

DAILY LIFE AS A FORUM FOR RELIGIOUS REFORM IN DUTCH AUGUSTINIAN FRIARIES, 1960-1980

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Histories¹ of the reform of Catholicism in the era of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) often concentrate on the reform of the liturgy, of theology, and of the church's attitude to the modern world. With good reason: the Roman rite was renewed and worship in the vernacular introduced, neo-Thomism gave way to theologies based on salvation history, and hostility to the non-Catholic world was replaced by dialogue. But this is only half the story: arguably more important to the lives of ordinary Catholics were the changes that occurred in the way they experienced their faith in everyday life. Some of these were the result of the council, but others of processes of reform that happened concurrently to the conciliar reforms, but did not always correspond to them. Being a Catholic in the secularised countries of post-1960s Northwestern Europe meant something different than it had done in the pre-conciliar era, and much of the difference was situated in the practice of daily life rather than in ideological or theological change. To explain what happened to Dutch society in this period, the Amsterdam sociologists Jan Willem Duyvendak and Menno Hurenkamp have proposed that the change be described as the transition from a society of *heavy communities* to one of *light communities*². In this model, a heavy community is, in Peter van Dam's definition, «characterized by a high level of mutual social obligations, a strong organizational concentration and an extensive definition of the identity of its members», while its light counterpart «is marked by

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¹ Various sections of this article have appeared previously in Dutch as part of my book B. HEFFERNAN, *Een kleine orde met allure. De augustijnen in Nederland, 1886-2006*, Hilversum 2015.

² J.W. DUUVENDAK - M. HURENKAMP, ed., *Kiezen voor de kudde. Lichte gemeenschappen en de nieuwe meerderheid*, Amsterdam 2004.

a strong emphasis on personal freedom, few common identity markers and a low degree of exclusivity»³.

There is something to be said for the notion that many religious institutes in the Netherlands, and in Northwestern Europe in general, underwent a comparable transformation in the 1960s and 1970s. Descriptions of how the Council changed religious life can – and should – concentrate on its call to return to the charism of the founder, and the developments that this precipitated in the Dutch Augustinian province are certainly worthy of further investigation⁴. Focusing on spiritual developments alone, however, risks losing sight of the fact that another important transformation was underway, perhaps more so in the Netherlands than elsewhere – one which occupied the minds of reformers just as much as theology or spirituality: practices of everyday life in the friary – or the monastery, or the convent, or the religious house in general – were being contested, defended, and changed.

This article delineates the changes that the Dutch province of the Order of Saint Augustine underwent from 1960 to 1980 from the perspective of daily life as a forum for religious reform. The year 1960 serves as its *terminus a quo* because it was around the beginning of the 1960s that the Dutch Augustinian debate on reforming religious life truly came into its own. Its *terminus ad quem*, 1980, is inspired by the reality that the decade that began in that year saw a shift away from these debates, towards a new focus on Augustine and Augustinian spirituality.

1. BEFORE THE 1960S

Having its history in the parish missions of the nineteenth century, the revival of the Dutch Augustinians from the 1880s onwards took the form of a ‘monastic revival’, with strong emphasis on the monastic aspects of the religious life such as communal life, internal discipline,

³ P. VAN DAM, «Constructing a Modern Society Through “Depillarization”. Understanding Post-War History as Gradual Change», *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 28, 3 (2015), 291-313: 306-307.

⁴ Cfr. B. HEFFERNAN, «Dutch Augustinians, Appropriations of Augustine, and Resourcement in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries», *Trajecta. Religion, Culture and Society in the Low Countries*, 26, 1 (2017), 45-64. See also M. SCHRAMA, *De regel van de liefde. Over de volgelingen van Augustinus*, Kampen 2006.

