



**Genesis**

**of the Vincentian Future**

**in The Netherlands**

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# List of Contents:

Introduction	3
<b>Victor Groetelaars:</b> <i>'Being at home as long as possible'</i> The development of the Vincent Depaul Care centre	6
<b>Sylvia Meulensteen:</b> <i>'In fact, nothing is too outrageous'</i> The perception of care of Vincent and the Vincent Depaul Care centre	11
<b>Wiel Bellemakers:</b> <i>'A House of Significance'</i> The history of the mission house in Panningen	16
<b>Raf Janssen:</b> <i>'Celebrating, Listening, Being Silent and Thinking'</i> The future of the "Kepèl" (Chapel) in Panningen	22
<b>Wiel Bellemakers:</b> <i>'This is the Last Thing we can do'</i> Mgr Schraven and the church in China	27
<b>Vincent Hermans:</b> <i>'A Painfully Topical History'</i> The murder of Mgr Schraven and Companions	32
<b>Tjeu van Knippenberg:</b> <i>'Faith is the Basis of Whatever Hope and Love you can Develop'</i> Vincent de Paul Center in The Netherlands	38
<b>Marieke van de Ven:</b> <i>'Much needed: a Center for Social Spirituality'</i> The Vincent de Paul Center in The Netherlands	43

# Genesis of the Vincentian Future in The Netherlands

In the twentieth century the Dutch Lazarists, as an apostolic society, lived and propagated the Vincentian charisma – mission and caritas – in the Netherlands and far beyond. From the beginning of that century they grew in numbers and their mission took shape in Europe, in Asia, in North-, South-, and Latin America, in Africa. In the sixties the religious world changed fundamentally. Vocations for the religious life stalled. For the Dutch CM province, it became increasingly harder to send forth new members to places where fellow Lazarists were already at work. This was a painful turn, but it had to be. However, no real breach had occurred in the continuity of their mission. After all, the Dutch Lazarists had created three new provinces: the CM provinces of Surabaya, of Addis Ababa, of Fortaleza.

Continuity and change are at odds, and need each other. In the seventeenth century Vincent de Paul, too, experienced this tension and made dynamic use of it. He saw that purely continuing 'what had always been so' was a dead end. His approach was unconventional, open and social. Besides communities with a low monastic content, the Congregation of the Mission and the Daughters of Charity, he created foundations characterized by their secular nature.

In this spirit the last Superiors General of the Lazarists have come

to emphasize the Vincentian Family as a community in which all those who share Vincent's conviction, co-operate. During the celebration of 400 years of Vincentian charisma one could see how thousands of international Vincentians coloured St Peter's Square in Rome yellow with their scarves expressing their Vincentian identity. The vast majority of these people was committed to the Vincentian charisma as laymen.

In this evolution we, Dutch Lazarists, also stand. In 2014 the visitors of all CM provinces were invited to develop lines of action towards the future. The Dutch province formulated four lines of action corresponding with the objectives it has pursued from the



beginning. The big difference with last century is the fact that these objectives cannot be realized exclusively by the Dutch Lazarists anymore. For that their number is too small and their age too high. This has also led to the transition of 'province' to 'house' of Rome.

The four lines of action mentioned relate to the present-day continuation of the CM legacy by what has come to be called 'Holland House'. They concern the commitment to care, culture, mission and social spirituality. In these fields four groups are active, the 'Zorgcentrum' (care centre), the 'Kapelgroep/Orfelcommissie' (Chapel Initiative Group/Organ Committee), the 'Mgr Schraven Stichting' (Mgr Schraven Foundation), the Vincent de Paul Center Nederland consecutively. Representatives of these groups have met in the so-called Platform CM&CO since April 2018. The Platform has been invited to present building blocks for a work plan. In fact, in December 2017 the General Council asked to set up a workplan for the future which indicates what elements with respect to content and structure are appropriate for the development of CM Holland House.

The interviews presented in this booklet serve as a background to the work plan mentioned. They give voice to some people who are involved with the origin and the continuation of the four lines of action. The representation of the interviews was realized by Arjan Broers, theologian and journalist. Translated by Ton Groos.

Tjeu van Knippenberg c.m.  
Chairperson Platform CM&CO



# 'Being at home as long as possible'

## The development of the Vincent Depaul Care Centre

**The history of a house can be as eventful as that of a person. Certainly that of an old person – or of an old-people's home. Lazarist Vic Groetelaars on the history of the Vincent Depaul Care Centre: 'This is a good house'.**



'This is a good house, but it has been better.' Putting things into perspective is in Vic Groetelaars' blood. He is tried and tested as an administrator, with more than three decades' experience in the administration of the Lazarists and also some time on the board of the care centre. Therefore, there is quite a lot that he calls 'nonsense'. Often, he says it smiling, but not when he is talking about the organisation of modern care. 'It's been better here, because in the past the nurses were not obliged to keep a detailed administration of the care they provide', he says. 'That bureaucracy is nonsense.'

Since 2015 the Law on Social Support has stimulated the elderly to live at home as long as possible and to receive aid there. An arrangement that is somewhat strange for Lazarists and Daughters of Charity. 'We have always lived like that', Groetelaars says archly. 'For us this communal house is our home.'

The oldest part of the house was built for refugees: sisters Ursulines who left Germany because of the 'Kulturkampf'. Subsequently it was inhabited by the German Sisters of the Precious Blood and in the end, it was taken over by the Congregation of the Mission or Lazarists who came from France. 'That fight against the Catholics in Germany and France at the end of the 19th century became an enormous impulse for the catholic church in the Netherlands', says Groetelaars. 'All those



priests and nuns found shelter in our country and founded religious houses and schools on the southern and eastern borders. And that happened at a time when there was a lot of religious enthusiasm in the Dutch church.'

