GOD'S WORK IN FLANDERS

VOLUME 1

Light in the South

Eight lives, from Amandus to Joseph Cardijn

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light.
Isaiah 9:2

WIM KAMPHORST

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Light in the South. God's work in Flanders, volume 1

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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: Across the Border

Driving south from the Netherlands, you notice almost nothing at the border. The language stays the same, though it sounds different. The villages look alike. Still, most Dutch Christians know the history of their own country better than that of Flanders. So did I, when I began this book.

That is a pity. A large part of what God did in the Low Countries happened right there. In Ghent and Antwerp, in Brussels and Leuven, in small villages in Brabant and West Flanders. Long before there was a border, this was one region, with one language and often one history too.

Eight Lives, from the Seventh Century to 1967

We begin with Amandus, a wandering bishop of the seventh century. He preached along the Scheldt, and the first monasteries of Ghent go back to him. Then follow two writers from the Middle Ages. Hadewijch, a woman of whom we know almost nothing except her words. And Jan van Ruusbroec, a quiet chaplain from Brussels who went into the forest and wrote there about God in the language of ordinary people.

Then we arrive in 1523 on the Grote Markt of Brussels, its Grand Place. Two young Augustinians from Antwerp, Hendrik Voes and Johannes van Esschen, were burned there for what they had come to believe from the gospel. In the seventeenth century a Jesuit from a West Flemish village travels to China. Ferdinand Verbiest became the teacher of the emperor.

The last three chapters are about the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Father Damien, who went to the lepers on Molokai and stayed. Adolf Daens, the priest from Aalst who chose the workers and so came into conflict with his own church. And Joseph Cardijn, the chaplain who taught young workers to look at their own lives, and who later became a cardinal.

Catholic and Protestant

For centuries Flanders was a Catholic country. Most of the people in this book were Catholic: monks, priests, a Jesuit, a cardinal. Voes and Van Esschen were condemned precisely by that church. I do not hide that. Nor do I take sides. I show what happened, what the people themselves wrote and said, and what others thought of it.

For Dutch readers I briefly explain Belgian places and concepts. Flemish readers will sometimes find that unnecessary. I hope they will forgive me.

Facts First

As in my other books, I stick to the facts. About the oldest people in this book we know little for certain. What is told about Amandus comes largely from a biography written centuries later, with miracles and legends in it. Of Hadewijch we do not even know a year of birth. I always say what is certain, what comes only from someone's own words, and what is tradition.

After each chapter there is a short overview of what is certain and what is not, and a list of the sources I used. Under the subheadings about what you can still see, it says where you can go. Many of these places lie a few hours' drive from the Dutch border.

People about whom I already wrote a whole chapter in other books appear here only briefly.

Amandus: The Wanderer Who Secured His Grave

On April 17, an old bishop sat in his monastery at Elnone, in the valley of the Scarpe, not far from Tournai. He was dictating a text to a monk named Baudemundus. It was his will. He wanted to be certain that he would be buried here, in the monastery he had founded himself, and nowhere else.

"It is unknown to no one how we have traveled far and wide through all the provinces and among all the peoples," he had them write. That is how it reads in the translation by the Limburg historian Régis de la Haye. No one was to prevent, he went on, his wretched body from resting in this monastery.

Seven men put their names to the document. Three were bishops: Reolus of Reims, Mommelin of Noyon and Tournai, and Vindicianus of Cambrai. Three were abbots. Bertinus came from Sithiu, the later Saint-Omer. Aldebert was abbot of the monastery at the confluence of the Leie and the Scheldt, in Ghent. The third abbot was named Johannes, and he probably came from the Blandijnberg, the second monastery in Ghent. The seventh was the writer himself, Baudemundus.

That will still exists. It is one of the few documents from the life of Amandus on which historians can truly build. The Belgian historian Alain Dierkens writes that the old man used every means at his disposal so that no one could later dispute his grave. And this was a man with a great deal behind him. For more than forty years he had been on the road. He had traveled to Rome and preached along the Scheldt. According to his biography, he had also been among the Basques and among Slavic peoples on the Danube. For a few years he had been bishop of Maastricht. He founded monasteries, among them two in Ghent, around which that city later grew. Later he was honored as the apostle of Flanders.

At the end of all that traveling, he wanted to secure one thing: where he would rest.

What kind of man was this, and how did it begin? To find out, you have to go back to an island in the sea.

An Island in the Atlantic Ocean

Amandus came from Aquitaine, the southwest of present-day France. Dierkens puts his birth around the year 600, perhaps in the region of Herbauge, south of the mouth of the Loire near Nantes. His parents were named Serenus and Amantia, according to his biography.

That biography, the Vita Amandi in Latin, tells how as a young man he left his parents' home. He became a monk on the island of Yeu, off the Atlantic coast. Then he received the tonsure in Tours, at the grave of Saint Martin. The tonsure was the shaved patch on the head by which you recognized a cleric in those days. Then he went to Bourges, in the middle of France. There he lived for about fifteen years as a hermit in a cell, under the eye of Bishop Austregisilus.

A Kerknet publication on Ronse places that cell in a hollow in the Roman city wall, right next to the cathedral.

Fifteen years in a cell. The Catholic Encyclopedia of 1907 says that he lived on bread and water. What else he did there, no one tells. But it is striking that the man who would later become the most travel-hungry missionary of his century first sat still for so long.

Peter in the Night

Around 625, Amandus traveled to Rome. Rome was the city of the apostle Peter, and Peter would color the whole life of Amandus.

The Vita tells in chapter seven what happened there. Amandus was keeping watch at night in Saint Peter's Church. Then Peter appeared to him and commanded him to go back to Gaul, the land of the Franks, to preach. So the hermit became a wanderer.

He obeyed. And Peter went with him in everything he did afterward. The churches Amandus founded were all dedicated to Peter, including those in Ghent. Dierkens notes this as well.

Somewhere in those years, probably before 630, Amandus was consecrated a bishop. He received no diocese. He became a missionary bishop, someone who traveled around and brought the faith where it was not yet found. King Chlothar II ruled the Frankish kingdom at that time.

A King with Plans in the North

Why did he go to the land along the Scheldt? Part of the answer lies in politics. In 629, Dagobert I became king over the whole Frankish kingdom. The historian Rijntjes writes that the mission work of Amandus along the Scheldt got under way after that. He calls Amandus an important pawn in Dagobert's northern policy. The king wanted to extend his authority to the north, and a church with

monasteries helped with that. Amandus received royal land on which to build monasteries.

I do not find that a disillusioning thought. That is what the world of the seventh century looked like. God works with people in their own time, and Amandus accepted the king's help. That choice would still bring him into trouble.

There is a witness from those years. Jonas of Bobbio, a monk who wrote the life of the Irish missionary Columbanus, tells in the dedicatory letter to that book that he traveled with Amandus for about three years, through the valleys of the Scarpe and the Scheldt. For three years, he wrote, he sailed in small boats along the coast of the ocean and on the Scarpe. He added a small, wet detail. In De la Haye's translation: "The sluggish marsh of the Elnon has often soaked the soles of my feet."

That is how you pick up the trail of Amandus. A bishop in a narrow boat, a traveling companion with wet feet, and a letter in which that companion wrote it down years later. The historian Alexander O'Hara calculates that it concerns the years 639 to 642. Jonas wrote his letter by 642 at the latest, and in those years he lived in Elnone, the monastery Amandus had founded shortly before.

Into the Scheldt

About what Amandus went through in Ghent, only his biography tells us. They are hard stories.

According to the Vita, the people of the Ghent region still lived in the old faith. Amandus looked for support. He asked Bishop Acharius of Noyon and Tournai to request permission from King Dagobert: whoever would not be baptized voluntarily could be forced to do so. Dierkens thinks that in practice this did not mean mass baptisms. The request itself is in the source.

I do not want to smooth this over. Compulsion in matters of faith does not fit the Jesus of the Gospels, and most Christians see it that way today. In the seventh century, many bishops thought differently. It belongs to an honest picture of Amandus.

The request helped him little. This is how the Vita tells it: in Ghent he suffered hardship, was persecuted, and achieved nothing for a long time. The people of Ghent threw him into the Scheldt, writes De la Haye. According to a summary by the Anglo-Saxonist Thijs Porck, this happened more than once, and he needed bodyguards from the king to be able to do his work.

A man lands in the cold water and the next day goes back to the same people. That takes a special kind of perseverance.

The Vita tells of one more thing, something smaller. He bought slaves their freedom and made sure they received a good education. De la Haye observes that other bishops in that century did the same. It fits the picture his monks kept of him: a man who took care of people who had no say.

The Man on the Gallows

The best-known story from these years takes place in Tournai. This is how the Vita tells it.

Amandus was present at a court session of a count named Dotto. A condemned criminal was tortured and hanged. Amandus had pleaded for him, but it did no good. The man hung on the gallows and was dead.

Amandus did not leave. He kept watch over the body all night. The next morning the man was alive. The biographer adds that mass conversions followed throughout the region. The Catholic Encyclopedia connects that turnaround with his work in Ghent.

You can read it the way the monks read it: God answered a night of prayer beside a dead man. There is no second source, and historians therefore treat it as a miracle story from the Vita. But look at what it says about Amandus. He pleaded for someone everyone had given up on. When that achieved nothing, he stayed with him, a whole night, beside a dead man.

Have you ever written someone off who, in your opinion, was no longer worth it? This story holds that question up to you, whatever exactly happened that night in Tournai.

Two Monasteries by Two Rivers

What is certain is that Amandus founded monasteries in Ghent. The old encyclopedias, the Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie of 1875, Dierkens, Rijntjes and the city of Ghent itself agree on this.

Ghent was not yet a city in those days. It was a place where two rivers met, the Leie and the Scheldt, and that place was called Ganda. At that confluence Amandus founded a monastery that was also called Ganda. It later became Saint Bavo's Abbey. On a hill a little farther on, the Blandijnberg, a second monastery arose, Blandinium. It later became Saint Peter's Abbey. It has borne that name since the tenth century. On the Blandijnberg there was probably a wooden house of prayer at first. Only in the tenth century did a stone monastery church come.

The city of Ghent puts these foundations at around 630. The city grew up around Ganda and Blandinium.

The abbeys became powerful, and they became rivals. In the nineteenth century, the German historian Oswald Holder-Egger investigated what that rivalry had done to the sources. Both abbeys wanted to be the oldest, and both claimed the first Saint Peter's Church of Amandus and the first abbot, Florbertus. Charters were

forged. The monks of the Blandijnberg produced a papal letter of Martin I in which Amandus founded their monastery. Saint Bavo's in turn forged a document of Pope Eugenius I. It is a sad little piece of history: the monks of Ghent fought over the memory of Amandus. In the box at the end you can read what the historians say about it.

A Nobleman from Haspengouw

In the Vita of another saint appears a man who would give Ghent its best-known name. He was called Allowin and came from Haspengouw, the fertile region in the south of present-day Belgian Limburg and around Liège. He was rich and of noble birth, and married to the daughter of a count.

His wife died. This is how his biography tells it: after her death he sought out Amandus, who was in Ghent at the time, and came to faith. He sold his possessions. He became a monk in Ghent and later lived as a hermit near the monastery. He died on October 1. In the church he received the name Bavo.

The Vita of Bavo also tells that Amandus destroyed idols in the fortress of Ghent and built a Saint Peter's Church there. And it names Florbertus as the abbot whom Amandus appointed.

The oldest biography of Bavo was written about two hundred years after his death. That he existed and was honored early is certain, however. The Anglo-Saxon scholar Alcuin already mentions him at the end of the eighth century, and from the beginning of the ninth century his name appears in the liturgy.

The monastery at the confluence later received his name. That is how Ganda became Saint Bavo's Abbey. A rich widower who gave his money away thus gave his name to the place where it had begun.

Rebuking a King

Back to Amandus and his king. The Vita tells that he confronted Dagobert about his way of life. The king became angry and banished him from the kingdom.

The story goes on, and it is a good story. Later Dagobert had a son, Sigibert, and he wanted Amandus in particular to baptize the child. Amandus refused at first. Two high officials of the court, Dado and Eligius, talked him into it. The baptism took place in Orléans, in 630 or 631 according to a source that De la Haye cites. After the prayer, no one said "Amen." Then the baby said it himself, in a clear voice.

Historians cannot confirm this. I tell it because it fits the picture the monks had of Amandus: a bishop who dared to contradict a king, even though he needed that king.

The Vita gives the same picture of his journeys farther afield. He went to the Slavs on the Danube, where he achieved little, and to the Basques in the Pyrenees, where his preaching was rejected. Dierkens writes all these journeys in the conditional: he is said to have been there. It was no success. It says something about him that the monks kept those failures on record.

Three Years in Maastricht

About one period we are better informed. Around 648 or 649, Amandus became bishop of Tongeren-Maastricht, the old diocese on the Meuse. According to De la Haye, Sigibert III appointed him, the child he had baptized according to the Vita, and the young king had to put all his weight behind it. Amandus evidently did not want it much.

It did not go well either. He clashed with the clergy of the diocese and complained to the pope about their lack of zeal and morals. He wanted to leave again.

The pope's answer still exists. Martin I wrote at the end of 649 or the beginning of 650 to Amandus, whom he addressed as his most dear brother. He advised him against resigning. He was to hold out and punish the guilty. Martin sent him the decisions of a synod held in Rome in October 649, about monotheletism, the teaching that Christ had only one will. Amandus was to persuade King Sigibert to send bishops to Rome, who could then travel with a papal delegation to the emperor in Constantinople. Martin also gave orders to send relics along, which the bearer of the letter had asked for. Books had been requested too. He could not send those, because the library did not have them.

That letter is one of the fixed points in this life. It shows that Amandus was known as far as Rome, and that he wrestled with his office.

How long he stayed in Maastricht differs from source to source. Dierkens reckons about three years, until the end of 651 or the beginning of 652. According to the Vita, he did not want to stay longer than three years. Then he let go of the diocese and went back to what he liked best: traveling around and founding monasteries.

It appeals to me that he dared to take that step. He was bishop of an important see. He gave it up, against the advice of the pope.

Elnone Became His Home

In the years that followed, Amandus founded or supported monasteries and churches over a large area. Dierkens mentions Ghent, Antwerp and above all Elnone. In Antwerp he built a church. Around the time he was in Maastricht, Itta, the widow of Pepin of Landen, together with her daughter Gertrude founded the

monastery of Nivelles, in present-day Walloon Brabant. Amandus supported that as bishop, because Nivelles lay in his diocese. Other foundations, such as those in Ronse, Leuze and Barisis, are attributed to him.

Elnone lay on the Scarpe, south of Tournai, in what is now northern France. He built it on a large estate that Dagobert gave him. There, by the water where Jonas had gotten his feet wet, he spent his last years. There, on that day in April, he had his last wish written down, with seven signatures beneath it.

A Signature from Ghent

Which year it was is a matter in itself. The will names no year of our era. It is dated in the second regnal year of King Theuderic III. Dierkens follows the German historian Josef Semmler, who adopts the calculation of Margarete Weidemann: Theuderic became king on September 12, 675. Then the day of the will falls on April 17, 676. In this chapter I follow Dierkens.

Amandus was old. How old exactly, we do not know. With a birth around 590, De la Haye arrives at about eighty-five years. He had Baudemundus write down his will, and seven men signed.

Two of them came from Ghent: Aldebert of Saint Bavo's and, with a question mark, Johannes of the Blandijnberg. From the monasteries by the Leie and the Scheldt, where according to his biography Amandus had once been thrown into the water, now came the abbots who signed his last will. The document says no more about them. To me that is enough.

Amandus died shortly after the will in Elnone and was buried there. His feast day is February 6, and according to De la Haye that is probably also the day of his death.

The monks of Elnone honored him. Their monastery came to bear his name: Saint-Amand. Around them the stories arose. In the ninth century the monk Milo wrote a biography in verse. In 1367 Gillis de Wevel wrote a Life of Saint Amand of more than twelve thousand lines of verse. Later, in the time of the Counter-Reformation, he was put forward in the Low Countries as proof that the Catholic faith was already very old here. He also became patron saint of brewers, wine merchants and innkeepers.

What You Can Still See in Ghent

Whoever walks around Ghent today can still find traces of Amandus. You do have to know where to look.

Saint Bavo's Abbey lies at the old confluence of the Leie and the Scheldt. In 1540, Emperor Charles V had the abbey church and a large part of the abbey demolished, as punishment for a revolt in Ghent. A Spanish castle took its place, of which nothing is left. What remained is a Romanesque wall that the city calls the oldest wall of Ghent. The refectory, parts of the cloister and the monks' washing place have also been preserved. Where the church stood, the lines of the floor plan have been marked out with hornbeams, and hornbeam columns five meters high evoke the vanished church. Where the altar stood, there is now a concrete stage. The ruin is fragile and therefore open only to a limited extent.

On the Blandijnberg stands Saint Peter's Abbey. The buildings you see there are much younger than Amandus: the inner courtyard, the chapter house, the refectory, the old kitchen, the wine cellar and the attics. The eighteenth-century infirmary now houses the natural history museum Huis van Kina. Beside the abbey stands the Church of Our Lady and Saint Peter, a Baroque church whose first stone was laid by Bishop Antoon Triest on April 14, 1629. According to Onroerend Erfgoed Vlaanderen (the Flemish heritage agency),

no object is known to remain that recalls the old abbey church. The name does recall it: Peter, the apostle to whom Amandus dedicated all his churches.

In Saint Bavo's Cathedral, in the heart of the city, a large painting by Peter Paul Rubens from 1624, almost five meters high, hangs in a chapel around the choir. It shows Bavo giving his possessions to the poor and entering the monastery. A staircase connects the two scenes. Abbot Florbertus, spelled Floribertus in the description of the painting, appears in it with Amandus and a few monks. The same Bishop Triest had the altar adapted so that the painting could be given a place there. The cathedral used to be called Saint John's Church. Only when the chapter of the demolished abbey moved there in 1540 did it receive Bavo as its patron. In 1559 Ghent became a diocese, and the church a cathedral. So the monastery of Amandus lives on in the name of the largest church in Ghent.

A Tower Without a Church

Across the border lies Saint-Amand-les-Eaux, the old Elnone. The abbey church there has disappeared. What remains is the tower, built from 1626 to 1640 and 82 meters high. It served as the portal of the church, and the roofs once reached halfway up its height. Now it stands alone, as a French travel guide describes it, with the city museum inside it and remains of the abbey. A gate with no church behind it.

Amandus carefully secured where he would rest. Of his own church only that tower still stands. In Ghent the places he began remain: two monasteries by two rivers, a city that grew up around them, and a name above the largest church of that city. That name belongs to Bavo, the rich widower who, according to his biography, came to Amandus when his life had come to a standstill.

Whoever stands among the ruins of Saint Bavo's in Ghent stands on the place where it began. Around you, hornbeams stand in rows, where pillars once stood.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources or a surviving document): Aquitanian origin; missionary bishop without a fixed see; mission work in the Scheldt region with the support of King Dagobert I; traveling companion Jonas of Bobbio, who wrote himself that he traveled with Amandus for about three years; founding of monasteries in Ghent (Ganda and Blandinium, later Saint Bavo's and Saint Peter's) in the seventh century, and of Elnone on royal land; dedication of his churches to Peter; bishop of Tongeren-Maastricht from about 648 to 652; the letter of Pope Martin I (end of 649 or beginning of 650) with the advice to stay, the synod decisions and the relics; the will of April 17 with seven signatories, among them Aldebert of Saint Bavo's; death and burial in Elnone shortly after the will; the later rivalry between the Ghent abbeys and the forged charters; the demolition of Saint Bavo's Abbey in 1540.

Only from the saints' lives (Vita Amandi, Vita Bavonis): parents Serenus and Amantia; the island of Yeu, the tonsure in Tours and fifteen years as a hermit in Bourges (the cell in the city wall comes from a Kerknet publication, the bread and water from the Catholic Encyclopedia of 1907); the vision of Peter in Rome; the request for forced baptism through Bishop Acharius (Dierkens does not think of mass baptisms); persecution in Ghent and being thrown into the Scheldt, and the bodyguards (this last via Porck's summary); the buying of slaves' freedom (according to De la Haye not unique in that century); the hanged man in Tournai who lived again (the Catholic Encyclopedia links this to Ghent, the Vita to Tournai); the banishment by Dagobert, the baptism of Sigibert in Orléans

and the "Amen" of the baby (Dierkens sees in it the occasion for a miracle story, Goosen calls it historically untraceable, and an encyclopedia says it is not certain that his criticism led to the banishment); the journeys to Slavs and Basques (Dierkens: "is said to have been"); the story of Bavo, the destroyed idols and the appointment of Florbertus as abbot (Vita Bavonis, written about two centuries after Bavo). That Bavo existed and was honored is certain: Alcuin mentions him at the end of the eighth century and he appears in the liturgy from the beginning of the ninth century.

Unconfirmed or disputed:

- *Birth.* Around 600 according to Dierkens, around 585 or 590 according to others; as region Herbauge near Nantes (Dierkens, De la Haye, who traces the name back to the oldest, largely lost biography) or the surroundings of Poitiers.
- *Journey to Rome.* Around 625 (Dierkens, with a question mark) or around 620 (New Catholic Encyclopedia). A Dutch reference work calls the Vita here outright historically unreliable.
- *Consecration as bishop.* Probably before 630; Kerknet gives 628.
- *The journeys of Jonas.* Around 630 to 633 according to Dierkens, 639 to 642 according to De la Haye, the New Catholic Encyclopedia and O'Hara. O'Hara derives it from the letter itself: Jonas wrote it by 642 at the latest and tells that about three years earlier he was still in Bobbio.
- *Founding of the Ghent monasteries.* Around 630 (city of Ghent), the middle of the seventh century (Onroerend Erfgoed Vlaanderen), roughly simultaneous (province of East Flanders). Which of the two came first has not been resolved. Rijntjes connects Saint Peter's with Amandus for certain and Saint Bavo's only cautiously. The claims of 608 for Saint Bavo's and 610 for Saint Peter's cannot be right, because Amandus had not yet begun then. Declercq showed that

the compiler of the tenth-century property book of Saint Peter's appropriated part of the foundation tradition of Saint Bavo's. Berkhofer writes that many charters in that book were deliberately altered, sometimes with a short addition, sometimes completely invented. Both abbeys recognized Florbertus as first abbot.

