Western European theorists of architecture and prominent architects of the mid-nineteenth century did not have a high opinion of the largest church building in the Christian world. As Nikolaus Pevsner put it: 'St. Peter baiting became quite a sport'.¹ British authors seem to have taken the lead: Wightwich condemned the Vatican basilica as 'replete with all vices', Ruskin characterised it as 'the penny-room of Leamington, built bigger', Knowles called it 'a dead swindle', and Morris 'the very type ... of pride and tyranny, of all that crushes out the love of art in simple people'.² These judgements are highly typical of one of the most vociferous artistic movements of the period, which had elevated medieval architecture and art to the canon for contemporary design. But religious loyalties were also involved. In a period when tensions between protestants and Roman Catholics ran high in many countries, while within the catholic world divisions sharpened between those who agreed with the progressive centralisation and Romanisation of the Church and those who did not, the shrine of the papacy was unlikely to remain neutral territory. For the leading catholic and 'Gothic' architect in the Netherlands, P.J.H. Cuypers (1827-1921), there was no possibility of avoiding these tensions in the areas of aesthetic and religious ideals.

Pierre Cuypers' journey to Rome in 1863 occupies a prominent place in the Cuypers historiography, in which the master himself distinctly had a hand. Traditionally, the focal point of the story is an 'incident' that took place when the young architect openly vented his distaste of the ecclesiastical architecture that he saw in the Eternal City. He is said to have made his rash remarks during a 'soirée' given by a cardinal. His son Joseph recounts the story as he must have heard it from his father: the disparaging remarks were taken in such bad part that the next day friends came to warn the provocative visitor that any repetition would definitely result in his expulsion from the Papal States.³ In the version of the younger Mr Cuypers, the criticism of the impertinent guest was directed especially at the Roman baroque, though a different source mentions recent works of art realised in the vicinity of the Vatican.⁴ The architect himself, however, made it quite clear that his abhorrence concerned the Roman Renaissance and Baroque in general, and St. Peter's in particular.

Cuypers touched on his experiences with Roman art in a speech at Utrecht in 1889.⁵ In this discourse, the Roman monuments were described as antithetic to the 'logic in art' which the speaker championed. The new St. Peter's, 'a Pantheon rising high into the sky' had usurped the place of its predecessor built according to the logical principles of Christian architects. The early Christian basilica was apparently regarded as a pre-figurement of the Gothic style, now elevated to the ideal norm.⁶ In the Sistine chapel it had become clear to Cuypers how the demise of logic in the art of the Renaissance even detracted from the 'unequalled paintings' by Michelangelo. He recounts that he spent three days in a supine position in order to enjoy Michelangelo's ceiling paintings. But his aesthetic enjoyment seems to have been severely marred by his irritation about the absurdity of arranging these 'masterpieces' in such a way that no-one could view them in a seemly posture while attending the holy offices. Moreover, he observed that the painted framework of pedestals, corbels and the like did not correspond to the architectural properties of the curving surfaces.

Various details of Cuypers' low opinion of St. Peter's have come down to us. Even at first sight, he decided that the building was poorly constructed.⁷ He detested the statues on the façade. Inside, he was horrified by the nude figures on some of the papal tombs. In his sketchbook, he recorded only features of secondary importance: heraldic motifs of Pope Innocent X and some 'cupids' carrying books and keys. Here, Cuypers is patently endorsing the dogma of the international neo-Gothic movement, i.e. that the Renaissance was a regrettable break in the history of Christian art. As a result, even the appreciation of highly esteemed architects and artists such as Michelangelo and Palladio had become problematical.⁸ Cuypers was also in two minds about Raphael: though a genius, his art had become progressively alienated from the Christian ideal.

Cuypers' hinted-at disparagement of contemporary religious art in Rome also fits entirely into the picture of the northern neo-Gothic artist visiting the city. He felt that as
long as contemporary Christian art did not link up with the broken line of development of medieval art, little good could come of it. Whether Cuypers ever sought out any of the ‘pious Nazarenes’ or ‘decadent Pre-Raphaelites’ is unknown. After all, these must have been the only practising artists in Rome with whom he might have felt any affinity, given both their historical orientation and their aim of reviving the fresco tradition. In earlier contacts with the Vatican, Cuypers had called attention to his efforts to revive the figurative mural in the Netherlands, in combination with the adoption of the Gothic style in architecture, of course.