Groetelaars himself has experienced a large part of the history of

what is called 'the rich Roman-catholic life'. Moreover, at the end of the war he was involved in an evacuation to Drenthe (a province in the north-east of the Netherlands) where his whole family got miraculously acquainted with protestant friends.

After his education at the Lazarist seminaries he studied in Nijmegen and, for a year, in Rome, he worked with students in Eindhoven and Nijmegen, and, for two periods, he was provincial and temporary provincial treasurer and mission procurator of

the Lazarists. At that time, he visited the missionary regions of the congregation.



'We owe the care centre in Panningen to changes in legislation in 1976', he says. 'Then the government provided funds for social facilities for the elderly of special categories. The largest of these was the Dutch religious. Now it is hard to imagine, but altogether they had 40,000 beds. That was a wonderful arrangement, for in this way there was money available that enabled us to take good care of our

own elderly', Groetelaars thinks. 'That happened at a time when we started to see that care for our elderly, mostly missionaries, was our first task. In the beginning this regulation only applied to members of our own congregation. Later this was liberalized

and also related laymen could be admitted to the home. This was arranged in a very humane way.'

When subsequently the number of elderly religious declined the Lazarists and the Daughters of Charity began to work together in one house. They named it after their common 'forefather' Vincent de Paul. In the 17th century this French priest started a social innovation movement in which nowadays also tens of thousands of people are involved. The houses of the Lazarists and the Daughters of Charity merged in 1996, when the new building was finished.

It has always been the intention that this should be a house where the religious could be at home as long as possible, says Groetelaars. He himself lives in a part of the building that does not belong to the care centre, but if necessary, he can get care and help from the care centre.

It is strange that according to the law on Social Support from 2015 sisters and brothers are not allowed to sit on the board or the supervisory board of the care centre. 'That was supposed to be a conflict of interest', Groetelaars chuckles. 'But this house was founded out of self-interest: to take care of our elderly brothers and sisters!'

The house statutes, in which the religious were involved, state that this is a catholic house. 'For example, there are daily services where people should feel at home', says Groetelaars. 'But we are not going to check if someone is catholic. Catholicity is not a side issue. In practice a lot has changed, also in people's perception, but their former perception should be recognizable.'

*"All people love  
being treated lovingly"*  
S. VINCENT

Togetherness has always been a strong point of the Vincent Depaul Care Center, Groetelaars thinks. 'There is kindness, people get along well. In the time when I was on the board, we knew all our staff. When somebody got married, we went to congratulate them. And when somebody was ill, we sent them a get-well card. I have the impression that this family feeling has become a lot less, unfortunately. Because of all the changes in care particularly the turnover of staff is higher.'

Sometimes Groetelaars worries about the future of the home. 'Among other things this is because giving care is becoming harder. In order to make ends meet the home should have more nursing beds. And it is my terrible fear that the home will be digitalized to such an extent that, so to speak, chips must be implanted in people for them to be able to enter or leave a place. I also hope that there will come a response to the bureaucratization of care, because that is not decent and impractical, both for the residents and the nurses.'

In fact, the Vincent Depaul Care Center came into being just like the seventeenth-century saint set up his organization: 'We are not monks, we are people who want to do something together and who want to organize this together, for ourselves and for others. That is basically all', says Groetelaars.

## 'In fact, nothing is too outrageous'

### The perception of care of Vincent and the Vincent Depaul Care Centre

**Five centuries ago Vincent de Paul had a vision of care which still warms the heart of a 21st-century administrator. 'It's not about the organization, but about the people who need help', says Sylvia Meulenstein. 'In order to help them you have to be creative, to think across borders. In fact, nothing is too outrageous, that's what it boils down to.'**



Sylvia Meulenstein has been manager-administrator of the Vincent Depaul Care Centre since the summer of 2016. She has a background as a doctor and her work in the past included medical disaster relief. 'One of its characteristics is having to work together. However, our care system thinks in boxes: the local council carries out the Social Support regulations, the care office is concerned with long-lasting care and the insurance companies deal with home care. That's what makes this work sometimes very complicated.'

The history of the care centre which is named after the 17th-century care innovator is not long, but it is eventful. Part of the building, which is situated in the centre of Panningen, was built as a seminary. Here young men were prepared for their future





life and work as missionaries. But in the seventies of the last century the house became a place where returned missionaries enjoyed their old age.

By turning the house into an old-people's home the state contributed to the care of the elderly religious. Co-operation was also sought with the Daughters of Charity, another part of the Vincentian movement and also established in Panningen.

In 1996 a new building was finished and the home became an open nursing home. After all, there were fewer and fewer religious and the home started to accept other elderly.

Now part of the mission house is a care centre, intended for people with a care indication. 'There was a time that elderly people went into a nursing home around the age of 65', says Meulensteen. 'This has stopped. Now everyone who lives here needs nursing care and more non-religious than religious live here.'

A part of the building is still lived in by Lazarists, but they are getting on too. That's why talks are going on between the congregation and the care centre about the future. At the moment the centre provides their meals and domestic services. 'We take care

of well-being and nursing', says the manager. 'Not of the maintenance of the buildings. For that we are going to have to co-operate with other parties.'

The home has its own atmosphere, Meulensteen thinks. 'I have seen more homes with a religious origin. It is often quieter or even serene there. Many people who live with us are into praying, into a rhythm of prayer. The chapels in our home are used.' For the whole complex has three chapels. First of all, the monument which was restored extensively in the autumn of 2018. Secondly a chapel of the sisters in the home and thirdly a chapel of the Lazarists in their own home. Gradually it is becoming clear that the Lazarists cannot officiate in all the celebrations.

