

PAINTED DEVOTION TO SAINTS IN VERMEER'S ALLEGORY OF THE CATHOLIC FAITH

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In one of his last paintings, the *Allegory of the Catholic Faith*, Johannes Vermeer painted a woman seated in contemplation before a crucifix [FIG. 1].¹ On the table beside her lies a book; behind it is a crown of thorns – symbol of the suffering of Christ – with a chalice alongside [FIG. 2]. Such attributes are unmistakable references to the Catholic faith. The pious setting is further underscored by a version of the painting *The Crucifixion* by Jacques Jordaens in the background. It is a typical devotional work for a Catholic home, before which one could also pray.

In Vermeer's time, the presence of religious (art) objects in Catholic households – such as those we also come across in the 1676 inventory of his estate – was promoted by the ecclesiastical community.² This is strikingly illustrated by the writings of the Amsterdam Jesuit Augustinus van Teylingen. He urged parishioners to furnish their homes with devotional works, not only to feel connected to the Church, but also to proclaim their faith, in spite of the prohibition on public Catholic practice: 'Likewise, always hang a crucifix or some paintings of devotion in your front room/ in order to let it be known/ that you are no heathen/ nor Turk/ nor Jew/ nor heretic/ but a Roman Catholic person'³

Various art historians have attempted to identify the book that lies open in the *Allegory of the Catholic Faith*. The volume in question has been referred to as a Bible or a missal (even an altar missal) in which the liturgical prayers for Catholic worship were recorded.⁴ New research, however, has made it possible to accurately identify the book and even the specific page at which it is open.

ALTAR MISSAL OR BIBLE?

Vermeer painted the open book on the table to the right in *Allegory of the Catholic Faith* in great detail. Yet it cannot be an altar missal, as has been supposed. Missals of the seventeenth century, such as the famous *Missale Romanum*, were printed in large type, with red and black ink, and were always in Latin. They contained the prayers and readings for the Mass, which the priest would deliver at the altar, and were usually kept in the sacristy. The best-known missal was printed and published in Antwerp by Plantin-Moretus [FIG. 3]. The book in Vermeer's painting does not match this: the

page layout is different and it lacks the characteristic use of red ink. It is also highly unlikely to be a Bible. With the advent of the Reformation, Bibles in prints and paintings became an unmistakable allusion to the Reformed Church. In Protestantism, reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin focused on Sacred Scripture as the only true and authoritative foundation of faith, in contrast to the Catholic Church, where traditions, sacraments and church doctrine played an equally important role.

In the wake of Luther and Calvin, numerous translations of the Bible were produced in Europe beginning in the sixteenth century. In 1618, during the Synod of Dort, the Dutch Reformed Church decided to issue a new translation of the Bible in Dutch. The aim was to create a biblical text trans-



FIG. 1 *Allegory of the Catholic Faith*, c. 1670–1674 (cat. 32)

lated from the original languages (Hebrew and Greek), and not via the Latin Vulgate, the standard practice of the past. This first 'States Bible' or 'Dutch Standard Version' was completed in 1637 and subsequently reprinted innumerable times. It was displayed prominently on the pulpit in every church. Members of Protestant families were expected to read from it regularly.

Catholics, on the other hand, used different Bibles translated into Dutch, the most common of which in Vermeer's day was the 'Moerentorf Bible' (1599). This was a revised version of the 'Leuvense Bijbel', which had been brought onto the market in 1548 as a translation of the Latin Vulgate, published a year earlier in the university town. The Leuvense Bijbel was translated by Nicolaas van Winghe, an Augustinian Canon Regular from the Priory of Sint-Maartensdal in Leuven, under the supervision of Leuven theologians. It was the successor to the Dutch-language Vorsterman Bible, which had been the authorized (Catholic) Bible for the Habsburg Netherlands since 1528. Bibles in the vernacular



FIG. 2 *Allegory of the Catholic Faith* (cat. 32), detail with the book, the crucifix and the chalice

had existed in the Netherlands since the Middle Ages and they were generally not banned by Church authorities, although this is still often claimed.

