

Priest religious of the social action

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*The sociology of Berne Abbey for farmers, small entrepreneurs, and employers 1895-1940*¹

1. A social four-leaf clover in Berne Abbey

‘To reform the mentality of individualism to a better insight, that is the program of the white Fathers of Heeswijk, [one] which they put into practice with apostolic fever, with unflinching energy and with a deep scientific feeling’². The secretary of the Dutch Catholic employers’ organization Kortenhorst used baroque words to honor the accomplishments of the social activities initiated by the Norbertine Fathers, on the occasion of the eighth centenary of the Abbey of Berne in 1934. The Norbertine community of Berne can count as the oldest monastic community that is still active in the Netherlands. It is situated in the town of Heeswijk-Dinther, in the southern province of Brabant. Its name originates from the place where the abbey was founded in 1134. In the Reformation, this abbey was destroyed and the Fathers were dispersed, until community life was restored again, in Heeswijk in 1857. Between 1890 and 1940, the period in which the eighth centenary was celebrated, the abbey was a center of social study and activism, and of course Kortenhorst, who worked closely with one of the main protagonists, had to honor this.

During this period, the abbey was home to four leaders of social activism who had an impact both nationally and internationally, and who, moreover, developed fields of action outside the then common domain of the workers’ question. Godefridus (Gerlacus) van den Elsen is still remembered as the ‘apostle’ of the farmers, as he led the emancipation of the farmers of Brabant, which developed into a powerful movement. Johannes (Josephus) Nouwens started a Catholic movement for small entrepreneurs and gave this social group a common identity in the church and in society. His successor Josephus (Julius) van Beurden laid the

¹ This paper is based on the book *Paters van de sociale actie: De Abdij van Berne en de sociale kwestie 1895-1940*. Heeswijk: Berne Media (2019).

² KORTENHORST, Abdij van Berne, quotation on p. 184.

foundations for this movement, and, as its political advisor, wrote well-considered papers about the subsidiary role of the state. Finally, Lambertus (Pius) van Aken is honored for having interested the Catholic employers in the social problems of their employees and for having coordinated the whole of the Catholic social movement later in his career. The historian of the abbey, Van den Hurk, characterized these four men as a four-leaf clover³, who brought luck to the abbey, to the church and to society.

Each of these social activists has received some scholarly attention⁴. There is a body of work especially on Van den Elsen and the farmers' movement. But these four men have never been analyzed together. And yet a joint analysis can highlight the reciprocal influences these social activists exercised on each other. Moreover, a joint analysis of their publications can reveal whether there was such a thing as a typical sociology of Berne, an answer to the social problems that the Netherlands faced at that time. Apart from this analysis, the question has never been answered why these four activists flourished in the abbey of Berne specifically. Norbertine spirituality and the activities in the early years after the foundation of the order were focused on parish ministry, catechesis and education, liturgy and pastoral care, and on fulfilling a role of leadership in remote parts of the medieval church, on the border with the non-Christian or non-Catholic world⁵. Why did Norbertines take a leading role in the social question and in the Catholic social movement, given that this was a complete aberration in the history of Berne Abbey and of its filiated abbeys, in the USA (De Pere), Germany (Windberg) and India (Jamtara)? And, reflecting on this question, what was the role of religious in the social question, compared to secular clerics who have received a much greater share of attention in the history of the social action of the church?

This paper presents an answer to these questions. It is based on extensive research of the personal files of these social activists in the archives of Berne Abbey. Moreover, all main publications on the social question by these four protagonists of social action (books, brochures, book chapters) were studied. Furthermore, secondary literature on Catholic social organizations, the social question in the Netherlands, and the history of

³ VAN DEN HURK, *Heeswijk-Dinther*, p. 68.

⁴ The various publications are listed in the bibliography.

⁵ As can be seen in the church history of North and Central Germany: HEIMANN et al. (ed.), *Brandenburgisches Klosterbuch*; HUSCHNER et al. (ed.), *Mecklenburgisches Klosterbuch*.

Berne Abbey, including biographical publications about these four social activists, was consulted. The structure of the contribution is as follows. First, the peculiarities of the Catholic social movement in the Netherlands are described. On the one hand, the social question developed relatively late compared to other European countries. On the other, the influence of the church authorities on this movement was greater than it was elsewhere. Second, the article will offer a portrait of the four social activists, each according to the same pattern: after a biographical note, attention will be paid to their activities and their sociology respectively. Third, the conclusion will answer the question why Berne could develop into a center of social action, and will explain what the characteristics of its sociology were.

2. Social questions and solutions in the Netherlands

2.1. *The social question*

Van Zanden and Van Riel have characterized the social question, which occurred in almost every European country in the nineteenth century, as the tension between the promises of the liberalization of the economy, society and politics on the one hand, and disillusion about the reality of this program on the other⁶. Liberalism promised greater welfare for everyone, political functions distributed by democratic elections, less governmental control, and more opportunities to climb the social ladder. The reality of early capitalist societies, however, was that large groups were extremely poor and had no opportunity to share in increasing wealth, that large groups were excluded from political participation, and that factory workers were subject to harsh control through economic measures. In the Netherlands, this tension came to the fore around 1870. During the previous decade, the Dutch economy experienced a transformation into a modern economy. There was more investment in machines and the technical infrastructure, which in turn led to the emergence of large firms. These were characterized by modern management structures, efficient and large-scale production procedures, integration of the product chain from production to sale, and high demand for capital.

