

“A new song we raise”. On the First Martyrs of the Reformation and the Origin of Martin Luther’s First Hymn

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The first hymn Luther made, is, as generally assumed, the ballad from 1523 in which the martyrdom is sung of two monks from the Antwerp Augustinian monastery, Henricus Vos and Johannes van den Esschen. The title of the hymn is *Eyn new lied von den zween Merterern Christi, zu Brussel von den Sophisten zu Löwen verbrant* (“A new song of the two martyrs of Christ burned in Brussels by the Sophists of Louvain”). It is better known by the initial line *Ein neues Lied wir heben an* (“A new song we raise”). The tidings of the martyrdom of the two fellow Augustinian monks are the beginning of Luther’s poetical work, from which thirty-six hymns sprung and several adaptations of liturgical pieces.¹

Report of the events

On July 1, 1523, a large crowd gathered on the Grote Markt in front of the city hall of Brussels. Before eleven o’clock friars from the three other mendicant orders² arrived at the Grote Markt in solemn procession, bearing banners and being preceded by a cross. They took the places reserved for them. The professors of theology and the abbots also took their places on a platform in front of the city hall.

At eleven a young monk from the order of the Augustinian hermits is brought to the centre of the market. He is robed as a priest, and ascends the steps to the platform, on which there is also an altar. He kneels down. Behind him there stands a Franciscan friar, who faces the people and begins to preach. In the meantime the bishop strips the monk of his priestly attributes. The sermon and secularisation of the monk takes nearly an hour. After he has been deprived of his priest's robes the monk is returned to the city hall. Then two other monks are brought to the altar, and are dealt with similarly. They calmly accept what done to them. The inquisitor tries to have them repudiate their errors, but they refuse. With this, they are handed over to the secular powers. The councillors of warden Margarethe of Parma passed them on to the executioners to execute the death penalty.

Shortly thereafter the two, Henricus Vos and Johannes van den Esschen,³ are dragged from the city hall and brought to a pyre in the middle of the market square. After they once more refused to recant, the fire is lit. They cry out that they are dying as Christians. While the flames mount they begin singing the *Credo* and the *Te Deum* antiphonally.

The two men who died on the pyre on the Grote Markt in Brussels on July 1, 1523, were the first martyrs of the Reformation.⁴ They were suspected of *Lutherije* (Lutheran opinions). How did it happen that in such a short time there was a hotbed of corruption in the Low Countries?

In 1513 Johannes van Mechelen, the prior of the Augustinian convent in Enkhuizen, sent several of his fellow monks to Antwerp to found a monastery there.⁵ The Augustinian convent of Antwerp belonged, just as the mother convent, formally to the Cologne province of the Order of the Augustinian Hermits, but in fact authority was exercised by the vicar-general of the congregation of all observant convents of the four German provinces.

The Augustinian monastery in Wittenberg also belonged to the congregation of observant convents. Representatives of the congregation of observant convents met together every three years. In 1518 this gathering had been in Heidelberg, where Martin Luther had defended his theological views before his fellow Augustinian monks.

From the register of students at the University of Wittenberg it appears that some of the Augustinian convent in Antwerp had studied at this shortly founded university.⁶ For Johannes of Staupitz, then vicar-general of the congregation of observant convents, had attached the “studium generale” (the official learned institution) of the congregation to the university of Wittenberg.⁷ They attended Martin Luther’s lectures among those of other fellow Augustinians. This explains why the Augustinian convent at Antwerp should be seen as a centre of *Lutherije* (Lutheran opinions). Like Luther, the Antwerp Augustinians campaigned against the sale of indulgences.

It is certain that the prior of the Augustinian convent in Antwerp, Jacobus Praepositus, very early came to share the views of his fellow Augustinian, Luther. He publicly espoused Luther’s views, and received a response from many residents of Antwerp. He was particularly prominent in the preaching against indulgences at Antwerp. In a letter to Martin Luther, dated May 30, 1519, Erasmus says of Praepositus that he is almost the only one of the order of preachers who does not preach material gain, but Christ.⁸ The theologians at Louvain, who November 7, 1519 had been the first to condemn Luther, tried to stem the tide.

On the basis of an edict of May 8, 1521, in which Charles V deemed Luther’s views to be heresy and forbade them, at some point prior to April 23, 1522 (the point at which Emperor Charles V officially established the Inquisition in the Low Countries⁹), Praepositus was prosecuted. He was taken into custody and removed to Brussels, where he solemnly abjured his “errors”.¹⁰ He was moved to a monastery at Ypres, but

there he once again became suspect of heresy. He was arrested for the second time in July, 1522, but was able to escape and in the spring of 1523 fled to Wittenberg.

