REQUIREMENTS FOR BECOMING AND REMAINING A PASTOR: AN IMPRESSION FROM THE LATE MEDIEVAL SYNODAL STATUTES OF THE DIOCESE OF CAMBRAI, 1308-1500

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1. Introduction

This contribution rests primarily on the synodal statutes of the old diocese of Cambrai. Therefore we will start with a characterisation of these sources and their significance for the history of pastoral care (section 1). After having situated the ecclesiastical and religious life of the southern Low Countries in its context of Western Christianity (section 2), the conditions to become and remain a pastor will be discussed (section 3). Not the specific tasks of pastoral care, which to a large extent involved the administration of the Sacraments, will be questioned, but the profile that every pastor had to fulfil in order not to be suspended or excommunicated will be questioned. This restriction implicates a focus on what in the statute books normally falls under the headings ‘ordination’ (De ordinibus) and ‘priestly conduct’ (De vita et honestate clericorum).

The survey of the requirements mentioned in these two headings allows us to trace and interpret the changes that took place in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. More precisely, what have the successive bishops done, by means of the synodal statutes, to maintain the requirements in order to improve the quality of pastoral care (section 4)? Eventually, some conclusions will be made and a comparison with the situation in the middle of the sixteenth century (section 5).

2. Characterisation of synodal statutes

After the foundation of the first parishes in the newly (or hardly) Christianised Merovingian kingdom of the seventh century, bishops

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1 See esp. Odette Pontal, Les statuts synodaux (Turnhout, 1975); Charles M.A. Caspers, ‘Synodale statuten en het kerkelijk en godsdienstig leven in de Nederlanden
began to organise assemblies of the clergy under their jurisdiction. In the Carolingian Empire these church assemblies experienced a true flowering in terms of frequency. However, they nearly disappeared in the tenth and eleventh centuries. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the development of Western Christendom was proceeding at full speed, the bishops once again had recourse to the means of diocesan synods as official and periodical meetings of the bishop (or his vicar) with those who were important for the administration of the diocese and pastoral care within its bounds. The decisions taken during a synod were recorded as 'statutes' and had the power of law. To make the regulations effective immediately, those present had to comply with the statutes. In the late Middle Ages this group consisted in the bishopric of Cambrai of as many of the secular clergy as could be present, and also of representatives of the regular clergy, such as abbots and abbesses, canons regular, and priors and provosts who resided in the diocese, even if they had acquired their function outside the diocese.

The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 was an important beacon in the history of the development of the diocesan synod. This Council decreed that diocesan synods had to be held once or twice a year, and that they were to make a substantial contribution to the moulding of those engaged in pastoral duties. Since pastoral care at that time was almost synonymous with the administration of the Sacraments, it is not surprising that the thirteenth and early fourteenth-century statute books are for the greatest part devoted to the Sacraments. For instance, about one hundred of the 156 statutes that were promulgated in 1307 by the bishop of Cambrai, deal with the seven Sacraments. After that year in most dioceses, as in Cambrai, the time had passed for putting together complete codifications or statute books, and the synods increasingly limited themselves to making supplements or additiones to already-existing statute books. These additiones

2 Odette Pontal, Die Synoden im Merowingerreich (Paderborn, 1986); idem, Les conciles de la France capétienne jusqu’en 1215 (Paris, 1995).