
This substantial book, written by a professor emeritus of Church history who is himself a Franciscan as well, fully testifies to both of its author’s qualities. The entire history of the Franciscans, the Franciscan third order, and the Franciscan lay movement, from their arrival in Holland in 1239–1240 up to the present is discussed in detail. Consequently, labeling this book ‘an orientation’, as the subtitle does, is simply too modest. Although the author rightly claims that a lot of additional research has to be done, he made the most of scrutinizing the literature available, digging up so many hidden and secondary articles that the reader sometimes may lose his thread.

De Kok distinguishes three periods in Dutch Franciscan history, referring to them as the first, the second and the third province. The periods match the three parts of the study, containing 104, 148 and 320 pages, respectively.

Understandably, as a Franciscan the author starts with Francis, the wanderings with his brothers, and the origins of the order. It is here that we immediately find the common sense characterizing De Kok as a church historian, which I still remember of his lectures. The expanding order needed regulations, he states, because “through the ages idealistic movements appear to have attracted also half-witted folks” (p. 17), and “with some hundred, and some thousand brothers soon thereafter, one cannot do it to Italy to keep wandering around criss-cross. It comes to permanent foundations” (p. 19).

The “first province” covers the years 1239–1240 until 1529. The author describes the Franciscans’ coming to Holland and does not avoid referring to the networking and political relations that were helpful to them (“vitamin-R also existed in earlier days”). In addition, he discusses Le Goff’s thesis on the Franciscan settlement of politics. In this section in particular the author tends to examine certain themes diachronically: the models of monasteries and convents, the numerous devotions, and the secular third order. At the end of this period the Observant movement caused a scission: the ‘old’ Franciscans continued as Conventuals (OFMConv., 1529).

The “second province” deals with the period 1529–1833, marked on the one hand by the Dutch Revolt, and on the other by the concentration of monasteries in the southern Netherlands at the borders of the Republic, as well as in the enclaves Ravenstein, Megen and Bokhoven, and at the mission stations in the *Missio Hollandica*. After the enforcement of the equality of all churches before the law in 1796 the Franciscans still had to face problems because of the ‘extinction decisions’ made by the French occupying power and, afterwards,
by King William I. Nevertheless, they were able to replace their clandestine churches (‘schuilkerken’) with so-called ‘waterstaatskerken’ (churches built in a governmentally prescribed style)—which were “with their light and open space still a relief, compared to the Gothic revival that would follow”, as the author rather unfashionably remarks.

The “third province”, from 1833 up to the present, comprising half of the book, is hardly to summarize here. It deals succinctly with a wide variety of themes, such as the rebuilding of the province and the insertion of the stations in the parish-based structure of the Dutch church province after 1853; subsequently, the rise and development of the Franciscan missions, especially those in China and Brazil, is discussed. In this part the author also pays attention to the interior missions—with an outspoken opinion about secularization: “Often the social question is cited as the cause of secularization. In some life histories that is true, but not for the broad masses, considering that it is an easy alibi for those who want to justify their way of life against others” (p. 319). In De Kok’s opinion, secularization is primarily caused by better education and by the rise of Sunday sports and leisure activities. After that, he gives some illustrative quantitative data about the order’s expansion during the period 1920–1960: a quickening of growth at the outset, but a decline of Franciscan novices’ ordination rates from 90% before 1900 to 53% in 1955.

Then the author gives some thematic chapters, each headed ‘growth and contraction’: the parishes, the monasteries, the third order, the missions, education and science, and the lay brothers.

As present times are drawing near, the author’s narrative is increasingly influenced by his personal views. For instance, when the De Kok briefly mentions mid-nineteenth century plans to dispose of small one-man or two-man stations in favor of the expansion of larger convents, he cannot refrain from heaving a sigh: “If only that would have happened!”, the historian is inclined to think more than a century later. Maybe those larger convents could have evolved into spiritual centers” (p. 293). Moreover, when he describes the last forty years the author makes it obvious that he regrets two main points: the process of losing contact with the original inspiration of Francis (‘Laborious ressourcement’, chapter 32), and the fragmentation of religious obedience, which made the fraternity disintegrate into individuals living together more or less coincidentally (“Especially after 1950 growing self-confidence appeared to go with a devaluation of the idea of ‘eternal dedication’” (p. 494)). In the last chapter (“To a fourth province?”) in particular, the Franciscan De Kok reveals himself in a sense as a Friar preacher,