CHAPTER SEVEN

DISORDERED AND HATEFUL TIMES

1. A Dexterous and Devious Response

The smashing of images by the Calvinists created an uncertain and treacherous period in which local forces and personalities dominated. Margaret’s regime was able to survive only by approaching each problem and situation separately. Confederate accounts vastly exaggerated Calvinist strength, leading Margaret to overestimate the power and popularity of the new religion. The reality was quite different, but information was confusing and contradictory. In Tournai, Beauvoir, the lieutenant in the citadel, and Hoorn made remarkably different reports after they had toured the city together to inspect the ruined churches. Hoorn solemnly stated that four out of every five Tournaisians had converted and that he wished to grant their wish to hold services in the city as the only means to keep them from further insurrection. In contrast, Beauvoir regarded the loud Calvinists as a small band of rowdy rabble in need of a thorough awakening to duty by his soldiers. When people cried out that they wanted to breakfast on the soldiers in the citadel, Beauvoir responded that it would be a very hard meal for them to digest, whereas Hoorn saw the threat as evidence that the troops should be removed. Caught in the middle, the magistrates squirmed, worried, and did nothing, precisely like their counterparts in many other cities.¹

The magistrates of Valenciennes, thoroughly intimidated by their own people, asked Margaret’s lieutenant Noircarmes to pacify the city. This was an impossible task. His only source of power came from the discomfort of those who sympathized with the new religion but were disheartened by the violence of iconoclasm. Noircarmes took the opportunity to challenge the magistrates on every issue, ordering them to take a stand and not to leave him at the mercy of the residents, in particular the artisans, whom they had been unable to control. He offered to help them

¹ Pasquier de le Barre, Mémoires de Pasquier de le Barre et de Nicholas Soldoyer, A. Pinchart ed. (Brussels: 1859–1865) 2: 375–380. Letters of Beauvoir and Hoorn to Margaret, 1 Sept. 1566.
only after they disarmed the city and curtailed freedom of religion. In his rebuke, Noircarmes first revealed the core of what would become Margaret’s counterattack. Where Calvinists seemed isolated, she rejected all their demands and sought Catholic support to enable the effective use of the small forces at her disposal.²

However, fear and tension made public affairs unpredictable and such opportunities were rare. The Confederates never doubted that the Calvinists had changed political life and would thus have a part in governance. Margaret’s own fear of and contempt for the Calvinists did not blind her to their strength. She came to believe that one necessary step, a dreaded one, involved the calling of an Estates General. The situation in September 1566 suggested that half the land would be lost if affairs drifted into civil war. She feared that the king wanted conflict, and tried to convince him of the destructive and futile character of efforts to defeat a religious idea on the battlefield. According to her political calculations, calling an Estates General seemed less dangerous than not doing so. The risk of losing religious orthodoxy in part of the land appeared desirable in comparison with a civil war that would subject all good citizens to evil. She hoped Catholics would stand up for their faith, challenging the Calvinists who, she heard, had grown cold to the idea of an Estates General, having become convinced that their insurrection had already earned them religious freedom. In an astute appraisal of the situation, Margaret also knew that any agreement would be limited to those provinces with the right to representation and that the divisive nature of the factions so evident in the provinces might keep any single group from acquiring sufficient power to dominate.³ Hence, despite its limitations, she and the Council of State convinced themselves that the method for avoiding civil war centered on discussing the problem at an Estates General. She begged Philip to act since the situation was decaying at an alarming rate. Margaret calculated that each day without funds or resolution caused a month’s harm, and each month a year’s.⁴

Problems in Antwerp, Amsterdam, and Ghent served as examples. The Council of State repeatedly discussed what Orange was doing in Antwerp,

³ Correspondance française, 2: 164. Margaret to Philip, 13 Sept. 1566; Le Barre, Mémoires, 1: 156–175.
⁴ Correspondance française, 2: 167. Margaret to Philip, 27 Sept. 1566.