- *Bavo.* Year of death usually 653 to 655, also 660 (one English-language reference work).
- *Maastricht.* 648 to 652 according to Dierkens, 647 to 649 according to the Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie and Goosen.
- *Other foundations.* Ronse, Leuze and Barisis are attributed to him, but Rijntjes warns that they must be mentioned with caution.
- *Elnone.* A charter that supposedly gave the monastery special rights on May 1, 633, is forged according to Dierkens.
- *The will.* The year is 676 according to Dierkens and Semmler (based on the start date of Theuderic's reign), 674 or 675 according to De la Haye and the New Catholic Encyclopedia. Whether Abbot Johannes of the Blandijnberg was present is uncertain.
- *Year of death.* Not known. Dierkens tentatively puts the burial around 680; other authors give 675, 679 or 684.

Interpretation: the biography of Amandus is, according to some historians, a relatively reliable document, according to others historically unreliable. Its dating ranges from the end of the seventh to the second half of the eighth century. Whether God raised a dead man that night in Tournai is something a historian can neither confirm nor deny. I have told the stories the way the monks passed them on.

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Hadewijch: The Voice Without a Face

It is Pentecost, very early in the morning. In the church they are singing matins, the early prayer of the hours. Among the people stands a woman who longs for God so intensely that her whole body trembles. She writes it down herself, in the first line of one of her visions: "Te enen cinxen daghe wart mi vertoent inde dagheraet." In plain English: on a Pentecost Sunday, at the break of day, something was shown to me.

What she saw, she describes precisely. From the altar an eagle flew toward her. He told her to prepare herself to become one. Then Christ came to her, first as a child of about three years old, then as a man. He gave her the bread and the wine. She felt one with Him, as if she were being taken up into Him.

The woman who wrote this was called Hadewijch. She became one of the greatest writers the Dutch language has had. Her songs stand in the canon of Dutch literature. Her letters and visions are still studied today, and they have been translated into English as well. About her life we know almost nothing. No birth date, no day of death, no grave, no portrait. We have only her words.

This chapter is therefore different from the others in this book. I cannot show you a childhood, a parents' home, a conversion on a fixed date. When I began this chapter, I very much wanted to find a scene from her youth, a moment when she first heard God. That scene does not exist. What I can do is let you hear what she herself told about what God showed her, and show you the women she lived among. Their houses are still standing.

"Arise"

Fourteen visions of Hadewijch have been preserved. Most of them came to her in church, during the liturgy. She describes how her soul rises to the throne of God, and how she comes back changed. She wrote them down, she tells us herself, so that other women could seek God through them.

The first vision ends with a short command. The soul falls down at the feet of Christ, and He says to her: "Arise." According to the interpretation of the Flemish scholar Veerle Fraeters, He means by this that the soul has already risen in Him, without beginning and without fall. Deep within, a person is bound to God, and she may come to realize it.

The Pentecost vision with which this chapter began is the seventh in the usual numbering. If you take your time, you hear what she adds to it. What mattered to her was becoming one, being taken up into Him. The first words of the eagle are an invitation: prepare yourself.

Jozef van Mierlo, the Jesuit who edited her work in the twentieth century, pointed to a small detail in this vision. Hadewijch received communion in both kinds, bread and wine, and she describes that as something ordinary. In the course of the thirteenth century the wine disappeared for ordinary believers. According to the commen-

tary, the vision must therefore have taken place in the first half of that century.

She herself describes what she experienced as something that was given to her. I believe with her that God really showed something to a woman who longed for Him so much. What scholars make of her visions you can read at the back.

"My Dear Child"

Thirty-one prose letters of Hadewijch have been preserved, and sixteen letters in rhyme. She wrote them to young women whom she guided spiritually. She addresses them as "my dear child" or "heart's beloved." Whoever reads the letters hears a leader who admonishes and in the same paragraph becomes tender.

Her great word is minne. You can translate it as love, and sometimes as the beloved. In Hadewijch, Minne is almost a person: divine Love itself, closely bound to Christ. Whoever wants to serve that Love, she writes again and again, must give everything.

She also writes honestly about the times when God seems far away. She calls them gebreken, the lack of God. She taught her pupils that in such times you need courage, trust and faith. According to Fraeters, Hadewijch saw this in Christ Himself as well. He knew Himself to be bound to the Father, even when He did not feel that bond.

Perhaps you recognize that. There are weeks when you pray and it seems you are talking to a wall. Hadewijch knew those weeks. She did not write around them.

Set against that is what she called gebruken: enjoying God. In rare moments, she writes, the soul falls, as it were, into God and for a moment shares in His life. The mind cannot grasp this, and words

fall short. She tried to put it into words anyway. That is what she wrote her visions for.

Women Who Were Not Nuns

Hadewijch was probably a beguine. In the past she was also called a nun or an abbess, and a few people have called her a heretic. Those ideas have been abandoned. Most scholars now see her as the leader of a small group of religious women at the beginning of the beguine movement.

What were beguines? From the end of the twelfth century, in cities in our region and beyond, unmarried women began to live together in order to give their lives to God. Widows joined in as well. At first they lived together in one house, a convent. Later they built little houses around a square or a stretch of grass, often close to a church. That is how the beguinage came about.

Beguines were not nuns. They took no vow of poverty and kept their own property. They did promise to live chastely and devoutly. And they were free to leave again, for example to marry. They earned their own bread, often in textiles, as washerwomen, or in hospitals and orphanages. They chose for themselves the women who led them, the mistresses.

They fit no existing box. Priests, bishops and city councils did not always trust them and tried to limit their freedom. In 1312, Pope Clement V even gave orders to abolish the movement. In the Low Countries, the bishops stood up for the beguines. They were allowed to stay, with stricter rules and more supervision.

I find it something beautiful that in our region that space remained. Women who kept living in the city, worked for their bread and at the same time directed their whole lives toward God. Hadewijch wrote for such women.

Her texts do show something about who she was herself. She wrote in Brabantine, the form of Middle Dutch spoken in the duchy of Brabant. For readers outside the Netherlands: that duchy is something different from the present-day Dutch province of Noord-Brabant. It covered today's Flemish Brabant, Walloon Brabant and the province of Antwerp, with cities such as Brussels, Leuven and Antwerp, and also part of what is now Noord-Brabant. She knew French. She could translate and rework Latin texts, such as Bible verses. She knew the courtly love songs that were sung at the courts in France. In the thirteenth century, a woman got such an education almost only if she came from a well-to-do family.

Songs to French Tunes

Hadewijch also wrote forty-five songs. For a long time they were called stanzaic poems, because no one knew they were sung. When scholars found the melodies for some of them, mostly those of French love songs, they began to call them songs. Songs like these, with new words to a familiar melody, are called contrafacts.

The troubadours and trouvères sang of a knight serving an unreachable lady. Hadewijch took over that form and filled it with something else. In her songs, the soul is the knight, and Minne is the beloved. All the longing, all the faithfulness and all the pain of courtly love poetry she directs at God.

The first song begins, like many of those French songs, with the seasons. Winter is yielding, summer is on its way. Then it becomes personal. Her friends and others disapprove of her service to Minne and pass judgment on her. She defends herself and calls on God as judge. At the end she calls on people to live love again and again.

In a song like that you hear something of her own life resounding. Not everyone understood what she was doing.

In 2009 an edition of her songs appeared, prepared by Fraeters and Frank Willaert. The musicologist Louis Peter Grijp reconstructed the melodies. After more than seven hundred years, her songs could be sung again.

"Minne Is All"

Hadewijch had people around her. In her letters names appear of women who stood close to her: Sara, Emma and Margriet.

At the end of one of her letters, the twenty-fifth, she wrote a short postscript. First she sends greetings to Sara. From the letter it appears that Sara seemed to have forgotten her. Then Emma and Margriet receive an admonition, and Margriet in particular: "Segghet margrieten datsi haer hoede van houerdicheiden." Tell Margriet to be on her guard against pride. About Sara, Hadewijch does not complain, the notes to the edition say. She wishes the friend who disappointed her all the best.

The women were no longer living with their leader at that point. Why not, the letter does not say. Hadewijch does ask them to prepare to live together again, in a new company. The postscript ends with four words: "De Minne es al." Love is everything.

The notes call that ending sublime and see in it a summary of her whole person and teaching. I think that is right. She wrote those words at the end of a letter in which she had been hurt. She had reason to become bitter. She chose a different sentence.

Wandering Through the Land

Hadewijch had opponents. In her letters she writes about enemies, and about beguines who wanted to leave her. Her authority as a leader was challenged. From her texts it appears that she and her pupils parted ways. How exactly that happened, we do not know.

In a later letter she writes to the same young woman, the friend of Sara, who is grieved by what is happening to her leader. Hadewijch comforts her and considers what awaits her: "Eest in doelne achter lande, eest in gheuancnessen." Is it wandering through the land, is it imprisonment? She describes a possibility, and nowhere does it say that this punishment had already been imposed on her.

From that letter it does appear that she had served people, according to the notes probably also with care for the sick and others in need. In it she also laments that her wondrous works had become known, and she thought that wrong. About the end of her life, no source says anything with certainty. Where and when she died is unknown.

It is strange to tell the life story of someone who has no ending. Her voice simply stops.

"Om Hare Gherechte Minne"

After her visions, the manuscripts contain a remarkable list. Scholars call it the List of the Perfect. In it Hadewijch names people who in her view had reached perfect love. First twenty-nine who had died. The list begins with "Maria die yerste," Mary the first, then follow John the Baptist, John the evangelist, Mary Magdalene and Peter. Further on are contemporaries who had already died, among them the German abbess Hildegard of Bingen. Then the living, by region and without names. Among others eleven in Brabant. Nine in England, among them five hermits. Five in Flanders: three beguines and two nuns. Ten in Jerusalem, five in Thuringia, six in Zeeland.

Among the dead there is also a person "daer ic heren henric van breda toe sande": someone to whom she had sent Lord Henry of Breda.

The twenty-ninth and last of the dead receives one short line: "Een beghine die meester robbaert doedde om hare gherechte minne." A beguine whom Master Robbaert killed, for her upright love.

According to Van Mierlo, that Master Robbaert could hardly be anyone other than the notorious inquisitor Robert le Bougre, a church judge who hunted heretics. The American historian Charles Haskins investigated in 1902 where he operated. In February 1236 Robert had people burned in Cambrai. Douai followed, where the countess of Flanders was present at the execution, and Lille with the villages around it. In May 1239 he had more than a hundred and eighty people burned on the Mont-Aimé in Champagne. According to Fraeters and Willaert, between 1236 and 1239 he had some two hundred and fifty people condemned to death.

Who that beguine was, we do not know. Hadewijch does not give her name. She knew the story of that woman and counted her among the perfect. In those years a beguine could be put to death by an inquisitor. Hadewijch knew that, and she kept writing.

This one line is the most important clue to the time in which Hadewijch lived. Van Mierlo found it in 1921 "most improbable, indeed impossible" that she was still writing after 1270. Most scholars place her in the thirteenth century, probably around the middle of it.

A Holy Woman, a True Mistress

After her death her work was copied in Brabant monasteries. From those circles also come the only two medieval witnesses about her.

The first is Jan van Leeuwen. He was a lay brother in Groenendaal, a monastery in the Sonian Forest, the great forest on the edge of Brussels. The prior of that monastery in those years was Jan van Ruusbroec, the best-known mystic of the Low Countries. Van Leeuwen

wrote about Hadewijch in the fourteenth century, the last medieval person we know of to do so. He called her a holy woman and a true mistress, a spiritual leader. Her books, according to him, were good and right, because God had given her the words. He also admitted that many people did not understand her.

The second witness is a short German text from the middle of the fourteenth century. It speaks of her as a spiritual mistress. Through her teaching, it says, many people in Brabant came to spiritual perfection about a hundred years earlier. She was never declared a saint by the church. In her own surroundings, however, she was seen that way.

Ruusbroec himself knew her writings. Her thoughts on union with God return in his work. So a line ran from a beguine in Brabant to the great master of Groenendaal.

After that it grew quiet. Only a few manuscripts of her work have been preserved, which suggests that she had no large audience. By the middle of the fifteenth century she was as good as forgotten.

An Auction in Amsterdam

For almost four hundred years, hardly anyone knew who Hadewijch was. The manuscripts lay in libraries. In 1838 one of her songs appeared in print, in the journal Belgisch Museum, under the title Geestelyk minnelied uit de XIIIe eeuw (Spiritual love song from the thirteenth century). In the same year the German linguist Franz Joseph Mone included her songs in an overview of old Dutch literature. He placed them among the secular songs, under the heading Minnelieder einer Nonne, love songs of a nun. Jan Frans Willems soon saw that they were spiritual songs. Slowly her name returned.

There are three large fourteenth-century manuscripts with her work. Two are in the Royal Library in Brussels, the KBR. They belonged

to the Rooklooster, a monastery in the Sonian Forest. The oldest, according to the manuscript scholar Erik Kwakkel, was written between 1325 and 1350 and contains all her work. The other dates from around 1380 and was made possible in the workshop of the bookseller Godevaert de Bloc. When he went bankrupt in 1383, the Rooklooster took over his inventory. The third manuscript is in the University Library of Ghent. Kwakkel places it in the priory of Bethlehem near Leuven. In the seventeenth century it was with the Jesuits in Antwerp. After the auction in Amsterdam in 1867, Ghent University bought it in 1878, together with nineteen other manuscripts from the collection of C.P. Serrure.

In 1875 her poems were published for the first time, by Heremans and Ledeganck. Twenty years later the prose followed. In the twentieth century Jozef van Mierlo made it his life's work. He published the visions in 1924, the songs in 1942, the letters in 1947 and the mixed poems, with the rhyme letters, in 1952.

In all that research it also came to light that not everything preserved under her name is by her. Part of the rhymed poems is by another, later writer, whom scholars call Hadewijch II or pseudo-Hadewijch.

She also acquired a name addition. On the first flyleaf of the Ghent manuscript, a loose sheet at the front of the book, stands a Latin note: "De B(eata) Hadewigis de Antverpia." About the blessed Hadewijch of Antwerp. A later hand added it. That is how the nickname stuck, without anyone being able to say whether she ever lived in Antwerp. What is known about that is in the box.

What remains are three old books of parchment, and a few lines on a flyleaf.

Forty Houses Around a Bleaching Meadow

A grave of Hadewijch you cannot visit. A house where she lived, neither. But you can see how beguines lived. In Flanders about thirty beguinages have been preserved. Most of the houses date from the seventeenth century, so from long after her time. The layout has remained: an enclosed world of small houses around a church or a stretch of grass, in the middle of the city.

On December 2, 1998, UNESCO placed thirteen Flemish beguinages on the World Heritage list. They lie in Bruges, Dendermonde, Diest, Ghent, Sint-Amandsberg near Ghent, Hoogstraten, Kortrijk, Leuven, Lier, Mechelen, Sint-Truiden, Tongeren and Turnhout. UNESCO calls them an exceptional testimony to the medieval tradition of independent religious women in northwest Europe.

Take the beguinage of Kortrijk, in West Flanders. It arose probably around 1238, in the time when Hadewijch was presumably writing. In 1242, Countess Joan of Constantinople bought a house there in which beguines were already living. In 1250 the community received its first rules. Today you walk past about forty little houses around a bleekweide, the meadow where the linen was bleached in the sun. In the Saint Matthew's Chapel stands an organ from 1678. In the former house of the portress, a viewing house was set up in 2016, as the home of a nineteenth-century beguine, and an experience center in the Saint Anne's Hall. Many houses are still inhabited.

In that beguinage lived the last beguine. Marcella Pattyn became a beguine when she was twenty-one. In 1960 she moved from Ghent to Kortrijk. She was almost blind. On April 14, 2013, she died, ninety-two years old. According to the beguinage, a tradition of about eight hundred years ended with her.

In the Netherlands, too, beguinages still stand, in Amsterdam, Breda, Delft and Haarlem. Whoever walks through the Begijnhof in Amsterdam is standing in a piece of the same world.

I imagine you walking through the gate there on a quiet morning. The city is not yet awake. Behind the windows of the little houses you see no one. In the middle lies the grass. Somewhere in a community like this, almost eight hundred years ago, sat a woman whose face we will never know, writing to a young woman she called dear child. At the bottom of the page she put four words.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): Hadewijch wrote in the thirteenth century in Brabantine Middle Dutch; her work consists of fourteen visions, thirty-one prose letters, sixteen rhyme letters and forty-five songs, plus the List of the Perfect; she was well educated and knew French, Latin and French courtly lyric; the songs are contrafacts on existing melodies; she was probably a beguine and leader of a small group of women; the dating rests mainly on the mention of the inquisitor Robert le Bougre (burnings in Cambrai, Douai and Lille in 1236, on the Mont-Aimé in 1239) and on communion in both kinds in the Pentecost vision; the Antwerp note in the Ghent manuscript is from a seventeenth-century hand, when the manuscript was with the Antwerp Jesuits; Jan van Leeuwen of Groenendaal called her a holy woman and mistress; her influence on Ruusbroec; the three fourteenth-century manuscripts in Brussels and Ghent, the auction of 1867 and the purchase by Ghent in 1878; the printing of a song in 1838 and Mone's overview from that same year; the editions of 1875 and the editions of Van Mierlo; the beguine movement as described; the thirteen beguinages on the World Heritage list since 1998; the history of the beguinage of Kortrijk; the death of Marcella Pattyn in 2013.

Only from her own testimony: the visions themselves, among them the Pentecost vision with the eagle and the first vision with the word "Arise"; the disapproval by friends in the first song; the greetings to Sara, Emma and Margriet and the separation from her pupils; the opposition she describes in her letters; her service to the sick (as the editor reads her letter); the List of the Perfect with the beguine who was killed by Master Robbaert and the mention of Lord Henry of Breda. Of the list, the living group, according to the editor, counts 56 names by region; here only the regions named are listed.

Unconfirmed or disputed:

- *Antwerp.* That she came from Antwerp or lived there rests only on later mentions. The Latin line on the flyleaf was added in the seventeenth century, according to the introduction to the 1905 edition very probably by the learned Jesuit Heribertus Rosweydus. The manuscript was then in the house of the Jesuits in Antwerp. That introduction thinks the nickname came to her that way: first Hadewijch of the Antwerp manuscript, later a woman from Antwerp. The Carthusians of Zeelhem, near Diest, had a manuscript with her letters, rhymes and visions, mentioned in a catalogue of the monastery of Sint-Maartensdal in Leuven, in which the writer was called "of Antwerp." Both that catalogue and the manuscript are lost. In 1867 the Ghent manuscript was auctioned in Amsterdam under the name Hadewych, Haywig or Heilwijck of Antwerp. Scholars do not rule out that she lived for a time in the area around Antwerp. They cannot prove it.
- *Hadewid Greca.* In 2010 the historian Daniel Devreese suggested in the journal Ons Geestelijk Erf that she is the same woman as a "Hadewid Greca" from a charter of 1212. That

charter is an agreement between Godfrey II, lord of Breda, and Konrad of Urach, abbot of the Cistercian abbey of Villers. Hadewid Greca was living at that time as a hermit on Godfrey's estate near Merksem, now a district of Antwerp, and according to the charter was assigned to the household of the abbot. Devreese reads the nickname Greca as a reference to her birthplace, the Hof van Grieken near Zoutleeuw, and arrives at a birth around 1187. I have read only summaries of his article. Van Mierlo thought in 1924 of a prominent beguine from Nivelles, who was buried as a saint in the abbey of Villers in 1269. None of those proposals has been proven.

- *Years of birth and death.* All dates are estimates, derived from her work: 1200 to 1260, 1200 to 1269, or 1200 to 1250. They appear nowhere in a legal deed.
- *Henry of Breda.* Which Henry is meant is not certain. Van Mierlo thought of Henry IV, who became lord of Breda after the death of Godfrey IV on April 25, 1246. Then Hadewijch wrote the list in 1246 or shortly after, as Fraeters and Willaert write in their edition of the songs. Devreese thinks of his uncle of the same name, the priest and magister Henry of Breda, who according to him lived from 1180 to 1250, and therefore dates the list between 1236 and 1244. The lords of Breda had property near Antwerp, and that also plays a part in the discussion about where she lived.
- *Exile.* Whether she was banished or imprisoned, we do not know. Some scholars think she had to wander. The notes to the edition read her "wandering through the land" as a supposition. Even the word ellende (exile), which she uses repeatedly, does not prove, according to the same edition, that she lived in exile.

- *Her last years.* An English-language reference work suggests that she may have worked in a hospital in her last years. I have not found a second source.
- *The killed beguine.* Who she was cannot be established. The Dutch Carmelite Titus Brandsma suggested a woman called Alaydis who was burned in Cambrai on February 17, 1236. Haskins does mention among the burnings at Cambrai a woman named Alice, called in his source a well-known sorceress, together with some twenty others. Whether she is the beguine from the list cannot be established, according to Fraeters and Willaert.
- *The numbers in the list.* In the thirteenth vision she speaks of a hundred and seven perfect ones, and whoever adds up the list itself arrives at one more among the living than she states. Van Mierlo attached little value to that. Hadewijch could have made a mistake, he wrote, and he considered a copyist's error largely ruled out.
- *The word beguine.* Its origin is disputed. The Etymological Dictionary of Dutch considers the Old French béguer, to mutter or mumble, the most probable. Fraeters and Willaert think so too. According to that dictionary, in the beginning it was a term of abuse for hermits who, according to their mockers, only muttered prayers and did not work. Van Mierlo thought of the Albigensians, heretics from southern France; the dictionary finds that even less likely. The linguist Anatoly Liberman finds that none of the explanations goes further than clever guessing.

Interpretation: what Hadewijch exactly experienced in her visions is a question of faith. Some scholars speak of deep meditation. She herself describes it as something that was given to her. Her texts de-

scribe the experience; no source outside her own work can confirm or refute it.

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Jan van Ruusbroec: The Chaplain Who Went into the Forest

In Easter week of 1343, three priests left the city of Brussels. They walked southeast, to the Sonian Forest, the great beech forest that still borders the city today. The oldest was Jan Hinckaert, chaplain of the Church of Saint Gudula. The second was Vrank van Coudenberg, a canon of the same church, a man with family at the duke's court. The third was Hinckaert's nephew. He was fifty years old, had been a priest for twenty-six years and was known as a quiet man. His name was Jan van Ruusbroec.

Duke John III of Brabant had given them an abandoned hermitage, at a place called Groenendaal: green valley. They took little with them and left much behind. The Ruusbroec Society in Antwerp, the research center that studies his work, says honestly that the reason for their departure is not entirely clear. What we do know is what happened afterward.

In that forest Ruusbroec wrote books about the soul's way to God. He wrote them in the language of ordinary people in Brabant, Middle Dutch, while scholars of the time wrote in Latin. His work was translated into Latin during his lifetime, the only Middle Dutch

writer for whom that was true. Later it traveled to Germany, England and beyond. In the fifteenth century, Dionysius of Rijkel, a Carthusian in Roermond, called him *doctor admirabilis*, the wonderful teacher. In Flanders he has been known ever since as the Wonderful One.

