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Valentijn Bisschop S.J., *Lof der suyverheydt* (1626, 1632)

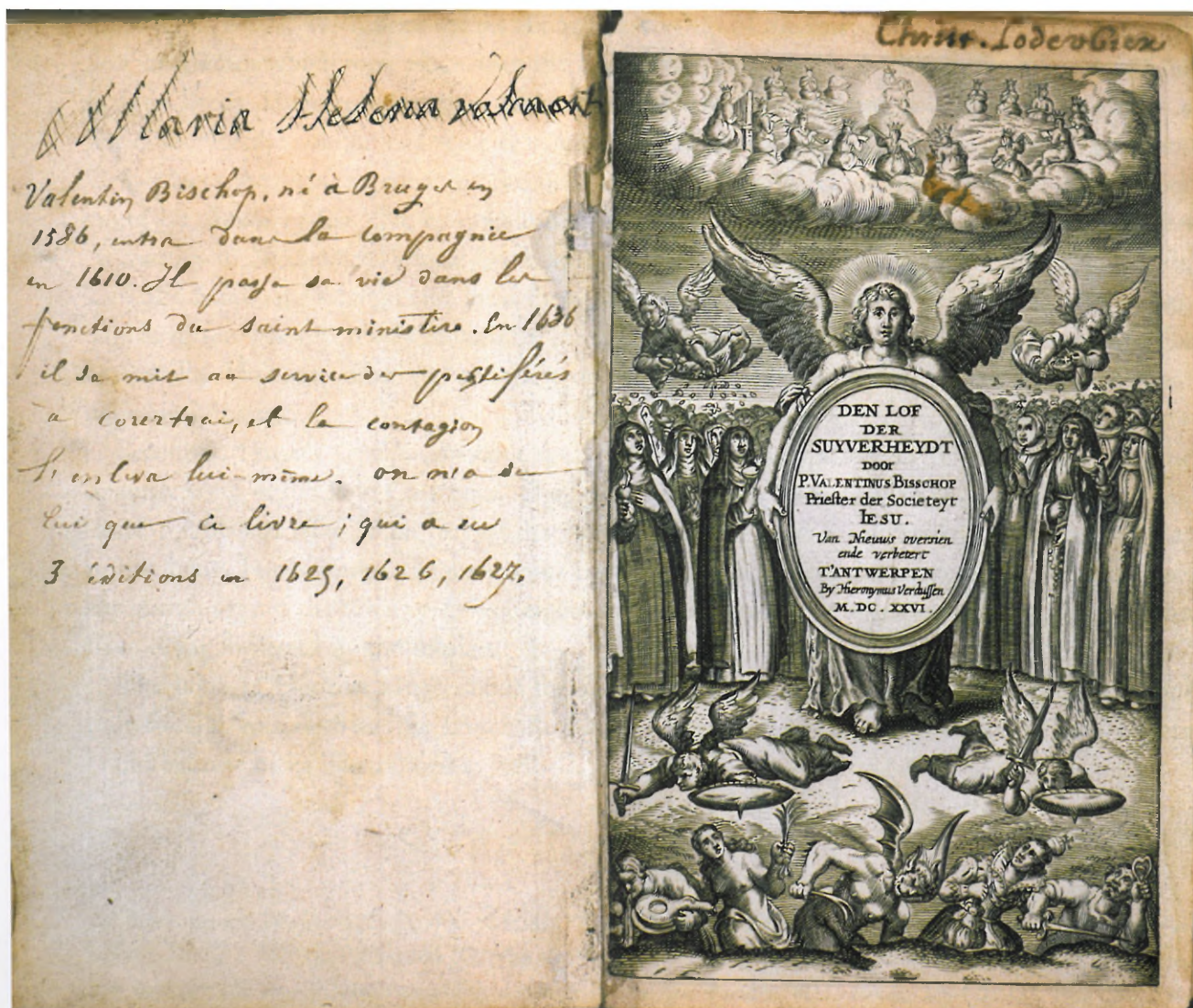
Den lof der suyverheydt door P. Valentinus Bisschop priester der Societeyt Iesu. Van nieuws oversien ende verbeteret. T'Antwerpen: by Hieronymus Verdussen, 1626. *, A-P8, Q6, Aa-Tt8; [16], 250, [2 blanco], 297, [6], [1 blanco] p. // 8° [15,8 × 9,3].

Provenance: Maria Helena Valcaert; Christ Lodewicx; Jh Daelemans, onderpastor te Uccle, 1839 (ms). Binding: contemporary, calfskin, traces of copper clasps, wooden boards, gilt supralibros (SJ logo) on boards. 2-000284/A

Lof der suyverheydt. Het derde boek inhoudende de gheestelijcke oeffeningen ende regel der maechden door P. Valentinus Bisschop priester der Societeijt Iesu. Van nieuws oversien ende zeer verbeteret.

T'Antwerpen: bij Joan Cnobbaert, 1632. A-Oo8, Pp4; 583, [15] p.: ill. // 8° [15,7 × 19,2].

Provenance: Seminarii Culeburgensis S.J. (bookplate); Bibl. Coll. Neom. S.J.; Bibliotheca Collegii Neomagensis S.J.; SJ Bibliotheek Berchmanianum Nijmegen (stamps). Binding: contemporary, parchment (black painted). 2-004515/A



VALENTIJN (Valentinus) Bisschop (Bruges 1586 – Kortrijk 1636) entered the Society of Jesus in 1610 as a member of the Flemish Jesuit Province, after having been ordained in Bruges three weeks earlier. In 1621, he took his vows as *coadjutor formatus spiritualis*, and was sent to the *Missio Hollandica*. At first, he assisted in the ambulant Jesuit mission in Groningen, one of the northern Provinces of the Dutch Republic. After problems with the secular clergy over Bisschop's jurisdiction, he was transferred to Rotterdam. In 1629, he was stationed in Nijmegen, to where he was recalled only a few years later. Still later, he worked in Antwerp, Bruges and then Kortrijk, where he contracted the plague while caring for patients and subsequently died in 1636.

