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A windmill at Groot-Ammers in the Netherlands

The Dutch plan

Will innovation save this church?

Stories by ROBERT J. McCLORY
Amsterdam and other cities in Holland

The 11 a.m. Sunday liturgy at St. Dominic Church in Amsterdam exemplifies the paradoxes of Catholicism in Holland. It is -- or is meant to be -- a Mass, with a soaring eucharistic prayer sung in alternative parts by the presider, the choir and the congregation. Other parts of the Mass familiar to Catholics are missing. This is an ecumenical Mass, unlike anything most Catholics would encounter at their local churches.

On a Sunday in November, the church was packed, as it is regularly, with some 600 worshippers, the majority elderly or middle-aged but with a substantial representation of younger people, including families with children. So powerful was the music and singing and so involved the congregation, it was impossible not to be moved. It did not look like something dead or dying, as Catholicism in Holland is reputed to be, but like something impossibly new.

There is a saying among Dutch Catholics these days that the situation of the church in the Netherlands is "hopeless but not serious." This Zen-like assessment reflects dual realities of the Dutch church: It is the place where some of the most dramatic innovations in Catholic practice in the past half-century have occurred simultaneously with one of the most precipitous drops in church membership in the Western world.

International interest in the state of Catholicism in this part of the world was stirred in September when the Dutch province of the Dominican religious order sent shock waves around the world with a 34-page booklet benignly titled “Church and Ministry” and distributed to all 1,425 parishes in the country.

The booklet proposes that because of a serious shortage of priests and a revised theology of ministry coming from Vatican II, the time is at hand for parish communities to designate laypersons to preside at the Eucharist in place of priests -- a form of ordination from below. It also declares that current church law, which bars women and married men from priestly service, stems from a “historically outdated philosophy of humankind and an antiquated view of sexuality.”



Free-falling numbers

According to the Catholic Institute for Social-Religious Research, there were 4.3 million Catholics among the Netherlands' 16 million people in 2006. That figure represents a decrease of 700,000 Catholics since 2000 and 1.3 million since 1980. The reality is even starker than the figures, since only about 60 percent of that 4.3 million really consider themselves Catholic in anything other than name. Sunday Mass attendance is about 7 percent of the Catholic population, down from 14 percent in 1990 and 24 percent in 1980. The total of active diocesan priests in 2006 was 950, compared to 2,150 in 1990 and 3,400 in 1980. Few young men attend theology schools. Ordinations have averaged 10 to 15 per year for the whole country. The Breda diocese had no ordinations for a recent stretch of almost 15 years.

Similar declarations have come from progressive theologians and other reform-minded Catholics for years, but this document, approved by an entire province of a respected religious order, is particularly dramatic and bold. What did these Dutch Dominicans hope to achieve? Some say it is best understood in the context of a country where Christianity has been on a steep downward

trajectory for decades, losing 22 percent of its members in the last 17 years alone.



-- Margaret McClory

Ton Bernts

Ton Bernts, director of the Catholic Institute for Social-Religious Research in Nijmegen, traces the decline to the usual suspects -- secularization and the loss of respect for virtually all forms of institutional authority. "People just don't accept what they're told any more," said Bernts. "I would say the time of the traditional territorial parish is over." He could point to virtually no signs in Holland of Catholic institutions that are showing strength elsewhere -- no new, conservative religious orders of women, very little evangelical or charismatic activity, only sparse interest in religious movements such as Communion and Liberation or Focolare, no visible presence of Opus Dei.

The only faith that appears to be growing in this part of the world is Islam, whose adherents in the Netherlands are approaching a million, he noted.

Though he sees no new models within Christianity to justify his cautious optimism, he believes it will survive, if in "a modest way," but only "if it can find a way to sell itself better, but I don't really see new models," Bernts said.

Little religion on campus

The challenge of engaging the next generation was visible at Nijmegen's sprawling Radboud University, which is, in effect, the official Catholic University of the Netherlands. There, in sharp contrast to the vibrancy of religion on many campuses in the United States, but perhaps as a harbinger of changes to come, Dutch students interviewed by *NCR* repeatedly said that religion and religious issues play no part in campus life. "If there's as much as 1 percent of Catholics here who have any interest, I would be surprised," said one junior history major. "It's not that we're angry at the church; it's just that the whole thing seems irrelevant."

In the lunchroom, Elam Zeyrek, a 25-year-old law student raised as an Orthodox Syrian Christian, was just finishing his sandwich. "Religion isn't discussed here except for Islam, and then it's all about the troubles with terrorism," he said. "Personally, I believe in God, but it's up to everyone to choose." Zeyrek admitted he often feels an urge to ask for a blessing when he sits down to eat, "so there's something still there, though it's not at the center of my life."



