. I do not know what those men were thinking. What I do know is what he himself wrote, year after year, about staying where it was dangerous. And I know that he went back to Barqa, when Sudan was also an option.

Do you recognize that, a place where things are hard and where you still know you have to be? Most people do not have to give their lives for it. In 1982 Nico Kluiters wrote that he had to choose between fleeing and keeping up courage. He made the same choice twice.

A portrait in the homes of Barqa

In 2013 the French Lebanese journalist Carole Dagher wrote a biography of him in French. On November 13, 2014, a small memorial chapel was dedicated next to the large chapel of the Stanislascollege in Delft, for him and for Frans van der Lugt, the Dutch Je-

suit who was killed that year in Homs in Syria. In March 2023 the Dutch translation of Dagher's book was presented in Delft, by Benoit Lannoo, who also checked the notes. About eighty people came, in Delft and in Antwerp. Anton de Wit of Katholiek Nieuwsblad called it a fascinating and human story and compared it with the film *Des hommes et des dieux* (*Of Gods and Men*) about the monks of Tibhirine. It is strange, he thought, that it is hardly known in the Netherlands. Another reviewer remarked that this is true even of Nico's own Delft. Lieve Wouters wrote in Kerk & Leven that in the rugged Bekaa Nico sought the beauty of the heart. The publishers describe him as a contemplative in action: his letters and diaries show, they say, a mystical insight into the struggle between good and evil. There is also a podcast about his life story, by Rick Timmermans and Piet van Breemen, the man who was once his novice master. In March 2025, forty years after his death, a collection of his own letters and diary passages appeared, *Verzoeningsartiest in het gebroken Libanon* (*Reconciliation Artist in Broken Lebanon*), compiled by the Jesuit Frans Berkemeijer in Beirut.

At the presentation of that collection, in De Krijtberg in Amsterdam, a new portrait of Nico was given a place next to that of Frans van der Lugt. It was painted by André Bikker.

In Barqa that portrait had been there for a long time. According to the Jesuits his image hangs in the church and in the homes of Catholic families. Candles and incense are burned before it. His grave is much visited, and believers call on him in their prayers.

On Sunday, March 16, 2025, Marc Desmet, the head of the Jesuits in the Netherlands and Flanders, came to Barqa for the commemoration of forty years. He wrote about the service. The hall was well filled. Halfway through, the power failed, and the service simply went on. Fellow Jesuits called Nico a Good Friday person. Desmet said: if Nicolaas knew only Good Friday, then this community is

his Easter. In the village his little room is kept as a small museum. Desmet closed the celebration with an improvisation on *O Sacred Head, Now Wounded* (in Dutch, *O hoofd vol bloed en wonden*), with Eastern sounds. The hall fell silent.

A school of the Jesuit Refugee Service for Syrian refugee children in Jbeil, on the coast north of Beirut, bears his name.

The boy from the dairy shop in Delft wanted to become a painter of men. In a village in the Bekaa the people now look at his face on their walls.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): born in Delft in 1940 (May 25 according to the Jesuits); entered the Jesuits in 1965 and went to Lebanon; years of pastoral and social work in the Bekaa Valley and as parish priest of Barqa; kidnapped on March 14, 1985; his body found in a ravine at the end of March or beginning of April 1985 (Time and the Jesuits); the opening of the beatification process in Beirut on January 22, 2022 (the Jesuits, AsiaNews, Université Saint-Joseph).

Only from own testimony or from the Jesuit order: his parents' dairy shop; his search by way of Taizé, Abbé Pierre and Charles de Foucauld; the words about a "painter of men"; the story of Ghassibé Keyrouz and his testament, with the words about his mother, his sisters and his blood; the Arabic that some parents did not understand and the rebaptism of a child (only Stuyt's review); the quotations from his Christmas letters and letters of 1980, 1982 and 1983; the diary questions ("Must I go when it is so dangerous?" from Stuyt's review, "Lord, are You pleased with what I am doing now?" from Desmet's account) and the prayer for the Way of the Cross, which in one review is printed as his text; the projects in Barqa, the bus for the

women and the reconciliation in the village; the Way of the Cross in costume; the threats; the course of events in Rome in 1984; the route through Nabha and Qaddâm; the torture in a cave by four armed men; the burial on April 3, 1985, in Taanayel, with the women of Barqa and without the men; the Arabic prayer; the veneration in Barqa; the commemoration of March 16, 2025, the little room as a museum and the words of Desmet. As for his brothers or sisters, I found nothing reliable, so they do not appear in this chapter. The name "aboena Nicolas" comes from a book presentation by the Jesuits.

