‘FROM THAT MOMENT ON, I WAS A MAN!’

IMAGES OF THE CATHOLIC MALE IN THE SACRED HEART DEVOTION

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The exclamation “From that moment on, I was a man!” is doubtless not the most frequently used description of a religious conversion. Still, in an article published in 1936 in the Flemish Messenger of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, this phrase perfectly covered its central theme, the blending of masculine and Catholic identity. This discourse on ‘masculine Christianity’ will be the central theme of this article. More specifically, the focus will be upon the discourse on men and masculinity in the Sacred Heart devotion.

This cult offers an interesting case for studying gender roles as there is some discussion on how to define the devotion; some scholars consider it ‘feminized’ whereas others emphasize its ‘virility’. While supporters of the ‘feminine’ interpretation refer to the great number of female devotees and its emotional and sentimental (so-called ‘feminine’) imagery and devotional practices, scholars such as Étienne Fouilloux stress the ‘virility’ of the Sacred Heart devotion and allude to its militant

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1 Bode, January (1936), 32.
2 Bode van het Heilig Hart van Jesus was the Flemish edition, the French edition Messager du Sacré Coeur de Jésus, was also read in Belgium. “Van Bode”.
3 See for example: Arts, “Mannelijk Christendom”; “Mannelijke vroomheid”.
4 Busch, “Die Feminisierung der Frömmigkeit”, 209-210. Harris also pictures the cult as typical of “la religion ‘au féminin’”. Harris, “Les miraculées”, 287. The attraction of the cult on French women was also noted by Smith, Ladies, 109. “I see no evidence to support Michael P. Carroll’s assertion of the maleness of the Sacred Heart.” Jonas, “Anxiety”, 64. (On Carroll’s Catholic Cults, 132-153.) He believes that the image of the Sacred Heart was created for a generation that was no longer satisfied with a God defined in strong patriarchal terms. The image of the Sacred Heart would remain in conflict with this more conventionally depicted patriarchal God and figured more as a supplement than a substitute. Jonas, “Anxiety”, 73, note 70.
image and emphasis on the defence of country and religion. German authors as Olaf Blaschke and Norbert Busch point at a ‘(re-)masculinization’ of the ‘feminized’ cult at the start of the twentieth century. They thereby refer to the increasing attention for men’s involvement expressed by changes in the cult’s organizations and focus at the start of the twentieth century. In these differing analyses of the cult’s ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’ character, ‘feminization’ and ‘masculinization’ mostly denote the nature of the devotion (and changes in this nature) and the target group. This article will not offer an opinion on this discussion about the characterization of the cult since the countries and epochs studied in these analyses are too diverse. Rather, it aims to reassess the term ‘masculinization’ through an analysis of the discourse of a Belgian men-oriented movement associated with the cult of the Sacred Heart.

Even though the cult of the Sacred Heart was very popular in Belgium, no detailed study exists of the ideal/real male and female images that were disseminated in the Belgian devotion. This article will focus on the (ideal) image of the Catholic male promoted in the Leagues of the Sacred Heart, which originally were all-male movements, but soon became women’s movements as well. It will study the strategies used by the men’s movement to present itself as ‘masculine’ and to differentiate itself from the Apostolat de la Prière that was depicted as ‘feminine’. The analysis will mainly focus on the 1930s, a booming period for the Leagues and the years in which the debate on women’s Leagues reached the central board of the men’s movement. This discussion offers interesting material on how the gendered ideals were formulated and how the Leagues presented themselves as a ‘masculine’ movement. A few references will be made to how the ideas trickled down into the non-gender-exclusive periodicals and organizations.

5 “Autant le culte du Sacré-Coeur apparaît en effet viril, dans sa défense de la foi et de la patrie, autant le culte marial témoigne de la féminisation du catholicisme depuis le XIXe siècle.” Fouilloux, “Le catholicisme”, 194. Similarly, Daniele Menozzi remarks that Ramière, a Jesuit from Toulouse, end of the nineteenth century, saw the devotion as militant, “une dévotion de combat”, “une dévotion éminemment virile” and pictures the cult as manly, conquering and connected to the Kingdom of Christ. Menozzi, “Un rêve”, 142.


7 E.g. a more masculine image of Jesus, the importance given to the dogmatic content and the role of men in the development of the cult. Busch, “Die Feminisierung der Frömmigkeit”, 205, 216-217.

8 Belgium was the first country to devote itself to the Sacred Heart (on 8 December 1868) and would repeat that action in 1919 and 1943. Different types of devotion and associations were connected to the cult, e.g. fraternities, the Apostolat de la Prière, dedication of the family to the Sacred Heart, the enthronement of the statue of the Sacred Heart, the coronation of the statue of the Sacred Heart and so on. Jacques Marx sees the following elements among the reasons for the success of the cult in Belgium: the return of Romanticism and the influence of the Jesuits and the boarding schools run by French sisters. Marx, “De cultus”, 107; Gevers, “De ‘belle époque’”, 174; Rion, “Une illustration”, 27, 32; Gabriëls, De Bonden; Quaghebeur, “De Eucharistische”, 108.