-- Margaret McClory

Marit Monteiro

Appearances are not deceiving, said Marit Monteiro, professor of Catholic history at Radboud. “Those interested in changing the structure, that generation is dying,” she said, “and young people aren’t interested.” Many Catholics may still continue “believing,” she said, but “not belonging. They don’t challenge the Vatican or the Vatican’s interpretation.”

In contrast, she said, in the 1960s and ’70s hopes were high. Those were the years when “the bishops went along with the rhetoric of renewal and modernization.”

The hierarchical part of the equation began to change in the 1980s when the Vatican stepped in and appointed conservative bishops, most notably Joannes Gijsen, to the southern, heavily Catholic diocese of Roermond. Renewal efforts were discouraged throughout the country, liberal priests and other church leaders lost their positions, the popular Dutch Catechism was suppressed. Though mass protests were mounted against the crackdown, by the year 2000, said Monteiro, “Catholics had reached the bottom of their endurance.”

In 2003 the reformist Eighth Day Movement, which had once drawn thousands to its rallies and conferences, shut down for lack of interest. The enthusiasm was gone and no one would pick up the baton.

Meanwhile, the Dutch Dominicans in Holland have remained exceptionally progressive, said Monteiro, who has written a history of the order in Holland. “They are courageous,” she said, “but now they are old and frail.” She described the new booklet on ordination of the laity as “their swan song.”

Hints of a flame

It was not difficult to find lay leaders who, while acknowledging the church’s dwindling profile, are deeply involved in church affairs and see hints of flame in the embers. Some are members of the Dutch Dominican Lay Fraternity, which extends the influence of the religious order into education, journalism, theology, social work and other professions. Jan van Hooydonk, 52, is editor of the magazine *Vol Zin* (loosely translated as “Full of Meaning”), a joint Catholic-Protestant publication dealing with spirituality, worship and theology. “I would think only 5 to 10 percent of Catholics support official church positions on things like birth control, euthanasia and male priesthood,” he said. “Unfortunately, there’s no discussion of these issues with the hierarchy.”



-- Margaret McClory

Jan van
Hooydonk

But van Hooydonk believes rejection of institutional religion does not necessarily translate into full-blown atheism or indifference. “People today are looking for symbols and rituals to nourish their lives,” he said, citing as an offbeat example a tremendous popular interest in the Dutch monarchy and the doings of Queen Beatrice and the royal family.

There still exists, he said, a healthy and creative interchange between Catholics and members of the Dutch Protestant church. Informal liturgies are organized by laypeople, priests and ministers, he said, on a larger scale than the public realizes. Van Hooydonk himself is a member of such a group, which celebrates Christmas, Easter and other occasions at Nijmegen’s historic St. Stephen Catholic Church. The Netherlands branch of the Catholic peace organization Pax Christi recently merged with the Protestant-led Interchurch Peace Movement, he noted, and Catholics are active members of the Netherlands’ National Council of Churches.

The ecumenical activity that prospered following Vatican II is largely ignored by church authority today. Nevertheless, it seems clear from the abundance of surviving and ongoing ecumenical contact that the future of Dutch Catholicism, however limited, will have a distinctive, even radical ecumenical character.

Ecumenism at St. Dominic’s

A dramatic example of that is the service at St. Dominic Church. The sermon the day this writer visited was delivered by the church’s copastor, Miriam Wolhuis, a Catholic theologian, on the presence of God in daily life as understood by Martin Buber. The presider during the eucharistic prayer was a layman, and seated near the altar, wearing a sweater and tie, was 84-year-old Jan Nieuwenhuis, the man who launched this ecumenical endeavor some 40 years ago and who remains a Dominican Catholic priest in good standing. He was one of the four authors of the Dominican booklet on ordination.



-- Margaret McClory

Jan Nieuwenhuis and Miriam Wolthuis

Following the service, a Protestant woman said she and her husband have been coming for 11 years because “it’s a place where you can bring your questions and your doubts and you’re not going to be dictated to.”

“We separated some 400 years ago,” said an usher. “Now, God willing, we’re getting back together again.”

Asked if we had participated in a real Mass with a real consecration, Nieuwenhuis said, “Of course, but actually it is we who are consecrated, we who are sent forth to break our lives for others.”

