CHAPTER THREE

MEN IN ASSOCIATION: CLASS AND CHARITY

Introduction

The Poor Sisters of the Divine Child originated in Amsterdam, around the middle of the nineteenth century. In those days care and the organisational structure it required was not determined by nuns, but by the social upper middle class, well-to-do Catholic men together with the clergy. Four men took the initiative and co-operated: the strong leader bishop Mgr. Van Vree, the fiery Jesuit Frentrop, the ambitious medical Doctor Cramer and the thoughtful priest Hesseveld. Although their collaboration was effective, it was not without mutual tensions. These socially and ecclesiastically influential people (i.e. men) initiated and organised charitable care. They left the actual care giving to those with less social power and esteem (i.e. women). Nineteenth-century Catholic charity in the Netherlands developed within the context of the emancipation of Dutch Catholics, and a slowly evolving process of modernisation. Catholic emancipation implied the recognition of civil rights for Catholics and the development of a confident religious identity.

It is in this context that the clergymen and gentlemen from Amsterdam established a new type of institutional charity, partly based on the traditional Catholic relief for the poor, partly following the example of the Protestant Society for the Public Weal [Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen]. Explicit concern for the poorest was a novelty and also new was the institutional form of large congregations of religious sisters and brothers. These congregations turned charity into a large-scale enterprise that included the lower strata of society, although nineteenth-century Catholic charity also continued the tradition of taking care of the middling groups.¹ Amongst the multi-denominational population

¹ These are the findings of two historians of Amsterdam charity in the seventeenth, eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries: Marco van Leeuwen, The Logic of Charity: Amsterdam, 1800–1850 (Houndmills, 2000), pp. 131–132; Anne E.C. McCants, Civic Charity in a Golden Age: Orphan Care in Early Modern Amsterdam (Urbana,
of Amsterdam the attraction of a church depended to some extent on
the material provisions it could offer to the underprivileged. This did
not necessarily mean that poor people selected a particular church for
pragmatic reasons, although present-day historians have characterised
charity as an instrument to attract new church members or to stabilise
class relations. The charitable clergymen and gentlemen of those days
viewed themselves as benefactors who were driven by a Christian neigh-
bourly love, not as people who inaugurated processes of discipline.

**Catholic Care Provision in Amsterdam**

Roosje V onk lived in the large children’s home for girls known as
The Providence in Noordwijkerhout from 1910–1922. This institute
belonged to The Poor Sisters of the Divine Child, as was explained
in the previous chapter. The congregation had existed for more than
half a century when Roosje met the sisters. It started in 1852 when a
priest from Amsterdam opened a small home for girls in need at the
Lauriergracht, in the middle of the Jordaan district in the centre of
Amsterdam. Apart from the Jewish quarter, this was the poorest district
of the city. Some rich Catholics financed Father Hesseveld’s modest
foundation and several women came to give care. Within a few decades,
the sisters were in charge of several asylums, including some outside
Amsterdam. Dozens of sisters took care of hundreds of children.

This chapter deals with the socially and ecclesiastically influential
founders of the first small home in Amsterdam and the sister congre-
gation that was part of it. Who were these men and what was their
goal? What did their activities mean in terms of care, and what was
the influence of gender and class factors on charity? The structure of
my historical description will follow Joan Tronto’s conceptual model,
which distinguishes four phases of care. I consider that these four
phases can also be seen as manifestations of care that do not necessarily
take place in a chronological order. Tronto’s first phase is *caring*

---

1997). McCants (pp. 6–10, p. 16) states that we should not concentrate on the elite
and the poor, but understand Amsterdam seventeenth- and eighteenth-century charity
with regard to the *middling groups*. To the latter, charity was a form of social insurance
undertaken by the tax-paying citizenry, and a form of risk distribution.

2 Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York,