

Diabolic Unions:

Life and Marriage of Catholics in the United Provinces

Giada Pizzoni, University of St Andrews¹

In the Seventeenth century, the Netherlands were a pluralistic and multi-confessional country. However, understanding tolerance in modern day terms could be misleading. In the Dutch Provinces tolerance really meant private connivance and public suppression. This multi-confessional and corrupted society gave the Catholic Church the opportunity to reorganize itself and to survive in this hostile environment, therefore leading to a rejuvenated role of Catholicism. Catholics were accepted as long as they complied with strict legislation. Therefore, to what extent can we talk of a community at the margins? Certainly penal legislation was issued, nevertheless Catholics stayed part of the society, by marrying Protestants, and by interacting with non co-religionists on a daily basis. During the Dutch Golden age, Catholics survived by combining divine and human laws. Rome was far and shrewd strategies ensured survival and endurance.

During the seventeenth century in the Netherlands, Catholics were accepted as long as they complied with strict legislation. In various provinces they made up half of the inhabitants, therefore they could not be persecuted, because their opposition to such persecution could have led to civil war. When they became a threat during the Spanish Revolt, the Dutch Provinces issued laws to keep them out of political and social life. Between 1572 and 1594 Calvinism became the only official denomination, although the Reformed Church never became Church of the State. However, to what extent can we talk of a community at the margins? This article aims to contribute to the recent debate on a new role of Catholicism in the Dutch Republic. It surveys a community of missionaries and benefactors, whose financial dealings opened a path into the centre of Protestant society. The distance from Rome and the official legal position of Catholic clergy at this time did lead to disorganization, and yet it also allowed relative freedom from Papal oversight. Recent

¹ Giada Pizzoni, PhD Modern History, Faculty of History, St Katharine's Lodge, The Scores, KY16 9BA, St Andrews, UK. E-mail: gp44@st-andrews.ac.uk.

literature has pointed out the consequences of anti-Catholic policies on the communities.² In contrast this article aims to examine how these communities economically and socially engaged with this hostile society, in which although the Reformed Church was the only official church, no one was ever forced to conform. The presence of various religious denominations made the custom of marrying non-coreligionists frequent, therefore Dutch society became a multi-confessional and pluralistic one in seventeenth-century Europe, the only country in which all the diverse minorities were tolerated. Understanding the term ‘tolerance’ with a modern connotation could be misleading. In seventeenth century Netherlands, tolerance really meant: private connivance and public suppression.³ Unlike Italy or Spain, where people were simply burnt at the stake, Dutch dissenters had the right to practice their own religion, but it came at a high price which had to be negotiated with the public magistrate. Indeed, the word ‘tolerance’ always has a negative connotation because it implies the acceptance of someone who is perceived as being ‘different’. However, the atmosphere of growing uncertainty created by this multi-confessional and corrupted society gave the Catholic Church the opportunity to reorganize itself and to survive in this hostile environment, therefore leading to a rejuvenated role of Catholicism in these lands.

During the 1570s the Catholic faith was banned and outlawed in all the Provinces. Religious properties were confiscated and the last decade saw them taken into civic use. Entire communities lost their strongholds, Parish churches were closed, tithes were seized and processions were banned. The confiscation of all the public properties ran parallel to the marginalisation of the Catholic faith. Patronage was the only means of survival since wealthy

² Charles H. Parker, *Faith on the Margins, Catholic and Catholicism in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Henk F. K. Van Nierop and Ronnie Po Chia-Hsia, *Calvinism and Religious Toleration in the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic: its Rise, Greatness and Fall, 1477-1806* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Benjamin J. Kaplan and Bob Moore, *Catholic Communities in Protestant States, Britain and the Netherlands c. 1570- 1720* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008).