Nieuwenhuis and several other Dominicans were appointed to St. Dominic’s in 1964 when the church was in poor condition and had few parishioners. “We were told to do what needed to be done,” he said. When the vernacular liturgy was introduced, the old choir, preferring Latin, left and was replaced by a local youth choir. “Immediately, the singing got better,” said Nieuwenhuis. Then a Protestant minister asked if he could join the parish and preach on occasion. The congregation voted him in, “and immediately the preaching got better.” Then a secular priest who had married asked to be involved. The congregation approved again, and outreach to the community got better. Nieuwenhuis said he and the staff then visited the bishop, who declared the situation at St. Dominic’s “impossible.”

In the 1980s the bishop attempted to close down the church and threatened to excommunicate Nieuwenhuis, but since the Dominicans are an exempt order, answerable only to their own superiors, his hands were tied. “I’ve had the support of the Dominican Order all these years,” he said, “and that is essential for this to happen.” The current pastoral staff includes copastors, one Catholic and one Protestant, and eight preachers, one of whom is Nieuwenhuis. More than 3,000 persons are associated with the church, many serving as volunteers in outreach programs.

Grass-roots ecumenism “represents the future of the Catholic church,” he said. “You can’t wait for the Vatican. You must do it.”

Hope in the present situation

Van Hooydonk, the editor, called the radical proposals regarding the Eucharist in the Dominican booklet “perfectly logical,” since “the Eucharist belongs to the community, and the community has a right to the Eucharist that takes precedence over church laws that restrict priesthood to celibate men.” The proposals stem directly from the theology of Dominican Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx, whom van Hooydonk called “the intellectual father of progressive Catholicism” in the Netherlands ([see related story](#)).

In effect then, the priest shortage has brought into the light Schillebeeckx’s theology “from below,” largely veiled from public consideration for some 27 years. It is just such developments, suggested van Hooydonk, that make the present hopeless situation “not so serious,” in fact, open to new developments.



-- Margaret McClory
Peter Nissen

Peter Nissen, who appears so often on television for his insights on Catholic matters that he has been called “the Dutch John Allen,” sees the Dominican booklet as “a survival guide.” At his home in Nijmegen, the dapper, 50-year-old history professor at Radboud University said the Dominican booklet is essential for the continually increasing number of parishes without priests. The proliferation of so-called “Word and Communion” services -- using pre-consecrated hosts and led by a lay pastoral worker -- has been growing each year throughout the Netherlands (630 such services in 2004 compared to 1,900 Sunday Masses that year). As it turns out, the compromise rituals are satisfactory neither to the hierarchy, who believe Catholics increasingly see the services as an actual Mass, nor for reformers, for the same reason, though they would prefer laity to be empowered to be eucharistic presiders.

The apparent strategy of the hierarchy now is to reduce the number of these Word and Communion services, so that eventually a priest will preside at every Eucharist. The price of course will be an increasing number of already exhausted circuit-rider priests, increased import of foreign priests and a steady trend of closed or merged parishes.

The Dominican plan would allow small basic communities to flourish under the leadership of their chosen eucharistic presiders. “Maybe such Eucharists aren’t quite as full as those presided over by a pastor, but they have meaning and they have value,” said Nissen. The Dominicans realize that neither they nor the dwindling supply of other clergy will be able to preserve Eucharist as the central act of the church, he explained, so this proposal is in a way “their last will and testament to the Catholics of the Netherlands.” The challenge is “how can we continue

as liberal, pluralistic and ecumenical and still preserve and protect a relationship with the broader church, the church in the world, and the church over the centuries?” Nissen did not seem to think the task impossible.

When I met Dominican Fr. Andre Lascaris, another of the booklet’s four authors, at the order’s monastery in Huissen, a quiet, tree-lined town some 20 miles from Nijmegen, he was in high spirits. Some 550 people had turned out for a hastily organized conference in Amsterdam on the controversial “Church and Ministry” document three days before and gave nearly unanimous approval to the recommendations. “I was delighted,” he said. “We wanted open discussion and we’re getting it.” At 68, Lascaris, the youngest of the authors and a bit impeded by his long battle with Parkinson’s disease, is still ready for controversy. His career as a Dominican includes early service in South Africa, from which country he was expelled for publicly protesting the apartheid system, and assignments as editor of Dominican publications, novice master, prior, co-provincial and peacemaker in Northern Ireland. He remains active with the Dominican Study Center for Theology and Society, which he founded.

Nothing new

“What we are proposing is nothing new,” he said. “Vatican II put the People of God first and the hierarchy second as ministers to the people [in the order of chapters in the document *Lumen Gentium*]. But the bishops are still far away from that thinking and acting that way. They don’t look or think like servants. They see priesthood as a form of monarchy.” Since the congregation as a whole “creates” the Eucharist, he said, the priest or other presider is present in an essentially “functionary role.”