9 According to Gevers there was a peak in the devotion during the interwar period. Gevers, “De ‘belle époque’”, 181.
ORIGINS

Although there already had been a private devotion and confraternities of the Sacred Heart, it was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that Belgium saw a very virulent rise of the Sacred Heart cult. Not only did the bishops in 1868 devote the country to the Sacred Heart, the 1860s also saw the development of a Belgian branch of the *Apostolat de la Prière* (1864 in Ghent and later on in Leuven) and a Flemish version of its periodical in 1869 (*Bode van het Heilig Hart*).

The Leagues of the Sacred Heart grew quite spontaneously in the margin of this *Apostolat* and out of the initiatives that were taken for working-class men. They originated in ‘movements of perseverance’ organized for workers who had been on a retreat. These retreats had been held since 1890 (in places such as Charleroi, Lier, Alken and Ghent) in order to ensure the moral health of the workers and to strengthen them against the bad influence of socialism. To make sure that these men would keep to their Christian life when they came home, they were organized in a movement for perseverance in which they could find comfort and religious support. Some of these movements were affiliated with the *Apostolat* and were called the Leagues of the Friends of the Sacred Heart (1897), of which the members shared in the spiritual benefits that were conferred on the members of the *Apostolat de la Prière*. Around the turn of the century the name of the movement changed into the League of the Sacred Heart and its goal broadened.

Although the perseverance movement was primarily aimed at working-class men, in 1909 the Belgian archbishop Mercier encouraged these Leagues to open up and to address the whole male population and not only the workers who had been on a retreat. He thereby followed in the footsteps of Leo XIII, who in 1899 formulated the hope that Sacred Heart movements would develop that addressed all adult men, since it was men who held a prominent position in society. The following years the Leagues became very successful as they developed a more general appeal, mass character and a firm central organization and structure. There was a clear task division: the central organization was in the hands of the Jesuits, the local administration was under control of the parish priest or his assistant priest and the activities of the movement were mainly carried out by the lay promoters. Although the movement was primarily aimed at men, women’s Leagues developed spontaneously and references

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10 This attention went parallel with the worldwide increased interest in the cult: the beatification of Margaret-Mary Alacoque (1864) and the *Syllabus Errorum* (1864) ended with a call for the Cult of the Sacred Heart. Busch, “Fromme Westfalen”, 341.


14 “Een wensch”.

to them were made from at least 1911 onwards. These women’s Leagues triggered a virulent debate in the 1930s and the discussions they incited form an ideal means to study the gender ideology promoted by the Leagues. They offer interesting material showing how the central board tried to define the Leagues of the Sacred Heart as a men’s movement (arguments, accentuation of men’s characteristics) and how they differentiated their creation from a women’s movement that had used the men’s Leagues as its model.

**A ‘MEN’S’ MOVEMENT**

Men were considered an important target group since their cooperation was depicted as a prerequisite for the maintenance of Christian society and because men’s religiosity (or lack of it) in the interwar period was quite often considered a problem. Men were depicted as rather reluctant towards religiosity as it was discursively feminized into ‘a women’s thing’. However, one should note that what was lamented was not men’s lack of religion per se, but their neglect of Catholic practices (e.g. Communion). Men’s religious involvement was considered particularly important as they held higher positions in society and as *patres familiae* had the authority over their families. As such they had an important influence on the (Christian) behaviour of their family members, especially on their sons’ comportment. Therefore, men’s involvement could be considered more important than women’s:

When the man is a Christian, then the whole family is; the opposite is not true; when you have the women and the children, often the man still resists, is that not to be blamed on an ill-placed love of oneself, to not appear tied to the apron strings of the ‘weaker sex’.