During liturgical services in Catholic churches, readings were taken from the Latin Bible. Some worshippers would read (folio-sized) Bibles in Dutch at home in order to better understand the texts that had been featured during Mass, or to let them sink in more profoundly. Priests and preachers also consulted these at length in preparation for the sermons they would give in Dutch. The Catholic Bibles were usually illustrated with vivid woodcut prints, which was also the case with the aforementioned Moerentorf Bible published in 1599 by the Antwerp printer Jan I Moretus, also known as Jan Moerentorf. Standard contemporaneous



FIG. 3 *Missale Romanum*, published by Plantin-Moretus, Antwerp, 1666, title page (A) and pp. 396–397 (B). The Hague, National Library of the Netherlands, inv. no. KW 1761 A5

Moerentorf Bibles of this size, such as the aforementioned missal, feature a different page layout from the book on the table in the *Allegory of the Catholic Faith*. In Vermeer's day, the 'Paets Bible' was a particular favourite among Catholics in the Dutch Republic; it was very richly illustrated with hundreds of woodcut prints by Christoffel II van Sichem [FIG. 4].

Although Catholic books were generally fitted with copper closures, like those visible in the painting,⁵ it does not seem likely that Vermeer would paint a Bible or missal in this Catholic home interior. Catholics traditionally preferred to be portrayed with books of hours or other prayer books.⁶ Bibles played a less central role in their spiritual life.⁷

THE OPEN PAGE

The left-hand page is clearly visible because the voluminous folio-sized book is open at about five-sixths of the way through the total number of pages. When we zoom in on the left-hand page layout, we can make out two columns of text.

The right-hand column is broken up by two white spaces two-thirds of the way down, with the title of a new chapter or section in the centre. Three of the four capital letters are clearly legible: U, G and O. The margin of the second column shows various glosses (printed annotations providing additional explanations of the text) painted with equal precision. The paragraph in the right-hand column above the white gap is painted darker: these seem to represent boldfaced sentences. From its size, page layout, glosses and boldfaced paragraphs, the book can be identified as an important seventeenth-century Catholic handbook: namely the *Generale Legende der Heylighen met het leven Iesu Christi ende Marie Vergadert wt de H. Schrifture, Oude Vaders, ende Registers der H. Kercke* (General Legend of the Saints with the Life of Jesus



Christ and the Virgin Mary, Compiled from the Sacred Scripture, Early Fathers, and Records of the Holy Church). On the handsome title page – designed by Peter Paul Rubens and engraved by Hans Collaert – the writers are listed under the title: 'P. Petrus Ribadineira ende P. Heribertus Rosweyde. Priesters der Societeyt-Iesu' ('Fr Pedro de Ribadeneira and Fr Heribert Rosweyde, Priests of the Society of Jesus') [FIG. 6]. Dries van den Akker S.J. and Paul Begheyn S.J. recently established a possible connection with this book as well, but the exact page painted by Vermeer was not found at the time.⁸

My search for the pages that lie open here has now produced an exact match. The *Generale Legende der Heylighen* consists of two individually numbered volumes: Volume I runs from January to June (792 pages); Volume II from July to December (728 pages). The two volumes were sometimes bound as one, like the copy depicted in the painting, and often separately as well. The left-hand page that lies open in the painting turns out to correspond exactly to page 546 of Volume II, as can be found in the second edition of 1629 and

the third edition of 1640 [FIG. 7].⁹ Vermeer reproduced the page layout with astounding accuracy. Not only are the letters U, G and O painted legibly, referring to Saint Hugh (Hugo in Dutch), but the glosses in the margin of the book are printed in exactly the same way along the edge; even the boldfaced section above the new chapter is subtly shaded a little darker in the painting.¹⁰

The open page relates 'Het leven van den H. Hugo Bischoep, Confesseur, ende Carthuysen' ('The life of Saint Hugh, Bishop, Confessor, and Carthusian'). Who was this saint, whose feast day is 17 November? To initiate in the seventeenth century, Hugh of Lincoln was known as a famous, respected and universally recognized saint of the Order of Carthusians, clearly not one who would be merely deemed



