



'Heroes of the Heart': Ideal Men in the Sacred Heart Devotion

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The article focuses on the complexity of Catholic heroism(s) and more specifically on the rhetoric on heroic men in the Apostolat de la Prière and its spin-off movement, the League of the Sacred Heart. It points at the specificity of Catholic heroism and its (partial) correlation with sanctity. It thereby discusses the recurring "types" of heroes and their "heroic qualities" and questions the importance of these heroes' "masculinity".

In 1937, the Jesuit father A. De Pauw published an article in the *Bode van het Heilig Hart van Jesus* in which he criticized the ease with which the label "hero" was used. "Sometimes", he remarked,

[O]ne gets the impression that heroism is for sale among the other articles in the warehouses and costs almost nothing. Succeed in no matter what exploit, win a race, knock someone knock out, and you are put on a pedestal. There is no end to the admiration and devotion. We have sunk that low. Recklessness and ambition, stupid contempt of death and muscle strength incite the enthusiasm of the people that no longer know how to value the silent sacrifice and invisible dedication for what it is worth. It proves that paganism and deification of material have polluted the people of the twentieth century. Someone who is able to perform a valiant action is not necessarily a hero.¹

His criticism on the adoration of contemporary "heroes" did not only point at the importance De Pauw attached to values that were (supposed to be) at the core of a heroic personality, but also indicated the changeability and variety of those personifications of "heroic" principles.

This article focuses on this complexity of heroism, and more specifically it analyzes the rhetoric on heroic men in the Belgian Sacred Heart devotion. This Catholic cult became very popular in nineteenth-century Belgium and characterized a sentimental and vivid ultramontane Catholicism. As there were various devotional organizations dedicated to the Sacred Heart, this analysis concentrates primarily on the discourse of one of the most important movements, the *Apostolat de la Prière*. This organization, which aimed at the restoration of Christ's honor, was introduced in Belgium in the 1860s and developed into the *Leagues of the Sacred Heart* at the turn of the century. These *Leagues* presented themselves as part of the *Apostolat*,

but as they were gender exclusive, they clearly differed from the *Apostolat de la Prière* which was a mixed movement (although the central boards consisted solely of women under direction of a male religious). To gain a clearer view on the historical variability and to take into account possible shifts in the nature of the cult, this analysis concentrates on and compares two time spans. Since it does not cover the years in between, no general conclusions on the evolution of Catholic heroic discourse can be drawn. Yet, by analyzing two time spans, similarities and differences might be detected. The first focus is situated around 1868, i.e. the moment Belgium devoted itself to the Sacred Heart for the first time. These years also witnessed the start of the Belgian *Apostolat de la Prière* movement and the creation of its periodical *Bode van het Heilig Hart van Jesus* in 1869 (Gevers, 2004; Rion, 1981; Marx, 2005; Gabriëls, 1991; Quaghebeur, 2002).² The previous years the French version circulated in Belgium and would continue to do so, therefore both periodicals have been included in the analysis.³ Other sources for this first period are the devotional books on the cult of the Sacred Heart that were edited in Belgium. The second focus is on the 1930s, one of the heydays of the cult since it was the blooming period of the *Leagues of the Sacred Heart*. These *Leagues* have been described as “la formule belge de l’Apostolat de la Prière”.⁴ Originally, only all-male *Leagues* were founded, but a women’s movement developed as well (Van Osselaer, 2008). Therefore, the sources of this interwar period include, next to the Belgian periodical of the *Apostolat de la Prière*, the periodicals and books published by these *Leagues* and other devotional books.⁵

This article focuses on heroic men in the devotional discourse. Some of these heroes were explicitly associated with the cult, for example the martial hero fighting under the banner of the Sacred Heart; others were depicted as an “apostle along the line of Jesus Sacred Heart” but often there was no direct relation between the devotion and these exemplary men.⁶

However, it must be noted that heroism was not only the province of men and it was not only the proverbial “great men” who excelled and rose above the Catholic crowd. On the contrary, it was explicitly stated that heroism was a quality that might be achieved by women as well. Accordingly, as he contemplated the heroic souls of Moses and Paul, the Jesuit author Toussaint Dufau, one of the main promoters of the cult of the Sacred Heart in Belgium, remarked that “God loves to operate through the persons who are the frailest”. He thereby revised his former stance since he had believed the “weaker sex”—created by God “solely to be man’s help”—to be incapable of this “angelic ardour”.⁷

Heroism

“Catholic” Heroisms

As pointed out by Max Jones (2007), heroes have been defined in various terms, for example as men of extraordinary bravery, superhuman strength and as the chief male characters of an epic. However, in his opinion, the last few decades the definition has shifted towards the depiction of a hero as “any man or woman” who is “endowed by others” with special “symbolic significance” (Jones, 2007, p. 441). Accordingly, the central focus of most recent studies is no longer a character study of male warrior heroes, but an analysis of the social construction of a heroic reputation (p. 442). Heroic individuals are thereby analyzed as an instrument of propaganda and

also as “a site on which a range of cultural attitudes and social practices can be examined” (p. 447). Similarly, Wilhelm Frijhoff (2004, p. 12) describes a hero as a representation of virtues and a role model inspiring imitation and veneration. In this depiction of the hero as a model, heroism depends upon the appreciation of certain characteristics and their taxonomy as “more than human”. Given that there were variations in their appreciation, the heroic constellation has changed historically, geographically and according to nation and denomination. It all depended on who created the (image of the) heroes and stressed certain qualities, neglecting others.⁸ Vassilis Saroglou (2006) however, not only points at a hero’s function as a model and his potential to become the object of sanctification and identification, but also stresses the heroic ability to surpass ordinary humans. Although he thereby accentuates the similarities between saints and heroes (for example in the heroism of the saint), in his opinion there remains a clear distinction: “If the hero is an exemplary figure of the city, the saint is an exemplary figure of religion” (Saroglou, 2006, pp. 314–317) [my translation].