The new statutes of the care centre state that all religious must be able to spend a pleasant and good old age there, 'up to and including the last one', emphasizes Meulensteen. 'And more-





over, we wish to commit ourselves to the continued existence of the centre with a function for all elderly inhabitants of Panningen and surroundings.'

For the centre occupies a special site, in the middle of the village, even though the fact that it was built as a monastery with a certain seclusion has consequences. Meulenstein would like it to become opener to the local community.

The care centre has its own kitchen – really special at a time when much is outsourced to external caterers – and has volunteers who provide Meals on Wheels for the elderly who still live at home. 'People who are very old or demented sometimes forget to eat. They do not need to heat up our meals, they are brought to their homes by volunteers. Then there is also a moment of contact.'

Meulenstein would like to do more with volunteers. 'Next year we are going to start a day centre for people with dementia who still live on their own, and who have need of company and daily structure. And also to relieve their caregivers. We now have 115 staff and 53 volunteers. That's very good, but if we really want to do something for the wellbeing of the elderly, we need more people. It could be anything: from people who can organize a creative afternoon to gardeners and animal caretakers. And it would be so nice to have more young people in the house.'

Important for the connection with the local community is also that the people who work in the home are local. 'Therefore, we also have to invest in our paid employees', says Meulenstein. The manager hopes that the building will also be more open when the chapel has been finished and can be used for music,



lectures and exhibitions. 'We want to invite people to also have a look at the inside of our home. But we have to co-ordinate this with the home of the gentlemen and the parts of the nursing home that are as yet closed.'

The Vincent Depaul Care Centre has a considerable waiting list. 'Demography shows that between 2020 and 2040 we will get far more elderly with a demand for care', says Meulenstein. 'Among them are, for example, quite a lot of couples one of whom suffers from dementia. It would be good to receive both partners in the same home, and not to have to separate them. We need more places to live in order to be able to keep providing good care for our elderly together.'

# A House of Significance

## The history of the mission house in Panningen

**In the centre of Panningen the mission house with its monumental chapel is situated. From here, missionaries have been sent all over the world; many of them returned here, in their old age. A precious history, supported 'in an amazing way' by the people of Panningen and surroundings, tells Wiel Bellemakers. 'It would be good if this story continued to be told'.**



It is often said that the world is changing so much nowadays. If you look at the recent history of the mission house in Panningen, you cannot help but conclude that the world has been changing for a much longer time.

The house was founded in 1903 by missionaries who because of anti-religious legislation were driven out of France. They followed catholic religious from Germany, who, after 1870, sought refuge in the Dutch border regions because of the 'Kulturkampf'.

The mission house in Panningen was such a refuge, first for German Ursulines, then for the German sisters of the Precious Blood. In 1903 the French Lazarists found their refuge there.

The French Congregation of the Mission, as the Lazarists are officially called, had, in 1882, first founded a minor seminary in Wernhoutsburg, on the border at Zundert, south of Breda. 'But

on the very opening day three people from Limburg stood on the threshold', relates former provincial and historian by nature Wiel Bellemakers.



The link of the Lazarists with the Netherlands and particularly Limburg was only to become stronger. For at the time when the religious had to flee from France and Germany, the Dutch catholic church went through an enormous revival. Since 1853, at long last, the Catholics

were allowed to have bishops, found congregations and build churches and monasteries, which they did with great zeal. Also, the interest in mission was exceptionally great in our country.

In the mission house in Panningen quite soon eighty students and teachers lived, sometimes in outright poor circumstances. Until 1918 both houses were financed by the Generalate in Paris, but the devaluation of the French franc during WWI caused problems. Then the anti-church policy in France changed and the training centres in the Netherlands were no longer necessary.

It was decided to continue the activities in the Netherlands, 'at their own expense', says Bellemakers. In 1921 the Dutch Province was established. From then on it had to bear its own financial burden for Panningen and Wernhoutsburg, and that

was not a success. 'Some time in in 1920 the chaplain of Panningen saw from his window in the rectory that the students who were walking in the garden of the mission house were thin and ill. There was simply too little money to buy food.'

What happened then is frankly impressive. The superior of the congregation gave two sermons in January 1921 and collected 2400 guilders – an enormous amount at a time when a labourer earned 25 guilders a month. Moreover, from that day onwards young farmers collected potatoes and vegetables in the six villages of the municipality of Helden. 'That was carried into our cellar in 50-kilo sacks', Bellemakers remembers.



'I read somewhere that between us we ate some thirty kilos of potatoes a day – all given to us free!' The potato action went on until 1968. There were also additional actions, like the egg collection at Easter. 'In 1951, for example, we got 3000 eggs. Incredible.'

The mission house was part of a world wide web- even though it was not called that at the time. 'The missionary commitment in Panningen and surroundings was unparalleled', says Bellemakers. 'Many boys from the region entered the congregation, eventually they were sent to countries between Iceland and Australia, China and Argentina. Actually, this house is a monument just because of what happened from this place.'

*"One of the things that touches the heart of God most is gratitude"*

*S. VINCENT*

Now, a smaller and ageing group of 'gentlemen', as the Lazarists are also called, lives in the mission house. What is going to happen to the house when the present residents have died?

In 2018 the chapel, just like the organ a recognized monument, was restored. 'At a sale the chapel will of course not yield a penny', says Bellemakers. 'Now that a part of the house is a recognized monument, we are obliged to ensure a meaningful destination. We hope it will remain a place of religious and cultural experience.'