uniformity, and institutional success⁵. To some friars, this seemed like an overreaction to the previous, parish mission, phase of Dutch Augustinian history. This had been dominated by the overriding goal of preserving the traditional Augustinian mission stations, which had made many Dutch friars suspicious of any idea of Augustinian identity that involved full observance of the rule and the constitutions, involving a loss of independence⁶. Thus, many friars in Dutch Augustinian parishes, secondary schools, and missions, that were to be built after the 1880s, simply devoted themselves to their ministry without overly concerning themselves with habits, the communal recitation of the office in choir, or prompt obedience to the local prior⁷. During the interwar years, young intellectual friars looked dismissively both at the ‘monastic’ zeal of such pioneers of the revival as novice master Thomas van der Vloodt (1869-1934) and provincial, professor, and novice master Gregorius van Etten (1830-1909), and at the complacency of seemingly unambitious friars in the parish presbyteries. They rediscovered Augustinian identity as *friars*, as brothers who lived Augustine’s great community ideal, and as *hermits*, dedicated to heroic self-sacrifice and asceticism⁸. This was the background against which ideas of the reform of Augustinian religious life began to emerge in the Dutch province in the 1950s.

These ideas revolved around two notions: first, that daily life in the Dutch Augustinian friaries was too traditional, rigid, and formalistic, and second, that it was insulated from the ‘real world’ of lay society. These two notions were both indebted to the radical idealism of the intellectual generation that came of age during the interwar years. This generation’s pupils were now emerging from the province’s houses of study after the Second World War, and these were beginning to draw their own conclusions. Rigidity and formalism were dangerous, they believed, because they impeded the real, authentic, living experience

⁵ Cfr. B. HEFFERNAN, *Spiritus Ordinis nostri paulatim reviviscere incepit. Augustinian revival in the Netherlands, 1886-1920*, in *La ripresa dell’Ordine. Gli agostiniani tra 1850-1920*. Congresso dell’Istituto Storico Agostiniano, Roma 15-19 ottobre 2012, L. MARÍN DE SAN MARTÍN, ed., Rome 2012, 349-73. See also A.K. DE MEIJER, *Augustinus in de Domstad. 350 jaar zielzorg van de augustijnen 1636-1986*, Utrecht 1986.

⁶ Cfr. B. HEFFERNAN, «Contested Augustinian Revival in the Netherlands during the Nineteenth Century», *Analecta Augustiniana*, 80 (2017), 185-207.

⁷ HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 87-112, 203-207.

⁸ Cfr. ID., *The Dutch Augustinians, 1920-1962. Expansion and the discovery of Augustinian identity*, in J. ÁLVAREZ FERNÁNDEZ, ed., *1914-1962: L’Ordine agostiniano tra la Grande Guerra e il Concilio Vaticano II*, Rome 2015, 799-817.

of the religious vocation. And insulation from the world was equally undesirable, because it made the religious life irrelevant to the lives and experience of ordinary modern people⁹. The reform-minded young friars that were being educated in the 1940s and 1950s found allies in friars who worked far away from the houses of study in presbyteries and other external apostolates, and who had long harboured doubts as to the practical relevance of the different versions of Augustinian identity that professors, definitors, and provincials had advocated over the years.

The search for authentic experience and relevance in the 1950s led to a number of changes in daily life in the Dutch friaries. Thus novices who attended the noviciate in that decade testify that, although the formal structure of the programme remained unchanged, novice master Daniel Liphuijzen (1914-1983) encouraged them to shun the seclusion that his predecessors had sought to foster. He did this, for instance, by giving them tips on how best to hitchhike – an invaluable skill for students seeking liberty of movement in the sparsely populated Frisian countryside where the Witmarsum noviciate was located¹⁰. Further testimony to this movement away from monastic isolation comes from the provincial council's decision in 1959 to abolish the practice of giving novices religious names: in future new candidates were to retain their baptismal name¹¹.

Increasing prosperity in the Netherlands in the 1950s was another catalyst for change, as it became common for friars to take holidays, even more than occasionally if we are to believe provincial Athanasius van der Weijden's (1910-1994) complaint in 1956 that Dutch friars were spending too much time travelling¹². The government's *Algemene Ouderdomswet* ('General Old Age Act'), introduced that same year, giving state pensions to all citizens over 65, eased the financial difficulties in which the province had frequently found itself during the interwar

⁹ HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 306, 309-315. See also the important book by M. VAN DEN BOS, *Verlangen naar vernieuwing. Nederlands katholicisme 1953-2003*, Amsterdam 2012.

