Gender and Christianity in Modern Europe

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Published by Leuven University Press

Art, Jan and Patrick Pasture.
Gender and Christianity in Modern Europe: Beyond the Feminization Thesis.

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In 1927, the Dutch Dominicans opened a modern boarding school complex in the village of Neerbosch just outside Nijmegen, in the southeast of the Netherlands. It provided accommodation for an expanding group of minor seminarians. The original Saint Dominic’s College, built in 1856 in the centre of Nijmegen, no longer met the standards of a modern educational institute, necessitating the move to the new college in 1927.

In 1930, in a brochure for the parents of prospective pupils, the Dominicans presented their institution as a modern school with the latest in technical equipment and facilities. Central heating throughout the building, clean and hygienic bedrooms for the boys, each with running water and a proper mattress were some of what parents could expect for their sons. The new building made the minor seminary fit for a new century. It offered plenty of room for the increasing number of boys who wanted to become priests. Its modern facilities made it possible for the Dominicans to compete with the Jesuits’ Canisius College in Nijmegen and the minor seminary of St Alphonsus. St Alphonsus was an impressive building on a hill on the outskirts of the town, which had been christened ‘Nebo’ at the turn of the century, after an open-air museum, devoted to creating a reconstruction of biblical locations in the Holy Land, opened its doors opposite the hill. St Alphonsus was founded by the Redemptorists in Roermond, in the far south of the Netherlands in 1870 and moved north to Nijmegen in 1928. Both the Redemptorists and the Jesuits also presented themselves and their institutes as modern and well-equipped. The Jesuits of Canisius College even provided pupils with postcards showing the central heating system, to send home to impress family and friends.

* I am very grateful to Marjet Derks and Marit Monteiro for their critical reading and useful suggestions.
The 1930 brochure produced by the Dominicans assured the boys’ parents that everything at Saint Dominic’s was “aimed at making things as pleasant as possible for your boy, whilst at the same time maintaining his inner soul in a state conducive for him to answer his calling.” The relatively isolated position of the new building would help create a protective environment. The Dominicans understood that a priest’s vocation was a fragile phenomenon which needed protection from the ‘dangers’ of modernity as they were depicted in grim terms among the Catholic clergy during the interwar years. A village just outside the city, therefore, seemed to be a more appropriate location for the new college than the heart of a modernizing Nijmegen.

Saint Dominic’s was among the growing number of Catholic boarding schools and minor seminaries in the Netherlands during the first half of the twentieth century. Nijmegen, in fact, became the Dutch ‘capital of Catholic education’, especially after the Catholic University was established there in 1923. This institute for higher education attracted many students from the ranks of the clergy and religious population, and offered educational prospects for members of staff of minor seminaries in town. Between them, the Dominicans, the Jesuits and the Redemptorists attracted boys from all over the country, although the three schools recruited students from different areas and social backgrounds.

The Dominicans cultivated an identity of intellectual and self-assured priests, attracting many boys from middle- to upper-class Catholic families. Saint Dominic’s was to be the first Dutch minor seminary to meet the intellectual standards needed to obtain the official status of ‘gymnasium’ (grammar school), in 1950.

Unlike pupils from Canisius College, those from Saint Dominic’s had expressed their wish to become priests. Officially, Saint Dominic’s prepared students for the priesthood, but not necessarily for entrance into the Dominican Order. In practice, however, the school culture was very much geared towards shaping ‘real Dominicans’. The boys were constantly influenced by their Dominican educators in their white habits and the College turned out to be a nursery for new recruits.

Transforming young boys into mature Dominicans was the central aim of education at Saint Dominic’s. This homosocial boarding school environment, where pious and not-so-pious boys were turned into men of God, was not only marked by religious standards, but also revealed traits of a particular masculine socialization. This masculine socialization was reflected negatively by the fact that only boys could enrol, and also in a constructive and formative way as a fundamental dimension of the school culture. In this closed Catholic institution, masculine socialization was influenced by various ideals and images of men and masculinity that stemmed from the Catholic tradition as well as from Dutch interwar culture. This type of religious masculinity proved to be of a rather ambiguous nature.

However, before elaborating further on the concept of masculinity, this study will concentrate on the historiography of masculinity in the context of boarding-school education.

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1 PAOD 779: Brochure Saint Dominic’s, ca. 1930: “Alles werkt er toe mede om het Uw jongen zoo prettig mogelijk te maken, doch hem tegelijkerlijd in den zielestaat te houden, die hem het gehoor geven aan zijn verheven roeping licht zal doen vallen.”

