CHAPTER SEVEN

THE CARE VISION IN THE NORMATIVE TEXTS

Introduction

Two sources provide an understanding of the care vision of the sisters, the *Special Instructions for the Upbringing of the Children* and their *Rule and Constitutions*.1 The sisters were told to raise the children piously, to approach them lovingly and to be patient, to set a good example and to teach them to be civil and useful in society. They were encouraged to give care as if they were caring for the Divine Child Himself. The encompassing frame of reference was the Christian grand narrative of creation, sin, the incarnation of Christ, his redemptive death on the cross, and his resurrection.

In the search for a care vision we must begin acknowledging that the congregation took care of the sisters. The sisters, in their turn, cared for the salvation of their own soul and took care of people in distress. Thus, a sister’s livelihood was guaranteed. When she entered, the congregation was obliged to care for the sister until she died. This contractual aspect of charitable was part of the ‘deal’ a sister made. It was an agreement between the council of the congregation and the individual sister. This fits in Model 2 of charity as a two-way interaction. Another type of exchange was supposed to take place between the sister and the Lord. He would reward her for her devotion and self-sacrifice. This spiritual exchange fits also in Model 2, though the repayment was expected to take place only in the life hereafter.

Apart from this contractual arrangement on a material and spiritual level, two main religious motives structured the charitable dedication of the Poor Sisters, as this chapter will explain.2 The first was typical

---

1 In the course of time, the congregation knew various updates of their rule and constitutions, as this chapter will explain.

2 Ida Magli, *Women and Self-Sacrifice in the Christian Church: A Cultural History from the First to the Nineteenth Century* transl. Janet Sethre (Jefferson, 2003); G.J.M., Bartelink, *De bloeiende woestijn: De wereld van het vroege monachisme* (Baarn, 1993); Peter Nissen, ‘Sterven voor de wereld als metafoor en paradigm,’ in Marjet Derks, José Eijt, Marit Monteiro (eds.), *Sterven voor de wereld: Een religieus ideaal in meervoud* (Hilversum, 1997), pp. 9–16; the
for this congregation, while the latter characterised all the Catholic charitable congregations. The first motive was metaphorical infancy, or being like a child. The instructions of the spiritual leaders, the religious vows, and the gospel summoned the Poor Sisters to become childlike themselves, i.e. modest, dependent and obedient. Both the sisters and the girls and boys in their care were considered to be ‘children of God’. Thus, a spiritual kinship was shaped, which prepared the sisters for a very demanding care practice.\(^3\) In other words, metaphorical infancy was a spiritual strategy of establishing solidarity between strangers.

The second motive was common in all charitable congregations and rooted in monastic asceticism, namely self-sanctification that required mortification. Here, the central theological idea was that nothingness, pain and death would lead to spiritual perfection, resurrection and eternal life. The more a sister would seek suffering and denigrating of the self, the more perfect she would become. Ascetic mortification and self-sacrifice were viewed as exquisite ways of taking part in the redemptive suffering of Jesus. Ascetic self-sacrifice was an ambiguous and double-edged notion. It referred to love and pain, grace and suffering, spiritual self-realisation and nothingness. Until the renewal of Vatican II, the sisters were confronted with a spirituality of participative redemptive suffering that was intertwined with a spirituality of God’s graceful and generous love. By seeking pain, humiliation and self-sacrifice, the nun was told to take part in Christ’s redemptive suffering. Co-suffering was viewed as a proper response of the believer on God’s abundance of grace and love. Central in the ascetic spirituality was the idea that suffering was excellent and valuable as such. Increasing their ability to suffer was viewed as the sisters’ way of participating in Christ’s surplus of love on the cross.\(^4\) Therefore, all sisters of all charitable

---

\(^3\) This is current patriarchal discourse; it would be more suitable to speak of a sisterhood.


historian Marit Monteiro commented on the Dutch edition *Liefdewerk*, on a symposium 26 August 2003, at the Theological Faculty of Tilburg: Marit Monteiro, ‘Geestelijke overvloed of innerlijk onbehagen?’ According to her, constant feelings of guilt characterised women religious more than an awareness of generosity.