Where the sources differ (in the story I chose one version each time):

- *Distances.* The Dutch Jesuits write that he drove some eighty kilometers every day between the Jesuit house and his work area. The Christmas letter of 1980 speaks of seven to eight hundred kilometers a week, past four parishes. Both figures come from the order.
- *Arrival in Lebanon.* 1966 according to most Jesuit sources (Bikfaya), 1976 according to AsiaNews, and another website gives 1977 for his work in Barqa. His first appointment in Barqa dates in any case from before the appointment as parish priest in 1981.
- *Entry.* 1965 according to most sources, 1966 according to AsiaNews.
- *Disappearance.* Lombardi gives March 14 as the day of the kidnapping and uses March 13 for the night in Hermel. Another website writes that he disappeared on March 13.
- *Age.* Forty-four according to his date of birth. A report on the presentation of 2025 gives forty-five, and another review does too.

- *The decision in Rome.* Sicking: his own decision; AsiaNews: Kolvenbach asked it; Lombardi: the superiors in Rome. It was probably a shared decision, as it often goes with Jesuits, but I do not know for sure.
- *What happened on the road.* According to the Jesuits he was stopped at a checkpoint, shot in the leg and taken to a cave by four armed men. Time reported a note from an unknown organization, an autopsy that pointed to strangling and a police theory about robbers. Another website mentions shots, hanging and stabbing; those details appear nowhere else. The church tribunal in Beirut has yet to give its ruling on this.
- *The body.* Time: a farmer found it. The Jesuits: vultures showed the spot. Jesuits Global: along the road. Another website: in a ditch.
- *The start of his work in Lebanon.* The year in which his permanent mission began differs from source to source (1966 or 1976).
- *The kidnappers.* The order speaks of Islamic militants and hatred of the faith. No one knows who they were.

Unconfirmed: the conversation with Palestinian fighters during the building of the church roof (only one Jesuit page, no second source); who exactly kidnapped him and why; the prayer for the Way of the Cross is attributed to him, but the source does not say where it comes from; the name of the Jesuit school in Jbeil appears in the order's members' magazine, without a year.

Interpretation: whether Nico Kluiters died as a martyr in the church's sense is still being examined by the tribunal in Beirut. This chapter calls him a martyr in the sense of this book: someone who was killed while, because of his faith, he stayed where it was dangerous. I have not read Dagher's biography or Berkemeijer's

collection myself; I know them through quotations and reviews by the Jesuits.

Sources for this chapter

1. Jezuïeten Nederland en Vlaanderen, “Nico Kluiters sj” (persoonspagina)
2. Jezuïeten Nederland en Vlaanderen, Federico Lombardi, “Nico Kluiters sj: martelaar voor geloof, gerechtigheid en vrede”, 20 januari 2022
3. Jezuïeten Nederland en Vlaanderen, “Proces zaligverklaring Nederlandse jezuïet Nico Kluiters officieel van start”, 20 januari 2022
4. Jezuïeten Nederland en Vlaanderen, “In onze harten groeit iets dat met de vrede van het Kind te maken heeft”, December 21, 2020
5. Jezuïeten Nederland en Vlaanderen, “Inwijding kapel Nico Kluiters sj en Frans van der Lugt sj”, 15 november 2014
6. Jezuïeten Nederland en Vlaanderen, “Boekpresentatie: Nicolaas Kluiters, herder in een verscheurd Libanon”, 2023
7. Jezuïeten Nederland en Vlaanderen, “Boekpresentatie Verzoeningsartiest in het gebroken Libanon”, 2025
8. Jesuits Europe, Thom Sicking sj, “Nicolas Kluiters, towards a beatification”, 2021
9. Jesuits Europe, “Beatification process Dutch Jesuit started”, 2022
10. La Civiltà Cattolica, Federico Lombardi, “Nicolas Kluiters: A Martyr for Faith, Justice and Peace”
11. La Civiltà Cattolica, Federico Lombardi, “Nicolas Kluiters, gesuita in Libano”, oktober 2020
12. AsiaNews, Fady Noun, 28 januari 2022
13. Time, “Terrorism: Death of a Captive”, 15 april 1985
14. Jesuits Global, “In the Bekaa Valley…”, 4 april 2019