'The story of the "fathers" and their ties with the population must be told at a time which so clearly takes its leave of that past', says Bellemakers. 'As a matter of fact, that also goes for the story of the Mission sisters of the Precious Blood, of whom 330 came to Panningen and 220 were sent out all over the world. And for all the brothers, sisters and fathers who lived and worked in the villages of Peel & Maas.'

Establishing part of the mission house as a museum is rather a





dream than a plan, Wiel Bellemakers admits. 'The question is how to realize or finance it. The members of the local history circles we could work together with are getting older, too.'

'We'd better give it a solid start shortly', Bellemakers says. As he is 85-years old, the interviewer looks at him a little incredulously. 'Do you think it won't get off the ground? Could be', he says, smiling.

*"Love is inventive  
to infinity."*

S. VINCENT

Then musing: 'Maybe we are too stingy and most of all suffer from the idea that we don't have the money for it. It is

deeply ingrained in us to be thrifty. As much of the money as possible went to the mission. We are there for the people, not for the stones. Exactly that clashes with the wish to turn the mission house into a place of remembrance, too.'

# Celebrating, Listening, Being Silent and Thinking

## The future of the “Kepèl” (Chapel) in Panningen

**It all started with the plan to restore the organ. It expanded into an inclusive conversation about the future of the chapel, the organ, the garden and a part of the mission house in Panningen. Raf Janssen is closely involved with the “Kepèlse Initiatief Groep”, the Chapel Initiative Group. ‘We must ensure that as a community we can take care of this, if in the future the fathers aren’t here anymore.’**



‘Remember: Vincent was a rebel!’ After the interview we are standing by the door, but Raf Janssen has to get this off his chest about the founder of the social movement which the Lazarists are part of. ‘Vincent de Paul may have been canonized, but it was not sweet or goody-goody what he did in his time. He strongly opposed!’

Maybe Raf Janssen (1945) is a rebel in disguise, too. He spent a large part of his working life fighting poverty in the Netherlands and from ‘social anger’ he wrote a thesis about the connection between the problems of poverty and the environment. His heart is in thinking about a fairer society.

‘Thinking is the most practical form of doing’, he says. ‘We need

other concepts for this society, which systematically excludes groups of people.’

This enthusiasm was aroused when, as a small boy, he came to listen to the stories of returned missionaries in the mission house in Panningen. ‘For example, they spoke about the Indians in Brazil, how they lived and what that father had experienced there’, he says. ‘A whole world opened up for me. That’s what I wanted, too!’

Thus, Raf Janssen entered the minor seminary of the Lazarists. But after one year at the major seminary he made a different life choice. ‘It was 1963, the world was changing and the world of the church felt unreal’, he says. ‘But I did not suffer from it. After

all, it was my own choice, young as I was, wasn’t it? Without the fathers I would never have had such a good education. And the bond with the Lazarists has always remained.’

*“The poor are our lords  
and masters”*

*S. VINCENT*

A number of years ago, when Janssen was still alderman for social affairs in the municipality of Peel and Maas, Lazarist Wiel Bellemakers shared his worries about the restoration of the monumental organ in the chapel. Janssen: ‘I called together a group of people to collect money, but then it appeared that the Lazarists had already solved that problem. The problem was bigger and expanded even further: how are we going to deal in the future with the chapel, the garden, the mission house?’

At the moment, the initiative group consists of twelve people –



it is an open group, members are welcome – which concentrates on the chapel. After the restoration, finished in December 2018, the chapel must become more and more part of the village community. 'It's a wonderful location, directly next to the village centre', says Janssen. 'But at the same time mission house and the chapel turn their backs on it. It is not accessible enough.'

In the near future the garden wall will be demolished and an



open fence installed. The initiative group wants to develop four kinds of activities in the chapel. 'In the first place, of course, the religious activities: celebrations and prayer meetings. We are having conversations with the parish about this. The church in Panningen is so big, maybe our chapel can be used more often by the parish. Even now the chapel is also used for organ concerts or choir performances. That is its second function.'

Thirdly, there is the wish to turn the chapel into a place of silence, 'in all the hustle and bustle of our busy lives this may be a place to come in and just be,' says Janssen. 'Therefore, the chapel must be opened more often. It's just got to succeed!'

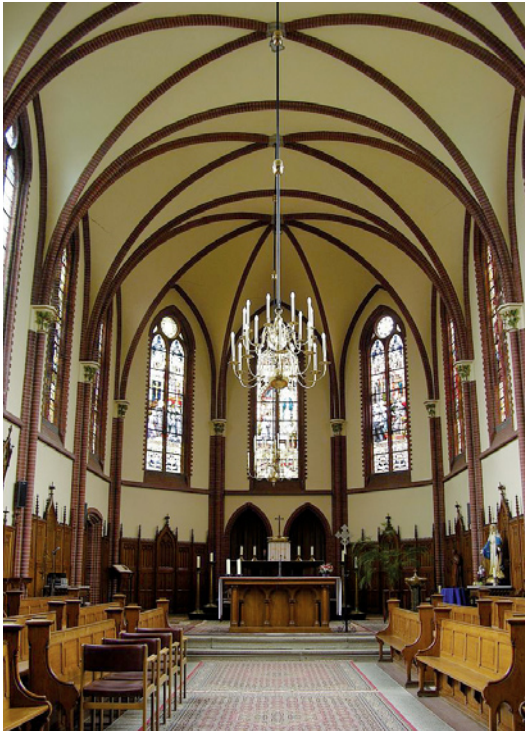
Fourthly, the chapel may be a support centre for the Vincentian movement. Raf Janssen dreams aloud of a chapel academy: 'A point of rest for new thinking. A place where local people and people from further away come to tell about their experiences and analyses. To think together critically and constructively about the question: what kind of society have we become? And can we change it?'