2 Monteiro, Gods Predikers, 17-19; Dellepoort, De priesterroepingen in Nederland, 227.
FROM BOYS TO MEN - SOME HISTORIOGRAPHICAL AND CONCEPTUAL REMARKS

The making of young Catholic boys into educated men at institutions such as Saint Dominic’s has not yet been the subject of serious historical research in the Netherlands. Catholic boarding-school histories appear mostly within the genre of memorial books. Although sometimes very detailed and thorough, these works do not approach the history of such educational institutions thematically, but focus mainly on facts and details. Needless to say, these books hardly put the school history in a broader social or cultural perspective. Gender or aspects of masculine socialization are themes that are hardly ever referred to. A remarkable exception is Henk Kroon’s semi-autobiographical Pubers voor God (Adolescents for God) that systematically analyses life at a diocesan minor seminary.

Kroon, himself a former pupil, outlines various ambivalences of seminary life that touch upon identity and masculinity. He describes to what extent the ideal of collectivity pervaded school life, in line with the importance the Church itself attached to ‘the collective’, formed by the community of believers. This emphasis officially accounted for the condemnation of so-called ‘particular friendships’ between two boys. The underlying notion was that, as future priests, boys needed to be equally available to and interested in every member of their ‘flock’. Yet, Kroon points out that the dangers associated with a homosocial school environment, a strong Catholic rejection of homosexuality, and a need for priests to be celibate, played an equally important role in establishing particular friendships. Although Kroon’s book is fairly systematic in its approach, it is not meant to be a scholarly evaluation. The same goes for Jos Perry’s highly informative, but mostly journalistic book Jongens op kostschool (Boys at the boarding school), which also explores the day-to-day life of a Catholic boys’ boarding school. In her study of Dutch Dominicans, historian Marit Monteiro looks at the specific role Saint Dominic’s College played, but focuses more on dimensions of masculinity in the internal religious regime than on views on the academic curriculum and school culture.

Catholic colleges and minor seminaries have also been explored by French and French-Canadian researchers, who have studied the institutional history of schools, the religious education of boys, and their social backgrounds, but gender is not, or

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1 E.g. Struyker Boudier, Vijftig jaar Nebo; Starink, Hoe wij slaagden; Reul, Het vierde Rolduc; Wolfs, Van oude en nieuwe schooljaren; Wijfjes, Het Stanislas; Tromp, Meer dan het geweest is; Elgershuizen, Een kroniek.
2 Kroon, Pubers voor God.
3 Ibid., 107.
4 Ibid., 132.
5 Ibid., 183.
6 Perry, Jongens op kostschool.
7 Monteiro, Gods Predikers, 297-302.
is only in part the explicit motivation behind this research. In this article, however, I am mainly interested in school culture and boys’ culture as it took shape in those institutions, a theme which has been comprehensively explored by British and American sociologists. Their studies often only implicitly refer to aspects of masculinity and masculine socialization. In my article I intend to bring gender to the fore as a relevant category of analysis. This is exactly what British historian Christine Heward did in her book Making a man of him (1988), in which she analyses a public school for middle-class boys. In this study Heward explicitly connects boarding school education with the masculine socialization that boarding schools strived for. According to Heward, the collective school identity revolved around the construction of masculinity. The public school was a setting in which boys learned from other boys, and learnt how to become men.

The shaping of the boys was mainly influenced by future career perspectives. To prepare pupils for their future role as men of the world, they were not only given appropriate knowledge of relevant subjects (including Latin), but were also taught to function in a competitive hierarchy. The entire school organization was geared towards this competition. Sport, in particular, was regarded as functional in this respect, as matches between houses or schools illustrate. Yet academic achievements were also competitive, with annual prizes awarded for excellence. Not only did it matter who excelled in sports or intellectual performance, but also who did not. The school environment provided a setting for a ‘survival of the fittest’ scenario at various levels, a daily struggle which caused the ‘weak links’ to leave.

Heward discerns three phases in which respective headmasters link career perspectives with social and cultural concepts of manliness in the public school system. The first phase roughly consists of nineteenth-century ideals of discipline, order and Christian morals. This ideology was embodied by the ‘Christian gentleman’, for whom the daily religious practice was considered necessary and formative. In the second phase, which started in about 1900, this ideal was replaced by the principles of ‘mus-
cular Christianity’.'  