¹⁰ Interviews by author with several Dutch Augustinians, see HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 283.

¹¹ Minutes of definitory meeting, 17 October 1959 (Het Utrechts Archief, Utrecht [HUA], no. 1392-1: Dutch Augustinian Provincial Archives [ANA], no. 65.

¹² Circular letter Van der Weijden, 10 May 1956, *Analecta Augustiniana Provinciae Hollandicae*, 72 (1956), xxvii-xxx.

years¹³. Television sets began to appear in the recreation rooms of many friaries in the mid-1950s and passenger cars could from that period on be seen parked outside: the trappings of a consumer society that enveloped not only the middle-class households from which most of the province's members hailed, but working-class homes too¹⁴.

2. THE EARLY 1960S

An important leader in the debates on reforming the life of the order from the early 1960s onwards was Robert Adolfs (1922-2009), who returned from an extended spell in the United States in 1960. He was appointed master of professed friars at the Eindhoven philosophate, prior of the Eindhoven friary, and editor of the provincial newsletter *Nederlandse Analecta OSA*. In this latter capacity he became a major opinion leader in the Dutch province, advocating radical reform¹⁵. The gist of his contributions in *Nederlandse Analecta OSA*, often expressed in articles commenting on discussions held during the now-frequent provincial consultations, was that normative views of Augustinian identity should be discarded in favour of new forms of religious life, to be developed on the basis of actual experience of what was valuable and worthwhile rather than on the basis of authoritative texts from the past such as the rule or the constitutions. The friars themselves, as persons, should be the benchmark for these forms, and any and all forms of religious life should be accepted or rejected on the basis of whether they expressed what friars themselves experienced and believed. He rejected the very concept of observance – of conforming to existing structures and rules. Reform did not mean replacing existing structures of religious life by new structures, but abolishing structures and rules altogether, giving way to what he called 'hypotheses', purely functional, experimental forms of living that could be shaped and discarded as experience dictated¹⁶. Adolfs's views were more radical than most friars', but much of what he

¹³ HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 83-87, 176-179, 272-4.

¹⁴ Television and cars: minutes of definitory meeting, 1 October 1956, and 30 October and 5 November 1957 (HUA, 1392-1, ANA, 64); middle class: HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 165.

¹⁵ HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 270, 312.

¹⁶ Cf. R. ADOLFS, «Critiek op het bezinningskapittel», *Nederlandse Analecta OSA* (1961), 23-25; editorial, *Nederlandse Analecta OSA* (1963), 101; 'hypotheses': R. ADOLFS,

said did resonate among a wider group in the province. The responses which friars gave to a questionnaire sent out by the definitory council in preparation for the 1964 provincial chapter echoed the same sentiments: «neither legal frameworks, nor constitutional rules of life make a community, but only the persons in their mutual acceptance of each other». The criterion of a good religious community was that it enhanced ‘possibilities for personal development’¹⁷.

Over the course of the decade, expectations of change began to rise. This was due to the phenomenological and existentialist renewal of Catholic thought that was being effected in the Eindhoven philosophate from the late 1950s onwards, to the Second Vatican Council, and in no small part to the avant-garde liturgical experimentations that were being held in the Boskapel, the public oratory of the Nijmegen friary, from 1962 onwards¹⁸. But these expectations were soon to be disappointed. The election in 1965 of Agostino Trapè (1915-1987) as prior general instead of Van der Weijden, the moderate tone of the Council’s sixteen documents, and Adolfs’s departure in 1968 following trouble with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith over his hard-hitting 1966 book *Het graf van God* (published in English as *The Grave of God*) caused many young friars to abandon hope that the radical change they desired would come through the official channels¹⁹.

3. THE LATE 1960S

They decided to act on their own, and did so by leaving the friary to experiment with a new form of life. In fact, many of their grievances were not so much theological as related to the way daily life was organised, although these objections were rooted in changing views of religious and clerical identity. Thus attempts had been made in the province from the early 1960s to remove the symbolic signs of separation between the friary and the world, and which corresponded with the process of clerical-

«Voorbereiding op het Kapittel. Notities bij een waardevol plan», *Nederlandse Analecta OSA* (1964), 29-32.

