

MAPPING SPIRITUAL LIFE:
A SPATIAL APPROACH TO LATE MEDIEVAL SPIRITUALITY¹

*CARTOGRAFIANDO LA VIDA ESPIRITUAL:
UN ENFOQUE TERRITORIAL
DE LA ESPIRITUALIDAD BAJOMEDIEVAL*

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Abstract: This contribution investigates the use of the concepts of place, space and (restriction) of movement in the spiritual education of religious women living in Third Order communities in the diocese of Utrecht (Netherlands). Through the study of institutional sources, in particular the Third Order statutes, and literary texts written and used in Third Order convents (the *Informieringheboek* by Jan de Wael and the *Jhesus Collacien*), the article will discuss the allegedly binary oppositions “inside-outside” and “safety of the convent-dangers of the world” that pervade the text of the statutes and form the backbone of the spiritual instruction of cloistered women.

Keywords: space; place; Third Order of Saint Francis; religious education; enclosure; diocese of Utrecht; speech acts; meditation.

Resumen: Esta contribución tiene como objetivo investigar el uso de los conceptos de lugar, espacio y (restricción de) movimiento en la educación espiritual de las mujeres religiosas que vivían en comunidades de la Tercera Orden en la diócesis de Utrecht (Países Bajos). A través del estudio de las fuentes institucionales, en particular los estatutos de la Orden Tercera, y los textos literarios escritos y utilizados en los conventos de la Tercera Orden (la *Informieringheboek* de Jan de Wael y el *Jhesus Collacien*), el artículo discutirá las supuestas oposiciones binarias “dentro/fuera” y “seguridad de los conventos/peligros del mundo” que impregnan el texto de los estatutos y forman la columna vertebral de la enseñanza espiritual de las mujeres enclaustradas.

Palabras clave: espacio; lugar; Tercera Orden de San Francisco; educación religiosa; diócesis de Utrecht; actos de habla; meditación.

¹ Abbreviations used: Haarlem, City Library = Haarlem, SB.

SUMMARY

1. The Third Order of Saint Francis in the Diocese of Utrecht: rules and statutes.– 2. Space and place in the Third Order statutes.– 3. Confinement and spiritual freedom.– 4. Conclusions.– 5. Bibliography.

If someone is asked to leave the convent on a worldly business, he or she will not too easily have his or her meals outside the refectory and by no means sleep outside, with the exception of lodgings owned by religious people; and they will be very careful not to take any news from the outside world to their home convent that are not useful or functional for others to know. And when they lodge somewhere else, they will not cause any trouble nor diffuse any rumour against the *minister* that could easily spread around. The decision to send a brother and in particular a sister on a mission outside the convent should not be too carelessly taken, with the exception of those who have a specific task².

This chapter from the Middle Dutch translation of the statutes for Franciscan Tertiaries in the diocese of Utrecht makes one point absolutely clear: it is essential to keep the world with all its temptations, news and rumours outside the safe space of the convent. Leaving the safe harbour of the cloistered walls can be dangerous, and contamination between the convent and the outside world must be reduced to a minimum and if possible avoided altogether, particularly in the case of women. The binary oppositions “inside-outside” and “safety of the convent-dangers of the world” pervade the text of the statutes and form the backbone of the spiritual instruction of female tertiaries and of cloistered religious women in general, who were from the very beginning of their spiritual path trained in distancing themselves from their worldly lives, families and goods in order to prepare themselves for the meeting with the heavenly groom. This stress on the limitation of movement outside the walls of religious houses does not, however, entail a denial of the

² “So wie ghesendt wort ende buten te doen heeft, en sal niet lichtelic buten sijnre herberghe eten ende in gheenre wijs daer buten slapen, het en ware in gheesteliker lude huse; ende sullen daer ernstelic toesien dat si gheen nuwe maren vander werlt thuus brenghen die gheen nutte noch gheen noot en sijn te weten; ende sien daer toe dat si inden husen daer si comen, ghenen onvrede en maken noch en spreken daer murmuringhe teghen den minister of onder den personen comen mochte. Ende niet lichtelike en selmen broeders ende sonderlinghe susteren alleen wt seynden, wtghenomen die ambocht hebben”. The text of the article “On those who are asked to leave the convent” [Van den genen die uutghesent worden] is cited from Van Engen, *De derde orde van Sint-Franciscus*, p. 416. For a complete Middle Dutch translation of the Rule for Franciscan Tertiaries in the diocese of Utrecht, see also D. de Kok, *Bijdragen*, pp. 103-116 and M. Vandecasteele, *Twee vijftiende-eeuwse redacties*, pp. 240-268.

importance of spatiality and of the relevance of displacement and movement in the religious experience of these women. On the contrary, the denial of freedom of physical movement in the outside world (as consequence of enclosure) involved the development of an enhanced sensitivity for spatial relations within the convent building and a redefinition of movement in terms of spiritual and mystical experience.

After a short introduction to the religious landscape in the late medieval Netherlands and in particular to the monastic history of Third Order communities in the diocese of Utrecht, this contribution will first present an analysis of the Third Order statutes in terms of space and place in order to more carefully reconstruct the spatiality of female tertiaries. In the second instance, the contribution will investigate the use of the concept of place, space and (restriction of) movement in the spiritual education of sisters through the analysis of two treatises written and used in female tertiary convents: the *Informieringheboeck* ("Manual for the Young Ones", 1510-1512), a handbook for the spiritual education of novices, and the so-called *Jhesus Collacien* ("Jesus collations" or "Jesus sermons", around 1450), a Middle-Dutch sermon cycle³.