For Cuypers, though much travelled, it was his first journey to Italy. He travelled in the company of two well-educated priests, who were personal friends. From the correspondence between the architect and his wife, who stayed at home, there emerges a certain familiarity with Italy. Cuypers was well prepared by his art-historical training and knowledge, while his wife had some knowledge of the Italian language. The journey took the travellers by train from Paris to the Alps. After crossing the Mont-Cenis pass in sledges drawn by mules and horses, they made their way to Rome via Turin, Milan, Genoa, Livorno, Pisa, Pistoia, Florence, Siena, Orvieto and Viterbo. They arrived in Rome around the 24th of March. The itinerary included a three-week sojourn in Rome, after which Naples was to be visited. Rome was clearly the principal destination; they usually spent one day only in the other towns. Because Cuypers’ own letters from Italy are not preserved in his archive, his art-historical and aesthetic observations have not come to us directly. The letters that his wife wrote to him suggest that the journey was a pilgrimage (with a daily Holy Mass, thanks to his priestly companions) combined with a professional and cultural agenda.

The expedition must be viewed in connection to the large-scale mobilisation of the Roman Catholic world, initiated by the Roman Curia in 1859, to the aid of the Papal States’ struggle for survival. This ‘papal campaign’ threatened to divide the Dutch Roman Catholics into passive papalists and ardent ultramontanes. Cuypers seems to have had a leaning towards the latter camp. It was precisely during the years preceding his trip to Rome that he designed a programme of murals for the chapel of the extremely ultramontane priest Henri de la Geneste at Grave (on the river Meuse, near Nijmegen). These murals were a political-spiritual statement of loyalty to Pope Pius IX, and were considered such a success that Cuypers had the cartoons sent to the pope as a promotional gift. Meanwhile, he received the papal internuncio from The Hague at his studio in Roermond, so that Rome might be informed about the successful development of contemporary ‘Christian art’ in the Netherlands. Hence, it is hardly surprising that in the intimacy of the spouses’ correspondence, the personal audience with Pope Pius IX that Cuypers and his friends were granted was described as the absolute highlight of the journey. The attention that was also given to his attendance of the papal ceremonies of Holy Week and Easter shows the strong religious and church-political dimension of the tour.
The artistic agenda of the tour may have been less politically charged, but it was far from leisurely.

In the preceding years, the publicist Jos Alberdingk Thijm and his brother-in-law and protégé Pierre Cuypers, had started to propagate the Gothic order in the Netherlands as the technically, artistically and spiritually most appropriate style for the building of churches. This had given rise to tensions in catholic circles between the Gothic innovators and those who saw no earthly reason for abandoning the familiar neo-Baroque and classicistic church-building traditions. The elite of the latter group were the 'Romans', prominent clerics trained in Rome, who wanted to see the familiar Roman forms reproduced in Dutch churches. Although there is not the slightest doubt about Cuypers' aesthetic allegiance, he does seem to have appreciated maintaining good relations with the 'Roman' party.

Cuypers' programme and his artistic comments during his sojourn in Rome are strongly reminiscent of those of A. W. Pugin, whose visit to Rome in 1847 had preceded that of his younger Dutch colleague. Pugin had written home: 'St. Peter's is far more ugly than I expected, and vilely constructed – a mass of imposition – bad taste of every kind seems to have run riot in this place'. Although there is not the slightest doubt about Cuypers' aesthetic allegiance, he does seem to have appreciated maintaining good relations with the 'Roman' party.

Cuypers' remarks at the cardinal's reception, sixteen years later, must have had a familiar ring to those who knew Pugin. The Englishman had also preceded Cuypers in his damning assessment of contemporary Roman church architecture: 'The modern churches here are frightful'. Unsurprisingly, Pugin also felt that nude sculptures did not belong in a sacred Christian space such as the Sistine chapel. Pugin did seek contact with the Nazarenes, but during his encounter with Friedrich Overbeck it was apparently Pugin who did most of the talking. The militant English convert had been very keen to meet Pope Pius IX personally, and in this he succeeded because of his well-placed connections. He was impressed by the pope's 'saintliness and paternal familiarity', but not by the aesthetic qualities of the room in which he held his audiences. In brief: the scenario of Cuypers' visit to Rome was pre-ordained by his close affinity with A. W. Pugin, whose findings he need not have known in detail to have gathered very similar experiences. However, Cuypers' visit took place in a different church-political setting and also had a quite different outcome to that of his English example.

