

# Third Order Convents in Western Flanders: Varieties in Tertiary Observance

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## **Introduction**

A panorama of late medieval religious reform and concomitant cultural production in the Low Countries would not be complete without due attention to the rich and variegated manifestations of the Third Order of St Francis in this densely urbanized corner of Europe. Obviously, this is a topic that cannot be exhausted within the compass of a single article. It is the goal of this contribution to present the case of a particular group of Tertiary convents in Flanders against the background of flourishing Tertiary life as a whole. The peculiar character of these convents, which are poorly documented in general, is illumined by the content of a manuscript kept at Bruges, which will be presented first. They have a clear sense of identity, which is founded in the specific trajectory of their history, characterized both by approach towards and distancing from the Observant Friars Minor. Their spirituality is portrayed, with a specific focus on two aspects: the balance they try to strike between labor and liturgical life, and their aloofness from literary culture. At the end, an effort is made to assign them their proper place in the general picture of the history of the Third Order in what is now Belgium and the Netherlands.

## The Bruges manuscript and the Tertiary convents of West-Flanders

As point of departure, I take a manuscript which is now kept in the State Archives (Rijksarchief) at Bruges, but which probably does not originate from that town.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of its content, in which a Tertiary convent in the Flemish town of Ypres is taking precedence over a group of kindred religious houses, it may be surmised that it was composed in a convent of Franciscan Tertiaries in Ypres in or soon after 1570.<sup>2</sup>

The manuscript contains four different texts:

- an annotated translation into Dutch/Flemish of the bull *Personas vacantes* (1413), issued on behalf of six Tertiary convents in West-Flanders (pp. 1-18);<sup>3</sup>
- a translation of the bull *Supra montem* with which pope Nicholas IV in 1289 chartered the Franciscan Tertiaries (pp. 19-27);<sup>4</sup>
- ‘other statutes’ to implement this rule, decided upon by various chapter meetings and approved by local bishops. These statutes do not constitute a systematic code, but appear rather as a loose chain of – undated – chapter decisions (pp. 28-42);
- a text entitled *Memorie* (memorial), which contains a short report on the history of the Third Order of St Francis in Ypres and a few adjacent towns, continued until 1570 (pp. 43-53).

In theory, the first one of these four texts may originally have stood apart; the other three certainly belong together from the start.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Bruges, Rijksarchief, Cumulus Ecclesiasticus inv. 824 [hereafter: Bruges MS]. Elementary description: a parchment register measuring 196 x 155 mm and consisting of four irregular quires. It shows standard lay-out with a decorated initial and rubrication. The manuscript is paginated, not foliated.

2 Marc Carnier, *De communauteiten van tertiariissen van Sint-Franciscus: Monasticon*. I: *De grauwezusters*. Bibliografische Inleiding tot de Belgische Kloostergeschiedenis vóór 1796 (Brussels: Algemeen Rijksarchief, 2002), 297, assigns it to the Ypres convent, probably rightly so. At page 45 the bull *Supra montem* is referred to, ‘maer die bulle en is hier niet onder de brieven van tconvent van Yper’ (‘but the bull is not found here among the charters of the Ypres convent’).

3 More on this bull below.

4 For the Latin original see *Bullarium Franciscanum*, ed. H. Sbaralea and C. Eubel, VII vols. (Rome: Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, 1759-1908) IV, 94-97.

5 The first text coincides with the first quire, but the remaining three texts are not coextensive with the quires.

Together, these four texts reveal a clear-cut sense of identity founded in the peculiar history of the group of convents to which it refers.<sup>6</sup> Although the insertion of *Supra montem* shows awareness of the Third Order at large, the real starting point is the bull *Personas vacantes*,<sup>7</sup> as both the manuscript as a whole and the historical narrative in the *Memorie* start with it. This bull was issued by pope John XXIII in 1413 on behalf of a group of convents of male and female Tertiaries in West-Flanders, situated in the towns of Furnes, Nieuwpoort, Ypres, Poperinge, Diksmuide and St Winoksbergen (Bergues Saint Winoc).<sup>8</sup> The pope confirms a set of rules they had adopted in order to live together as a congregation, the most remarkable being that these Tertiaries on their entry take the vows of poverty, obedience and purity. They are not enclosed, but are allowed to go out on strict conditions. Their habit is regulated meticulously, but it is dominated by grey – hence the customary name of ‘Grey Sisters’ for the female members – in order to express their poverty and simplicity. The dress code also provides for situations in which they have to go out. The Tertiaries are expected to do honest labor in order to win a livelihood; the proceeds of their labor are consumed in the community. In case of necessity, however, they are allowed to go out begging. Those who are capable of doing so say – not sing – the full Canonical Hours, but members who have difficulty in learning them, may content themselves with lesser forms of prayer, such as the Hours of Our Lady or even a simple series of Paternosters. Superiors must be diligent to strike a balance between work and prayer. The bull reveals the existence in several of the six towns mentioned of both male and female convents. Men and women have separate overarching chapter meetings, although a male Superior Minister is functioning as the head of all of these convents.<sup>9</sup> The chapter meetings of both branches are visited by delegates

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6 The identity of Tertiaries as revealed by their textual culture has been investigated by Alison More, ‘Religious Order and Textual Identity: the Case of Franciscan Tertiary Women’, in: *Nuns’ Literacies in Medieval Europe: the Antwerp Dialogue*, ed. Virginia Blanton, Veronica O’Mara, and Patricia Stoop (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 43–59. Her approach is not applicable to the case at hand, however, exactly because a textual culture is lacking, as will be argued in the following.

