

THE EXPERIENCE OF VITALITY.
*A study of the Place of the Body
in the Congregation of St. Louis,
in the Netherlands, 1928-1955*

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By all accounts in Christianity the body would come off badly. In relation to the sacred, the body would only have a negative role or have no role at all. This cliché does not take into account the various ways in which the body has played a role within Christianity.

In this article, I focus on the place of the body in the religious life of the brothers of the Congregation of Saint Aloysius of Gonzaga, or St. Louis², from the twenties till the fifties in this century. There is no question of hostility towards the body. On the contrary, a vital body is the point of departure. The central question is how the body should be experienced. First, the biography *Par la Joie et la Souffrance, André de Thaye 1912-1926* will be discussed. This biography was translated into Dutch in 1928 on the initiative of some brothers of St. Louis. His life was annexed as the ideal model for the educational system of St. Louis,

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² The Congregation of St. Louis was founded in 1840 at Oudenbosch. In the 1930's it had grown into one of the main educational brothercongregations in the Netherlands. In several cities the brothers taught Catholic boys at primary and secondary levels. The "Mother" house, together with the boarding school, had its seat in Oudenbosch.

as a "petit St. Louis riant et moderne"³. The biography centres on the affirmation of the body in its vitality and in its vulnerability. The message of the biography is that one has to undergo the body and eventually lose it.

The ideal of André de Thaye was meant for the pupils. But the message which is propagated in the biography can be discerned from the texts on the religious life of the brothers, as written by the General Superior, Robertus, in the forties and fifties. In these texts the central question is as to how the vitality of the body should be integrated into religious life, without threatening the bond between the brother and God. Here, sexual feelings become problematic. According to Robertus they have no place in religious life.

Afterwards, two texts from 1955 from the magazine of the congregation will be discussed. In these texts some brothers strike a different note, saying that sexual feelings do have a place in religious life. Finally the reviewed texts will be looked at from the perspective of a basic structure of the monastic life, namely striving for perfection. It appears that in the texts a fundamental shift has taken place in this monastic structure due to a change in viewing the place of the body.

1. The Will to Lose Oneself

André de Thaye, born in a village near Charleroi in Belgium, died of a bone infection at fourteen years of age. His mother, together with some Jesuit priests, wrote a biography, in which they praise him as an ideal pupil of the local Jesuit college and as a little saint. The biography was authorized by the bishop of Tournay.

The Congregation of St. Louis at Oudenbosch had a Jesuitical character⁴. Therefore the French edition of the biography drew the

³ Preface to the second edition by the translator, Brother Christoforus.

⁴ The Congregation of St. Louis was the only educational congregation in the Netherlands which adopted a Jesuit rule.

attention of some brothers, who recognized André de Thaye as an ideal role model for the pupils of St. Louis.

The biography consists of a series of anecdotes of André's life. Strikingly, nothing special is told. André doesn't seem to be particularly holy. As a good boy, he goes to Communion and joins the Congregation of Mary. The tricks he plays are fully emphasized, not condemned. He plays soccer enthusiastically and he is a serious boy scout. He does some repairwork on his bicycle and tinkers about with the wireless. In short, "Nothing special marked his short existence", as is written on the first page of the biography, but continues by saying: "Yet... All who knew him, who saw him growing up and smiling, wished to have lived a life like his.⁵" Actually, living like André is nothing special. It is being born and growing up full of vitality. Therefore what is admired in André is "the splendid figure of the young hero himself⁶". André's virtue is just being himself. Moreover, he is a beautiful and attractive boy. He feels at ease within his own body. André's relics show his zest for life also: "No collection of prayerbooks, or instruments of flagellation, but instead, worn out soccer boots and a scout uniform, funny drawings and comics.⁷" The story makes clear that life may show up in an unconstrained manner. In André's holiness, his vitality is hallowed. The biography is a hagiography of life. Or stated differently: a hagiography of both the vitality, as well as the vulnerability, of life.