Besides the future of the chapel thought is given to that of the mission house, for example to set up a permanent exhibition about the history of the monasteries and their inhabitants in the region of Peel and Maas.

When Janssen talks about this, you can almost see it happen. But it will not go of its own accord. Much depends on the position which the owners of the chapel and the mission house, the Lazarists, will take. 'Some take it badly if there are many changes in the house where they live', says Janssen. 'Others want to be involved up to the smallest detail. I can understand that, but we have got to get to work. For the question is how we, as a community of Peel and Maas, are going to provide continuing care for this place when the fathers are no longer there.'

The exploitation of the chapel is feasible, with entry fees and the employment of volunteers. But the chapel and the mission house must also be maintained and heated, for example.





There are plenty of ideas. A congregation fund can be a good start, and then good co-operation with the care centre and a housing association. 'Suppose we turn the building partly into apartments for which people would gladly pay a little more in order to keep up the chapel', Janssen suggests.

'I'm glad there is more contact with the Vincent Depaul care centre, the Mgr. Schraven Foundation and the Vincent de

Paul Center in Nijmegen', he says. 'Together we are going to make a good plan for the future of the Lazarists' inheritance in the Netherlands.

And off Raf Janssen buzzes, for, as a rebel with a cause he is active in a lot of organizations, like the local food bank. 'If you are critical of our society you cannot just stand shouting on the side-lines', he says. 'Then you've got to be involved wherever you can.'

## 'This is the Last Thing We can do'

### Mgr. Schraven and the church in China

**The efforts to tell the story of the murder of Mgr. Schraven and his companions are the 'completion of our work in China'. Says Wiel Bellemakers, as former superior of the Lazarists still deeply involved with the beatification of the martyrs.**



The story of the martyrdom of Mgr. Schraven and the others is encouraging for the church in China. 'They were heroes of the people', says Wiel Bellemakers. 'They were not imperialists who came to subdue China, but they came to help. And that is what they showed: they gave their lives to protect Chinese women from sexual abuse by the Japanese occupiers who came to claim them. That is also a testimony of faith.'

Wiel Bellemakers is a man of stories. Take whatever turn you like and immediately there is a new yarn, complete with exact data and incredibly rich details. 'That's something I've always had', he says. And with an arch smile: 'Ask me about father Luijpen's sermon at Christmas 1968 and I can tell you just like that.'

Even as a young man Bellemakers was fascinated by China. That arose when Lazarist Harrie Hermans taught religious education

at primary school. 'He wrote the character for human being on the blackboard', says Bellemakers, 'I thought it extremely interesting. Hermans was sent out and we read about him in the magazine Missiefrent. On 25 July 1951 he was arrested and kept in prison for three years. Back in Holland he told stories about those years of communist brainwashing, which I lapped up.'

*"Real love opens the arms  
and closes the eyes"*

S. VINCENT

Bellemakers read all he could find about this big, mysterious and also dangerous China, in all the languages that he knew. He prepared for the mission there, but because the country was closed to the outside world this did not happen. In 1958 in Rome he did meet a fellow Lazarist from Hong Kong, who hoped to gain understanding in the Vatican for the Chinese bishops who were ordained in that year without Rome's permission and for the existence of a patriotic church. In the end, it was not until 1997, the year of the commemoration of the murder of Schraven and his companions sixty years before, that he visited China for the first time.

He considers it crucial that the request for a process of beatification came from the Chinese church itself. 'On our side no one was really involved', says Bellemakers. 'But for them it is important, also to be able to be part of China and its history as church. When they ask for this, we are obliged to pass it on. It is the last thing we can do.'

In 1988, Bellemakers became provincial superior. He accustomed himself to reading nine to eleven letters from missionaries at

night after recreation (a monastic term for a common evening session): 'How I enjoyed what they wrote to their families or the congregation about their daily lives and their work. I remember the moment when the letters from Alexander Waelen from 1916 turned up, found in a drawer of a chest in the farm where his family lived. Fascinating.'



When, at last, Bellemakers saw China, it was a wonderful and mixed experience. He knew so much about it that he felt at home, and that was strengthened by the cordiality of the priests and bishops who had yet been educated by Dutch fellow Lazarists and the Chinese faithful.

'They were so happy that we had come', he says. 'And at the same time, it was clear that we were under observation all the time. That was a frightening and unfree feeling.'

With eleven fellow fathers Bellemakers visited the city of Zhending in 1997. 'It is striking that the two monuments that the inhabitants and the Japanese erected already a year after the murder have been preserved. It would have been more logical if they had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. That is

for me conclusive evidence that the whole population of the city and the region have continued to honour the martyrs.'

He has gone back to his great love, as he calls China, a number of times. But that first visit was a first signal that the Catholic church in China was rising up. 'The fact that foreigners visited Zhending sixty years after the tragic event there made a deep impression.'



In close co-operation with the diocese of Roermond the process of beatification has started. 'Bishop Wiertz thought it self-evident to perform this service for the church of Zhending', Bellemakers recalls. 'Hopefully it may be a contribution to the unity of the Chinese Catholic church.'



*"Forgiving insults is  
healing wounds in your  
own heart"*

S. VINCENT

'Through the enormous commitment of Vincent Hermans, Marja Grim and Mgr. Stefan van Calster the application for the beatification has been completed. In 2017, the Roermond file was approved by Rome. Now, the Congregation of Canonizations in Rome will examine it.