15. Université Saint-Joseph Beiroet, Mass for the beatification of Nicolas Kluiters, December 23, 2021
16. Proche-Orient Chrétien 71/1, Gabriel Hachem, “Introduction: Special witnesses”
17. Jezuïeten, members’ magazine no. 73, Jan Stuyt on Dagher’s biography (pdf)
18. Jezuïeten, members’ magazine 2025, no. 79, Marc Desmet on the commemoration in Barqa on March 16 (pdf)
19. Jezuïeten, ledenblad 2025, nr. 78, “Nicolaas Kluiters, 40 jaar later” (pdf)
20. Jezuïeten, members’ magazine no. 60, report on the JRS school in Jbeil (pdf)
21. Ignatian Solidarity Network, on Nicolas Kluiters

Frans van der Lugt: the priest who stayed in Homs

At the end of January 2014 someone in Homs put a short video on YouTube. It shows an old man standing by what looks like the altar of a church. He is thin. He speaks Arabic, the language of the people around him, and he asks the world for help. At that moment the old city of Homs had been under siege for a year and seven months, he said. The biggest problem was hunger. After that came the lack of medical care. He spoke on behalf of the Christian communities, and there were still about seventy Christians in the city. They were not the only ones without food.

One sentence from that appeal went around the world: "We refuse to die of hunger in Homs." He also said that there is no greater sorrow than seeing mothers search for food for their children. And he said that Christians and Muslims love life and want to live.

The man was Frans van der Lugt, a Dutch Jesuit from The Hague. He was seventy-five and had lived in Syria for almost fifty years. He had founded a farm there where people with disabilities worked, and he had led thousands of young Syrians on walks through the

mountains, Muslims and Christians together. When the war came, he stayed. Two months after that video he was dead.

It began in a Catholic family with seven children.

A banker's son from The Hague

Frans van der Lugt was born in 1938 in The Hague. He was one of five sons and two daughters, according to the obituary of the Dutch Jesuits. His father was a banker.

The family later lived in Amsterdam. Frans went to the Sint-Ignatiuscollege there, a Jesuit school. As a young man he led a lively social life. He was popular, and he liked belonging. That is how he later wrote it himself, and his fellow Jesuit Jan Stuyt retells it. But more and more he came to dislike the shallowness of the parties.

When he said he wanted to join the Jesuits, many people looked up in surprise. His girlfriend too, Stuyt writes.

In 1959 he entered the Jesuits, in Grave. The novitiate lasted two years. After that he studied philosophy for three years at the Berchmanianum in Nijmegen.

Thirty Dutchmen to the East

In 1964 he left for the Middle East to learn Arabic. He was not the only one. About thirty Dutch Jesuits went to Lebanon, Syria and Egypt in those years, Stuyt writes. One of the first was Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, who would later become the worldwide leader of the order.

Frans learned Arabic in Lebanon. He also took a crash course in the Lebanese dialect there, so that he could quickly talk with ordinary

people. That already says something about him. He did not want to live with an interpreter between himself and the people.

After that he studied theology in Lyon, at Fourvière. He also studied psychology and, according to the obituary, psychoanalysis. The subject later helped him to guide young people.

In 1971 he was ordained a priest. On that day he gave a short speech, and in it, according to Stuyt, he said: "We must accept that our hands are empty." You have to learn to receive, he went on, before you can give. And Jesus Himself lived with empty hands, so that there was room for His Father and for others.

A priest with empty hands. What would you do with that sentence on the day you begin your life's work?

Syria, but when exactly?

He settled in Syria for good, and he would stay there for almost fifty years. When he died, newspapers and news services wrote that he had lived there since 1966, and the Jesuit Refugee Service wrote that too. What is certain is that in 1982 in Homs he made his solemn vows, the final promises of a Jesuit to his order. In those years he worked as a chaplain for students. He taught religion, gave guidance to young people and members of religious orders, and led retreats. He also wrote a small book in Arabic, about failing and succeeding. In it the cross is the place where God's love becomes visible, even for someone who is your enemy.

He was a priest, but also trained in psychology. How he brought the two together in his conversations, the sources do not say.

"The hike brings people together"

In 1980 he began something that would become his signature. With students from his parish he went walking in the Jebel Ansariya, a

mountain range in the west of Syria. The BBC wrote this in 2014, in a long portrait.