⁵ p. 10.

⁶ Introduction to the second edition, p. 3.

⁷ Quotation from a review of the biography in the *Dagblad van Noord-Brabant* (Journal of North-Brabant), 23-7-1930. The contemporary character of the relics made André into a recognizable 'saint'. This is the case in many letters received by the translator, Brother Christoforus, in reaction to the biography or to the relics which were received. For instance: "I like his life story so much, because it tells about a boy in these modern times, a boy who lived in exactly the same circumstances as we do" (W. Pallado to Brother Christoforus, 23-1-1938).

In the story, the experience of vitality seems to be stressed in order to emphasize the vulnerability of the body. When André is seized by a bone infection, at first his vitality does not seem to be affected. He lies on the operating table being so beautiful, that the doctor is flabbergasted, exclaiming: "Oh, what a strong boy!... What a beautiful lad!"⁸ Not much remains of that beautiful body during the operation. The doctors burrow in it by "making a deep cut in the knee right to the bone, to clear the leg of the pus, by which it was horribly infected, cutting off firmly the dead flesh, boring through the shinbone"⁹. The doctors reveal that the body, which at first was whole, suddenly consists of rotting flesh and bones. They force André in a very rough way¹⁰ to experience the transiency of his body.

In the biography, vitality is put alongside vulnerability, without any euphemistic descriptions. André looks both zest for life as well as suffering straight in the eye. The story is about André's attitude. The story tells about a sermon dealing with a tragic accident. This sermon makes André aware of the fact that every moment may be his last. Therefore he feels compelled to adopt the attitude: 'Be prepared!' This attitude is more than just a scouting posture. 'Be prepared!' has a double meaning. First, be ready to use life as fully as possible, with an attitude of service and sacrifice. And second, be ready to take leave of life altogether, to sacrifice it completely.

To André, this attitude of sacrifice consists of a distant awareness, that he feels when seeing the vulnerability of other

⁸ p. 57.

⁹ p. 58.

¹⁰ The doctors are presented as torturing rather than healing. They operate André's body literally to pieces. The name of the surgeon immediately evokes the image of the operating room full of surgical instruments and dissecting knives. And the nurse, who carries out the most gruesome treatments, says to herself "that one has to become an executioner in order that one might be a love-nurse" (p. 72).

people's lives. But when he suddenly learns about this vulnerability from his own experience, he must take up an attitude towards it himself. This he does in a specific way. He doesn't delight in suffering. Pain is no pleasure to him. On the contrary, it frightens him. Yet he doesn't complain nor does he scream out at any time. He endures his suffering by a force of will, which is highly praised by his biographers. The force of André's will is focussed on losing his vital body as the way of linking himself to Jesus. It is a will to lose himself.

On his sickbed André goes through a process in which he practices this will to lose his body and himself. Through his relationship with Sister Bertha, who nurses André, his will obtains a transforming power. His vitality seems to pass from his body into his will. Sister Bertha functions as a link between the dying body that André is losing and the new, angelic body which he is taking on. The story tells how she tears the pieces of flesh from beneath the gauze and squeezes his leg in her fingers "for the very last drop of pus¹¹". At the same time she guides him towards heavenly atmosphere, in which they share mystical moments. His vital, breezy laugh changes into a soft, angelic smile. At the end, the visitors at his bed can hear "in the trembling of his praying lips a rustling like the wings of angels flying¹²". They imagine a crown of holiness radiating from his head. The story suggests that André has changed into an angel even before he is dead. The suffering is being used for losing his already decaying body and in acquiring a new, angelic one.

To sum up, the vital body has a prominent place in the biography of André de Thaye. As long as the body is vital, it may be admired. Because of that, its vulnerability is experienced more harshly. The body and its vitality are in no way to blame, but the message is that one should have a correct attitude towards it. Zest for life and suffering have to be undergone in order to be able to eventually lose the body and oneself.

¹¹ p. 72.

¹² p. 69.