How long it will take before a definite decision is taken? I hope I will still be around to see it.'

But since the request from China much more has been set in motion than just the application for beatification in Rome, Bellemakers says. Thus, in Broekhuizenvorst, a remembrance chapel has been set up, which makes a profound impression on the groups of Chinese who have come to visit in recent years.

In China, near the city of Zhending, in a remembrance church special honour is given to those 'who gave their lives for their sheep', as it says on the monument near the old cathedral. Moreover, it has benefited the self-confidence of the Chinese Catholics.

Mgr Schraven and his companions are honoured as 'Heroes of the Chinese People', says Wiel Bellemakers – and so not only of the Catholics. 'That is the clearest evidence that there will not be any resistance on the part of the Chinese against a possible beatification.'



# A Painfully Topical History

## The murder of Mgr Schraven and Companions

**In 1937 bishop and Lazarist Frans Schraven and eight companions were murdered in China. The facts have been shrouded in a 'mist of uncertainty' for decades, says Vincent Hermans. On behalf of the Mgr Schraven Foundation he has profoundly studied the story which is still worth being told, both here and in China.**



The story came back to life when Pope John Paul II, at the end of the last century, made an appeal to write a book about martyrs in the twentieth century. That led to an article by Lazarist Wiel Bellemakers about the murder of his fellow brother bishop Frans Schraven and others, in 1937 in China. It became clear that the facts of the murder were uncertain. Research was difficult, for China at that time was closed to the outside world.

In 1997 an international group of Lazarists visited China. In that year, for the first time a remembrance service was held. That happened in Lottum, Schraven's birth place. In 2005, in China, a booklet was published with the Chinese version of the murder. This gave the impulse for the foundation which bears the name of the murdered bishop.

From the very start Vincent Hermans has been involved with the

Mgr Schraven Foundation. Even as a child he heard of the murder of the missionary bishop, who was his grandmother's brother. 'But nobody knew why it happened and who was responsible', he says. 'One day I decided: when I'm retired, I'm going to find out.' It was a decision with rather a lot of consequences. With his wife and others, 'we examined some eighty archives in a number of countries', he says as if it amounts to nothing. 'And I haven't finished yet.'

The facts of what happened in 1937 are clear now. Japan had invaded China and advanced on the city of Zhending. Thousands of citizens fled to the grounds of the mission of the Lazarists and other religious. There, after their victory, Japanese soldiers came to claim 200 women, but Frans Schraven and his eight companions refused to co-operate. 'You may kill me if you want', he is reported to have said, 'but give you what you want: never!' The men were taken away and, that same night, they were stabbed and burnt near a Buddhist pagoda. It was October 9 1937. Involved were Lazarists from the Netherlands (3), France (2), Poland (1) and present-day Croatia (1), a Trappist from France and an organ builder from Slovakia. It is said that then the Japanese soldiers left the women alone.

*"Be sure that people love  
you for the example of  
your life"*

S. VINCENT

The murder is not ancient history, but surprisingly and painfully topical. In the first place because sexual violence against women is anything but something from the past. On a small scale, but also in wars countless women are still raped or abused. The non-violent resistance of Mgr. Schraven and his

companions arouses awe and respect. Moreover, the murder is significant both for Japan and China, says Vincent Hermans. 'At the time the Japanese pretended that Chinese criminals were the perpetrators', he says. 'For Japan this is a disgraceful story, which will be emphasized once more when the beatification is a fact.'



For China, too, the murder is significant, particularly for the Chinese Catholics. Their church, which had to operate partly underground for a long time and is still supervised by the Chinese authorities, sees the story of the martyrs as extra support. It shows that their church was not founded by evil imperialists, but by people who were even willing to give their lives for the Chinese. The Chinese authorities, too, monitor the development carefully, Hermans observed during his visits to that country.

Since the establishment of the Mgr. Schraven Foundation in 2008 a lot has happened. In the first place, an extensive file was put together which was presented to the Vatican congregation for beatifications and canonizations at the beginning of 2014. This followed a request from China and gained the support of



Mgr. Frans Wiertz of Roermond. The carefully prepared file counts 1860 pages.

Furthermore, the foundation has made all sorts of efforts to spread the story of Mgr. Schraven as an icon against sexual violence. Thus, a chapel has been fitted out in Broekhuizenvorst. In a closed-off side-wing of the church in that North-Limburg village some 100

volunteers created an image of Schraven's life story, led by father Jan Haen CSSR. 'The chapel was consecrated on October 14 2012 by the Chinese archbishop Savio Hon Taifai', Hermans recounts. 'Very impressive was the written excuse that an especially commissioned representative of the Japanese Bishops' Conference presented to the victims' families.' Since then, a remembrance service has been held annually around October 9; in the morning a celebration of the eucharist and in the afternoon a Mgr. Schraven lecture on a related sub-

ject. On every occasion Chinese from Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands came to the chapel.

In 2012 a comic book was published about the story of Mgr. Schraven and companions, made by the Belgian cartoonist Geert de Sutter. The book was published simultaneously in Dutch, English, French and German. Later, in China followed two editions in simple and traditional Chinese. The Chinese booklet about bishop Schraven was edited in Dutch, too, just like a booklet about the work of art by father Jan Haenen with the title Over My Dead Body.

The foundation received numerous invitations to give lectures. In 2013 a promotion tour was made to the Far East and lectures were given in Macau, Hong Kong and Taiwan, followed by a similar journey to Poland in 2015.