This saw the virtues of the Christian gentleman combined with physical strength and sport. This image changed again during the interwar years. In this third phase, learning how to serve society became an important aspect of the masculinity cultivated in public-school education. In all three phases, it not only mattered what the boys would be doing in their future lives, but how they would actually perform in their future careers. Heward’s study details the impact of changing standards of masculinity and masculine behaviour on curriculum and school culture.

Her findings are pertinent to a minor seminary such as Saint Dominic’s, yet only to a certain extent. Indeed, the perspective of becoming secular or regular priests did shape collective standards and the underlying notions of aspired identity. In daily life, this specific future perspective was embodied by the boys’ educators, the Dominican priests and lay brothers. Yet, these men were not ‘men of the world’, and did not embody the general standards of manliness. They were bound to a celibate lifestyle and dressed in habits that more resembled a woman’s dress than a man’s suit. Thus, the masculine socialization of students was marked by a specific form of Catholic clerical masculinity.

These observations coincide with outcomes of research conducted by Canadian historians Louise Bienvenue and Christine Hudon. In their article “Entre franche camaraderie et amours socratiques”, they discuss relationships between Catholic college boys in the period 1870 to 1960. In “Pour devenir home” they focus on the masculine socialization of students from the same three classical Catholic colleges in Quebec between 1880 and 1939.

In this last article they note that a clear distinction existed between the masculine dimensions of Catholic culture within the schools, and what they call the ‘virility’ of the Quebec culture outside the college walls. Within the colleges, students were confronted with daily male role models that clearly deviated from what was considered masculine in Quebec society at the time. Bienvenue and Hudon state that the boys tried to compensate for this difference in clerical manliness and worldly virility by subtly breaking the rules. Although only of a modest nature, such rebellious behaviour enabled the boys to develop a gender identity that coincided with the hegemonic masculinity of the ‘real world’.

One could rightfully question the conclusion that only students of Catholic colleges tried to strengthen their masculine identity by breaking the rules. However, Bienvenue and Hudon clearly point out that particular forms of masculine socialization in a closed Catholic environment deserve, and even demand, attention. This certainly applies to Saint Dominic’s. The distinction Bienvenue and Hudon make be-
between the virile culture ‘outside the walls’ and the more feminine form of masculinity found inside the schools, is also applicable to this minor Dutch Dominican seminary. Yet, the opposition between religious or clerical masculinity and worldly virility that Hudon and Bienvenue propose appears to be too strict. In daily life, both varieties seemed to have been complexly interwoven. Within the walls of a school like Saint Dominic’s, they even merged, as will be pointed out later.

This contribution will argue that the Catholic identity of Saint Dominic’s was influenced by the professional future perspectives of students, and that this had profound consequences for the ideals and masculine self-image of the pupils. At the same time, it will show that features of a more worldly, or even hegemonic masculinity, marked by modernity, penetrated college life, even though the Dominicans did their very best to safeguard traditional seminary culture from undesirable modern influences. They did so by carefully exposing youngsters to sports, modern film culture and popular music. At Saint Dominic’s a specific boys’ culture evolved, consisting of religious masculinity mixed with what boys between 12 and 18 outside the college considered to be fun or meaningful.

Obviously, this article will not interpret ‘masculinity’ as a fixed category. On the contrary, Masculinity is regarded as a constitutive element in the education and formation of the boys, to which students as well as educators attributed various meanings. As this analysis will show, Catholic boys were not only influenced by clerical and monastic ideals imparted by their instructors, but also by sports heroes and starry-eyed idealists who took it upon themselves to change the world with their manly passion. Religious and clerical definitions of manliness at Saint Dominic’s blended with forms of hegemonic masculinity that dominated Dutch interwar culture. As will be pointed out, virility, an essential feature of this hegemonic manliness, clearly affected the culture of Saint Dominic’s.