⁶ VAN ZANDEN & VAN RIEL, *Nederland*, p. 317.

This trend further increased as the Netherlands was integrated into the European economy, and it was stimulated by the liberal economic policy of the government (low wages, open borders). The west of the country was at the center of this development, and as a consequence, many people moved from the countryside to the big cities of Holland, a process stimulated by the agrarian crisis of the 1880s. However, these cities were not equipped to house all these newcomers, and this resulted in desperately poor housing conditions for the workers. Around 1870, the first signs of worker unrest and strikes were becoming apparent, and a committee was founded to discuss the 'sociale questie'. Only after 1872, when the legal ban on unions was lifted and free association was allowed, modern trade unions could be founded. Soon, after a number of major strikes, the trade unions dominated the labor market. This caused great tensions between employers and workers⁷.

The liberal elite started a civilization drive, in which confessional groups later also became involved. As a result, new social institutions were set up that ameliorated social insecurity. Then the state also took its responsibility by introducing social laws: a ban on child labor, a law on working conditions, and compulsory insurance against workplace accidents. But it was not until the First World War and the interwar years that the government intervened in the organization of the economy to realize more just structures and to prevent social unrest. The government subsidized payments to the unemployed, and in 1917 general suffrage for men was adopted (for women 1919). In the interbellum, social security was further improved (working day, housing). Also, structural consultations between workers and employers were organized, which decreased the tension between the two groups. Collective agreements were negotiated and the state ensured the implementation of these agreements for the sector for which they had been concluded. By 1940, the social question had been more or less solved⁸.

2.2. *Catholic solutions*

To solve the tensions that had been caused by liberalism, a new vision of society was needed. Socialism and social Protestantism offered alternative visions of society, and after the publication of *Rerum novarum*, so

⁷ IDEM, pp. 315-316, 331-336, 344-361.

⁸ SENGERS & NOORDEGRAAF, *Religion und Wohlfahrtsstaatlichkeit*.

did social Catholicism. This encyclical letter by Pope Leo XIII can be considered the starting point of modern Catholic social thought, although there had been important precursors in Germany, the United Kingdom, and France. Pope Leo wanted to raise awareness of the disruption of society as a result of the gap between the rich and the poor, and therefore posited a number of principles for social action. Among these were the right of property as the fruit of one's labor to secure the needs of the worker and his family. The state must guarantee just economic and political structures so that this property could be gained and secured. The pope denounced the liberal state as he emphasized that the state must protect the common good. He made a plea for just wages, healthy work conditions, reduction of labor by women and children, and Sunday observance. He also stated that private property was not absolute but had a social and collective aspect; workers and capitalists needed each other and it was wrong to see them as opponents. Finally, the pope acknowledged the right of workers to organize themselves to secure their rights.

The publication of *Rerum novarum* caused shockwaves among the economic and political elites of Europe: had the pope become a socialist? In the Netherlands, however, where Catholics had been in a deprived social situation ever since the Protestant Reformation, the encyclical letter was received positively. It caused Catholics to adopt a more positive opinion towards society and to the problems they experienced within society. No longer did they regard modern society as bad, dominated by the rationalist and materialist worldviews of liberalism and socialism. Since *Rerum novarum*, the idea was that social problems could not be solved by charity alone, but also required just social structures. Social problems were not caused only by erroneous worldviews, but were also the result of social and collective actions. These principles set Dutch Catholics on the road to social action: under the leadership of the church in Catholic social organizations, society had to be returned to the order that God had instituted during the creation⁹.

But before this action could develop, a number of principles resulting from *Rerum novarum* had to be further clarified for the Dutch context. These debates about the correct organization of the workers and the role of the church in social action had far-reaching consequences for the social publications and actions of the Berne Norbertines. The first debate

⁹ BORNEWASSER, Sociaal-ideologisch denken; VAN DEN EERENBEEMT, Ideeën rond 1900.

was about whether the workers should be organized on the basis of their social position (workers in general) – thus giving priority to the religious and cultural aspects of their action – or of their profession (e.g. carpenters) – thus giving priority to the more secular aspects of the workers' lives. The second debate was about whether denominational or interdenominational organizations should be established: if such bodies were to be organized on the basis of their members' social position, they would need to be denominational and directed by the local bishop, but if not, they could be interdenominational and organized on a nationwide basis. The third debate was about whether it was necessary for these social organizations to have a priest as a religious advisor: if they were based on profession, this was not required, if they were based on social position, it was obligatory. Ultimately, in 1916, the bishops decided that workers, and in fact all social action should be organized on the basis of the social position of the target group, that such organizations should be exclusively Catholic, and that they required a priest as a religious advisor. These were the principles that would characterize Dutch Catholic social action up to 1956¹⁰.

3. Social activists of Berne

3.1. Van den Elsen

Godefridus van den Elsen (or Elzen, according to his baptismal certificate) was born as the son of a farmer in Gemert on April 13, 1853. According to his own record, he received his First Holy Communion on April 6, 1865. He attended the Latin school at Gemert, an institution established in the Middle Ages by the Teutonic Order, which exercised sovereignty over Gemert up to 1800. On November 10, 1869 he entered Berne Abbey and received the name of Gerlacus, after a hermit saint from Houthem (Dutch Limburg). He received his philosophical and theological training at the abbey and was ordained a priest on June 24, 1876. From 1878 to 1880, Van den Elsen was a parochial vicar in the parish of Berlicum, a small village in the vicinity of the abbey. He then returned to the abbey and lectured in biblical studies and church history, taking a special interest in the latter. He wrote about the history of the

¹⁰ SENGERS, *Roomsche socioloog*, pp. 106-120.