*"Blessed are they who  
spend the short moment  
of their lives on love and  
justice"*

*S. VINCENT*

Similarly, foundation researchers took part three times in symposia at Chinese universities, to promote the story there, too: in 2009 in Beijing and in 2014 in Shijiazhuang and Shanghai. In 2017 this was followed by an extra conference at the university of Beijing, especially dedi-

cated to the murder of Zhending. In the same years, together with the Verbiest Institute of the university of Louvain, the foundation organized a pilgrimage to China, to the place where Mgr. Schraven lived and was murdered.

'In Zhending there are two monuments', Hermans says. 'One was erected by the Japanese and one by the Chinese. It is remarkable that both have survived the Cultural Revolution.

Apparently, they were so significant for the population that the communists did not dare to demolish them.'

Moreover, a project has been devised for primary schools that want to visit the remembrance chapel; there is also a website and a walk with information panels in Lottum, Schraven's birth place. Every year the participants receive newsletters about recent developments and events. The wish list of the foundation includes a short film and maybe even a musical or passion.

Finally, the Mgr. Schraven Foundation wants to support women. This is done by supporting projects aimed at enhancing the self-reliance and empowerment of women. And also by establishing, in 2018, an annual afternoon of prayer for the resistance to violence against women together with related organizations. 'We are only small', says Vincent Hermans, 'but the story of Mgr. Schraven and our efforts are valuable.'



# 'Faith is the Basis of whatever Hope and Love you can Develop'

## The Vincent de Paul Center in the Netherlands

**Wouldn't it be a pity if the name and inspiration of Vincent de Paul disappeared from Nijmegen? That question prompted Lazarist Tjeu van Knippenberg to build up a centre which translates the Vincentian inheritance to this age. 'Spirituality and action go together. That is beneficial to people.'**



In the past, Nijmegen was called 'Monnikendam' ('Monks' Town') because after the foundation of the Catholic University of Nijmegen in 1923 just about all the orders and congregations in the Netherlands (and there were quite a lot of them) founded houses there. The Lazarists had one, too: on the Ubbergseweg, just outside the city, there was the house of study Vincentius a Paulo until a few years ago.

In 2010 it was decided to sell the house, because it had no future. But would that mean the disappearance of the name of Vincentius from the city? Tjeu van Knippenberg (1937), Lazarist and until his retirement professor at the faculty of theology of

Tilburg University, did not want this to happen. 'Name and identity have a lot to do with each other', he says. 'Vincent de Paul stands for a way of working and looking at the world.'

This spirituality of Vincent's went against the prevailing culture at the time – and it still does. 'Four hundred years ago the church was completely turned in upon itself', says Van Knippenberg. 'In contrast, Vincent orientated himself on the world. He wanted both to take care of people and pass on the Gospel, not only by clerics in churches, but also by laymen. Your monastery is the street, he said, and your chapel is the parish church.'

Vincent's efforts have taken effect. The world-wide Vincentian movement counts about 2.5 million people. At a certain time, the Daughters of Charity were the largest congregation of female religious. 'Vincent stood for an outward movement, and that still inspires people', says Van Knippenberg. 'The task is: go to the people!'

So, Vincent's spirituality is supported by two pillars: mission and caritas. Or, in the translation of the Vincent de Paul Center: inspiring and serving. But when Tjeu van Knippenberg and fellow pioneer Marieke van de Ven made a tour of all sorts of projects and institutions there appeared to be little need of another do-good organization.

*"Simplicity is my gospel"*

S. VINCENT

'There are already so many places where marginalized people can get concrete help', Van Knippenberg says. 'It was no use adding to that. So, it made more

sense to get started on the other side: how do you look at society and life. There is a lot of interest in spirituality in the community, but there is little knowledge of the strength of its religious side.'



And so, the Vincent de Paul Center started with a course on Vincentian origin and inspiration. What are the central concepts? What is the significance of the virtues that Vincent distinguished? Van Knippenberg: 'If the language is missing, in the long run the ideas will be missing. But if you help people to dwell on the significance of values like humility and meekness, then these values can orient their thinking and guide their actions.'

The Vincent de Paul Center does not concentrate on a specific target group. 'That might be better', says Van Knippenberg. 'But in doing so you exclude unexpected meetings. It suits us better to extend a broad welcome. Time and again we notice that it is fruitful when people from different backgrounds get in touch with each other. In the masterclass, a longer training which we have provided twice now, there are people from politics, education and the social sphere together.'

Part of the masterclass is for the participants to start a new project in their own work environment and to make that part of their learning process. 'Then you see that the ideas and experiences of people with different backgrounds influence each other.'

The Vincent de Paul Center got off the ground in 2012 and has produced a number of precious activities. Off late, co-operation with the other Vincentian lines of action has been growing, too: the care centre, the Kepèlse Initiative Group and the Mgr Schraven Foundation.

At the same time, it is rather hard to give the organization a future. Where do you find somebody who is an administrator and inspirer like Tjeu van Knippenberg, or a thinker and organizer like Marieke van de Ven? 'That is not easy,' the former recognizes. 'And it may stop in six years' time. But by then we will have done a number of precious and good things for a number of years.'

It is the vulnerability of many organizations that try to bridge the views of religious tradition and the modern questions and needs in the secular society.

Are you a pious man, I ask Van Knippenberg on an impulse. He pauses for thought. 'Not in the 'good', pietistic sense of the word,' he says. 'But if pious means devoted, certainly. To my surprise I am more and more committed to Vincent's charisma. That is because he saw that faith is the basis of whatever love and hope you can develop. Faith is the antidote to emptiness. It's about what I give my heart to, what I entrust myself to. From that I hope and I love.'