This study explores these types of masculinity within the culture of Saint Dominic’s in the so-called Rhetorica. The sixth-formers took their exams and were faced with choices over their future: entry into the Dominican Order, becoming a priest, or - seldom a preferred option then - a worldly career. The focus is on the class of 1936. The majority of the young men would enter the Order. They were supposed to become leading figures in the Dutch Catholic milieu. This specific Catholic and clerical future

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23 See also chapter 7 by Monteiro and the next chapter (9) by Derks, as well as Monteiro, Gods Predikers, 205-206. Monteiro describes what she calls the virile-polemic attitude of the generation of Dutch young Catholics who manifested themselves in the interwar years. This attitude was characterized by positively appreciated values such as creativity and energy that were presented as typically masculine, as opposed to feminine values with a negative connotation. In this respect she refers to an analysis by Dutch linguist Van Boven who speaks of “the virile generation of 1918”. In her study on Dutch Catholic radical religious women Heilig moeten, Derks also refers to the virility that marked the interwar culture of the Netherlands. Derks notices that such virility was not reserved for non-Catholics, or restricted to men. While the nineteenth century in their eyes was seen as a time of a passive, feminine and weak culture, the twentieth century was seen as an era of activity and virility. Modern times were masculine. Derks, Heilig moeten, 30-31.
perspective had been the central and formative aspect of their seminary years. The exploration of the seminaries’ culture is presented along three lines: sports culture, formal education and self-images of minor seminaries as presented in the school paper, De Vlieger (The Kite).

SAINT DOMINIC’S BOYS’ CULTURE

A sunny day in a Dutch playground in 1936. The cheerful young men in the photograph (see illustration p. 156), about 18 years old, together formed the Rhetorica, which was the sixth and final year of the minor seminary. After completing the year, the students - if considered suitable candidates - could enter the Order. For the 11 boys in the picture, a future as a Dominican priest had by then become self-evident. Ten out of the 11 started their noviciate in September 1936. In the end, only five of them would remain in the Dominican Order for the rest of their lives.

Students of Saint Dominic’s usually got in touch with the college through a Dominican priest from the parish where they lived, or through family members who had ties with the Dominican Order. This was the case with several of the Rhetorica students of 1936.24 The 11 boys originated from different parts of the country, although more than half came from the west, where the Dominicans had several parishes. The boys also had varied social backgrounds, although most of the families can be categorized as middle-class. Jan van Vugt’s father had his own grocery store, while Bertus van Elswijk’s father was a carpenter. Dirk Jan Gomes’s father was a merchant officer while Louis Ariaans’ father was a policeman. Herman van Run’s father owned some land, had his own drapery shop and worked as a town treasurer.25 Social status, like other factors, such as having a rural or urban background, played a part in the formation of a social hierarchy among the boys.26

Although the two other Catholic boys’ colleges in Nijmegen of that time, Canisius College and Nebo, had much in common with Saint Dominic’s, the background of their pupils differed slightly. The Redemptorists seemed to have recruited pupils from mostly rural areas and a lower-middle-class background.27 The six Jesuit Colleges in the Netherlands, by contrast, attracted more boys from upper-class families. This not only reflected the social composition of society at the time, but the colleges also prepared boys for the ranks of the social elite. In this respect, Saint Dominic’s consciously or unconsciously opted for another pattern of recruitment, consistent with objectives that differed from those of Jesuit Colleges.

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24 Interview with Herman van Run, 10 July 2006.
25 Remarks on his classmates by Herman van Run, August 2006.
26 Interview with Herman van Run, 10 July 2006.
27 Dellepoort, De priesterroepingen in Nederland, 226-228.
EDUCATION

In the 1930s Saint Dominic’s was not yet an officially recognized grammar school. The education on offer was modelled on the curriculum of a grammar school, but in general the instruction level was not as high, and not all the teachers were qualified. This, however, did not mean that intellectual achievements, competition and discipline were not appreciated by the Dominicans. On the contrary, prizes were awarded annually to the best pupils in each subject and in each class. The Dominicans certainly considered themselves to be an intellectual order. Intellectual performance, stimulated by the system of awards, was considered an essential part of Dominican socialization.28

SPORTS CULTURE

Until the early 1920s, Dominicans at the college seemed to adopt the attitude that a future priest could do well without sports. In the latter years of that decade and the 1930s this attitude started to change. As the sports adventures of the 1936 Rhetorica students and their school mates reveal, by 1936 competitive sports had developed their own place at the Dominican minor seminary. This section shows how boys such as Rhetorica student Bertus van Elswijk experienced college sports, and how this popular feature of interwar culture was relatively smoothly incorporated into school culture.