Those walks grew into a yearly hike of eight days right across the country. According to the BBC, two to three hundred young Syrians took part: Christians, Muslims, Druze and Alawites. Frans led the hike himself, even when he was already in his seventies. His fellow Jesuits call them hard, demanding hikes. He said of it himself: "The hike brings people together." He did not want to say too much about the purpose. But he admitted that the hike had become something special.

When you walk up a mountain together for eight days, eat together and sleep together, you see the other person differently. That was what he was after. Afterward it matters less whether someone is a Christian or a Muslim than that he was there. He did not believe in discussions about the shared roots of religions, the BBC wrote. He preferred to begin with the encounter itself, with people who get tired and help each other.

Years later, in 2017, about 240 people in the Netherlands walked a hike in his memory, from Helvoirt to Nijmegen. Most of them were young Syrians who had ended up in Europe. One of the organizers, a young Syrian woman who had walked with him in Syria herself, told the NOS, the Dutch public broadcaster: "Father Frans had a very special spirit, he was full of humor." However busy he was, she said, he always made time for you. She met her husband on such a hike. Thanks to Father Frans, she said.

The hike lasted four days, with a rest day for workshops. On the evening before the start there was a memorial service in Den Bosch. Another Jesuit, Jan Peters, helped with the organization. He explained to the NOS what Frans wanted with such hikes: he believed you should make people exert themselves, to the end of

their strength. Only then does a great deal come loose, Peters said. A boy of seventeen had come especially from Germany. He was ten when his parents fled Syria.

The earth

In 1993 Frans returned to Homs. He became superior of the Jesuits in the city. In those same years he was given a piece of farmland, some fifteen kilometers, about nine miles, southwest of Homs. He called it Al Ard, Arabic for "the earth." It is simple, he told the BBC, like the earth.

His family and Dutch friends supported the work with money. At Al Ard vegetables, grapes and olives grew, without weedkillers or pesticides. Between the olive trees and the vines ran a sandy path, and wildflowers bloomed everywhere. Every morning Frans drove past the nearby villages in an old Volkswagen van. He picked up people with disabilities and brought them to the farm to work. From 2000 on, according to the obituary, forty people with intellectual disabilities lived and worked there. In a country where such people often stayed indoors, that was remarkable. He wanted a community in which everyone counts. The vineyard helped keep the work affordable.

Al Ard was also a place for silence. People of all faiths came there for retreats. Frans built a bright room there for meditation and yoga, which was neither a church nor a mosque. He himself meditated in silence every morning and had long studied Zen.

In 2009 a Belgian student, Babs Mertens, visited the Syrian desert monastery of Deir Mar Moussa for an internship. The silence there confronted her with herself. Sister Houda advised her to talk with Frans, because, she said, he speaks your language. Mertens went to the Jesuit house in Homs and then to Al Ard. It was raining,

and for the first time in a long while she saw green. In the center stood a statue with the words: here the ground is made fruitful. That evening she sat with the others around a campfire. There was laughter, singing and music, and a water pipe passed from hand to hand. They slept on mattresses in the visitors' center. She felt welcome.

How Al Ard had grown, Frans summed up in one sentence: one thing led to another. It began as an agricultural project. He dreamed of living and working at Al Ard with people of different religions. So a place came into being where people with disabilities came every day and where young people visited on weekends, for yoga, meditation, discussion circles and hikes.

Here I want to come and stand beside you for a moment. Perhaps you shift uneasily in your chair at that word yoga, or at a priest who said he did not care much for religions and believed above all in the spiritual experience that faith comes from. That is how he put it to the BBC. He told the same to the writer who visited him, Daniel Silas Adamson, who had been introduced to him by Paolo dall'Oglio. Dall'Oglio was also a Jesuit who lived in Syria for decades and who in 2013 was kidnapped by Islamist rebels in Raqqa. Nothing has been heard of him since. I do not share all Frans' choices. I write them down because they belong to him. Anyone who only wants to tell his life smoothed over is not telling it.

Mertens later wrote that he did not feel like a foreigner. He called himself "a Syrian among the Syrians." The Syrian people had given him so much, he told her.

Seven families in one kitchen

In 2011 the war in Syria began. In the middle of that year Frans had to leave Al Ard. The work stopped. Others took over the buildings,

and the vineyards were later destroyed. He moved into the Jesuit house in the old city of Homs, with the small community of which he was superior.