Norbertine Order and Berne Abbey, and about the history of Brabant. He also wrote poems and theater plays, for which he was rewarded with membership of the Dutch Literary Society. In 1886 he founded the *gymnasium* or college in the buildings of Berne Abbey, and he was the rector of this school until 1902. But his main activity was devoted to the farmers' question. He suffered a stroke in 1920 and had to give up most of his functions; he died on April 20, 1925¹¹.

It was the combination of history and literature that opened his eyes to the problems of the farmers. When Van den Elsen edited the second edition of the popular sermons he had preached in Berlicum in 1892, he became aware that the position of the farmers had deteriorated. A number of articles he read similarly addressed the problems of the farmers, and *Rerum novarum* – though this encyclical did not mention the farmers specifically – was also influential, as it talked about poverty and social harmony. It was clear that organization of the farmers was necessary, but who would take the lead? Van den Elsen wrote several articles in 1896, but the first Dutch Christian farmers' association NBB (Nederlandse Boerenbond) was founded by others in Arnhem in January 1896. However, Van den Elsen was present at the start of the provincial Brabant Christian Farmers' association NCB (Noordbrabantse Christelijke Boerenbond) in Den Bosch in August 1896. Soon, he acquired an influential position in this interdenominational organization, as he was appointed chief editor of the association's weekly publication. He also became secretary of the NBB from 1902-1917. Van den Elsen had become a man to be reckoned with, and people who ignored him did so at their cost, in the form of negative comments in this periodical¹².

One important question was whether the farmers' associations should be denominational or interdenominational. Both NBB and NCB were interdenominational organizations that followed the example of the German farmers. Both organizations were dominated by Catholics, but the leaders made great efforts to implement an interdenominational policy. For Van den Elsen, this was a pragmatic question: in Brabant, most farmers were Catholic and as long as the association was based on *Rerum novarum*, the few Protestant members of the organization would not be able to harm its predominantly Catholic identity. For this reason, Van den

¹¹ Baptismal certificate and autobiographical notices ABH 1001.

¹² Van den Elsen documented this history in *Stichting Boerenbond*.

Elsen initially refused to become the spiritual advisor of the NCB, as this was a typically Catholic office. But when the members elected him to this office unanimously, and the bishop gave his approval, he had to accept it in 1897. However, the interdenominational position was difficult to maintain in the early twentieth century due to the policy of the bishops. The solution for Van den Elsen, who had always defended the cooperation of all farmers, came from the outside, as the first Protestant farmers' organizations were founded from 1913 onwards. This meant that Protestant farmers could join their own associations, and the NCB was able to turn into an exclusively Catholic body. This situation was formalized after Van den Elsen's death¹³.

Van den Elsen promoted his organization and its development whenever and wherever he could. Clerics who promoted the ideas of the NCB as these had been defined by Van den Elsen, received subsidies from the NCB. He engaged in a fierce struggle with the state-controlled provincial agricultural organization, which promoted the interests of the large farmers and the Protestant rural elites, arguing that his NCB was the true representative of the farmers and that it should therefore receive provincial subsidies. Van den Elsen was convinced that only collaboration of the farmers could improve their position. It is in this field that he gained his greatest fame, by setting up the cooperative farmers' banks (Boerenleenbank). The main problem for the farmers was their lack of funds, which they needed to improve their buildings, machines, techniques and soil so that they could increase their production. Van den Elsen adopted the ideas of F.W. Raiffeisen, who promoted local cooperative banks in Germany led by volunteers from the agricultural community. The plan was that the banks would transform the local community into a single Christian family, as the farmers would look after one another and help each other to improve their social and professional development. Soon after they started in 1897, cooperative banks were established across the south of the country and also in the north – all thanks to Van den Elsen's personal efforts. Soon, the cooperative network of the NCB expanded with many other cooperative organizations, including a mortgage bank, insurance for cattle and against fire and storm damage, dairy cooperatives and many other initiatives¹⁴.

¹³ HOLLENBERG, Gerlacus van den Elsen, pp. 69-71, 205-212.

¹⁴ For a general overview of farmers' cooperatives see ROMMES, *Voor en door boeren*.

Van den Elsen propagated a vision of the farmers and their position in society that was influenced by Neo-Scholasticism, shot through with Romantic notions. This vision had a mobilizing function in the early years of his involvement in social action, but it became outdated during his lifetime and was criticized even within the NCB, which was very loyal to him. He strongly opposed liberalism, which in his view was the source of all evil, as it makes some people rich and kept others poor. Liberalism, and liberal economic politics, were the reason that farmers did not have fair opportunities to improve their fate and were subject to global economic trends (i.e. cheap grain from the USA). In the name of liberalism, the farmers were subject to unjust legal and economic structures that defended the interests of the rich. Van den Elsen believed the solution was a return to the values defended by the Catholic church, especially as they were explained in *Rerum novarum*. He believed that these values of cooperation, charity, decency, and frugality had been preserved among the farmers and that these therefore had a crucial role to play in society. This is why he opposed rationalization and modern techniques among the farmers, as he believed these would harm their original, Christian spirit¹⁵.