Megan Cassidy-Welch has recently emphasized the importance of space and place for medieval research. In her overview, she stresses how research into medieval space and place arose with Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1958)⁴. Starting from the assumption that space has much more than a strictly geographical meaning, the sociologist Lefebvre introduced a threefold taxonomy of space: social space, physical space and mental space. While in his view physical space was *empty or void* and mental space *entirely abstract*, social space was *produced by various economic and political means*⁵. Studies in the last forty years have tried to further define the very complex concept of space. Space *may be understood as a means by which locate themselves in their immediate and eschatological surrounds*. It is moreover continually demarcated *by action, by movement, by use* and is *dynamic and fluid, and not always demarcated by fixed material or imagined*

³ For a first introduction to the *Informieringheboeck*, see S. Corbellini, *The Manual for the Young Ones* and S. Corbellini, *Mannenregels voor een vrouwenwereld*. On the *Jhesus Collacien*; T. Mertens, *Private Revelation and Public Relevance* and idem, *Discourse and Spirituality in the Jhesus collacien*.

⁴ M. Cassidy-Welch, *Space and Place in Medieval Contexts*, p. 1.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 1. See also H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, pp. 1-66. For a recent descriptions of the theoretical framework of "space", see D. Massey, *For Space*; S. Rau, *Räume*; I. Baumgärtner, P.-G. Klumbies, F. Sick (eds), *Raumkonzepte* and N. Staubach, V. Johanterwage, *Außen und Innen: Räume und ihre Symbolik im Mittelalter*. For a specific discussion of "sacred space", see S. Hamilton, A. Spicer, *Defining the Holy*, pp. 1-23.

*boundaries*⁶. The continuous connection of space, action, movement and use permits the transformation into “place”. As Doreen Massy has affirmed, places are created by human interaction and the geographical space where people are living, travelling and imagining. Places are *practised spaces*, where intersections, articulations and relations between the human and the *wider power-geometrics of space* can be reconstructed⁷. The connection and the intersection between the human and the space/place in terms of power are of course particularly relevant for the analysis of cloistered life: the maps of spiritual life are designed by rules and statutes, by hierarchical relations within the community and by a voluntary act of separation from the world. In the profession-formula attesting the start of an enclosed life, the sister herself expresses her desire to renounce the world and submit herself to the restrictions of rules and statutes. In fact, she starts building the walls her own enclosure⁸.

1. THE THIRD ORDER OF SAINT FRANCIS IN THE DIOCESE OF UTRECHT: RULES AND STATUTES

As recent research has very convincingly demonstrated, the tertiaries in the Northern Dutch area (the diocese of Utrecht) belonged –despite their Franciscan denomination– to the *Devotio Moderna* movement⁹. The vast majority of the communities were gathered in the so-called Chapter of Utrecht that served as an “umbrella organization” and was responsible for the drawing of the statutes, the organisation of annual chapter general and the visitation of communities. The Chapter was officially set up in 1399 in the Northern Dutch town of Amersfoort, during a meeting that was presided by a number of disciples of Geert Grote from towns in the Northern Low Countries, including Willem Hendriksz of Amersfoort, Wermhoud of Boskoop of Utrecht, Gijbert Dou of

⁶ M. Cassidy-Welch, *Space and Place in Medieval Context*, pp. 1-2.

⁷ *Ibidem*; Massey, *For Space*, p. 130. The term “practised space” is used by M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 117.

⁸ One aspect that will not be studied in this contribution is the relationship between enclosure and monastic architecture or the “architecture of female monasticism”. A pioneering study on this subject is J. Hamburger, *Art, Enclosure and the Cura Monialium*. See also C. Jäggi, U. Lobbedey, *The Architecture of Female Monasticism*.

⁹ The history of the Third Order of St Francis in the diocese of Utrecht has been reconstructed in a research project at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, led by prof. dr. Koen Goudriaan. Key publications on this subject have been published by the members of the research project in a thematic issue of “Ons Geestelijk Erf” 74/1-2 (2000) and “Trajecta” 14/2 (2005). See also H. Van Engen, *De derde orde van Sint-Franciscus*. J. Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of Common Life*, p.121-125 gives a brief overview of the history of the Third Order.

Amsterdam, Hugo Goudmit of Haarlem, Pouwels Albertsz. of Medemblik and Herman of Gouda¹⁰. Five months after the Amersfoort meeting, Pope Boniface conceded the first privileges to the newborn gathering of *the beloved sons and daughters in Christ belonging to the order of St Francis called of Penance residing in the towns and diocese of Utrecht*. They were allowed to build their own chapels, and to choose a confessor and a supervisor (*visitator*). The organisation was in 1401 empowered by the papal bull *His quae divini cultus augmentum*. After the setting up of the institutional structure, the number of communities adhering to the Chapter grew exponentially: in 1424, the congregation consisted of 40 to 50 convents, in 1439 seventy and by 1450 more than a hundred communities were accepted as members of the Chapter¹¹. In spite of the exclusive presence in the sources of the names of founding fathers, the Third Order movement was predominantly a female religious movement: only 14 of the communities were male convents.