7 Lucas Wadding, *Annales Minorum IX* (Quaracchi: Ad Claras Aquas, 3rd Ed., 1932), 653–657.

8 Note that this last town, and several of the towns mentioned in the following as well, belong to France nowadays.

9 Bruges MS, 13.

of corresponding gender.<sup>10</sup> Finally, these Tertiaries are allowed to choose a visitator from an approved order, but remain under the jurisdiction of the local bishop, which for this part of Flanders is the bishop of Théroutanne. Although the bull presupposes that these convents had already been in existence for some time, nothing about their previous history is known.<sup>11</sup> Neither is much information available on the vicissitudes of individual convents during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.<sup>12</sup> The participation of male convents soon seems to have come to an end, as did the functioning of a Superior Minister.<sup>13</sup> As a group, they grew from the original six to 27 in 1487; by that time, they were known as the Chapter of St Catherine.<sup>14</sup>

One of the convents joining this chapter along the way was St Catherine's at St Omer (1430).<sup>15</sup> Probably, this convent soon acquired a leading position such as even to lend its name to the group as a whole. The important harbor town of St Omer happened also to be the seat of an influential convent of Friars Minor. In 1408 this had been reformed after the example of the Observant convents of Touraine,<sup>16</sup> an event which started the glorious advance of the Observance Movement in the Low Countries. The history of the Tertiaries in this region took a fateful turn in 1448, when an internal conflict occasioned pope Nicholas V to subject them to the Observant Friars Minor by the bull *Apostolicae sedis gratiosa benignitas*. The vicar-provincial of the Observants now had to appoint the visitator, whose jurisdiction was enlarged at the cost of the local bishop.<sup>17</sup> No doubt the Observants of St Omer were the driving force behind this move.

Two comments are in place here. Marc Carnier has put forward the general idea that in fifteenth-century Flanders the flourishing of Tertiary

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10 This is remarkable, because the female convents of the Chapter of Utrecht, to be discussed later, were represented by their confessors.

11 Walter Simons and Paul Trio, 'Begijnen, begarden en tertiariissen in het middeleeuwse Ieper', *Jaarboek voor Middeleeuwse Geschiedenis* 4 (2001), 118-167, in particular p. 143 with note 102.

12 The scarce documentation is listed in Carnier, *Communauteiten*, nos. 19, 37, 49, 56 and 65.

13 A Superior Minister is still mentioned in the bull *Apostolicae sedis gratiosa benignitas* (see note 17).

14 Jérôme Goyens, 'Chapitres des sœurs grises hospitalières en Flandre 1483-1528', *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 14 (1921), 199-208; Carnier, *Communauteiten*, 20-23.

15 Wadding, *Annales Minorum* X (Quaracchi: Ad Claras Aquas, 3rd Ed., 1932), 559-560; Carnier, *Communauteiten*, 21, note 26.

16 P. Gratien, 'Le grand schisme et la réforme des Cordeliers à Saint-Omer', *Neerlandia Franciscana* 5 (1922), 5-15; 143-180; John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968; Reprint 1998), 382; A. Derville, *Histoire de Saint-Omer* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1982), 97.

17 *Bullarium Franciscanum* n.s. I, 606-607, no. 1194.

life was due mainly to the influence of the Observant Friars Minor; according to him, the formation of congregations from among them took place within the framework of the Franciscan provinces.<sup>18</sup> In the light of the developments presented here, this appears to be open to correction, at least as the Chapter of St Catherine is concerned.<sup>19</sup> The role the Observants came to play within that chapter is secondary. It is probably because of his overall approach that the really innovative point of the 1448 bull, the subjection of the Tertiaries to the Observants, escapes Carnier's notice.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, referring primarily to the Conventuals, Bert Roest has remarked that we must not take it for granted that the Franciscans were eager to engage in *cura monialium*.<sup>21</sup> However, at least in the Low Countries, the Observants showed considerable ambition to take responsibility not only for Poor Clares but for female Tertiaries as well. This is not only evident in the case of the Chapter of St Catherine, but may also be observed for example with respect to a group of Tertiary convents around St Catherine's Vale at Hasselt in the diocese of Liège.<sup>22</sup>

The intrusion of the Observants did not remain uncontested, however. Both in the diocese of Liège and in Flanders the Observants met with much opposition. In a remarkable move, pope Sixtus IV let himself be persuaded by the archdukes Maximilian and Mary to issue the bull *Iniunctum nobis desuper* (1481), in which he declared several privileges granted the Observants in the past to be null and void, forbidding them henceforth to interfere with the Tertiaries.<sup>23</sup>

Still, this was not the end of the story. A serious quarrel broke out within the bosom of the Chapter of St Catherine about the choice of a visitor. *Personas vacantes* had left the Tertiaries free to pick their visitor from whichever approved order they liked, and the 1481 decision of pope

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18 Carnier, *Communauteiten*, 16.

19 It may be true for two other chapters discussed by Carnier, those of the Hospital Sisters and of the Sisters of the Cell.

20 Carnier, *Communauteiten*, 21.

21 Bert Roest, *Order and Disorder. The Poor Clares between Foundation and Reform* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 62-67; for the Observants: p. 220.