How did a quiet chaplain from Brussels become the man who gave mysticism a voice in our language? It began with a boy who went to the city at the age of eleven.

A Boy of Eleven at His Uncle's

Jan was born in 1293, probably in Ruisbroek, a village near Brussels. His name simply means: Jan from Ruisbroek. About his father we know nothing. His name appears in no source.

Around the age of eleven, Jan went to Brussels, to his uncle Jan Hinckaert. He was to learn Latin there. Hinckaert was a priest at the great church of Saint Gudula and lived in the Loxemstraat, directly across from that church. This is how his fifteenth-century biography tells it: the boy ran away from home in order to be with his uncle. A child who wanted so much to be with a priest already knew what he was seeking.

Jan probably attended the lessons of the chapter school of Saint Gudula until he was sixteen. A chapter is a group of priests, canons, who serve a great church together and often have a school. There he learned the trivium: grammar, reasoning and speaking. He most likely did not go to a university. His later books do show that he knew Latin well.

Around 1305 his mother also came to Brussels. She became a beguine there. Beguines were women who lived, prayed and worked together in a beguinage, without taking monastic vows. His mother remained for him more than a memory. That is how the old biog-

raphy tells it: after her death she appeared to her son to ask for prayer. She came back after his first Mass to thank him, and later she told him the date of his own death. That is how the brothers of Groenendaal saw him: as a man for whom the border between earth and heaven was thin.

That biography comes up more than once, so let me say something about it right away. It was written by Henrik Utenbogaerde, a canon of Groenendaal who called himself Henricus Pomerius in Latin. He died in 1469, almost ninety years after Ruusbroec. He used an older account by a fellow brother and spoke with men who had known Ruusbroec. What he recorded is the picture that the monastery kept of its prior.

Chaplain in the Shadow of Saint Gudula

In 1317 Jan was ordained a priest. He was twenty-four. He became chaplain of the collegiate church of Saint Michael and Saint Gudula, the church where his uncle served. A chaplain was a priest who said Masses at a particular altar in a large church, often with a small income from an endowment. It was not a high post.

The church itself was a building site in those years. In 1226 the duke of Brabant had begun turning it into a Gothic church. That construction lasted almost three hundred years. So Ruusbroec did his work in a church that was still being built.

Pomerius describes him as a quiet, silent man. He walked through the streets of Brussels like a hermit and seldom went outside. The biography adds a small incident. He was crossing a square and heard a man say that he would not want the life of such a priest, even if he were given all the riches of the world for it. Ruusbroec thought to himself that the man knew nothing of the joy that God gives.

In Brussels he also began to write. A Carthusian monk, Gerard of Saintes (Sint-Renelde) from the monastery of Herne in Flemish Brabant, collected five works of Ruusbroec in 1362 and wrote an introduction to them. According to Gerard, Ruusbroec had already finished two books as a chaplain in Brussels. The Ruusbroec Society calls this the only fact about those years that is firmly established. The researcher Michiel Vandenbroucke writes that Ruusbroec wrote *Dat rijcke der ghelieven* (The Realm of the Lovers) entirely in Brussels, and that he also began his major work there.

A Woman on a Silver Chair

According to Pomerius, Ruusbroec had an opponent in Brussels. Her name was Bloemardinne. She is said to have been the leader of the movement of the Free Spirit, a current that the church regarded as heretical. She is said to have taught from a silver chair, and it was said that two angels accompanied her when she went to communion. Ruusbroec is said to have refuted her writings point by point and to have stirred up much hostility by doing so.

This story has long been told as the reason he left the city. New research puts question marks over it. Vandenbroucke points to a Brussels woman, Heilwigis Bloemaerts, who was known for her help to the poor. A Mass was read for her every year until the sixteenth century. That fits poorly with a condemned heretic. Not a single writing of Ruusbroec against her has been preserved. The historian Geert Warnar finds the connection between her and Bloemardinne reasonable, although it is not proven. The conflict, according to him, was probably above all a difference of opinion.

A story can be retold for centuries and still remain uncertain. Perhaps it did a woman who helped the poor an injustice for years. Whatever truth there is in it, it belongs to the picture his brothers kept of him: a man who took the truth about God seriously.

Easter Week 1343

Then comes that Easter week with which this chapter began. Ruusbroec was fifty. Together with his uncle and Vrank van Coudenberg, he went to Groenendaal. That the duke gave them the hermitage and the lands around it, they owed above all to Coudenberg's ties with the court. There was one condition, writes Warnar. Five men were allowed to live in the hermitage, and two of them had to be priests. They were to serve God in a new chapel in memory of the duke's late wife, Marie of Évreux. On March 12, 1345, that chapel was consecrated.

Why did they go? It began, according to Warnar, as early as around 1335, with the conversion of Hinckaert. Hinckaert and Coudenberg then gave up their prebends, their fixed income from the church, in order to live together on what God gave them. The other canons of Saint Gudula took that as criticism. The departure to the forest was for the three men, writes Warnar, more a practical solution than a matter of principle.

What went through Ruusbroec when he left the city behind? He never wrote it down. Do you know that, a moment when you know you have to leave somewhere, though you cannot explain it well?

At first the three men wanted no monastic rule and no superior. They simply wanted to live together, pray and work. It went like that for seven years. On March 10, 1350, they did take on the Rule of Augustine and became regular canons, priests who live together under a monastic rule. Vrank van Coudenberg became provost, the administrator. Jan van Ruusbroec became prior, the spiritual leader of the brothers. He remained so until his death.

"Behold, the Bridegroom Is Coming"

Ruusbroec's best-known book is called *Die geestelike brulocht*, The Spiritual Espousals. He had begun it in Brussels and finished it in Groenendaal. A literary history from 1966 dates it around 1350.

The book opens with a sentence of Jesus from the parable of the ten virgins who wait with their lamps for the bridegroom. Ruusbroec wrote: "Siet, die brudegom comt, gaet ute hem te ontmoete." In the New King James Version it reads: *And at midnight a cry was heard: "Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!"* (Matthew 25:6).

Around that one sentence he built his whole book. He described the way of the soul in three parts: the active life, the inner life and the contemplative life. First a life of good deeds and faithfulness. Then a life in which a person turns inward and seeks God in his heart. Finally a life in which he may see God and be united with Him in love. For that last step, Middle Dutch had no words yet. Ruusbroec had to make them himself.

In all he wrote eleven mystical books, or treatises. All eleven have been preserved. Besides Espousals, we know titles such as *Vanden blinckenden steen* (The Sparkling Stone) and *Een spieghel der eeuwigher salicheit* (A Mirror of Eternal Blessedness). He also wrote many letters. Only a small part of them remains, and none in his own hand. Seven letters were preserved because the Carthusian Laurentius Surius published them in Latin in 1552. Of a few, late copies and fragments in Low German still exist.

The work traveled fast. The monks of the abbey of Ter Doest near Bruges asked, while he was still alive, for a Latin Espousals. For them Willem Jordaens, a learned fellow brother in Groenendaal, translated the book into fine Latin. Later he translated more, so that scholars outside Brabant could also read Ruusbroec.

Not everyone was pleased. Around 1400, almost twenty years after Ruusbroec's death, Jean Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, read that Latin Espousals. In the third part he found formulations that he considered suspect. He read in it that a person could become wholly one being with God, and he condemned that. Ruusbroec's words about a union with God without distinction were easy to misread, writes Vandenbroucke. According to the Flemish scholar Albert Ampe, Gerson never withdrew his judgment.

A Tree That Seemed to Burn

Groenendaal lay in a forest, but it was not cut off from the world. Pomerius tells, for example, of two clergymen from Paris who asked the prior for a word to live by. Ruusbroec answered briefly: "You are as holy as you want to be." The two felt brushed off and complained to the canons. A few brothers brought them back, and Ruusbroec explained: as good as your will is, so great is your holiness. Then they left satisfied. It shows that he could be short and dry.

About writing at Groenendaal, Pomerius tells a story that became well known in Flanders. Ruusbroec often went into the forest with a wax tablet and a stylus. He wrote down what the Spirit gave him, as he saw it himself. When he grew older, a fellow brother went along who wrote down what he dictated.

One day a brother looked for him and did not find him. Then he saw in the distance a tree that seemed to be on fire. Under that tree sat Ruusbroec, completely absorbed in God. According to the biography, that tree was honored for centuries afterward as the tree of Ruusbroec. The English writer Vincent Scully, who retold Pomerius in 1910, writes that Prior Jacob van Dynter had a linden planted on that spot at the end of the fifteenth century. It is said to have withered in the wars of religion in 1577 and sprouted again when the canons returned in 1607.

It recalls Moses at the burning bush. A man sits under a tree with a wax tablet on his knee, and listens. That is how his brothers saw him: as someone who listened to God in the forest and wrote down what he heard.

The Good Cook

Groenendaal did not become a monastery of scholars only. In 1344 a man who was already getting on in years joined, Jan van Leeuwen. He came from the area of the abbey of Affligem, between Brussels and Aalst. He became the second lay brother of Groenendaal, a member of the community who was not a priest. He worked as a cook and did manual labor. The brothers called him the good cook.

This cook wrote twenty-two mystical treatises himself in Middle Dutch. Vandenbroucke calls him the only medieval layman from the working class who wrote such books in the vernacular. He died on February 5, 1378.

That picture makes me quiet. A prior who wrote about the highest union with God, and a cook who sought the same thing among his pots and also wrote it down. With God, the kitchen weighed as much as the study.

The founders meanwhile passed away one by one. Jan Hinckaert, the uncle who had taken him into his house as a boy, died in 1355. Vrank van Coudenberg died in 1368.

A Visitor from Deventer

In 1378 a visitor came from the north. It was Geert Grote of Deventer. In 1374 he had given up his rich life as a scholar in order to serve God. The Catholic Encyclopedia of 1913 writes that Grote often sought out the old prior.

About the meeting, Pomerius tells, and so does Thomas à Kempis in his biography of Grote. Ruusbroec greeted Grote by name, although they had never seen each other. He told him that he had never written anything except by inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The conversation also had a sharp edge. According to Pomerius, Grote thought that Ruusbroec had too little fear of God. Ruusbroec spoke so freely about God's mercy that it worried Grote. Grote tried to bring him to more fear, but the prior would not be persuaded. He answered, as the tradition tells it, that Grote could not have frightened him, and that he only wanted to be ready for God's will.

The two men continued to respect each other. Grote translated Espousals into Latin, and the *Mirror* as well. In a letter to Ruusbroec, somewhere between 1377 and 1381, he wrote that he hunted for books like a miser. He spoke with praise of the prior's thinking and honored him, as the Catholic Encyclopedia writes, like a father.

The movement that Grote began, the Modern Devotion, grew large in the Northern Netherlands in the fifteenth century. Ruusbroec's books found many readers there. In 1412 Groenendaal joined the chapter of Windesheim near Zwolle, the heart of that movement. So Brabant and the IJssel touched each other.

The German preacher Johannes Tauler also came to Groenendaal. Geert Warnar writes in his major study of Ruusbroec from 2007 that Tauler came around 1346 and probably took copies of the books with him. In any case, around 1350 a German version of Espousals was already circulating among the Gottesfreunde, the Friends of God, a circle of laypeople and clergy in Basel and Strasbourg.

December 2, 1381

Ruusbroec grew old. At the end of 1381 he got a fever. According to Pomerius, the brothers first laid him in the provost's room, but he

wanted to be treated as the least of them. At his request they carried him to the ordinary infirmary, among the other sick brothers. There he lay for two weeks. They heard him murmur the same words from the Psalms over and over, in Latin: *As the deer pants for the water brooks, So pants my soul for You, O God* (Psalm 42:1).

He died on December 2, 1381, in Groenendaal, in his eighty-eighth year, as Pomerius counts it. He had been a priest for more than sixty years and thirty-eight years in the forest.

Around his death the biography tells a series of stories that his brothers handed down about him. The dean of Diest saw him that night shining, in priestly vestments, on his way to the altar. Geert Grote heard of his death through a revelation and had the bells rung. A brother took one of his teeth, and it later healed a woman from Mechelen of her toothache. Five years after his death, his body was found undecayed when it was dug up. They are stories from the veneration of saints in the late Middle Ages.

What is certain: his brothers preserved his memory. He was buried in the choir of the monastery church. Pomerius wrote down his life. Around 1540 an unknown artist painted a triptych with famous members of the monastery, the *Praeconiale Viridis Vallis*, the panel of honor of Groenendaal. Ruusbroec, Jan van Leeuwen and Willem Jordaens appear on it together. The panel is now kept in the collection of the Ruusbroec Society in Antwerp.

A Shrine in Brussels

In 1622 his grave was opened. The body was officially examined, the first step in a process to have him declared a saint. According to Scully, who draws on the monastery sources, the archbishop of Mechelen gave orders for it. The bones were washed and laid in a new shrine, and Archduchess Isabella, who was then ruling the

Southern Netherlands, helped pay for a chapel. The Flemish heritage inventory describes that Ruusbroec Chapel as a small square annex on the south side of the monastery church. The remains were moved there from the choir. The process afterward stalled.

When the monastery was dissolved in 1784, the shrine went to Brussels. It was given a place in a side chapel of Saint Gudula, the church where Ruusbroec had said his Masses as a young priest. It did not lie there long. In 1793 French revolutionaries plundered the church, and the shrine was desecrated. Scully wrote in 1910 that no trace of the relics was left. There is no grave to visit today.

Only in 1908 did an official decision come from Rome, at the urging of the Belgian church. On December 1 of that year a decree, approved on December 9 by Pope Pius X, confirmed the veneration he had already received for centuries. Since then he has also officially been called the Blessed Jan van Ruusbroec.

What Remained in the Forest

If you go to Brussels today, you can visit the church where Ruusbroec was chaplain for twenty-six years. Since 1962 it has been the Cathedral of Saint Michael and Saint Gudula. The Gothic church was only finished around 1519, almost a century and a half after his death. In one of the side chapels his shrine stood from 1784 to 1793.

In the ambulatory stands a statue of Ruusbroec, made in 1917 by the sculptor Jules Jourdain. He holds a wax tablet and a stylus and waits for inspiration from God. His right foot rests on the head of a woman. According to the cathedral, that is probably Bloemardinne. Jourdain followed the story of Pomerius. The Brussels historian Roel Jacobs said about it in 2020 to VRT NWS: “They have rewritten history.” Behind the statue hangs a copper plate recalling that the painter Rogier van der Weyden is buried in this church.

The monastery in Groenendaal no longer exists. Emperor Joseph II, the Austrian ruler who then governed the Southern Netherlands, dissolved it on April 13, 1784, along with many other monasteries. On June 6, 1786 the decision was made to demolish the buildings. The church was sold in 1787 with the obligation to tear it down, but after a petition and a lawsuit the work was halted halfway. In 1795 the definitive dissolution followed by the French Republic.

As a result more remained standing than you would think. Of the monastery church, the walls still stand to about half their height, at the end of the Aartshertoginnendreef. They were later converted into a dwelling with a stable and storage space. The eighteenth-century priory farm on the Duboislaan is now the Forest Museum Jan van Ruusbroec, the Groenendaal welcome gate of the Sonian Forest. In 2025 activities for schools and families were still being held there. In the Lange Staartdreef stands a stone bench from 1953 by the Flemish Tourist Association, with an image of Ruusbroec. The municipality of Hoeilaart has laid out a walk along these places, the Ruusbroec Route.

The Ruusbroec Society mentions three more things: a few small buildings, the pond and a replanted summer oak. The stream, the IJse, still flows through a series of twelve ponds.

Whoever walks there now sees mostly trees. Close by runs the ring road around Brussels, and across the road lies an ecoduct, so that bats can cross to the other side again.

Almost seven hundred years ago, a man of fifty walked out of the city there with two friends. He took his wax tablet with him and a sentence from the Gospel. Behold, the bridegroom is coming. He went out, into the forest, to meet Him.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): birth in 1293, probably in Ruisbroek; stay with his uncle Jan Hinckaert; mother a beguine in Brussels around 1305; ordination and chaplaincy at Saint Gudula in 1317; first works in Brussels (Gerard of Saintes, 1362); departure to Groenendaal in Easter week of 1343 with Hinckaert and Coudenberg, on land of Duke John III, with the condition of five residents of whom two priests and a chapel for Marie of Évreux, consecrated on March 12, 1345 (Warnar); the Rule of Augustine in 1350, with Ruusbroec as prior; Jan van Leeuwen and Willem Jordaens; eleven treatises, all preserved, and seven letters in the Latin edition of Surius (1552) (Warnar; the Ruusbroec Society: at most some eight); Latin translation during his lifetime, among others for Ter Doest; visit of Geert Grote (Vandenbroucke: 1378), his letter and translation; death on December 2, 1381; Windesheim 1412; Gerson's criticism around 1400; the panel of honor from around 1540; the opening of the grave in 1622 and the transfer to a chapel by the church; dissolution in 1784, demolition decree 1786, partial demolition, definitive dissolution 1795; the decree of 1908; the statue by Jules Jourdain from 1917 (cathedral, VRT NWS).

From older sources, not confirmed by recent research: the transfer of the shrine to Saint Gudula, the desecration in 1793 and the loss of the relics (Scully 1910, Catholic Encyclopedia 1913). Warnar (2007) describes only the division among relic holders in 1622.

Only from an edifying source (mainly Pomerius, fifteenth century): that he ran away from home; his silent life and the man on the square; the wax tablet in the forest; the greeting of Grote by name, the words about the inspiration of the Spirit and the disagreement about the fear of God; the answer to the Parisian clergymen; the infirmary and the psalm on his deathbed; his age at death. Pomerius (Henrik Utenbogaerde, died 1469) used an older account by a fel-

low brother and spoke with men who had known Ruusbroec. The Ruusbroec Society warns that his book is an edifying story and not a reliable account of facts.

Disputed: the visit of Tauler (Catholic Encyclopedia 1913: it is not established that he ever saw Ruusbroec; Warnar 2007: around 1346).

Unconfirmed:

- *The appearances of his mother.* Such stories say more, according to the researchers, about how the monastery later looked at him than about what really happened.
- *Bloemardinne.* The struggle with her comes only from Pomerius. Whether she is the same as Heilwig Bloemaerts has not been proven. Warnar describes her as an unmarried daughter from a Brussels patrician family, rich enough to take over an impoverished beguine house around 1305. In 1335 she had her will drawn up under the supervision of Jan Hinckaert, Ruusbroec's uncle. Her heir had a hospice for twelve poor women set up in 1357. Vandenbroucke thinks that later writers liked to portray Ruusbroec as a fighter of heresy in order to protect him from criticism, such as that of Gerson.
- *The burning tree and the linden.*
- *The miracles around his death.*
- *The reason for the departure.* Pomerius mentions the bustle of the city. Vandenbroucke sees a climate of growing distrust after the condemnation of mystical writers such as Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart, while Ruusbroec spoke of a union with God that was easy to misunderstand, and had trouble with priests in Brussels who showed little inner faith. In the chronicles there is also a chaplain, Godfried Kerreken, who sang loudly and off key in the choir, but Warnar doubts

whether that was the cause. His own explanation too is a reading, not a certainty.

Interpretation: whether Ruusbroec erased the difference between God and man has been a theological discussion since Gerson. Whether God really came as near to him in the forest as his brothers believed, no historian can establish. His own books show what he listened to.

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Hendrik Voes and Johannes van Esschen: The Two Who Sang on the Grote Markt

On July 1, 1523, the Grote Markt of Brussels was full before eleven o'clock. Friars of three other mendicant orders came walking in procession, with banners and a cross. On a platform in front of the town hall, professors of theology and abbots took their places. An altar stood there.

On the stroke of eleven, the first of the young Augustinians was brought onto the platform, dressed as a priest. He knelt at the altar. Behind him a Franciscan preached, and a bishop took away from him, one by one, the marks of his priesthood. It lasted almost an hour. Then the next one's turn came. When they were priests no longer, they were handed over to the secular power.

In the afternoon they came back to the same square. Now a pyre stood there.

Their names were Hendrik Voes and Johannes van Esschen. They came from the Augustinian monastery in Antwerp, of the same order as Martin Luther. They had refused to recant what they had come to believe about the gospel, and that afternoon they were

burned alive. According to the reports still printed in 1523, they sang the Creed and the Te Deum in the flames, the ancient hymn of praise of the church.

They are called the first martyrs of the Reformation. The movement had begun in Germany, but its first dead fell in the Low Countries, on a square where tourists take photos every day. Luther wrote a song about them. It is probably the oldest song of his that has been preserved.

How did two monks from Antwerp end up on that pyre? For that we must go back ten years, to a new monastery in the busiest port city of Europe.

A Chapel for the Trinity

Around 1510, a group of Augustinians came to Antwerp. They came from Enkhuizen, from a monastery known for its strict, reformed rule of life. The local clergy were not waiting for them and opposed their coming. Their lawyer in that case was a scholar from Utrecht named Adriaan Floriszoon. We will meet him again.

In 1513 the brothers began building a monastery and a chapel, dedicated to the Holy Trinity. A year later the church followed. On April 25, 1514, Mass was celebrated there officially for the first time.

One of the brothers who signed the foundation charter was Johannes van Esschen. He was among the first seven. In the charter he is called in Latin Johannes de Essendia. About his youth we know nothing. About Hendrik Voes we know even less. Even their surnames are spelled in all kinds of ways in the sources: Vos, Voes, Van den Esschen, Van Essen, Esch.

Where they came from was written down by a man who was present when they died: Johannes Pascha, prior of the Carmelites in Meche-

len, one of the inquisitors. He noted in Latin the name of Hendrik, with 's-Hertogenbosch after it. The Antwerp chronicles also name that city. According to the historian Akerboom, 's-Hertogenbosch and its surroundings are the most probable origin. If he is right, the first martyrs of the Reformation came from what is now the Netherlands and died in what is now Belgium.

Their age we do not know. Luther called them young boys in his song. An eyewitness wrote in July 1523 about the youngest of the three imprisoned brothers, who was led across the square first, that he had no beard yet. The 2023 commemorative book calls Voes and Van Esschen both not yet thirty. A grave they do not have, nor a birthplace. What we have is a monastery church, a song and a square.

The Same Order as Luther

The Antwerp monastery belonged to the Saxon congregation of the Augustinians, the branch of the order to which Martin Luther also belonged. The leader of that congregation, Johannes von Staupitz, had tied the education of his brothers to the young University of Wittenberg. That is how Antwerp brothers ended up in Germany.