His opposition to liberalism came to the fore in his discussion of the fate of tenant farmers. The practice of tenancy was very problematic at the time: as the farming population increased, rent was high and surpluses were insufficient to cover it. The plots of land rented out were small and inefficient. And improvements to the buildings led to higher rent, but the farmer did not have fixity of tenure. In short: the tenant bore all the risks, and was dependent on the landlord. Van den Elsen wanted to improve the security of the farmer, so as to guarantee that he could profit from the work of his hands. If that were the case, the farmer would be able to live a more decent life, which would be beneficial to the whole of society. He looked to the history of the abbey for an example of this, as Berne had always had good relations with its farmers before the Reformation. In Van den Elsen's day, however, commercial motives governed the relationship between farmer and landlord. Finally, he demanded a just law for tenancy contracts, supervised by independent judges or by tenant committees, and not by the landlord alone¹⁶.

¹⁵ Most ideas are summarized in VAN DEN ELSEN, *Boerenstand*.

¹⁶ VAN DEN ELSEN, *Pachtrecht*.

Liberalism also led to the emergence modern contractual relationships between the farmer and agricultural laborers. This was contrary to Van den Elsen's idea of the farmer as the father of a family who cared for his children and his workers alike. The agricultural laborers suffered from the agrarian crisis of the 1890s and moved to the cities. Van den Elsen wanted to improve their fate through membership of the farmers' organizations: farmers and farm workers were dependent on each other, the farmer should take care of his workers as if they were his own children (this certainly is an idealistic picture that Van den Elsen painted), and if the workers were to unite separately, this would certainly increase rural class struggle. He also opposed organization of the agricultural laborers, and even improvements in their contracts, as improvement of the position of the farmers was his primary focus. A good Christian farmer, freed from unjust contracts and laws that benefited the landlords, and with enough sources of income – this was his goal – would certainly take good care of his employees. Therefore Van den Elsen believed agricultural laborers had to be integrated into the farmers' organizations, although they themselves did not want to be in the same organization as their patrons¹⁷.

3.2. *Nouwens*

Johannes Petrus Nouwens was born on January 2, 1875 in Klundert. His father, a coppersmith, died in 1877. His mother then opened a bar in the family home. His guardian sent him to the Jesuits in Turnhout (B) to be educated. However, alumni of this school were expected to become missionaries, and this was probably a problematic prospect for his widowed mother. Nouwens was sent to St. Norbert's College in Heeswijk instead, to finish his education. He was one of the best of his class and he entered the abbey in 1893, receiving the name of Josephus. He was sent to Rome for further studies in 1897, was ordained a priest in 1899 and obtained a degree in canon law in 1901. After returning to the abbey, he lectured in philosophy. Nouwens is remembered as the founder of the Catholic movement of small entrepreneurs, to which he devoted much of his physical and intellectual powers. He continuously complained about his weak health, but was nonetheless appointed procurator general of the Norbertine Order in Rome in 1910. After returning from exile in

¹⁷ He set out his vision in a handwritten note ABH 1036.

Switzerland (Berg Sion) during the First World War, he was accused of having Bolshevist contacts and, when he refused to obey the orders of the Vatican, was expelled from the order and from the priesthood in 1922. Together with his girlfriend, Marie-Anne von Hoytema, he settled in Meran (I), where he died on January 20, 1968¹⁸.

Around 1900, the changes in the economy that led to a modern production and retail system started to affect small entrepreneurs all across Europe. Due to his own family background, Nouwens had affinity with this group and he had discussed these problems in Rome with his professors in the light of the ideas promulgated in *Rerum novarum*. Back in Heeswijk, Nouwens studied small entrepreneurs' first attempts at combination, their problems, and reports of their first international associations, and he started to publish about the subject himself. As small entrepreneurs were excluded from the farmers' cooperatives, Van den Elsen urged Nouwens to start a separate movement for the entrepreneurs. On December 9, 1901, an informal meeting of entrepreneurs was held at Berne Abbey. On December 24, Nouwens visited the Bishop of Den Bosch, who encouraged him to start a movement of small entrepreneurs in his diocese – 'Start with courage under God's blessing'. On January 8, 1902 there was a preliminary discussion about the statutes of the new association, and the Hanze Association, called after the Hanseatic League, the medieval network of trading cities, was founded on February 6. Nouwens was appointed its spiritual advisor. In October of the same year, the periodical *Hanzebode* started with Nouwens as its chief editor¹⁹.

Initially, this movement of Catholic small entrepreneurs was a participant in the neutral Dutch association of small entrepreneurs. But for Nouwens, the Catholic identity of Hanze was important. Inspired by *Rerum novarum*, he depicted small entrepreneurs as the bonding factor between workers and employers and thus as important for the stability of society and of the church. He argued on the basis of Leo's encyclical that the entrepreneurs should organize: combination was a natural process that was necessary to pursue the interests of the group. He defended the role of priests as spiritual advisors; this position, for him, was the expression of priestly care for the people of God. As long as the national

¹⁸ Diplomas from Nouwens ABH 1201-1204. For the Nouwens affair see POELS & SENGERS, Power play.

¹⁹ See for the start of the movement VAN DEN EERENBEEMT, Nouwens katholieke middenstandsbeweging.

association remained neutral, the Catholic Hanze organizations could continue to be members of it. But under Nouwens's successor Van Beurden, the national association took sides in a political issue that was essential to the Catholic parliamentary party. As this compromised its neutrality, the Catholics broke away from this association to found their own national association of diocesan Hanze organizations in December 1915²⁰.