Although these definitions offer interesting starting points, the selection of the heroes analyzed in this article did not depend upon a restrictive definition of the term “hero” or “heroism”. This open approach makes it possible to define how heroism is described in the sources and how it is characterized as “Catholic” heroism. It focuses on those sections which offer descriptions of the “heroic” and explicitly allude to “heroism” and “heroic” men. The analysis thereby gives a clear view on the complexity of “heroism” and its expressions within religious discourse. Apparently heroism very easily coincided with “sanctity”. The parallelism of both terms runs along the lines of Frijhoff’s remark that both heroes and saints are presented as role models one has to strive to imitate, but whose example is hard to follow (Frijhoff, 2004, p. 36). In the hagiographic accounts that were published in the devotional literature (both periodicals and books), the label “saint” was easily replaced by “hero”. Saint Joannes Berchmans, for example, was described as someone whose “sanctity was heroic” and whose “heroism was saintly”.⁹ Sanctity might therefore be regarded as the ratification of heroism by the Catholic Church since heroic virtues, or to be more precise, the exercise of virtues up to a heroic degree, are one of the conditions to be proclaimed a saint (Frijhoff, 1998, p. 14; Wilhelm, 1910, pp. 292–293). A lot of the heroes described and promoted within the Sacred Heart devotion were, in fact, saints. Therefore this attention to the male hero also leads towards a better understanding of the male saint. As such, it contributes to the study of the construction of masculinity in hagiography that is, in spite of the numeric preponderance of male saints, still in its infancy according to Teresa Berger (2005, pp. 64, 75). Even though numerous saints were described as heroes in the devotional literature, there was no complete interchangeability. Since other variations on the heroic theme were attested as well, this analysis covers more than a male hagiography.

“Male” and “Masculine” Heroism?

Since a hero can represent virtues and figure as a role model (Frijhoff, 2004, p. 12), it is interesting to pause a moment at the “maleness” of heroic men depicted in the devotional literature. Although these men embody virtues, do they (as biological “men”) explicitly symbolize “masculine” qualities?¹⁰ According to Wilhelm Frijhoff

(1998) “great men” have always outnumbered women in the course of history, “at least in public memory”. In his opinion this is due to the fact that “exemplary values and ways of life belong to the public realm” in which women could only play “a minor part, if they were not excluded”. However, men’s preponderance also has to be linked to the “public discourse” that “has assigned the realm of virtue, intelligence and action to men, and that of emotions, spiritual experience and self-denial to women” (Frijhoff, 1998, p. 9) [my translation].

If “spiritual experience” is defined as a women’s thing, then the Catholic heroes represent an interesting case. However, there are various sides to Catholicism and next to the “spiritual experience”, Catholicism offers a male dominated hierarchy, an ideology in the political field and military campaigns. As such its heroes can fit into the ideal images that populate the “escapism” that Martin Francis (2002) describes. They offer a means through which “Men constantly traveled back and forward across the frontier of domesticity, if only in the realm of imagination, attracted by the responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood, but also enchanted by fantasies of the energetic life and homosocial camaraderie of the adventure hero” (Francis, 2002, p. 643). Since heroes can represent ideal qualities, the analysis of Catholic heroes offers an insight in which characteristics were considered exemplary.

Heroes

Jesus, an Exemplary Catholic Hero?

According to the Catholic authors who commented on heroism in the devotional publications of the cult of the Sacred Heart, Catholic heroism was not to be equated with “ordinary” heroism. They illustrated this idea by the description of that prototypical Christian hero, who inspired and surpassed all other Catholic champions, Jesus.¹¹ As noted by the abbot H. Saintrain who published his book *Le Sacré-Coeur de Jésus, étudié dans les livres saints* in 1868, the Gospel was a strange book since it stressed the humiliations of his main hero, did not even hesitate to describe his moment of despair in the garden of Gethsemani and treated those moments with the same calm and simplicity as it recounted his glories, without any regard for the effect that it may have on the mind of its readers.

One might even say that it treats the humiliations of the son of men more elaborately than his glories. It thereby differs from human writers as they like to hide all that could diminish the reputation of their heroes, or present it in more favorable colors or even change it completely, so that they can go on focusing gladly on all that might exalt them.¹²

What was stated in the 1860s was also observed in the interwar period: Catholic heroism had its own quality and differed from other forms of heroism. Apparently it was not perceived as heroism by everyone and in 1935, the Jesuit R. Hardeman commented upon this depreciation: “In the broad German circles, the religion of the crucified is considered to be too weak, and not heroic enough, and they try to replace Christ by some other pure German god and heaven by the Walhalla”.¹³ In spite of these criticisms, the Catholic authors explicitly stressed Jesus’ heroism as they depicted him and his qualities as “more than human” and placed him at the

center of a Catholic epical history. "Other heroes of human history have succeeded in placing themselves for some time above the mediocrity of their environment, by their exceptional bravery, perseverance, contempt for death." However, these heroes were apparently not of a constant and all-compassing quality and failed from a moral and religious point of view. Since "many of these men" that were "celebrated as heroes fallen in the field of honour, did not have the courage in the normal way of life to fulfil their duties as husbands and family man as they should". They did not place the love of God above all other things and their "glorious deeds" were driven by "thirst for power, a longing for glory, greed, self-love, haughtiness, vanity, or other not so honourable passions". Therefore, according to these Catholic authors, these heroes did not measure up to Jesus' heroism that was a constant feature of a moral and supernatural quality based on humility, self-denial, sacrifice and the love of God.¹⁴