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17 The central office was installed in 1922 in Mechelen; later on the Flemish dioceses would also install diocesan offices. The Walloon office was installed in 1930. Quaghebeur, “De Eucharistische”, 108-109; BME, II.4: Le Secrétariat des Ligues du Sacré Coeur d’expression française en Belgique 1930-1940; Les Ligues du Sacré Cœur dans les paroisses belges d’expression française 1930-1940.
19 AFJ, V.4: Letter about the Feast of the Sacred Heart in Roeselare, 1925; COA/4.7: Report of the work of the Leagues of the Sacred Heart by J. Hardy, Eucharistical Congress of Amsterdam 1924; AFJ, III.5: Extract from the *Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, April 1926, by Hardy; AFJ, IV.3: Reports about the mass action; Henvaux, “Le Problème”, 150-155; “Waarom”.
20 “Quand l’homme sera Chrétien, toute la famille le sera; la réciproque n’est pas vraie; quand on a les femmes et les enfants, que de fois l’homme résiste encore, ne fut ce que par amour-propre mal placé, pour ne pas sembler être à la remorque du ‘sexe faible’.” AFJ, III.5: Extract from the *Messenger of the Sacred Heart*, April 1926, 193-199: “Les communions mensuelles et collectives d’hommes”, by Hardy.
Apparently women’s enthusiasm could not guarantee men’s involvement. Thus references to the ‘weaker sex’ were best avoided in the development of the discourse of a men’s movement. The affiliation between the Leagues and the Apostolat therefore turned out to be a problematic one. Although the successful men’s Leagues originated within the Apostolat, by the 1930s the Leagues’ leaders criticized the image of the mixed movement and lamented in their private correspondence its ‘feminine’, ‘French-bourgeois’ and ‘old-fashioned’ character. Although the Apostolat was a mixed organization and by no means presented itself as a ‘women’s’ movement, it apparently struggled with this image and the feminine connotation was, most clearly, not considered a positive one.\textsuperscript{21}

This negatively evaluated feminine characterization of the Apostolat points in the direction of an explicit differentiation between the genders. Accentuation and elaboration of gender characteristics had, primarily since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, become a central theme in discourse.\textsuperscript{22} According to Aurora Morcillo, the discourse that emphasized this difference between the sexes “was revived throughout Europe in the first third of the twentieth century. New psychological and sociological arguments revitalized the already stale notion of biological determinism.”\textsuperscript{23} These characteristics were a common knowledge, strong and persistent enough to build a movement’s discourse on, strong enough to maintain a gender exclusiveness of the all-male Leagues in the first years of their existence, but also influential enough to insist upon the creation of a ‘feminine’ version of the Leagues even after women had already developed their own Leagues along the lines of the men’s movement. ‘Men’ were depicted as a delineated pole of a binary opposition with ‘women’ at the other end of it. According to the Leagues’ discourse, men’s and women’s characteristics did not and could not overlap. Men were in need of an all-male movement with a ‘masculine’ character; mixed Leagues were not taken into consideration.

\textsuperscript{21} AFJ, III.4: Letter by J. Zeij, S.J., 25 November 1933: “That in France and elsewhere, the Apostolat is regarded as ‘feminine’ is simply fatal.” (Dat in Frankrijk, en elders, het Ap.d.G. vooral ‘vrouwelijk’ schijnt te zijn, is gewoonweg fataal.); a letter to J. Zeij, 8 March 1933 on the situation in Belgium: “In fact the Apostolat was too well known as a women’s work.” (“In feite was het Apostolaat des Gebeds te veel bekend als een Vrouwenwerk.”)


\textsuperscript{23} Morcillo, True Catholic, 19.
MASCULINE AND CATHOLIC IDENTITY

‘MASCULINE’ CHARACTER

According to the Leagues’ leaders in the 1930s, it was the explicit appeal to men that made the movement successful. Men were apparently flattered by the attention they received and showed it by flocking to this men’s movement.24 This all-male movement was noted in the rest of the Catholic world and in 1929 the pope addressed the pilgrims of the men’s Leagues and expressed the wish that they would always ‘preserve’ the ‘masculine character’ of the Leagues. This quote did not only stress the importance that was given to male involvement, but would also turn into a favourite argument in the creation of gender-exclusive Leagues.25 The ‘masculine character’ thereby did not only point in the direction of an all-male movement, but also at the ‘masculine’ definition of the features the Leagues had in common with the non-gender-exclusive Apostolat.26 In order to achieve the best results, the Leagues’ leaders tried to take into account ‘masculine’ characteristics in the organization and development of the men’s movement. Not only were their members recruited by men, a guarantee for an adequate apostleship, but their membership tasks were also designed for the male persona.27

Once they had signed up, members of the Leagues shared some obligations, i.e. a morning prayer and rehabilitating Communion.28 These tasks were not only described as fit for a man and his busy ‘masculine’ life, but were actually also presented as ‘designed’ to fit men’s features. Men were, according to the Leagues’ leaders, ruled by a worldly view, and in order to fight those prejudices their public activities, for example their collective Communion, had to be carried out collectively. This performance as a group represented a double benefit for the Leagues. Not only would the men’s numbers impress the other churchgoers and eventually attract other men, but the members would feel more safe, connected and comforted when they stood shoul-

