FRANS TITELMANS, THE CONGREGATION OF MONTAIGU, AND BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

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In order to sketch a portrait of Frans Titelmans of Hasselt it is necessary to reexamine the main features of the Congregation of Montaigu, which was founded in Paris by Jan Standonck at the end of the fifteenth century. Titelmans in fact received his higher education in the Leuven College of the Congregation. This experience influenced his whole approach to theology, even though he formally left the Congregation of Montaigu when, twenty-one years old, he became a Franciscan minor friar. A couple of years later he faced Erasmus in a short but challenging dispute about New Testament scholarship, which took place between 1527 and 1530.¹

The Paris College of Montaigu had fallen into decay in the late quattrocento. In 1477 Amâtre Chetart, principal of the College, asked Jan Standonck for help with the administration. A young man, aged thirty-four, and fresh from his licence in arts in Paris, Standonck came from Mechelen, midway between Brussels and Antwerp. He had grown up in a very poor family and studied in the schools of the Brethren of Common Life. He enrolled at the University of Leuven, but later moved to Paris, where he had to find employment in order to survive, since he lacked any economic resources. He was employed as a servant in the Abbey of Sainte-Geneviève, which was next to the College of Montaigu. Chetart’s offer meant an advancement for Standonck, and when Chetart died in 1483, Standonck succeeded in his place. In a few years’ time he revived, restored, and expanded the college. Enrollment increased, and students were subjected to a discipline observed with extreme strictness.² Standonck however was not a mere administrator,

² The information mentioned above can be found in Marcel Godet, La congrégation de Montaigu (1490–1580) (Paris, 1912), pp. 2–28. More details about Standock and
but rather a religious reformer. He could not tolerate the corruption of the Church and tried to defeat it in three ways: preaching, creating a religious congregation, and trying to reform the French clergy. First of all he began with intense and forceful preaching against the corrupt clergy, which found favour with several aristocrats and was esteemed by Hendrik van Bergen, bishop of Cambrai, whose territory included Mechelen and Antwerp. Next, Standonck reorganised the framework of his college. Montaigu would become a house for poor students. The undertaking was successful, and in 1495 Standonck drafted an iron rule that transformed his students into members of a religious congregation, the Congregation of Montaigu. In 1496 Standonck started to reform the French religious orders by introducing into their houses the statutes of the brethren of the Congregation of Windesheim and with those statutes the ideas of Devotio Moderna.

Montaigu’s members were expected to counter ecclesiastical corruption by means of a truly poor lifestyle and unobjectionable behaviour. The whole community lived in extreme poverty. Penance and mortification were judged to be necessary to reach the goal. A rigorous lifestyle would make Montaigu’s action universally credible. Montaigu’s reformation was to be transmitted and disseminated through the preaching of its young graduates. Respect for tradition was essential for Standonck. His own time seemed to him desolate and corrupt. Therefore, in order to keep the spirit of his community incorruptible and immutable in the future, Standonck needed an external guarantee. For this he relied on the Carthusian order. Their community had never undergone internal reformation because of its perfect organisation and rigorous discipline. In the eyes of Standonck, the Carthusians would preserve his reformation project are presented in Augustin Renaudet, “Jean Standonck. Un réformateur catholique avant la Réforme,” in Augustine Renaudet, ed., *Humanisme et Renaissance. Dante, Pétrarque, Standonck, Érasme, Lefèvre d’Étapes, Marguerite de Navarre, Rabelais, Guichardin, Giordano Bruno* (Geneva, 1958), pp. 114–61; André Tuilier, *Histoire de l’université de Paris et de la Sorbonne*, 1 (Paris, 1994), pp. 273–77; I. Rodriguez-Grahit, “Ignace de Loyola et le collège de Montaigu. L’influence de Standonck sur Ignace,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 20 (1958), pp. 388–401.


7 A famous adage dating back to the XVth century: Per tria, silentium, solitudinem visitationem, cartusia permanet in vigore’. Carthusians were therefore renowned for the immutability of their charisma and traditions. Cf. Heinrich Rüthing, “Zum Einfluss