Ton H.M. van Schaik and Karin Strengers-Olde Kalter

_Het arme Roomse leven. Geschiedenis van de katholieke caritas in de stad Utrecht._


This book was commissioned by the “Katholieke Caritas der Stad Utrecht,” in other words by the book’s subject and its predecessors, who go back all the way to the fifteenth century. Inevitably, the core of the book is a chronicle of the charitable works, and the ways in which these were organised, undertaken by these Catholic institutions. This tale is set in the wider context of the transformation of alms-giving into ultimately the welfare state as we know it today.

The story of the book starts with the creation, in 1491, of a Catholic orphanage, by the prominent Utrecht canon Evert van Zoudenbalch. The care for orphans and the elderly was the core business of the institutions discussed in the book, even though it also pays attention to the support provided to the Catholic poor who were not institutionalized but lived in their own homes. The early period is, however, treated very briefly in the book, which only comes to life in the late seventeenth century, when the inter-confessional poor relief as it had existed in Utrecht since the Reformation, came to an end. The local Catholics were forced to set up their own institutions, which was a financial burden on their community but also an implicit recognition of its civic contribution by the Protestant authorities who were in charge of the city. In 1696 the “Rooms Catholyke Aalmoezenierskamer” had amassed the funds to open a new orphanage. In 1729 the “Aalmoezenierskamer” was able to acquire more real estate in the so-called “Mariahoek,” next to the Church of St. Mary, where a hidden church was also established for Catholic worship. This area has remained a Catholic stronghold ever since.

Shortly afterwards the Utrecht Catholic community was torn apart by the splitting away of the Jansenist “Oud-Katholieke Kerk,” which also forced a division of the local churches’ property. After the split the “Aalmoezenierskamer” continued to receive substantial gifts, suggesting that it continued to elicit loyalty from the faithful. In 1763 a local brewer left his business to the Catholic poor, which in the next half century helped to bankroll much of its activities. In the nineteenth century the “Aalmoezenierskamer,” now called “Armenkamer,” had the financial capability to create a social housing project, the now infamous “Zeven Steegies,” a very modern initiative at the time. In the 1870s a substantial new building was commissioned to house both the orphans and the elderly.

By this time nuns had entered the picture as teachers in Catholic schools, also staffing the various Catholic homes in Utrecht and elsewhere. They combined the benefits of religiosity, a certain level of professionalism, and cheap
labour. From the several conflicts between the nuns and the administrators we can surmise a certain amount of agency with these females, despite the overwhelming male dominance in the Catholic world of the time. However, both were coming under increasing pressure after World War II, when the government started to impose new regulation, demanding new investments in staff and buildings. At the same time, state pensions and various benefits made the Catholic charitable activities increasingly redundant. Currently, the “Katholieke Caritas der Stad Utrecht” is still holding substantial capital, with which they no doubt do useful things, but religious charity is no longer the linchpin of the welfare system.

The book is a detailed, source-based and therefore valuable addition to the literature on Dutch charity and poor relief. What is missing from the text is an analytical perspective that would have created a narrative that permits broader conclusions. Readers of this journal would be interested, one assumes, to know more about what is specifically Catholic about the charity described by the book. In many ways, I suspect, one could write a very similar story about the Protestant diakonie in Utrecht, or any other Dutch town for that matter. For the sixteenth to eighteenth century there is a rich literature that might have helped flesh out such a comparison. Such a perspective would have helped the authors also to highlight remarkable dimensions of their story. I was struck by two in particular.

The first is the size and substance of voluntary contributions to Catholic charity, already alluded to in my summary. Numerous Utrecht Catholics contributed every month, no doubt most of them with small amounts of money, but then most of them had problems making ends meet for themselves in the first place. The authors report several very substantial gifts from the parishioners. On top of this, many people participated in charitable activities, as administrators and volunteers, without much or even any remuneration. One thinks especially of the nuns who ran the various homes in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The authors seem to take this more or less for granted, but from a 21st-century perspective it is a striking reminder of how the state has taken over these legally private, but in many ways very public contributions made by individual citizens. These contributions were no doubt motivated by religious beliefs, but surely also by a sense of community. It would have been interesting to hear more about the methods used by the administrators to encourage the Utrecht Catholics to be generous with their time and money.

A second remarkable feature of the book is how long it really took for these charitable works to become superfluous. In the last chapters of the book one is struck by the still significant role of this charity even in the 1960s and 1970s.