³ Charles H. Parker, ‘Paying for the Privilege: The Management of Public Order and Religious Pluralism in Two Early Modern Societies’, *Journal of World History*, 17 (2006), 267-296 (289).

families could shelter priests, host the services in their private chapels, employ members of these communities in their households and pay the fees or bribe the officials. It cannot be denied that where wealthy families were numerous, Catholics could live undisturbed. The community was socially and politically subordinated and vulnerable, it was subjected to the ebbs and flows of the system and it depended upon the avidity of the public officials. Even the interfaith marriage policy was subjected to most diverse circumstances. Each province and even each city had a different set of laws, which were continually revised, repealed and reissued. As a result, this produced a situation of uncertainty in which all the unions deemed diabolic were never nullified. Even if married in a Municipal hall or in a church, the holy marriage was always considered valid by any authorities, therefore it would have been impossible to dissolve its bond. Besides, a fierce intrusion into the private sphere of the citizens would have caused, perhaps, a huge upheaval. This would have discomforted the ruling class who worried about social stability, therefore interfaith marriages have been deemed a symptom as well as a cause of tolerance.⁴ Despite the social and political ostracism, the Catholic community survived. This paper seeks to explain and clarify how economic and financial needs surpassed any religious intolerance.

I

Seventeenth-century Holland was always a source of wonder for the contemporaries of other European States. Holland never ceased to amaze Europe, given its religious plurality and tolerance towards dissidents, even though, rather than tolerance, it seems more appropriate to speak of “co-inhabitancy”, since Catholics and Protestants lived among each other in their daily lives. The relative laxity with which authorities applied their anti-papal laws created for

⁴ Benjamin J. Kaplan, “‘For they will turn away thy sons’: The practice and perils of mixed marriages in the Dutch Golden Age”, in *Piety and Family in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honour of Steven Ozment* ed. by Benjamin Kaplan and Marc Forster (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 115-133 (115).

the Catholic communities a situation of general impunity, but also of uncertainty. The Dutch Republic was too tolerant to force Catholics to become Protestant, but at the same time it was not enough to allow Catholics free practice of their beliefs. The large number of Catholics in the United Provinces made actual persecution an impossible practice, they were about a third, and in some areas reached almost half the population. In any case, there were attempts to eradicate their 'cult', and the Dutch government began to act during the revolt against Spain. From 1572 to 1594, gradually in every province, the Reformed Church became the only public church.⁵

National, provincial and municipal governments accepted the Reformed faith as the only public faith, but the political authorities never required full conformity to Calvinism, and this allowed for the presence of a large number of people that did not belong to the Reformed denomination, or that officially did not belong to any confession. The result was that, during the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic was a multi-confessional society in which the Calvinist Church was indeed the only official church of the State, but never State Church. The situation of relative tolerance, or in any case the shared presence of other confessions, gave Catholic hierarchy the possibility to survive and regroup. As it became clear that the revolt against Spain was more than a temporary rebellion, Pope Clement VIII created an apostolic bishopric in 1592 with jurisdiction over all the United Provinces. This marked the beginning of the missionary organization that the contemporaries called *Missio Hollandica*, an organization whose purpose was explained by the pontiff himself when he wrote to the vicar Vosmeer: 'do in those territories as I would do if I were there'.⁶

⁵ Ernestine Van der Wall, 'Toleration and Enlightenment in the Dutch Republic', in *Toleration in Enlightenment Europe*, ed. by Ole P. Grell and Roy Porter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 114-129; Andrew Pettegree, 'The politics of toleration in the Free Netherlands, 1572-1620' in *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation*, ed. by Ole P. Grell and Bob Scribner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 182-198.

⁶ Harlem, Archive of the Parish of Harlem, MS BGBH 57(1939), fol. 138. Mission of Franciscan fathers.

