

Spiritual Virgins and their Passion for Devotional Prints

Ruusbroec Institute, Print room · Thijs Collection

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Some important sources for research into the religious history and culture of Flanders are *archivalia* and *Catholica*: pious books and manuscripts. Less well-known sources for research in this area are devotional prints or 'prayer pictures'. These little pictures were disseminated from Antwerp throughout Europe and beyond at the time of the Catholic Counter Reformation. They served, in addition to the imagination of belief, as an important aid to prayer.

During the Early Modern period many people experienced the calling to follow Christ. Thousands of women united themselves via a mystical wedding with their heavenly groom and in the process made the vow of chastity. Most of these spiritual virgins or spiritual daughters (*filiae devotae*), however, in contrast to nuns, remained 'in the world' and were active in education and handiwork (e.g. embroidery and lacemaking). (Semi) religious women were a definite majority in relation to their male counterparts. In the northern Netherlands such spiritual virgins or daughters were popularly called 'klopjes' whereas in Flanders they were called 'kwezels'. The 'quesel' depicted on page 8 stems from a series of representations of religious dress in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.



De lesse van de morale [The lesson on morality], coloured copper engraving on parchment, anonymous · Thijs Collection

In their daily lives the *virgins* made full use of devotional prints. In Antwerp millions of these pictures were printed to inspire a virtuous life following Christ, His mother Mary and the saints. On one of these prints two *Spiritual Virgins* are pictured together with their main exemplar Mary. They are in the process of receiving a meditation lesson from her while doing their handiwork.

SEER HEYLIGE EN PROFYTELYCKE DAGELYCX MORGENS OPDRACHT
 Tot oeffeningh van alle Gelooverye, om daer door befonderlyck deelachtigh te worden van alle de
 verdienften van Jesus, MARTA, en alle Gods lieve Heyligen, tot vergiffenis der sonden,
 beternis van leven, en bekomingh der eeuwige saligheyt.

Godt Hemelcken Vader, siet ick
 arm sondarigh mensch drage u he-
 den op alle de verdienften van het le-
 ven, lyden, ende doot van uwen eenigen
 geboren Soone Jesu Christi. Syn valten,
 syn waerken, syn bidden, syn traenen, syn
 geestheyt, s'gheftmoedicheyt, oot-
 moedicheyt, gehoorfamenheyt, sijn be-
 nautheyt, sijnne wonderen en alle sijnne ver-
 dienften, met de verdienften van sijnne
 genoeschelyc Moeder ende Maget Ma-
 rta, ende alle Gods lieve Heyligen, met
 alle Heylige sacrificien van de Missen,
 dieer heden inde heil Weert geschieden,
 en sullen geschieden, tot vergiffenis
 van mynen alle menschen sonden, vol-
 comen beternis van ons leven, ende dar-
 naer d'eeuwige glorie, noek voor die in
 peryckel nu noch sijn van sonden of
 fouden eenen in peryckel, dat u godde-
 lycke geestheyt die son belienet, dieer
 van te ver, v'et, noek tot troost van al-
 le benoude en bedruckte herten, ende
 verlossinge van alle Christene slaven wys
 de slavenvy der ongelooverye, tot ges-
 singe, onafingelooft van alle s'cke ende
 stervende menschen, tot verheffinge van
 on: Heyligh Roornich Catholyck Ge-
 loof, ende weeten van onsen Ackerhey-
 lighen Vader den Paus van Roomen



finnellyc Opperhoofd der ware Ker-
 ke Jesu Christi, en voor alle geestelyc-
 ke ende werelycke Overighen en on-
 dardanen, Bichdraders, en Sichestdraders,
 dat sy die en alle menschen, door uwen
 Goddellycken Geest belieft te bestien.
 Ende eyndelyc tot leffenisse en ver-
 lossinge van alle Gelooverye Zielen in-
 de pyne des Vagwien, noek voor N...
 N... tot dien ghynde drage ick u op
 geheel myn selven tot uwen ewigen
 lof, myn woorden, myn wercken ende
 gepyllen, u biddende dat sy allegader,
 door u om ten in u alken mogen be-
 ginnen, gedon worden ende verlyden.
 Verenticht met die van uwen eenigen
 Soone Jesu, ende uwe welbemindc Doch-
 ter Maria, ootmoedelyc verfoeckende
 ons deelachtigh te maken van alle hun-
 re verdienften door Jesu Christi, u
 ontfatters, welken Aldergoddertien-
 sten Jesus ick bedanke van al de me-
 nighvuldige weldaden en liden die my
 onwerdich behoort, p'feytelyc in u
 sijn Alderlychlicht menschenwoedinge
 ende geboorte, bittere Passie, ende Doot.
 Den welken leest ende regneert, met
 Godt den Vader, en den Heyligen Geest,
 Godt inder ewigheyt der ewighe-
 den. Amen

*Smaendaghs salmen dese Opdracht oeffenen ter eeren van het bloedigh sweeten in het Hofsten, ende ge-
 wangensisse Jesu Christi. Ende dan dit misterie inden dagh somwylen overpersien principalyck in u Gebeds of
 Meditatie, ende al loo doende dagelycx met de navolgende misterien op die navolgende dagen.*
Dynsdaghs ter eeren vande vrede gewangensisse Jesu Christi.
Woensdaghs ter eeren vande sobroomelycke gesessinghe.
*Donderdaghs ter eeren vande pijnelycke Doorne Croone Jesu Christi, en het Hoogbruederigh H. Sacra-
 ment des Autaers.*
Vrydaghs ter eeren vande sware Cruysdraginge ende Cruysinghe.
Saterdaghs ter eeren vande Doot en begraffensisse Jesu Christi, ende bedruckte Moeder Gods Maria.
Sondaghs ter eeren vande Verrijfensisse en Hemelvaert van Jesus en Maria.

V. A. E. L. C.
 Antwerpen, By Hendrick Thielluier, Boeckdrucker en Verkooper, inde Wollanen. 1710.

Seer heylige en profytelycke dagelycx morgens opdracht [Very holy and profitable daily morning exercise], (Antwerp: Hendrick Thieullier, 1710) · Thijs Collection

A particularly rare combination of word and image is constituted by a detailed prayer picture *Seer heylige en profytelycke dagelycx morgens opdracht*, made by the Antwerp printer and bookseller Hendrik Thieullier from 1710. In the middle a virgin is meditating on the four last things: death, the last judgement, heaven and hell. Around it are printed some texts: a pious prayer to the Father and how one can follow Christ throughout the entire week in His suffering. This print was kept in a book, but was meant to hang on the wall as a reminder. Although probably printed in large numbers, this is the only surviving example, a fate that befell many of them.

These three unique sources of the spirituality of the Spiritual Virgins come from the rich legacy of professor Alfons K.L. Thijs. Together with his friend Filip Lemmens he has contributed much to our knowledge of devotional representation. Following his death in 2014, the pictures were bought by the University of Antwerp Library and loaned to the large existing collection of pious pictures of the Ruusbroec Institute Library to aid research into the history of devotion during the Early Modern period.

Further reading

- A.K.L. THIJNS, *Antwerpen internationaal uitgeverscentrum van devotieprenten, 17de–18de eeuw*, Louvain, 1993.
- E.M.F. VERHEGGEN, *Beelden van passie en hartstocht. Bid- en devotieprenten in de Noordelijke Nederlanden, 17de en 18de eeuw*, Zutphen, 2006.