The “double identity” of the movement becomes clear from the choice of normative texts that guided the institutional and daily life of the communities. The guiding principle was the so-called Third Rule of St Francis, approved by Pope Nicholas V in his bull *Supra Montem* (1289). In addition to this rule, the Chapter drew up statutes (completed around 1401-1402). As Van Engen has convincingly demonstrated, the statutes were to a large extent based on the *consuetudines* of the male communities of the Modern Devout Windesheim Chapter: the structure of the Windesheim *consuetudines* was adopted and several passages were copied verbatim. The Latin text of statutes was also translated into Middle Dutch within a few years, probably for the use of female communities¹². These statutes make the structure of the Chapter clearer: the convent superiors were to choose a new Minister General every four years. All members of the Order were supposed to pay deference to Minister General but he, in turn, had to be a model for the brothers and sisters and take no important decisions without the agreement of the convent’s elders. The minister of each convent was free to appoint a *procurator*, an infirmarian (*dengene die de ziecken bewaert*), a clothing attendant (*dengene die de cleederen bewaert*) and a librarian (*bewaerder der boecken*)¹³.

A fundamental step in the history of the Chapter of Utrecht was the development of a stronger monastic orientation and the start of a process of claustralization, which was completed in the second half of the fifteenth

¹⁰ J. Kemperink, *Johan van Ingen: Geschiedenissen*, pp. 29-30.

¹¹ D. de Kok, *Bijdragen*, pp. 169-170; H. Van Engen, *De derde orde van Sint-Franciscus*, pp. 159-166 and p. 429.

¹² H. Van Engen, *De derde orde van Sint-Franciscus*, pp. 21-38 and p. 427.

¹³ D. de Kok, *Bijdragen*, pp. 103-116.

century. In the first years, new members of the Order were only asked to promise obedience to the Chapter's statutes, to take a solemn vow of chastity and to renounce property. The importance of the individual promise of obedience to the statutes is paramount. As Julie Ann Smith has recently affirmed:

The authority of a monastic rule only exists because those who commit to it do so voluntarily and perceive it as spiritually efficacious. The *institutiones* of a community become a participant in the performance of the *religio* of each nun [or sister] and in the complex of relations that shape nunnery, spaces and behaviours¹⁴.

By the late 1480s, the three monastic vows had been made obligatory. The strengthening of the monastic orientation also implied the introduction of the *clausura* for female communities. While in the beginning of the Third Order movement enclosed communities were an exception, the number grew steadily in the fifteenth century and around 1430 enclosure had become a common practice for at least half of the communities of tertiaries in the diocese of Utrecht¹⁵. This passage from open to enclosed communities was of course a major step in the institutional development of the tertiaries' communities, but it also had a major impact on the spiritual and religious life of the community and of each individual sister as:

Enclosure consisted not simply of the imposition, and protection, of walls, doors and locks. It also required the vigilant shaping and monitoring of behaviours, and, most importantly, the development of state of mind that enabled the individual nun to ensure her own personal enclosure. Thus, enclosure is not simply statutory; it is an on-going exchange between *institutiones*, community, and the individual nun¹⁶.

¹⁴ J.A. Smith, *Clausura Districta*, p. 18. In her discussion Smith refers to T. Asad, *On Discipline and Humility*, pp. 125-167. It is of course true that in the medieval situation a monastic rule could be enforced, even by secular powers, but when taking into consideration the individuality and the spirituality of each member of the community, the individual and personal commitment plays a fundamental role.

¹⁵ H. Van Engen, *De derde orde van Sint-Franciscus*, pp. 244-248 and pp. 430-431. The introduction of enclosure in female communities was accompanied by the translation of specific texts, geared at explaining to the sisters the relevance and the importance of the *clausura*. On this subject, see S. Corbellini, *Een oude spiegel voor nieuwe maagden*.

¹⁶ J.A. Smith, *Clausura Districta*, p. 13.

2. SPACE AND PLACE IN THE THIRD ORDER STATUTES

Following this line of thought –that is the analytical transformation from institutional approach to the reconstruction of the learning of behaviours and states of mind leading to the *praxis* of spiritual and religious life– the Third Order statutes can be studied in terms of space and place. In fact, *a monastic rule assigns each space within a monastic community with its particular values and establishes it as a place for the performance of particular activities*. The study of spatial relations and performances is as such strictly related to the reconstruction of the “lived experience” of a cloistered community¹⁷.

The statutes link specific functions and activities in the community to definite spaces and places within the building in which the sisters are living. Healthy sisters are separated from the sick and the dying who are looked after by a sister taking care of their physical and spiritual health. Cloths and garments are kept by a *vestiaria*, who has not only the task of looking after woollen and linen fabrics, dresses and fur coats, but also of preventing other sisters from developing *an excessive attention* towards clothing. The convents also had a specific reading room, or at least a room where books were kept, and a sister librarian, responsible for writing ownership marks in each volume and for drawing up a book list. No books could be borrowed outside the convent’s walls without the permission of the *mater* or the minister, who were responsible for the correction of any mistake¹⁸. Next to these places dedicated to specific activities and which were accessible only for the fulfilment of precise functions and needs of the community, the statutes mention at least three other places dedicated to specific communal activities: the chapel, the refectory and the dormitory.