What has been carefully underexposed in the Cuypers historiography, is any connection between the trip to Rome and the architect's work in hand. It is only in local publications in western Noord-Brabant that we find any mention of the fact that Cuypers' journey was fund-
ed by 'an anonymous Maecenas' from Oudenbosch, a village west of the town of Breda. This was part of a plan dreamt up by the village priest: to build a grand parish church, modelled on St. Peter’s.

In 1829, Willem Hellemons (1810-1880) had been sent to Rome by the Cistercian order he had entered, in order to follow his advanced studies there. He later described the five years he spent at the Cistercian college near the basilica of S. Croce in Gerusalemme as a decisive spiritual and cultural phase in his life. Not only did he intensely enjoy the life and art of Rome and its environs, Rome also seems to have enjoyed the presence of ‘Fra Guglielmo’ as he paraded down the streets with his blue eyes and golden curls.22 Around 1865, Hellemons, now a parish priest at Oudenbosch, managed, in a series of sermons, to talk his parishioners into the costly adventure of building a church on the Roman model, openly professing his enduring passion for Rome: ‘I love Rome and the churches of Rome. As well as its ceremonies, with which my soul is deeply imbued. [...] To everything that deviates from Rome, I am cold, and indeed more than indifferent.’23 The Roman church buildings were to him not just products of ‘art and human science': they were ‘designs descended from Heaven and inspired into the Vicar of Christ by the Holy Spirit’. Hellemons said that he had been drawn to St. Peter’s above all, and had spent innumerable hours there so that he could absorb every detail. At the same time, he also felt a special connection to S. Giovanni in Laterano, because he had lived close by and was ordained there in 1833. He valued Galilei’s façade of the Lateran basilica more highly than that of St. Peter’s. In his sermons, Father Hellemons asserted that while studying St. Peter’s in his youth, he already had the intention of ‘transplanting’ some of this to his homeland.

In 1865, construction started on the church that Hellemons had envisioned for so many years. Fifteen years later here stood a St. Peter’s, half the size of the original, with a dome (1874) the scale of which was unparalleled in the Netherlands. (figs. 1 and 2) In 1892, the original plan was completed with the building of a façade modelled on that of S. Giovanni in Laterano. At various stages of the long-drawn-out decoration works, the artists were sent to Rome to find inspiration and to collect pictorial material that could serve as a model.24 The years 1865-’66 also saw the construction, at a short distance from the church, of the large boarding-school complex ‘St. Louis’, belonging to the Friars of Oudenbosch, a congregation founded by Hellemons. This complex also incorporated many explicitly Roman architectural features, such as a Bernini-style colonnade in wood and a large Baroque chapel with a reduced Lateran façade and a high dome.25 This monumentalised ‘Rome cult’ sprang directly from the radical papalism of the vil-

3. Oudenbosch, Basilica of Sts. Agatha and Barbara, interior.
lage priest. He made Oudenbosch into a transit centre for Dutch papal Zouaves. Between 1864 and 1870, 3000 men volunteering to defend Pius IX’s states were given a lavish welcome in the halls of ‘St. Louis’ and provided with pep talks and square meals.26 Hellemons had in every respect realised his most heart-felt desire: of ‘being able to sit in a shadow of Rome’ at Oudenbosch.

It is clear that Father Hellemons was not only the patron and the concever of the two Roman-inspired church buildings in the village, but also outlined much of their design. Although many priests with architectural inclinations considered their own skills sufficient to warrant eliminating the expense of a professional architect, Hellemons entrusted his plans at an early stage to one of the greatest professionals that he could find: P. J. H. Cuypers. As early as 1860, the young, successful Cuypers, on the instigation of Hellemons, came to Oudenbosch to write a damning report on the structural and aesthetic properties of its medieval parish church.27 It must have been perfectly clear to Cuypers that he could only expect a commission for a new church if he would forget about the Gothic style for a while. Hellemons deliberately wanted to avoid the all-pervading ‘Gothic order, with its towers, turrets and pointed arches’.28 Soon after, Cuypers made some sketches based on Hellemons’ instructions, with a large dome as its central feature (fig. 4).29 His client was very critical, constantly looking over the architect’s shoulder and rejecting the two towers that Cuypers initially had in mind to complement the dome.

The architect invoked the campaniles Bernini had planned for the façade of St. Peter’s and those on St. Paul’s in London. How much difficulty he had ignoring the pre-Renaissance monuments is evident from his reference to the two medieval transept towers of S. Giovanni in Laterano. At this point, the priest must have realised that Cuypers, however professional, lacked what, to him, was the foremost source of inspiration: direct experience of, and a personal passion for the Roman style of church building. It was time to bring the architect conceptually closer to his patron.