2. The Atmosphere of Sacrifice

Robertus was one of the brothers who, in 1928, introduced the figure of André de Thaye to the Congregation of St. Louis¹³. In 1945 he was elected as General Superior. Up to 1957 he guided the religious life of the brothers. In monthly letters to the Superiors of the different houses of the congregation he proposed the subject matter for the recollections, the monthly retreats. Apart from these letters, his ideas about the religious life can also be found in his collection of personal notes¹⁴. In these texts the attitude which is propagated in the biography of André de Thaye can be discerned.

In the recollection of November 1946, Robertus considers the vitality of the body as an undeniable fact, but he does not face it with much enthusiasm. He is apprehensive of its effect on the religious life. In his eyes, the power of vitality tends to consume everything, including the whole person, in which case there won't be any question anymore of "the true, Christian love, that is founded on sacrifice¹⁵". If the brother wants to belong to Jesus unconditionally he must not identify himself with having a "handsome appearance or charm or a wonderful voice." He must have a heart "that does not delight in health and bodily strength, physical skill or beauty." Because "if we may or must live in excellent health, in a shapely body, let's not be overwhelmed by it. We must be able to lose it at any time without regrets.¹⁶"

To Robertus, the vitality of the body represents particularly the power of growth, maturation and development into adulthood. He

¹³ In a letter of 20-11-1929 to Brother Christoforus, the father of André de Thaye writes: "Réjouissez-vous et avec vous les chers frères Robert et Egmond, vous les ouvriers de la première heure, la Hollande a été la grande propagatrice du culte d'André."

¹⁴ Robertus made numerous personal notes: thoughts, quotations, ideas in preparation of meetings or speeches and notes during retreats. *Regional archive Zevenbergen*, Files 1597 - 1610.

¹⁵ Recollection, November 1946.

¹⁶ Recollection, November 1946.

does not reject this vitality. On the contrary, it has to be recognized and explored, but with a continuous readiness to lose it. This attitude has to prevent life from indulging its own vitality. This attitude of sacrifice has two sides to it. First, the brother has to make himself subservient to his appointed tasks. Second, he must foster an attitude, in which he is able to lose himself altogether. He must, as it were, stand next to his life or facing it. Through such an attitude the brother won't find himself in a vacuum. He attaches himself to God instead of to his own existence. He has to invest in his own person, but as seen within the perspective of his bond with God, he is nothing. Consequently Robertus can say: "Become what you are, in all your greatness and beauty", and this is followed by: "the way there is with a deep sense of personal nothingness (...) and an affectionate surrender to God."¹⁷

Robertus doesn't provide the brothers with any concrete means to foster this attitude of sacrifice. Such an attitude is nevertheless aroused by the complete dedication of the brothers to their educational tasks. Along with that, Robertus stresses that there should be an atmosphere in which such an attitude of sacrifice will thrive of itself.

In 1954, in the recollection of Pentecost, Robertus worries about the atmosphere among the brothers. He notices a sentimental atmosphere: "An adoration of the so-called 'delicate' type, that too often assumes effeminacy, weakness, sentimentality under a mask of good manners, attentiveness and good breeding."¹⁸ In his view, this brings about too great an interest in boys "with a beautiful voice, a fine complexion, nice boyishness, talent for acting, etc."¹⁹. Furthermore, he gathers from conversations among the brothers that they detect something special in "those (often younger) confreres, who have something feminine about them"²⁰.

¹⁷ File 1605.

¹⁸ Recollection, Pentecost 1954.

¹⁹ *Idem.*

²⁰ *Idem.*

Robertus says that pure, Christian love should not be mixed up with sentimentality because in a sentimental atmosphere the correct attitude of sacrifice doesn't thrive. Such an atmosphere causes one to attach onto things that work against an attachment to God. In the eyes of Robertus, this might create a dangerous situation in which sexual feelings between brothers, and between brothers and pupils, can come very close.