The first prior of the Antwerp monastery, Johan van Mechelen, received his doctorate in Wittenberg in 1511. Several Antwerp monks later sat in the lecture hall where Luther taught. So a direct line ran from the monastery on the Scheldt to the man who would shake the church of his time.

Voes and Van Esschen did not walk that line themselves. According to the Leuven church historian Jos Vercruysse, they never studied in Wittenberg. What they believed, they learned at home, in Antwerp, from their own brothers.

Almost the Only One Preaching Christ

In 1518 Jacob Proost became prior of the monastery. He came from Ypres and, according to an entry in Cologne, was born in 1486. He had studied in Wittenberg, became a licentiate in theology there in 1521 and was a friend of Luther. In Antwerp he preached openly what he had learned there: that a person is saved by grace, through faith in Christ.

He stood out. In a letter of May 30, 1519, Erasmus, the most famous scholar of his time, wrote about Proost. According to Erasmus, he was almost the only one in the city who preached Christ and not his own gain.

Meanwhile Luther's writings were entering the city. In April 1518, half a year after his theses on indulgences, they were already for sale in Antwerp. From 1520, Antwerp printers printed them themselves. German merchants brought little books and ideas along with their wares. Antwerp was a world city, with ships and traders from all over Europe, and new thoughts traveled fast there.

I try to imagine what it must have been like for a young monk. You live by a strict rule, you pray the hours, you celebrate Mass. And then you hear your own prior say that you cannot earn the grace of God, because Christ has already done everything. What does a word like that do to you?

The Edict and the Prior Who Came Back

In 1521 the climate changed. Luther was condemned at the Diet of Worms. On May 8, 1521, the Edict of Worms followed, the first placard against the Reformation in the Low Countries. A placard was a government order that was posted and proclaimed everywhere. Emperor Charles V was lord of the land here. His aunt, Margaret of Austria, governed the Netherlands as regent.

Charles V appointed Frans van der Hulst as inquisitor. Van der Hulst was not a priest. He was a layman, a councilor in the Council of Brabant, the highest court of the duchy. Church and state ran together in those days, and heresy was seen as a danger to both.

On December 5, 1521, Van der Hulst invited the prior to come with him to Brussels. There Proost was confined in a monastery of the Friars Minor. He held out for a long time. On February 9, 1522, he gave in, afraid of the death penalty, and recanted before a large crowd in the church that is now the Cathedral of Saint Michael and Saint Gudula.

He was sent to Ypres. There he began again to preach about the gospel. In May 1522, Van der Hulst had him arrested again. Via Bruges he ended up in Brussels, where he was condemned as someone who had relapsed into heresy after his recantation. A fellow brother helped him escape, and Proost managed to reach Wittenberg. He married there, became a preacher in Bremen in 1524 and died in that city on June 30, 1562.

A prior who first gave in and then began preaching again: his brothers in Antwerp knew his story. He had seen how heavy such days are, and that afterward you can still choose.

Three Hundred Women

In the summer of 1522, the Antwerp monastery received a new prior, Hendrik van Zutphen. He too had studied in Wittenberg. On September 29, 1522, he was arrested on the regent's orders and confined in the abbey of Saint Michael.

A crowd gathered at the abbey. A chronicler noted that people from the congregation, helped by three hundred women, broke open the room where the prior was held. Hendrik van Zutphen was freed

and fled. Two years later, in December 1524, he was killed by an angry mob in Heide in northern Germany.

The brothers in Antwerp stayed behind. Without a prior, under the eye of the inquisition.

The Castle Dungeon of Vilvoorde

Now the regent intervened. In the autumn of 1522, the sixteen monks were carried off on wagons, some to the castle of Vilvoorde, a small town between Brussels and Mechelen with a state prison, and some to Hoogstraten. In Vilvoorde they were interrogated by theologians of the University of Leuven.

Most of them gave in. They recanted in public, in the Church of Our Lady in Antwerp, and were released. I will not judge that harshly. Whoever sits in a castle dungeon and knows where refusing can lead faces a choice that few of us ever have to make.

Three brothers refused: Hendrik Voes, Johannes van Esschen and Lambert van Thorn. Lambert came from Thorn, a small town in Limburg.

By order of the regent the monastery was closed. On October 7, 1522, the church was desecrated and the altars were torn down. The monastery buildings were demolished. The church itself remained standing.

Sixty-Two Propositions

For the three, months of interrogation followed. In May 1523 they were transferred to the prison of Brussels, by the Steenpoort. Frans van der Hulst led the trial. On June 1, 1523, Pope Adrian VI made him, by a bull, general papal inquisitor for the Low Countries.

That pope was the same Adriaan Floriszoon who ten years earlier had supported the Antwerp opponents of the new monastery. He came from Utrecht.

From the interrogations came sixty-two propositions, which were later printed in a Latin pamphlet. In them the brothers defended what they had learned from Luther, among other things about the sacraments and about the authority of the pope. Weapons they did not have. They had convictions, and they did not want to swallow them.

The church court declared them heretics. According to the law of that time, that meant death, but the church did not carry out that punishment itself. They were handed over to the secular judge: the Council of Brabant, which gave judgment in the name of Margaret of Austria.

We Praise You, O God

What happened that morning and afternoon we know mostly from pamphlets that were printed in the German-speaking world that same year, by people who sympathized with the martyrs. One is called *Der actus und handlung der degradation und verprennung*, the account of the degradation and the burning. Another is the Latin *Historia de duobus Augustinensibus*. I tell it here as they tell it. The broad outline recurs in all the sources.

The degradation was led by a bishop who acted on behalf of the bishop of Cambrai, under whom Brussels then fell. A retelling based on the old reports calls him Adriaan of Bruges. Johannes Pascha was there too, as inquisitor. He urged them once more to renounce their errors. They refused. The councilors of the regent handed them over to the executioners.

Lambert van Thorn did not stand beside them. According to the *Actus*, he had asked for four days to think it over.

In the afternoon the two were brought to the pyre. Once more someone asked whether they wished to recant, and once more they said no. They cried out that they died as Christians. When the fire rose, they sang in turns the Creed and the Te Deum, the hymn that begins with the words: We praise You, O God.

Two young men, bound, singing while the flames rise. About how the fire went, I say nothing more. It was about two human beings.

One of the letters that circulated in 1523 tells that the marketplace fell silent. Even the chancellor of Brabant, Jeroen van der Noot, is said to have said that he had never seen anything like it at an execution.

Of one of the two, a saying still goes around. In the flames he is said to have said that it felt as though roses were being strewn around him. The Brussels Protestant church magazine *Le Lien* tells it in 2023 as a story that circulates. A sixteenth-century source for this sentence I have not found. Whether he spoke that way, I therefore do not know. That the story kept circulating does say something about what people saw when they looked at these two.

Not everyone told it that way. Inquisitor Van der Hulst wrote in a letter that at the last moment the two had recanted after all. The German church historian Otto Clemen devoted a study to it, and the retelling of the reports calls the letter highly implausible. Pascha, who was also there, wrote nothing about a conversion at the last moment.

A Third Who Did Not Die

In Wittenberg, Luther soon thought that Lambert too had been executed, on July 4. Erasmus heard rumors about July 3. Both were mistaken. Lambert was imprisoned for life in the Steenpoort. Luther wrote him a letter on January 19, 1524, to give him courage: Christ was suffering in him, he wrote.

A payment register of September 1528 states that Lambert had died in prison, without confession, persevering in what the writer called the *Lutherije* (Lutheranism). He was buried under the gallows on the Flotsenberg, the gallows field on the southern edge of Brussels, in old Uccle. Erasmus wrote in 1529 that he had been killed in secret. Five years he was held. His name is rarely mentioned.

Ein neues Lied wir heben an

At the end of July 1523 the news reached Wittenberg. Luther was deeply moved. To his friend Georg Spalatin he wrote that Christ had raised up in these regions "new martyrs, perhaps the first."

He also wrote an open letter to the Christians in the Low Countries. In it he used an image from the Song of Solomon: the time had come again when the voice of the turtledove was heard and the flowers appeared in the land. In the Bible it reads: *The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land* (Song of Solomon 2:12). The murder of the two brothers, Luther wrote, was meant precisely to make believers stronger.

A piece from his hand also appeared in which he explained for which articles the two Augustinians had been burned in Brussels. In Germany, meanwhile, pamphlets about them were being printed, such as the *Historia* with their sixty-two propositions in it. A title page from 1523, now in the university library of Ghent, shows them as martyrs. And Luther wrote a song.

It was called *Eyn new lied von den zween Merterern Christi, zu Brussel von den Sophisten zu Löwen verbrant*: a new song about the two martyrs of Christ, who were burned in Brussels by the scholars of Leuven. It begins with the line that also became its title: "Ein neues Lied wir heben an." A new song we raise.

In the song, Luther sends the story of the two young monks out into the world. The devil tries with tricks and threats to turn them from their faith and sets the scholars on them. It does not work. When their clothing and their ordination are taken from them, they accept it with joy. The core of their error, Luther sings, was that they trusted in God alone and not in men. That is why they had to die. They went into death with praise, and that made an impression on those who stood by.

It was printed in 1524, in an Erfurt songbook with ten stanzas and in a Wittenberg booklet with twelve. Vercruysse calls it a ballad. Such songs went quickly from city to city, writes Akerboom. Traveling singers sang them in markets, along the road and in inns, and whoever heard them soon knew them by heart.

In one of the stanzas that appear only in the longer version, there is a line that has not let go of me since this research: "Die Asche will nicht lassen ab." The ash will not stop. Luther sings on that this ash blows over all lands, and that no stream, hole or grave can hide it. Whoever burned them wanted nothing of them to remain. Luther saw the opposite happening.

In the closing stanzas Luther strikes back at the talk of the opponents: that the two had renounced their faith at the last moment. He sings that you should let those lies rest and that you should thank God, because His Word has returned. As spring comes after winter, God will complete His work. Later Willem van Haecht translated the song into Dutch.

What the Ash Did

Was Luther right? Protestants were persecuted in the Low Countries for centuries more, wrote La Libre Belgique in 2017. What happened on July 1, 1523, opened a long, painful time. The same newspaper wrote that with these two deaths the inquisition in the Low Countries truly began.

It is good to be honest about who did what. The Augustinians of Antwerp were Catholic monks who thought that their church should return to the gospel. Their judges were Catholic scholars and officials of the emperor, who believed they were protecting truth and order. Erasmus, who himself remained Catholic, wrote with admiration about their death.

For centuries the two were commemorated only by Protestants. In their old monastery church, now a Catholic parish church, a memorial for them hangs today.

There I want to end. At the place where they lived.

The Church on the Sint-Andriesstraat

Whoever walks through the Sint-Andries district of Antwerp today sees a large church between the Augustijnenstraat, the Pompstraat and the Waaistraat. It is the Saint Andrew's Church, the same church that the Augustinians took into use in 1514 and that was desecrated in October 1522.

In 1529 it was consecrated again, now as a parish church. It has been through a great deal. In the iconoclastic fury of 1566 it was damaged, in 1581 Calvinists tore down the choir and the transept, and in 1755 the tower collapsed. Each time it was rebuilt. Inside stands a famous Baroque pulpit from 1821, on which Jesus calls the fishermen Andrew and Peter.

And in the church hangs a memorial for the Augustinians, the Protestant martyrs of 1523. The text tells that the Augustinians settled here and opened a chapel in 1513, that the first Lutheran sermon of Antwerp was preached here and that Hendrik Voes and Jan van Essen lived here, who were executed in Brussels on July 1, 1523. It ends by saying that they too, in difficult and confused times, proclaimed the word of Christ. Beside it stands a word from the Sermon on the Mount: *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 5:10). The church writes that with this commemoration, Catholics have broken a long silence since 2004.

Close to the church lies, since October 31, 2017, the Maarten Lutherplein. The German ambassador and the mayor of Antwerp inaugurated it on the day that Luther's theses were five hundred years old.

A Square Full of Tourists

And in Brussels? The Grote Markt has been a World Heritage site since 1998. Most of the houses around it are younger than 1523: in August 1695 a French army shot the square largely to pieces, and the guilds then rebuilt it in stone. The facade and the tower of the town hall survived that bombardment. In front of that town hall stood Voes and Van Esschen. On the city of Brussels' own website it says that here in 1523 the first Protestant martyrs were burned by the inquisition.

In 1923, four hundred years later, the Belgian society for the history of Protestantism had a stained-glass window made by the artist Louis Rivier. It was donated to the city of Brussels and, according to the Brussels heritage inventory, belongs to the collection of the Museum of the City of Brussels, in the Maison du Roi across the square. It hangs on loan in the Protestant church of Doornik, a Wal-

loon city that is called Tournai in French. In 2023, at the five hundredth anniversary, the Faculty of Protestant Theology in Brussels held a colloquium on the meaning of their death. A book came out of it.

Have you ever been to the Grote Markt? Perhaps you stood there among the people with their phones held up, looking at the golden facades. Then you stood on the place where two young men sang the Te Deum.

I do not know how old they were. I do not know for certain where they were born. A grave they do not have. What remained is a song that was written in Wittenberg and sung all over Europe, and a monastery church in Antwerp where they are remembered with a word of Jesus.

The ash has begun to blow.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): the founding of the Antwerp Augustinian monastery from Enkhuizen (1513 to 1514) and the tie with Wittenberg; Johannes van Esschen as one of the founders; the role of the priors Jacob Proost and Hendrik van Zutphen, with the arrest, recantation and escape of Proost; the arrival of Luther's writings in Antwerp from 1518; the arrest of the brothers in 1522, the imprisonment in Vilvoorde and the recantation of most; the closing and demolition of the monastery; the trial under inquisitor Frans van der Hulst; the burning of Voes and Van Esschen on July 1, 1523 on the Grote Markt in Brussels, after a degradation in the morning; the fate of Lambert van Thorn, who died in prison in 1528; Luther's letters and his song *Ein neues Lied wir heben an*; the Saint Andrew's Church as the former monastery church, with the memorial for the martyrs; the stained-glass

window by Louis Rivier (1923) in the collection of the Museum of the City of Brussels.

One source: the role of Adriaan Floriszoon against the founding of the monastery (Christman); the three hundred women at the liberation of Hendrik van Zutphen (a chronicle, cited by Marnef); the name of Bishop Adriaan of Bruges, the silence on the market and the statement of Chancellor Van der Noot (a retelling of the 1523 reports); the transfer to the Steenpoort in May 1523; the commemoration in the Saint Andrew's Church since 2004 (the church itself). The content of the stanzas of Luther's song is given here according to the description on the German Wikipedia page about the song; I have not opened the song text itself.

Only from pamphlets of sympathizers (1523): the details of the last hours, such as their cry that they died as Christians and the singing of the Creed and the Te Deum in the flames. Modern historians adopt these reports, but they come from one side. According to the retelling of the reports, the Te Deum appears only in the *Historia*, not in the *Actus*.

Disputed: the letter of Van der Hulst that the two recanted at the last moment; Otto Clemen wrote about it, and the retelling of the reports calls the letter highly implausible. Luther's song calls this story a lie in the closing stanzas.

Unconfirmed: their birthplace (Pascha and the Antwerp chronicles name one place: 's-Hertogenbosch; the *Chronycke van Antwerpen*: the Kempen and Zeeland, where Akerboom, for Zeeland, thinks of a Brabant village near Uden; published by Fredericq, 1900); their age (no birth years; an eyewitness of July 1523 says only that the youngest of the three had no beard yet and not who that was; the 2023 commemorative book calls both not yet thirty, without source); the story about the roses in the flames (the oldest cited source is

the church magazine *Le Lien* of 2023, which presents it as a rumor; a nineteenth-century martyr book also mentions it, but I have not opened that); the precise date of the flight of Jacob Proost (June 1522 or spring 1523); a memorial plaque on the Grote Markt (mentioned in none of the sources consulted, nor in *Le Lien* and the 2023 commemorative book, the city of Brussels or the heritage inventory; not checked on site); the year in which the memorial in the Saint Andrew's Church was placed (the church mentions only the commemoration since 2004); the location of Lambert's grave (Ucclensia: the Flotsenberg in old Uccle; Vercruysse names Vorst).

Date of Vilvoorde: the *Chronycke van Antwerpen* names October 6, 1522 (Fredericq no. 98), followed by Vercruysse and the 2023 commemorative book; the accounts of Charles V book the transport costs under September 1522 (Fredericq no. 95); Akerboom names July 1522 without source. The arrest of Hendrik van Zutphen on September 29 makes the end of September or the beginning of October most probable. In the story, therefore, only the autumn of 1522 appears.

Interpretation: whether Voes and Van Esschen were the very first martyrs of the Reformation depends on how you count. Luther himself already called them "perhaps the first." Historians such as Guido Marnef and the commemorative book of 2023 call them that. That the death of these two men was not in vain, I believe with Luther. What the sources show is that their story and Luther's song spread quickly.

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Ferdinand Verbiest: The Astronomer Who Made a Shadow Speak

On December 27, 1668, a rod stood upright in the ground in Beijing. It was a gnomon, a pole whose shadow you measure to find the position of the sun. It was 8.49 chi tall, a Chinese unit of length. On the ground a Flemish Jesuit had drawn a line 16.66 chi from the foot of the rod. There, he had calculated, the shadow would fall at twelve o'clock noon. Officials appointed by the emperor stood watching. When noon came, the shadow fell on his line.

The day before, the young emperor had asked him for proof. The Jesuit had answered with a proposal that is preserved in the Chinese records. He asked that a gnomon be set up, and said the length did not matter. Any height would do. He would still predict the shadow.

His opponents, the court astronomer Yang Guangxian and his helper Wu Mingxuan, insisted the shadow was a fraction longer. The emperor had them measure for two more days. Two historians who studied the surviving documents again in 2022, Christopher Cullen and Catherine Jami, describe how the Jesuit passed those

tests as well. A few weeks later he was the head of the Imperial Astronomical Bureau.

Four years earlier that same man had sat in a Chinese prison in chains. His name was Ferdinand Verbiest. In China they called him Nan Huairen. He became the teacher and confidant of Emperor Kangxi, one of the most powerful rulers of his age. He built instruments that still stand in Beijing today. Beneath all that work lay one longing: that China would come to know the God he had carried with him from Flanders.

He came from a village in West Flanders.

A Bailiff's Son in Pittem

Pittem lies in West Flanders, the Belgian province on the coast, about twenty-five kilometers from Bruges. At the end of 1622 Joost Verbiest came to live there. He had earlier been a schoolteacher and sexton in nearby Tielt. In Pittem he became bailiff and tax collector for the lord of Pittem. A bailiff acted on behalf of the local lord. His wife, Anna van Hecke, came from a family in Bruges. According to a 1975 article in the journal *Ons Erfdeel*, the family belonged to the respectable middle class and was strictly Catholic.

On October 9, 1623, their son Ferdinand was born. He was the fourth of seven children. The same article tells that he was named after Notary van der Schuere, the man his father worked for.

He first went to the village school. In 1635, when he was twelve, his parents sent him to the Jesuit college in Bruges. A year later he moved to the one in Kortrijk, where he studied Latin and Greek for four years. On January 7, 1641, he enrolled at the Lily College of the University of Leuven. He was seventeen.

Seventeen Years Old and a Letter to America

That same year, on September 2, 1641, he was accepted by the Jesuits. He went to the novitiate in Mechelen, the training in which a young candidate spends two years learning to live as a member of the order. On September 4, 1643, he took his first vows.

For readers who did not grow up Catholic, the word Jesuit deserves a short explanation. The Jesuits are officially called the Society of Jesus. The Spaniard Ignatius of Loyola founded the order in 1540. Jesuits take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, with a special obedience to the pope. They work in the middle of society, as teachers, scientists, or pastors, and from the very beginning they went out into the world as missionaries. Their motto is *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam*, to the greater glory of God. Verbiest himself had studied at their schools.

In Leuven he studied philosophy and mathematics under the Antwerp Jesuit André Tacquet, a well-known mathematician. But his heart was elsewhere. In January 1645 he asked for the first time to be sent to the mission in America. It was refused. In February 1647 he asked again, and again the answer was no. In May 1647, with his third request, he received permission. He was to go to Nueva Vizcaya, in the north of Mexico. But the Spanish authorities would not let him board in Cadiz. There were already enough missionaries in Mexico, Spain decided.

He became a teacher at the Jesuit college in Brussels, from 1648 to 1652. After that he studied theology in Rome. In Seville he was ordained a priest, and according to the biography of the University of St Andrews he earned a doctorate there in April 1655. He asked once more to be sent out, this time to the New Kingdom of Granada, present-day Colombia. That ship, too, sailed without him.

How many times do you knock before you decide the door must stay shut? Verbiest knocked on a different door. From Genoa he wrote to the superior general of the Jesuits in Rome. He asked whether he might go to the Far East.

Pirates off the Coast

He was allowed. In January 1656 he left Genoa for Lisbon, the port where the ships to Asia departed. That journey also went differently from what was planned. The ship, *De Griet*, was attacked by French privateers. The missionaries escaped.

On April 4, 1657, he sailed from Lisbon with thirty-seven missionaries. Seventeen of them were headed for China, led by the Italian Jesuit Martino Martini. In October 1657 they reached Goa, the Portuguese city in India. From there they went on to Macau, a Portuguese trading post on the Chinese coast. Verbiest arrived there in the summer of 1658.

Many of his traveling companions did not make it. They died along the way, as often happened on those long voyages. In the spring of 1659 Verbiest was among the fourteen missionaries who were allowed to enter China itself from Macau.

His first post was in the province of Shaanxi, in the city of Xi'an, far inland. He had to preach there. He was given a Chinese name, Nan Huairen. After about ten months Adam Schall had him summoned to the capital.

On June 9, 1660, Verbiest arrived in Beijing, then spelled Peking. He wrote it down himself, in a letter of July 5, 1660: after a full month of travel he had, in his old Flemish spelling, "ten laetsten ghekomen binnen de Koninklijke stadt van Pekin", which means he had at last come into the royal city of Peking. There he became the assistant of Johann Adam Schall von Bell, a German Jesuit. Schall headed

the imperial observatory and the Astronomical Bureau, the office that made the calendar. Schall's health was failing, and he chose Verbiest as his successor. The Jesuits hoped that their knowledge of the stars would open a door for the gospel.

A year after Verbiest arrived, Emperor Shunzhi died. His son Kangxi was still a child, and regents took over the government. For the Jesuits at court it became dangerous.

Chains in the Autumn of 1664

In 1664 the Chinese official Yang Guangxian brought an accusation against Schall. He charged the Jesuits with false astronomy and with spreading Christianity. The regents went along with it.