As for the farmers, cooperatives were seen as the solution to the problems of small entrepreneurs. Nouwens initiated only one cooperative, the Hanzebank. Due to various reasons, one of them being their old-fashioned way of managing customer relations, small entrepreneurs often did not have enough money to invest in their business. And as most large banks were concentrated in the Western region of Holland, which preferred to invest in new, large-scale forms of production, small entrepreneurs were short of money. Nouwens copied Van den Elsen's initiative and started a cooperative bank after the model of Schulze and Delitzsch, a model more adapted to the needs of entrepreneurs. After some discussion, the bank started in 1904 with the aim of providing credit to the members of the Hanze association, which meant in effect to Catholics. Many small entrepreneurs were skeptical about the new bank; Nouwens had to write a brochure praising it, and the standards for membership had to be lowered to attract business. In the 1910s the bank finally gained widespread acceptance, although gross mismanagement, flouting of the statutes, and the banking crisis after the First World War caused it to go bankrupt in 1923²¹.

Following the German Jesuit Heinrich Pesch, Nouwens saw the return of society to the Christian plan which God had instituted at the creation as the solution to the social question. Human beings had been created as individuals and as social beings, and their end was to be happy in heaven and on earth. Individual people and societies should therefore adhere to the will of God. As the Catholic church placed the dignity of human beings at the center of its social and economic teaching, these principles, Nouwens believed, promoted welfare. The social character of humankind implied mutual rights and duties, including in this world. That meant that the church demanded social reforms so that people could develop accord-

²⁰ See VAN DEN DUNGEN, *Middenstandsbeweging Nederland*, pp. 15-22, 33-41.

²¹ VAN DEN EERENBEEMT, *Middenstandskrediet*.

ing to their personal destiny. On a social level, this principle meant that a society was happy when there was no poverty. In Catholic socio-economic teaching, persons and their needs were placed at the forefront, before the production of goods. Moreover, as all persons were seen as equal, it advocated an end to class struggle and promoted solidarity and unity among the nations²².

Organization and cooperation of small entrepreneurs was needed to improve their position and to maintain their intermediate role between producers and consumers. These functions were developed within the Hanze organization. Commercial education was needed to improve administrative skills and knowledge of product quality. Employment offices could help to provide well-trained personnel. Only a powerful organization could support Sunday observance for entrepreneurs and could fight unfair competition. Emulating Van den Elsen's enthusiasm, Nouwens also promoted cooperatives for small entrepreneurs. Nouwens showed them that it was necessary to put their individual interests aside and work together so as to be able to buy products at the wholesale market for a good price in small quantities. In other fields, too, Nouwens saw opportunities for cooperatives for small entrepreneurs²³.

Nouwens was a rising star not only in the Catholic social movement. He was present on the national and international stage and was appointed to state commissions to investigate the problems of small entrepreneurs and their possible solutions in 1904 and 1908. This marked a change in state policy, away from *laissez-faire* liberalism to intervention in the economic field. In 1908-1909, Nouwens and the president of the national association, J.S. Meuwsen, toured the Austrian-Hungarian Empire to document what the imperial government had done to improve the situation of small entrepreneurs. They observed that local customs and regulations had been harmonized and the free exercise of trade and craft was promoted. The traditional, strict boundaries between the professions had been relaxed. Associations and cooperatives were being promoted and supported. The result was that this economic section was flourishing in the empire. Nouwens and Meuwsen were also enthusiastic about the Austro-Hungarian government board for small entrepreneurs, which

²² NOUWENS, Inleiding [introduction to a translated paper of Pesch].

²³ NOUWENS, Middenstand coöperatie. For an overview of Hanze suborganizations and cooperatives see ABH 1263.

increased the quality of the products and the innovation of new products through exhibitions. After their return, they travelled through the Netherlands to share their experiences²⁴.

3.3. *Van Beurden*

Josephus Stephanus van Beurden was born on December 26, 1878 in Kaatsheuvel. His father was a shoemaker. Jos wanted to become a missionary, and he therefore attended St. Norbert's College in Heeswijk and then entered the abbey in 1898, receiving the name of Julius. The abbot recognized Van Beurden's talents and sent him to Rome for further studies at the Gregorian University. He fell under the spell of neo-Thomist philosophy there and obtained a degree in philosophy in 1904. In the same year, he was ordained a priest in Den Bosch. Back in the abbey he was appointed a lecturer in philosophy and canon law, but he would not turn out to be a philosopher. When Nouwens left for Rome, Van Beurden was appointed his successor in the Catholic movement for small entrepreneurs. In this capacity, he continued and extended the initiatives that Nouwens had started. First he promoted and organized commercial education courses. This laid the foundation for what is now the largest group of Catholic secondary schools in Brabant, and eventually for the Catholic University of Tilburg, which started as a third-level college for the economic sciences. Second, Van Beurden became an important advisor on questions concerning small entrepreneurs: in the Catholic social movement, as an editor of magazines, he initiated the association of young entrepreneurs, and he was a member of state committees and advisory boards. He died on September 16, 1945. Van Beurden burned his papers and it is not possible therefore to trace his activities through archival research. This section will therefore focus on his publications²⁵.

After the Catholic movement of small entrepreneurs broke away from the neutral national movement, it was Van Beurden who drafted a program of principles. In this program, he distinguished between a religious-moral and a social-economic program for small entrepreneurs. He regarded the religious-moral program as the most important, as the roots

²⁴ MEUWSEN & NOUWENS, *Middenstandsorganisatie Oostenrijk-Hongarije*, pp. 7-11, 63-72, 96-97, 124-127, 138.