Persecution against Catholicism began in 1570, and secularization of clerical property continued for the entire decade, justified by pressing financial needs due to the war, as well as ideological motives. The loss of sacred buildings, monastic properties and parish incomes marked a deep tear with the past and a turning point for Catholic communities, that watched their beacons become nullified. Secularization of clerical property went hand in hand with the proscription of all activities regarding the exercise of the Catholic faith.⁷ Anti-Catholic declarations reappeared periodically throughout the seventeenth century, and Catholicism became an outlawed denomination, pushed to the margins of society, out of the public sphere, not always tolerated and subordinated to the new Protestant political order. Both the clergy and the laity collaborated to re-establish the Catholic presence in Dutch lands, in which the legislation was not always coherent. Indeed, in provinces in which the Catholic presence was significant, such as Holland or Utrecht, a fierce persecution would have caused public disorder or civil wars, and the first objective of the authorities was always to keep public order and safety, although persecutory practices occurred.⁸ Patronage was the only guarantee that Catholics had against Calvinist authorities, and it is not a coincidence that persecution was inversely proportional to the presence of wealthy Catholics. Catholics had to stipulate informal agreements to be able to practice their faith, and permission had to be purchased; the only conceded right was to be able to pray and celebrate privately, in hidden churches, attics or barns. Even in areas of great tolerance, such as Amsterdam for example, Catholics were not exempt from these payments.⁹

After negotiating the agreement, easily corruptible officials allowed private Catholic worship, but the agreements were continuously renegotiated, because they depended on the will or the avidity of the local sheriff. Usually after a certain period of connivance, Catholic

⁷ MS BGBH 1(1873), fols 222, 229, 233, 235, 244. *Tabula Chronologica Episcopatus et Ecclesiae Cathedralis Harlemensis*.

⁸ MS BGBH 57 (1939), fol. 371. *Historia missionis Oudetonganae*; *Ibid.*, fol. 370.

⁹ Utrecht, Archive of the Archbishopric of Utrecht, MS AAU 1(1875), fol. 46. *Extractum e libro synodali officialis oldenzaliensis et partium Twentiae*.

clergy could be again persecuted, clandestine churches robbed and the community threatened.¹⁰ Tolerance required strategy, and leniency couldn't always be bought. Catholicism was not illegal *per se*, but its practice was not allowed. The Catholic religious authorities always tried to co-operate with the public officials in order to ensure public order. They were aware of their boundaries and were willing to maintain a low profile. On the other hand, the political authorities were always influenced by the ebbs and flows of social and political life, so while they were attempting to hamper the Catholic services at the same time they also wanted to protect the Protestant communities by ensuring social stability and commercial order. The practicalities of toleration were much debated. The United Provinces experimented with a different approach towards dissenters. Social stability allowed the economy to thrive and this was the main objective for a community ruled by merchants. Non-Calvinists were not forced to convert and as long as their rituals were kept private, they could worship undisturbed. All the laws and decrees issued and reissued throughout the decades demonstrated their inefficiency and the authorities' leniency.

II

After the advent of the Protestant Reform, interfaith marriage became common in Dutch lands; it was only after the Revolt against Spain that this custom began to be condemned due to its connection with the new status of the Catholic population, under suspicion of plotting with the Spanish. A document of the *Missio Gallo-Hollandica* in 1672 refers to the city of Zutphen, where numerous marriages, not necessarily mixed, abided by

¹⁰ Ibid., fol. 44.

the Catholic ritual privately, but were also celebrated with the Calvinist ceremony in public.¹¹ The Catholic communities were required to pay fines and in some provinces, Catholics were forced to marry in the ‘Calvinist temples’, and their offspring would then be baptized into the Reformed faith.¹² Interfaith couples were faced with punishments, threatened both by Catholic authorities as well as Protestant, and both the secular and regular clergy tried to make laymen abide by tridentine standards, while trying not to break Dutch law. All of this stirred up great uncertainty; a clergyman could not always order a punishment or take appropriate measures, because he would have had to deal with not only the lack of a standard parish organization, but also with the relative social exclusion experienced by Catholic communities in certain cities.

In 1648, the apostolic vicar Filippo Rovenio, clearly stated that marrying a non-worshipper was prostituting oneself with the devil.¹³ In 1657, the Roman Congregation of *Propaganda Fide* ordered priests of the Republic to no longer officiate interfaith weddings unless the non-Catholic would first convert. The apostolic vicars continued to stress that no one could join two persons in marriage if one part was a ‘heretic’, an act punishable by excommunication.¹⁴ If, despite the prohibitions, an interfaith wedding was still pursued, then it was deemed that the non-Catholic spouse should convert or promise to convert before the wedding. If the ceremony was celebrated without a clergyman or a Catholic missionary, the union would not have been recognized, the spouses would have lived in sin and their

¹¹ Ibid., fol. 262.