In the spring of 2012 he wrote a long report for the Flemish journal Streven, *Lief en leed uit Homs* (Joy and Sorrow from Homs), as an eyewitness to the months since September 2011. He told how armed groups had taken over the Christian quarter and the residents could hardly leave their doors for three days. How houses stood empty, how bombs fell and five churches were wrecked. Of the roughly one hundred thousand Christians in the region, only about a thousand were left, mostly elderly people, who lived in cellars and were short of medicine.

Then in his report comes the house itself. Six weeks earlier, he wrote, they had taken seven families into the house, about forty people in all, Muslims on the run. They had become one big family and shared one kitchen. The mothers cooked for him too. One of them asked shyly whether he had any dirty laundry. After the shelling the men repaired the water supply, the electricity and the telephones, and they helped the neighbors. An imam of the mosque next to the house regularly brought bread, even when bombs were falling.

When the refugees heard that Frans wanted to celebrate Palm Sunday with the remaining Christians, mostly Orthodox, they suggested cleaning the dirty church together. They also came to Mass, their children in their best clothes in the front row. During the service the imam read a text from the Quran and gave a short sermon on brotherhood. Many of those present took communion. Frans wrote that his strictly dogmatic ideas went out the window. At Easter everyone was back at Mass. The faith of the people was natural and unadorned, he wrote. They had lost everything, but

not their trust in life. They could still laugh, help others and make children happy.

He also told of a drive to Damascus. In his little Volkswagen van he took some twenty people out of a village where men wanted to kill them. They knew no one in the city. But good, decent people are always to be found in the world, they said. In those words Frans heard the Good Samaritan.

A parishioner died. He fetched the coffin himself in his van, with permission from both armies, and the funeral took place in a safer Orthodox church. An older Christian told him that they live under God's eye.

According to his fellow Jesuits, the leaders of an old mosque nearby entrusted their centuries-old documents to him. Those papers survived the war. That story comes only from the circle of the Jesuits.

Around the summer of 2012 the old city was surrounded. Almost no food could get in. Most of the inhabitants fled. Christians, who had once been a large community in Homs, nearly all left. Frans stayed.

"I see, above all, human beings"

Why did he stay? He explained it himself many times. He was superior of the house and felt responsible. He felt at home with the Syrian people. A few months before his death he told The Tablet: "As long as there is one person from our community left here, I will stay with them."

And he made no distinctions. In February 2014 he spoke with the Jesuit Refugee Service. He was then the only priest and the only foreigner in his part of the city. "I don't see Muslims or Christians," he said. "I see, above all, human beings." He did not feel like a for-

eigner, he said. If the Syrian people were suffering now, he could share their pain and problems. The faces in the street were becoming weak and yellow. The Syrians were patient and could live on little, but what if there was nothing left? It was about bread and medicine, and about a hunger for an ordinary life.

He was critical of the negotiators in Geneva. They talk about us, he said, but they do not live with us.

He stayed with the people in the streets. He visited the sick, buried the dead and gave people courage, Babs Mertens later wrote. What that looked like day by day, we hardly know. There were no cameras. Above all there was hunger. Residents who later returned told journalists about it. The food ran out. They lived on rice and lentils they had stored, and after that they boiled grass and leaves. One of them remembered drinking a glass of whiskey with the priest almost every day.

Frans sought out the fighters and negotiated with them, and sometimes with army officers. He arranged for the sick and wounded to leave the city, and he brought in medicine. For the only doctor in the neighborhood, who had cancer, he arranged an evacuation. The doctor died nineteen days later in a hospital in Damascus. According to the residents he insisted that fighters share the food they brought in. When rebels wanted to debate religion or politics with him, he said he spoke only about people. He refused to appear before a sharia court. Rebels thought he could get food through the Pope, and they wanted him to use the Christian community for that. He would not do it.

On February 6, 2014, he spoke by telephone with a Catholic news agency. There was no food, he said. The wounded were not allowed to leave the city. Newborn babies died quickly, because there was no milk. People had died of hunger. A day earlier he had told another

news agency that there were still sixty-six Christians, while before the war some sixty thousand lived in the old city. He had always been able to feed everyone, he said, until the last weeks, when he had no bread left. Hunger drove people mad, he said, with panic attacks and delusions.

Shortly after that a temporary truce came. In February the United Nations and the Red Crescent brought about 1,400 civilians out of the old city. Frans could have gone with them. He did not.

How could he leave, he asked in the interview with the refugee service. He called it impossible.