Despite the fact that these places were designed for the performance of communal activities, enhancing the sense and the spirit of a shared spiritual and religious choice, the statutes stress that the sisters had to refrain from speaking and keep the *silentium* while entering, living and performing in these spaces. A specific rubric is dedicated to the issue of keeping silence: during the praying of the Hours, meals and in the dormitory sisters had to remain silent. According to the statutes, silence has several pragmatic functions: to help concentration during prayer and attention to the reading of texts at the table, but also to grant a small portion of privacy in the sleeping area. Breaking the silence during meals without the permission of the *ministra* (the female leader of the community) could be punished with the compulsory reading of

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁸ D. de Kok, *Bijdragen*, pp. 107–108. On the use of books in communities of tertiaries, see S. Corbellini, *The Manual for the Young Ones*.

prayer texts. Generally speaking, the action of speaking had to be limited to a minimum of short questions and answers and to the fulfilment of essential communication¹⁹.

The compulsory refraining from talking to other members of the community is even one of the regulations described in the rubric on the communal confession, or the chapter of faults (*van den capittel om scult te houden*). The communal confession was organised on Friday evenings, every two weeks or every month according to the needs of the community: even in the case of this pragmatic use of speech as an essential step in the process of repentance and penitence, speech had to be controlled and monitored. All members, from the oldest to the youngest, had to present their faults, in particular violations of the rule, to the community and then to ask the other members to lay blame on them for the faults. During this reciprocal process of finding and admitting faults, no secrets could be revealed and reproaches could only be made out of a feeling of true love and reciprocal help. It was strenuously forbidden to talk during the chapter of faults and everyone was bound to keep the contents of the chapter secret from outsiders²⁰. In this process of openness and privacy, the sense of community was strongly reinforced: the place designated for the chapter and the practice of the sharing the weaknesses leading to faults permitted an enhanced level of communication through the spoken word that was not accepted in other spaces and places.

Inappropriate contact with outsiders and the outside world was probably one of the gravest faults, which could even lead to expulsion from the community. Generally speaking, contact with the “world” had to be limited: leaving the community, entry by outsiders, and speech between sisters and outsiders were all considered breaches of the statutes and of the enclosure and were thus to be punished if they happened without the explicit approval of the superior or for a compelling need. Eating and sleeping outside the convent without any evident good reason, especially at night, could be punished with ejection. Conversation and contact with outsiders at the parlour (*spreekhuijs*) were also restricted. The general chapter decided in 1437, for example, that it was forbidden for sisters to *talk to outsiders at the window on*

¹⁹ D. de Kok, *Bijdragen*, pp. 112-113. The importance of silence in the process of achieving a truly spiritual life is described by the prioress of Windesheim monastery Diepenveen in her *A Way of Life for the Sisters*: “if you wish to achieve a truly spiritual life, you must refrain from too much talking, especially during manual labour, because work is a kind of medicinal plaster for wounds of our sins. If we are concerned to salve our wounds and apply medicine, we must be very careful lest through too much talking we instead add wound to wound”. On Salome Sticken, see J. Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna*, p. 182 and W. Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women*, pp. 113-119. On silence, see also J.A. Smith, *Clausura Districta*.

²⁰ D. de Kok, *Bijdragen*, pp. 111-112.

feast days, unless the visitor had travelled a long way (“Item non loquentur sorores festivis diebus cum extraneis nisi a longe venerint, ad fenestras”). In 1495 the Chapter again discussed the issue and decided that it was strongly forbidden to sisters, either enclosed or non-enclosed, to eat together with outsiders at the window or in the guest room. Breaking the rules could be punished by the prohibition of having any kind of contact with the outside world through the window. The question was discussed once more in 1504, when the Chapter decided that the convents had to build iron latticework in order to minimize the openness of the *fenestra* and to put a structural barrier between the sisters and outsiders²¹.

The control and monitoring of speech and the request to keep silent during the daily routine also raise questions about private and public space in communities of tertiaries. The statutes describe a world in which “private space” does not exist as such and in which movement is limited and access to and use of space is regulated by rules and conventions. On the other hand, the limitation of contact with other members of the community and with outsiders conveyed the feeling of a form of “private space” within the community into which the sisters could withdraw without being disturbed by their fellow sisters or outsiders. The stress on the importance of silence to enhance devotional feelings and to help in a better performance of daily prayer makes clear how the enclosure and confinement propagated by the statutes and the decisions of the Chapter of Utrecht could be assimilated into the community and be transformed into a “personal enclosure”: the acceptance of a near-total separation from the outside world, but also of a voluntary isolation—at least verbal and auditive—from the other members of the community in order to create a spiritual relationship with God. Withdrawn from the outer temporal world, withdrawn from their own community and withdrawn from themselves, they could experience a fulfilled and privileged spiritual life. The outer voice was silenced to give space to the inner experience of community, which could transcend the convent’s walls²².

3. CONFINEMENT AND SPIRITUAL FREEDOM

As Julie Ann Smith has reconstructed for thirteenth-century Dominican nuns, the purpose of the confinement of female religious described

²¹ D. de Kok, *Bijdragen*, pp. 114-115, 121, 141, 145.