Before the college moved into the new building outside Nijmegen, entertainment for the boys was limited to indoor activities, such as handicrafts, billiards, chess and music. This is not to say that the Dominicans underestimated the benefits of physical exercise, but the opportunities proved to be scarce as there was no room for such activities in the vicinity of the old school buildings. Therefore, in the early 1920s the students’ physical exercise consisted mainly of walking tours around Nijmegen and occasional exercise in the courtyard.29 However, not long after the school had moved, the spacious fields surrounding the new college building were converted into sports facilities.30 Gradually, previously mistrusted sports such as athletics and football gained a better reputation and came to form an important part of the programme. In contrast with the more traditional walking tours, these sports made it possible for the boys to compete against each other, to excel physically and to obtain popularity among the other boys.31

28 Monteiro, Gods Predikers, 18. Of course, the religious formation also was a constitutive part of this socialization. Without comprehensively examining this subject, the last section, dealing with the seminarians’ self-image, will cover this further.
29 Wolfs, Van oude en nieuwe schooljaren, 57.
30 Ibid., 79.
31 In Catholic circles competitive sports such as rugby, cricket (which became more popular in the nineteenth century after originating in Saxon or Norman times) and football, originating in the nineteenth century, were looked at with distrust at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was a consequence of the ambivalent Catholic vision on corporality, in which the body was seen as a temple of God, as well as a locus of sin and lust. Derks, “Modesty and Excellence”, 11.
The elements of competition and the risk of physical exercise being given a higher priority than intellectual training explain the ambivalence of some religious institutes to sport. Religious orders running secondary schools had to deal with the rising popularity of sports among pupils. They had already had their doubts about physical exercise as part of the curriculum because it entailed a risk of putting the body over the soul. Moreover, schools feared that physical exercise would negatively influence the modesty and decency of the pupils. Relatively ‘modern’ sports such as cricket and football were seen as particularly threatening, for they stimulated competitiveness, a characteristic of modernity.32

Competition on the football field was appreciated differently by the Dominicans than competitiveness in intellectual matters. Their high appreciation of discipline and intellectuality that they hoped to stimulate by their system of prize-winning, probably made the difference here. However, by the 1930s the Dominicans had accepted that football and other modern sports were a suitable means of recreation for their pupils. They began to stress the positive influence that football had on the boys’ physical health, instead of underlining the competitive element.33 Of course, this did not prevent the boys from becoming aware of fierce competition when playing a match against a football team from one of the nearby Catholic colleges.

Although sports became increasingly important at Saint Dominic’s, they did not define the boys’ college culture as much as was the case at the nearby Canisius College of the Jesuits, where competition became the most constitutive element of school culture. Here, enthusiastic boys as well as younger staff members, who had become acquainted with a fanatic sports culture of the British Jesuit College in Stonyhurst, had built up a very popular and extensive sporting life at their school. The virtue of excellence, traditionally favoured by Jesuits, probably played an important role here.34 Student Bertus van Elswijk, one of the boys from the Rhetorica of 1936, was a real sportsman who did not hold the other footballers at the college in high esteem because, in his opinion, they lacked a proper sports mentality.35 Most boys on the football pitch only played the game because they detested the traditional school walk that was organized twice a week. The result of this ‘negative mentality’ was 22 players just trying to keep the ball to themselves, with no team spirit at all.36 Bertus was not the only one who complained about untalented footballers at Saint Dominic’s. In 1930 one of the boys criticized the ‘cucks’ on the Dominicus football grounds and

33 PAOD 785: Concilium de Studiis, 1 October 1933. Derks explains that the ideal of the so-called ‘muscular Christian’ helped to accept modern sports culture in Catholic circles. See Derks, “Modesty and Excellence”.
34 Ibid. Sports became so popular at Canisius that in the 1950s a commission of Dutch Jesuit educators expressed concern about the position sports had taken, and feared that sport harmed the intellectual, more refined and sensitive students of the College who either did not want to or could not excel at sport. PANJ 913: Meeting Commissio de Instituenda Juventute, 20-3-1957.
35 Written remarks on classmates by Herman van Run, August 2006.
36 PAOD 6182: De Vlieger, 1935-1936, 42.
remarked that “our football club was founded for boys who want to play football and not for boys who do not want to walk”.  

Nevertheless, the players who performed well on the field were admired by their schoolmates, and this boosted in-house spirits considerably. Their accomplishments, especially in matches against the Canisius College of the Jesuits in Nijmegen, drew the attention of the rest of the school. Players from the sport-minded Jesuit College were usually too strong for the boys from Saint Dominic’s, but that only seemed to elevate the heroic status of the players who dared to fight the strong boys from Canisius College. The annual match against Canisius College was referred to in the school paper as “the great battle”. Victories were appreciated, losses were taken proudly if the boys from Saint Dominic’s had played well. “Honourable defeats”, wrote Van Elswijk in the school paper, did not harm the reputation of the college.