26 Van der Veken, Handleiding, 163-164.
27 Meeus, Mannen- en vrouwenbonden, 5.
28 The Rehabilitating Communion is a Communion in which Christ’s honour is restored and the sins committed by mankind (diminishing Christ’s honour) are balanced through a public honouring of Christ’s suffering. An all-male version had been introduced in Toulouse in 1875 under impulse of Henri Ramière. AFJ COA 1/6: L. De Coninck, Histoire de l’Apostolat de la Prière en Belgique, offprint of the supplement of the Messager du Cœur de Jésus of May 1928, 5; Van der Veken, Handleiding, 31.
der to shoulder with other men. This Holy Communion made all men equal and improved the feeling of brotherhood among the members. Since their presence had to be impressive, the men would not only flock together, but also sit, quite prominently, in front of the altar and not at the church’s portal, the much-lamented favourite spot of a male churchgoer. The Leagues’ leaders explicitly stressed the importance of this group activity, as they did not really think highly of men’s religiosity, believing that without this collective Communion far too many men would keep away from this Christian duty. Group activities such as the monthly Communion, public demonstrations and ‘spiritual lectures’ were organized in order to improve a community feeling, publicly demonstrated by the members wearing the same pin and men - whose capability to sing had been questioned - singing songs about their brotherhood.

The morning dedication was also presented as especially fit for men. The prayer formula was “short”, “masculine” and “striking” and therefore ideal for men who were not really drawn to long prayers. So, although these tasks - the morning dedication and rehabilitating Communion - had also been part of the obligations of some of the Apostolat members, the Leagues gave them their own cachet and presented them as ‘masculine’.

FE/MALE MOVEMENT

According to the Leagues’ leaders, this men’s movement inspired women with amazement, cooperation and above all, jealousy. Although women’s first response had been astonishment, they had soon got over the initial surprise and had contributed to the success of the men’s movement by their enthusiastic response, urging their male family members to join the Leagues, sending them to the meetings and making sure they went to confession and brought their prayer books to church. However, according to the central board, the success of the movement also incited some jealousy and before long, women developed their own Leagues. This women’s movement presented a difficult situation for the men’s Leagues, as it challenged the self-implied ‘masculine character’ of the men’s movement. The response of the Leagues’ leaders was at first

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30 Van der Veken, “De mannen”, 49.
31 “Het Pilatushoekske!”; “Onze Zondagmis”.
32 Van der Veken, “De mannen”.
33 Ibid., 49.
34 Meesen, La belle histoire, 9; “De eerste Bondsmis”.
denial, but pressed by the archbishop to take control of the central organization of the women’s movement, they decided not only to make a clear difference between the men’s and women’s movements, but also to do everything in their power to not let the women outshine the male Leagues.

Women’s Leagues were thereby considered a double problem: not only would they make the male members feel less exclusive; it would also not take long before the attention of the Leagues’ leaders would only concentrate upon the female audience as it was more easy to please and almost effortlessly showed good results, in contrast to men, considered a tough audience. The central board only consented to organize and control the women’s Leagues, after years of refusal, because around the 1930s some of the clergy concluded that women needed this movement (just as much as men) and that the image of the more ‘pious sex’ was no longer adequate. However, it would be the archbishop who gave the final push in the central creation of the women’s Leagues. As he publicly announced the need for a central organization of the women’s Leagues, the Jesuits could no longer deny the request and had to give in. As they discussed this demand they realized that they themselves could profit from the control over the women’s movement. By taking the central organization into their own hands, they avoided another religious order’s taking charge of it and as the central board they could prevent the women’s Leagues from becoming more successful than men’s. The board therefore reformulated its vision: the women's movement could be useful, but men's Leagues had to remain their priority.

In order to preserve their masculine character, the Leagues’ leaders created differences between the men’s and women’s Leagues. In their correspondence they very explicitly stressed the fact that the women’s movement had to differ from the men’s movement in appearance and content. The most prominent demarcations between men’s and women’s Leagues were made along the following lines.

The first differentiation pointed at the rehabilitating Communion. Since the male members of the Leagues were obliged to attend a rehabilitating Communion once a month, so were the members of the women’s movement. There was, however, a clear distinction made between the men’s and women’s movements. Women’s rehabilitation would have less of a social character, since it was men and not women who represented society. Men, and in concreto men’s Leagues, were therefore held responsible for the public rehabilitation and women for the ‘private’, i.e. familial, rehabilitation of Christ’s honour. This division was clearly made along the lines of the

37 AFJ, I.2: Note sur les Ligues du Sacré Coeur pour femmes.
38 “Onze Mannenbonden, waarop men terecht in ons land fijt is, zullen er aan houden, hun roem waardig te blijven en zich niet te laten overtreffen door de Vrouwenbonden.” “Vrouwenbonden”.
40 AFJ, I.2: Note sur les Ligues du Sacré Coeur pour femmes; COA, 1.10: Note on women’s Leagues, October 1931.
42 AFJ, I.7: Letter to Meeus by Verwimp, 15 June 1935.
43 “Haar eerherstel heeft uiteraard minder een sociaal karakter, daar niet zij, maar wel de mannen, de aangeduide vertegenwoordigers zijn der Maatschappij.” Meeus, Mannen- en vrouwenbonden, 5-6, 11; AFJ, I.9: Report meeting 11 February 1936.
archetypical distinction between the ‘masculine’ public spheres and the ‘feminine’ private spheres as they have been presented in the separate-spheres ideology.