²² The expression “personal enclosure” is used by J.A. Smith, *Clausura Districta*, p. 35. For a discussion of private and public space in female religious communities, see E. de Parmentier, *Experiencing Space*.

in the Third Order statutes could also be interpreted as a way to *facilitate the nun's spiritual, transcendent journey to know the divine*²³.

This transformation of physical confinement into spiritual freedom is indeed a central issue in one of the most relevant sources for the reconstruction of spiritual education and life in communities of female tertiaries in the diocese of Utrecht, the *Informieringheboeck der jongen* ("Manual for the Young Ones", 1510-1512), written by Jan de Wael, the confessor of the convent of St Agnes in Amersfoort. As Jan de Wael writes in the prologue to his masterpiece, the *Informieringheboeck* is a treatise in which the novices and the young professed sisters were *instructed and informed about how to outline a program and plan for their spiritual exercises*²⁴. The instruction and information needed by the sisters is contained in 40 chapters in which the spiritual guidelines are described and analysed through the use of citations, *exempla* and descriptions of daily convent life: the role of the *meysterse* (the mistress, the head of the educational system of the community); the *spreecsusteren* and *informiersterschen* (the mentors who were primarily responsible for the education of postulants and novices); the spiritual exercises; the importance of books and reading; and a description of the difficulty of climbing of the *mount of contemplation* (drawing from works of Jean Gerson, Bonaventura and Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen). But first and foremost, he concentrates on the choice for an enclosed life and on the importance of cloistral virtues²⁵. He dedicates one complete chapter to the importance of enclosure (chapter 37: *A description of enclosure and how some people through harmful and scandalous contact with the outside world have been lost. With a number of examples, citations and comparisons (...) With praise and consolations given by enclosure*)²⁶, in which he explains how enclosure is the best way to counter the dangers of the world and how enclosure confers spiritual freedom to the sisters, granting them the possibility to *think, speak and act in the praise of God in a lighter and unrestricted way, without anxieties and concerns*²⁷.

²³ J.A. Smith, *Clausura Districta*, passim; M. Cassidy-Welch, *Space and Place in Medieval Contexts*, p. 9.

²⁴ S. Corbellini, *The Manual for the Young Ones*, p. 389. The autograph manuscript of the *Informieringheboeck* is kept in Haarlem, SB, 187 D 11.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 395. See also S. Corbellini, *Een oude spiegel voor nieuwe maagden*, pp. 188-190.

²⁶ Haarlem, SB 187 D 11, f. 105v: "Ende wat cloesterlic beslutinghe is. Ende hoe datter menigen menschen ouermits schadelicke of schandelicke wtgangen sijn verloren. Mit veel exempelen, schriften ende ghelickenissen (...) Met die werdich lof ende geprijs toeherdynge ende troestingen des ewygen slots".

²⁷ Haarlem, SB 187 D 11, f. 106v: "te beth lichtelicker, vrylicker ende onbecommerlicker pensen, spreken ende doen die dinghen die totter eren gods toe horen".

Reflection on enclosure and on the dangers of the world functions moreover as a connecting thread in his manual. Jan de Wael dedicates, for example, chapter 13 to the *causes for young sisters to leave the frivolities and the trivialities of the world*²⁸ and chapter 14 to the *contempt of the world and good reasons why the world should be contemplated*²⁹. He compares the world to shadows, hay, flowers, clouds and vapour, which are dissipating, dissolving, losing their beauty and their colours. Even a great reputation in the world is temporary and provisional, as the painted portraits of famous and worthy men and women illustrate: the great kings and queens, the warriors, the rich and mighty and even the great Athenian philosophers Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy and Socrates had to leave this world and their renown is just a shadow of their presence in the world³⁰.

It is, however, clear that taking distance from worldly preoccupations does not entail the development of passivity and inactivity. The fulfilment of household chores and working tasks –moving through the enclosed space in which they are living– is valuable, as it can be translated into a devotional activity. Copying, binding and illuminating books; brewing beer, cooking and baking; and working in the infirmary, in the stable and the guestrooms, when performed as tokens as God's love, can be interpreted as spiritual exercises³¹.

After this description of the vanities and of the dangers of the world and his pressing request to accept physical confinement as the only solution to the mortality of the world, Jan de Wael proposes an alternative to the sisters of the community. They are invited to start a spiritual journey along the *seven paths leading to the heavenly landscapes of the Holy Fathers and to the eternal bliss*. The seven paths, all aspects of an enclosed monastic life, are described thoroughly as they can transform into steps in the formation of the religious self, following the example of Jesus and his journey from earth to the heavenly father. By starting their *imitatio Christi*, the sisters are asked to move away from the temptations of the world and to find shelter in the Celestial Realm :

²⁸ Haarlem, SB 187 D 11, f. 26v: "Die saken ende oersaken waer om die jonge mensche gaerne ende lichtelic die ydel werlt laten ende ouergeuen sullen"

²⁹ Haarlem, SB 187 D 11, f. 29r: "Van versmadenisse der werlt mit die saken ende oersaken waer om datmense soe versmaden sel".

³⁰ Haarlem, SB 187 D 11, ff. 27v-32v. The importance of this process of "visualisation" is paramount in the reconstruction of process of generation of theological contents. On this theme, see J.F. Hamburger, A.-M. Bouché (ed.), *The Mind's Eye*.