FIG. 4 *Biblia sacra*, published by Jan Moerentorf, Antwerp and reprinted by Pieter Jacobsz Paets, Amsterdam 1657, title page (A), Allard Pierson,

a regional 'popular saint'. Born around 1140 in the French town of Avalon, in 1163 he joined the Grande Chartreuse, the mother house of the Carthusians, twenty kilometres north of Grenoble. In 1179, he moved to England in order to establish a Carthusian monastery, at the request of King Henry II. He was consecrated Bishop of Lincoln in 1186 and became one of the kingdom's most prominent bishops. Twenty years after his death on 16 November 1200, he was canonized by Pope Honorius III. Why Vermeer chose to depict the page about this saint cannot yet be definitely ascertained. Neither in the history of Delft nor in Vermeer's life can we find a conclusive reason that would explain his attachment to this saint or to this date.¹¹

THE GENERALE LEGENDE DER HEYLIGHEN

According to its title page, the *Generale Legende der Heylighen* was written by the Spaniard Petrus Ribadineira S.J. (Pedro de Ribadeneira), a direct disciple of Ignatius of

Loyola, and the Utrecht native Heribertus Rosweyde S.J.¹² Heribert Rosweyde studied in Tournai and Douai before joining the Society of Jesus in 1588, at the age of 19. Upon completing his studies, he taught rhetoric, among other subjects, at the Jesuit college in Douai. He finally settled in Antwerp in 1612 and became a leading hagiographer.¹³

In the *Generale Legende der Heylighen*, translated and adapted by Rosweyde, the days of the year are linked to saints, with the ecclesiastical feast days based on the life of the Virgin Mary and Christ. This type of catalogue is called a *calendarium*. This Dutch-language bestseller was printed and published by several generations of the Verdussen family in Antwerp. The encyclopaedic, hagiographical lexicon was first issued in 1619, followed by another six printings, in



Universiteit van Amsterdam, OF 06-735 and pp. 54–55 (B), Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, GF 383 A3

1629, 1640, 1649 (two editions), 1665 and 1686 (two editions), respectively, and the last in 1711.¹⁴ The first day of each month is accompanied by an engraving, attributed to Pieter de Jode the Elder, showing images of saints and feast days celebrated in that particular month [FIG. 5].¹⁵

No figures exist on the print runs of these editions. It is known that the first volume of the *Acta Sanctorum*, the compendium of hagiographies published in 1643 by the Bollandists, a group of learned Jesuits who studied the ancient hagiographies of the saints (later known as the Bollandist Society), and printed in Latin by Plantin, had a print run of 1,000 copies. This seems a fair and reasonable indication for the print run of each edition of the *Generale Legende der Heylighen*, but there could also have been more copies.¹⁶ The fact that the *Generale Legende der Heylighen* was issued in seven printings, specifically for the Dutch-speaking regions, attests to the popularity of this costly book in the Netherlands.

The encyclopaedic work *Generale Legende der Heylighen* was based on the Spanish book of hagiography by Pedro de

Ribadeneira S.J. of 1599: the *Flos Sanctorum o Libro de las vidas de los Santos*.¹⁷ The extensive archives of the Bollandist Society in Brussels have yielded no evidence that the two writers, Ribadeneira and Rosweyde, were in close contact with each other. Ribadeneira lived in Madrid from 1575 until his death in 1611. His significant and influential book of hagiography had already been translated into French several times prior to 1619 and its successive editions were highly popular.¹⁸ Nor has any correspondence or account of a journey by Rosweyde to Madrid been found in Brussels. Rosweyde wrote that he relied on the *Flos Sanctorum* for his reference work, as well as using other published sources, in the introduction to the second edition:

in the original book to *Les Fleurs des Vies des Saints et des Festes de toute l'année*.²⁰ In the introduction of 1629, Rosweyde writes about this:

The Reader shall find here ... Thirdly: The principal Saints of the Low Countries; not only the first Apostles to these lands/ through whom we came to the knowledge of Christ: but also several, both men and women/ who excelled in virtues here. I have compiled these/ from old records of the Low Countries/ written in Latin/ and translated them into our Dutch language.²¹



FIG. 5 Pedro de Ribadeneira and Heribert Rosweyde, *Generale Legende der Heylighen met het leven Iesu Christi ende Marie*, third edition, 1640. Page 457: images of saints for the month of November, including Saint Hugh of Lincoln on 17 November. Engraving by Pieter de Jode the Elder. Leiden, private collection