Van Elswijk’s thoughts on inter-college football, with his emphasis on team spirit, fair play and honour, seem to have been successful in reconciling the Dominican ideal of a harmonious community with the ideals of competition and excellence associated with football. However, there was no serious sports culture at Saint Dominic’s during the interwar years. It was not until 1949 that the college prefect announced that from that point on, sports had to be actively practiced by all college boys, instead of being a hobby for a smaller group of sport fanatics. This is not to say that enthusiasm for football was not a definite part of college life. Although not a central factor in the masculine socialization of the students, it certainly was one of the ways for boys to develop physical and mental strength. Thus, fanatic sportsmen such as Van Elswijk introduced a virile variant of masculinity to the school, allowing more subdued fellow students to be passively involved as supporters of the school’s teams. This supporting of the College’s football players strengthened the collective identity of the students at Saint Dominic’s.

Clearly, the modern sports culture was simply something that could not be ignored by Dominicans. From the 1930s onwards, the interplay of fanatic footballers among pupils, and an enthusiasm for sport by several of their teachers guaranteed the institutionalization of modern football in this minor seminary. Although it fitted well with a pedagogical emphasis on competition, it collided with specific clerical standards of masculinity. In Saint Dominic’s culture, therefore, sport was not given a central position. However, it did provide ample opportunity for teachers and pupils to merge a sporty modern masculinity with a clerical manliness, in which the collective and the team spirit played a minor part. They did so by connecting football to physical health, honour and team spirit, which helped to intensify the collective identity of Saint Dominic’s.

37 PAOD 6181: De Vlieger, 1930-1931, 32. Indeed, one of the former pupils who went to Dominicus College in this era admitted that he only played football because he hated the compulsory walks. Questionnaire completed by former Dominicus student Baars.
38 PAOD 6181: De Vlieger, 1930-1931, 52.
41 Wolfs, Van oude en nieuwe schooljaren, 89-90.
As the school population moved to the new college in 1927, they started their own newspaper, titled *De Vlieger* (The Kite). Pupils formed an editorial board and one of the teachers functioned as a censor. The school paper provided a forum for exchanging opinions, but also for a discourse on school culture and the identity of the minor seminarians at Saint Dominic’s. By 1929 readers were encouraged to write critically about “the characters of the Saint Dominic’s boys”, to see who they really were: “pious, hard workers, or dandies or lazybones?”.

The articles show that ideals on priesthood and Dominican life were put forth as guidelines for the students’ own behaviour. The editors linked modern and popular activities, such as football, with virtues such as honour and community life. They reprimanded undesirable behaviour or character traits such as vanity. For instance, boys who were too keen on following the latest hairstyles were corrected in a poem that ended: “And then something else, you poor things/ Do remind yourself why you are even here/ Becoming a priest, that is your vocation / So don’t prance around like fashion dolls.”

Becoming a priest, of course, was why the boys attended Saint Dominic’s. It was this definite future perspective that formed a constantly recurring theme in the school paper. According to the founders and first editors of the paper, its title, *De Vlieger* (The Kite), did not merely refer to its intended audience, the boys who generally loved to fly the kite, but also to their vocation as priests, for which the kite was said to be a proper symbol.

Isn’t our vocation up in the sky like a kite, above the lively city of our youth? Don’t we all have one purpose, one and the same vocation, one and the same kite? There will be gusts of wind and storms. The kite may lurch to and fro... But we will have to take care then - while keeping the rope tight! - that it will not drop down on the bustling city of our youth!

This analogy directed the boys’ eyes towards heaven and allowed them to visualize their perception of their proposed vocation as something (literally) to look up to, as an ideal that was almost unattainable. The culture at Saint Dominic’s in the 1930s was clearly marked by this notion of the priesthood as a highly elevated and therefore almost unreachable ideal. This theme runs throughout poems or stories of the boys about the priest celebrating the Eucharist, which reflect how the pupils saw their future as priests. In their minds, a priest was set apart from the community as a direct mediator between God and his people. “So highly elevated is the priest, that he may daily bear Christ’s precious body, and even may command Christ to descend on the altar.”