In the autumn of 1664 Schall, Verbiest, and eight others were arrested, among them their fellow Jesuits Lodovico Buglio and Gabriel de Magalhães. They were kept in chains. Schall was old. On April 20, 1664, he had been half paralyzed, and he could hardly speak. Verbiest, the young assistant who had been in Beijing for only four years, took up his defense. His Chinese was actually not yet good enough for it, writes the Encyclopaedia Britannica. He showed that Schall's calculations were correct.

Around the turn of the year from 1664 to 1665 the verdict came. Schall was sentenced to death, and later that sentence was made even harsher, to a cruel, slow death. Verbiest, Buglio, and de Magalhães received a hundred strokes with the stick and were to be banished. So it stands at St Andrews and in Rachel Attwater's 1963 biography of Schall.

The Chinese Christians were hit hardest. Five officials of the Astronomical Bureau were sentenced to death and beheaded. One of them was Li Zubai, whom Schall had baptized in 1622 and who had written a defense of the Christian faith. The database of the Ricci

Institute at Boston College records that he was executed together with four Chinese astronomers. Their names appear in the official history of the Qing dynasty, the *Qingshi gao*. There you read how the court showed mercy to Schall and two others, and how five men of the bureau were nevertheless sentenced to beheading: Li Zubai, Song Kecheng, Song Fa, Zhu Guangxian, and Liu Youtai.

I name them because they belong in this story. They were Chinese men who had begun to follow Christ and who paid for that faith with their lives. Five men, and no one builds a statue for them in Pittem.

In April 1665 earthquakes struck Beijing. A fire broke out in the imperial palace. To many Chinese these were signs from heaven that an injustice had been done. On April 19, 1665, amnesty came for Verbiest, Buglio, de Magalhães, and a Chinese Christian official. Four days later Schall's death sentence was also commuted. They came out of prison, but they were not free. According to Cullen and Jami, the Jesuits in Beijing remained under house arrest until 1668. About thirty missionaries were banished south, to Canton. Verbiest was allowed to stay in Beijing.

Schall did not survive his illness. He died on August 15, 1666, in Beijing.

Yang Guangxian was now himself head of the Astronomical Bureau. Verbiest was under house arrest. According to St Andrews, that gave him time for his astronomical work. He calculated.

A Line on the Ground

In 1668 he found errors in the calendar that Yang and Wu Mingxuan had made for the year 1669. Kangxi was by now a teenager and had begun to take part in governing. On December 26, 1668, the

emperor asked Verbiest for clear proof that his way of calculating agreed with the heavens.

Verbiest proposed the shadow test. He would calculate in advance how long the shadow of a rod of a certain height would be at noon. Yang and Wu first said that they could do that too. Later they admitted they could not. On three days in a row, December 27, 28, and 29, measurements were taken, each time with a rod of a different height. After the first day the emperor's envoys reported that the shadow fell on Verbiest's line. Yang and Wu said it was a fraction longer. The emperor gave the order to measure twice more.

Cullen and Jami show that Verbiest adjusted his calculation for the second and third days to the way of measuring his opponents were used to. The difference lay, in their view, in an agreement about how to measure, and his sums were sound. After the tests the Jesuits in Beijing were set free. In January 1669 Verbiest was appointed head of the Astronomical Bureau. Yang and Wu lost their posts.

He was of two minds himself. The Spanish Dominican Domingo Navarrete wrote later that Verbiest had told the emperor he did not want the post, just as Schall had once wished to refuse it. The Jesuit visitor, Luís da Gama, forbade him to accept it, even if the emperor commanded it. The historian Thierry Meynard describes how the Jesuits in Beijing nevertheless agreed in late 1668. It was the only road by which the missionaries could return to their parishes.

A man who four years earlier had been sentenced to beatings now managed the heavenly calendar of the Chinese empire. What moves me is how little spectacle there is in it. No speech is given and no battle fought. There is a pole, a line, and a man who had patiently calculated in a house he was not allowed to leave.

"Where Is Nan Huairen?"

In 1669 Kangxi, fifteen years old, took power into his own hands. The young ruler was curious. Verbiest became his teacher in geometry, philosophy, and music. According to St Andrews, he translated the first six books of Euclid's *Elements*, the classic Greek textbook on geometry, into Manchu, the language of the imperial house. Scholars doubt this. Noël Golvers believes that Verbiest did not yet master that language well enough before 1675. The Manchu geometry printed in Beijing in 1690 is the work of his later fellow Jesuits Gerbillon and Bouvet. He also explained the Christian faith to the emperor.

The article in *Ons Erfdeel* describes the bond between them as one of very good friends. What such a friendship looked like, Verbiest described himself. In 1682 and 1683 the emperor took him along on long journeys beyond the Great Wall, to Manchuria and Mongolia. He wrote a letter to Europe about each trip. In 1854 they appeared in English translation.

The first journey began on March 23, 1682, and lasted until June 9. About seventy thousand men went along. Verbiest had to follow the emperor everywhere, unarmed and close to him, even on the hunt in the high mountains. After a day on horseback he could sometimes barely stand. He saw a road full of dead animals.

On a clear evening the emperor had him name all the important stars. A man who four years earlier had sat in a cell stood under the open sky and named the stars while the emperor listened. At a swollen river, where the procession had to wait, Kangxi called out, in the words of the 1854 translation, *Where is Nan Goay gim?* That was the old spelling of Verbiest's Chinese name. Then the emperor said, *Let him get into the boat and cross with ourselves.* So it stands in the letter.

Why did he go along? He gave two reasons himself. He had to observe with his instruments what was to be seen along the way in the sky and on earth. And he could not refuse the emperor's command. He wrote that the success of the mission, humanly speaking, depended entirely on the emperor's goodwill.

Along the way he did a priest's work. In his letter he describes how he met Christians and heard their confession. Others, who had already been taught by them, he baptized. Without that journey, he wrote, they would hardly have been able to find the way to salvation. To the high lords in the emperor's train he spoke on every occasion about Christian teaching and worship. It felt, he wrote, as if he were preaching to an enormous congregation. Seventy thousand men, a hunting party, and in the middle of them a priest from Pittem who seized every chance to tell the gospel.

The second journey, from July 6, 1683, lasted more than seventy days. In his letter of October 4, 1683, from Beijing, Verbiest tells how the emperor took them into account. Kangxi knew that the fathers kept fast days. He often asked whether it was a fast day, and when they ate no meat, he had dishes brought to them that suited their fasting. Along the way he asked whether all was well and put questions about the height of the mountains. The emperor's mother revered the lamas, and she knew that the Jesuits opposed her religion. That Kangxi nevertheless treated them so honorably, Verbiest called a wonder, indeed a miracle, at the very least a special proof of God's power and providence. He ascribed the emperor's steady favor to God's particular care.

A friendship with an emperor is a strange kind of friendship. The one can do everything, the other nothing. Verbiest knew that. He had seen how quickly the wind could turn.

Bronze on the City Wall

The old observatory of Beijing stood on the city wall, on a brick platform fourteen meters high. Verbiest had it refitted. He designed six large bronze instruments: two armillary spheres, which are systems of rings that show the paths in the sky, a celestial globe, an azimuth horizon, a quadrant, and a sextant. They followed the design of the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe and were decorated in Chinese style. According to Noël Golvers the drawings were ready in or before 1664, but the building was postponed. Work went on from 1669 to 1673, and in May 1674 Verbiest presented the instruments to the emperor.

In 1674 he also made a large world map in two hemispheres. For the emperor he built a small cart that ran on steam. Steam from a boiler over glowing coals drove a paddle wheel. The toy is sometimes called the first car.

There was other work too. In 1673 General Wu Sangui rose in rebellion in the south of China. Kangxi needed cannons, and he asked Verbiest for them. First it was 132, then another 320. According to Vanden Berghe, more than half of the 905 cannons cast under Kangxi were made under Verbiest's supervision. He also designed four-wheeled carts to transport them.

A missionary who casts cannons. That grates, and it grated in his own time too. Some fellow Jesuits reproached him for spending too much time on worldly matters, for accepting and giving gifts, and for bearing titles that had nothing to do with his calling. Noël Golvers also writes that Verbiest had to defend his work against criticism from Europeans, Jesuits and others. Verbiest himself saw his service to the emperor as a means. He worked for Kangxi, writes Vanden Berghe, because he hoped that in this way he could gain permission to spread Christianity.

I will not pass judgment on that. He lived in an empire where the emperor decided everything, and where a refusal could put his fellow Jesuits and the Chinese Christians in danger. But you may ask yourself what you would do if loyalty to God and loyalty to a man in power had to be carried so close beside each other.

"So Too Will Astronomy"

Why did he do all that work? The biographer Roger Blondeau lets Verbiest say it himself. Just as knowledge of the stars once brought the wise men from the East to Bethlehem, so astronomy would lead the Chinese to the altar of the true God. In the Dutch rendering the words are that astronomy, too, will show the peoples of China the way.

He was thinking of the wise men in the gospel, who came to Jerusalem with a question. *For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.* (Matthew 2:2) Verbiest wanted to be the star in Beijing that pointed to Christ.

In 1677 he became vice-provincial, the superior of all Jesuit missions in China. He looked beyond the foreign fathers. On June 12, 1678, he wrote from Beijing a document in which he argued for the ordination of Chinese priests, who would say Mass and administer the sacraments in Chinese. His fellow Jesuit Philippe Couplet went to Rome in 1680 to ask the pope's approval for it. He did not receive it.

On August 15, 1678, Verbiest wrote a circular letter to the Jesuits in Europe. He asked them to come to China. He also asked for money and resources for the new Christian communities, for catechists, and for schools.

According to the *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, he tried to achieve that Christianity would no longer be regarded as a

forbidden sect. Provincial officials who came to the capital he recommended the missionaries and the Chinese Christians in their regions to. He wrote more than two dozen books in Chinese, on faith, astronomy, mathematics, and geography.

How many people came to faith through his work, I do not know. Even after long searching I found no reliable number, and I will not invent one. The people he baptized along the route through Manchuria are the only ones I can connect to him with certainty, because he described them himself.

A Fall from a Horse

On February 13, 1687, Verbiest fell from his horse. He had to take to his bed, and his health declined afterward. That same year his *Astronomia Europaea* appeared in Dillingen, Germany, a Latin account of the work of European astronomers in China.

On January 25, 1688, he came down with a high fever. The next day he received the last sacraments. On January 28, 1688, he died in Beijing, sixty-four years old. Kangxi paid for his funeral and had it held with great honor, on March 11, 1688. He was buried in the Zhalan cemetery in Beijing, near Matteo Ricci and Adam Schall. On May 19, 1689, the court gave him an honorary title after his death, rendered in Dutch as learned and diligent. According to *Ons Erfdeel*, few received such an honor.

His successor as the emperor's astronomer was the Jesuit Antoine Thomas, also from the Southern Netherlands. In 1692, four years after Verbiest's death, Kangxi issued an edict of toleration. Christians were allowed to profess their faith. The article in *Ons Erfdeel* sees in this the fruit of the knowledge and trust that Verbiest had built up.

He was not left in peace. In 1900, during the Boxer Rebellion, his grave was desecrated. The German field marshal Count von

Waldersee afterward had some of Verbiest's instruments, among them the celestial globe, taken to Potsdam. After the First World War Germany had to give them back. By 1921 they stood in Beijing again.

What Still Stands

Whoever goes to Pittem today will find on the Markt a bronze statue of Verbiest. He is shown as a Chinese mandarin, pointing at a globe. The statue was unveiled on August 10, 1913, before a great crowd, during that year's Verbiest festivities. The sculptor was Count Jacques de Lalaing. In May 1940 it was slightly damaged by bomb fragments. Afterward it was hidden, so that the German occupier would not melt it down. In 1988 it was restored in Leuven.

For the festivities Cyriel Verschaeve wrote a play about Verbiest. He portrayed him as a priest who was forced by the emperor, against his will, to serve science and so neglected his calling. The article in *Ons Erfdeel* later calls that picture entirely wrong. With Verbiest, science served the mission.

At Markt 1 stands the Ferdinand Verbiest Visitor Center, with an exhibition about his life. A walk of about a kilometer begins there, past places from his life, and there is a separate walk for children.

In Leuven, since 1982, there is the Ferdinand Verbiest Institute at KU Leuven, which works for dialogue between Europe and China and for contact with the Church in China. In 1989 the university received a copy of his celestial globe.

And in Beijing his instruments still stand in the open air on the platform of the Ancient Observatory, near Jianguomen, on a piece of the old city wall. Six of the eight bronze instruments are his. Office towers surround them. In 1982 the observatory became protected

national heritage, and in March 1983 it opened to the public. It now belongs to the Beijing Planetarium.

His grave lies in the Zhalan cemetery, which is now on the grounds of a party school, the Beijing Administrative College. There are eighty-eight graves of Jesuits from the seventeenth century onward. In 1986 the gravestones of Ricci, Schall, Verbiest, and others were restored. The grounds are closed and guarded. Groups enter with a guide.

A Pole in the Noon Sun

Ferdinand Verbiest did not make China a Christian country. That was also beyond his power. He wanted to go to Mexico and ended up in Beijing. He was chained and condemned, and afterward honored by the same throne. He worked for an emperor and traveled with him far beyond the Wall. Along the road he heard the confession of Christians in Manchuria, and he baptized others there.

Perhaps you too know such a life, where the door you knocked on stayed shut and another one opened. Verbiest walked through the door that opened. When it grew dark, he stayed at his table with his calculations.

On a winter day in Beijing a rod stood up from the ground. The sun was at its highest point. The shadow slid across the ground and came to rest on a line that a man from Pittem had drawn.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): birth in Pittem on October 9, 1623, as the son of bailiff Joost Verbiest and Anna van Hecke; schooling with the Jesuits in Bruges and Kortrijk and studies in Leuven; entry into the Jesuits on September 2, 1641, at the age of seventeen (novitiate in Mechelen); failed attempts to go to America; de-

parture from Lisbon in 1657 and arrival in Macau in 1658; arrival in Beijing on June 9, 1660 (according to his own letter) as Schall's assistant; the accusation by Yang Guangxian and imprisonment in chains from 1664; Verbiest's defense of the half-paralyzed Schall; the sentence of a hundred strokes with the stick; the execution of five Chinese Christians, among them Li Zubai, and their names (Li Zubai, Song Kecheng, Song Fa, Zhu Guangxian, Liu Youtai, in the *Qingshi gao*); criticism from fellow Jesuits and others of his work at court (Vanden Berghe, Golvers); the death of Schall on August 15, 1666; the earthquake and the pardon in 1665; the shadow tests of December 1668 and his appointment as head of the Astronomical Bureau in 1669; the new bronze instruments (built 1669 to 1673, presented in May 1674); the casting of cannons; his friendship with Kangxi; death in Beijing on January 28, 1688, and a funeral paid for by the emperor; the statue in Pittem, unveiled during the Verbiest festivities of 1913; the removal of instruments to Germany after 1900 and their return.

From his own letters or from circles around Verbiest: the baptisms, the confession, and the teaching of the court nobility during the journey of 1682 (March 23 to June 9), the emperor's questions along the way, the boat crossing, and his explanation of the emperor's favor as God's providence (letters of 1682 and of October 4, 1683, in the English translation of 1854); his statement about astronomy as a road to God, known through Blondeau's biography; his objection to the post in 1668, known through the Dominican Navarrete, whom Thierry Meynard regards as a less reliable source. I read the letters in the English translation of 1854; the sentences in the story are retold from them, not copied word for word, except the emperor's words at the river, which are quoted from that translation.

Only from one source: the naming after Notary van der Schuere and the earlier work of his father in Tielt (both only *Ons Erfdeel*

1975; not found in Biekorf and other Flemish texts); the total of 905 cannons (only Vanden Berghe; the first 132 are also mentioned by the Catholic Encyclopedia); the precise reproaches of fellow Jesuits about gifts and titles (only Vanden Berghe; that there was criticism is confirmed by Golvers); that Verbiest defended Schall with a Chinese that was not yet good enough (Britannica).

Unconfirmed or told differently: his age at entry (some articles say eighteen, the dates give seventeen); the precise date of arrival in Macau (June 17 according to Golvers and St Andrews, July 17 according to other sources, including older Flemish ones; I have not been able to establish which is right); the date of arrival in Beijing (June 9 according to his own letter, June 6 according to St Andrews and Golvers); whether Verbiest himself translated Euclid into Manchu (St Andrews says yes, Golvers and Pang and Stary doubt it; if he made a translation himself, it is lost); the number of converts through his work (no reliable number found); that the five executed men were Christians (the *Qingshi gao* mentions only their sentence; that they were Christians is stated by Britannica, the Ricci Institute, and Vanden Berghe); the precise date of the verdict (late December 1664 according to St Andrews, January 16, 1665 according to Attwater via Asia Harvest); the dating of the construction of the instruments (one source gives 1669 for the whole).

Interpretation: whether the service at court, including the cannons, helped or hindered the mission has been an open question since his own time. The edict of 1692 is often credited to his work, but it came four years after his death. Verbiest himself saw it as God's leading. What I can verify is that he told it that way, in letters he sent to Europe.

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Father Damien: The Priest Who Stayed on Molokai

In May 1873 a boat sailed to Molokai, one of the islands of Hawaii. There were cows on board. There were also fifty sick people, men and women with leprosy who had been taken away from their families and were being brought to the remote peninsula of Kalaupapa. Among them stood a Flemish priest of thirty-three.

His name was Father Damien. In Flanders they call him Damiaan. His bishop had not wanted to order anyone to go. Whoever went to work at Kalaupapa stood a great chance of falling ill himself. The bishop asked for volunteers, and Damien was the first to step forward. The plan was that he would stay a few months. Then another priest would take over.

He stayed sixteen years. He built houses and a water line, he cared for the sick and built coffins. He started choirs and a brass band. Around 1884 it became clear that he had leprosy himself. In 1889 he died of it, forty-nine years old. After his death he became one of the best-known Belgians in the world, and also one of the most discussed. There was admiration and there was criticism, and a fa-

mous writer joined the fight. In 2009 the Catholic Church declared him a saint.

His story begins on a farm in Flemish Brabant.

A Grain Business in Ninde

Jozef De Veuster was born on January 3, 1840, in Ninde, a hamlet that now belongs to the municipality of Tremelo. Tremelo lies in the Belgian province of Flemish Brabant, not far from Leuven. His father was Frans De Veuster, his mother Catharina Wouters. They had a farm and traded in grain. Jozef was their seventh child.

He went to school in Werchter, the neighboring village. After that he worked for a few years in his parents' business. According to the mission press bureau Fides it was four years. In 1858 he spent a year at the state secondary school in Braine-le-Comte, in Hainaut, a French-speaking province in the south of Belgium.

Jozef's older brother Auguste had already joined the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary in Leuven. That order is also known as the Picpus Fathers. There Auguste took the religious name Pamphile.

At Christmas 1858 Jozef wrote his parents a letter. The feast had given him certainty, he wrote: God was calling him to leave the world and become a religious. He asked their permission. The Honolulu Star-Bulletin printed that letter in 2009, at his canonization. A boy of eighteen who writes to his parents that God is calling him, and then waits for their answer.

Around the turn of the year from 1858 to 1859 Jozef followed his brother to Leuven. On February 2, 1859, his novitiate began, writes Father Bernard Couronne of the same congregation. He was first

accepted as a lay brother, a religious without priestly training. He chose the religious name Damien.

A Picture of Francis Xavier

He was sent to Paris to learn Latin and Greek. On October 7, 1860, he took his vows there. In 1861 he returned to Leuven to study theology, on the way to the priesthood.

In those years he dreamed of the mission. Father Couronne writes that, like many young men of his time, he modeled himself on Francis Xavier, the patron saint of missionaries. The biography the Vatican published at his canonization tells that he prayed every day before a picture of Xavier to be sent out.

In 1863 Pamphile was to leave as a missionary for Hawaii. In Europe the islands were still called the Sandwich Islands. Just before departure Pamphile came down with typhus. He could not travel.

Damien offered to go in his place. According to Kerknet he unexpectedly received permission in October 1863. He was not yet a priest. On November 8, 1863, he left the German port of Bremen on the ship *R.W. Wood*. The voyage took about five months. On March 19, 1864, he arrived in Honolulu.

His superior Modeste Favens and Bishop Louis Maigret were waiting there. On May 21, 1864, the bishop ordained him a priest.

Do you recognize that, a calling that begins in a place someone else had to leave empty? Damien went because his brother fell ill.

The Carpenter Priest

For nine years Damien worked on the largest island, which is also called Hawaii. First he was in the district of Puna, then in Kohala in the north. He built small churches there with his own hands and

earned the nickname carpenter priest. In October 1869 he wrote his parents that he had built two new churches that year. He did not need pews, he explained: the Hawaiians sat on mats.

He learned Hawaiian. He would badly need that language later.

His days were filled mostly with visiting the sick, he wrote in July 1872 to his sister Pauline. More people died than were born. Only by God's grace did he find his yoke easy and his burden light. In this he echoed the words of Jesus: *For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.* (Matthew 11:30)

At that time there was no medicine for leprosy. In the 1870s the Norwegian physician Hansen discovered the bacterium that causes the disease. Working medicines did not come until around 1940. From 1866 the government of Hawaii had people with leprosy collected from all the islands. They were separated from their families and taken to the peninsula of Kalaupapa on Molokai. That policy would last until 1969.

According to the American National Park Service, which now manages the area, about seven hundred people with leprosy lived there in 1873. Damien himself wrote in August of that year of some eight hundred.

"In the Name of Obedience"

Bishop Maigret knew that the sick on Molokai needed a priest. According to the Vatican biography he did not want to send anyone "in the name of obedience". He knew what it could cost. An arrangement was devised in which four priests would take turns. Damien was the first to go. The bishop first thought of three months.

On May 10, 1873, he arrived on Molokai. He wrote to his provincial superior that he wanted to sacrifice himself for the poor lepers. In

Dutch the old word for leprosy is *melaatsheid*, and Damien's Dutch-speaking family would have called the sick *melaatsen*.

There was no house for him yet. According to the archive of his own congregation he therefore slept the first days under a pandanus tree by the chapel of Kalawao. The American writer Charles Warren Stoddard visited Damien in October 1884 and ate and talked with him. In his book of 1885 he wrote that in that early period Damien slept for a while in the open air under a tree, in wind and rain. Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in 1890 about that first night under the tree, and the Vatican repeats it. Under the same tree he was later buried.

A man of thirty-three, under a tree, among people no one wanted. The bishop had thought of a few months, and Damien stayed. He went to live in Kalawao, a village on the peninsula. A small wooden church already stood there, built a year earlier by Brother Victorin Bertrant and dedicated to Saint Philomena.