¹⁷ ‘Provinciaal kapittel 1964’, 3 July 1964, 1, 2, 42 (HUA, 1392-1: ANA, 260).

¹⁸ HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 302-306, 315-322.

¹⁹ HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 322-325. Cf. R. ADOLFS, *Het graf van God. Heeft de kerk nog toekomst?*, Utrecht 1966.

isation of the clergy that had been ongoing in the Netherlands since the mid-nineteenth century²⁰. Most Dutch Augustinians stopped regularly wearing the habit about mid-decade, and the clerical collar similarly disappeared from regular view, as it did for most Dutch priests²¹. This was not simply the discarding of outdated status symbols, but it reflected a reversal of values, as the modern layman became a positive ideal type for clerical reformers: independent, critically-minded, emancipated from naive religious realism, ritual formalism, and unquestioning subjection to authority²².

One particular grievance of the reformers was lack of communication between members of the religious community itself. The quality of community life had become an explicit gauge of fidelity to the Augustinian charism when Augustine's community ideal was discovered in the Dutch province in the 1930s²³. The practices of everyday life in the large friaries of the Dutch province involved conviviality during recreation, including such traditional clerical pursuits as playing cards, smoking, and partaking of refreshments, but rarely involved deep conversations about personal motivation and experience, let alone emotions. But young reformers had come to believe that precisely such encounters were crucial to living the religious life in an authentic way²⁴.

Elsewhere in the country from 1965 onwards, small experimental communities had been formed outside the confines of the monastery or convent by young religious who eschewed traditional religious life, and a number of these communities also admitted laypeople of both sexes²⁵. In 1967, two Dutch Augustinians in Haarlem left the friary on ideological grounds to live separately²⁶. In November 1968, a group of likeminded friars from Nijmegen issued a statement of principle for a

²⁰ J.M.M. LEENDERS, 'Zijn dit nu de handelwijzen van een herder...!' *Hollands katholicisme 1840-1920*, Nijmegen 2008, *passim*; W. GODDIJN - J. JACOBS - G. VAN TILLO, ed., *Tot vrijheid geroepen. Katholieken in Nederland, 1946-2000*, Baarn 1999, 63-68, 197-211, 319-325, 423-428.

²¹ LEENDERS, *Zijn dit nu de handelwijzen*, 203.

²² HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 288-289.

²³ Cf. Visitation report Makaay, St. Nicholas's (Witmarsum), 13/14 June 1933 (HUA, 1392-1: ANA, 502) and Visitation report Makaay, St. Augustine's (Utrecht), 26 January 1943 (HUA, 1392-1: ANA, 504).

²⁴ Interviews by author with several Dutch Augustinians, see HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 290.

²⁵ GODDIJN - JACOBS - VAN TILLO, *Vrijheid*, 234-236.

²⁶ HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 326.

similar plan. They wanted the province to permit them to start experimenting, to find «new forms, new figures, new structures» for the religious life, and the experiments in question could involve a wide range of modalities:

living together in a large group in one house; working together on a single project; living together in a small group; living together but working on different activities; living together as celibates with eternal vows; living separately as celibates with regular encounters and communal consultations; living together as celibates without vows; living together with a daily order of communal prayer; living separately with regular meetings for prayer; living separately as married people and working together on a single project, communal ties of solidarity as married and celibate people working together with a single purse for the finances; working together with mutual financial support, etc.²⁷

Communication among the members of the group was of paramount concern, and the authors of the proposal emphasised that the services of professional communication coaches would have to be engaged to help foster an atmosphere of true, authentic communication²⁸. A group of young friars in the Haarlem friary made similar proposals²⁹. A provincial consultation held in November 1968 in Culemborg adopted a resolution that accepted the ‘factual diversity’ of the Augustinians of the Dutch province as a legitimate thing, and encouraged the experimentation that the young reformers advocated. The intermediary chapter held only a few days later followed suit³⁰.