22 Koen Goudriaan, 'Het klooster Maagdendries en de Moderne Devotie in Maastricht', *Publications de la Société Historique et Archéologique dans le Limbourg* 155 (2019 [2020]), 57-121, in particular 79-80. Moorman, *History of the Franciscan Order*, 565-566, observes the same tendency in Italy but ascribes much of it to papal strategy.

23 *Bullarium Franciscanum* n.s. III, ed. José Maria Pou y Martí (Quaracchi: Ex Typographia S. Bonaventurae, 1949), no. 1433.

Sixtus IV had restored them in that freedom. Nevertheless, at a meeting in Bruges in 1487 the majority of the convents of St Catharine decided to subject themselves to Observant visitation again.<sup>24</sup>

Now, the salient point in the *Memorie* of the Bruges MS is that it does not mention the 1487 decision at all. It is no coincidence that the Ypres convent was not represented at Bruges.<sup>25</sup> The decisive turning point according to the *Memorie* is exactly the 1481 bull that denied the Observants any authority over the Tertiaries.<sup>26</sup> After that date the convents of the Ypres group seem not to have participated any more in the dealings of the Chapter of St Catherine. The *Memorie* consistently presents their history in function of *Personas vacantes* as reinterpreted by the 1481 bull of Sixtus IV. Pride of successfully having withstood the encroachment of the Observants runs through the whole of the narrative. This victory is represented as having the effect 'that the sisters should not be harassed and troubled in following their old way of life'.<sup>27</sup> Instead of adopting the lifestyle imposed by the Observants, they managed to stick to their own observance. Unfortunately, the *Memorie* does not tell us what the changes would have been if the Observants had got their way.

Finally, in 1570 a new conflict between the Friars Minor and the Tertiaries broke out. It was occasioned by the issuing in 1568 by pope Pius V of a *breve* entitled *Itaque inter*, by which he again subjected the Tertiaries to the First Franciscan Order, Observant as a whole by now.<sup>28</sup> This was the outcome of a general policy followed by the popes after the Council of Trent,<sup>29</sup> which also had repercussions in the Low Countries. We are informed in much detail about the enormous upheaval this measure caused in the diocese of Utrecht.<sup>30</sup> The report on this affair with which the

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24 Goyens, 'Chapitres', 204-208; Carnier, *Communauteiten*, 22.

25 List of participants: Carnier, *Ibidem*.

26 Bruges MS, 47-52.

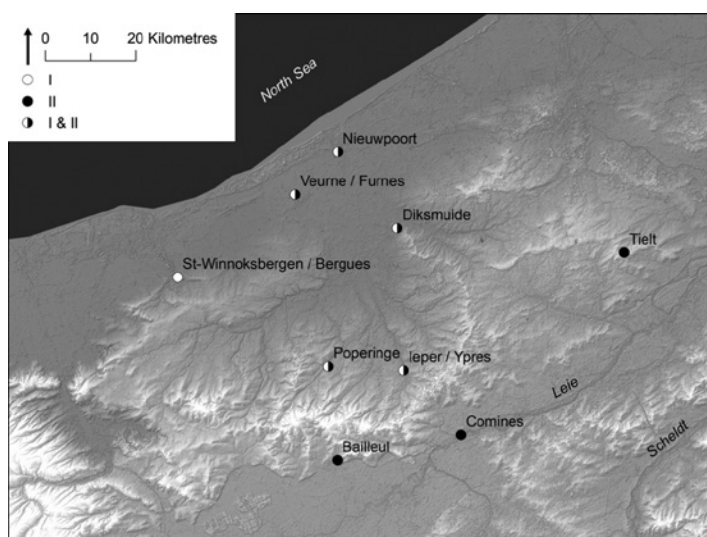
27 *Ibidem*, 50: 'datmen de zusters in huerlier oude manierre van leven niet quellen noch turberen en zoude'.

28 Wadding, *Annales Minorum* XX (Quaracchi: Ad Claras Aquas, 3rd Ed., 1933), 568-571.

29 Hildo van Engen, *De derde orde van Sint-Franciscus in het middeleeuwse bisdom Utrecht. Een bijdrage tot de institutionele geschiedenis van de Moderne Devotie* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2006), 149.

30 Koen Goudriaan, 'De derde orde van Sint Franciscus in het bisdom Utrecht. Een voorstudie', *Jaarboek voor Middeleeuwse Geschiedenis* 1 (1998), 205-260, in particular 210-216. Van Engen, *Derde orde*, 148-156.

*Memorie* ends is rather succinct.<sup>31</sup> Eight convents in Flanders laid the case before the Secret Council of the Habsburg Low Countries, and as it was clear that this high college of state was in favor of the Tertiaries, the Friars Minor did not further pursue their case. It is only at this occasion that the *Memorie* gives a list of the convents of the Ypres group: they are located in Ypres, Furnes, Nieuwpoort, Diksmuide, Bailleul, Poperinge, Comines and Tielt. It may be observed that this group largely coincides with the six convents with which the Chapter of St Catherine had started in 1413. In the case of the Tertiaries in Utrecht, their resistance was directed specifically at two grievances: the enclosure imposed on those convents which so far had not adopted it, and the policy of the Friars Minor of forcefully transplanting people from one convent to another, which was quite contrary to what the Tertiaries were accustomed to.<sup>32</sup> These same issues may have been at stake in Flanders in 1570, too, and even in the earlier conflict, but the *Memorie* is silent about it.



I. *Personas vacantes* (1413)

II. *Bruges Memorie*

Image created by Peter J. Brown, Radboud University Nijmegen, using data from the Copernicus Digital Elevation Model (DEM) and Natural Earth.