Cataloguing Heroes

Although Christ was depicted as the Catholic hero *par excellence*, he enjoyed the company of other Catholic heroes. Since Catholic heroism and sanctity were quite often synonymous, the attention these heroes received in the periodicals often coincided with the processes of their canonization or beatification. In spite of this temporarily increased attention on specific heroes, the depictions of Catholic heroic men in both the second half of the nineteenth century and the 1930s were similar. Throughout both time periods, the various "types" of heroes were largely the same: they were martial men, missionaries and martyrs, presented as an "encouragement" and "model" for the Catholic public.¹⁵

The heroes that populated the Catholic epics were quite often martial men. The battlefield offered an ideal stage to outshine one's fellow man and demonstrate more than human qualities. Within the Catholic context the "miles Christi" has worn the armor of the crusader, of the zouaves, of army chaplains and of the common soldiers of World War One.¹⁶ The martial qualities of these military men and a romantic idealization were combined in reminiscences with knighthood.¹⁷ These nostalgic identifications were apparent in descriptions of, for example, St. Joannes Berchmans, a young Catholic "hero", and by no means a martial man, portrayed however as a knight in service of his lady, Mother Mary.¹⁸ Contemporary Catholic soldiers (for example the portraying of the zouaves in the 1860s) were also presented as heroes and soon became the subject of a nostalgic idealization as they would come to personify an idealized past in the interwar period.¹⁹ The close connection between the martial, the most common field for the lay heroes, and heroism was also apparent in military metaphors that were used to define other (non-martial) heroic categories, for example the Christian martyrs of Japan who were portrayed as a "glorious army" or the "battlefield" of a religious sent to a remote place.²⁰ Martial metaphors were also used to arouse the Catholic readers, both in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources: they were presented as "soldiers of Christ" with "a duty to battle" and in the middle of "a crusade".²¹

Martial activities were not the only way to demonstrate heroism. The missionary field was at least as successful as the battle field in creating and inspiring Catholic heroes.²² This attention to mission was to be expected since the Jesuits, the main promoters of the Sacred Heart cult and publishers of the various periodicals,

were in both time periods active as missionaries. As apostolic activities were to be carried out in “savage” areas among the enemies of the Catholic faith, missionary activity was presented as almost synonymous with a martyr’s death, “a sacrifice without return”.²³ Although heroic religious were most often missionaries, there were other heroic religious whose heroism was not earned by a martyr’s death in the missions but by their heroic qualities as a founder of a religious order, as a religious author or through their exemplary life as “angelic youth”.²⁴ Their heroism mostly consisted of the display of virtues up to heroic degree, such as “charity”, “discipline”, “humility” and “obedience”.²⁵ In spite of the fact that these qualities might seem a little un-heroic to our modern eyes, it was precisely this kind of heroism that was presented as attainable for readers of devotional literature. Heroism was above all the victory over themselves: “It is the quality of a heroic disciple of my heart to pray and make all efforts to conquer himself both in the things that bad nature repulses and in the things towards which she carries herself”.²⁶

Just like some of the portrayals of the martial men, most of these descriptions of missionaries situated their heroic biographies in a distant past. Through this historical framing these martyrs of their faith resembled the first Christians, also presented as Catholic heroes, ready to sacrifice their lives as the ultimate testimony of their faith.²⁷ So, although heroism was by no means described as the province of personalities of the past, it was quite often connected to the heroic qualities of these bygone periods as if to render contemporary heroism part of a Catholic heroic tradition and increase its worth. As such the first Christian martyrs and the Crusaders were portrayed as an example for the readers of the nineteenth-century devotional periodical and the zouaves were depicted as with the “features of the Christian heroism, worthy of the age of the martyrs”.²⁸ The twentieth-century public on the other hand was encouraged to live up to the example of the martyrs and at that time already mythical zouaves.²⁹ Heroic ages were therefore echoed not only through descriptions of their heroes, but also through comparisons of the qualities of these heroic men with those of contemporary heirs of that heroic tradition.

Heroic Qualities

Although one should not strive to standardize Catholic heroes and make universal claims within this wide range in heroic categories, the lay and religious heroes had some basic qualities in common. These features were significant both for the champions of the second part of the nineteenth century and for those of the interwar period. The most prominent quality among them was a hero’s readiness to strive, battle and die for Catholicism. In the various narratives Catholic heroes considered it a privilege to sacrifice their lives for the Catholic faith and Catholic martial and missionary actions.³⁰ These activities, for example missions among the heathens, Crusades, wars against anti-popes and the Roman question, were rendered “heroic” through the heroic qualities of their participants. The reverse however, was also true: taking part in these heroic missions could put someone on his way to heroism. As the price to contribute to these actions was often the sacrifice of one’s life, the descriptions often paid explicit attention to a hero’s reaction upon his looming death. One missionary, for example, “could not control his joy” after

hearing his death sentence³¹; another was disappointed that he was not selected for the missions and was therefore not able to shed his blood in Christ's honor.³² However, one could also sacrifice one's life without the interference of an enemy of the Christian faith. Sickness and trials were therefore to be regarded as divine favors.³³ In this less bloody scenario the basic idea remained the same as the Catholic hero who dedicated his whole life to a (Catholic) cause. In the description of Pierre Canisius, for example, his whole life was summarized in the following phrase: "He dedicated himself completely to the Mother Church ... constantly and with a heroic generosity".³⁴ In these Catholic narratives it was therefore not the victory over an enemy that revealed heroic qualities, but the victory over life and its challenges.