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42 PAOD 6181: *De Vlieger*, 1929-1930, 43.
43 PAOD 6181: *De Vlieger*, 1929-1930, 43. “En dan nog iets arme stumpers / Denk toch aan wat je hier komt doen / Priester worden, dat is je roeping, en / dan niet als modepoppen doen.”
44 PAOD 6181: *De Vlieger*, 1927-1928, 3.
45 E.g. PAOD 6181: *De Vlieger*, 1930, 3 and 5; PAOD 6182: *De Vlieger*, 1935-1936, 16 and 19.
46 Ibid., 19.
Some students, such as Herman van Run from the Rhetorica, romanticized the priesthood, depicting it as something that resembled the Holy Grail: desirable but unattainable. Like most other seminarians, Van Run had been an altar boy in his parish church before coming to Saint Dominic’s. While serving Mass, he had experienced standing at the altar and being part of a sacred ritual where bread and wine are believed to become the body and blood of Christ. As an acolyte he already felt “chosen” in a way. The boys remained ambivalent about becoming a priest. On the one hand, there was the exceptional status of the priesthood, while on the other the students continuously doubted their ability to reach such a status. They could picture themselves as future men of God, whom people would look up to, but were very aware that it was out of their hands whether they would indeed join the clergy.

Dominican fathers who led the college provided examples of this ideal of the priesthood on a daily basis, especially while performing their rituals during Mass and other religious gatherings in chapel. The Rhetorica also had the privilege of visiting the nearby Albertinum in Nijmegen, where young Dominicans studied theology while preparing for their ordination. The boys were impressed by the asceticism and religious fervour of these young Dominicans. In the school paper the inhabitants of the Albertinum were described as both ascetic and chaste religious men, as well as highly elevated priests who, with their monastic humility and hardiness on display, were shown to be truly pure and chosen men of God.

Such discussions on priesthood and monastic identity seem to have been reflected in the internal debates among Dominicans in the interwar period regarding their specific identity as regular priests. The pupils of the Rhetorica appreciated the monastic priest, whom they later hoped to emulate. Their idealized views of the chastity and purity required for this life revealed various and, at times, ambivalent dimensions of masculinity. For the demand of purity was made not only of young seminarians, but also of girls of their age. The discourse of celibacy, however, was connected to moral strength and the heroism of making a sacrifice. In school life the boys were constantly reminded not only of their shared ideal, but also of the price they had to pay. Their educators controlled their purity and chastity, trying to restrain the pupils from discovering and enjoying their own sexuality.

The debates among the Dominicans revolved around the clerical and the monastic dimensions of their identity. Echoes of these deliberations reverberate through the school paper. In their appreciation of devoted and responsible priests who lived up to the high standards of their status, the boys criticized those less devoted and responsible: the hedonistic parish priest, to whom a good cigar and a drink were essential diversions from parsonage life. He proved to be the stereotype of an undesirable form of clerical masculinity. For many boys, the Dominican parish priest in their

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67 Interview Herman van Run, July 2006.
69 Monteiro, Gods Predikers, 302-314.
70 See the contribution by Monteiro in this volume.
home town had been the first Dominican father they had ever seen, and they often
thought highly of him. They saw him as a spiritual caretaker, a fluent preacher, a man
of high social status.51 But a parish priest could also be a fat, smoking and drinking
type that played cards every night with colleagues from nearby parishes and did not
come close to the ideal alter Christus.

The school paper warned boys who considered such men to be examples of the
priesthood “what a priest actually is: an alter Christus, that he should completely
forget himself, that his entire life and ambition ought to be directed to the salvation of
souls, and therefore he must never be tied to alcohol, that would give him a pleasure
which is beastly and unworthy of a priest”.52 Such examples confronted the boys with
the fragility of their own future perspective as priests. They were asked “Would you
not like to think of what you are going to become?”53 The answer seemed to be given
in active ‘boyishness’ cultivated by the pupils from Saint Dominic’s, which comprised
passion, idealism and manly activism.

Considering the discourse on unwanted aspects of clerical life and the emphasis
on excessive drinking, it was no wonder the battle against alcohol was underlined
as an integral part of the proper mentality of a Saint Dominic’s boy. The school had
its own temperance society, the Kruisverbond.54 One of the active members was Rhe-
torica student Louis Ariaans. He asked his schoolmates to keep their promise to ab-
stain from alcohol like ‘real men’ by not drinking during the holidays. He also urged
other club members to participate actively in club work. But he sensed that most boys
were not willing to invest actively in the anti-alcohol movement and criticized their
attitude as passive and spineless.

