

Letters Written in Good Faith. The Early Years of the Dutch Norbertines in Wisconsin, translated and edited by Dr. Walter LAGERWEY, Alt Publishing Co., Green Bay, Wisconsin, USA, 1996, 547 pp., Library of Congress Card Number 96-79953; also available in the bookshop "Berne", Abdijstraat 49, NL-5473 AD Heeswijk-Dinther, 60 NLG.

This book, numbering 547 pages, contains the texts of 16 documents and 208 letters in English translation. The letters of Dutch Norbertine missionaries are directed to their abbot, their confreres and family members in the period between November 1893 and October 1, 1902. All the documents and letters are translations of the unedited originals and each is provided with a brief introduction. There are at least 400 footnotes which clarify the texts.

Nine years of pioneering work led around 1900 to the establishment of a Norbertine foundation (St. Norbert Priory) located on the lower Fox River, in West De Pere — now De Pere — in the American state of Wisconsin, near the city of Green Bay. It was a foundation of the Berne Abbey in the village of Heeswijk in the province of Noord-Brabant in the Netherlands. The history of the Berne Abbey dates back to 1134.

With the establishment of the St. Norbert Priory, the St. Norbert College, and a novitiate of its own, Prior Bernard Pennings had attained his principal goals. But unbeknownst to him another career challenge of no less than fifty years still awaited him. In 1925 he was consecrated the first abbot of St. Norbert Abbey. He held that post for thirty years, until his death on March 7, 1955. His final remains are entombed within the impressive St. Norbert Abbey which was erected on the east side of the Fox River under his successor, Abbot Sylvester Michael Killeen.

In one of his first letters, dated December 19, 1893, Father Pennings wrote: "It seems that my letters are arriving in fairly good time, and are also being read, well, that is what they are for. Still I had by no means reckoned with their being copied into a book and kept forever. I merely write in good faith, about this and that, hoping that you and my good friends and acquaintances will gladly overlook any errors; but what will people say of them later on? I suggest that in Heeswijk they give that book the title: 'Letters written in good faith, by a well meaning soul, pray for him!'" (pp. 70-71).

We may certainly speak of Bernard Penning's prescience: a little over one hundred years later his suggestion was followed, not by "Heeswijk", but by his own creation: "De Pere".

The realization of this first volume — a second will contain the letters to 1940 — was dependent on a number of happy coincidences, and especially the very formidable efforts of several people. There was the 100th anniversary of the arrival of the first Norbertines in America in 1993. There was the determination of the then presiding Abbot, Benjamin T. Mackin, the constant care and accuracy of the archivist of "Berne", Huub van Bavel O. Praem., and the talent and devoted dedication of the translator,

Dr. Walter Lagerwey, emeritus professor of Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and his wife, Wilma, both of Dutch descent and Reformed, with an open mind and heart for the White Canons in America, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The nephew of Bernard Pennings, Norbertine Ambrose Pennings, who died in 1991, and the Norbertine Xavier Colavechio worked hard in diligently collecting the letters, preparing a typescript of them, and even translating many of the now published letters.

For me, as a historian of emigration to North-America from the Netherlands, and more particularly from Noord-Brabant, the letters are of great importance as ego-documents, which for the most part achieve a nice balance in the description of their personal experiences and their new environs. Many of these letters circulated among friends and acquaintances in Heeswijk and elsewhere. A number of letters, slightly edited, were published in the Norbertine journal *Het Offer* (The Sacrifice) which was published quarterly beginning in 1892.

What is most important about the publication of these letters, it seems to me, is the fact that they now appear in the light of day, and that they have been made available in a very convenient format to all interested persons who can read English. On quite a few occasions the writers were reacting to something written in Holland, letters which in general have not been preserved. Of course many letters were also written to the 26 Dutch Norbertines, 21 priests and 5 brothers, who left Heeswijk to go to Wisconsin — the last one in 1912 —, but they were never collected and preserved. In all likelihood the receivers did not attach any historical significance to them.

It is likely — but we shall have to await the publication of the second volume — that the letters of the first period constitute a greater unity than those written in the next period, if only because of the small number of letter writers. In addition, reports about the pioneering period have a very special charm. Still the later letters probably are also historically significant.

In addition to expressing my admiration and respect for all that was achieved in this very successful publication, as a historian I would also like to make a few critical observations.