31 Bruges MS, 52-53.

32 Goudriaan, 'Derde orde', 213; Van Engen, *Derde orde*, 49-150.

## Liturgy and labor

Efforts to identify the peculiar type of spirituality characteristic of the Tertiaries of the Ypres group must take as point of departure the indications given by the bull *Personas vacantes* in combination with the statutes registered in the Bruges manuscript. Of course, from a methodical point of view there is some risk in relying too much on sources of a normative type. But apart from the fact that other sources are practically non-existent, the spiritual life described in the 1413 bull reflects a practice that had crystallized already to a certain degree and now was submitted to the pope for codification. Moreover, the tenacity with which the convents under discussion clung to it warrants that they continued to identify with the type of spirituality contained in it.

In analyzing the spirituality adopted by the Ypres Tertiaries I refer to the definition of this concept as developed in the Nijmegen school of Spirituality Studies and expounded by Kees Waaijman. Spirituality touches upon the inner center of a person, in which he is 'open to the transcendent dimension'.

'It is here that the person experiences ultimate reality. [Spirituality studies] explore the discovery of this core, the dynamics of its development, and its journey to the ultimate goal. It deals with prayer, spiritual direction, the various maps of the spiritual journey, and the methods of advancement in the spiritual ascent.'<sup>33</sup>

Whether or not the ultimate goal of the religious life is formulated in mystical terms, an approach like this one highlights the slow transformation of the religious person implied in such a life. This means that not only the endpoint, but also the means to reach it are worthy of attention. Both the journey and the equipment with which to go the road matter. For the historian this has the advantage that he/she is provided with a general framework of interpretation for the analysis of specific forms of regular observance governing religious life in community.

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33 Kees Waaijman, *Spirituality. Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Louvain: Peeters, 2002), 4, adopting a definition given earlier by Ewart Cousins.



The bull *Supra montem* through which the Third Order was approved originally in 1289, was directed towards lay people conducting an enhanced religious life, but without vows. However, as we have seen already, *Personas vacantes* presupposes that its addressees take the vows of obedience, poverty and chastity from the start. Quite a lot of articles contained in the statutes are directed towards the implementation of the vows, especially of poverty. The prohibitions on possessing even the slightest item of private property are severe. Transgression is punished with fasting on water and bread and exclusion from communion. It is not allowed to own money through the mediation of third persons, on penalty of incarceration. By handling money sisters equal a Judas or a Simon the Magician. A sister found to have coins in her room is committing a deadly sin; if she dies in it she is not allowed to be buried in consecrated earth.<sup>34</sup>

The Ypres Tertiaries are not enclosed, however. *Personas vacantes* presupposes that they may go out, by differentiating between the habit to be worn inside the house and the dress for going out. But it is also true that the statutes narrowly circumscribe the use to be made by the sisters of their freedom to leave the convent. They never go out alone. In town, they only visit the houses to which they are dispatched. If they are sent to another town in matters concerning the convent, they have to present themselves immediately on arrival to the *mater* of the local convent, who has to supervise them during their stay instead of the mother of their own convent.<sup>35</sup>

Great score is set to the celebration of the liturgy, the series of statutes starting with this topic. The sisters are expected not to neglect the canonical hours. Matins are celebrated every night and those who fail to attend them run the risk of being disciplined. Each sister shall read the Vigils of Nine Lessons once a week.<sup>36</sup> But building on the allowance given in *Personas vacantes* for reduced forms of prayer, the statutes replace the Vigils by 15 Paternosters and 15 Ave Maria's for those sisters who are unable to read. Silence has to be observed from Compline to Prime.<sup>37</sup> The 'meestrigghe' (mistress) of the novices shall assemble daily both the novices and the younger and unexperienced sisters in order to train them in the liturgy.<sup>38</sup>

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34 Bruges MS, 35-36.

35 Ibidem, 38-39.

36 The extended form of Matins with nine readings from Scripture.

37 Ibidem, 28-30.

38 Bruges MS, 40.

The rules set for labor are intriguing because of their brevity. The basic prescriptions contained in *Personas vacantes* are the obligation for every member of the convent to do decent labor in order to win a livelihood both for him- or herself and for the community, and the injunction to the superior to divide time between prayer and labor in such a way as neither to extinguish devotion nor to induce the inmates to harmful laziness.<sup>39</sup> The bull does not specify, however, which type of labor is meant. In the Flemish translation inserted in the Bruges manuscript, the corresponding article is superscribed 'labor within the house'.<sup>40</sup> But in the stipulations with respect to the dress worn outside the possibility transpires that sisters leave the convent for doing their job. Do we have to assume that they left the convent in order to tend the ill? The statutes say that the *mater* shall not allow the sisters to go out singly to any house in town, 'nor to the ill'.<sup>41</sup> This could mean that they had license to visit the ill only two-by-two. But the implication could as well be that they were forbidden to visit the ill altogether. Positive evidence on the type of work they did is lacking almost completely. We only know that in 1458 the Tertiaries of Furnes did manual labor, including the washing of altar cloth.<sup>42</sup> In sum, before rushing to the conclusion that these West-Flemish convents were 'active' in the sense of geared towards charitable work, we must bring to mind that the Ypres region in the Later Middle Ages was the seat of a flourishing cloth industry. Perhaps the proper context for the labor done by the Tertiaries has to be sought for here.