See (devout Reader) here is a General Legend/ drawn from several Legends/ that have been hitherto published; and mostly from the Flowers of the Saints, which was compiled in the Spanish language by our Fr Petrus Ribadeneira, estimable Writer/ and universally renowned.¹⁹

It is therefore not clear what precisely Rosweyde used as a basis for his work, the Spanish version or French translations that preceded the publication of the *Generale Legende der Heylighen*. François De Vriendt suspects that he probably based his work on French translations. These were published in Paris (1609, 1612, 1614 and 1618), Valenciennes (1613) and Arras (1613), with the addition of local French saints. Rosweyde's adaptation, which added a number of saints from the Low Countries to Ribadeneira's text, may have been inspired by the revisions made ten years earlier by René Gaultier, who had added French saints who had not featured



FIG. 6 Pedro de Ribadeneira and Heribert Rosweyde, *Generale Legende der Heylighen met het leven Iesu Christi ende Marie*, published by Hieronymus Verdussen, Antwerp, 1640, title page. Leiden, private collection

The fact that the *Generale Legende der Heylighen* was published in the Dutch language makes it probable that it was intended for a broad audience: for lay people as well as for numerous women who had chosen a life of religious devotion in the seventeenth century. One or more copies have been found in the surviving libraries of various clandestine Catholic churches, often containing handwritten references. The book was widely disseminated among the Catholic populace during the Counter-Reformation. While monasteries and convents were outlawed in the Dutch Republic, this did not deter various men and women from joining re-established or newly founded priories in the Rhineland or the Southern Netherlands. After all, Dutch was spoken or understood there as well. The *kloppen* (single Catholic women who chose a non-cloistered life of chastity and service) and beguines tolerated in the Dutch Republic followed a strict daily schedule, similar to that of priories, based on the ancient monastic rule *Ora et Labora*. Dozens of books called



FIG. 7 *Allegory of the Catholic Faith* (cat. 32), detail of the book in the painting (A); Pedro de Ribadeneira and Heribert Rosweyde, *Generale Legende der Heylighen met het leven Iesu Christi ende Marie*, third edition, 1640, open here to the life of Saint Hugh of Lincoln, p. 546 (B). Leiden, private collection

kloppenboeken were written for these ‘spiritual virgins’ (or ‘spiritual daughters’, *filiae devotae*) and religious widows, including precepts for everyday life; a daily reading of the lives of saints was part of that daily schedule.²² The hagiographical work of Ribadeneira and Rosweyde was the leading handbook for this purpose.²³ Few, if any, records have survived about the use of the *Generale Legende der Heylighen* in wealthy Catholic families, but it seems evident that this book was consulted daily in these circles as well.

Rosweyde’s *Generale Legende der Heylighen* attests to the same interest in saints that underlies the undertaking of the *Acta Sanctorum*, which began in 1643; however, the research method, the target audience and the objective are different. Rosweyde had laid the foundation; his successors, Jesuits

During the Counter-Reformation, numerous publications about the lives of the saints, often written by Jesuits, were published as tools and books of examples for the maintenance of virtues. In addition to hagiographies researched and rewritten by the order, devotional prints were disseminated among the Catholic populace in large quantities as resources for prayer. Using a specific kind of devotional images, called *suffragia*, patronage prints or monthly saints calendars, Catholics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries meditated intensively on the virtues of saints. This methodology of prayer was incorporated in the booklets issued in vast print runs for Dutch brotherhoods as well in handbooks for *kloppen* and beguines.²⁴ The method had been introduced by the Spanish Jesuit Francis Borgia. One



FIG. 8 Suffragium featuring Saint Hugh, celebrated on 17 November, published by Hendriek Thieullier, c. 1694–1715. Antwerp, Ruusbroec Institute

Jean Bolland, Godfrey Henschen and Daniel van Papenbroeck, elaborated on his initiative and completed painstaking academic studies on saints as part of a larger, comprehensive project. Thanks to their *Acta Sanctorum*, they are now considered the founding fathers of critical hagiography.

SAINTS AND THEIR VIRTUES

In the Netherlands of the seventeenth century, a fierce debate raged in Christian theology about whether and how one might achieve eternal salvation after death. The Reformed Church, dominant in the Dutch Republic, had decreed at the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) that the performance of virtues in life made no difference to the attainment of eternal life (the doctrine of predestination). For Catholics, on the contrary, saints and their virtues played a vital exemplary role. Virtues practised by means of good works were determinant for the resurrection of the soul and the achievement of eternal salvation.