To create an atmosphere in which "the beautiful isn't confused with the sentimental"²¹, the brothers should conduct themselves like gentlemen²². A gentleman rightly stands midway between "rude manners" and "soft, weak femininity"²³. Too masculine a manner works against an attitude of sacrifice, because through it one asserts oneself too much²⁴. With too effeminate a manner one attaches oneself too much to all sorts of pleasurable things, which then can't be surrendered easily. Robertus prefers rather the expression of courage, strength and restrained masculinity. These will create an atmosphere of distance and respect. Within such an atmosphere it will be possible to sacrifice everything without regrets. It will make the attachment to God a lot easier. The attitude of sacrifice that Robertus wants is not only a personal matter, but also a social one. The inner attitude of the brother and his exclusive bond with God must be supported by the behaviour of the brothers among each other and towards the pupils.

Comparing the texts of Robertus with the biography of André de Thaye, it becomes evident that the same inner attitude is propagated. 'Be prepared!', the motto of André de Thaye, has also to be applied by the brothers: they have to be prepared to make their vitality subservient, and to be ready to lose it at any time. The

²¹ *Idem.*

²² Robertus praises the "elegant, fresh, sprightly manner of the distinguished gentleman" (File 1606).

²³ Recollection, Pentecost 1954.

²⁴ Robertus wants masculinity to be combined with an atmosphere of "warm humanity, cosy cordiality. Not one-sidedly rational, businesslike, rough competitive, officelike" (File 1606).

texts of Robertus are different from the biography of André de Thaye in that they have a pessimistic tone: vitality has to be formed continuously. And in contrast to André de Thaye, the brothers are confronted by sexual feelings.

3. The Recognition of Sexual Feelings

Robertus is of the opinion that sexual feelings are problematic because they very strongly effect an attachment to this life. A vital body and a maturing person can be formed into an attitude of sacrifice. But sexual feelings are not suitable for that kind of formation. They can't be sacrificed from a deeply experienced realisation or knowledge. According to Robertus the only suitable advice regarding sexual feelings is: "Hands off!²⁵", which is a lot easier in an atmosphere wherein gentlemen express distance and respect, rather than in an atmosphere of bravura or sentimentality. With regard to sexual feelings, Robertus remains rather empty-handed²⁶. In his view, these feelings can in no way be experienced as being in the interest of God.

Contrary to this pessimistic assesment by Robertus, there were those in the congregation during the first half of the fifties, who also made some optimistic sounds concerning the possibility of an integration of sexual feelings in the religious life of the brothers. In the March 1955 issue of the magazine of the Congregation of St. Louis, *Our Life*, an article was published by a brother of St. Louis, Venerandus, which raised the question of what place sexual feelings should have²⁷. In the article brother Venerandus focussed

²⁵ Recollection, November 1946.

²⁶ Robertus made some notes on virginity (File 1616). These are clearly quotations without comment or acknowledgements. Therefore Robertus' own view on the subject cannot be traced.

²⁷ The article has been written in connection with a seminar of the Catholic Pedagogical Association, which was held at St. Louis in Oudenbosch. Its subject was coeducation, the joint education of boys and girls. Although this article doesn't deal explicitly with the

on the notions of 'sexualization' and 'desexualization'. Presenting a fictitious story, he explained the meaning of those notions.

The sixteen year old 'I' of the story and his friend come across a monumental statue during a cycle-tour: the figure of a naked man breaking his chains. Whereas his friend doesn't seem to be affected by the man's nakedness, the 'I' doesn't know where to look. He can only look at the statue in a sexual way. According to Venerandus, the view of the 'I' has been sexualized. The sexual detail determines his perception of the image. Desexualization means that the sexual aspect is assigned to its proper place, viz. as a part of one's own perception and feelings. In contrast to Robertus, brother Venerandus sees the possibility of containing the vital power of sexual feelings. In his opinion, one can learn to deal with sexual feelings by correctly forming and developing one's personality. This is made possible by adopting a humble attitude in recognizing sexual feelings. Accepting the lack of freedom towards these feelings will be the starting point for dealing with them correctly.