²⁵ VAN STRATUM, *Berna ut lucerna*, pp. 202-203.

of the social question lay in the denial of and attack on the moral-religious principles of the economy, the state and society. Therefore, the church should lead the social action of Catholics and develop and realize Catholic principles in economic life. Cooperation with non-Catholics was possible, but exclusively Catholic organizations were better, because they made it possible to change the liberal views prominent even among Catholic small entrepreneurs. The social-economic program must attack this liberal view of the economy that had led to a divide in society between rich and poor that was detrimental to small entrepreneurs. In the Catholic view, society was a necessary and divinely instituted association of persons with the goal of protecting everyone's natural rights and of supplementing individual shortcomings. According to Van Beurden, economic life should adhere to this goal of civil society, to which it was subject. The social organizations of the small entrepreneurs should promote these ideas about economy and society among their members and also in society²⁶.

The state played a major role in Van Beurden's thinking. The discussion revolved around finding the right balance between too much and too little intervention. He answered the question on the basis of principle: man cannot provide in his own and his family's needs all by himself. It followed from this that cooperation between individuals was necessary, and Van Beurden believed that this was the natural goal of society. This meant for the economy that there was both a personal and a social aspect in economic activity, and that these two needed to be combined. This again implied that economic activity was limited by the needs of society as a whole and by its well-being. It was the duty of the state to strike a balance between the freedom of the individual and the whole of society. This was especially important for small entrepreneurs, whom he characterized as the pillar of society. He therefore defended the freedom of small entrepreneurs, but at the same time acknowledged the right of the state to intervene if necessary. Van Beurden identified several criteria for state intervention: there had to be no other means to achieve the common goal, the intervention had to be limited in time, the number of people and firms affected by the intervention had to be small. On the basis of these criteria, Van Beurden also identified several abuses, both among the small entrepreneurs themselves (who asked for state intervention to protect their business) and on the part of the state (which erected state

²⁶ VAN BEURDEN, *Beginsel- en werkprogram*. The first edition was published 1918.

monopolies, for example in electricity and postal services, that could just as easily be provided by the market)²⁷.

Van Beurden's ideas about the role of the state in the economy culminated in a strong condemnation of fascism from a Catholic perspective. In earlier publications, the state was the guarantee of the common good, but in 1935 (influenced by *Quadragesimo Anno* 1931) he argued that the state supplemented the functions of society. Human beings and their families, and other associations at a lower level (such as unions), existed before the state did, and people cooperated in the state to the extent that their needs could not be met in other ways, through some lower-level organization or association. The state was a means to realize the goal of human well-being, and was not a goal in itself, and it should build on natural forms of cooperation. But as liberalism denied this natural cooperation and posited the individual in opposition to the state, parliamentary democracy had degenerated. Van Beurden saw National Socialism and fascism as extreme reactions to these mistakes of liberalism. However, Catholic social teaching offered a better solution as it promoted an organic society built on natural associations. Although there were parallels with fascist and National Socialist views, Van Beurden emphasized that these ideologies regarded the state as an absolute, and viewed society and even personal well-being as subject to the state, whereas in Catholicism the state was subsidiary to society and individuals²⁸.

3.4. *Van Aken*

Lambertus Henricus van Aken was born on September 7, 1876 in a farmer's family in Terheijden. He was the third son of a family of nine, some of whom also became priests or religious sisters. His parents rented the farm but were listed in the tax register, thus quite prosperous. Lambertus attended the college of the abbey from 1889 onwards and entered the abbey in 1894, receiving the name of Pius. He was appointed editor of the journal *Het Offer* of a devotional confraternity associated with the abbey. He was ordained a priest on June 9, 1900 in the cathedral of Den Bosch. He was then made a teacher at the college and later a lecturer at the seminary of the abbey, where he taught sociology. Over the next two decades, he became the leader of the Catholic employers' movement, but

²⁷ VAN BEURDEN, *Overheidsbemoeiing*.

²⁸ VAN BEURDEN, *Fascisme en wij*.

in 1923 he returned to the abbey. He became director of the fraternal society and mission procurator for the abbey's missions in India and Germany. In 1926 he became a parish pastor in Vlijmen. He continued to be involved in social action from a distance until his final illness in January 1938. He died in Den Bosch on February 22, 1938²⁹.

Van Aken entered social action through the temperance movement and began by writing articles and giving lectures about some other social questions in the years 1902-1905. In 1906, Van den Elsen went on vacation to the United States, and Van Aken replaced him in the farmers' movement. In 1907, there was a labor dispute in the Brabant cigar industry. Many workers were fired, and they were supported by the Catholic clergy. The employers possibly realized that they could not win this struggle and they asked Van Aken for help. He became the editor of their magazine in 1910, later changing the format into that of a periodical for employers in general. Van Aken believed that the social question could only be solved if the employers took their responsibility, and he informed them about social questions through this journal. Gradually, Van Aken became involved in other employers' organizations. He became the spiritual advisor of the Catholic book printers' guild and of the basket makers' association. The time had come to start a Catholic employers' organization, but the employers themselves were hesitant. Van Aken was sent to Rome to receive the opinion of the Holy Father, but the pope was indisposed, so Van Aken only received a written blessing over his work. Delayed by the outbreak of the First World War, the Catholic employers' organization was founded on September 2, 1915³⁰.