Coffins and a Brass Band

At the end of November 1873 Damien wrote to Pamphile about what his days looked like. There were some eight hundred sick and no doctor. So he did that work himself, and he made the coffins for those who died. God had chosen him to help these people, he wrote, him, his unworthy brother.

In the same letter stands a sentence that later became famous. He himself did not have leprosy, he wrote. But he made himself a leper with the lepers, to gain all for Christ, as the apostle Paul did. In his sermons he began with "we lepers". So it stands in the fragments of his letters that Kerknet published.

What else did he do in such a place? According to the National Park Service, nearly everything. He spoke with the people in their own

language. With the help of the sick themselves he built houses. He laid a water line and planted trees. He set up schools, a brass band, and choirs. He dressed wounds and buried the dead. By 1877 he had enlarged the little church of Saint Philomena and added a bell tower.

He wrote letters. To the government in Honolulu, to his church, to his family in Flanders. He asked for money, for supplies, for people. In August 1873 he wrote to his superior general that although he could not cure them, he could at least comfort them. And to Pamphile he wrote that he was the happiest missionary in the world.

Those words come from his own pen. The National Park Service puts it more soberly: through his presence Kalawao became a place to live instead of a place to die.

A Shared Pipe

Damien took few precautions. The National Park Service writes that he kept no distance from the sick. He ate with them from the same bowl of poi, the Hawaiian dish made of taro, and he shared his pipe. After dressing open wounds he did not always wash his hands.

In 1884 it became clear that he was infected. The German physician Eduard Arning confirmed it, and in 1885 the diagnosis was made official. So it stands with the International Leprosy Association. By then Damien had lived in Kalawao for more than eleven years.

How he noticed it himself was told later by Ambrose Hutchison, who lived on the peninsula. Damien came to him with a bandaged foot. He had put it in water that was too hot, and he had not felt the heat. He added that he thought he had the disease. That memory appears in *Kalaupapa: A Collective Memory* by Anwei Skinsnes Law, a book full of testimonies of residents.

The magazine Time wrote in 1933 that on one Sunday in 1885 he began his sermon with "we lepers" instead of the usual address, brethren. From his letter of 1873 we know that he had used those words much earlier. Then it was still a choice. Now it was true. In his last months he told the painter Edward Clifford, who was visiting him, that when he preached to his people he did not say my brethren, as Clifford did, but we lepers.

He had himself treated by a Japanese leprosy doctor, Masanao Goto. Goto worked with hot baths. In December 1886 Damien wrote to his bishop, Hermann Koeckemann, that the baths sometimes made him cry. He spoke of his purgatory of Kalawao. He closed with the request to pray for each other. The same letter shows that Belgian newspapers had already reported his death. He was still alive.

In November 1887 he wrote to Pamphile that the disease had long ago singled him out. He accepted it as his special cross and wanted to carry it like Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross of Jesus. The disease would make the road to the fatherland shorter and narrower, he wrote. By the fatherland he meant heaven. He asked his brother for prayer, that he might persevere. The disease had marked him, but he still felt strong and said Mass every day.

Nine Hundred and Seventy-Five Pounds

Help came from far away as well. In London, Hugh B. Chapman collected money for Molokai. He was an Anglican clergyman, attached to the parish of St. Luke's in Camberwell, in the south of London. So it stands in the press kit that the French province of Damien's congregation issued in 2009. On January 20, 1887, Damien thanked him for a bill of exchange for 975 pounds. The draft of that letter, now in the archive of the Fathers of the Sacred Hearts in the United States, shows what he did with it. Winter was coming. He ordered cloth and other supplies from his suppliers in Honolulu for five to

six hundred sick people. The rest he kept back for later. The recipients would thank the donors, he wrote, whatever church they belonged to.

Stevenson later heard a story about that same money. According to his notes, Damien first wanted to spend it only on Catholics. A colleague kept talking with him deep into the night. In the end Damien admitted that it would have been theft, and he thanked his colleague for it. Stevenson told it as proof of an honest heart. He does not name the colleague. Edward Clifford, who visited Damien shortly before his death, describes how Damien showed him his books. He wanted Clifford to see that the gifts had been shared fairly among Protestants and Catholics.

On July 19, 1888, Damien wrote to Chapman again. He explained how the gifts had been spent, announced new plans, and let him know that further support was welcome. That letter comes back at the end of this chapter.

Helpers from Everywhere

In his last years help finally came to the peninsula itself. In 1886 Joseph Dutton arrived, an American, who set about putting up and maintaining buildings. In 1888 came the priest Louis Conrardy from the diocese of Liège, who took over part of the pastoral work.

In November 1888 Mother Marianne Cope came with two sisters from the United States, Leopoldina Burns and Vincentia McCormick. Mother Marianne had run a hospital in Syracuse, in the state of New York. The sisters took over the boys' home that Damien had set up in Kalawao.

It is striking how mixed the circle around him was. Among his friends and helpers the Vatican names the Lutheran superintendent Meyer, the Anglican Edward Clifford, the island physician Mouritz,

and the Buddhist leprosy doctor Goto. Clifford was an English painter. Three months before Damien's death he made watercolors of him on Molokai. In a draft of a thank-you letter to his donors Damien wrote how happy that visit had made them. Clifford had entertained the sick with a magic lantern, a music box, and singing.

Softly to the Grave

On February 19, 1889, Damien wrote his last letter to Pamphile. He was ill and had already given up writing to most of his relatives. He was content, he wrote, and he was going softly to his grave. He prayed for the grace of perseverance and a good death.

From his last months Georgetown University in Washington keeps a short note to his doctor, Sidney Bourne Swift. Damien asked him to come by, because he feared internal problems. He signed as his weak friend.

According to the National Park Service he thanked God that he could die of the same disease, and in the same way, as his lepers. He died on April 15, 1889, in Kalawao. Mother Marianne was with him. He was forty-nine years old and had lived sixteen years among the sick.

He was buried next to the church of Saint Philomena, under the pandanus tree.

The attention he had stirred with his letters did not stop after his death. Neither did the criticism.

A Letter from Honolulu

On August 2, 1889, Reverend Charles McEwen Hyde, a Protestant minister in Honolulu, wrote a letter to a colleague, Reverend H. B. Gage. Hyde was no indifferent man. He worked for smallpox vac-

cination and education for the Hawaiians. He disagreed with the praise for Damien in the newspapers.

He called Damien "a coarse, dirty man, headstrong and bigoted." He wrote that Damien had gone to Molokai without orders and had not kept to the rules of the settlement. The improvements, according to Hyde, came from the government's board of health, and Damien had caught the disease through his own carelessness. He also suggested that in his dealings with women Damien had not been pure.

On October 26, 1889, the letter was printed in a church paper, The Presbyterian. With that it lay open to the world.

I want to be honest here, because in this book the facts come first. Part of what Hyde wrote is true. More on that in a moment. For the accusation about women I have found confirmation in no source at all. Stevenson went looking for it on Molokai. He heard many complaints about Damien, he wrote, but not one about impurity. The only trace he found was a bit of gossip from a man from Honolulu in a bar in Samoa. The island physician Mouritz, who knew Damien well, later rejected that his illness came from an immoral life. He pointed to the years of daily contact with the sick, while Damien was overworked and weakened. The accusation remains what it was: a charge in a letter, without proof.

"He Was"

The Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson, known for *Treasure Island* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, came to Molokai shortly after Damien's death. He stayed eight days and seven nights and talked with people who had known Damien.

When he read Hyde's letter, he wrote an open letter in reply on February 25, 1890, in Sydney. In March 1890 it appeared as a book-

let and became a worldwide success. The New York Times headlined that a gossiping minister had been put in his place.

What Stevenson conceded still surprises. Was Damien coarse? It may well be, he wrote. Was he dirty? His answer: "He was." Headstrong? He agreed with Hyde there too, and he thanked God for Damien's strong head and heart. In his own notes from Molokai Stevenson had already described Damien as meddlesome, clever, uneducated, and bigoted, rough in his manners. On the same page he called him magnanimous, in the smallest things and the greatest.

Then he turned it around. According to Stevenson, little had changed on Molokai before Damien came. The sacrifice of this priest had made the world look. Because of it money, attention, and sisters came. He ended with the thought that Damien had been Hyde's father too, if God had given him the grace to see it.

What do you do with a story like that? I find it more honest than a saint's life without a stain. Damien had sharp edges. He was headstrong, even according to the man who defended him. And he stayed with the sick, sixteen years long.

A Training Ship to Antwerp

Damien lay forty-seven years on Molokai. In January 1936 his grave was opened. The American magazine Time described how the concrete cover was broken away and the simple coffin lifted. King Leopold III had the year before written personally to President Roosevelt for help. The body went by American army ship to the Panama Canal and there transferred to the Belgian training ship *Mercator*, which sailed to Antwerp.

His remains were laid to rest in Leuven, in the church of his own congregation. Leuven is the old university city of Flanders, the city where he himself had entered the order.

In 1938 the investigation into his holiness began. That is what the Catholic Church calls the procedure in which it is examined whether someone may be venerated as a saint. On June 4, 1995, Pope John Paul II declared him blessed in Brussels, in the basilica of Koekelberg. After that his right hand returned to Hawaii as a relic. It was laid in his old grave in Kalawao.

In December 2005 Flemish viewers in a program of the VRT, the Flemish public broadcaster, chose him as The Greatest Belgian.

Two Feasts in October 2009

On October 4, 2009, Tremelo celebrated. On every house hung a white flag with his portrait. In a large white tent Cardinal Godfried Danneels led a Mass with about two thousand people. King Albert II and Queen Paola sat in the front row. From Hawaii came the bishop of Honolulu and eleven patients from Kalaupapa.

A week later, on October 11, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI declared him a saint in Rome. Because of rain the Mass was held inside Saint Peter's Basilica. About forty thousand people followed it on large screens in the square. The Vatican estimated the total at fifty thousand. The eleven patients from Kalaupapa sat with their caregivers close to the altar. One of them told the Hawaii Catholic Herald that Damien was now their saint.

As the miracle for the canonization the Church recognized the healing of a retired schoolteacher from Hawaii from cancer. Her doctor had been the first to establish her recovery. In Rome she brought a relic, a lock of Damien's hair, to the pope. Whether it was a miracle is a question of faith. A medical file can only describe what happened.

The pope spoke about Damien in Dutch, French, and German. He said that Damien went to Molokai not without fear and revulsion. I find that an honest sentence. He was afraid, and he went.

What You Can See Today in Tremelo and Leuven

In Tremelo his birth house still stands. Since 1952 it has been a museum, the Damiaan Museum on the Pater Damiaanstraat, which means Father Damien Street. Over the years the house has been renewed and expanded. In May 2025 it reopened after a restoration of about nine months. The roof, the stained glass windows, and the old floor that Jozef walked on as a child were restored.

You will see a permanent exhibition about his youth, based on the oldest account of his childhood, written by his niece Marie. There is a round fair table that belonged to his grandfather. There is a soup tureen that his mother bought when his brother was ordained a priest. His original coffin is there. You see a chasuble, the priest's Mass vestment, his lectern, a mission cross, and a Hawaiian god image. There is also an altar that he carved himself, and paintings by Edward Clifford hang on the walls.

In 2026 a letter was added: the one of July 19, 1888, to Hugh Chapman. The London charity Saint Francis Leprosy Guild had received it from relatives of Chapman. On May 12, 2026, it was handed over in Westminster Cathedral in London to the director of the museum and a delegation with the mayor of Tremelo. A priest of that cathedral, formerly an art dealer, had acted as intermediary. The museum already had many letters from Chapman to Damien, and a draft of this letter. According to curator Ruben Boon it shows how large Damien's network was.

From May 17 the letter was on display for a time. At the end of May it went back to the archive, because the paper may not hang

in the light too long. The museum is having it digitized, so that it can be shown on a screen. The letters in the museum have been recognized since 2013 as a Flemish Top Piece, a protected item of exceptional importance to Flanders.

In Leuven Damien lies in the crypt of the Saint Anthony's Chapel on the Pater Damiaanplein, the church of the Fathers of the Sacred Hearts. In the church you follow his life on photo panels, from his calling to his death. A stair lift takes you down to the grave.

On Molokai the church of Saint Philomena still stands, one of the few buildings that remain on the Kalawao side. The National Park Service restored it in 2009. It is not freely accessible. Next to it, on his first grave, stands a large wooden cross with his name, hung with flower garlands. There, next to the church he enlarged, lies his right hand.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): birth on January 3, 1840, in Tremelo (Ninde) as a child of Frans De Veuster and Catharina Wouters; entry in Leuven into the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts (1858/1859, novitiate from February 2, 1859, according to Couronne); departure in place of his sick brother Pamphile (1863); arrival in Honolulu on March 19, 1864, and ordination (May 21, 1864, according to most sources); arrival on Molokai on May 10, 1873; his building and care work in Kalawao; the becoming known of his leprosy in 1884 and the confirmation by Dr. Arning (official in 1885); that Hugh Chapman was an Anglican clergyman in Camberwell (press kit of the congregation, 2009); the arrival of Dutton (1886), Conrardy (1888), and Mother Marianne Cope (November 1888); his death on April 15, 1889; the letter of Reverend Hyde (August 2, 1889) and the reply by Stevenson (Sydney, February 25, 1890); the transfer to Leuven in 1936; the beatification in Brussels

(June 4, 1995); The Greatest Belgian (2005); the canonization in Rome (October 11, 2009); the letter to Chapman of July 19, 1888, and the handover on May 12, 2026; the museum in Tremelo, the grave in Leuven, and the church and grave in Kalawao.

From his own testimony (letters): his Christmas letter of 1858; his wish to sacrifice himself for the lepers; that he made himself a leper with the lepers and began his sermons with "we lepers" (letter of late November 1873); that although he could not cure them, he could at least comfort them (August 1873); that he was the happiest missionary in the world; the two churches and the mats (1869); the visiting of the sick and the gentle yoke (1872); the hot baths and the purgatory of Kalawao (December 1886); that the disease had long ago singled him out (November 1887); what he did with Chapman's money (January 1887); that he was going softly to his grave (February 1889). All this we know from his own letters. Letters from the archive of his congregation I have not quoted word for word, because the archive requires permission from the postulation in Rome for that; they are retold.

From the memory of a resident: the bandaged foot after water that was too hot, by which he noticed he was ill (Ambrose Hutchison, included in Law, 2012).

From a conversation with a visitor: his words about "we lepers" to Edward Clifford (Clifford, 1889). That he slept for a while under a tree during the first period was written by Stoddard in 1885 after a conversation with Damien himself.

Only from the congregation or the Vatican: that he prayed every day before a picture of Francis Xavier (only the Vatican biography; that he modeled himself on Xavier is also written by Couronne); that he slept the first days under a pandanus tree (archive of his congregation, Stoddard 1885, Stevenson, Vatican).

Unconfirmed: an eyewitness account of the nights under the pandanus tree (Stoddard spoke with Damien in 1884 but was not there in 1873); the precise Sunday in 1885 of the sermon "we lepers" (only Time, 1933; that he preached this way, he said himself in 1873 and later to Clifford); the story about Chapman's money that was first meant only for Catholics (only from Stevenson's notes, secondhand; Clifford confirms only that the gifts were in the end shared among Protestants and Catholics); Hyde's accusation about his dealings with women (no source found that supports it; Stevenson heard no complaint about it on Molokai, and Dr. Mouritz rejected it).

Where the sources differ (in the story I chose one reading):

- *Arrival at the monastery.* The day on which Jozef arrived in Leuven differs by source; the novitiate began on February 2, 1859, according to Couronne.
- *Ordination.* May 21, 1864, according to most sources, including those of his own congregation; one old Belgian biography gives June, the Catholic Encyclopedia of 1913 gives May 24.
- *Number of sick in 1873.* About seven hundred (National Park Service), about eight hundred (Damien himself), six hundred (Catholic Encyclopedia).
- *Year of the sermon.* His letter of 1873 already mentions the words; Time (1933) places a sermon with "we lepers" in 1885.

Interpretation: Hyde's criticism that Damien was coarse, dirty, and headstrong is partly confirmed by Stevenson. Whether the healing of the retired schoolteacher from Hawaii was a miracle is a question of faith; the medical report describes a recovery, not a cause. What Damien himself wrote about his calling, his illness, and his happiness, I believe along with him. The sources show that he experienced it that way and described it that way.

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Adolf Daens: The Priest Who Chose the Working Man

On Monday, June 17, 1907, at nine o'clock in the morning, a priest was buried in Aalst. He lay on the hearse of the poor, a bare bier with six candles. The Mass was quiet, without singing. There was no music, there were no flags and no wreaths. On both sides of the bier the family knelt.

The Church of Saint Martin was full of ordinary people from the city. The Flemish lexicon in the DBNL notes that no one from the Catholic Party or from the church leadership was there. At the cemetery the dead man's brother, Pieter, spoke. He ended with the request to pray an Our Father together for the repose of the soul of Father Daens. The hundreds of people around the grave knelt. Pieter wept, and he led them in the Our Father.

So the Jesuit and historian K. van Isacker described it in 1956, in the journal Streven. The priest who was buried that morning was Adolf Daens. He had twice been a member of parliament, and a whole movement bore his name. His bishop had forbidden him to say Mass in public. Rome had called him to order. He had been told to take off his priestly garb and had refused. Four months before his

death he had reconciled with his church, on a sickbed, with a nod of his head.

How does a priest from a shopkeeper's family come to such a funeral? It began in a street under the tower of that same church.

A Tower House on the Kerkstraat

Augustinus Adolphus Daens was born on December 18, 1839, in Aalst, a city on the river Dender between Ghent and Brussels. His father Ludovicus was a slater, someone who covered roofs with slate. His mother Anna Maria Boon was a shopkeeper. She made bonnets, and according to the Priester Daensfonds, the foundation that keeps his memory, she stood with a stall on the Grote Markt on Saturdays.

The family lived halfway down the Kerkstraat, which means Church Street, in an old-fashioned little tower house under the bell tower of the Church of Saint Martin. That house no longer exists. The building that stands there now is probably Kerkstraat 11, from 1888. A plaque there recalls his birth. The place has stayed the same.

Adolf had an older brother, Augustinus, who became a priest before him. His younger brother Pieter, born on June 10, 1842, became a printer. Those two, Adolf and Pieter, would later carry a movement together.

Adolf went to primary school and to the humanities, the Belgian name for classical secondary school, with the Jesuits in Aalst. There he was *primus perpetuus*: year after year the best of his class.

Twice a Jesuit, Twice Gone

At eighteen or nineteen he joined the Jesuits, in the novitiate of Drongen near Ghent. He taught at Jesuit colleges in Antwerp, in Bergen (the French-speaking Mons), and in Turnhout. In Leuven he studied philosophy and theology.

In 1871 he left the order. Why, the stories differ. According to one version he was sent away after disagreements about discipline and protested without result. According to the other, his superiors agreed to his departure, and the official reason was poor health. Both versions say one thing: the headstrong, Flemish-minded, and socially engaged priest did not fit easily in the order.

He did not give up the priesthood. That same year he went to the major seminary of Ghent, and in 1873 he was ordained a priest for the diocese of Ghent. He became a teacher at the episcopal college of Oudenaarde.

In 1876 he himself asked for a post in Sint-Niklaas. The head of the minor seminary, the school for boys who might want to become priests, worked there too. His name was Antoine Stillemans. Twenty years later, as bishop of Ghent, he would stand across from Daens.

In 1877 Daens went back to the Jesuits one more time. After a few days he left Drongen again. A short period in Kruishoutem followed, a village in East Flanders, and then until 1888 he was a teacher in Dendermonde. There too he left of his own accord.

A Priest Without a Parish

He went to live with Pieter in Aalst. The years that followed were hard for a priest of almost fifty. He applied, and was turned down. A chance passed by. He made several attempts to get a church position in Aalst, and the last one failed in 1892, partly because the conservative Catholics in the city disagreed with his brother's politics.

He gave private lessons, translated texts from Hebrew, and wrote lives of saints. His translation of the book of Job caused friction with his bishop in early 1893.

Whoever has seen the film about him may think he was the pastor of a parish in Aalst. He never was. The man who gave the workers of Aalst a voice stood himself on the edge of his church. The New Encyclopedia of the Flemish Movement says soberly that his political work made up in part for what his church career had not given him. It helps to understand why the conflicts later became so sharp.

Thread, Children, and Fourteen Hours

Aalst was a factory city, with thread mills among other industries. The factories were in the hands of a French-speaking bourgeoisie, Catholic and liberal, who also controlled politics.

Around 1890 the thread mills ran into trouble because of competition from Germany. According to a historical overview in the journal Ons Erfdeel, the manufacturers responded with lower wages, with still more labor by women and children, and with working days of twelve to fourteen hours. The workers could barely stay alive on their meager pay. Daens lived in that city, in his brother's house.

In 1891 a circular letter by Pope Leo XIII appeared in Rome, the encyclical Rerum Novarum, on the position of the workers. For Adolf and Pieter it was an opening. They saw in it the basis for a Christian movement of and for the common people.

Pieter had the tools for it. Since 1870 he had printed and led the Catholic paper Het Land van Aelst, and in 1872 he started the people's weekly De Werkman. From 1893 both papers chose Christian democracy. Adolf wrote for them too.

Okegem, April 15, 1893

On April 15, 1893, in Okegem, a village near Ninove, a group of men came together: the Daens brothers and a number of socially

minded Flemish activists from the Ninove area, who were called Roelanders. They founded the Christene Volkspartij, the Christian People's Party. Adolf's name stood on the public deed of foundation, and according to the old Encyclopedia of the Flemish Movement he wrote the program.

That program was concrete. The party asked for shorter working days, pensions for workers, compulsory schooling, and equality of Dutch and French. In a city with child labor, compulsory schooling meant that children went to school instead of to the factory.

The moment was well chosen. In 1893 Belgium introduced plural universal suffrage. Every man received at least one vote, some more through property or education. Thousands of people were allowed to vote for the first time.

The founding led almost at once to a break with the conservative Catholics in Aalst. Their leader was Charles Woeste, the spokesman of the conservative Catholics in all of Belgium.

At the beginning of 1894 Adolf Daens decided to stand as a candidate for the elections of October. He would head the list in the district of Aalst, the electoral district around the city.

Was that even allowed, for a priest? Daens asked it himself of Canon Jules De Becker, a church lawyer from Leuven. According to the historian Frans-Jos Verdoodt, De Becker found no prohibition in church law. He advised against it anyway, because Daens owed his bishop obedience. Later De Becker wrote to Woeste that Daens had gone against his advice and had let himself be carried away by passion.

Bishop Stillemans did not approve the candidacy. He forbade Daens to use the bishop's name in his campaign, and afterward he was no longer allowed into the taverns.