¹² MS AAU 2 (1875), fol. 91, *Relatio laborum et fructuum missionariorum Provinciae in Hollandia et Frisia a festo Penthecostis anni 1655 usque ad festum Penthecostis 1656*.

¹³ Arnoldum a' Brakel, *Philippus Rovenius, Reipublicae Christianae Libri Duo*, (Antwerp, 1648), 385; MS AAU 7 (1875), fol. 272, *Breve Chronico Missionariorum Societatis Iesu in Agro Transisalano*; MS AAU 36 (1910), fol. 110, One must try some means to remove the custom of receiving sustenance of missionaries in the act of confession. *Collectio Epistolarum Pastoralium, pro regimine Archidioecesis Ultrajectensis*; MS BGBH 59 (1941), fol. 218; Rome, Archive of *Propaganda Fide*, MS *Missio Hollandica*, Vulgar Letters of 1787 from Amsterdam. The Internunciatus of Fiandra, as superior of the Mission of Holland, obtains the authority to grant matrimonial waivers and indulgence.

¹⁴ MS AAU 34 (1908), fols 35-36, In *Druenen* in 1615 it is referred that there are many difficulties regarding matrimony with heretics and it is pondered whether a clergyman can celebrate Mass in a place where there are only three or four heretic families.

offspring would only have been saved if they were educated according to the Catholic faith.¹⁵ Still, in 1795 an archbishop in the province of Utrecht wrote: ‘the most probable cases are those in which a Catholic man or woman is joined in marriage with a non catholic *coram magistratu or praedicatio protestanti*, union which is then annulled, having found some impediment’.¹⁶ Even an account by the Jesuits dating back to 1679 reported that among new spouses someone had come into marriage in the presence of a heretic minister or in their public offices, while others, who swore themselves Catholic, had a heretic consort, thus ‘tarnishing the holy matrimony’.¹⁷

These types of unions were considered by Catholic authorities next to mortal sins, and those who wed with heretic rite or in the presence of a Protestant minister could not receive the Eucharist.¹⁸ Roman authorities were peremptory, but they did not take into account that Catholic communities were to respect the laws in force, and in some provinces the law required that weddings be presided over by a Protestant minister or a magistrate.¹⁹ Apostolic vicars, bishops and prefects of the Mission engaged in long debates to try to regulate these unions, to prevent errors and determine eventual admonitions, punishments or absolutions to

¹⁵ MS AAU 7 (1879), fol. 68, *Breve chronico missionariorum Societatis Jesu in Transisalaniam*; Ibid., fol. 204.

¹⁶ MS AAU 36 (1910), fol. 330, *Letter of Cardinal Brancadoro to Cardinal Antonelli*. The former, to contrast these unions deemed diabolical, delegates all his authority to the high priests, warning them to remember that sometimes there had been cases that had fallen outside the realm of his jurisdiction, for which he himself had turned to his superior, Cardinal Antonelli.

¹⁷ MS AAU 59 (1935), fol. 157, *De sacramento matrimonii, 1679*.

¹⁸ ‘S-Hertogenbosch, Archive of the Parish of ‘S-Hertogenbosch, MS BB 23 (1956-1957), fol. 194; MS BB 11 (1931-1932), fol. 58, *De Sponsalibus et matrimonio*. A clandestine matrimony contracted in a civil service in Amsterdam between a Catholic and an atheist who was born Catholic is not to be celebrated, and its validation would only be granted if they should renew their consent in front of the clergyman and two or three witnesses.