-- Margaret McClory
Fr. Lascaris

Lascaris uses dramatic analogies to make his points during our discussion. Suppose, he said, we discover rational beings in another galaxy 100 light years away. We can’t possibly go there but we can communicate; they read our scriptures and come to believe in Jesus Christ as savior. So now they can baptize one another, but are we to tell them they can’t have Eucharist because we can’t send anyone with the power that far? “No!” said Lascaris. “The Eucharist comes from below.”

Later he opened his Bible to the Book of Daniel and cited the account in Chapter 2 of the prophet’s interpretation of the king’s dream about a great statue of gold, silver and bronze but with legs partly of earthenware. When struck by a rock the feet collapsed, toppling the structure.

“The church is fragile,” he said. “It would be better if democratization comes before the whole thing collapses.”

He does not believe “Church and Ministry” alone will alter church policy. “It’s dialogue we want,” he said. “We don’t expect miracles but we have to keep knocking on the door.”

A few days later Lascaris, summoned by the Dominican master, Fr. Carlos Azpiroz Costa, left for Rome in the company of the Dutch Dominican provincial and another Dominican. When I spoke with Lascaris by phone on his return, he was unrepentant. Yes, he said, Costa was “annoyed” that he had not been informed about the distribution of the booklet and he had suggested the authors redo the document to correct certain misinterpretations.

“Of course this was impossible,” Lascaris said. So it was agreed that an article critical of the booklet, which is being written by a French Dominican, will be sent to all the parishes that had received “Church and Ministry.”

“This could further the dialogue,” he said.

Robert J. McClory, a longtime contributor to *NCR*, lives in Chicago.

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-- Margaret McClory

Bishop de Korte

Smart, suave, he may be next Dutch cardinal

Throughout Holland the word is that Gerard de Korte has a good chance to become the next archbishop of Utrecht and eventually the tiny country's next cardinal. He is currently the auxiliary bishop of the archdiocese (one of only three auxiliaries in the seven Dutch dioceses). The current cardinal-archbishop, Adrainus Simonis, is retiring this month.

I met de Korte at his stately residence in Zwolle, 45 miles from Utrecht. Handsome, suave and looking younger than his 52 years, he handed me a page and a half of "talking points" for the interview and proceeded to explain them one by one. I feared a one-way conversation. The points stated that "the bishops cannot support" the Dominicans' solution for the priest shortage, that any "relativity" in the matter of sacraments is "not acceptable," that the question of married priests and women priests "is already decided."

He moved through the talking points briskly, then leaned back in his chair as if to say, "Go ahead, shoot!" I did, and his answers were surprising. Despite his episcopal bearing, there was no arrogance or defensiveness in his replies. At one point he said, "There is a real tension today between the rules of the church and the lives of the people. We are supposed to help them find the good life, and it's not easy." I said many people had told me the bishops of Holland are hopelessly out of touch with the people, have nothing to say to them.

"I know," he said. "We cannot reach the people now. I believe we must learn to listen, listen, listen. That's what bishops are supposed to do." Then he reminded me that bishops also have to defend the deposit of faith. I suggested that some teachings that were once thought to be in the deposit have been since removed and that some others need to go. He laughed, and this led to a friendly, extended exchange of ideas about to whom a bishop owes his first allegiance.

He showed me his collection of books by Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx, whose theology he finds “creative and interesting.” But his preference, he said, is for the work of the Protestant Swiss theologian Karl Barth, who deeply influenced such Protestant theologians as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Richard Neibuhr and Paul Tillich. Barth’s concept of God as transcendent, “wholly other,” contrasts starkly with contemporary images of God as intimately connected to individual human beings.

De Korte said he is working to establish a network of small faith groups called “Faith Now” in the archdiocese and he hopes to see it spread. And he is strongly supportive of a study by the bishops of the feasibility of ordaining qualified married men. “It’s unfortunate,” he said, “that some bishops don’t even want to talk about it.”

He leaves the impression that he is an intelligent man wrestling with the tension between his allegiance to Rome on the one hand and a genuine desire to be a bishop in touch with the people on the other.



-- Margaret McClory

Theologian Eric Borgman

Like an Old Testament prophet

Eric Borgman is a Dutch force of nature whose opinions on Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular can be read on the op-ed pages of daily newspapers, heard on radio religion commentary and experienced in lecture halls at the Catholic university in Tilburg, where he is a professor of systematic theology. When he entered a restaurant in Utrecht for an interview, his bright eyes, long white hair and beard gave him the look of an Old Testament prophet. And he sounds like one, too.