Mass Behind Convent Walls

The elections of October 1894 gave the Catholic Party a majority in Aalst, but for part of the seats there was a runoff. In it Daens stood against Woeste himself.

Then the bishop took a heavier decision. From October 18, 1894, writes Van Isacker, Daens was no longer allowed to say Mass in public. He could celebrate only in convent chapels, and those, according to Verdoodt, were often open at hours that suited him badly. For a priest it struck at the heart of his work. The ban became known, and the campaign grew fiercer because of it. In the runoff on December 9 both men were elected, Woeste and Daens.

Daens became a member of the Chamber of Representatives, the Belgian parliament. He defended pensions and shorter working days there. Woeste and he clashed openly. In the Chamber Woeste called him "un prêtre dévoyé", a priest who had strayed from the right path.

One of his best-known appearances concerned the municipal elections in Aalst. Daens accused the Catholic opposing side of bribery. According to the Flemish lexicon in the DBNL he spoke of "barrels of beer, thousands of hams, and kilometers of sausages" handed out to voters.

Who was the disobedient one now? The two camps thought about this completely differently. For Daens and his followers, church and government had to see at last how great the need of the common people was. For the church leadership he was a priest who contradicted his bishop in public and so divided the faithful. The historian Verdoodt calls the whole affair unsavory. Daens, he says, was not always free of rashness and a lack of diplomacy, and he was also provoked. The lower his opponents in the church stood, writes Verdoodt, the more fiercely they raged against him.

To Rome

In May 1895 Daens was summoned to the Vatican. He came back without a public condemnation, but with the instruction to obey. He had received the urgent advice to leave politics, and he did not. What exactly was said in Rome is told in different ways by the sources, and that appears in the box at the end. According to the Flemish lexicon, Leo XIII would not even receive him and rebuked him in writing. If that is true, there is something bitter in it. The man who appealed to the circular letter of Leo XIII was not let in by that same pope.

He stayed in the Chamber. In 1896 he joined the Belgian Volksbond, a Christian democratic movement within the Catholic Party. Leaders of his own party were against it, and in 1897 he was expelled again. Between 1895 and 1897 the bishop imposed church penalties on him ten times. There was a first suspension in June 1896 and a second in July 1897.

In 1898 a way out seemed to appear. Bishop Stillemans asked him to withdraw from politics. Daens agreed, on condition that he be given a decent place in the church. That place never came. At the urging of his followers Daens went back into politics.

On December 3, 1898, he was definitively forbidden to say Mass. On October 13, 1899, he received the order from Stillemans to take off his priestly garb. He refused, and he never accepted that order.

How did the church leadership see it? Van Isacker wrote in 1956 that Woeste and the conservative leaders of Aalst had pressed the bishop and the Vatican to remove Daens as a priest, and that they had succeeded. He laid the greatest blame for the damage on them, and he called their campaign hateful and merciless. The bishop he did not condemn. Daens's open resistance and his inflammatory language justified, in Van Isacker's view, the harsh measures. Daens

himself also bore, in his eyes, part of the blame for what happened to him.

What do you do when you are convinced that you are standing up for the weak, and the people placed over you say you must stop? I think then of a verse from the Psalms: *Defend the poor and fatherless; do justice to the afflicted and needy.* (Psalm 82:3) Whether Daens had this verse in mind, we do not know. His program did ask for exactly this. The bishop saw his authority and the unity of the church at stake. Twenty years earlier they had worked in the same city. Now they stood directly opposed.

"I Promised God"

From 1899 to 1907 Daens stood in practice outside the fellowship of the church. He was not allowed to say Mass and was in practice excluded from the sacraments. Van Isacker, who judged his disobedience severely, still calls him in those years a believing and devout priest. There are a few moments in which you see something of that faith.

From 1899 he traveled regularly to the Netherlands to give lectures. In 1900 he stood as a candidate in Brussels and lost. In January 1902 he fell seriously ill. The diocese of Ghent then set conditions for a reconciliation: he had to express regret before two witnesses for his disobedience. Dean Van Doren visited him a few times. To the bishop he wrote: "He is decidedly rebellious." Daens would not say he was wrong as long as he did not feel he was dying.

In those same weeks he wrote himself to the leaders of his party. God would restore his health, he wrote, so that he could work even better for the Christian Flemish people. He prayed for recovery, to be able to work better.

Daens recovered. In May 1902 he came back into the Chamber, now elected in Brussels, with the support of liberal and freethinking voters. In February 1903 he suffered another heart crisis, and Dean Roelandts tried to move him to submission, without result. After his recovery he told the newspaper Le Courrier de Bruxelles that he had promised God to speak the truth until his last breath, if he was spared.

So he was not a man who put his faith in a drawer. In Brussels in those years he received absolution and communion from a Capuchin to whom he confessed. According to Pieter this probably happened with the approval of Cardinal Goossens. We know that only from what his brother wrote about it.

In 1905 the Vatican spoke out formally against him. According to La Libre Belgique, Pope Pius X disapproved of his political activity. In that same year he and Pieter submitted a bill to make the University of Ghent Dutch-language.

On May 27, 1906, he was not reelected. He was sixty-six and had a weak heart. His parliamentary allowance had been his only income, so now he worked as a traveling salesman in wine and olive oil. Pieter described later how Adolf came home tired from the Bierstraat and said he had sold quite a bit after all. A former member of parliament and a priest without an altar, on the road as a salesman in wine and oil.

Let Me Go

In January 1907 Daens still wrote in the paper L'Avant-Garde that a free, independent Christian people's party was needed. In silence he had long been doubting, according to Van Isacker. For months he had known, writes Van Isacker, that he was on a wrong path. His concern for his brother and his brother's family held him back.

On January 29 he left Pieter's house on the Werf. Pieter tried to stop him. "Let me go," said Adolf, and: "I must go to Maria." He went to his niece Maria Delafortrie-Daens on the Molenstraat. There he was too weak to be moved further. The doctor feared he would not survive the night and advised that he be allowed to confess. Daens hesitated. He said he had nothing on his conscience.

Maria had Curate Van den Abeele called, a former pupil of Daens. She begged him to come: he must not let her uncle die without the sacraments. Meanwhile Daens asked his brother what then he should retract. Had he done wrong by fighting for the poor people? Pieter went to his daughter and son-in-law and said what he would do if Adolf died without the sacraments: bring the body to his own house at night and bury it in a civil ceremony, with himself in front carrying a large cross.

It did not come to that. The next morning Daens was still alive. Dean Roelandts went to the diocese, and Stillemans demanded a written statement of regret. On Thursday, January 31, Daens told his family that he wanted to submit.

To his family and to Van den Abeele he also confessed why he had not submitted earlier. His family depended on him. He received three hundred francs a month from a rich liberal in Brussels and gave that money to Pieter, and with his wine sales he earned a few thousand francs more.

Van den Abeele read out a French statement in three points. The first was regret for the offense Daens had given through his disobedience toward the bishop and the Holy See. The second was regret that he had remained suspended so long. In the third he renounced any political demonstration at his funeral. "With a nod of his head Father Daens signaled his agreement," writes Van Isacker.

At five o'clock he confessed and received the last sacraments. Jules Delafortrie-Daens, Father Fonteyne, Pieter, and sexton Camiel Roosen were present as witnesses. Afterward Daens thanked his family for the greatest service anyone had ever done him.

A Little Cross on His Forehead

The next day Dean Roelandts came. Daens wept, kissed the dean's hand, pressed it to his forehead, and asked for a little cross on his forehead. He asked the dean and the bishop for forgiveness. He said he was tired of fighting, and he promised to bid politics farewell for good if God let him live.

On February 7 he wrote to Bishop Stillemans that his only desire in life was to be "an obedient and faithful priest", toward the bishop and so toward the Holy See.

What Daens exactly conceded has never become entirely clear. According to the old encyclopedia he regretted his disobedience, but did not accept any disapproval of the principles for which he had fought. Van Isacker sees it the same way: he did not renounce democracy and the independence of the party, he only withdrew as a priest from the movement. The New Encyclopedia is harder. It calls the reconciliation a forced submission, the capstone of a scenario that the bishop of Ghent had laid out as early as 1902.

On February 3, on the advice of Dean Roelandts, he had let the party congress in Brussels know that he did not want to become chairman or honorary chairman again. Father Fonteyne succeeded him, and the party took him off the list. Contradictory reports went around about what he had agreed with the church. Daens said in an interview that he disapproved of nothing and approved of nothing, but as a priest wanted to stay out of politics.

So at the end of his life he stood once more between two worlds. The church had him back. The party that bore his name had let him go. In a note of April 28, 1907, he wrote that he wanted to be "buried and forgotten". He still hoped that the Christian democrats and the old Catholic Party would come together again. On June 7 he urged Pieter to return. Pieter walked out of the room, moved. The reconciliation did not come.

A week later, on June 14, 1907, the end came. In the afternoon the prayers for the dying were read. Around five o'clock he looked at his family one last time, with a crucifix in his hands. Adolf Daens was sixty-seven.

Catholic newspapers wrote that on his deathbed he had renounced the Christene Volkspartij. His followers did not believe it. Three days later came the quiet funeral with which this chapter began. He received a place in the grave of the Daens family, in the municipal cemetery of Aalst.

A Statue on the Dender

Pieter led the party for a few more years and remained a member of parliament until his death in 1918. In 1909 he wrote a book about his brother, Priester Daens. The New Encyclopedia calls it inspired and extensively documented, and at the same time written like a saint's life. It has strongly shaped how Flanders remembers Adolf Daens. Later came a novel by Louis Paul Boon, in 1971, a film by Stijn Coninx with Jan Decleir as the priest, in 1992, and a musical in 2008. Many Flemish people know Daens mainly this way.

What do you see today in Aalst?

In 1957, fifty years after his death, a statue of Daens was unveiled. Frans De Neve, the chairman of the memorial committee, unveiled it, and afterward it was donated to the city. It was made by the Aalst

sculptor Marc De Bruyn, in rough limestone. In that year a Priester-Daenscomité was also formed, and since then there has been a commemoration every year. The statue stands on the Werf, next to the Werfkapel, by the bridge over the Dender. It has stood there since 2010, when the square was redesigned. Daens looks at the water and at the bridge that leads to the working-class district of Mijlbeek. In October 2026 the statue was cleaned with brush and water by the Flemish minister Ben Weyts, volunteers, and an expert from Monumentenwacht. There was a lot of green buildup on it, and it had not been thoroughly cleaned for at least fifteen years.

On the pedestal stands in capital letters: “The worker may be neither slave nor beggar, he must be a free and prosperous man.” Below it are his name, the years 1893 and 1907, and the year of the statue, 1957. La Libre Belgique quotes the same thought in French, from a sermon of Daens.

On the Kerkstraat, under the tower of the Church of Saint Martin, stands the building with the plaque on the site of his birth house. The Priester Daensfonds organizes walks through the city and made with Erfgoedcel Denderland three bicycle routes past seventeen heritage signs. There is also a brochure, Wandelen in de voetsporen van Daens (Walking in the Footsteps of Daens), with eighteen stops. In 1989, on his hundred-and-fiftieth birthday, the Belgian post office issued a stamp with his portrait.

His grave lies in the municipal cemetery. Every year on November 1, members and friends of the Daensfonds go there with a choir and lay flowers. According to La Libre Belgique and the Flemish opinion site Doorbraak he became an honorary citizen of Aalst in 2004.

On June 6, 2015, Archbishop André-Joseph Léonard of Mechelen-Brussels presided at the annual commemoration Mass in the

Church of Saint Martin, the church of the quiet funeral of 1907. The Priester Daensfonds keeps what he said that day: "That is why I am here today as archbishop, to restore Daens to honor. Better late than never." According to Doorbraak he laid flowers on the grave later that day. Ten years later, at the commemoration of 2025, Dean Hans Vandenholen recalled that Léonard had asked forgiveness in that church.

It is easy to make Daens a hero and his bishop a villain, and I understand why. The sources do not allow it. You see a stubborn priest who stood up for the children in the factories, who got no post and would not give up his political work, and who wanted to die at peace with his church. You also see a bishop who was under pressure from powerful men and wanted to preserve the unity of his diocese.

Daens never walked out of the church. He was punished and suspended. He remained a priest, even when no one gave him an altar anymore. At the end he asked for a little cross on his forehead.

On the Dender he stands now in stone, with his face to the water and to the workers' houses on the other side.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): birth on December 18, 1839, in Aalst, as the son of Ludovicus Daens, slater, and Anna Maria Boon, shopkeeper (birth record, Daensfonds); education with the Jesuits and departure in 1871; ordination as a priest in 1873; failed attempts to obtain a church position in Aalst; the Christene Volkspartij of April 15, 1893; the election of 1894 against Woeste and the ban on public Mass; the trip to Rome in 1895; the failed agreement of 1898, the suspension and the refusal in 1899 to take off the priestly garb; member of parliament for Brussels from

1902; the bill about the University of Ghent; the reconciliation in early 1907 and the break with his party; the work as a traveling salesman (two sources, different year: Van Isacker after the defeat of 1906, the lexicon already around 1902); death on June 14, 1907; his grave in the municipal cemetery (block C, row 2, grave 5); the statue by Marc De Bruyn (1957) and the inscription; the restoration of honor by Archbishop Léonard on June 6, 2015.

From one source or from his own circle: the market stall and the tower house on the Kerkstraat (Priester Daensfonds); everything about his sickbeds, his promise to God, and his last months, such as the exact dates of the church penalties, the events of 1902 and 1903, the promise in Le Courrier de Bruxelles, the letter to his party leaders, the trip to his niece on January 29, 1907, his words to Pieter, the three points of January 31, the three hundred francs a month, the letter of February 7, the deathbed, and the quiet funeral (all from the article by Van Isacker of 1956); the confession to a Capuchin with possible approval of Cardinal Goossens (only according to Pieter); Pieter's plan to bring the body home at night; the portrait of Daens in Pieter's book of 1909, which was written as a tribute. Van Isacker's article was written by a Jesuit in 1956 and rests on that circle and on documents from the time itself. I opened it through its text on DBNL and retold the stories from it.

Where the sources differ (in the story I chose one reading):

- *Departure from the Jesuits in 1871.* The New Encyclopedia speaks of dismissal, probably after disagreements about discipline, against which he protested. The old encyclopedia says his superiors agreed and names poor health as the official reason, with his headstrong attitude as background.
- *Novitiate in Drongen.* 1858 according to the old encyclopedia, 1859 according to the new.

- *Rome in 1895.* The New Encyclopedia: at the nunciature in Brussels a public condemnation had been prepared, which Rome softened; he received the urgent advice to leave politics. The old encyclopedia: his teaching and conduct were examined, he was not condemned and was advised to submit to his bishop. The Flemish lexicon: Leo XIII would not receive him and rebuked him in writing. What the sources have in common: no public condemnation in 1895 and the instruction to obey.
- *1898.* The New Encyclopedia says the church did not keep its promise; the old encyclopedia says no suitable position was found.
- *The building of the birth house.* 1870 according to the Daensfonds, 1888 according to visitors; I think of Kerkstraat 11, which the heritage inventory dates ANNO 1888, but the inventory does not mention Daens. That it is that spot is my own inference.
- *Pius X.* 1905 according to the New Encyclopedia and La Libre Belgique, 1903 according to the historian Jean-Louis Jadoulle.
- *What Daens exactly conceded in 1907.* According to the old encyclopedia and Van Isacker he regretted his disobedience but did not renounce his principles; according to the New Encyclopedia it was a forced submission. On the break with the party: according to Van Isacker Daens himself asked on February 3 not to be reelected, according to the encyclopedias the party under Hector Plancquaert set him aside.
- *Léonard's Mass of restored honor.* June 6, 2015 according to the Daensfonds, Doorbraak, and the heritage inventory, 2014 according to La Libre Belgique.
- *Wages in Aalst.* I did not find exact amounts in the sources I could check; the description comes from one historical overview in Ons Erfdeel.

- *Flowers and grave in 2015.* Only Doorbraak reports that Léonard laid flowers on the grave.

Unconfirmed: that King Leopold II stood behind the bishop's action in 1894 (the old encyclopedia presents it as something that was told; nothing found elsewhere, not even in the biography of Stillemans, which says only that the king held him in high esteem); the honorary citizenship in 2004 (only La Libre Belgique and Doorbraak; no city decision found); that the inscription on the pedestal comes from a sermon of Daens (only La Libre Belgique).

Interpretation: whether Daens did well to disobey his bishop for years is judged differently by Catholic historians and Daensists. Van Isacker places the greatest blame on Woeste and the conservatives and still finds the bishop's measures justified; the New Encyclopedia calls the reconciliation a forced submission. Whether his recovery was an answer to his prayer, we know only from what he himself wrote and said. I read it along with him: he prayed, and he made a promise of his recovery. The novel by Louis Paul Boon (1971), the film by Stijn Coninx (1992), and the musical (2008) are not a source for his life. I have not used them as a source in this chapter; according to Ons Erfdeel the film is not a faithful adaptation of the book, it revolves around Daens and Woeste, adds a love story, and ends in 1899.

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3. Encyclopedie van de Vlaamse Beweging, "Daens, Adolf"
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6. Wim de Poorter, “Daens, of het internationale niveau van een Vlaamse film”, Ons Erfdeel 36 (1993), via DBNL
7. Frans-Jos Verdoodt, Daens (Sterck & De Vreese), excerpt
8. Priester Daensfonds, “Priester Daens”
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10. La Libre Belgique, August 2, 2022
11. VRT NWS, October 8, 2026, on the statue of Daens
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21. Stadsarchief Aalst, birth record 461 (1839), via Open Archieven
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Joseph Cardijn: The Priest Who Taught Young Workers to See

In March 1925 a Brussels priest of forty-two stood in the Vatican. "I had no connections or protection there," he said later, "but through a kind of miracle I got to the pope." He received a private audience with Pius XI. That the audience took place is found in the work of historians. What was said, we know from him.

So Joseph Cardijn told it in 1962, on his eightieth birthday. The pope asked what he had come to do. Cardijn answered: "I want to give my life to save the mass of workers." According to him, Pius XI said that he was the first who had ever spoken to him of the masses and not of the elite. Cardijn stayed a full hour and argued for his views. At the end he was told: "You must carry out your plans, not only in Belgium but in the whole world."

Cardijn was then a curate without great authority. Forty years later he was a cardinal, and the movement he had built counted, by his own estimate, some three million young people in ninety-two countries. In Flanders it was called the KAJ, the Kristene Arbeidersjeugd, which means Christian Working Youth. In the French-speaking part

of Belgium it was called the JOC. Whoever was ever in that movement knows three words of his: see, judge, act.

It began with workers in wooden shoes, in the dark, on their way to the factory.

A Birthday That Did Not Add Up

Joseph Cardijn was born in Schaarbeek, a municipality of Brussels. In most places November 13, 1882, is given as his birth date, also on his memorial card of 1967. A memorial card is the small prayer card handed out at a Catholic funeral. In the New Encyclopedia of the Flemish Movement the date is November 18. Cardijn explained that difference himself. His father had registered the birth too late and had adjusted the date on paper a little, so he told it. Officially, then, he was five days younger than in reality. He added that it later caused him trouble in Mechelen, and that he had always caused quite a bit of trouble anyway.

It was a simple family, and Joseph was the eldest son. His father Henri came from Halle, a small town southwest of Brussels that is known in Flanders for its pilgrimage to Our Lady. His mother grew up in Schellebelle. At home the family spoke Flemish and outside the home French. In Schaarbeek they lived on the Haachtse steenweg, at number 32. His father was a coachman there and his mother a doorkeeper in the same building, so Cardijn told it. Later they moved to Halle and started a coal business. "Many a time I had to help fill the coal sacks in my youth!" he said. The historian Marc Walckiers, who earned his doctorate on Cardijn's early years, calls the father a gardener in Schaarbeek and has the family return to Halle around 1886, where the father kept a café and sold coal.

Joseph grew up in Halle. He went to primary school there, walked along in the processions to Our Lady of Halle, and took his first

Latin classes at the Our Lady Institute. Historians agree that his parents made him sensitive to the misery of the workers. It was the time of Adolf Daens, the priest from Aalst who stood up for the factory workers. According to the New Encyclopedia the young Cardijn came under the influence of his ideas in Halle. He himself mentioned Daens's language as something that spoke to him.

Wooden Shoes Before Dawn

What he saw as a child he described sixty years later as if it were yesterday. Workers walked in wooden shoes, before it grew light, to the factories of Tubize and the Senne valley. They came back when it was already dark. They worked ten to twelve hours a day for very little pay. There was no protection at the machines, and many men were missing part of a finger. Toilets had no door. Nowhere was there a place to wash. At nine he first heard of Rerum Novarum, the pope's letter about the workers.

He called it a disgrace for that century. And he added something that explains the rest of his life: there lay "the reason for everything I have done in my life."

There was another experience that stayed with him. When he started to learn Latin, the boys from his old class no longer played with him. After primary school they had gone into the factory. After a few weeks, according to him, they had changed, grown rougher, and for the girls it was even worse. To them Joseph had become a traitor, someone who belonged with the capitalists. He also noticed that children were left to their fate after their first communion. The church had baptized and taught them, and then let them go at the moment when life only began to get hard.

Do you know that, someone you grew up with and suddenly lose because life sent you in different directions? For Cardijn that loss

became a question he never let go of. He swore, he said, that this would change.

The Evening Before the Factory

Joseph too was to go to the factory. So he told it himself. At his first communion, at twelve, he had decided he wanted to become a priest, and since then he had lived a double existence, as a schoolboy and as a worker's child. The evening before his first working day he asked his parents whether he might study to become a priest. They agreed, even though for a family like his it meant making sacrifices. Part of the tuition came from a fund for needy priests.

At fourteen he went to the minor seminary in Mechelen, the archbishop's city between Brussels and Antwerp. The major seminary followed. There he talked with friends about Gezelle and Streuvels, two great Flemish writers, and he belonged to the student leagues, where he traveled through the Pajottenland. There he learned, he said, to dare to speak and practical charity. Frans Van Cauwelaert he admired then like an idol.

In the spring of 1903 he was called home. His father Henri was dying. He passed away on May 24, 1903. According to the biography by Marguerite Fiévez and Jacques Meert, two people who worked with Cardijn for decades, Joseph knelt at his father's bed for his last blessing. There he promised to give his priesthood to the salvation of the workers. In the movement this story is often told. Cardijn himself did not mention it in the interview of 1962, but it fits everything he did afterward.