Since women were not allowed to take part in the public manifestations of the Leagues (i.e. demonstrations, consecration of the flags), the division between public and private also played its part in the second difference between the two Leagues.\(^{44}\) However, they were allowed to contribute to the success of these public manifestations by sending their husbands to them, reminding their male family members of these activities. They could support the demonstrations by making sure that their husbands had a nice dinner waiting for them once they got back and by showing a warm interest in the events of the day.\(^{45}\) As a movement, the women’s League might even be asked to cooperate in the organization of these public manifestations. More specifically, its help would be needed for tasks “along the line of their feminine character”:\(^{46}\) i.e. “the decoration of houses and windows, the fabrication of flowers and the selling of signs”.

Men apparently were the external representatives, the symbolic identification of the Leagues.

The third differentiation related to the Leagues’ symbols. As one’s identity is strongly based on external elements, women’s Leagues had to have a different sign, song and preferably even a different name. However, the name League of the Sacred Heart, according to the central board, was too much connected with “churches full of men, with waving flags, demonstrations, dedications of parishes and communities, the processions at congresses and pilgrimages”, and men would not like that unity to be touched. They would rather not share their name with any other organization, “however charming it might be”.\(^{47}\) The central board wanted to name them Margaret-Mary Leagues, because the name referred to the Sacred Heart devotion and also had something “specifically feminine”.\(^{48}\) However, the reaction to this name proposal was not unanimously positive. Other names were proposed, such as St Lutgardis League (named after a Belgian saint also connected with the Sacred Heart devotion) and Mary Leagues.\(^{49}\) Their name was not the only element the men’s League closely identified with; apparently their song was also an important expression of the movement’s identity. The Leagues’ song was considered a ‘masculine’ song and therefore not fit for a women’s movement. Women’s improvisations on the text (for example the replacement of ‘sons’ with ‘daughters’) were not only considered a musical blunder,

\(^{44}\) AFJ, I.8: Note to Mgr. De Wachter: “Are women’s Leagues useful or necessary?” (7 September 1927); COA, 1.10: Note on Women’s Leagues, October 1931.


\(^{46}\) “(...) die op haar terrein gelegen zijn: b.v. de versiering van huis en vensters; de vervaardiging van bloemen, de verkoop van herkenningsteeken enz., enz.” Meeus, *Mannen- en vrouwenbonden*, 12.


\(^{48}\) AFJ, I.9: Report meeting 11 February 1936.


On Saint Lutgardis see: “De godsvrucht tot het Heilig Hart”.
but were also regarded as not sufficient; women had better have their own song. According to the board it would be preferable if women’s Leagues were not only indicated by their own name and song but also by their own pin, which “women would be proud to wear”. Apparently, there were even some discussions about adapting the mark of the Apostolat for this use, a rather ironic choice if one thinks about the (problematic) ‘feminine’ connotation of this movement.

The fourth, and one of the most striking, differentiations between the men’s and women’s movements alluded to the organization of the rehabilitating Communion that the members of the League were supposed to attend once a month. In the opinion of the central board, men’s exemplum would count for more than women’s; therefore not all too much attention had to be paid to the Communion of the women’s Leagues as a group. In the men’s movement, the leaders stressed the attendance of the monthly Communion on a specific day; in the women’s Leagues the members were given various options. In their own reports and discussions they explained this flexibility in this way:

For the women we use the pretext of difficulties in the household, to let them have the choice between the first Friday (requested by the Sacred Heart) and a Sunday different from the one of the men’s Leagues. The outcome will be that; divided between two Masses to attend Communion, their number will be less impressive and the men’s Leagues will make a better impression and we will use every opportunity to put the men’s Leagues on a pedestal and in the spotlight.

The Leagues’ leaders and the movement’s authors quite literally followed this strategy and presented this monthly Communion as they had planned it: in their booklets, women’s instable life is lamented as they are offered flexibility. The public discourse on women’s dual option therefore looked like this:

For a lot of women it is not easy, even impossible, to commit themselves to attend H. Mass on a certain Sunday of the month. Various domestic occupations hold her back: making coffee, getting the children ready to go to church, and so on. From a utilitarian point of view a change is already required. The group

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50 Meeus, “Mannen- en Vrouwenbonden”, MM, July 1936, 3. The text of the song was as follows: “Oh Heart of Jesus, we are Your sons, with a powerful will and strong in number. That we are and that shall we prove to be, everywhere.” AFJ, I.3: Songtexts. Women’s song is alluded to by Van der Veken, Handleiding, 179: J. Bogaerts wrote the text and the music was the congress song from Budapest.


