

Spiritual Virgins and their Passion for Devotional Prints

Ruusbroec Institute, Print room · Thijs Collection

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

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



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

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

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

Godt Hemelcken Vader, siet ick
d'arm sondarigh mensch drage u he-
den op alle de verdienften van het le-
ven, lyden, ende doot van uwen eenigen
geboren Soone Jesu Christi. Syn valten,
sijn waecken, sijn bidden, sijn traenen, sijn
geestheyt, sijn gheestmoedicheyt, sijn
oetmoedicheyt, gehoorsamenheyt, sijn be-
naetheyt, sijn wonderen, en alle sijne ver-
dienften, met de verdienften van sijne
geheylighe Moeder ende Maget Ma-
ria, ende alle Gods lieve Heyligen, met
alle Heylige sacrificien van de Missen,
dier heiden ende heel Weert geschieden,
en sullen geschieden, tot vergiffenis
van mynen alle menschen sonden, vol-
comen beternis van ons leven, ende dar-
naer d'euwige glorie, noek voor die in
peryckel nu noch sijn van sonden of
sonden eenen in peryckel, dat u godde-
lycke geestheyt die son belien, dier
van te ver, vreesnoek tot troost van al-
le benoude, ende bedruckte herten, ende
verlossinge van alle Christene slaven wys
de slavenvre der ongelooverye, tot ge-
singe, onafsaligedoot van alle sicke ende
stervende menschen, tot verheffing van
on: Heyligh Roomsch Catholyck Ge-
loof, ende weeten van onsen Ackerhey-
lighen Vader den Paus van Roomen



finnellyck Opperhoofd der ware Ker-
cke Jesu Christi, en voor alle geestely-
cke ende werelycke Overgheryt en on-
dandenen Bichtvaders, en siechtstreders,
dat sy die en alle menschen, door uwen
Goddeleycken Geest belieft te bestien.
Ende eyndelyck tot leffemise en ver-
lossing van alle Gelooverye Zielen in
de pyne des Vagwiers, noek voor N...
N... tot dien eynde drage ick u op
geheel myn selven tot uwen ewigen
lof, myn woorden, myn wercken ende
gepylen, u biddende dat sy allegader,
door u om uen in u alken mogen be-
ginnen, gedon worden, ende verlyden.
Verenicht met die van uwen eenigen
Soone Jesu, ende uwe welbemindde Doch-
ter Maria, oetmoedelyck verfoeckende
ons deelachtigh te maken van alle hun-
re verdienften door Jesu Christi, uwen
onfater, welken Aldergoddertien-
sten Jesus ick bedanke van al de me-
nighvuldige weldaden en lieftde, die my
ouwerdich behoort, profitycelyk in
uyn Alderlychlichte menschenwoedinge
ende geboorte, bittere Passie, ende Doot.
Den welken leest ende regneert, met
Godt den Vader, en den Heyligen Geest,
Godt inder ewigheyt der ewighe-
den. Amen

*Smaendaghe salmen dese Opdracht oeffenen ter eeren van het bloedigh sweeten in het Hofsten, ende ge-
wangensisse Jesu Christi. Ende dan dit misterie inden dagh somwylen overpersien principalyck in u Gebeds of
Meditatie, ende al loo doende dagelycx met de navolgende misterien op die navolgende dagen.*

Dynsdaghs ter eeren vande vrede gewangensisse Jesu Christi.

Woensdaghs ter eeren vande sobroomelycke gesessinghe.

*Donderdaghs ter eeren vande pijnelycke Doorne Croone Jesu Christi, en het Hoogbuerendigh H. Sacra-
ment des Autaers.*

Vrydaghs ter eeren vande sware Cruysdraginge ende Cruysinghe.

Saterdaghs ter eeren vande Doot en begraffensisse Jesu Christi, ende bedruckte Moeder Gods Maria.

Sondaghs ter eeren vande Verrijfensisse en Hemelvaert van Jesus en Maria.

V. A. E. L. C.

Antwerpen, By Hendrick Thiellullier, Boeckdrucker en Verkooper, inde Wollanen. 1710.

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

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

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

Further reading

A.K.L. THIJNS, *Antwerpen internationaal uitgeverscentrum van devotieprenten, 17de–18de eeuw*, Louvain, 1993.

E.M.F. VERHEGGEN, *Beelden van passie en hartstocht.*

Bid- en devotieprenten in de Noordelijke Nederlanden, 17de en 18de eeuw, Zutphen, 2006.