In one of his sermons shortly before the start of construction, the priest revealed that Cuypers had made a journey to Rome on his instigation, ‘so as to study the current plan as it is in those actual churches [St. Peter’s and the Lateran basilica], and to compare the design with the original buildings’.30 Evidently, Cuypers’ journey to Italy was directly prompted by his part in the building plans at Oudenbosch and was paid for by a benefactor in the parish.

Of course, the architect sent letters from Rome to the
parish priest of Oudenbosch. Late in March 1863, he reported that he had spent over three days inside St. Peter’s, and that he had already obtained a good picture of both the beautiful and the deplorable traits of this ‘great and grandiose’ building (fig. 6). It is clear that in the preliminary discussions with the priest, he had mentioned his serious reservations about the architectural qualities of the envisaged prototype. But it is also implied that open-minded observation had allowed him to put these aside and to concede that his first impression of St. Peter’s was ‘very favourable’. The proportions, the harmonious colour scheme, the ‘principal lines’: these immediately won the Dutch visitor over. This impression related to the interior, because in regard to the exterior he could be nothing but scathing. Cuypers went on to say that he would now first continue his studies at St. John’s of the Lateran, after which he would put forward a design that would certainly gain Hellemons’ approval. The description of his first encounter with Rome is full of enthusiasm: despite the political and military threats, it still was ‘the world’s first city’ for any artist or Christian.

Upon his return Cuypers’ experiences in Rome prompted a dramatic adjustment of the plans for the church of Oudenbosch, causing the budget to be considerably increased. The outcome of which was a definitive design and Cuypers’ appointment as principal architect. He was also directly involved in the structure’s finishing and furnishing. Thus the parish church of Sts. Barbara and Agatha at Oudenbosch was the product of an unusual interaction between the vision of an impassioned patron and the design of a talented architect (fig. 3). Even disregarding its Roman style, the building is utterly at odds with Dutch Roman Catholic church architecture of the period. Its dimensions were greater than those of even the most pretentious of parish churches, and Hellemons’ clerical colleagues reacted with corresponding envy. But the well-thought-out interior disposition, with a free-standing, centrally placed altar and a seating plan that afforded an unimpeded view of the altar from all direc-

tions, was also quite unusual for the Netherlands in the 19th century (fig. 5). The construction of the large dome, with a masonry vault and an iron outer shell, as well as the broad, entirely brick-built nave vaulting were daring feats of structural engineering. In many areas, it is evident how the architect deviated from the original in lines and proportions, apparently with the aim of avoiding the effect of slavish imitation on a reduced scale. Sometimes the perceived aesthetic and structural defects of St. Peter’s were deliberately corrected, as in the concept of the façade and the shape of the dome.

The parish church of Oudenbosch inexorably became the object of widespread ridicule and general disdain. Jan Kalf, in his standard work, De katholieke kerken (The Catholic Churches), dating from 1907, attempted to do justice to ‘Dr Cuypers’ plans’, by briefly praising the interior as ‘impressive by its forms and dimensions’, but his praise sounds a little faint and met with little response in intellectual circles. The authoritative – and equally catholic – book by Gerard Brom, Herleving van de kerkelijke kunst in katholiek Nederland (Rebirth of ecclesiastical art in Dutch Catholicism) dating from 1933 reflects the general mood by speaking of ‘a fit of megalomania’, and a ‘papal souvenir’ of the sort that one might expect to find in ‘the cultural desert of America’. The author dutifully accepts the information given by Cuypers’ son that his father had merely exercised some ‘technical supervision’ regarding the construction of the dome, thereby posthumously rescuing, not without some malicious glee, the reputation of the great architect who was ‘guilty of complicity in such an un-Gothic farce’.

Cuypers must have done some agonising over the part he played at Oudenbosch, feeling that on the one hand his integrity as an architect was at stake, but on the other, his loyalty to the pope. How delicate the matter was, is evident from a remarkable discrepancy in the concept of the façade and the shape of the dome.

I consulted the Cuypers archives at the Nederlands Architectuur Instituut in Rotterdam (abbreviation used in this article: CA). Furthermore, I was allowed to consult the parish archives of SS. Agatha and Barbara at Oudenbosch (abbreviation: PABO), for which I acknowledge the generous help of Mr A.M.C. Dekkers. The translation of this text from the Dutch was taken care of by Ms Xandra Bardet, Groningen.