52 AFJ, I.8: Note to Mgr De Wachter, 7 September 1927.

53 “Pour les femmes nous prenons prétexte des difficultés de ménage, pour leur laisser le choix ou bien le premier vendredi (demandé par le Sacré-Coeur) ou bien un dimanche différent de la Ligues des hommes. La conséquence est que divisé en deux Messes de communion, leur nombre est moins imposant et la Ligue des hommes en est rehaussée et nous prenons prétexte chaque fois que la chose est possible, de mettre en épiéngle et en vedette les Ligues des hommes.” AFJ, I.2: Note sur les Ligues du Sacré Cœur pour les Femmes (s.d.).
should not be demanded so strictly of the women’s movement as of the men’s movement. The differentiations that had been discussed by the Leagues’ leaders were also published in the periodicals and in small booklets. In these editions the male and female movements were presented not as opposites, but as a complementarity. Although the modifications in the women’s movement (the pin, flexibility concerning the monthly Communion) were presented in discussions and publications as if they would better fit a feminine audience, they were also made to clearly differentiate men’s and women’s movements. Men would no longer have to feel embarrassed that women took part in their movement, as women’s Leagues were clearly presented as part of another organization, a women’s movement. No longer would women operate in the shadow of a men’s movement that was so clearly defined as ‘masculine’ without presenting themselves as an (externally and internally) different organization. Apparently, this solution was also approved by the clergy. The priests were happy that the Jesuits took care of the women (and women did not have to turn to yet another religious order), but at the same time they were, according to the central board, delighted that men remained the main focus of the Leagues of the Sacred Heart.

**INCORPORATION OF A MASCULINE CATHOLICISM?**

The importance of men’s involvement was a common theme in the periodicals of the men’s Leagues. Members were reminded of the fact that their “moral life was in greater danger” (than women’s) and their “religious life” was “threatened to a larger extent”. However, the meaning of their membership was not only based upon the moral support they could receive from these group activities and from this religious funding, but also on the fact that, as heads of the community life and as authority holders, they could represent society’s rehabilitation of the honour of the Sacred Heart. The Leagues’ members were addressed as men, with their own (masculine) problems, duties and ideals. As Catholic men they combined multiple identities and were confronted with principles corresponding with the various aspects of this ideal masculine image. They were depicted as men, fathers, husbands, citizens, Catholics and apostles.

The Leagues’ members were reminded of their duties as fathers and heads of the household. They were to make sure that no bad influences could trickle down into their family lives and into the souls of the members of their households. They ought

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54 “Voor vele vrouwen is het niet gemakkelijk, is het zelfs onmogelijk zich te verbinden om iedere maand op een bepaalde Zondag een bepaalde H. Mis bij te wonen. Allerlei huishoudelijke bezigheden weerhouden haar; koffie klaar maken; de kinderen gereed maken voor de H. Mis, enz. Uit utilitaristisch oogpunt dringt zich reeds een zekere aanpassing op. De groep mag niet zo strikt geëist worden voor de Vrouwen- als voor de Mannenbonden.” Meeus, “Mannen- en Vrouwenbonden”, *MM*, August 1936, 2.
to know what literature, fashions and movies were fit for their family.\textsuperscript{58} Apparently, men were not always capable of meeting those prerogatives and could be called back to their duties as husbands and fathers by the Leagues’ discourse. At any rate, this is the conclusion that can be derived from some of the letters preserved in the archives of the movement. One of them introduces a woman, signing as “Mother and wife of a Christian family” who saw her husband a changed man: “... he has become a promoter of the League of the Sacred Heart, which made his nature much softer ...”, though he was not yet what he should be “... but his inclination to other women is not really fading well ...”. She has great confidence in the power of the Leagues’ leaders over her husband and hopes that they may make some remarks on the subject in their periodical. She is convinced that her husband will listen to them and remarks that he often tells other people to read that magazine and derive a lesson from it.\textsuperscript{59}

These marital and family ideals return in the description of the death of an “exemplary member” of the men’s movement. His life was a “model of Christian life and a loyal sense of duty”, according to the Bondsblad. Although he was a fruit merchant and often had to go to Brussels on Sunday, he nevertheless always tried to attend Sunday Mass and take part in the group Communion of the League. He also tried to go to church during the week, and showed his sense of religious duty as a father. He did not hesitate to make his sons sit down with him in the evening to make them say the rosary with him and carried his suffering, after a deadly fall from a ladder, in a ‘manly’ Christian way.\textsuperscript{60} In this description, the Catholic father not only combined his duties as head of the household and member of the League of the Sacred Heart, but also went to church and attended Mass. Since the group Communion was one of the central features of the men’s movement and the Eucharist had become an important point in Catholic discourse and organizational life, this stress on an ideal member’s Mass attendance was not very surprising.\textsuperscript{61}