### Actives versus contemplatives?

This brings us to the question how to categorize this specific branch of the Third Order. The present contribution relies heavily on the useful repertory published by Marc Carnier on the Grey Sisters of Belgium under the auspices of the National Archives at Brussels.<sup>43</sup> By 'Grey Sisters' Carnier understands the Tertiaries with an 'active' style of life, following the

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39 Wadding, *Annales Minorum* IX, 655.

40 Bruges MS, 9.

41 Ibidem, 40.

42 Carnier, *Communauteiten*, 516.

43 Carnier, *Communauteiten*, passim.

common distinction between 'contemplative' female religious orders that are devoted to prayer, meditation and study, and 'active' ones orientated towards various types of charity and social care, and to teaching. A separate, much smaller, volume on the contemplative Tertiaries of Belgium was planned but not executed.<sup>44</sup>

The majority of the convents of Grey Sisters in the repertory is found in the historical county of Flanders. In accordance with his general approach, Carnier subsumes them under the Franciscan province of Francia.<sup>45</sup> They belong to three chapters: the Chapter of St Catherine, a Chapter of Hospital Sisters numbering 24 convents in 1483, and a Chapter overarching a much smaller group of Sisters of the Cell. In Carnier's arrangement of subject material a certain amount of 'path dependence' – to borrow a term from economic history – has played a role. In the first place, in grouping together exactly these three chapters, Carnier is heir to two important publications from the early twentieth century. In 1921 Jérôme Goyens edited written reports on chapter meetings of the Hospital Sisters at Wisbecq in 1483 and of St Catherine at Bruges in 1487 in such a way as to suggest that these meetings united the same group of convents.<sup>46</sup> Three years later, Henri Lemaître published a survey of convents in Belgium and the adjacent part of Northern France with – what he supposed to be – a call for nursing tasks, among which all three aforementioned chapters were represented.<sup>47</sup> Carnier distinguishes more clearly between the three Chapters but adopts from his predecessors the general idea of grouping them together.

Secondly, in composing his volume on the Grey Sisters, Carnier adopts the standard binomy of 'active' and 'contemplative' orders, as does the 'Bibliographical Introduction to Belgian Monastic History' series to which his volume belongs.<sup>48</sup> He himself, for that matter, is well aware of the dif-

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44 Ibidem, 5-6 (Preface).

45 Carnier, *Communauteiten*, 18-27.

46 Goyens, 'Chapitres'. Goyens found his documents in the Provincial Archives of the Friars Minor, which may have influenced his way of presenting them. Source criticism is necessary, but this is not the place to pursue this point.

47 Henri Lemaître, 'Les soins hospitaliers à domicile donnés dès le XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle par des religieuses franciscaines, les soeurs noires et les soeurs grises. Leurs Maisons', *Revue d'histoire franciscaine* 1 (1924), 180-208.

48 Bibliografische inleiding tot de Belgische kloostergeschiedenis vóór 1796 (Brussels: Algemeen Rijksarchief, 1996 - ). See also Craig Harline, 'Actives and Contemplatives. The Female Religious of the Low Countries before and after Trent', *The Catholic Historical Review* 81 (1995), 541-567, focusing on the Early Modern Era.

difficulties involved when it comes to the application of this simple opposition to the complex life of the Late Middle Ages.<sup>49</sup> And although the binomy has much practical value, it is not without ambiguity as well as of anachronism. As Giles Constable has made clear, the use of the Mary and Martha metaphor for the contemplative and the active life exhibits an infinite range of varieties.<sup>50</sup> If applied to the evaluation of manual labor, it is possible, indeed, to subsume this under the category of the active life. This happens for instance in the context of an opposition between monks singing the Office in choir and lay brethren doing agricultural work. But one also finds the conviction that manual labor – in contrast to works of mercy – is a help rather than a hindrance for contemplation.<sup>51</sup> In the orbit of the *Devotio moderna* it was customary for women's convents to combine spinning and weaving, indoor activities accessible even to cloistered women, with prayer and meditation, inserting these activities in a contemplative style of life.<sup>52</sup>

Apart from this, a neat division between two overarching types of religious orders, the one active, the other contemplative, is nowhere found in medieval sources. In papal or episcopal privileges allowing convents to adopt an ecclesiastically approved rule – either the Third Rule of St Francis or the Rule of St Augustine – we do find stipulations to adjust their new canonical status to their customary charitable activities if they wish to continue them. Cases in point are those of the Flemish Hospital Sisters in 1458 and of the Sisters of the Cell in 1474.<sup>53</sup> But in cases like these it is never suggested that by this transformation they came to belong to an overarching category of 'active' orders.

With respect to the Chapter of St Catherine, Carnier himself voices his doubts as to whether it is right to subsume it under the active category. He finds almost no trace of care for the ill and observes that the convents

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49 As transpiring in his Preface: Carnier, *Communauteiten*, 5.

50 Giles Constable, 'The interpretation of Mary and Martha' in: Idem, *Three studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought* (Cambridge Mass: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-141.

51 Cf. the case of the Cistercian monk Idungus cited in Constable, 'Mary and Martha,' 85.

52 Anne Bollmann, "Mijt dijt spinnen soe suldi den hemel gewinnen." Die Arbeit als normierender und frömmigkeitszentrierender Einfluss in den Frauengemeinschaften der *Devotio moderna*, in: *Normative Zentrierung = Normative Centering*, ed. R. Suntrup and J.R. Veenstra (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2002), 85-124.