Empty hands

I try to imagine what it is like to be seventy-five and sitting in a besieged city. I cannot. But I do know what he did with those last months. He stayed in the Jesuit house, he shared what there was and he kept talking to a world that hardly listened. In his video he asked for food and for safe passage for anyone who wanted to leave.

According to residents the video had a history. Rebels wanted him to make an appeal to the Pope. At first he refused. Then he agreed, on the condition that the appeal would be for everyone, including those who were not Christian. His fellow Jesuits write that he looked weakened at that time, with bruises on his face. He refused to say on camera what fighters wanted to hear from him. He took no side in the war, the Dutch weekly Katholiek Nieuwsblad later wrote. That did not make him loved by everyone.

A Belgian Jesuit who had never known him personally, Nikolaas Sintobin, later described how he grew thinner, until he had to wear warm clothes, even indoors. He lacked everything, Sintobin said, and yet he stayed.

Three days before his death his fellow Jesuits called him. He said the siege would soon be over. They invited him to come to the Netherlands and rest. He said yes. First he wanted to go to Damascus to renew his residence permit. Then he would be sure he could come back.

On Sunday, April 6, he sent one more message with news from Homs. Christians were asking him what they could do, he wrote. His answer was simple. A person can do little. But he can believe that God is with him in his trouble. He wrote about the goodness of people who shared their wheat and lentils, and about the resurrection they wished for Syria. The message ended with an Arabic word he often used: "Ilal'amam," forward.

It was his last message.

Monday morning, April 7, 2014

On Monday morning, April 7, 2014, a masked man came to the Jesuit house in the Bustan al-Diwan neighborhood. He took Frans outside and shot him in the head. Frans van der Lugt died instantly, the news agency AP reported. About the exact spot, the garden or the doorstep of the house, the accounts differ. A Syrian Jesuit, Ziad Hilal, told the news agency AFP that a single gunman walked into the church and shot him in the garden. According to a witness who is not named, the man let him sit on a plastic chair. An engineer from the neighborhood was there a few minutes later. Frans had refused to go with the man, he said.

Hilal called him "a ray of joy and hope" for everyone trapped in the old city. Who killed him has never been established. The killer has not been found. The warring parties in Syria blamed each other. The rebels denied having anything to do with the murder and pointed to the regime. A colonel of the Free Syrian Army said

the rebels had protected the priest for a year and a half, and that they could have stepped in earlier if they had wanted to harm him. According to the NOS, the Jesuits also do not want an arrest, for fear of revenge on the Christians who still live there. The motive is unknown as well. Katholiek Nieuwsblad wrote that political reasons are more likely than hatred of the faith, but that has not been proven either.

He was buried in the garden of the Jesuit house. According to the obituary this happened the same day, according to Jan Stuyt the day after. A resident who helped bury him later said that Frans had cared for everyone, Muslims and Christians. Muslim families had lived in the house.

On Wednesday, April 9, Pope Francis spoke about him at his weekly audience in Rome. He called Frans a brother Jesuit and said that he had cared for everyone in Syria. "He was therefore loved and highly esteemed by Christians and Muslims." The United Nations and the Dutch government condemned the murder. The Dutch minister of Foreign Affairs said that Frans had brought nothing but good to Homs. Newspapers all over the world wrote about the Dutch priest who had not left.

Not long after that a truce came, and the old city was evacuated. Frans did not live to see it.

A grave in the garden

In the garden lies his grave. It is covered with stone slabs that a resident took from destroyed houses. Beside it stands a statue of Saint George, and photographs. And next to the grave stands the plastic chair, with plastic flowers. A Jesuit from the city told a journalist that Frans is still there.

A year after his death Jan Stuyt visited the house in Homs. He wrote that the grave had become a place of pilgrimage, for Christians and for Muslims. Young people above all came there. A brother received visitors there every day. The NOS and the Jesuits themselves also report that people of both faiths pray there. The Al Ard center has been destroyed, the vineyards ruined. The Jesuits say it will be rebuilt when peace comes.

Two Syrian women who knew Frans and later lived in Ghent, in Flemish Belgium, told Babs Mertens what he meant to them. Through him they had learned to understand the Bible as life, not as stories. "I believe it because I saw a man live this way," one of them said. Mertens wrote: "This is being a Christian to the uttermost."