The same affirming attitude towards sexual feelings that Venerandus proposes can also be found in a text of an unknown brother in the April 1955 issue of *Our Life*. Here the subject matter is the religious life of the brothers. Concerning sexuality, the author proposes that the brother has to grow into "a maturity of knowledge²⁸". This knowledge has to be integrated in religious education and formation as a prerequisite for the "experience of sexuality in accordance with God's intentions²⁹". According to this author, the brothers could somehow experience their sexual feelings in a way that won't stand in the way of their bond with God. How the brothers have to do this is not pursued.

religious life of the brothers, it contributed to forming their opinion on matters of sexuality.

²⁸ Unknown author, probably a brother, in the column 'varia' of *Our Life*, April 1955, volume 8, no. 11.

²⁹ *Idem*.

The texts of *Our Life* have the same point of departure as the texts of Robertus: acknowledging the vitality of the body. This focusses the attention on the experience of sexual feelings. Robertus reacts with an attitude of denial towards sexual feelings, because he cannot see how any experiencing of them could ever be combined with an attachment to God. Brother Venerandus and the other brother react by acknowledging sexual feelings in order to cope with them within religious life. In personal formation they recognize an instrument for dealing with sexual feelings.

4. The Struggle against the Flesh and Experiencing Vitality

Recognizing the vitality of the body brings about a fundamental shift in the basic structure of the monastic life, viz. striving after perfection. The struggle against the 'flesh', which is at the centre of this striving after perfection, is replaced with experiencing the body. As a result, there is a change in the way in which the body and its feelings are dealt with.

According to the Canon Law for the Religious³⁰, perfection is the goal of the monastic life. Due to his or her vows, the religious is obliged to set him- or herself to strive for perfection. Thus the monastery is a school for the practice of perfection. According to a manual³¹ which was widely used by the religious, the struggle against the 'flesh' is the method by which perfection should be achieved. In this manual it is explained that God loves man. He longs to be united with man: God attracts man. At the same time, man feels an emptiness which has to be filled up by God. Since the

³⁰ *The Canon Law for the Religious*, by Dr. Hubertus van Groessen, o.f.m. cap., Roermond/Maaseik, 1940. Here, for instance, pages 13-16: 'The Christian Condition of Life' and 'The Condition of Christian Perfection'. And pages 25-26 'The Monastic Condition as a Condition of Perfection'.

³¹ A. Tanquerey: *Synopsis of Ascetic and Mystic Theology (Kort begrip der ascetische en mystieke theologie)*, Tournai (Doornik), Belgium, 1947. Translation of the seventh French edition, Paris, Desclée, 1932. Notably pages 165-166, 232, 289.

coming of Christ a duality exists in the Christian individual. On the one hand, man reborn, the new man, who is begotten by the Holy Ghost. This new man desires to be united with God. On the other hand there is still the old man, also called the 'flesh'³².

In this manual striving for perfection is seen as the struggle within the individual, between the old and the new man. A inner struggle where the stakes are appetites, desires, inclinations. In this struggle the body doesn't coincide with the 'flesh' however strongly the inclinations of the 'flesh' be anchored in the body. Nor does the Christian individual coincide with his or her own body in a self-evident way. There is a fundamental, inner unrest. Whereas the individual is saturated with the old man, he or she must work on something new in a continuous process of transformation. In doing so the body is a point of contact, as an object for analysis. Its inner inclinations have to be known and unraveled, so as to free oneself from the entanglement within the 'flesh'. A paradoxical situation, producing a typical Christian experience of the inner life³³.

The point of departure in the struggle against the 'flesh' is formed by desires. The body is only a point of contact. Consequently, practices of mortification like fasting, waking and

³² There is much confusion as to the meaning of the notion 'flesh'. In its broadest sense the 'flesh' means the human existence after the fall. In a narrower sense the 'flesh' means the lasting inclination of the old man in the form of the so-called "triple desirability: the unrestrained search for sensual pleasure, for self-aggrandisement and for temporal property" (Tanquerey, p. 232).