53 *Bullarium Franciscanum* II, ed. José Maria Pou y Martí (Quaracchi: Ex Typographia S. Bonaventurae, 1939), no. 552; resp. III (1949), no. 571.

under discussion rather lived from manual labor and rents.<sup>54</sup> We might add that the importance attached to liturgical life points to a 'contemplative' rather than to an 'active' profile.

## Literary culture?

One important domain of spirituality so far has not been touched upon with respect to the Tertiaries of the Ypres region. The theme of the 2021 Nijmegen conference included cultural production as an important aspect of Observant reform. In his opening address, Bert Roest referred to the well-known thesis of Werner Williams-Krapp, according to which there is a close connection between late medieval monastic reform and the intense flourishing of devotional literature produced during that period.<sup>55</sup> As a matter of fact, this characteristic of late medieval religious life is conspicuous by its absence from the spirituality of the Ypres group. The series of statutes inserted in the Bruges MS ends with an article that is flatly discouraging with respect to the reading of books:

'No convent of sisters shall allow the use of the Bible or the New Testament in Flemish or Walloon. The sisters shall not be curious or desirous to possess or read new books. Rather they should train themselves in exercising obedience, meekness, patience, humility and in cultivating good inner devotion. With the knowledge and consent of the Mother some may have common good old devout books, for example of the Passion of Christ. Nevertheless, they should not be too much attached to reading, but rather to doing and living well.'<sup>56</sup>

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54 Carnier, *Communauteiten*, 23.

55 Werner Williams-Krapp, 'Observanzbewegungen, monastische Spiritualität und geistliche Literatur im 15. Jahrhundert', *Internationales Archiv für Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur* 20 (1995), 1-15.

56 Bruges MS, 42-43: 'Datmen in gheen convent van suesteren toe en late tghebruijck van Vlaem-schen oft Walschen Bijbel, oft oock het nieuwe testamente. Ende dat de zuesters niet curieux noch begheerlick en zijn van nieuwe boucken thebben, of te lesen, maer meer huerlier zelve pooghen toeffenen inde exercitien van obedientie, zaechmoedicheijt [sic], patientie, otmoe-dicheijt [sic] ende in goede inwendighe devocie. Zulken nochtans bij wete ende consent van de Moeder mueghen hebben gheemeene oude goede en devote bouxkens, als van de passie ons Heeren en dierghelijcke, alsoo nochtans datse up dlesen niet te seer staen en moeten maer meer up tdoen en wel leven.'

It is quite possible that this particular article is late and reflects a reaction to the Reformation. Its position at the end of the statutes is an indication for this. But it does not stand alone. Its negative attitude towards the consumption of religious literature is underscored by the complete absence of evidence for literary activity in the West-Flemish convents under discussion right from the start in the early fifteenth century. In order to evaluate this observation properly, it is necessary to confront the findings for the Ypres group with those on other groups of Tertiaries in the Dutch-speaking parts of the Low Countries.

The best known group of Third Order convents in this region so far are those belonging to the so-called Chapter of Utrecht. It is also the most important group, which even near its end, around 1570, still numbered 82 convents, mainly situated in the central parts of the corresponding diocese.<sup>57</sup> The Chapter of Utrecht belonged to the wider movement of the *Devotio moderna*. From the start and right till the end it remained outside the sphere of influence of the Observant Franciscans.<sup>58</sup> A much smaller, though still important, group of kindred convents can be located in the diocese of Liège. These Tertiary women in due time came to be associated with the so-called Chapter of Zepperen of male Tertiaries.<sup>59</sup> Though their history is less well-studied so far than the history of the Utrecht Tertiaries and the situation in the diocese of Liège is slightly more diffuse than in the north, it seems justified to consider the Zepperen Tertiaries as a southern extension of the *Devotio moderna* that started in the Northern Low Countries.<sup>60</sup>

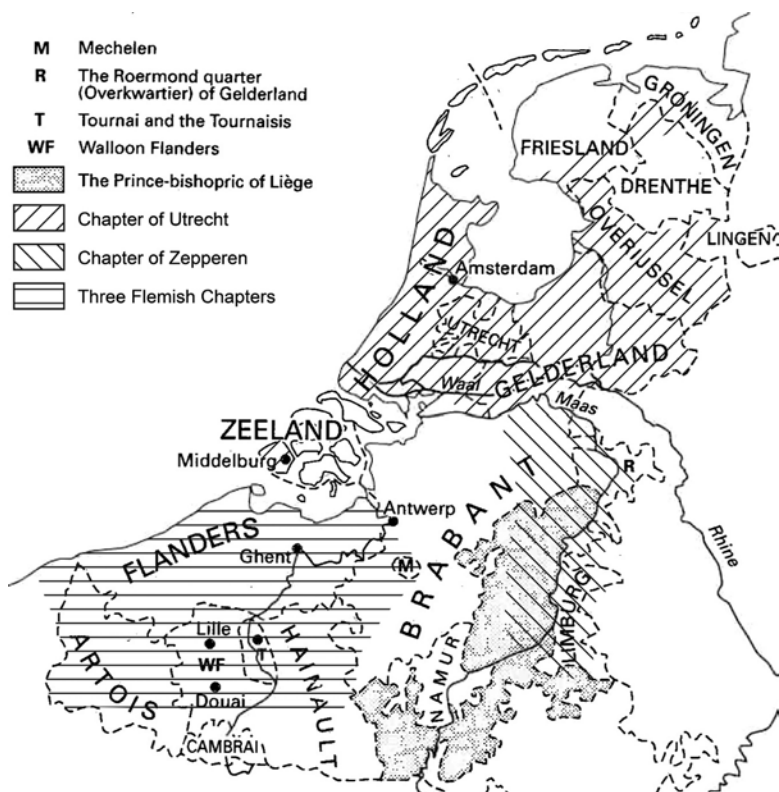
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57 For a list of convents see Van Engen, *Derde orde*, 411-414.