¹⁹ Hugo Franciscus Van Heussen, *Batavia Sacra, sive res gestae apostolicorum virorum qui fidem Bataviae primi intulerunt in duas partes divisa, 1716* in Weijling, *Bijdrage* (Utrecht: Van Rossum, 1951), 107. Van Heussen in *Batavia sacra* proposed to defend the tradition and character of the old Catholic creed, through a historical analysis of the bishops of Utrecht from the remote past until the present. It described in detail the faith and heroic spirituality of the first missionaries and bishops, paying particular attention to the most important icon of medieval Dutch church, St. Willibrord. He underlines the importance of ancestors for Catholics of the time, especially those benefactors that proved their piety and charity through foundations and donations so that their descendants would not seem unworthy of such fervor. Starting from the titles, the work hails the Dutch character of the Catholic Church in the Netherlands.

apply in case Catholics wed heretics or witnessed the ‘mysteries’ of their churches.²⁰ The difficulties in the social and civil context prevented the respect of the precepts of religious life, and canonical matrimony formed one of the most debated issues, and it shed light on the difficulties that the Catholic communities faced in those lands, restricted within the boundaries of the Protestant Reform and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The standards of the Council of Trent on matrimony were clear: candidates for matrimony had to have been baptized in the Catholic faith, and vows were to be contracted under the auspice of a priest, in front of two or three witnesses. In Catholic consistories, as much as in the Reformed ones, the problem of these unions received great attention. However, for the Catholic authorities the marriage, being a sacrament, could not be dissolved, although interfaith.²¹

The apostolic vicar had difficulty in granting forgiveness for these unions, and obviously in the first period of the Mission he tried to adapt the canonical laws case by case. In 1595 the Papal Nuncio observed that in the Netherlands a general rule could not be accepted, since social and political conditions did not allow for a rational and efficient organization. Excessive rigour would only have damaged consciences and would not have allowed Catholicism to prosper.²² To further complicate the situation the Reformed Church did not consider the matrimony to be a sacrament, therefore this dogma introduced significant differences in the marital union; the provincial and national bodies also established decrees on the matter and in all the United Provinces marriage became a public affair dominated by civil authorities. The involvement of clerical officials was regulated by each province: Holland, Friesland and Utrecht offered the couple two possibilities since the future spouses could celebrate the engagement privately and, later on, exchange vows in the presence of municipal officials or a Reformed minister. Despite the prohibitions and admonitions, it seems as though interfaith marriages increased in the second half of the 1600s and continued

²⁰ Ibid, 118.

²¹ Kaplan, “*For they will turn away thy sons*”, 117.

²² MS BB 9 (1928-1929), fol. 163. *Declaratio status Diocesis Buscoducensis*.

for the entire century. This phenomena could be explained not only by the daily co-inhabitancy of Catholics and Calvinists in the same area, but also with the confusion that reigned between the secular clergy and regular orders, and with the fact that the anticipated punishments were quite probably mitigated and often only involved suspension from Communion or a simple declaration of faith.

The new *Missio Hollandica* and the orders of the Jesuits tried to govern and regulate the Catholic communities, and to impose respect of the tridentine standards. However, the decisions of the clergy, both Roman and Protestant, were confused and often unproductive. The worshipper thus found oneself torn between tridentine standards, Reformed standards and Dutch civil laws. Following a correct Counter-Reformed policy was difficult if not impossible in some areas, where there were no parishes nearby, or where the clergyman was not always present, and where Catholics had to firstly negotiate the right to a peaceful existence. All of these challenges made it complicated to follow a homogeneous religious policy, and even if in theory, the prohibitions were clear, the reality was much more confused. It seems that despite the numerous threats, interfaith marriages continued to prosper well into the eighteenth century and beyond, as stated in the various decrees that continued to be issued, for example the general decree of 1721 published by the General States of Holland, in which the prohibition of matrimony between Catholics and Reformed Christians was reiterated. Catholic authorities, on the other hand, affirmed that these disorders were to be attributed to the excessive laxity of the first management of the *Missio Hollandica*.²³ As a result, religion had almost become an accessory, and tradition was almost as dissolute.

