CHAPTER THREE

NARRATIVES OF THE PAST, PROGRESS AND POLARIZATION

1. INTRODUCTION

In the literature on the changes within Dutch Catholicism and the secularization of Dutch society, the narratives of the believers who used to fill the pews of the churches do not really have a place. How did the people who were the subjects of the immense efforts that resulted in the dense network of organizations of the Catholic pillar experience all the changes? How did the place of religion in their lives change as a consequence of the crumbling of this pillar? How critical, or nostalgic, are they towards the Catholic past? Many of their narratives have been gathered in documentaries, in (auto) biographical books, and in fiction.¹ There are very few studies that systematically examine the narratives of lay believers on the changes within Dutch Catholicism to reflect on the nature of these changes and the consequences they have for the present day nature and place of religion in society.²

This chapter describes the ‘narratives of the past’ of the generation that was born before the Second World War in Welden. They came of age and had their families at the triumphant height of post-war Catholicism described in the previous chapter, and witnessed the changes that took place in Dutch Catholicism starting in the sixties. It starts with a comparison: on one side, there are the representations of ‘the past’ of active Catholic intellectuals who were part of the spirit of renewal unleashed after the Second Vatican Council. They emphasize that change was inevitable. This representation will be compared to the narratives of the elder generation: did they also see change as inevitable? Was their religious life really so unbearable according to themselves? (Sections 2 and 3). Section 4 will describe the ‘local face’ of the polarization within Dutch Catholicism,


and especially the Roermond diocese already described in the previous chapter. Section 5 describes the narratives that emerged when I asked the respondents to compare the world they grew up in with the present, in terms of values and lifestyle.

The term ‘narratives of the past’, the title of this chapter, is intended to indicate that I take the stories that people told me not as the uncomplicated representation of attitudes and moral orientations in the past, but as the present-day result of a process of making sense of the changing historical landscape in which they lived their lives. The assumption is that the narratives expressed in the individual interviews are part of a body of shared narratives. Although they were at that moment created for my benefit, these narratives emerged and evolved throughout the contexts of interaction my respondents participated in: from discussions between husband and wife on how to raise their children, via conversations with a family member or close acquaintance who is a member of the clergy, to discussions among colleagues, neighbours, friends and community-members.

The interview material that formed the basis of the descriptions here resulted from 15 in-depth, open-ended interviews with respondents of the generation born before World War II, most of them living in Welden for the greater part of their life. The interviews lasted about two hours, sometimes longer. Often, I would also join them for lunch and informal conversation ensued (not recorded). Because I was mainly interested in people’s own narratives about the changing religious practices and moral orientations they experienced during their lifetime, I structured my questions loosely around the personal biography of the respondent. At the start of the interview I asked people to describe to me the world they grew up in and the role of the church in their daily life. Follow-up questions focused on the role of priests and chaplains in their life, the changes in the church and local parish life, how they raised their own children, the widening gap between the doctrines of the church and general moral consensus in Dutch society, and the comparison between the past and the present.

Overcoming Hesitations, the Dynamics of Interviewing and the Burden of Secrets

For several reasons, I had some difficulty finding respondents. One reason was that some people were insecure whether they would be a good source of information for me, because they did not consider themselves very knowledgeable about ‘church matters’ or because they thought I was