This interest in Mass attendance was stressed by the Leagues’ cooperation in the action “Back to the Sunday Mass”. Through intensive media campaigning they tried to get the Belgian population, and especially men, back to church and made them attend Mass. In the posters and folders, men could explicitly be addressed as fathers who had to set a good example to their children. The campaign protested against the empty chairs and the inattentive male presence at Mass. It promoted the use of a prayer book and advised lectures in which a detailed analysis of Mass promoted a better understanding of the ceremony. During the campaign the Leagues meditated

\textsuperscript{58} “Zedenverwildering”; AFJ, IV.3: Letter from E.H. Pissens.
\textsuperscript{59} The date stamp notes “17 JAN 1938”. “Moeder en vrouw van een christelijk huisgezin” “... nu is hij ieveeraar geworden van den bond van het H. Hart hij is ierdoor veel zachtter van aard geworden maar een neing naar andere vrouwen dat gaat er niet goed uit ....” “... want ik hoor hem tegen de menschen zeggen ge moet het lezen er staan soms goede dingen in waar ge veel nut kunt uit trekken.” Another letter has almost the same content but in that case the writer asks them to mention their lesson in the sermons. No date is given there. AFJ, I.3.
\textsuperscript{60} “Voorbeeldig Bondslid”.
\textsuperscript{61} See for example the founding of the Eucharistic Crusade (Eucharistische Kruistocht) for children. This Crusade also had its adult sections. Quaghebeur, “De Eucharistische”. The central position of the Communion inspired a number of books concerned with men’s Communion, e.g. Solvyns, \textit{De Heilige Communie voor Mannen}; Lintelo, \textit{De Heilig Communie der Mannen}. 
on the best way to reach men and encouraged the use of slogans as “Using a Prayer book is not sanctimonious”. According to leaders of this action, the best method by far was the home visit. Those were considered very effective since one would not only talk to men, but - more importantly - by visiting people at home, one would also contact wives who would be keen on their husbands attending Mass, and who would make sure that their husbands would keep the promises they had made to the men involved in this campaign.

The Leagues’ members were not only addressed as fathers and practising Catholics, but also as potential voters. Although the Leagues did not have a political goal, and avoided every political connotation, the members were still reminded of their duties as Christian citizens. Since men were entitled to vote, they had to do their best as a voter or even a propagandist in order to defend the Christian interests in modern society. Although no League activities could be devoted to the elections - the Leagues had to remain apolitical - members were encouraged to pray within a family context for a ‘positive’ result of the elections.

The promoters of the Leagues, the lay elite of the movement, were not only addressed in their men-only capacities as fathers and citizens, but also as apostles. The apostleship was a man’s job par excellence, since the first apostles had been men and Christ had built his Church, counting on the help of men. They were motivated to show courage, to battle, to suffer and to sacrifice. They not only had to defend, but above all they had to battle and conquer in the name of Christ.

The masculine character of the men’s Leagues was cultivated to such an extent that one entering the Leagues could say that he was depicted and addressed as ‘a man’. Their physical manhood apparently was a unifying quality and any differences that may have existed between them (e.g. class) were dissolved by the monthly Communion that equated and elevated every man. Although these distinctions had been able to motivate the construction of various men’s movements before, in the Leagues of the Sacred Heart they preferably did not play a part. The central board did differentiate between men, however, in its discussions on the non-practising of the men of Wallonia, the religiosity of men in the countryside, or in their analysis of various work spots, but most commonly men were addressed as men, with more characteristics in common than differences between them.

Not only were the members referred to in their men-specific identities as fathers and citizens, but the ‘masculine’ image of the Leagues was carefully constructed, preserved and externalized through monthly Communion and demonstrations. Even when the women’s Leagues came into existence the ‘masculine’ character was not to be challenged, and a clear differentiation consolidated the idea that men’s and women’s Leagues were two different organizations. Men’s Leagues presented themselves as a masculine version of the

62 “Een kerkboek gebruiken is niet kwezelachtig”; “Terug naar de Zondagsmis. De tijden zijn rijp!”.
63 “Onze Zondagmis”; “Terug naar de Zondagmis!”.
64 “De Bonden en de aanstaande verkiezingen”.
65 Palau, De Katholiek, 106.
67 “Uit het Walenland”; “Bij onze Waalsche broeders”; Meeus, “De Bonden van het Heilig Hart”.

