Catholicism, Gender, and Volcanic Leadership: Controversies around the Grail Movement in the Netherlands, 1920s–1930s

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Introduction

In 1936, Father Homuller, dean of Leiden in Haarlem diocese in the west of the Netherlands, wrote an emotional letter to his bishop, the newly appointed Johannes Huibers, saying:

I demand that the Grail leadership will never interfere again with confession, or with any examinations of conscience, or spiritual leadership. This means... no religious reflections, no imposing of mortifications in so called action clubs, nor any giving of moral and religious instructions to the girls to pay special attention to. In other words, all spiritual matters must lie solely in the hands of priests. This is of the utmost importance.¹

Here was a member of the male clergy complaining about the interference of lay people in spiritual matters. His letter ran to several pages, full of underlinings, bitter complaints and frustrations that, according to Homuller, were not his alone but were shared by the majority of the clergy in the diocese. Although Homuller does not explicitly say it to be the case, a modern historian cannot suppress the feeling that part of his frustration was caused by the fact that the said lay people were women. To be more specific, they were highly educated young women, and leaders of the Grail, the largest Catholic girls’ and young women’s movement in the Netherlands which in the 1930s also spread to the Dutch East Indies, England, Scotland, Germany, Australia, and the United States. The leaders of the Grail were known as the Company of the Women of Nazareth.

¹ Episcopal Archives Haarlem, no. 30: Minutes of the meetings of priests and rectors: letter from Homuller to Huibers (1936). Also see Herman Pijfers and Jan Roes, Memoriale. Katholiek leven in Nederland in de twintigste eeuw (Zwolle, 1996), p. 95.
The Women of Nazareth were the last people one would expect to carry out religious tasks that were reserved for the male clergy and yet they had appropriated several of those tasks. This appropriation was an essential ground of complaint for Homuller, and for the other clergymen. Their complaint referred to the fact that the religious control of the leading Grail women, although lacking any ecclesiastical foundation, was widespread and intense. It allowed the women to exercise unusual degrees of spiritual leadership. The women seemed to have a hold on the girls and young women in their movement that went much further than that of any priest. Some even referred to it as “dangerous.” Furthermore, as I will point out, it was not only this appropriation that bothered them, but the fact that Huibers’s predecessor, Bishop Johannes Aengenenet, had denied the clergy all influence over the young women’s movement and its leadership and yet had them finance it. That had stung.

**Religious Volcanicism in the 1920s and 1930s**

The conflict that arose between the clergy and the Grail leadership has relevance to recent historical debate, and can perhaps offer some questions and some nuance to that debate. When Callum Brown claims that the growth of religious militancy is predominantly a trend that dates from the 1970s onwards, he is isolating a phenomenon that in my opinion should be studied from a much wider and longer term perspective. This is especially the case if one wants to study the role of gender in religious developments in the twentieth century, something for which Brown, and also Hugh McLeod, have argued explicitly, as had several female historians before them. If, as Brown states, there is a major requirement for a workable narrative through which to tell the

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