When a few hundred nobles marched into the palace of Margaret of Parma in April 1566, and presented her with a petition to end the persecution of heretics, they knew they could count on widespread sympathy from the population of the Netherlands – amongst the burghers and officials, Catholics and Protestants, there was no support for the royal policy. Yet what was a public secret on the streets of the Netherlands somehow came as an unpleasant and unexpected surprise to the king. Of course, Philip knew that there was opposition to his policies. Although by this date he had been in Madrid for several years, in the 1550s he had spent time in the Netherlands, and he had had plenty of opportunity to get to know the situation on the ground. Even so, the king was distinctly over-optimistic about the extent to which ‘good Catholics’ were prepared to support his policies. This article will suggest that the gap between the strict laws against heresy and their actual implementation on the ground was accompanied by a conspiracy of silence among Philip’s officials, that left the king very much under-informed about the real state of public opinion around this issue in the Netherlands.

Charles V and Philip II considered it their sacred duty to defend the old traditions and the old Church against all innovations, and all those whom they regarded as heretics. Precisely because they thought in terms of heresy, they found it difficult to compromise. When legislation did not work, their remedy was to make the ‘placards’ even harsher. The legislation against heresy culminated in the

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1 This article is a reworked version of a chapter of my forthcoming book, De escalatie van een conflict. Over de voorgeschiedenis en de eerste stadia van de Nederlandse Opstand, that will be published by Balans in Amsterdam. I am grateful for Balans’s gracious permission to publish this English version ahead of the book.
notorious placard of 1550, that was confirmed by Philip II immediately after he succeeded his father. Their disapproval of heresy was so intense that they decreed the death penalty even for those heretics who were prepared to abjure their convictions, so as to prevent any chance of a ‘relapse’ of the convict or the ‘contamination’ of others.

The five case studies presented in this chapter will demonstrate how far removed this ideology was from actual practice. It concerns a number of exceptional instances, such as the actions of the Inquisitor Titelmans; the open air sermons or prêches outside Antwerp in 1558; two major conflicts, one in Amsterdam, the other in Friesland, and finally a remarkable appointment in Groningen, where such conflicts were avoided. In all five cases, persecution and government strictures met with resistance from relevant officials. The cases do not reflect the overall situation, in some instances persecution still produced many victims. Yet these extraordinary cases illustrate well how very small the social support base for persecution really was.

Titelmans and the Council of Flanders

Pieter Titelmans had been inquisitor of Flanders since 1545. He was convinced that heresy was spreading fast, and that it should be met with force. Given the urgency of the situation, the inquisitor thought he should not be hindered by civic legislation or urban privileges; thus he did not consider himself bound to the rule that a citizen could only be arrested with the assistance of two schepenen, local judges. When the Catholic queen, Mary Tudor, succeeded to the throne in England in 1553–54, and many Protestant refugees returned to the Netherlands, there was every reason to be on full alert. Even so, in some respects Titelmans was more moderate than Charles V and Philip II. He did not follow imperial edicts but abided by canon law, so that a heretic who was prepared to abjure could expect, at worst, life imprisonment. The Council of Flanders agreed with him in this matter; soon after the placard of 1550 this body had successfully requested permission to modify the penalties for penitent heretics, and it was to make frequent use of this option. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Council of Flanders and the inquisitor

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