‘What’s Learnt in the Cradle Lasts till the Tomb’: Counter-Reformation Strategies in the Southern Low Countries to Entice the Youth into Religious Reading

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From the moment the Catholic Church had to compete with Protestantism, it soon understood the importance of teaching children the principles of faith as early as possible. For this purpose Luther had developed a very efficient method, namely his Catechism.1 Despite its Protestant origin this interactive learning system based on question and answer was soon adopted by the Roman Catholic Church. Youngsters between seven and twelve years of age were considered an optimal target group for learning. Religious education in primary schools up to about the age of fifteen consisted mainly in the memorization of Catechism questions.2 As to the question whether it was also necessary that pupils actually understood what they studied by heart, the educators were not in agreement.3 Sunday schools in particular adopted this memorization method which was, because of the emphasis on orality, very suitable for reaching illiterate children. They targeted children who mostly were too poor to attend ordinary schools, and their program almost exclusively consisted of learning the Catechism.4

Attractive Catechism Lessons

To attract pupils it was necessary to make and to keep Catechism lessons appealing. The Calvinist Philips van Marnix van Sint Aldegonde suggested adding an element of competition: ‘Dans ces exercises, on les fera rivaliser entre eux, ou bien leurs maîtres les interrogeront, ou bien encore ils interrogeront eux-mêmes leurs maîtres’.5 The Jesuit Philippe d’Outreman (1588–1652) advised illustrating the lessons with stories of miraculous events or warning examples of those who did not comply with the rules. These stories showed their audience a wonderful world full of improbabilities and supernatural forces. The virtually literary stories were sometimes a far cry from the message of the Gospel.6 Antoine d’Averoult, rector of the college of the Falcon at Louvain until his entrance in the order of the Jesuits in 1600, offered several hundreds of short histories, which could serve as examples to all parts of the Catechism, in his collection *Fleurs des exemples, ou: Catéchisme historial, contenant plusieurs beaux miracles et excellents discours* […] (Douai, Jean Bogart: 1603).7

Another way to make Catechism lessons attractive was the singing of religious songs set to popular melodies. Songs were very suitable for evoking feelings, refreshing memory and teaching. They made the students more enthusiastic to participate and helped in teaching the rules of faith.8 As early as 1571 the Antwerp Bishop Franciscus Sonnius published *Een bequaem maniere om ionghers soetelyck by sanck te leeren ‘tghene dat alle kersten menschen moeten weten* (A proper way to sweetly teach youngsters by singing what all Christian people have to know) (Antwerp: Widow of Ameet Tavernier). The booklet, counting only fourteen pages, contained a sung version of the Lord’s Prayer, the Hail Mary, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments.9

In *Het prieel der gheestelijcke melodie* (The arbour of sacred melody) (Bruges, Pieter Soetaert: 1609) the Jesuit Bernardus Bauhusius introduced a new genre, the ‘catechesating’ song’. This kind of song expresses an almost literal interpretation of a Bible passage, a rhymed version of an existing

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6 Henrivaux, “Méthodes catéchistiques” 76–78.