With the exception of a ten-page long *strena spiritualis* (spiritual New Year's present), his writings are limited to the two volumes under scrutiny. *Den lof der suyverheydt* ("In Praise of Chastity," books one and two), first appeared in 1625 and was reprinted in 1626; *Lof der suyverheydt. Het derde boek inhoudende de gheestelijcke oefeningen ende regel der maechden* ("In Praise of Chastity, the third book containing the spiritual exercises and the rule for the virgins") first appeared in 1627 and was reprinted in 1632.

In Rotterdam, he not only founded separate Marian sodalities for men and women, but also functioned as the spiritual director for a group of so-called 'spiritual virgins' (*klopjes*). These unmarried women devoted themselves to God, leading a non-cloistered religious life under the guidance of a secular or regular priest, without further official ecclesiastical approval (see pp. 212-215). Contemporary observers within the Dutch Republic explained this choice by the political situation that prevented these women from entering a convent because Catholicism was officially banned. However, outside of the Dutch Republic, where women could freely choose between the convent or a life as a spiritual virgin, a substantial number of spiritually ambitious women also preferred a non-cloistered religious existence. Examples from the Southern Netherlands and France particularly illustrate this.

These two volumes of Bisschop's *Lof der suyverheydt*, both second editions, "revised and improved," combine an apology for the way of life of spiritual virgins based on the evangelical counsels of chastity, obedience and poverty (book one and two) with specific rules or guidelines geared towards the implementation of these counsels beyond convent walls (book three). *Lof der suyverheydt* is one of thirty-four books that appeared between 1570 and 1730 in Dutch or in a Dutch translation that specifically dealt with the state in life and the religious regime of spiritual virgins. Most of them were printed and ecclesiastically approved in Antwerp, and thus primarily meant for a market in this diocese in the homogeneously Catholic Southern Netherlands. Yet, they found their way to the Northern Netherlands as well. Invariably, they were of a small format, which indicated that they were intended for regular use. The majority (twenty-three) appeared after 1650, which may indicate a growth of readership. It is estimated that in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century nearly 5,000 women opted for a life as a spiritual virgin. Most of them lived either independently, in small groups with like-minded women, or with relatives, always under the guidance of a secular or regular priest.

Bisschop's *Lof der suyverheydt* represents an early and extensive example of this particular genre. He encouraged his female readership to choose material and spiritual autonomy through a spiritual marriage to Jesus Christ. Inspired by Jesuit theologian Leonardus Lessius (1545-1623), Bisschop argued that the way of life of spiritual virgins was indeed just as dignified as the ecclesiastically approved religious state, and would equally ensure the salvation of their souls. His plea for a life devoted to God beyond the convent – which may be read as an explicitly formulated alternative



to the recognized religious state – influenced later authors, like Dutch secular priest Joannes Lindeborn (1630-1696), who was sentenced to correct such views in his *Scala Jacob* (Antwerp [i.e. Amsterdam]: Joachim van Metelen, 1666) by the Congregation of the Index in 1667. Bisschop was of the opinion that the state in life of spiritual virgins demanded a specific calling that was as valid as the monastic calling of nuns. His reasoning not only clearly tends to defend a *via media* or a *via tertia*, but is also an attempt to upgrade the status of the spiritual virgins who canonically remained laypersons after being initiated in their new life style. Especially where he deals with the tasks allotted to spiritual virgins, this upgrading shows a tendency to put these women on an equal footing with the clergy. He denotes their responsibility to teach the tenets of the Catholic faith while acknowledging that it officially remained the work of ordained men. Here, he explicitly alludes to women who lament being barred from the priesthood on account of their gender, and encourages them to take up religious instruction in order to circumvent such gendered boundaries.

The provenances of both volumes illustrate the dual intended readership of this specific genre. Spiritual virgins were the obvious readers in mind who could particularly benefit from the practical guidelines as to how

to structure their days and organise the religious regime that ensured the propriety of this particular unmarried life. Perhaps Maria Helena Valcaert (books one-two) was a spiritual virgin. The entry of the name of “Jh Daelemans,” assistant priest in the small town of Uccle/Ukkel (now a Brussels suburb) in 1839, as well as the label of the Jesuit-run seminary in Culemborg and the stamps of the Berchmanianum in Nijmegen (book three) – which served as a house of studies for the Dutch Jesuit Province between 1929 and 1967 – illustrate that Bisschop’s books kept capturing the attention of the secular and regular clergy. This can best be explained by the creative defences of the virginal state in life, which was part of a polemic among secular and regular priests in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also served a purpose in the confessional debate with Protestant authors over the significance of virginity.

Marit Monteiro

Lit.: Sommervogel XII, 1512; PIBA I, 112; *Menologium van de Sociëteit van Jezus voor de Nederlandsche Provincie I* (Leiden, [1913]), 227-230a; BCNI 7635 (Bk 1-2); M. De Vroede, *Kwezels’ en ‘Zusters’: De geestelijke dochters in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, 17de en 18de eeuw*, Verhandelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen, Letteren en Schone Kunsten van België, Klasse der Letteren, 56/152 (Brussels, 1994), esp. chapter 1; Marit Monteiro, *Geestelijke maagden: Leven tussen klooster en wereld in Noord-Nederland gedurende de zeventiende eeuw* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1996), esp. chapter III.