When the Haarlem group of young friars attempted to put their new-found freedom into practice by negotiating a division of the friary’s communal property, they encountered stiff opposition from a sceptical prior. The ensuing standoff led to the celebrated ‘breakout’ of five Haarlem friars in later 1968 and early 1969: they left the friary for temporary accommodation in the city while looking for a private

²⁷ «De structuur van de konventen en de functie van de plaatselijke gezagsdrager. Ter voorbereiding van de provinciale bijeenkomst te Culemborg, 6 november 1968», *Nederlandse Analecta OSA* (1968), ‘OSA Nederland’, 11-16: 14.

²⁸ «De structuur van de konventen», 15.

²⁹ J. BERNSEN - *al.*, «Experiment te Haarlem», *Nederlandse Analecta OSA* (1968), ‘OSA Nederland’, 24-26.

³⁰ «Ruimte met of zonder grenzen. Samenvatting van de provinciale bijeenkomst te Culemborg, 6 november 1968», *Nederlandse Analecta OSA* (1968), ‘OSA Nederland’, 17-22: 19; minutes of Provincial Intermediate Chapter, 1968 (HUA, 1392-1: ANA, 68).

dwelling where they could start their new, experimental form of religious life³¹.

As has been seen, these developments in the Dutch province were fully in step with what was happening in other religious institutes in the country. The ongoing Noordwijkerhout Pastoral Council of the Dutch Church Province (1966-1970) organised a session on the reform of the religious life in January 1970, and proposals identical to those formulated by the Nijmegen and Haarlem Augustinians were discussed in the preliminary debates held in November 1969³². In the same month, the prior provincial, Isaias Mijnsbergen (1916-1994), and his definitory council published a preparatory document for the 1970 provincial chapter, entitled *Nota '70*, which adopted many of these ideas. In it, he proposed the transformation of the Dutch province into a loosely-organised 'federation' that would accommodate a wide diversity of forms of life, and would accept married as well as celibate members, and women as well as men³³.

4. THE 1970S

The chapter held in 1970 elected Wim Saelman (1923-2008) as Mijnsbergen's successor, a moderate left-winger whose formidable diplomatic skills prevented the wholesale adoption of *Nota '70* by the chapter – an eventuality which would have precipitated a head-on collision with General Trapè and his council – while at the same time accommodating many of the demands of the young 'radicals'³⁴. He could not, of course, prevent the departure of many friars at this time, although the fact that departure figures spiked between 1966 and 1969 and declined thereafter should caution us against postulating any direct causal relation between the *Nota '70* controversy and this phenomenon, which, moreover, was

³¹ Interviews by author with several Dutch Augustinians, see HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 328.

³² J.Y.H.A. JACOBS, *Werken in een dwarsverband. Een portret van de gezamenlijke Nederlandse priesterreligieuzen 1840-2004*, Nijmegen 1976, 141-142.

³³ I.G. MIJNSBERGEN - *al.*, «Nota provinciaal kapittel 1970. Ter discussie voorgelegd aan de leden van de Nederlandse Augustijnen-provincie», 22 November 1969, *Nederlandse Analecta OSA* (1969), 'OSA Binnenland', 23-34.

³⁴ HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 373-375, 382-384, 412-414.

quite similar to that occurring among other religious and among the secular clergy³⁵.

Daily life in the friaries of the Dutch province changed drastically after 1970. For a start, the traditional large communities, with their mixed populations of young and old, priests and lay brothers, and their clearly stratified structures of seniority and power, all but disappeared. By 1982, only two friaries (Eindhoven and Venlo) had populations of more than ten friars, and this at a time that the province still counted close to two hundred members. The others all lived in small communities, presbyteries, school friaries, or experimental groups, or, indeed, alone in private accommodation: by 1978 a third of the Dutch friars lived by themselves³⁶. These changes resulted in part from the 1970 chapter's decision to embrace the principle of 'group formation': the reorganising of the province into small, organically formed communities of members who shared the same ideals³⁷.

Life in the remaining large friaries, especially in Mariënhege in Eindhoven, was probably least affected by change, and an observer who visited this house in the late 1970s would have seen many things he might also have seen there twenty years before.