FIG. 9 Suffragium featuring the Dedication of the Basilicas of the Apostles Peter and Paul, celebrated on 18 November. Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent, inv. no. OKM dp 6701

was meant to pray every day and to practise the virtues of a specific saint who was venerated on the day and in the month in question.²⁵ Next to the engraved image of the saint, a virtue was listed, to be particularly practised during that month, that could be linked to the saint being venerated, in addition to incantations and prayer intentions inspired by the Fathers of the Church or Sacred Scripture. A brief summary of the saint’s life was printed on the reverse. The patronage prints were randomly distributed, with the handwritten name of one of the members of the congregation below the prayer intention. The recipient was expected to pray for the person added to the print. In 1694, the aforementioned Daniel van Papenbroeck S.J. would triumphantly declare, in reference to the ‘religious custom of distributing Patronages by lot each month’, that ‘particularly in our devout Netherlands, ... there is hardly any priory or virtuous congregation left that has not accepted this.’²⁶ With these textual and pictorial suffragia, after all, Catholics distinguished themselves provocatively from Protestants, who

had abolished all forms of ‘idolatry’ and representation of saints and the Virgin Mary. The Vermeer family, who were very well acquainted with the Jesuit station in Delft, undoubtedly participated in this common practice of the Dutch Republic.²⁷ Significant surviving examples in this context are patronage prints of Saint Hugh of Lincoln, whose feast day is 17 November, with a brief summary of his hagiography on the reverse [FIG. 8]. One day later, on 18 November, the Dedication of the Basilicas of the Apostles Peter and Paul was celebrated. One such print, bearing at the bottom the handwritten name of Geertruijt Vermeer, most likely Johannes’s daughter, is kept at the Museum Catharijneconvent in Utrecht [FIG. 9]. Its user was meant to remember her in prayers during the month of November.



FIG. 10 Silver gilt chalice comparable to the one depicted in Vermeer’s painting *Allegory of the Catholic Faith* (cat. 32). This chalice was made by the silversmith Jan Herck in Antwerp in 1646–1647

ANTWERP’S INFLUENCE IN THE DUTCH REPUBLIC

From the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Jesuit stronghold of Antwerp supplied Catholics in the Northern Netherlands with support and devotional literature, paintings, prints and liturgical objects to sustain their religion in everyday practice. In addition to the aforementioned canvas by Jordaens, it is now certain that the book on the table came from the city on the river Scheldt. This may also have been true of the gilded chalice depicted in Vermeer’s painting. A very similar-looking chalice of 1646–1647 made by the Antwerp silversmith Jan Herck is currently kept in Haarlem [FIG. 10].²⁸ A large number of liturgical vessels by Flemish silversmiths have been preserved. Like paintings, books and prints, these were marketed from the Southern Netherlands in the seventeenth century. The identification of the book provides guidance for new research into the art-dealing activities of Johannes Vermeer, with a potential focus on commercial contacts and a network in the Southern Netherlands.