A Year That Decided Everything

In 1906 Cardijn was ordained a priest by Cardinal Mercier. Afterward he was allowed to study social and political sciences in Leuven

for a year. He was not happy with it, he said. He preferred contact with reality. At a colloquium on Cardijn in 1982, Walckiers nevertheless called that one year decisive for his further development.

During the holidays he traveled through Belgium and beyond: to München-Gladbach, Essen, Münster, Cologne, and Aachen, to Lille and Roubaix. He met the priest Sonnenschein and saw the workers' associations and the work of Kolping. In France he came to know Léon Harmel, a manufacturer whose workers called him "le bon père", the good father.

From 1907 to 1912 he taught at the minor seminary of Wavre, south of Brussels. There he came into contact with Christian trade unionists. In the summer of 1911 he traveled to England. He studied the British trade unions there and talked with the union leader Ben Tillett. He also visited cooperatives in Manchester and Liverpool. Baden-Powell, the founder of the Scouts, asked him to become a Scout commissioner. Cardijn answered that he wanted to work with working-class youth, not with youth in general. Baden-Powell did not understand the difference.

Five years in the classroom, one summer among the English trade unions. Because of illness he resigned in Wavre, and his cardinal sent him to the city.

Against the Stream, in Laken

In April 1912, around Easter, Cardinal Désiré-Joseph Mercier appointed him curate in Laken. A curate, called an *onderpastoor* in Belgium, is the assistant priest of a parish. Laken is a part of Brussels, on the north side of the city. The Church of Our Lady stands there, where the royal family also has its tombs. The dean did not believe in him. He complained, so Cardijn told it, that his social works were "ruined".

His approach in Laken was simple. Every day he walked against the stream of workers, spoke to them, and visited families. He did not ask them what they believed or whether they went to church. He asked what they needed. Whoever trusted him came with practical problems, and only later did he speak about spiritual life, with the message that people are valuable. First a sandwich, he still said at eighty, and only then talk about God.

He started study circles for young women workers, girls who worked in the factories, and set up small unions with them. According to the New Encyclopedia those circles were the forerunner of the later women's KAJ. He himself said that the women's union in the parish grew to about a thousand members. Paul Wynants, who wrote the history of the movement, says that in Laken Cardijn already sketched the method of the later JOC.

In August 1915 he was given more work. He became responsible for all Christian social works in the district of Brussels, and remained so until 1927. He organized trade unions and sickness funds, founded a workers' bank, and invested in education: saving, better housing, going to school. But by then the country had already been occupied for a year.

In Saint-Gilles, with a Handbook in His Head

The First World War brought Cardijn twice into a German cell. He preached in November 1915 in the Church of Saint Gudula in Brussels, in Flemish and in French, and named aloud what the Germans had done to the country. On November 17, 1916, he wrote, on behalf of one hundred thirty thousand Christian union members from Brussels, a protest against the deportation of Belgian workers to Germany. On December 6, 1916, German soldiers came for him. He was first held in a cellar and then in the prison of Saint-Gilles. On February 7, 1917, he stood with twenty-five others before the court

martial, and he received thirteen months in a cell and a fine of one hundred fifty marks.

His mother, with whom he lived, could not bear it. That arrest affected her so strongly, he told in 1962, that she lost her mind from grief.

His friends from Laken held a novena, nine days of prayer, and went on pilgrimage to Jette. On the last day he was released. That was on June 15, 1917, after six months.

The second arrest came later in the war. Cardijn had to pass on reports every week about train traffic in Laken: how many wagons with war materiel or with animals passed by. He put his notes in an agreed mailbox. Later it turned out that they ended up with the Germans. According to Fiévez and Meert he was in Saint-Gilles again from June 23, 1918, and this time received ten years of hard labor. Shortly before the armistice of November 1918 he was released. About that second imprisonment he said something that stays with you. Men who sat alone in a cell for months sometimes went mad from it. The loneliness was a cruel trial.

He himself, by his own account, was never bored. He used the time. He read Karl Marx, which according to the New Encyclopedia had a lasting influence on him. A priest reading Marx in a German cell: it says something about how seriously he took the questions of the workers. He also wrote down the core of what he had experienced in the years before. By his own account he designed in prison the handbook for the movement that did not yet exist.

What do you do when your life is suddenly put on hold? Cardijn sat in a cell and wrote to the future.

Two Attic Rooms in Brussels

After the war things moved fast. In November 1919 a group of young workers began in Brussels under the provisional name Jeunesse syndicaliste, young trade unionists. Cardijn stood with them, together with three young men: Fernand Tonnet, Paul Garcet, and Jacques Meert. After the war he settled on the Pletinckxstraat in Brussels. Tonnet became his secretary, and together they began a federal secretariat in two attic rooms.

Cardijn clashed in those years with the rich Catholics who governed the social works in Brussels, among them the politician Jules Renkin. He left the House of Social Works after a conflict with the leadership. In 1921 he even founded a Christian people's party for workers and farmers in the district of Brussels. He wanted workers to have their own voice, in politics too.

In 1924 the movement received its lasting names. In French it became the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne, the JOC. Dutch-speaking young people from Brussels joined groups from Leuven and Antwerp that were called De Jonge Werkman, the Young Workman. Together they became the Kristene Arbeidersjeugd, the KAJ, with a K, as the movement spelled it itself. At a youth congress in Marcinelle in 1924 the Jocists proved the largest and most enthusiastic, said Cardijn, and that made an impression.

Not everyone in the church was glad. Catholic Action, the official lay movement, wanted mainly to form young people religiously and saw nothing in separate groups by social class. Cardijn insisted that young workers would accept something only if it connected with their life on the shop floor. It came to the point that his movement was in danger. According to the Australian Cardijn Institute, which keeps the history of the movement, Cardinal Mercier had almost decided that the JOC must disappear. Then Cardijn traveled to Rome.

"You Must Carry Out Your Plans"

It was the Holy Year 1925, a jubilee year of the church. In March Cardijn was received. He often told about it as if it happened almost by chance: Vatican officials led him from room to room, each room smaller than the last, until he stood before the pope. What was said in that hour you read at the beginning of this chapter. He himself called it a kind of miracle.

He came back with the pope's support. According to Wynants's historical account, Cardijn used that audience at once to push his line through within the Catholic youth movement. On April 18 and 19, 1925, the JOC held its first national congress. That year the movement was officially founded, in four branches: boys and girls, Dutch-speaking and French-speaking. Cardijn became general chaplain, the spiritual leader of the whole.

He gave his method a short form: see, judge, act. First you look honestly at what happens at your work and in your street. Then you ask what God and the gospel say about it. Then you do something about it, together. The KAJ called on its members to conquer their own working environment, "seeing, judging, and acting", as a study of the movement later summarized it.

It sounds simple. In many regions priests and leaders first found it too demanding. Only in the 1930s was the method generally accepted.

His core message, he said at eighty, was that faith without deeds is dead. I think here of a sentence in the letter of James: *For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.* (James 2:26)

A Building He Could Not Pay For

The movement grew, outside Belgium too. In 1927 the Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne was officially founded in France, in the presence of Cardinal Dubois, after a first group that Father Guérin had begun in Clichy. During a study week in Reims, Cardijn spoke about working-class youth and about his own youth. Cardinal Luçon embraced him, and a chaplain said that the JOC had received the baptism of Reims.

In 1928 Cardijn was relieved of the leadership of the social works, to devote himself entirely to the movement. The next year, in 1929, about fifteen hundred young workers, according to him, went on pilgrimage to Rome, in three trains. The pope called them missionaries of the working world and gave them Saint Thérèse of Lisieux as patroness. That same year Cardijn became an honorary canon of Saint Rumbold's Cathedral in Mechelen.

In 1933 he traveled to Portugal to explain to the bishops how working-class youth should be educated. There he saw a factory building, just burned down and rebuilt, for sale, and he prayed in Fatima for that building. He did not have the money for it. So he told it himself in 1962. Back in Belgium he was phoned twice with the instruction to go to the owners. They were an old gentleman, an old lady, and their son. In the end they gave him the building, for free.

After that the trouble began. A nonprofit association was set up, and the tax authorities demanded seven hundred thousand francs in tax on the gift. Three ministers of finance negotiated about it, among them Hendrik de Man. Only with Minister Marcel was it settled.

On August 25, 1935, the JOC celebrated its tenth anniversary in the Heysel Stadium in Brussels. Seventy thousand to eighty thousand

people came. Twenty-three years earlier it had begun with study circles for factory girls in Laken. At such numbers I always pause. A full stadium says little about a single life. But the method that brought all those young people there always began small, in a little group, with the question of what you see at your work and what you are going to do about it.

A Skylight and a Chimney

Then came the Second World War. In 1939 an international pilgrimage to Rome was to take place, with twenty thousand registered young people from forty countries. The war came in between, and the pilgrimage did not happen. Young people from Canada and Colombia traveled to Rome anyway, and the pope sent Cardijn a photo with a handwritten word of encouragement.

The headquarters of the movement became a refuge for refugees. He baptized three children who were born there. The JOC resisted the compulsory labor of Belgian young people in Germany. According to a study of the movement in wartime, it helped members of the resistance and belonged to a network set up from the Belgian government in London.

On June 11, 1942, Cardijn was arrested again. Arrested with him were Victor Michel and Jef Deschuyffeleer, the presidents of the JOC and the KAJ, and the priest Joseph Magnus. The Germans wanted to let him go separately when he was released. Cardijn demanded that his men be freed with him. The international movement gives September 21, 1942, as the day of his release, and speaks of about three months. Cardijn himself later spoke of four months.

Fernand Tonnet and Paul Garcet, two of the boys of 1919, did not survive the war. They had been arrested because they had had contact with a boy from the movement who had been dropped as a

parachutist. They refused to flee so as not to endanger the movement, Cardijn told. They died in German concentration camps.

In 1944 the Germans came for Cardijn once more. He told about it himself in 1962. It was about half past seven in the morning and he was just about to say Mass. In the house it had been agreed not to open before ten in the morning and after five in the afternoon, because hostage-taking was threatened. Two of his men went to look. One of them warned him that he must not let himself be arrested. Cardijn climbed over the garden wall, went through the damaged house of the neighbors, crawled through a skylight, and hid behind a large chimney. The Germans searched for a long time. They saw his hat and his coat lying there. Him they did not find.

A canon over sixty behind a chimney on a roof. It sounds like him: sober, and not planning to give up.

A Word in an Encyclical

After the war Cardijn looked beyond Europe. An international movement came about, with a first large assembly in the Cirque in Brussels. The world congress of 1950 in Brussels drew a hundred thousand young people, with five hundred delegates from fifty countries. In 1957 the pope in Rome approved the statutes, during a pilgrimage with thirty-two thousand delegates from eighty-seven countries. Cardijn traveled through the three Americas, through Asia and Australia, and later through South America and Africa. He became involved in peace movements and had much attention for what was then called the Third World: the poor countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Rome gave him one honorary title after another: privy chamberlain in 1950, domestic prelate in 1956, protonotary in 1962.

The greatest shock for him was the Islamic world in Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt. He asked himself how the church could win those people for Christ. In Calcutta he saw people born and dying in the street. Rich countries had to change, he said, otherwise communism would attract those people, and it was false Christianity to forget them. Blacks, yellows, and reds are brothers, he said, and the Christian world had to show that in deeds.

He also spoke in halls where nobody expected him. In Gilly communists said he was not allowed to speak there. He put to them the demand that workers must be treated as human beings, and afterward the hall fell silent. In *Le Peuple* Fernand Demany wrote a praising article. Cardijn did not go along with the idea that he was therefore a socialist. He kept politics at a distance.

In 1961 Pope John XXIII wrote the encyclical Mater et Magistra, a letter to the whole church on social questions. In it the application of the church's social teaching is described as going in three steps, which according to the pope are usually summarized as observe, judge, act. The name Cardijn does not appear there. Whoever knows the history recognizes his three words. Stefan Gigacz, who writes about him for the Cardijn movement, tells that Cardijn himself had urged John XXIII in 1960 to write such a letter, seventy years after the first great social encyclical.

On his eightieth birthday he gave the long interview from which much of this chapter comes. He was still the same man, and he called himself an outspoken optimist. He laughed at himself and admitted that in his life he had given many people trouble. In 1964 his book *Laymen on the Front Line* appeared. Laymen are believers who are not priests. Cardijn saw them standing at the front, on the shop floor.

Cut Off in Latin

In February 1965 Pope Paul VI made him a cardinal. He also became titular archbishop of Tusuro, an ancient bishop's seat that exists now only as a title. He was eighty-two.

Since 1962 the bishops of the whole world had been meeting in Rome for the Second Vatican Council. Cardijn was already involved as an expert, from 1963 to 1965, writes Wynants. As cardinal he took part in the autumn of 1965 as a council father in the last session.

On Monday, September 20, 1965, the fourth day of the debate on religious freedom, he took the floor. The American Jesuit magazine *America* reported that he spoke directly after the Prague cardinal Josef Beran, who had been imprisoned under the Nazis and later under the communists. "Cardinal Cardijn, too, spoke in favor of the schema," the magazine wrote: Cardijn also supported the text.

A French bishop, who signed with the initials L. C., wrote on September 25, 1965, a letter from Rome for the diocesan paper of Montauban. Whoever had known Cardijn in the 1930s recognized him at once, he wrote. A little older and a little fuller, but with the same commanding chin and the almost brazen bearing of the old chaplain. His voice still sounded powerful, and he could address a hall, even in Latin, with gestures. Only being brief he had never learned. Speaking time was limited to seven or ten minutes, and both of Cardijn's speeches were cut off before he finished. The bishop thought that a pity. He saw in Cardijn's appointment at just that moment, when the council was speaking about the laity, a plan of God.

What he spoke about, says Wynants: about young people, the working class, the Third World, and religious freedom.

He did not remain a cardinal for long. On July 24, 1967, Joseph Cardijn died in Leuven, eighty-four years old. He was buried in the Church of Our Lady in Laken, the parish where in 1912 he had begun as a young curate with factory girls.

What You See Today in Laken and Halle

Whoever goes to Laken today finds his grave in a side aisle of the Church of Our Lady. That aisle is always open to visitors, apart from the royal crypt, which opens only rarely. In the chapel that is called the royal chapel stands a permanent exhibition about his life and about the history of the KAJ and the JOC. It was set up in 2000, renewed in 2007 with KADOC, the documentation center of KU Leuven, and updated again for the hundredth anniversary of the movement in 2025. Admission is free as long as the church is open.

On November 13, 2022, his hundred-and-fortieth birthday, well over two hundred fifty people came to that church. Pupils of the Cardijn School and young people of the Brussels KAJ spoke. Kerknet quoted that day a sentence attributed to him: "A young worker is worth more than all the gold in the world."

In Halle stands the Basilica of Our Lady, the Saint Martin's Basilica, where he walked along in the processions as a boy. The street along the basilica is today called the Kardinaal Cardijnstraat, Cardinal Cardijn Street. I did not find a memorial plaque on his parents' house.

Wooden Shoes on the Sidewalk

More than a hundred and thirty years ago a boy in Halle looked at workers in wooden shoes. They walked in the dark to the factories

in the Senne valley. He knew nothing yet of Laken, of Saint-Gilles, or of Rome. He only looked.

At eighty he said that everything else had come out of that. He had begun with seeing.

What do you see, when you go to work in the morning?

In Laken the side aisle with his grave stands always open, for whoever walks in from the street.

What is certain and what is told

Certain (several independent sources): birth in Schaarbeek in November 1882; childhood in Halle in a simple family; seminary in Mechelen from age fourteen; ordination as a priest in 1906; a year of study in Leuven (1906-1907); teacher in Wavre (1907-1912); curate in Laken from April 1912 and study circles for young women workers; leadership of the social works in Brussels from 1915; two arrests by the Germans in the First World War, the first in December 1916 after his protest against the deportations, with six months in a cell (Walckiers, and also Fiévez and Meert); the father's coal business in Halle (Walckiers and Cardijn himself); the Jeunesse syndicaliste of November 1919 with Tonnet, Garcet, and Meert; the names JOC and KAJ in 1924 and official founding in 1925; private audience with Pius XI in March 1925; the congress at the Heysel on August 25, 1935; arrest on June 11, 1942, and about three months of imprisonment; the death of Tonnet and Garcet in concentration camps; cardinal in 1965; expert at the Second Vatican Council (1963 to 1965) and council father in the last session; his speech for religious freedom on September 20, 1965 (*America*, 1965) and two speeches that were cut off (letter from Rome in the diocesan paper of Montauban, September 25, 1965); death in Leuven on July 24, 1967; grave and exhibition in the Church of Our Lady in Laken.

Only from his own testimony or from his own circle: the explanation for the two birth dates, the mother from Schellebelle, and the languages at home; the address in Schaarbeek and the occupation of his parents; the images of the workers in wooden shoes and of his classmates; the decision at twelve and the question to his parents the evening before his first working day; the promise at his father's deathbed in 1903 (biography by Fiévez and Meert; Cardijn does not mention it in the interview); the holiday trips, Ben Tillett, and Baden-Powell's request; his resignation in Wavre because of illness and the dean's skepticism in Laken; the women's union of a thousand members in Laken; the sermon in Saint Gudula, his mother's grief, the novena of his friends, and his release on the last day; the reports on train traffic; that in prison he designed the handbook of the movement; everything that was said in the audience of 1925, and the way through ever smaller rooms (only Cardijn's own story); that Mercier had almost abolished the JOC (Australian Cardijn Institute); the prayer in Fatima, the gift of the building, and the tax case; that in 1942 he demanded that his men be released with him; that Tonnet and Garcet refused to flee; the pilgrimage of fifteen hundred young people in 1929, the baptism of Reims, and the pilgrimage of 1957; the escape over the roof in 1944; the meeting in Gilly; that Cardijn urged a social encyclical in 1960 (Stefan Gigacz); the estimate of three million members in ninety-two countries.

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

- *Birth date.* November 13 according to Cardijn himself, Wynants, Walckiers, the international movement, and his memorial card; November 18 according to the New Encyclopedia and, according to Cardijn, the official date (his father registered him on November 21). I could not consult the birth record.

- *His father's occupation.* Coachman according to Cardijn himself, coachman and gardener according to Fiévez and Meert, gardener according to Walckiers. Walckiers has the family return to Halle around 1886 and names a café with a coal trade there.
- *The first imprisonment.* Cardijn himself in 1962 placed the sermon on November 2, 1915, and the arrest on December 6, 1915, with seven months in Saint-Gilles until June 1916, and told that German soldiers fetched him at home. Fiévez and Meert place the sermon on November 8 (without a year in my source, after his appointment in August 1915), the arrest on December 6, 1916, in the sacristy after his Mass, the court martial on February 7, 1917, and the release on June 15, 1917. Walckiers confirms December 1916 and six months. I follow 1916; in 1962 Cardijn presumably mixed up the year of the sermon and the year of the arrest. The details of the court martial, the thirteen months, and the fine come only from Fiévez and Meert.
- *The second arrest.* June 23, 1918, and ten years of hard labor come only from Fiévez and Meert; Cardijn himself said only that it was an espionage case. Walckiers does not mention it.
- *The Heysel in 1935.* Seventy thousand to eighty thousand according to Wynants; a hundred thousand according to Cardijn himself in 1962, who also said that it was the day Queen Astrid died. I could not check that last link in an opened source.
- *The second arrest in the Second World War.* About three months and free on September 21, 1942, according to the international movement, four months according to Cardijn himself.
- *The council speeches.* Three in the hall and two in writing according to a website of the Cardijn movement and Wikipedia; two up to September 25, 1965, according to the letter from Montauban, which fits a session that lasted until December.

The subjects (young people, working class, Third World, religious freedom) are named by Wynants; which speech was about which subject, other than that of September 20, I could not establish.

- *The year of the book. Laymen on the Front Line* is 1964 according to the New Encyclopedia; Wynants mentions a French edition of 1963.
- *Memorial plaque.* A plaque on his parents' house in Halle or Schaarbeek I did not find.

Interpretation: Mater et Magistra (1961) names the three steps observe, judge, act, without naming Cardijn. The link to his method is generally made, but is not in the text itself. I opened the interview of 1962 and used it for what Cardijn told himself. Whoever takes him at his word reads in the prayer in Fatima and in the novena of Laken a man who believed that God worked along with his plans. The sources cannot prove that. I believe it along with him.

Sources for this chapter

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4. Interview with Cardinal Cardijn on his eightieth birthday, broadcast December 19, 1962 (DBNL)
5. Kerknet, commemoration of 140 years of Cardijn in Laken (November 16, 2022)
6. JOC Internationale, exhibition on Cardijn in Laken (2025)
7. IYCW, "Cardijn's life"

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9. Cardijn Reflections, on Henri Cardijn and the promise of 1903
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14. Wikipedia, “Joseph Cardijn” (starting point)
15. Belvicci, Sint-Martinus Basilica of Halle
16. King Baudouin Foundation, view of the basilica of Halle
17. America, “The fight for religious freedom” (1965)
18. “Lettre de Rome”, Bulletin catholique du diocèse de Montauban, September 30, 1965
19. Paul Wynants, “La JOC et l’Église: de l’adhésion à la contestation (1961-1974)”
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21. Stefan Gigacz, proposal for a Vatican commission for youth (IHU, 2018)
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23. Cardijn en Vaticanum II (website of the Cardijn movement)
24. M. Walckiers, “Joseph Cardyn jusqu’avant la fondation de la J.O.C.”, summary of the dissertation (UCL, 1981), Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis 1982
25. Memorial card of Jozef Cardijn (1967), Heemkundige Kring Braem, via Open Archieven
26. Bible.com, Jakobus 2:26 (NKJV)

Afterword

Eight lives, from a testament in a monastery near Tournai in the seventh century to a cardinal who died in Leuven in 1967. A bishop who put in writing where he wanted to be buried. A woman without a face. A chaplain in a forest. Two boys who sang on a square. An astronomer and a shadow. A priest on an island of the sick. A priest who chose the working man. And a chaplain who taught workers to see.

They differed in almost everything. Some were learned, others not. Some received a statue, others a stake. Two of them clashed with the church they belonged to. A few of them are now called saints. Of most of them we know less than we would like.

What they have in common is that they took God seriously. It was allowed to cost them something: a secure place, a career, their health, sometimes their lives.

What touched me most while writing is how close it all lies. Whoever walks in the Sonian Forest near Brussels walks in the woods where Ruusbroec wrote. The Grote Markt of Brussels is full of tourists who do not know what happened there in 1523. In

Tremelo stands the house where Damien was born. And in Laken lies Cardijn buried.

Perhaps you will drive south someday. Then take the time to visit one of those places. Ask yourself there what God might ask of you.

The people who walked in darkness Have seen a great light. (Isaiah 9:2)