*"Let's love God, but with  
our arms and with sweat  
on our faces"*

S. VINCENT

In our society faith is disappearing. Not just religious faith, it goes deeper than that. What is also disappearing is the awareness and the dialogue about what people devote themselves to, the basis of their acting and loving.

But spirituality and action go together, Tjeu van Knippenberg thinks. You must know what gives you the basis to be able to work in the community in a fruitful and sustainable way. 'That double orientation belongs with us, Vincent saw that very clearly four hundred years ago. We still have a lot to learn about that, and to share.'

## 'Much needed: a Center for Social Spirituality'

### The Vincent de Paul Center in the Netherlands

**If there is anything that our overactive and individualistic culture needs, it is reflection on our basic values. For Marieke van de Ven, board member and long-time co-ordinator of the Vincent de Paul Center, this is abundantly obvious. 'If you don't pay attention to this, discontent will arise.'**



Marieke van de Ven (1951) was 'flabbergasted' when they received an invitation from the international administration of the Vincentian family in Philadelphia (US): the question was if they wanted to contribute ideas in a project dealing with the revitalization of Vincent de Paul's spirituality. 'We? Little as we are? Could it be that we have something to say about this?'

It is true, the Vincent de Paul Center consists of only a small group of people and has been active only since 2012. Yet, in those years, much has been started and much has been learnt.

Take for example the subtitle of the foundation: *center for social spirituality*. These words were found to typify working in the spirit of Vincent de Paul. 'When we began, we also wanted to



do practical work', Van de Ven says. 'Collecting clothes and books, helping people at the bottom of society. But in Nijmegen much good was already being done, we learnt. And all the organizations we approached showed embarrassment about their basic values, their spirituality. People do not really have a language for that in this day and age.'

That language is crucial, Van de Ven thinks. 'There are many people who feel attracted to what can give hope to the world', she says. 'But if that is not given shape and nurtured, there will be discontent.'



For Marieke van de Ven all threads from her working life come together in the Vincent de Paul Center. She gained experience in education, politics and welfare work. She coached teachers, was a policy officer in an organization for the elderly, founded the

*"Serve the poor with respect and dedication"*

S. VINCENT

Weekend School (for motivated children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods) and worked in parliament. 'I've always had an interest in religion', she says, 'but I never worked that out. I did feel that here was genuine contact with people concerning love, trust and destiny. Working for the Vincent de Paul Center has also become my own development.'

Van de Ven learnt to appreciate Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) as a social innovator. 'I became impressed by his double focus', says Van de Ven. 'In his time the church was very much turned in upon itself, completely focussed on faith. But Vincent noticed how he was touched and refreshed, also as a believer, by meeting the poor and the sick. According to him, they are our teachers. Vincent did not choose for church or society, he belonged radically to both. A characteristic statement of his is: "There is enough love, but it is badly organized."

Van de Ven became the driving force behind the programmes of the Vincent de Paul Center. Since her recent retirement she has been a member of the board, but she is still just as active. The programmes are mainly aimed at feeding and deepening spirituality in action. For example, there are the *Tuesday Conferences*, small-scale meetings in which experts and interested people together explore old and new sources of spirituality. The conferences take place mainly in Nijmegen, sometimes also in Arnhem or Panningen. Other activities are multi-day retreats, the Vincent study Group, the publication *Portretten van Sociale Spiritualiteit*

(Portraits of Social Spirituality) (2017) and the Vincent Course, given in Nijmegen, Tilburg and Maastricht, consisting of five meetings on the life and work of Vincent de Paul.

More recent are the *Dante Days* in 2018, two days during which people, together with artists and scientists, explore their religious biography, using the metaphors which Dante in his Comedy uses for life. 'In fact, this is also about tasting old and new language', says Van de Ven.

The showpiece of the centre is the *Masterclass 'Inspiring and Serving'*, which has now been provided twice in the former monastery ZIN in Vught. It is a leadership course in a number of

multi-day sessions, in which lectures, practical sessions and the participants' own practical projects are combined. 'It is wonderful to see how learning is transferred directly into practice', says Van de Ven, 'and how that in its turn is reflected upon'.

"To love someone means to want the very best for him"

S. VINCENT

The masterclass is partly based on the work of the American Robert Greenleaf on serving leadership. There is also co-operation with a university which originated from the Congregation of the Mission: the Depaul University in Chicago. One of the modules of the masterclass is given by a teacher of that university.

Van de Ven: 'At the beginning of this century people at the university reflected on the principles of the social innovator Vincent de Paul, and how they can be transferred to this day and age. They arrived at four inspiring principles. First: *Make no small*

*plans*: think big, have ideals. Next: *People and process first*: put people first, not the results. Thirdly: *Sustainable institutions*: get organized sustainably. And finally: *Concern for the poor*: the poor come first.'

A large-scale activity was Project 1617. In 2017 it was four hundred years ago that Vincent de Paul had his 'conversion experience'. There was a big international conference in Rome, at which Tjeu van Knippenberg and Peter Reijers gave a lecture. Among other things, this led to the request of the international Vincentian family to advise a theological work group which wants to reformulate Vincentian inspiration.

Whether and how the Vincent de Paul Center can survive gives cause for anxiety, particularly because its organization is vulnerable. This goes for more initiatives in the religious sphere and in the Vincentian family, Van de Ven recognizes.

But for her it goes without saying that it is important to set people in motion socially and spiritually. 'The time of the great stories is over', she says, 'and also the time of the big masses. It is often small groups that participate, but they are motivated and of good will.'





