CHAPTER NINE

THE MAKING OF CHARITABLE HISTORY

Introduction

In the course of time, the Poor Sisters of the Divine Child constructed various historical narratives about the past. Such narratives are Evelina’s Diary, the annals, the memorial book of 1927, the illustrated booklet of 1952, and the jubilee books of 1977 and 2002. These writings offer various interpretations of who played a most decisive part in the foundation, and they mirror an ever-changing self-understanding and self-evaluation. They also testify to what the sisters, at certain points in time, considered to be the core of their charitable efforts. This process of ‘the making of history’ was a response to the changing world outside the convent, during the course of the twentieth century.

A ‘dialectics of progress’ seems to have affected the sister congregations, which were established in the nineteenth century. Initially, they were the pioneers of a new type of large-scale institutional education and care. In those contexts, they developed teamwork, new treatments, and methods for education. After fifty years of pre-professionalisation, the sisters went through four decades of professionalisation (between 1900 and 1940). The more than twenty homes for children and elderly, and the schools of the Poor Sisters flourished. The sisters managed and staffed their expanding institutes. After the Second World War, however, greater demands were made on professionalism. Dutch sisters were bypassed by laywomen, who by then had received better schooling and professional expertise in education, nursing and care.

Evelina’s View

The Poor Sisters of the Divine Child left a considerable mark on church and society, and they developed various interpretations of their past. In the following paragraphs, we will see two aspects of ‘the making of history’, or the sisters’ reconstructions of their own past. Firstly, writing history is an expression of self-understanding: the sisters had a
certain understanding of who they were. The focus is not on whether the sisters gave a correct image, but rather on what the diverse images of the past tell us about the continuously altering self-perception of the sisters. Secondly, the construction of history is about interpretative constructions and self-evaluation: the images created of the past contain a value judgement. What did the sisters qualify as ‘good’? And which obviously not so positive aspects were, at particular moments, suddenly erased from the historical narrative?

My approach is based on the epistemological insight of the philosopher of history Robin Collingwood. He stated that the past is not accessible. We can only reconstruct what he called ‘the logic of question and answer’: why have people at certain times tried to solve certain problems, and how were their actions and thoughts an answer to these problems? The stories of the past mirror self-understanding and self-evaluation at certain points in time. Six sources qualify for my analysis. First, there are the memories of an asylum child, going back to the middle of the nineteenth century, Evelina’s Diary. Then there are the annals, history books of every convent and of the congregation as a whole, reflecting the view of the leaders of the congregation. The third source is the memorial book published on the 75th anniversary of the congregation in 1927. The fourth source is an illustrated booklet published at the centennial in 1952 and the fifth a historical survey that appeared in 1977. The last source is a jubilee book published on the occasion of the 150th celebration, written by historians and theologians who did not belong to the congregation. Who was honoured as the founder of the charitable care practice in each of these sources, and how was this practice depicted? To situate the sources, one paragraph will give an overview of the changed mentality during the renewal process in the 1960s and 1970s.

1 Herman Pijlers, Jan Roes (eds.) Memoriale: Katholiek leven in Nederland in de twintigste eeuw (Zwolle, 1996), p. 104.
2 Maria Grever, De enscenering van de tijd, (Rotterdam, 2001).