Was he a martyr? The question has been asked, within his own church too. In the Roman Catholic Church a martyr is someone who is killed out of hatred of the faith. In his case that has not been established, because no one knows who killed him or why. A book about him from 2015, edited by Paul Begheyn, is called *Bruggenbouwer en martelaar in Syrië* (Bridge builder and martyr in Syria). In 2019 the Jesuits announced that a process for his beatification had begun. In 2019 a collection of his texts also appeared, *Wie ben jij, o liefde* (Who Are You, O Love), compiled by Cilia ter Horst.

In January 2022 Katholiek Nieuwsblad reported that the process had stalled, probably for good. The paper gave several reasons for this, on the authority of a source who was not named. The order has not explained the matter further in public. So I leave it with these facts.

Does he belong in a book about martyrs, then? I think so, and I will say why. He was killed in the place where he stayed out of faithfulness, when he could have left. Why he stayed, he said himself.

They were his people. He had promised to stay with them as long as even one was left. Whether the man in the mask knew anything of his faith, no one knows. Frans knew.

Jesus said it this way: *Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.* (John 15:13).

Forward

On the tenth anniversary of his death, in 2024, the worldwide leader of the Jesuits wrote a letter about him. Frans often used an Arabic word, he wrote: "Ilal'amam." It means "forward." Father Sosa also wrote that Frans said he gave so much because he had received even more from the Syrian people.

In 2019, on the fifth anniversary, there were commemorations in Amsterdam and in Homs, and in Beirut. Thousands of people came to the celebrations in the Middle East, led by the superior general. In 2024 there was a memorial Mass in Amsterdam. In Homs people came together. A group of children recorded a song for him.

Perhaps you too are standing somewhere you cannot leave, or do not want to leave because there are people you will not abandon. Your hands are empty. You have little to give, except that you are there.

In the garden of a house in the old city of Homs a Dutchman lies buried. The people who come there to pray are Muslim or Christian. They walk into the same garden.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): born in 1938 in The Hague; father a banker; youth in Amsterdam; left for the Middle East in 1964 and learned Arabic in Lebanon; almost fifty years in Syria; the yearly mountain hikes with young people of different faiths;

the farm Al Ard near Homs with work for people with disabilities; move to the Jesuit house in the old city in 2011; the video appeal of late January 2014; his refusal to leave during the evacuation of February 2014; his death at the hands of a masked gunman on April 7, 2014; burial in the garden of the Jesuit house; the words of Pope Francis on April 9, 2014; the grave as a place of pilgrimage for Christians and Muslims; the memorial hike in the Netherlands in 2017.

From his own words (own report, interviews, messages): the report *Lief en leed uit Homs* in Streven (2012, which I know through a detailed summary of the text on DBNL): the seven families, Palm Sunday with the imam, Easter, the drive to Damascus and the coffin; the words in the video of January 2014 (Vatican Radio); the conversation of February 6, 2014 with the Catholic news agency; the interview with the Jesuit Refugee Service and the words to AsiaNews in February 2014; what he said to The Tablet and the BBC; his saying "a Syrian among the Syrians." The last message of April 6, 2014 and the words of his ordination come from the article by Stuyt in La Civiltà Cattolica.

Only from the Jesuit order or from a single source: his social life before entering the order and his girlfriend's surprise (Stuyt); entry in Grave in 1959; Aleppo from 1976 and the years in Damascus; the solemn vows in 1982; the small Arabic book about failing and succeeding; the fifty hectares from the government and the forty residents of Al Ard from 2000; the documents of the mosque; the last telephone call; the word "Ilal'amam" as a habit of Frans (Sosa); the statements of the residents about the meals of grass and leaves, the glasses of whiskey, the doctor with cancer, the sharia court and the pressure to make the video (one article by an American journalist, via a Portuguese version and an American newspaper); the plastic chair (one eyewitness and an article); the visitors in 2009 (Babs Mertens).

Where the sources differ (in the story I chose one version each time):

- *Syria.* When he died, newspapers and news services wrote that he had lived in Syria since 1966. The obituary gives Aleppo from 1976 and Damascus from 1987 to 1993. Stuyt writes in 2019 that Frans came to Syria in 1980 and worked in Damascus for twelve years. These years do not all fit together. He probably came to Syria as early as the 1960s and settled there for good later, but I have not been able to build a timeline that holds together.
- *Size of Al Ard.* The BBC speaks of a few acres. The obituary mentions an estate of fifty hectares, about 120 acres, that he received from the Syrian government.
- *Burial.* On the day of his death (obituary) or the day after (Stuyt).
- *Place of the shots.* The garden or the doorstep of the house. The Jesuit province reported by e-mail to Rome that armed men had taken him away, beaten him and shot him twice in the head. An eyewitness mentioned one shot. That he was beaten appears nowhere else.
- *Number of Christians.* About seventy (video of January 2014), sixty-six (AsiaNews, early February), twenty to twenty-five (the Syrian Jesuit Hilal after his death) and twenty-three (American newspaper). The numbers are from different moments.
- *Muslim families in the house.* Seven families, about forty people, in his own report of 2012; five families according to a resident who later spoke with a journalist.
- *Age.* Seventy-five at his death; a few days later he would have turned seventy-six.