³³ In this matter I subscribe to what Michel Foucault has raised in his *History of Sexuality* 1, 2 and 3. Namely, the idea that Christianity generated a specific experience of the subject, characterized by a typical relation of the self to the body. One tries to recognize oneself in one's own body in which one is confronted by something strange: the 'flesh'. This concern about oneself produces a specific form of experience of the subject. See also: "Michel Foucault: an Unexpected Hermeneutics of Christendom?", by Patrick Vandermeersch, in *Tijdschrift voor theologie*, 25 (1985).

flagellation are not aimed at the body. The body is being struck by harsh and concrete means in order that these might influence and manipulate the inner movements of desires. The texts reviewed above deal not with the struggle against 'the flesh' but with something else. The body is not a point of contact but a point of departure. The issue that is at stake is its experience.

In the biography of André de Thaye, the body is affirmed as being vital and vulnerable. The autonomy of the body shows itself in growth, spontaneity and joy, as well as in pain, sorrow and suffering. The point here is not by which desires André is carried away, but what attitude he learns to adopt.

Robertus acknowledges the autonomous vitality of the maturing individual. This vitality is unavoidable, whether you like it or not³⁴. The point is how this should be experienced by the brothers. In spite of good health, a shapely body, one's own person 'in all greatness and beauty', they must know, sense and feel that they are with God and not with themselves. This is not a process of transformation, like in the struggle against the 'flesh', in which the new man gains more and more ground over the old man. In the texts of Robertus something else is happening. Namely a shift in perspective or a change in position. The brothers have to experience their life from within the perspective of their life with God. In order to realize such a shift of perspective a correct atmosphere and correct behaviour are required. This, too, constitutes an important difference with the struggle against the 'flesh'. That struggle is mainly a lonely adventure, whereas in the case of Robertus the social setting plays an important role. How the brother relates to his fellow brothers determines how he will relate to himself.

In the struggle against the 'flesh' the body is approached as if it were an instrument. The inner inclinations are of the essence. These have to be influenced. The body is the stage for this

³⁴ Typical is indeed Robertus' phrase: "If we may or *must* live in excellent health, in a shapely body", Recollection, November 1946, (underlining E.H.).

struggle, or the equipment that is being used in the struggle. By means of his body he can get a grip on the desires that dwell within it. In this context the brother is able deal with his body.

In the biography of André de Thaye and in the texts of Robertus, Venerandus and the other brother the idea of a struggle against the 'flesh' has been abandoned altogether. The body itself has become essential. There is no other choice than to accept it. However prominent the place of the body, it escapes the individual to a great extent. There are no concrete means for dealing with the body. Man therefore takes refuge in experiencing it from the perspective of a bond with God.

In the struggle against the 'flesh' sexual feelings play a role in giving off a signal. Experiencing sexual feelings indicate that one has not yet liberated oneself enough from the entanglement within the old man. In the texts reviewed, on the other hand, sexual feelings are essential. They have an absolute status instead of that of just giving off a signal. Sexual feelings are experienced as the strongest expression of the vitality of the body. Because in experiencing these feelings the individual is already consumed by vitality, the relationship with God is at stake. Because of that, Robertus chooses to exclude experiencing sexual feelings altogether. The others choose to acknowledge sexual feelings as a prerequisite for being able to deal with them.

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The texts reviewed show that in the Congregation of St. Louis during the period 1928-1955, the monastic striving after perfection was given a specific interpretation. The idea of a struggle against the 'flesh' has been totally abandoned. The body no longer has an instrumental role, but an essential one. For some, this means they feel at a loss as to what to do with sexual feelings and react by rejecting them. Others acknowledge sexual feelings and try to deal with them. In both cases the ascent of the brother to God has become unimaginable without the brother relating to his body and his sexual feelings.