The will to sacrifice oneself was expressed within the wide field of "Catholic courage". This bravery might be demonstrated in the readiness to fight (military) enemies, to face challenges of the missionary field (environment, lack of food, sickness) or the willingness to make an all-compassing sacrifice.³⁵ However, Catholic courage apparently also included the declaration and representation of one's Catholic faith in more ordinary circumstances. Openly professing to be a Catholic proved, according to the Catholic periodicals, that Catholic courage was as present in day-to-day experiences as it was in the missionary field or battlefield.³⁶ However, there were some conditions to this Catholic courage as it had to be accompanied by "dry eyes"³⁷ and although it was considered suitable (for a man) to express enthusiasm, sadness and grief in tears³⁸, it was not proper to cry when faced with a challenge.³⁹ Henri Suson, a German Dominican mystic, who had the bad luck to forget that code of comportment, was reminded of it by Jesus himself who asked him if he was not "ashamed to cry like a woman".⁴⁰

These heroes were presented as grand examples to the Catholic public because of their courage and self-sacrifice. Yet, their modesty and the humiliations they suffered were valued as highly as their bravery. It was mainly because they stayed humble at heart that they reached a true magnanimity.⁴¹ Their modesty was thereby described as a challenge to the so-called heroes that lived on praises and attention. Catholic heroes, on the contrary, did not like to be praised for their efforts and accordingly did not want to take positions that were honored highly.⁴² It was the obedience towards the ecclesiastical hierarchy that pushed them to climb the professional ladder as one could not refuse an honorable job imposed by one's superior.⁴³ In their modesty they mirrored the "soft humility of Jesus' heart"⁴⁴ and in their gentle disposition they echoed its loving and caring nature (symbolized in Jesus' bleeding heart, the main symbol of the Sacred Heart devotion). As such, Catholic heroes were praised in the devotional discourse for their gentle, soft and loving character.⁴⁵ In the descriptions this tenderness and love were sometimes reflected in the physical appearance of these men and the gentleness of their character was mirrored in the "softness of their traits".⁴⁶ Their compassionate nature thereby triggered the somewhat surprising use of the metaphor "as a mother": Jesus, St. Jérôme Emilien and General de Sonis were all compared to a "mother" in their activities.⁴⁷

However gentle towards their companions and fellow men, towards themselves, Catholic heroes, and primarily heroic religious men, displayed a strict discipline. As they disciplined their body they embodied their own heroism, or more precisely saintly heroism, by fasting, lack of sleep, flagellation and wearing a

cilice.⁴⁸ Although this might seem a practice that could easily become outdated, it was still part of heroic descriptions in the interwar period. “Heroic” discipline was also presented as a (difficult) path to sanctity. Joannes Berchmans thereby figured as an example of how discipline not only implied corporal discipline but also strict obedience of every rule one felt subject to. His biography illustrated how one could attain sanctity through a strict observation of every rule that one was expected to obey or imposed upon oneself. As such he presented a model that might be imitated by the Catholic public.⁴⁹ Although this self-control appeared to be an important component of Catholic heroism, it could be counterbalanced through the descriptions of visions and ecstatic experience that in some cases were an important part of saints’ portrayals as well.⁵⁰

Heroic “Men”

Gentleness was often a central heroic quality in these Catholic narratives. As such, soft physical traits were a positive thing (as it mirrored the mental disposition of the heroes) and did not make Catholic heroes less heroic.⁵¹ The gentleness and dedication of heroic men could even take on a comparison with women. In the passages in which heroes were compared to “mothers”, they were equipped with “feminine” qualities that were positively evaluated (contrary to the negatively evaluated “weeping like a woman”). These descriptions can be linked to Martina Kessel’s (2003) definition of the “whole man” who combines both “masculine” and “feminine” characteristics (contrary to a more polar model).

However, although this article focuses on heroic men, there were only very few references to “men’s” bodies and characteristics in the descriptions of these nineteenth-century heroes. Most of these were made within the context of the depiction of heroic soldiers and more specifically the papal zouaves.⁵² These martial heroes clearly had “male figures”⁵³, wrote songs of “a simple and masculine poetry”, and were incited to show themselves to be “men”.⁵⁴ They were praised for physical qualities such as their vigor in a fight and their ability to take a bullet.⁵⁵ The “maleness of their bodies” was mentioned only once, but that was more than could be said about other Catholic heroes. Although the heroism of other (non-martial) Catholic heroes might also be incorporated in their bodies, as for example the martyrs, who were described as “athletes of Christ”⁵⁶, and the heroes that excelled in the heroic corporal discipline (fasting and flagellation), the “maleness” of their bodies was not mentioned. This might appear a bit strange but the same was true for the interwar period: a “male body” of a military hero⁵⁷ might be mentioned once, but there were no references to the “maleness” of the body in the description of the non-martial heroes although there were references to their physical beauty.⁵⁸ Maybe it was due to the fact that the maleness of their bodies could not render an extra quality to their heroism (contrary to that of martial men) and therefore did not need to be included in the description, or because Catholic heroism did not require the physical strength and vigor of a (male) body (contrary to martial heroism)?