My main point is the absence of a more thorough going discussion of the historical background of this successful mission of the Norbertines. Naturally the idea for doing mission work in the United States did not just fall out of the sky in Heeswijk. Nor can you explain the mission by just referring, as the Introduction does, to the conversation between the bishop of Green Bay, S.G. Messmer, and a Dutch priest in his diocese, Alphonse Broens, who advised him to ask the Berne abbot for assistance in ministering to the predominantly Belgian immigrants on the so-called Peninsula, the peninsula between Green Bay and Lake Michigan. After all, there was the threat that the Walloon Belgians would be lost to the church because of the lack of good priests, and that they would fall victim to heresy, spiritualism, and what was then regarded as equally bad, to Anglicanism or another form of protestantism.

The mission of the Norbertines is a part of the great mission activity which developed in the Netherlands in the nineteenth and twentieth century. In the nineteenth century alone, 220 Dutch priest-missionaries were working in the United States. Important work was done by the Flemish and Dutch Jesuits in the Mid-west and in the Far-west. Well-known is the Fleming, Pieter De Smet (1801-1873), the apostle of the Rocky Mountains. He returned to Europe eight times in order to make propaganda for the American mission and to enlist students. American prelates called on Dutch seminaries with the same goal in mind.

After the establishment of the Collegium Americanum in Louvain, 730 men were trained here for the American mission, including 82 from the Netherlands, between 1857 and 1901. A high proportion of the Dutch missionaries came from the region where the Dutch Norbertines were active. And not only missionaries but also other catholic emigrants came from precisely this same area.

In 1848 the Dutch Dominican, Theodorus van den Broek (1784-1851), after making a journey to his native land, brought back with him 200 colonists from the province of Noord-Brabant to the area along the Fox River, where he had already been doing mission work for fourteen years. His church and parsonage were located in Little Chute. A few years later another group of 200 emigrants followed from Noord-Brabant. In a so-called chain-migration thereafter more and more catholic Hollanders came to this area. Among them relatives and acquaintances of the Norbertines.

In 1891 the diocese of Green Bay numbered 110,000 souls, of whom 10,000 were of Dutch or Flemish origin. Of the 110 priests 17 were of Dutch descent. The numbers just kept on growing over time. In 1909 there were two "Holland" churches just in De Pere, St. Mary in East de Pere and St. Boniface in West de Pere. Which is to say that the coming of the Dutch Norbertines must be placed in the context of a more general emigration movement within their own environs.

And as far as the founding of a convent is concerned: several Crosier Fathers and Brothers, living in places not far from Heeswijk, had left already in 1850 for the Fox River area with the intention of founding a cloister. In the end that attempt failed, among others because of too little support from the Netherlands. The Norbertines who came forty years later must have known all about this history, and their leaders doubtless drew lessons from it.

The most important Crosier who arrived in America, in the period of Father van den Broek, was Eduard Daems (1826-1879). He it was who in the 1850's called attention to the so-called Peninsula as a good area for a settlement to the Walloon Brabanders from the area of Brussels. Their settlement began in 1853 with forty to fifty persons and by 1857 there were already several thousand people. Daems himself became a pastor-priest on the edge of the Peninsula, in Bay Settlement, and there founded, in addition to a very shortlived Crosier convent, the congregation

of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Holy Cross, whose mother house is still located in Bay Settlement. In 1868, when the diocese of Green Bay was established, Eduard Daems became the first vicar-general of Bishop Joseph Melcher. From Bay Settlement he had to care for another thirteen mission posts (congregations) and a chapel.

For a more detailed history of the Crosiers in the United States see the book of Jerome W. Rausch, *The Crosier Story*, Onamia MN, 1960.

Less than fifteen years after the death of Daems the first three Norbertines arrived whose first area of work was on this Peninsula. Would not the catholics living here, principally Walloons, who in the meantime had been badly served, have rejoiced at the arrival of priests much like the Crosiers? After all, Crosiers (Diest) and Norbertines (Averbode, Grimbergen, Tongerlo) were also known in Belgium for their settlements.

The published letters of the Norbertines clearly indicate that their parishioners gladly cooperated in the restoration of the older, religious life. The so-called heretics and apostate didn't have much of a chance. The Walloons and the other catholic inhabitants of the Peninsula could again participate in the traditional manner in the celebration of the sacred liturgy in their own language, of devotions, of pilgrimages and processions, and count on the administration of the sacraments. The Norbertines were most welcome to them and remained so even when their center became located in De Pere.

My intent in the above is to emphasize that the letters need to be understood in a historical context. The letter writers and readers of a hundred years ago were aware of many matters about which the present readers know nothing. For that reason in my judgment a historical introduction is really indispensable to a publication of old letters.

In addition I regret the absence of more clear maps with giving the names, then and now, of places, parishes, and mission posts in the area in which the Norbertines worked.

Though more illustrations are not essential, they are desirable, as is an index of names. Perhaps these wishes can still be met when the second volume is published.

May that volume appear within a few years and thus bring to completion this most valuable source book.

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