Although Borgman, 50, is a member of the Dominican Lay Fraternity and gave one of the speeches at the recent conference on the order's recommendations concerning ordination, he immediately dismissed the proposals as "a last gesture of despair."

"It won't succeed, nothing will succeed!" Borgman thundered, his voice arousing the curiosity of other diners. "Nothing happens at the diocesan level in this country, everything is blocked, nothing works!"

There is only one question worth asking, he said: "What does it mean to be church in this situation at this time?"

The answer, he declared, is not to be found in ecclesiastical condemnations of secularization and not in rambling on and on about the culture of death. "That only reinforces the belief that the Catholic church has nothing to offer. The real answer is getting to know the people and dealing

with the issues that are important to them.” The church, he said, ought to have “a public presence at the center of society” where people are wrestling with the big questions like “what is community, how can a society be integrated, how do we deal with insecurity in a global society, how can we hope when we don’t see a future? We need a theology of the public domain.”

Borgman is convinced the themes of theology -- transcendence, compassion, salvation -- can speak to the world if translated into intelligible language and related to the signs of the time. “It’s necessary for the church to stop emphasizing that there’s something that only we have and start pointing to where God is already at work in the world, start showing the good that is already happening,” he said.

“We’ll not get leadership from the clergy,” he insisted. “They only ordain people who are celibate and pious and can’t lead anything.” He paused for a moment. “You know,” he said, “we could really use some bishops who embody the tradition of Catholicism. That could be a beginning.”

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-- Margaret McClory

Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx

At 93, renowned Dominican still at work

Holland's towering Dominican theologian, Fr. Edward Schillebeeckx, is with us yet, though at 93 his physical presence has diminished even as his influence flourishes.

I requested a meeting with him, knowing that though he was not involved in writing the startling new booklet by the four Dutch Dominicans, the radical proposals they put forward stem directly from his thought.

The Belgian-born Schillebeeckx remains in Nijmegen, where he taught for so many years at the University of Nijmegen, and where, in a small house on a quiet street, he awaits publication of his next book. I had been told that he is in failing health and might be too weak to receive visitors. But when I phoned, his full-time caregiver, Dominican Sr. Hadewych Snijdewind, said we could come.

My wife and I found Schillebeeckx sitting in his study, thin but bright-eyed, clearheaded and ready to chat. This man's theological ideas, expressed in some 400 books and articles, published in 14 languages, have influenced several generations of Catholic thinkers. Although he has endured years of Vatican scrutiny and the Vatican has publicly rejected some of his ideas, he has managed to escape both silencing and censure.

It was Schillebeeckx who contended in his 1980 book *Ministry: Leadership in the Community of Jesus Christ* that the church had gone awry by connecting the faithful's right to Eucharist to

some “magical power” of the hierarchy to ordain, thereby disconnecting it from the community of Christians. He noted that the Council of Chalcedon in the fifth century had declared any ordination of a priest or deacon illegal, as well as null and void, unless the person being ordained had been chosen by a particular community to be its leader.

Because the church has basically ignored that clear directive of the early church throughout the second millennium, Schillebeeckx recommended “new possibilities” for reconnecting the Eucharist to its community roots, even if such actions contradict current church law.

In “Church and Ministry,” the newly released document, the Dominicans put forward such “new possibilities” as this: “Men and women can be chosen to preside at the Eucharist by the church community; that is, ‘from below,’ and can then ask a local bishop to ordain these people ‘from above.’ ”

If, however, “a bishop should refuse a confirmation or ordination” of such persons “on the basis of arguments not involving the essence of the Eucharist, such as a requirement that deacons or priests be celibate, parishes may move forward without the bishops’ participation, remaining confident “that they are able to celebrate a real and genuine Eucharist when they are together in prayer and share bread and wine.”

This notion of community-based ordination was in the background as we sipped our wine, nibbled on cheese crackers and talked of other things. Schillebeeckx mentioned his many trips to the United States and shared his view that most young Catholics are “choosing their own vision of Christianity.” He said he feared the institutional church did not “have enough movement toward Jesus Christ.” And he spoke about his soon-to-be-published book, a collection of 60 of his homilies, with a title still being fine-tuned: something like *Weren’t Our Hearts Burning Within Us: Theology as a Model for Proclamation*.

As for the future, Schillebeeckx is optimistic, “always optimistic.”

“I believe in God and in Jesus Christ,” he said, as if to ask: “And what else would one need?”