The Catholic identity of the employers' organization was not self-evident. Employers esteemed their business contacts regardless of religion or worldview, and they profited from the liberal economic policy that they implemented in their own firms. The bishops decided in 1913 that employers should be organized on the basis of their social position, thus emphasizing the moral-religious aspects of their work, and leaving the temporal aspects of their role (how to lead a firm) outside the church's remit. This decision allowed them to continue to be members of neutral organizations and to decline to accept the Catholic workers as partners in social talks. For Van Aken however, Catholic membership was essential.

²⁹ VERHULST-BOTS, *L.H. van Aken*, pp. 11-15.

³⁰ LINSSEN, *Werkgeversorganisatie katholieke patroon*, pp. 50-58.

The social question was about more than temporal questions: it was also about the salvation of society. That is why the church authorities had the right and duty to lead social action. When the bishops demanded that Catholics should unite in Catholic organizations, Catholics should obey this. The Catholic employers held back in this struggle and thus stood to lose influence in church and society. It was in their own interest to organize and thus to contribute to social peace on the basis of Catholic principles. However, the archbishop of Utrecht did not appoint Van Aken as spiritual advisor, although the Catholic employers' organization made him its honorary president³¹.

Van Aken was the director and administrator of many Catholic social organizations. He became president of the Catholic agricultural council in 1920 and president of the Catholic tenants' council in 1921. He is also remembered as the founder of the young Catholic employers' organization, through which he tried to lead new generations of employers in their involvement in social action. But his finest hour, though not the easiest one, was when he became president of the Dutch Catholic Social Action KSA after its reorganization in 1920. The national offices of the various social organizations were combined in one central bureau in order to coordinate their actions and to give the KSA a sound financial basis. But Van Aken proved unable to change a number of bad habits that had become ingrained in the Dutch Catholic Social Action: quarrelling, gossiping, competition and bad cooperation. In 1926, the KSA was shut down. There were some other initiatives to bring the diverse Catholic social initiatives together, especially employers, small entrepreneurs, farmers and workers, but by that time Van Aken had withdrawn from public life and was working in parish ministry³².

Van Aken's main publications were his social studies, a collection of lectures held in the winter of 1914-1915. The goal of these lectures was to make employers more aware of the social question, something Van Aken believed was necessary to solve this question. It was necessary that Christians – he meant employers – should strive for a Christian society and therefore take an interest in the feelings and circumstances of fellow Christians – he meant workers. Labor and capital needed each other to

³¹ Van Aken lectured on the origins of the movement ABH 1103; relevant documents ABH 1101.

³² VERHULST-BOTS, *L.H. van Aken*, pp. 108-112.

come to fruitful and efficient production and common welfare, and therefore workers should earn a reasonable wage. After discussing socialism and liberalism (both of which he condemned) he defended the church's alternative: solidarism treated society as a moral organism in which groups had to cooperate, and this was the answer to social divisions. Freedom was limited by the common good and the natural rights of others, if necessary through social legislation. One of these rights was the right of association (in unions for example), which the employers should acknowledge. Van Aken underlined that especially the Catholic unions, under the guidance of the church, could be of benefit to the employers as they sought the common good. He also defended workers' strikes, and reminded the employers that a sound, firm policy could prevent strikes. Collective labor agreements, in his view, stood at the top of the pyramid of this reorganization of the economy according to Christian principles³³.

It was typical for Van Aken that he did not set out to please the employers. He demanded that employers should treat their workers as fellow Christians with whom they were engaged in a common battle against the evils of liberalism. Liberalism had caused charity and social justice to disappear from society, whereas *Rerum novarum* reminded employers of their duty to employ these principles in their daily actions. In faith, there is no difference between the rich and the poor, and employers should open their hearts to the needs of the workers, even if workers were union members – *Rerum novarum* supported union membership as a natural right. Employers should look upon unionization as a positive thing, as only organized workers could be supportive of an ordered economy. Van Aken also defended foremen, whom employers regarded as loyal but as closer to the workers than to themselves in social status. Employers forbade foremen's organizations but Van Aken defended these: it was the duty of the foreman to address the employer in the name of the workers, organization could help to raise the moral level of the foremen, and moreover: organization was a natural right that could not be forbidden³⁴.

An interesting memorandum that Van Aken wrote on September 23, 1932 dealt with possible solutions for the economic crisis of 1929. It discussed the reduction of the weekly working week to 40 hours, with the aim of reducing unemployment. Van Aken repeated accepted social

³³ VAN AKEN, *Tien sociale studiën*.

³⁴ VAN AKEN, *Patroon en werkman*.

teaching as he said that labor was not a goal in itself: it was a means to reach a higher goal, to meet human needs. To work longer than necessary to reach this goal was 'anti-social' in Van Aken's words. From this perspective, he defended the reduction of working hours, which was also made possible by technical developments that allowed for more efficient production. Reducing working hours compensated the worker for the increasing demands of the modern production system (he meant rationalization). In this way, the worker shared in the results of technical development, which was a social gain. Justice demanded that the profits of technical improvement be dispersed evenly among the participants in the economic process, because, as Van Aken concluded, 'the progress of the human mind is a gift from God and is for the benefit of the whole of humankind'³⁵.