58 For the occasional tensions between these Tertiaries and the Friars Minor see Ibidem, 111-121; 148-156.

59 Marcel Haverals, 'Het Sint-Hiëronymusveld en de congregatie van Zepperen (1425-1460). Een bijdrage tot de kennis van de verhouding Begarden-Tertianen in het bisdom Luik' (Unpublished licentiate's thesis, Louvain, 1968). Available at <https://worldcat.org/ILL/AE/jVPQfJuo8>. See also Van Engen, *Derde orde*, 344-350.

60 Goudriaan, 'Maagdendries', 70-73; 77-80.



Distribution of Chapters of Tertiaries in the Low Countries. Source image: Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic, Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477-1806* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). Edited by Peter J Brown, Radboud University Nijmegen.

The spiritual profile of the Modern Devout Tertiaries of Utrecht and Zeperen has much in common with that of the Ypres group as we have come to know it, including the importance attached to manual labor, in which economic and spiritual motives are interlaced. There is one important difference, however. Central to the religious life of the Utrecht and Zeperen sisters was an intense vernacular literary culture. Literary historians have charted by now the astonishing variety of literary genres produced by the Modern Devout.<sup>61</sup> The way they used to handle written texts as tools for

<sup>61</sup> An important vehicle for these studies is the periodical *Ons Geestelijk Erf*. Cp. The portrait of Thom Mertens by Kees Schepers in *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 90:3/4 (2020), 205-210.

spiritual formation has been analyzed under the heading of 'pragmatic literacy'.<sup>62</sup> Already before 1400 Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen wrote the treatise *De libris teutonicalibus* in defense of the reading of religious books by lay people (to which the Tertiaries belonged according to canon law), although he also applied considerable cautiousness in order to avoid the suspicion of heresy.<sup>63</sup> On behalf of the Tertiaries of the Chapter of Utrecht a translation campaign was launched in the early days of their existence.<sup>64</sup> Tertiary convents invested energy and capital in the building of libraries. Among preserved Dutch manuscripts with a monastic provenance those related to the *Devotio moderna* are preponderant, accounting for over 70% of the 1132 items. The heritage of convents of female Tertiaries covers 21% (239 manuscripts, only 18 of which from outside the *Devotio moderna*).<sup>65</sup>

These findings are in sharp contrast with those for the convents of the Ypres group. Among the fifteenth- or sixteenth-century manuscripts that have been transmitted no one can be traced to one of these convents. This suggests that the article in the statutes quoted above which dissuades from reading spiritual texts reflects an attitude towards literary involvement that was not at all new in the age of the Reformation. Aloofness from the handling of books may be taken as an important clue to the peculiar spirituality of these West-Flemish Tertiaries.

By the way, this is a trait which the convents of the Ypres group shared with those of the Chapter of St Catherine from which they had branched.

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62 This concept was introduced in *Devotio moderna* studies by Nikolaus Staubach, 'Pragmatische Schriftlichkeit im Bereich der Devotio moderna', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 25 (1991), 418-461.

63 Gerhard Zerbolt of Zutphen, *Was dürfen Laien lesen? De libris teutonicalibus / Een verclaringhe vanden duytschen boeken*, ed. Nikolaus Staubach and Rudolf Suntrup (Münster: Aschendorff, 2019).

64 Kees, Schepers, *Bedwinghe op Cantica Canticorum, bewerkende vertaling van Glossa Tripartita super Cantica. Editie en teksthistorische studies* (Doctoral thesis Groningen, 1999; Edition Louvain: Peeters, 2006); Geert Warnar, 'Tleven ons heren Jhesu Christi: Readers and Dutch Devotional Literature in the Fifteenth Century' in: *Saints, scholars and politicians. Gender as a tool in Medieval Studies. Festschrift ... Anneke Mulder-Bakker*, ed. Mathilde van Dijk and Renée Nip (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 25-41; Sabrina Corbellini, 'Een oude spiegel voor nieuwe maagden,' *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 80 (2009), 171-198; José van Aelst, *Vruchten van de passie. De laat-middeleeuwse passieliteratuur verkend aan de hand van Suso's Honderd Artikelen* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2011), 62-92. A survey in: Koen Goudriaan, 'East and West in the *Devotio moderna*? A critical reexamination', *Ons Geestelijk Erf* 90:3/4 (2020), 330-362.

65 Census: Karl Stooker and Theo Verbeij, *Collecties op Orde. Middel nederlandse handschriften uit kloosters en semi-religieuze gemeenschappen in de Nederlanden*. 2 Vols. (Louvain: Peeters, 1997). Calculations: Goudriaan, 'East and West', 344-345 and breakdown in Table IV on p. 349.