At the other end of the spectrum stood the experimental groups. There were three of these in the Dutch province, all established in 1970: one in Haarlem ('Leefgroep Schalkwijk'), and two in Nijmegen ('Leefgroep Archipelstraat' and 'Leefgroep St. Annastraat'). Each had between five and ten members, and the Haarlem group and one of the Nijmegen groups also included non-Augustinians, including women and non-celibate members³⁸. Despite the common idealism that underlay these groups, it proved difficult to build a viable community in the absence of agreed values; a shared commitment to open experimentation was evidently not sufficient grounds for community formation. The

³⁵ 121 *Informatiebulletin*, 15, 19 (1987), 798.

³⁶ Eindhoven and Venlo: *Nederlandse provincie van de orde der augustijnen. Naamlijst (1 december 1982)* (HUA, 1392-1: ANA, 723); private accommodation: L. VAN GELDER, «Komt de "E" weer in de "OSA"»? De alleen wonende en/of levende religieus», *Nederlandse Analecta OSA* (August/September 1978), 1.

³⁷ Acts and decisions of the provincial chapter, 1970 (HUA, 1392-1: ANA, 23).

³⁸ H. KROON, «Nota '70. Opkomst, bloei en vervolg (1)», *Augustijns Forum*, 12, 1 (maart 2013), 2-4; P. VAN HASSELT, «Nota '70. Opkomst, bloei en vervolg (2)», *Augustijns Forum*, 12, 3/4 (december 2013), 6-8; L. VAN GELDER, «Nota '70 en de OSA-groepen», *Augustijns Forum*, 14, 4 (2015), 10-11.

emphasis on intensive communication within the groups probably also facilitated personal clashes between group members in ways that simply would not have happened in the traditional friaries, where interaction between members was ritualised rather than spontaneous and where store was set by monastic silence. By 1974, the three groups had disintegrated, although vestiges remained in the form of Augustinian participation in various comparable initiatives in the decades that followed³⁹.

By far the greatest change was the rise of what might be called the 'single friar': the friar who lived alone, in private accommodation. This phenomenon was not entirely new to the Dutch province or indeed to the order, and there are, I would venture to speculate, precedents in Augustinian history for the 'single friar' due to the exigencies of parish, chaplaincy, or missionary work. The rapid disappearance of collective, provincial projects such as secondary schools, chaplaincies, and seminaries removed the practical need to live together, while the necessity of finding new appointments elsewhere was a powerful centripetal force. Many a friar had to move out of the friary simply because the new pastoral appointment he had accepted required his presence near his new job. But the rise of 'single friars' also reflected disenchantment with the form of community life that had emerged during the monastic revival, and perhaps despair at the chances of developing a new, more satisfactory form of the religious life. It would be quite mistaken, however, to view the decision to live separately as necessarily involving a choice against community life, as the establishment of the so-called *regional* or *provincial* convents testify. These were *living apart together*-style groups set up for friars who lived alone, but who met regularly to meet, talk, and pray together. Two of these groups were formed in the 1970s, and they prove that many single friars still tried to give shape in some way or other to the Augustinian community ideal⁴⁰.

5. CONCLUSION

Our investigation of daily life as a forum for religious reform has revealed that debates about the particulars of how Augustinian life should be organised were an important vector of change in the Dutch province,

³⁹ HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 415-416, 431-432.

⁴⁰ HEFFERNAN, *Kleine orde*, 414, 443.

and that much of the reform of these reformist decades was about practices of daily life rather than any theological or spiritual principle. Having said that, it would be mistaken to think that the transition described here from the province as a *heavy community* to a *light community* was an inexorable process, somehow driven by impersonal laws of history. It was driven not by esoteric external phenomena like *secularisation* or *modernisation*, but by people whose changing paradigms, expectations, and perceptions caused them to break with tradition. Traditional life in the friary had become unacceptable to some friars by 1970 not because it was objectively unsuited to the times or ill-adjusted to modernity. «Such as we are, such are the times», to quote a writer of undisputed authority. It had become unacceptable because the reformers in question had convinced themselves that it was so. On what grounds? This question leads us back to the history of theology and spirituality, but it invites us to historicise the reformers and their ideas, to view them as historical subjects rather than as purveyors of objective analyses of reality.