Unconfirmed: the birth date of April 10 (Wikipedia only, though it fits a Jesuit source); what exactly drew him to the order; the exact year in which he settled in Syria; who killed him and why. A text on the Jesuits' site called "his last message" ("Two bullets. Two. In my head.") was written by Rick Timmermans in the first person as Frans and is therefore not a text of his own; I have not used it.

Interpretation: whether Frans van der Lugt is a martyr in the church's sense has not been established; according to Katholiek Nieuwsblad the process for this has been stalled since 2022. That he stayed out of faithfulness to the people around him is in his own words. I have not read *Wie ben jij, o liefde* or Begheyn's book myself.

Sources for this chapter

1. Jezuïeten, In memoriam Nederlandse jezuïeten 2014 (pdf)
2. Jan Stuyt SJ, "Frans van der Lugt, bridge builder and martyr", La Civiltà Cattolica, 25 juli 2019
3. Daniel Silas Adamson, "Frans van der Lugt: A Dutch priest in Homs", BBC News Magazine, 26 april 2014 (herplaatst door Souria Houria)
4. Radio Vaticana, 29 januari 2014
5. ReliefWeb (Jezuïeten Vluchtelingendienst), 10 februari 2014
6. The Tablet, 7 april 2014
7. America Magazine, 7 april 2014
8. Middle East Eye, "Dutch priest shot dead in Syria's Homs"
9. Irish Jesuits International, "A Jesuit martyr for peace", april 2014
10. Paus Franciscus, algemene audiëntie 9 april 2014
11. Jan Stuyt SJ, Kerknet, 27 april 2015
12. Babs Mertens, "Plots besefte ik wat christen zijn tot het uiterste betekent", Otheo

13. NOS, April 8, 2017, “Voettocht van Syriërs in Nederland voor vermoorde pater Frans”
14. NOS, 6 april 2019, “Pater Van der Lugt weigerde belegerd Homs te verlaten en werd martelaar”
15. Anton de Wit (Katholiek Nieuwsblad) via Crux, 22 januari 2022
16. DutchNews, 21 januari 2022
17. Jesuits.global, “The murder of Fr Frans van der Lugt, 10 years later”, 6 april 2024
18. Frans van der Lugt, “Lief en leed uit Homs. Verslag van een ooggetuige”, Streven, 2012 (DBNL)
19. AsiaNews, “Jesuit priest says people in Homs are starving”, 5 februari 2014
20. Jonathan S. Landay (McClatchy) via Anchorage Daily News, “2 years on, priest who aided Christians through Syrian siege didn’t see the end”, 29 mei 2014
21. Landay (McClatchy), Portugese weergave: “Síria: túmulo do padre Frans SJ tornou-se um santuário”, 5 juni 2014
22. Syria Direct, “In memoriam: Father Frans of Homs”
23. Bible.com, Johannes 15:13 (NKJV)

Afterword

A priest at the oven in Woerden. A mother who wrote a letter for a boy who could not yet read. A woman who wanted to talk about her faith and kept silent about her friends. A man who walked back across the ice, so the story goes. A professor who passed a pipe and a crumb of bread through the wire in Dachau. A minister who handed out addresses. A shepherd of the shepherds in the Bekaa. An old priest who stayed in Homs.

They lived in different centuries and belonged to different churches. Four of them were killed by other Christians. I have tried to tell that honestly, without condemning the people I do not know.

About some of them we know a great deal, about others almost nothing. Of Dirk Willems we have a sentence of death and a story. Of Bastiaan Jan Ader I did not find a single sentence of his own. What remains is what they did.

The court clerk in The Hague wanted no memory of Jan de Bakker to remain. In the Petruskerk (St. Peter's Church) in Woerden he now stands in colored glass, with an open Bible. Behind these eight stand many more whose names no one wrote down.

Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life (Revelation 2:10)