References to “masculinity” in heroic descriptions were also not very frequent in the sources of the interwar period and primarily alluded to the courage of men and their seriousness.⁵⁹ This poor concern for their heroes’ “masculinity” is remarkable since the general discourse of the *Leagues of the Sacred Heart* frequently alluded to “men’s character” and presented the movement as a “masculine”

movement (Van Osselaer, 2008). The periodical of the *Apostolat* that provided most of the “heroic” references also demonstrated explicit attention to religious “masculinity”; however its heroes were not defined more “masculine” than those of the *Leagues’* periodical.⁶⁰ Therefore one could wonder whether these exemplary Catholic heroes figured as models of heroic Catholic masculinity or of a more general Catholic heroism and thereby a step away from binary (gender-exclusive) thinking. However, one would have to keep in mind that *Leagues’* periodicals of the interwar period were aimed at an all-male audience and therefore did not need explicit mention of being “for men”. The periodical of the *Apostolat de la Prière* however, remained non-gender exclusive in the 1930s and so did the periodical’s heroic narratives. There is no explicit mentioning of the (gender-exclusive) intended audience.⁶¹ Still, one should hesitate to draw any final conclusions since an analysis of the rhetoric on heroic women will contribute to a better understanding of the specificity of Catholic heroic men.

Catholic Heroisms

The analysis of the devotional discourse indicates that Catholic heroism was described as differing from other forms of heroism as it focused on sacrifice, humility and humiliations and not on “grand” actions.⁶² As Catholic heroism did not build upon the great reputation of its heroes, but on their ability to humiliate themselves in service to God, it was, according to various authors, not always perceived as heroism. Expressions such as “heroic victim” made sense within the devotional discourse as a Catholic hero attained heroism by sacrificing and humiliating himself.⁶³ The Catholic authors realized that this kind of heroism raised problems with their contemporaries as they saw little distinction between an “act of heroism or foolishness”.⁶⁴ However, heroism was explicitly presented as part of a Catholic tradition in which characters such as General de Sonis proved that “Christianity grows heroes and knights”.⁶⁵ According to the Jesuit Henri Ramière it was through the actions of these heroes that God saved the people. Their courage, however, had to be maintained by the “less brilliant bravery” of others and it was the fervor of a large number that gave birth to heroes.⁶⁶ Heroes could only exist and shine thanks to the existence of other Catholic souls; therefore the readers had to try to imitate or at least support these Catholic heroes, as their salvation depended upon their efforts.

However, heroes did not only function as a kind of a *pars pro toto* for a general package of ideals, but also as reference points upon which to build an identity. Therefore they could figure as a self-affirmation in moments of despair and defeat, shaping a collective identity through commemorative rites and a shared history (Gerbod, 1982). Catholic heroes were presented as part of a unifying Catholic tradition. They were the contemporary heirs of heroic ages that witnessed Crusaders, missionaries and other “great” men.⁶⁷ However, these heroes could become outdated⁶⁸ and to make them attractive their historical context was presented as comparable to the public’s own situation.⁶⁹

Catholic heroes were not only a part and representation of a Catholic (unifying, Rome-focused) tradition, they could also belong and contribute to a national or regional identity. Since the love of one’s country and the service a hero owed his nation were recurring themes, they could be presented as national or regional heroes and contribute to a people’s myth. This “appropriation” is hard to

analyze in the two time periods that were studied. Although it is clear from the sources of the interwar period that the “Flemish” roots (and not the “Belgian” roots) were a common feature in the description of the heroes in the Flemish sources, heroic narratives also frequently described other (non-Flemish) heroes.⁷⁰ For the first period (1860s) a large proportion of the publications that circulated in Belgium were created in France.⁷¹ Therefore it is hard to decide whether or not it was at that time as important as it was in the interwar period to have one’s own (Belgian or Flemish) Catholic heroes depicted.

In a description of Joannes Berchmans’ life in the 1930s, the Jesuit Lode Arts remarked that “The Middle Ages had a hard time imagining their Saints other than buried in a desert, or hidden in a lonely cell, with rigid, gaunt faces, in stiff, grubby, hair shirts, and with an annoying aureole around their heads!” He countered this image with what he believed to be a modern Saint: Saint Joannes Berchmans. In his opinion Berchmans was “A Saint in weekly clothes, who speaks and acts like other people, and walks with them the ‘normal’, the ‘small’ way of daily life!” He believed that it was a “special sign from God” that the “modern Saints were common people”.⁷² Notwithstanding the fact that Saints were frequently regarded as heroes, the heroic category was, as we have noted before, broader than the Catholic Saints. However, Arts’ remark indicated that he believed that there had been a change in the representation and appreciation of these Catholic Saints.⁷³ Is the same to be said about the category of the Catholic heroes? The basic heroic typology (martial men, missionaries, heroic religious, lay martyrs) was mostly the same during both time periods. It is, however, remarkable that lay heroes such as Matt Talbot became very popular in the *Leagues of the Sacred Heart* as he was neither a military man (as for example the nineteenth-century General de Sonis who was also popular during the interwar period⁷⁴), Catholic author or politician, and he did not suffer a martyr’s death. He therefore might be indicative of a new kind of hero, whose popularity depended as much on his working-class background as on his exemplary life.⁷⁵ However, one could wonder whether his popularity was due to the laicisation of Catholic heroes in general or if it should be linked to the broadening of the cult’s public and the working-class adherence of the *Leagues*.