³¹ Haarlem, SB 187 D 11, f. 42v. This combination of daily activities, meditation and prayer is also described by Salome Sticken. See J. Van Engen, *Modern Devotion*, pp. 176-186.

1. Holy Baptism (meditating on Christ's baptism);
2. Indulgences (meditating on Christ's Passion);
3. Compunction and awareness of sins (meditating on the episode of the thief on the cross);
4. Prayer, in particular in the presence of the Holy Sacrament (meditating on the Eucharist);
5. Patience in tribulation;
6. Spiritual martyrdom;
7. A full-fledged religious life in a monastic community regulated by rules and statutes ³².

Spiritual travels could also have a worldlier destination as Jan de Wael explains in his treatise. Bound to and enclosed in their convent, the sisters are invited to leave their daily routine and to travel virtually to Rome and Jerusalem in order to see the Holy Land, visit the churches of Rome and earn indulgences³³. Describing spiritual activities that can be performed on feast days after morning services, he proposes to the sisters that they start with a triple pilgrimage and visit first the seven principle churches of Rome (St Peter's Basilica, Basilica of St John Lateran, Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls, Santa Maria Maggiore, St Laurence Outside the Walls, Santa Croce in Gerusalemme and St Sebastian Outside the Walls), some places in the Holy Land as well as the Heavenly Jerusalem. These pilgrimages could, in the description of Jan de Wael, be started by looking at one of the altars, at chests, statues and paintings in the convent church, which could trigger meditation and inspire the virtual pilgrimage.

As Kathryn Rudy has stated in a recent monograph on virtual pilgrimage, these practices *rely on a considerable amount of visualization on the part of the votary, who transports herself virtually to the sites of the Passion or to the Seven Principle Churches of Rome*³⁴. In her overview of texts, books and works of art linked to the performance of virtual pilgrimages in the Netherlands, she describes to what extent stationary pilgrimage devotions were connected to a specific female spirituality based on enclosure and on the fear of corruption through corporeal travels. One of her most striking examples refers to a female scribe from a tertiary

³² Haarlem, SB 187 D 11, ff. 32v-36r.

³³ Haarlem, SB 187 D 11, f. Vr. Jan de Wael has also written a specific treatise on indulgences and on religious practices linked to the earning of indulgences. The treatise has been copied in the Memorial Register of the Amersfoort St Agnes convent (The Hague, KB, 75 H 18, ff. 83r-89r).

³⁴ K. Rudy, *Virtual Pilgrimages*, p. 257. For a recent study of women and pilgrimage, see A.E. Bailey, *Modern and Medieval Approaches to Pilgrimage, Gender and Sacred Space*.

convent, describing in a rubric meant to accompany a prayer to the Virgin the supporting argument for choosing to travel virtually to the Holy Land. Indeed starting a virtual pilgrimage without leaving the enclosure could be particularly rewarding:

There was a recluse who had a great wish to go to Rome in the golden year. She deserved the special grace that an angel should appear to her to say that she should stay in the enclosure and read the following prayer and, as often as we would read it, she should earn an indulgence of 30,000 years. But whoever reads it for 200 days in a row will earn a plenary indulgence, and that totals many more than 30,000 years for each trip³⁵!

Although no specific information is preserved about the actual presence of works of art and liturgical furniture in the St Agnes convent, it is possible that the church had at least a small number of religious objects that could somehow help to ignite the virtual travel and the meditation. The multiplicity of devotional objects named by Jan de Wael could also suggest the possibility of performing a virtual pilgrimage by moving through the conventual space, transforming the convent itself into Rome or Jerusalem. This could have been especially true during Jan de Wael's activity as a confessor. In fact, he proudly stresses in his treatise that his community has gained indulgences from several bishops and auxiliary bishops, in particular those connected to the prayers to the *wounds of Christ*. The importance of gaining indulgences is reiterated in several chapters of the *Informieringhe* and described as

the best and easiest medicine in the Holy Church, by which the believers can help themselves and can repent for their sins and faults. Thanks to faith, hope and the love of Jesus Christ who has given the keys of the Holy Church to the believers (...) Indulgences find their origin in the treasures of the Passion and in the merits of our beloved Lord, his mother, all male and female saints and in our mother the Holy Church³⁶.

³⁵ K. Rudy, *Virtual Pilgrimages*, pp. 124 and 415 (translation of the text).

³⁶ Haarlem, SB 187 D 11, ff. Vv: "Want huden te dage en wert gheen lichter medicine geuonden in die heylighe kerck mit welcken een mensche sich selue helpen mach in manyeren van voldoninge voer sijn sonden van ghesetter penitencien dan nae deser wysen van den afflate soe te wynnen en te vercrighen. Ende dat in vast gheloue, hope ende mynne ons heren ihesu Christi die welcken alsulcke macht der sloetelen vander heiligher kerke heeft den mensche ghegeuen" and 33r: "Want sy hebben haer rechte oerspronghen wtten schatte der passien ende verdiensten ons lyefs heren, sijnre weerdige moeder maria, alle suncte ende sanctynnen ende onse moeder der heyliger kerken".