Boys, keep your ardour and be as active as possible as a member of the Kruis-
verbond. So be animated and don’t be weak-willed as if you are a bunch of
stick-in-the-muds. That does not suit you as boys, but even less as young fiery
advocates of temperance.55

Passion, action and idealism were also preached in the first edition of the school
paper, as the editorial board urged all boys to employ their boyish enthusiasm to write
good and sound articles. A paper for boys that were equally striving for the same ideal
should be characterized by happiness and fiery boyish passion. “Our boys’ idealism
wants to move forward, we don’t want to stand still but we want to work as much as

51 Questionnaires completed by former pupils of Saint Dominic’s from the 1930s and 1940s. Van
Dongen, Joosten, Van den Idsert and Willems.
52 PAOD 6181: De Vlieger, 1929-1930, 117.
53 Ibid.
54 The Kruisverbond at Saint Dominic’s was part of the Dutch Catholic temperance society which
was established by Catholic priests at the end of the nineteenth century. Despite this clerical
support, not all priests adhered to the ideal of temperance. The society was mainly supported by
members of the Catholic upper middle classes. Men and women, boys and girls all had their own
society branch. The temperance movement can be considered an attempt to refine and civilize the
lower classes. Cf. Dols, De geesel der eeuw.
possible on our education right now, in order to be able in later years, to work with
greater energy."\(^5\)\(^6\) The boys presented themselves as idealists in their school paper,
combining all the youthful energy, religious fervour and idealism that they felt was
necessary to become priests. Their shared enthusiasm bound them together and even
seemed to bring them a bit closer to the seemingly unattainable priesthood. In the
students’ self-proclaimed idealism religious masculinity and youthful energy were
united.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This analysis of Catholic boys’ culture at Saint Dominic’s shows that masculinity was
a constitutive, though variable element of school life. By exploring three different
areas of the boys’ school culture, it has been shown which concepts of masculinity
came into play in the relatively closed Catholic environment of a minor seminary dur-
ing the interwar years.

The central objective of the education the Dominicans offered their students was
the building of the character of prospective members of their order. The intellectual
formation was therefore aimed not only at stimulating intellectual achievements, but
on concentrating on discipline and competition as well. The humanities, especially
Latin, were thought to help form the boys’ characters and to initiate them into the
clerical world of priesthood. Alongside this clerical form of masculinity, was a more
‘feminine’ and softer, nineteenth-century masculinity-ideal of the gentleman, made
visible in the emphasis the Dominicans put on cultural education, specifically stress-
ing classical music. This is not to say that elements of modern twentieth-century cul-
ture were completely banned by the school. Although placed in a critical Catholic
perspective, aspects of a virile interwar world outside the school were highly appeal-
ing to the boys, and formed an integral part of school life, thanks to books, papers
and excursions.

The college’s sports culture was also influenced by this virile masculinity that
characterized modern times. Although sports were not a core activity for all Do-
imican boys, they were nevertheless a popular element of school life. The fanatic
sports lovers among the college introduced a muscular masculinity into the school.
Those who did not or could not participate themselves could support the teams, and
thereby become part of the collective and strengthen the collective college identity.
For Dominicans this modern and virile element of school culture was not a threat,
since they successfully ‘framed’ it in a more religious perspective that underlined the
importance of teamwork and physical health instead of the need to win.

Apart from formal education and sports culture, this article has explored the
boys’ discourse on their identity and future state in life. Their self-image is reflected
in their school paper, which reveals that the students’ future as Dominican priests
plays an essential part. In their perceptions of the priesthood, the boys merge aspects
of clerical and monastic manliness, as their Dominicans educators at that time did.

\(^5\)\(^6\) PAOD 6181: *De Vlieger*, 1927, 5.
In their opinion, priests ought to embody the humility and purity of their religion in order to reach the high expectations of their status within the Catholic community. In addition to writing about their future as priests, the boys from the Rhetorica of Saint Dominic’s clearly cultivated their own boys’ culture, in which their religious vocation merged smoothly with an energetic and virile spirit of boyishness.
The Grail culture can be seen as an example of ambiguous female Catholicism that displayed some distinctively masculine traits. An Amsterdam section of Grail girls.  
[Nijmegen, KDC Archives of Grail Movement]