In their study of the cult of the Sacred Heart, Norbert Busch (1995) and Olaf Blachke (2006) noted a “(re-) masculinisation” of the Sacred Heart devotion at the beginning of the twentieth century. With this term they described (among other things) the stress on male involvement and the changes in the nature of the devotion (Bush, 1995, pp. 203-219; Blaschke, 2005). Nonetheless, the analysis of Catholic heroism indicates that Catholic heroic men do not appear to be depicted as very “masculine” in the interwar period. Catholic heroic men could do without the references to their male bodies and characteristics. If a hero represented a “mould of imagined masculinity” (Davin, 1997, p. 137) then the Catholic exemplars left the reader various options. Although the main characteristics of Catholic heroes were very similar, there was no unifying way to be a Catholic hero, and there were as many (or even more) Catholic heroisms in the interwar period as there were in the second half of the nineteenth century. This variety of Catholic heroic men warns us not to define heroism too strictly and points at the importance attached to having one’s own heroes.

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Notes

¹ De Pauw (1937, p. 73). All translations of the source material in this article are the author's.

² The French periodical was called *Le Messenger du Sacré Coeur de Jésus. Bulletin Mensuel de l'Apostolat de la Prière*; the Flemish version was called *De Bode van het Heilig Hart van Jesus. Maandelijksch Tijdschrift van het Apostelschap des Gebeds en van het aartsbroederschap van het H. Hart* was introduced in 1869 (Van Bode, 1991, p. 2).

³ E.g. Belgian promoters of the Apostolat de la Prière were stimulated to promote the *Messenger*. Archives of the Flemish Jesuits (Heverlee), Archives of the Leagues of the Sacred Heart. III. Apostolat de la Prière 1. Old documents. Reports of the Association du Sacré Coeur de Jésus et de l'Apostolat de la Prière (1868).

⁴ Letter (2.2.1944) on the centenary of the *Apostolat de la Prière*. Archives of the Flemish Jesuits (Heverlee), Leagues of the Sacred Heart, III. *Apostolat de la Prière*, 5. Correspondence.

⁵ *Maandelijksche Mededeelingen over de Bonden van het H.Hart, Bondsblad voor Bonden van het Heilig Hart*. The periodical for Leagues of Wallonia, *Regnum Christi*, has not been studied thoroughly. The one issue I was able to track down gives the impression that the periodical was a translation of the Flemish periodical *Maandelijksche Mededeelingen*.

⁶ Smit (1930, p. 14); Le Bienheureux Pierre Canisius (1865b, p. 131).

⁷ Dufau (1869, p. 557).

⁸ What Wilhelm Frijhoff remarked about the saints, might be true for heroes as well: in the hand of other producers and protagonists, accentuations change (2004, p. 43).

⁹ Stoffels (1938, p. 17).

¹⁰ Since I use an open approach of "heroism", there does not necessarily have to be a relationship between masculinity and heroism. However, gender-exclusive approaches might be signaled as well: Max Jones (2007), for example, exposes in an analysis of the principal usages of the term "hero" that are described in the Oxford English Dictionary, an inter-relationship between masculinity, warfare and heroism (p. 440).

¹¹ On representations of Jesus as an "ideal man", see Troughton (2006) and Gill (2000).

¹² Saintrain (1868, pp. 245–246).

¹³ Hardeman (1935, p.138).

¹⁴ Vermeulen (1937, p. 525).

¹⁵ S. O. (1863, p. 280; A.D. (1864, p. 259).

¹⁶ On army chaplains: *Het dagboek* (1937, pp. 35–37). Common soldiers: Quirijnen (1935, pp. 3-4). The case of the Belgian zouaves is studied by Thomas Buerman (2008). On the zouaves as atypical heroes: Harrison (2007); on the zouaves and their connection to the cult of the Sacred Heart: Jonas (1998, p. 60; 2000, pp. 147–176).

¹⁷ As "a knight in armour" the missionary Jean de Brébeuf had passed three years in prayer and penance (De Pauw, 1939, p. 204). General de Sonis is described as an example of how Christianity grows heroes and knights. The general is also portrayed as a "miles Christi" (Smit, 1930, pp. 4, 21). On General de Sonis see: Jonas (2000, pp. 164–168).

¹⁸ Arts (1938a, pp. 225–229). Fighting for Mary’s honor: Arts (1938b, p. 299). The same comparisons can be noted in the descriptions of the zouaves: Gevoelens (1869, pp. 169–170); Les zouaves hollandaise (1869, p. 219).

¹⁹ Over een vaandel (1937, p. 6).

²⁰ H. R. (1864, p. 20); Alexander Briant asked when they tried to take away his crucifix: “Does a soldier throw away his banner?” (De Pauw, 1935a, p. 107). Carlo Spinola is described as “a first-class general”, “blood of a general” (De Pauw, 1936a, pp. 101, 102).

²¹ Le bienheureux Pierre Canisius (1865a, p. 27); A.D. (1864, pp. 264–265); G. D. (1868, p. 282).

²² On the image of the Catholic missionary see: Dujardin (2003, pp. 293, 295). On the Protestant missionaries and the gender differences in heroism, see: Rowbotham (2000, p. 88).

²³ J.D. (1866a, p. 189); De Pauw (1935b, pp. 207–214; 1939a, p. 82); Een missieheld herdacht (1935, pp. 294–298). The missionary J. Marquette, “happily sacrificed his life for that grand task (Van den Daele, 1938, p. 9). Description of the missionary Noël Chabanal as a “hero not of the brilliant action, but of the secret passion”: he stayed while he detested his whole environment (De Pauw, 1939b, p. 155).

²⁴ Régnault (1865, pp. 78–93); Arts (1938b, p. 299); Stracke (1938b, pp. 249–253).

²⁵ These qualities will be discussed in the next section.

²⁶ Arnold (1864, p. 383). Saint Stanislas’ life incited “humility”, “obedience” and “self-denial” (A. D, 1864, p. 264). The example of the heroes had to stimulate the readers to resist bad impulses and strive constantly towards an exalted Christian life (Gedachten, 1937, p. 276).