The space in which the sisters were living –the convent building itself– could also be transformed into a starting point for the meditation. In chapter 18 of his treatise, Jan de Wael introduces the concept of *cloister of the soul* as a counterpart of the monastic architecture in which they were living. Inspired by the words of Hugo of Fouillooy, cited explicitly as author of *De Claustro Animae*, Jan explains to his sisters how architectural structures should be interpreted as spiritual building blocks³⁷. In Jan de Wael's interpretation, the *cloister of the soul* ("cloester der zielen") can be decoded as an instruction for the contemplation that he describes as a process that allows a person to take distance from all worldly, physical and external preoccupations and worries and his or her own uncertainties and failures and to be enclosed in the cloister of the soul where he or she can fully meditate and concentrate *on an all pervading joy and jubilation of the heart*³⁸.

Every room in the convent building can be the starting point for a figurative meditation related to the life of the sisters: the convent walls represent the solemn vows and the profession; the doors stand for silence; the church or the chapel are places of prayer and the refectory represent the holy and pure thoughts that are feeding the souls of religious women. The dormitory is peace of conscience, the chapter house signifies penitence and repentance of sins and faults and gives way to the room where the confession takes places and to the laundry where the soul is washed clean. The stable can aid in meditation on the sinfulness of an unruly life and the kitchen, bakery, brewery and the infirmary can help in remembering the importance of obedience and duties. Once the sister has visited all the spaces and performed the required spiritual activities, she will be admitted to the heavenly convent of eternal bliss, where Jesus is the prior and Mary prioress, and the angels and the saints are the brothers and the sisters. Jan de Wael stimulates an active approach to this

³⁷ In several chapters in the *Informieringheboeck*, Jan de Wael summarizes books and treatises that in his view were fundamental for the spiritual education of sisters. In his chapter 33, which deals with *the ways of contemplation*, he analyses and summarizes for example five manuals that were used in the community as manuals to learn *how to climb the mountain of contemplation and to wander to the mountain's top*: a Middle Dutch translation of Gerson's *Montagne de Contemplation*, Bonaventura's *Breviloquium*, Gerard Zerbolt of Zutphen's *De Spiritualibus Ascensionibus*, William of Auvergne's *Rhetorica Divina* and sermons by Bernard of Clairvaux. See also, S. Corbellini, *The Manual for the Young Ones*, pp. 403-405. About Hugo of Fouillooy, see F. Negri, *Il De Claustro Animae*, C. Whitehead, *Making a Cloister of the Soul* and J. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, pp. 157-158.

³⁸ Haarlem, SB 187 D 11, f. 48v: "Want dat menschelike ghemoede wert dan verscheden ende ofghetogen van alle wtwendige werlicke ende vleeschlicke sturicheit, becommernisse ende sorchuondic eit mit alle die wtdwalende synnen of ghedachten ende toegheneygelicheit der natuerlicke crancke broescheit Ende werde dan ghesloten int cloester der zielen Daer in pensende ende sich vlytelic alleen becommere mit eenrehande vrye ghenueclike iubilacien des herten".

figurative meditation; the sisters are expected to mentally wander through the convent buildings and to renew their vows and their obedience to the rule and the statutes. It is striking how the adaptation of Hugo of Fouillooy's treatise on the situation of the sisters in a tertiary convent is intimately connected with the description of spaces, places and the performances described in the statutes designed by the Chapter of Utrecht. This is particularly clear in the description of the convent doors, the openings to the outer world: they should be kept shut at all times and they should be connected with the virtue of silence, as through the doors news, fictional stories and preoccupations could invade and disturb the quietness of the enclosed community³⁹.

The use of daily objects and the references to the spatiality of the convent as starting points for meditation is also a feature of the Middle Dutch Sermon cycle *Jhesus Collacien*, also called the *Leliestock* ("branch of lilies"). This cycle of 72 sermons are delivered by Jesus and the Holy Ghost to a sister, a Franciscan tertiary, during the Lenten period. The sister receives from Jesus the task to write down the sermons and to communicate them to her fellow sisters⁴⁰. On the second day of Lent, the sermon refers the climbing of the twelve stairs to the dormitory as symbolic reference to the meditation on twelve sheddings of Christ's blood. Each stair evokes one of the episodes from the Passion of Christ:

Listen my father's daughters and pay attention. I (Jesus) will teach you how you will climb twelve golden stairs to reach the dormitory. The first stair that you will climb in your thoughts is my first blood shedding during my circumcision. The second stair is my sweating of blood during the night in the Garden of Olives. The third stair is my bleeding when I was beaten in Anna's house (...) The twelfth stair is the shedding of my precious blood from my side. Now you have reached the highest golden stair. Take now the key of your good intentions and open the dormitory of your clear conscience and go there to take a rest, because the sweet meditation of my blood has purged you from your daily sins⁴¹.

³⁹ Haarlem, SB 187 D 11, ff. 48v-50r.

⁴⁰ T. Mertens, *Private Revelation and Public Relevance*, p. 34. The text has been edited by A.M. Baaij, *Jhesus Collacien*.