1) N. Pevsner, Some architectural writers of the nineteenth century, Oxford 1972, 146 note 51.
2) Ibid., 130, 146, 242-243, 279.
6) The inferiority of Renaissance architecture to early Christian (and Romanesque and Gothic) building had already been expressed by Thomas Hope (died 1831) in his posthumous An historical essay on architecture (1835): see Pevsner, op. cit. (note 1), 69-75.
7) Unknown (oral?) source, quoted by G. Brom, Herleving van de kerkelijke kunst in katholiek Nederland, Leiden 1953, 294.
8) Cfr. e.g. ibid., 294-298.
9) The qualifications as phrased by Brom, ibid., 295.
10) Cuypers to Internuncio Vecchiotti, 12 August 1860, Archivio Segreto Vaticano, Archivio della Nunziatura L’Aia, busta I 3: ‘...je suis assez heureux de pouvoir communiquer à Votre Excellence, que les dernières années ont été très avantageuses à l’art Chrétien dans ce pays-ci, et, que non seulement j’ai à bâtir plusieurs églises en style ogivale, mais que les peintures murales deviennent de plus en plus généralement appréciées. Dans ce moment même je m’occupe de la peinture de l’église de Saint Servais à Maastricht, dont je me propose d’exposer les principaux cartons l’année prochaine à Amsterdam, et j’ai toujours des dessins à faire exécuter en vitraux historiés dans différentes églises du Royaume.”
11) W. Everts and Th. Ariëns; both were teachers at the boarding school of Rolduc.
12) Letter from Cuypers to his wife, Turin 14 March 1863, CA s 48 map 126.
16) CA s 47 map 119. Some of these letters have been published in: In memoriam Antoinette Cathérine Thérèse Cuypers-Alberdingh Thijm 1829-1859-1898, Amsterdam 1915.
19) 'Recollections of Pugin', The Rambler 3rd Series 5 (September 5, 1861), 394-402.
20) It is possible that Cuypers had direct knowledge of the 1861 article in The Rambler. Cuypers' close affinity with Pugin, rather than with the rationalist Viollet-le-Duc, is emphasised by A. van der Woud, Waarheid en karakter. Het debat over de bouwkunst, 1840-1900, Rotterdam 1997, 168-170.
21) According to Cuypers' son Jos, his father travelled to Rome 'to pay his obeisance to Pius IX': Cuypers, op. cit. (note 3), 59.
23) Sermon by Hellemons in PABO (quoted in fragments by Buijs, ibid. and Joh. F. van Hoek, Gids voor een bezoek aan de Basiliek van Oudenbosch, Oudenbosch 1980, 11-13).
24) In 1881, the art teacher Florschütz, the sculptor De Vriendt, the painter Dirkx and others travelled to Rome. In 1926, photos and models of details from St. Peter's were supplied by Alessandro Antonelli, 'painter' of the Fabbrica di San Pietro. In 1931, the local painter Cornelis Raaijmakers returned from Rome with a large number of photographs which he used in painting the interior of the dome. Documents in PABO.
25) M. J. G. Buijs, 'Rondom de Cour': de geschiedenis en herbestemming van het complex Saint Louis te Oudenbosch, Oudenbosch 2001, 44-48. The cupola was not erected until 1888-1889. The external 'Roman' porticoes were demolished in 1954.
26) Chr. van Langen, Tussen windvaan en koepel: vertelsels over de congregatie van Saint Louis, Oudenbosch 1940, 153-167.
27) Report by Cuypers, 20 November 1860 in PABO: 'a building that does not have the slightest artistic value'.
28) Sermon, cit. (note 23).
29) Letter from Cuypers to Hellemons, 10 June 1861, PABO.
30) Sermon, cit. (note 23).
31) The only letter written by Cuypers from Rome in PABO (4 pages, dated 28 March).
33) Several documents in PABO. In Cuypers' archive, there is a drawing of an altar baldachino modelled on that by Bernini over the tomb of St. Peter. CA d 1198.
34) Hellemons explains the well-considered principles of this disposition in the sermon, cit. (note 23).
35) J. Kalf, De katholieke kerken in Nederland..., Amsterdam 1906, 495. Without doubt, this is the version authorised by Cuypers himself, Cuypers being the book's official 'editor'.
36) Brom, op. cit. (note 7), 303.