²⁷ Dufau (1869, p. 198).

²⁸ Les défenseurs (1867, p. 397). “Those new Crusaders” (Départ des zouaves 1868, p. 380). A papal soldier prepares himself “in the mood of the old Crusaders” (G. D., 1869, p. 287). For the use of the Crusades as a reference point see: Knobler (2006, pp. 293–325).

²⁹ Over een vaandel (1937, p. 6); Gedachten (1939, p. 276).

³⁰ On the tension between the sacrificial (based on revenge), anti-sacrificial ideal (based on forgiveness) and the idea of self-sacrifice (conflates prowess and piety) in knighthood see A. Frantzen (2003, p. 3).

³¹ N. P. (1868, p. 24). Others regarded it as “the greatest blessing that could happen to me” (Dufau, 1869, p. 367).

³² Patron du mois de Février (1863, p. 71). Paulus Navarre jumped for joy when he heard he was going to be put to death (Gedachten, 1937, p. 275); Spinola hopes that God will not deny him a martyr’s death (De Pauw, 1936b, pp. 164, 165).

³³ “My dear sickness is a great treasure to me” (G. D., 1867, p. 377); “The memories of those sufferings were nothing but soft” (J. D., Saint Patrice, 1866b, p.16).

³⁴ Le bienheureux Pierre Canisius (1865a, p. 30); Arts (1936b, p. 225); Van Mierlo (1939, p. 250).

³⁵ “[B]ut nothing could lessen his courage” (G. D., 1867, p. 382). “courageous and indefatigable servant” (H. R., 1864, p. 17); “courageous defender of virtue” (A. D., 1864, p. 262); “apostolic courage” (Le bienheureux Pierre Canisius, 1865a, p. 29).

³⁶ “[H]e was not afraid to present himself as a Christian” (G. D., 1869, p. 286). General de Sonis facing laughter of co-soldiers (Smit, 1930, p. 25). Courage in every

day life: “And nowadays it is much harder for most people, much more heroic, not to sin in public against the first commandment that commands us to recognise God as Creator and Father and to worship him, than to obey the nine other commandments in secret” (Stracke, 1938a, p. 99).

³⁷ Even in the case of a child martyr (Béatification, 1867, p. 249). About the life of Joannes Berchmans: “Not a single moment tears are mentioned” (Arts, 1938b, p. 300).

³⁸ G. D. (1869, p. 289); Les zouaves hollandais (1869, p. 217); Les défenseurs de la papauté et ses ennemis (1867, p. 404).

³⁹ On this emotional element of the Catholic heroes see: Heywood (2007, pp. 215–216): “For the ultramontanes, tears play a very important role as the expression of the soul. Religion, that is love, and love affects” (“Pour les ultramontains, les pleurs jouent un rôle primordial comme expression extérieure de l’âme. La religion, c’est l’amour, et l’amour émeut”) [my translation].

⁴⁰ G. D. (1866a, p. 248).

⁴¹ Saint Ignace behaved “soft, humble, patient and loving” (Patron du mois de Février, 1863, p. 78).

⁴² E.g. H. R. (1864, p. 25); G. D. (1866b, p. 370); Longhaye (1868, p. 102); L. D. (1865, p. 191). Hyacinth Hermans commented on the missionary Ter Maat that “The old ascetic was apparently afraid of to be regarded as a hero” (1936, p. 272). A description of the heroic gentleness of the Jesuit Cayron: Hillegeer (1932, p. 71).

⁴³ “that saintly obedience that sometimes is asked by not-saintly superiors and is acted out by not-yet-saintly inferiors to a heroic degree” (Stracke, 1937, p. 54).

⁴⁴ S. O. (1863, p. 280). Lazarus was “soft and humble as his Master” (L. D., 1863, p. 265).

⁴⁵ “[L]ife of heroism and charity” (L. D., 1863, p. 269); “a living image of the charity of Jesus’ Heart” (H. R., 1864, pp.17, 24); Pierre Canisius is “an apostle along the lines of Jesus’ Heart” and shows “softness towards his enemies, that love of souls” (Le Bienheureux Pierre Canisius, 1865b, p. 135); “He was very soft, very affable for those who came to see him” (L. D., 1865, p. 196).

⁴⁶ “[T]he softness of his traits, the modesty of his face” (J. D., 1866b, pp. 13, 18): “tender charity”; “He became the softest of men, never, neither on his face nor in his words, did one remark the slightest irritation” (G. D., 1866b, p. 369); “his face reflected the beauty of his soul” (G. D., 1869, p. 286).

⁴⁷ Saintrain (1868, p. 19); G. D. (1866b, p. 374). Joannes Berchmans is described as “a little mother” (Schoeters, 1940, p. 65). De Sonis took as “a mother” care of those who were entrusted to him (Smit, 1930, p. 32). On the cult of Jesus as a mother in the Middle Ages see Walker Bynum (1982); on the cult in nineteenth-century France see Gibson (1993, pp. 84–86).

⁴⁸ “He prolonged his prayer and multiplied his fastings” (Régault, 1865, p. 84; L. D. (1865, p. 194); G. D. (1866b, p. 374). Carlo Spinola flagellated his body every night and wore a rough hair cloth, his life seemed to be one long period of fasting. The only thing he asked after years of prison was a new whip (De Pauw, 1936a, p. 105; 1936b, pp. 162–168).