4. Ad omne opus bonum paratus

During the German occupation of the Netherlands during the Second World War, the social organizations founded by the Berne Norbertines were forbidden. After the war, they continued in a different form but without guidance from Berne: the four Norbertines who were involved had all died except Nouwens, who had been laicized. In the history of the abbey, the degree of social activity between 1890 and 1940 was exceptional. A first explanation for this is the stabilization of community life after the Reformation. In 1857 the dispersed community reassembled in Heeswijk. The community started to revive the contacts it had had, sometimes for centuries, with several parishes in the region and with the local population. New entrants joined the abbey, bringing in their networks in the province with them. Among these entrants were young men of great intellectual ability, who beforehand had had little to no opportunity for further studies. The abbey provided further and higher education in its own grounds, and this laid the foundation for profound study of spirituality, history, biblical sciences, and philosophy. It is in this thriving context that the four social activists discussed in this paper entered the abbey, each with their own specific social and family background.

³⁵ ABH 1113.

They entered the abbey at a time that the Netherlands was in state of change. The consequences of this change were felt especially in Brabant, or to put it differently: Brabant had a specific economic constellation in the social question. Brabant had many small farmers who rented their land and could not live off their plots. There were small entrepreneurs who were affected by migration of the rural population to the big cities in the west. And Brabant was also the province where the first large-scale companies were established (Philips, Unilever). Moreover, the Catholic population of Brabant was ruled by liberal Protestant elites. As the abbey revived its contacts with its surroundings, it could not ignore these developments. Among the farmers and the small entrepreneurs, three issues were to the fore: financing, political power, and new techniques. The social activists developed initiatives on all of these issues: they founded banks to provide finances, they started cooperatives to organize economic and political power, and they informed the target groups about technical, social and administrative developments, including developments in church and religion, in order to bring them up to date. An innovative aspect was to involve the employers in social action, which was possible as the employers and workers traditionally entertained close social relations. The four priests discussed in this article appealed to a common Catholic identity to convince both workers and employers to cooperate and thus limit the consequences of class struggle.

Not only the Netherlands was in a state of change; this also applied to the Catholic church as a whole. *Rerum novarum* was published in 1891, and all four social activists referred to the themes of this ground-breaking encyclical. A recurring theme was the workers' rights to the fruits of labor. This theme was discussed in the farmers' question, but employers too were reminded that they must pay their workers a wage from which the workers and their families could live a decent life. Another important issue was the role of the state as the guardian of the common good. From the sidelines (as Catholics did not have political power until 1918), they appealed to the political elites to take their responsibility as Christians. Regulation was seen as a means to order the economy in a just way, to the benefit of farmers, small entrepreneurs, and employers alike. Private property and its social aspects, an important theme in *Rerum novarum*, was not prominent in the writings of these social activists, but they did emphasize that it was important to pay taxes and give charity. All four social activists renounced the idea of class struggle and actively set up organizations to promote social consultation. A final theme was that they

actively supported the right of association, and they used this principle of organization to order the economy. The social activists of Berne were not creative thinkers, as they were developing social teaching originating in the works of people like Hitze or Pesch in Germany, but they were very good at adapting these teachings to social situations and target groups.

Social Catholicism was an alternative to liberalism on the one hand, and to socialism on the other. The Norbertine Fathers of Berne enthusiastically supported this program that was promoted by the pope and the Dutch bishops. They founded and guided Catholic social organizations and provided these with legitimacy both in their ideology and through their presence as priests. At the same time, the Berne Fathers translated the needs of their target groups to bishops and (Catholic) political leaders. In their activities, they closely followed the guidelines of the bishops, who wanted exclusively Catholic organizations under diocesan control. They also accepted the division in the Catholic social movement between social-cultural organizations and professional organizations, although they themselves would have preferred to keep these two aspects together – something their target groups also wanted. They were active as spiritual advisors – also a point of discussion in the Catholic social movement.

If we review the case of these Berne priests as a whole, we can draw a number of conclusions about the characteristics of religious in social action. First it is striking that the Norbertines combined social theory with social action; they did not limit themselves either to theorizing (like intellectual orders as Jesuits or Dominicans), or to action alone (like active congregations). They combined these two aspects, allowing theory and action to influence each other. And second, they were able to play a role on both the national and the international level. Many priests who were active in the social question were limited by their diocesan boundaries and their local bishop. The religious were not limited by bishops, although they were dependent on them, and thus they had greater freedom to develop activities with a broader range of influence. Other Dutch religious (Franciscans, Dominicans) also had similar super-diocesan influence, but existing research has not focused on this aspect of their activities.

It is in this thriving and changing context – in society, in the church, and in the order, more specifically the abbey – that the four social activists discussed here could flourish. But their history also points to two other aspects. First, the innovative power of the cooperative organizations and the mobilizing force of the ethical concepts used in the discussions,

both internal (with the target group) and external (with politics and non-Catholics). Obviously, with the cooperative models on the one hand and Catholic social teaching on the other, these social activists were able to convince various audiences to engage in the social action of the church and to control and reorganize the economy. This was a change in the hearts, minds and behavior of the economic actors. Second, their success points to hard work, to the efforts and perseverance of the social activists. Tirelessly, they promoted their organizations at meetings, courses, lectures, in commissions, among parish boards, before bishops and even before the pope. In addition, they developed a respectable number of books and brochures, newspaper articles and reports, and the manuscripts of many more lie unpublished in the Berne archives. Without this dedication to improve the situation of the target groups, and of the economy and society as a whole, Berne Abbey would not have become the center of social action that it was. These men truly lived according to the motto of the Norbertine order: prepared to do any good work that came their way.

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ABH = Archives of Berne Heeswijk, available online at www.bhic.nl

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