These, too, are absent from the census of Middle Dutch manuscripts with a monastic provenance.<sup>66</sup> This observation, in its turn, elicits two points of commentary. It may be no coincidence that no interaction or exchange is recorded between the Tertiaries of West-Flanders – those in the Ypres group and those that continued to adhere to the Chapter of St Catherine – and the Tertiaries in the Chapter of Utrecht, as was the case with the convents which came to be subsumed under the Chapter of Zepperen. This amounts to saying that the Flemish convents were outside the orbit of the *Devotio moderna*.

Secondly, apparently no connection exists between the influence of the Observants and the abstention of reading culture as practiced in some Tertiary convents. This characteristic is shared by the convents of St Catherine, which submitted to the Observants, and the Ypres convents, which did not. Additionally, the Observant Friars Minor of the Northern Low Countries managed to start a small number of Tertiary convents of their own, alongside those of the Chapter of Utrecht. These Tertiaries, sometimes entitled Barefoot Sisters, did leave behind a (small) number of manuscripts.<sup>67</sup>

### **A matrix of Tertiary spiritualities**

It is time to pull the strings of the argument together. But before coming to a conclusion, a brief remark must be inserted on one particular characteristic of the West-Flemish Tertiaries: their taking the three vows. It is difficult to measure the impact of this specific tool on their spiritual life, due to lack of evidence for the convents under discussion, extremely low profile as they are. Remarkably, with their early adoption of the vows (1413) they were far ahead of other categories of Tertiary convents in the Low Countries. At the foundation of the Chapter of Utrecht (1399/1401), the participating convents were obliged to take the vow of chastity; the two other vows were

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66 Stooker and Verbeij, *Collecties op Orde*, Vol. 2.

67 For this category of convents see Goudriaan, 'Derde orde', 237-238; Van Engen, *Derde orde*, 166. The convents involved are situated in the following towns (with reference to the digital census *Monasteries in the Netherlands until 1800*: <https://geoplaza.vu.nl/projects/kloosterlijst/en/>): Alkmaar (A12); Enkhuizen (E13); Haarlem (H18); Harderwijk (H35); Hoorn (H89); Leiden (L20 and L28), and Schiedam (S08). For the relevant manuscripts, see: Stooker and Verbeij, *Collecties op orde*, nos. 437; 698-701; 743-744; 750-751.

added only gradually, a process which took the largest part of the fifteenth century.<sup>68</sup> The situation for the Tertiaries of Liège is less clear. A leading convent in this area, St. Catherine's Vale at Hasselt, implemented the vows from the start (around 1440), but explicitly after the model of the Flemish Tertiaries, not of the Chapter of Utrecht to which it was more akin in other respects.<sup>69</sup> In general, the vows were introduced in Flanders more quickly than in the regions more thoroughly influenced by the *Devotio moderna*.

This contribution tried to illustrate the rich variation in Tertiary life in the late medieval Low Countries, highlighting in particular a small group of convents in the Westernmost corner of historical Flanders. If we enter the variation in a matrix, one cannot escape the impression of a certain amount of arbitrariness in the spread of the variables. Focusing on literary culture in the case of the Tertiaries of Ypres and region and in the Chapter of St Catherine, it now appears that a style of spirituality which points more to contemplation than to action not necessarily entails the cultivation of literacy.

Category	Start	Observants	Three Vows	Enclosure	Active/Contemplative	Literary Culture
Ch. of St Catherine	1413	increasingly	yes	no	contemplative (?)	no
Ypres Group	1481	no	yes	no	contemplative (?)	no
Ch. of Hospital Srs	1447	from the start	yes	no	active	no
Ch. of Cell Srs	1474	from the start	yes	no	active	no
Ch. of Utrecht	1399	no	1, later 3 vows	partly	contemplative	yes
Tertiaries of Liège (Zepperen)	ca. 1460	combatted	partly ?	partly	contemplative	yes
Holland Barefoot Sisters	ca. 1466	yes	?	?	contemplative	yes

68 Van Engen, *Derde orde*, 214-231.

69 Goudriaan, 'Maagdendries', 75-77.

In 1517 pope Leo X united all Franciscans under the umbrella of Observantism with the bull *Ite vos in vineam*.<sup>70</sup> This was a triumph for the claim of the Observant branch of the Friars Minor to represent the proper way of observing the Franciscan lifestyle. Around these same years efforts were made to adjust also the Third Order convents to the interpretation of Franciscanism advocated by the Observants. In the *breve Inter cetera* pope Leo X replaced *Supra montem* as the charter to regulate Tertiary life by a new set of rules, which not only incorporated recent developments such as the increased tendency to adopt both the three vows and enclosure, but also tied the Third to the First, by now Observant, Order.<sup>71</sup> Although this particular measure appears to have had little impact,<sup>72</sup> throughout the sixteenth century a program of making the Third Order conform to the Friars Minor remained on the ecclesiastical agenda.

However, the conclusion to be drawn from the material presented here is that the historian would do well in keeping some distance to the normativity implicit in the claim of Observantism. That will enable him to gain a clearer sight of the varieties in observance recognizable in the rich religious life of late medieval Tertiaries. One of the variables at work was exactly literary culture: often it was fostered as an element of devotion, but it could be opposed or thwarted as well.

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70 Wadding, *Annales Minorum* XVI (Quaracchi: Ad Claras Aquas, 3rd Ed., 1933), 49-55; Moorman, *History of the Franciscan Order*, 583-585.

71 I consulted *Inter cetera* in the edition *Magnum Bullarium Romanum*, ed. Laerzio Cherubini, vol I (Lyon: Arnaud, 1692), 619-621.

72 Van Engen, *Derde orde*, 32-33.