²³ MS BGBH 40 (1921), fol. 380. Reports of the Archpresbyter of Holland, Zeeland and West-Frisland; Ibid., fol. 420; MS BGBH 49 (1932), fol. 11, Reports of the apostolic vicar of *Batavia*; MS BGBH 47 (1931), fol. 9, *De conversione haereticorum, schismaticorum, et excitatione frigidorum Catholicorum*: In 1656 in Leiden Father Vincenzo claims that for twenty years he has dealt with diabolic unions. In the year 1812, a complaint for the disgraceful state of a parish had come from the current province of Holland: not just for financial reasons, but also for the high number of mixed marriages: *non pauci matrimonio mixto iuncti*

However, to avoid overestimating the process of secularization involved in the institution of civil marriage, one must consider that the civil ceremony remained a religious act, strongly soaked in Christian tradition, with the magistrate reciting a non-denominational function. This is the formula with which the magistrate wed the two spouses:

‘N. fateris hic, coram Deo et hac sua sancta communitate, reformata scilicet, quod acceperis, et accipias in legitimam uxorem N. hic praesentem, promittendo illi quod eam amabis, eris fidelis et non, juxta doctrinam S. Evangelii, reformabis te?’

Et respondet sponsus: ‘Ita’

*Eodem modo sponsa interrogatur.*²⁴

Many Catholic and Protestant dissidents integrated the civil ceremony with a religious one, led by a priest or a minister.

In many places, it was after the introduction of laws against mixed marriages that the religion of couples began to be registered systematically.²⁵ These laws reflect the growth, among the Dutch rulers, of awareness of the diffusion of these types of unions.²⁶ Decrees continued to be issued until 1798, during the Napoleonic wars, therefore proving that after two centuries interfaith marriages were still celebrated. One can assume that the previous laws did not obtain what they claimed, but furthermore one can also assume that the cultural and political background made persecution impossible and unproductive. However, to control the Dutch communities the Catholic Church showed clemency towards irregularities, and

²⁴ MS AAU 2 (1875), fol. 97, *Relatio laborum et fructuum patrum missionariorum apostolicorum Provinciae Coloniensis minorum stricta observantia seu recollectarum ab 1656 usque ad festum Pentecostis 1657 ex propriis illorum litteris desumpta.*

Ex litteris P. Arnoldi Perckens missionarii aposloiici in Cundera dominio Transyzulctniae, Veen Juiysen, Langelijel, Spangerdick, Aselamerdick et locis adjacentibus Frisiae.

²⁵ Benjamin J. Kaplan, ‘Integration vs segregation: religiously mixed marriage and the pillarised model of Dutch society’ in *Catholic Communities in Protestant States, Britain and the Netherlands c. 1570-1720* ed. by Benjamin Kaplan, Henk Van Nierop and Judith Pollman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 48-65 (54).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 57-61.

managed to survive by trying to adapt.²⁷ The Counter Reformed Catholicism was too strict and not suitable for a land strained by a lack of a coherent parish organization, a shortage of religious men, and in which rules from Rome travelled slowly.

The Roman Church was always willing to rethink its policies, and in the Netherlands the Catholic citizens were requested to respect the civic laws, besides their creed. In 1741, Pope Benedict XIV, in the *Declaration of Holland*, declared that the Sacrament of Marriage could not be denied, even when contracted with non-Catholics. There had never been a clear set of rules or a coherent doctrine. Decisions were taken and dispensations granted according to the various needs. During the Dutch Golden Age, the Catholic communities survived by combining divine and human laws and as a result the United Provinces became a model of toleration and social acceptance in which conflicts between religious groups were minimized and kept at bay. Shrewd economic and mercantile policies benefited the skilful dissenters, turning a little corner of Europe into the biggest empire of the seventeenth century.

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²⁷ Cecilia Cristellon, 'Matrimoni misti, matrimoni trasgressivi tra Europa e Nuovo Mondo (secoli XVI-XVIII)' *Attraverso la storia: Seminario SISEM di giovani studiosi e studiose dell'età moderna*, (Arezzo 23-25 Settembre 2010).

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