⁴⁹ “In perseverance one recognises the hero: in the silent, continuous, courageous perseverance” (Arts, 1938b, p. 299). Cf. Arts’ comment on Joannes Berchmans: “nothing is as heroic as this silent, constant dedication of every day, every hour,

every moment!" (Arts, 1939, p. 538). "One shivers if one thinks what a colossal effort of will, what a continuous self-mastery such a life must have demanded. One cannot deny that: the strong, heroic sanctity of Saint John Berchmans is really to be found in the stubborn lovingly observance of the smallest duty, in the ruthless loyalty towards God in the smallest deed" (Schoeters, 1940, pp. 212–213); on his fasting and flagellating: Schoeters (1940, p. 263).

⁵⁰ E.g. G. D. (1868, p. 285; 1866b, p. 367).

⁵¹ This soft expression is not the same as women's face that was clearly negatively evaluated in the interwar period: "Fat Paul and his girl's face, white and pink": (T Haakstertje, 1937, p. 253).

⁵² One exception: Nicolas de Flue is described as having a "candid and masculine eloquence". However, it has to be kept in mind that he was a former military man, and part of the laity (L. D., 1865, p. 191).

⁵³ "Most of them are men of a magnificent figure and appearance: several of them were more than 6 feet"; "the manly figures of those warriors" (*Départ des zouaves pontificaux*, 1868, pp. 381, 382). Zouaves were not only described as "young men" but also "fathers of a household" and "old men". Some were even described as a "child" (*Les défenseurs de la papauté*, 1867, pp. 398, 400).

⁵⁴ *Les zouaves hollandais* (1869, pp. 220, 222).

⁵⁵ *Les défenseurs de la papauté* (1867, pp. 401–404); *Les zouaves hollandais* (1869, pp. 216–218).

⁵⁶ Dufau (1869, pp. 199, 365); N. P. (1868, p. 22). Athletic references also in the description of the missionary father Damian: "God had made this Fleming athletic. His body and soul appeared to be created in order to break and build" (Arts, 1936b, p. 223).

⁵⁷ It was a comment on General de Sonis: "With a tall stature, a well-featured face, manly and supple, of a simple refinement in his manners, he had won with his liveliness of spirit and frank cheerfulness the friendship of many" (Smit, 1930, p. 18). In another passage (p. 34) the general is described as a "robust, proud man".

⁵⁸ "[S]upernatural beauty", "charm" (De Pauw, 1935a, pp. 105, 106).

⁵⁹ "Man's earnestness", "a man full of courage and earnestness" (Arts, 1938a, p. 225. "Manly" (Stracke, 1938c, p. 304).

⁶⁰ E.g. in the article by L. Arts (1936a, pp. 32–35).

⁶¹ The explicit mentioning of an audience was the case for those articles that aimed at a younger audience: they explicitly mentioned their audience in the introduction (A. D., 1864, pp. 257–266; Stoffels, 1938, pp. 16–20).

⁶² As for example the reference to a commentary of Machiavelli in which he stated that religion did not create "great men" because it focused on humbleness and self-denial (Goetstouwers, 1939, pp. 36–37).

⁶³ A. D. (1864, p. 265).

⁶⁴ Not comprehended by contemporaries (G. D., 1866b, p. 370). Not comprehended by the author's contemporaries (Arts, 1936b, p. 223).

⁶⁵ "General Louis Gaston de Sonis is known in our century as a kind of bolder times. In him God has given an example, how Christianity grows heroes and knights. Christian in heart and soul, lightened by the fire that Christ brought on earth, he was a Saint in soldiers' clothes, impressive because of his heroic courage in the service of

his country, even more impressive because of his heroic courage in the service of his Redeptor” (Smit, 1930, p. 4).

⁶⁶ “Elite souls are never wanting in a society in which the masses are animated by an ardent religious zeal. The fervour of a large number brings heroes into existence; and it is through the exploits of heroes, supported by the less brilliant courage of the other soldiers, that God saves the people” (Ramière, 1862, p. lxvii).

⁶⁷ For a reference to the “heroic times” of the Jesuit Missions in the new world and India see Schoeters (1940, p. 147). For the Crusaders as a popular reference point see Frantzen (2003, p. 2).

⁶⁸ E.g. Stracke’s comment that a lot of people consider Vincentius a Paulo outdated (Stracke, 1938c, p. 302); on the lack of attraction in Saint Joannes Berchmans’ life (Stoffels, 1938, p. 17).

⁶⁹ Saint Berchmans was a “child of his time: but that time looked a lot like ours: war, revolution, uproar, change”. Therefore he could be called “a man of our times” (Arts, 1938, p. 298).

⁷⁰ “Flemish soul” (Van Mierlo, 1939, p. 11); “Flemish boys” (Quirijnen, 1935, p. 3); “young Fleming” (Arts, 1936b, p. 223); “Flemish hero” (Een missieheld herdacht, 1935, p. 294).

⁷¹ As noted above, the Belgian periodical *Bode van het Heilig Hart van Jesus* was created in 1869. However, the French periodical (*Messenger du Sacré Coeur*) circulated in Belgium from the moment it was first published (1861).

⁷² Arts (1939, pp. 539–540).

⁷³ Cf. Frijhoff’s note on the “democratization” of the Saints (2004, p. 10).

⁷⁴ For example, Smit (1930).

⁷⁵ See Dewickere (1935, p.69) for the “heroic soul of Talbot”. His popularity might be illustrated by the fact that the *Leagues*’ visited his grave on their journey to Dublin. Archives of the Flemish Jesuits (Heverlee), Archives of the Leagues of the Sacred Heart, IX. Bondsleven, 8. Thinking about the Leagues, text of the Dublinfilm.

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