

TINE VAN OSSELAER

The Pious Sex. Catholic Constructions of Masculinity and Femininity in Belgium, c. 1800-1940

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The controversy surrounding “gender ideology” has made headlines in recent months. On the one hand, social science researchers have analysed and deconstructed gender relations and, on the other, militants, who mainly refer to Catholicism. According to the well-known *Ambiguous and debatable terms regarding family life and ethical questions* directed by the Pontifical Council for the family (2003), the catholic creed objects to any new representation of the distinction between men and women.

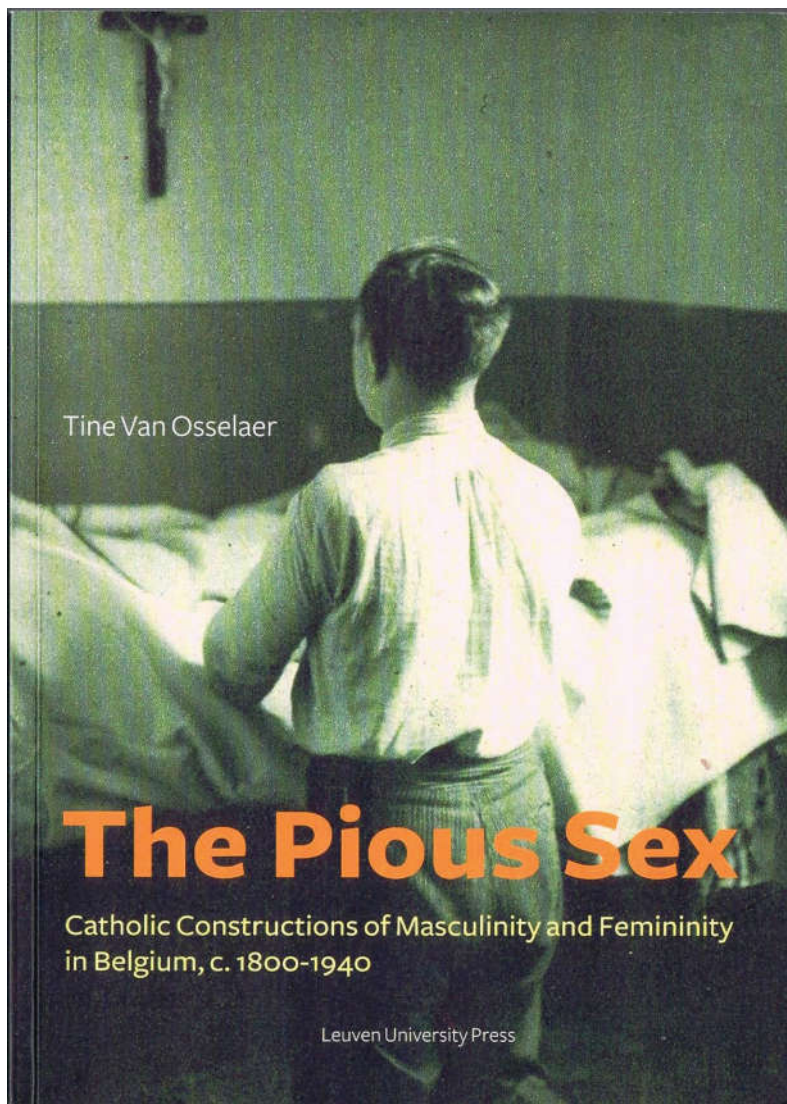
They claim that the difference between the sexes is the natural order of things and willed by God. To question this reality puts society at grave risk. Over the last years, several studies have enquired into the history of this rhetoric. Tine Van Osselaer’s thesis contributes to this research with her analysis of the instrumentalisation of the difference between the sexes by the Catholic world. We can only conclude that the church invented “gender ideology”. It was indeed the church that, since the eighteenth century at least, worked to construct an ideology, by means of textbooks, books, sermons, newspapers and encyclicals, aimed at imposing a radical differentialist vision between men and women. It was also the church that tried to impregnate consciences through two movements closely examined in the thesis : the *Liges du Sacré-Cœur* and *Action catholique*.

The importance of this study lies in demonstrating that this was made at the cost of numerous contradictions, opposites and logical twists, not least the roles at home. Women are expected to watch over the moral and spiritual well-being of their children and husbands. Yet, the church urges fathers to take an interest in the household, i.e. to take on domestic concerns which should however not affect them. In the same vein, it is unclear which role is expected from women. While being constantly reduced to their role as the “weaker sex”, they are also required to embody the strong female characters of the bible.

A woman should be the “angel in the home” (p. 85¹) and create a kind of “little church” in her home, in other words be the “family priest” (p. 86). Their virtue reflects on society as they keep their children away from non-Catholic schools and provide soldiers for the church. However, their devotion must not be calculated. They must not be biased (hypocritical, unstable, disturbingly emotional) and burden the priests with their presence, nor question their authority.