1 For an overview of literature on the *Allegory of the Catholic Faith*, see exh. cat. Amsterdam 2023, pp. 288–289.
2 See Roelofs 2023b.
3 ‘Voorts hanght oock altydt in u voorhuys een Crucifix/ oft eenige schilderijen van devotie/ waer door ghy bekennt soudt konnen worden/ dat ghy gheen Heyden en zijt/ noch Turck/ noch Jode/ noch ketter/ maer een Roomsche Catholijcke Persoone ...’, Van Teylingen 1651, pp. 376–377. For Catholic (art) objects in Vermeer’s home, see Weber 2022, pp. 31–40; Roelofs 2023b, pp. 56–62, 69–74, 76–77.
4 Hedquist 2000, p. 341; Franits 2015, p. 266.
5 Franits 2015, p. 266 writes that the book is fitted with gold clasps, but this is unlikely. On this, see also Verheggen 2006, p. 90.
6 Verheggen 2024, pp. 19–21.
7 With thanks to Wim François. See especially François 2015. On Catholic Bible translations in the 17th century, see, for example, Agten 2015.
8 Van den Akker and Begheyn 2023, p. 63.
9 The author of this essay identified the book on 13 February 2023 and announced this discovery on 14 February on her public Twitter account (now X).
10 The first edition of 1619 containing the life of Saint Hugh (p. 1300) differs from the representation in the painting, as does the fourth edition of 1649, which seems to match it at first glance but turns out to be a little different on closer inspection. The second edition of 1629 (vol. II, p. 546) does match, as does the third edition of 1640 (vol. II, p. 546), where the chapter on Saint Hugh begins halfway down. The glosses in the margin differ as well. Starting with the fifth edition of 1665 (vol. II, p. 492), the page layout clearly no longer corresponds.
11 Based on known sources, no connection has yet been found with events in Vermeer’s life or the history of Delft on 17 November in the years 1670 to 1674, to which the painting has so far been dated. With thanks to Nikki den Dekker, City Archives, Delft.
12 Van Rossem 2014, pp. 75–77. De Backer and Sommervogel 1890–1932, vol. VII, pp. 190–207.
13 For more on the evolution of Rosweyde as a leading hagiographer, see Godding 2009.
14 For the double editions in 1649 and 1686, see Van Rossem 2014, p. 76, n. 90, and p. 136.
15 The attribution was made possible because the preliminary drawings are kept at the British

Museum. See Leesberg 2019–2020 (Hollstein, de Jode), vol. VII, pp. 128–146.
16 With thanks to François De Vriendt, researcher at the Société des Bollandistes in Brussels, who helped with research into the *Legende* and the writers Pedro de Ribadeneira S.J. and Heribert Rosweyde S.J.
17 De Backer and Sommervogel 1890–1932, vol. VI, Ribadeneira: pp. 1724–1758.
18 For the various editions and translations of the *Flos Sanctorum*, see De Backer and Sommervogel 1890–1932, vol. VI, pp. 1737–1754.
19 ‘Siet (Godtvruchtighen Leser) hier is eene Generale Legende/ ghetrocken uyt verscheyden Legenden/ die tot noch toe ghedruckt zijn; ende meest uyt de Bloeme der Heylighen, die inde Spaensche tale by een vergadert is gheweest door onsen P. Petrus Ribadeneira, lofweerdighen Schrijver/ ende over al wel bekennt, Ribadeneira and Rosweyde (1629 and subsequent), ‘Voor-reden tot dese Legende’.
20 For the native saints venerated in the Northern Netherlands, see Verheggen 2006, pp. 250–251. The life of Werenfridus (27 August) is missing from the *Legende*.
21 ‘De Leser salhier vinden ... Ten 3. De principale Heylighen van’t Nederlandt; niet alleen d’eerste Apostelen van dese landen/ door welcke wy tot de kennisse Christi ghekomen zijn: maer oock verscheyden soo mannen als vrouwen/ die hier in deughden uytgheschenen hebben. Die ick uyt oude Registers van’t Nederlandt/ in ’t Latijn beschreven zijnde/ by een vergadert hebbe/ ende in onse Nederlandtsche tale doen oversetten’, Ribadeneira and Rosweyde (1629 and subsequent), ‘Voor-reden tot dese Legende’.
22 Verheggen 2006, pp. 44–45 and 51.
23 The Leiden University Libraries, for example, have in their collection a *Generale Legende* from 1649 with a handwritten dedication at the front: ‘Dit werk is gegeven aan de maagden om te gebruiken en hoort aan de kerck in Noordwijk 1724 den 8 Decemb.’ (‘This book is given for the use of the virgins and belongs to the church in Noordwijk, 8 December 1724’).
24 Verheggen 2016, pp. 170–174.
25 Verheggen 2006, pp. 182–196.
26 Thijs 1983–1985, p. 564.
27 Weber 2022, p. 27.
28 The Museum Catharijneconvent administers an online database, ‘Kerkcollectie Digitaal’, cataloguing the patrimony of churches, monasteries and convents in the Netherlands.

Next pages: DETAILS Allegory of the Catholic Faith (cat. 32); The Music Lesson (cat. 16); The Love Letter (cat. 31); The Milkmaid (cat. 8); Woman with a Pearl Necklace (cat. 19)