⁴¹ A.M. Baaij, *Jhesus Collacien*, pp. 133-134: "Hoert dochteren mijns vaders ende merct Ic sal u leren hoe ghi des avonts selt op clymmen twalef gulden trappen. Op dat ghi comen moghet opten dormter der rusten. Die eerste gulden trap die ghi op clymmen selt mitter gedachten Dat is die eerste uutstoringe mijns edelen bloets inder besnydenisse. Die andere gulden trap. is die uutstoringe mijns edelen bloets ende zweets. dat ic uutstorte inder nacht opten berch van oliveten. Die derde trap is die uutstoringe des bloets ten noese ende ten monde. doe ic ontfenc den herden kynnenbacslach in annas huus (...) Die xij gulden trap is die uutstoringe mÿns duerbare bloets uut mijnre zijden. O susteren nu sidi gecomen opter overster trap des gulden graets. Neemt nu den slotel eens goeden opset. Ende ontsluit den dormter. uwer

The process of meditation can also be instigated by objects in the refectory: the cross on one of the tables refers to the Passion of Christ and the voice of the reading sister is pouring sweet wine, pressed by the holy fathers from grapes of godly wisdom. Once in the privacy of their sleeping room, the sisters are invited to *get drunk* of the sweetness of the honey and the wine⁴². Books can also spark the process of meditation: prayer books themselves are the pierced hands of Christ, the golden letters his wounds and the rubrics his blood⁴³. Even the preparing of food could give way to a reflection on God's love. The sisters are asked to prepare three recipes every evening in their minds: honey made of the bees of heavenly thoughts; braised hare, in order to symbolically kill the temptations of the flesh; and spiced wine, made of grapes of all virtues⁴⁴.

Daily tasks are thus transformed into spiritual exercises and the space of daily work and activity can be converted into places of meditation and spiritual exercise, inspired by a principle which permits, following the principle of the Modern Devotion, the combining of manual labour with spiritual exercise⁴⁵. The importance of daily work is clearly described in the statutes where in the rubric about *Eating and dispensation from eating* it is stated that *given the fact that the members of this order have to earn their own living by working, the visitor will judge them mildly in matters concerning fasting and the severity of the rule*⁴⁶.

As in the case of the *Informieringheboeck*, the central idea of enclosure and of spiritual freedom is discussed at length in the sermons of the *Jhesus Collacien*. It cannot be by mere chance that the first sermon describes the relationship between Jesus, who has chosen to leave heaven and descend to earth, and his brides, who have chosen to leave the world in order to ascend to eternal life. Moved by the great love that has convinced the sisters to *refrain from wandering on worldly trails and to be enclosed in a convent* ("want ghi om mijnre mynnen wille ghelaten hebt die straten der werlt te bewanderen ende in een cloester besloten sijn"), Jesus grants

gevreder consciencien ende gaet in rusten". The image of the stairs is used also in the following meditation: Jesus uses a silver stair to climb down in the hearts of the sisters; see A. M. Baaij, *Jhesus Collacien*, pp. 135-137.

⁴² A.M. Baaij, *Jhesus Collacien*, pp. 224-225.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, pp. 206-207.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 209-210.

⁴⁵ W. Scheepsma, *Medieval Religious Women*, pp. 62-65.

⁴⁶ D. de Kok, *Bijdragen*, p. 113: "Ende want dije personen deser oordens ghemeenlick haer nootdruft met haren arbeit plegen te winnen, so sal dije visiteerder, off dije hij sijn macht bevolen heeft, in allen abstinencien, vasten ende hardicheden der regulen mildelick met hem dispenserem".

them access to seven golden pathways into heaven: spiritual riches; a heavenly collectivity; a clear avowal of faith; heavenly pleasure; joy and prosperity; mutuality; and heavenly wisdom. The access to these pathways is a prerogative of the virtuous and of those who are *pure in their bodies, chaste in their hearts and uncorrupted in their senses* (“suver van lichaem ende reyn van herten ende onbesmet van sinnen”). Enclosure is described as part of a dynamic process of the individual sisters and of the community, a walk along paths that have been revealed to those who have chosen to leave the world, to sit at the feet of the heavenly groom and listen to his words⁴⁷.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The mapping of spiritual life in convents of female tertiaries through the analysis of institutional (the Third Order rule and the statutes of the Chapter of Utrecht) and literary sources (the treatise *Informieringheboeck* and the sermon cycle *Jhesus Collacien*) has demonstrated to what extent the experience of space and place is at the very heart of female spirituality. Experiencing separation from the world, from the community, from themselves and even from their own voices, the sisters were asked to deepen the experience created by the following of the statutes and the obedience to their restriction by initiating a personal process of spiritual enclosure. Interestingly enough, the pathway to this personal enclosure is often expressed in terms of actions, movements, travels, displacement and transformation of daily objects and situations into mystical experience. The well-defined borders of the enclosed community, assigning specific functions to specific places, can be crossed by assigning to each of the spaces and places another performative function geared at the spiritual development of each individual sister: a kitchen can transform into a meditation on duties and the reinforcement of the promises made during the profession, the stairways to the dormitory can trigger the meditation on Christ's blood-shedding and a virtual pilgrimage can be started in front of one of the altars in the convent's chapel. The walls of the cloister of the soul may be as impenetrable as the architectonic structures, but they can grant their inhabitants spiritual freedom.

⁴⁷ A.M. Baaij, *Jhesus Collacien*, pp. 129-132.

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Fecha de recepción del artículo: noviembre 2013

Fecha de aceptación y version final: marzo 2014