These contradictions stem from strategic changes. Due to a decline in fertility and the adoption of universal male suffrage in the beginning of the twentieth century, the clergy became increasingly interested in paternity. The father had to be respected and had to inculcate the value of discipline in his offspring. He must bless them every morning and evening. The solidity of the catholic family and consequently the solidity of society rested on his shoulders. One of the clergy’s challenges was to attract men

1. NT : All page numbers refer to the French edition.



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to Sunday mass, which they increasingly deserted. The clergy claimed this was the influence of socialism and even more of the alleged “feminization” of the church. The phenomenon was seen as a drama with disastrous consequences, since the men were the guardians of social order. Leo XII was particularly concerned with this issue and wrote about it in a letter to the Belgian episcopate on 21 July 1899. The priests were henceforth encouraged to have a differentiated behaviour according to their flock’s sex, by encouraging and flattering men. Women must of course inspire mistrust (sexual relations with them being always possible). This attitude entailed problems regarding the priests’ sexual identity. Indeed, they stood for the exact opposite of what was expected from a “true man” : they were bachelors, childless and their dresses were not exactly virile.

The obsession with the family which pervaded the church’s projects in the XIXth century was perfectly timed for the cult of the Sacred Heart. Indeed, the consecratory act of the Sacred Heart was accomplished through a solemn ceremony which called for a total engagement on the part of the family. Later, the ceremony took place inside the home around a statue of the Sacred Heart, an object which would reinforce family cohesion.

The evolvement of the Apostleship of Prayer, a devotional movement dedicated to the Sacred Heart, eloquently represents the acceleration and reinforcement of the gender construction. At the beginning, the movement was accessible to all, only requiring its members to pray and offer their sufferings and their work to the Sacred Heart. Several women took part in the movement, without

being reproached of going beyond the bounds of their competences, i.e. the domestic sphere. Men were invited to take part in the movement and their participation was carefully noted. In this sense, they were invited to express their feelings and the tears they shed were the tokens of their faith (p. 127). In the late XIXth century, the movement changed its public image and its target to concentrate its efforts on working-class males. The Apostleship of Prayer was seen as an instrument to bring them back to communion and to church. The virilisation of the movement was progressively exacerbated through a change in the ceremonial enactment towards a more public and aggregative practice. Apparently flattered by the attention paid to them, the movement was joined by numerous men. Subsequently, it was adapted to fit the busy lives and supposed psychology of these men. Prayers were shortened and made more “masculine”, and group activities were carried out to encourage fraternity. In order to insure commitment, home-based propaganda addressed also their wives, in order to convince them to support... and keep an eye on their husbands. Logically, women organised their own movement, which was allowed as long as the feminine league remained different in form and content (p.143), as taking part in public enactments was of course out of the question.

This discourse was flavoured with heroic glorification. Women were to embody piety, tenderness, generosity, shyness, modesty and sacrifice. Nuns could find examples of this among the martyrs (Joan of Arc, Saint Martha). For men, the model was more martial. Recurring to military metaphor, their examples were drawn from the epic stories of Pontifical Zouaves and from the Great War.

The heroic stance did not necessarily require fighting an enemy of Catholic faith, but could be accomplished by finding the courage to face other dangers like sickness (leprosy), hunger, etc.

Catholic Action groups developed along the same lines in the course of the XXth century. Even though the hierarchy was unwilling to risk the Church's national unity by exacerbating class distinction, they were eager to distinguish young from old, and men from women (p. 183). Each group had its own organization. The women's was different from the men's in the sense that the first included men : they were headed by priests.

The driving force of Catholic Action in mobilizing men was based on the premise that religion, having been feminized in the XIXth century and caused the men to desert it, had to be virilised and masculinized. At the time, the pervading social discourse repeatedly mentioned Europe's "masculinity crisis" and the danger faced by virility. The church responded by inviting men to be real men, not in their bodies but in their personalities. The propaganda drew from martial discourses and appealed to the courage of "Christ's soldiers". It also drew from profane vocabulary to reach the middle classes and businessmen. Martial imagery naturally matched the current climate.

Women's Catholic Action was formed somewhat later, and was of course based on what was expected from the "weak sex". Public manifestations like the men's were ruled out. The apostleship must be carried out in the family, and through parochial and missionary charity (p. 208) and must

be occasional, in order to support the men's activities.

The book's most interesting feature is that it reveals how the church's assertiveness in normalizing the sexes repeatedly faced obstacles, not only in the practical applications but also in the ontological system in which it was inscribed. How could the believers give up the ancient maternal image of Jesus, deny the role played by emotions and tears (feminine expressions !) to male pilgrims, or sever the martial body from its feelings, which were the source of faith ? This proves that in the gap between genders "there was still room for a grey zone in which metaphors crossed gender boundaries. The rhetoric on heroic personalities therefore not only confirmed binary gender construction (e.g. 'masculine courage'), but also indicated how flexible and elastic gendered images could be" (p. 169).

On the other hand, the differentiation of gendered characters corresponds to pastoral and propaganda strategies dependent of historical and geographical contexts. In order to depict this phenomenon, the author carried out a judicious cross-examination of perspectives (discourses and people) which allows to question the discourse, its reception and its results at every stage. In order to do this, she draws from a wide range of heuristic tools. The drawback could be that the book contains many repetitions, probably due to its structure based on sections of authors and of institutions. It could have been more practical to recur to a structure based on transversal topics. This negative aspect is nonetheless most insignificant if compared to the overall qualities of a work

which truly contributes to the history of the relations between gender and religion.

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