‘FROM THAT MOMENT ON, I WAS A MAN!’
Apostolat, although this mixed movement had never claimed to be a women’s movement and the origins of the Leagues have to be placed within this movement. Still, by the 1930s the Apostolat had a ‘feminine’ reputation (maybe because the promoters were mostly and preferably women) and attempts by the still-existing Belgian Apostolat cells (Antwerp, Ghent e.g.) to contact the leaders of the Leagues were blocked. Still, although the leaders of the Leagues would not collaborate on an organizational level with these remaining cells, they did present themselves as part of the Apostolat and were presented as such in its publications.

The ideas about differentiation between the sexes and the critique of men’s religiosity also trickled into the Apostolat. Its periodical, the Bode van het Heilig Hart, published some articles on the subject, e.g. the article on ‘Masculine Christianity’. Since the editorial staff consisted mainly of Jesuits and this religious order was also in charge of the Leagues of the Sacred Heart, interaction would have been very likely. At least one Jesuit, Louis Verheylezoon, wondered in 1930 whether or not the Apostolat was fit for men. “In general”, he began, “it is better to take on women as promoters of the Apostolat but if one wants to bring men together in a separate league it will be better to let men act as apostles.” Although his stress on women as promoters of the Apostolat was quite along the line of the first draft of the organizational model by Toussaint Dufau, the first apostle of the Apostolat de la Prière in Belgium, this stress on an all-men’s movement and its male apostles was not.73 The passage clearly refers to the Leagues of the Sacred Heart, since the movement was regarded as the male branch of the Apostolat and he mentions it a little later. Apparently the attention paid to the advantages of a gender-exclusive movement (e.g. “men are more easily attached to an all-male movement that is designed especially for them”) was a new feature, the result of increased interest in differentiation between the sexes, stimulated and externalized by the Leagues.

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68 Van der Veken, Handleiding, 163; AFJ, COA 4.6: De Internationale Bond van het Heilig Hart.
69 On its female promoters see e.g. AFJ, III.2.; Verheylezoon, Het Apostolaat, 10-11.
70 AFJ, III.4: Letter to Zeij (8 March 1933); COA 6.4: Letter from Hardeman to the Provincial Father.
71 AFJ, III.2: Comment fonder l’Apostolat de la Prière, Toulouse, 1923, 14.
72 The Leagues had their own periodicals: e.g Bondsblad (°1930); Maandblad voor Xaverianen en H. Hartbonders (1929); Maandelijkse Medededeelingen over de Bonden van het H. Hart (°1924, from 1935 onwards there was also an edition for women: Bonden van het Heilig Hart Vrouwenbonden); Regnum Christi (1931).
73 Dufau, Beautés, 605-606.
74 Verheylezoon, Handboek, 63-64, 110-130; AFJ, III.2: Verheylezoon, Het Apostolaat, 10-11. This edition in the archives includes a little note with remarks “all done by female promoters. Is the Apostolat only for women?” “What if there is a men’s League? Or when a men’s League is organised in a parish where such an Apostolat already exists?” “Alles door ijveraars! Is ADG enkel voor vrouwen? [...] quid waar mannenbond bestaat?”; AFJ, I.9: Report of the meeting on 13 March 1935.
MASCULINIZATION?

The men’s apostleship in the Leagues of the Sacred Heart has been described as part of a ‘masculinization’ of the cult of the Sacred Heart at the beginning of the twentieth century, but this phrase raises more than one question. At first sight one could agree: the Leagues targeted men and cultivated a ‘masculine’ character. However, taking into account the spontaneously developing women’s Leagues, one would also have to consider a renewed ‘feminization’ of the Sacred Heart devotion in this women’s movement, a development parallel to the ‘masculinization’ of the men’s League. Therefore, the term ‘differentiation’ seems to be a better description for this (Belgian) case since it indicates the (increasing) stress on the constructed difference between men and women and the (conscious) adaptation to ‘natural’ characteristics of both. For if one uses the term ‘masculinization’, one may all too easily follow the idea of a constant binary opposition with a permanent ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ character that would be imposed on historically, socially and geo-politically different discourses. ‘Masculinization’ can be a helpful term, but it may include too much the idea of a linear development from ‘feminization’ towards ‘masculinization(s)’. The phrase very easily leads one into an essentialist view on ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’, and imposes it on a religious discourse without consideration for the contextual, historical flexibility of these very fluid terms. For what is there to say about the ‘masculine’ character, if women were attracted enough to develop their own Leagues in the shadow of this ‘masculine’ movement? Should we not think of the Leagues as a men’s movement that could also attract women and did so to such an extent that differences had to be imposed on them, again?

With this triptych depicting the three stages of spiritual development leading towards the union with God, the Dominican painter Raymond van Bergen (1883-1978) engaged in a gendered debate on identity among the Dutch Dominicans.

[Zwolle, Convent of Saint Thomas; © Stichting Kerkelijk Kunstbezit in Nederland, Utrecht]