Some important sources for research into the religious history and culture of Flanders are archivia 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 (filiæ devotae), however, in contrast to nuns, remained 'in the world' and were active in education and handicraft (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.

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 PROFYTLYYCKE DAGELYCK MORGENS OPDRACHT
Teeffeninghe van alle Gehoornde, om dat door hebbende denne dachten in welck alle de verdrukkingen van Jesu, Maria en alle Gods lye Heyligen, weens gijgiften der fanden, bemoet van leven, en uckmachtig dat erwege blijvende.

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A particularly rare combination of word and image is constituted by a detailed prayer picture. See heylige en profytlycke dagelyck 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