The ecclesiastical and secular authorities wished to firmly suppress the heresy in Antwerp. In the early morning of a day in July, 1522, all the monks from the Augustinian convent in Antwerp were seized and carted off in wagons to Vilvoorde, a little town north of Brussels. There they were interrogated by several professors from the University of Louvain. All but three were prepared to recant. These three were imprisoned at Vilvoorde. The others were permitted to return to their monastery, but had to publicly renounce their views. Despite this, the spirit of reform in the Augustinian convent in Antwerp was not extinguished. Some of the monks began to preach the new doctrine in public once again. In September and October, 1522, the whole monastery was cleared. On October 7 the church at the monastery was deconsecrated and the altars levelled. From letters it is clear that Adrian of Utrecht, a theologian of Louvain who by now had become Pope (from early 1522 to his death in the autumn of 1523), ratified the demolition of the monastery.¹¹

The martyrdom of the two Augustinians from Antwerp was publicised in several pamphlets.¹² The first was *Der actus vnd handlung der degradation und verprennung der Christlichen dreyen Ritter vnd merterer Augustiner ordens geschehen zu Brussel. Anno M.D.XXIII* (The act of degradation and burning of the three Christian knights and martyrs of the Augustinian Order occurred in Brussels in the year 1523).¹³ This pamphlet incorrectly speaks of three martyrs. The fate of the third Augustinian, Lambertus of Thorn, is not entirely certain. In a letter to Spalatinus dated July 22 or 23, 1523, Luther writes with great certainty that the third monk was executed on July 4, but on the same matter Erasmus writes only that he had heard rumours of the execution.¹⁴ On January 19, 1524, Luther however sends Lambert a letter to encourage him. He writes that Lam-

bert does not need his comfort, because Christ suffers in him and strengthens him.¹⁵ Apparently he remained in prison until his death in 1528.¹⁶ A second historically important pamphlet, which was also translated into German, is entitled *Historia de duobus Augustinensibus, ob evangelii doctrinam exustis Bruxellae – M.D.XXIII. Articuli LXII. Per eosdem asserti* (“The history of two Augustinian monks who died because of the evangelical doctrine in Brussels – 1523”).¹⁷ This *Historia* comprises two letters reporting the execution and reproducing the sixty-two theses for which the two Augustinians gave their lives, and finally contains an admonition to anyone who has disavowed his faith out of fear of persecution. The first letter is a report from an eyewitness who must have had close links with Louvain.¹⁸ The second letter shows evidence that the person who sent it – possibly the writer of the first letter – was informed about plans that were being forged in the leading circles in Louvain.¹⁹ The sixty-two doctrinal theses are critical of the measures which have been taken against Luther; they reject the absolute authority of the Church and argue that the Church is restrained by Scripture; they accept only three sacraments, namely baptism, Eucharist and confession; according to them, the Mass is not a sacrifice; they reject transubstantiation; it is not necessary that a believer confess all sins and do penance in order to receive forgiveness from God; all believers, even women, are priests; good works are a consequence, and not a condition, for justification; they deny purgatory and apparently challenge the canonisation of saints; according to them, vows are not binding; and finally, both Augustinians unleash considerable criticism on the clergy.

It is clear from this that both monks must have been serious and well-trained theologians. Erasmus writes of their martyrdom with great admiration. The executioner is asked if they recanted on the scaffold. The answer is negative.

Martin Luther's response to the martyrdom of Vos and Van den Esschen

The execution of adherents of his views left a deep impression on Martin Luther. That can be seen in several letters and a pamphlet he had published, *Die artickel warumb die zwen Christliche Augustiner münch zu Brussel verprandt sind, sampt eynem sendbrieff an die Christen ym Holland und Brabant* ("The articles for which the two Christian Augustinian monks have been burned in Brussels, together with a Letter to the Christians in Holland and Brabant"). Luther must have learned of the circumstances of their martyrdom toward the end of July, 1523. He was well aware that others had undergone what his enemies wished to see happen to him. At the end of July, 1523, he wrote a letter to the Christians in the Low Countries: "Now the time has come again when we hear the voice of the turtledove and flowers sprout up in our land... We here [in Germany; D.A.] to date have not yet been worthy of becoming so costly and dignified an offering to Christ,²⁰ although many of us have not been without knowing persecution, and yet know it... Although the opponents of these saints make them out to be followers of Huss, Wycliffe and Luther and glory in their murder, that should not surprise us, but rather strengthen us, because the Cross of Christ must have its malingers. But our Judge is not far: He will pass another judgement, of that we are certain."²¹

That the execution made a deep impression on Luther can also be seen from the fact that it stimulated him to writing songs. The first song, "A new song we raise" (*Ein neues Lied wir heben an*), the title of which is *Eyn new lied von den zween Merterern Christi, zu Brussel von den Sophisten zu Löwen verbrant* ("A new song of the two martyrs of Christ burned in Brussels by the Sophists of Louvain"), is a ballad regarding the execution of the Augustinian monks in Brussels.

Eyn new lied von den zween Merterern Christi, zu Brussel von den Sophisten zu Louen verbrant.²²

[1] Eyn newes lied wir heben an²³
des wald Gott²⁴, unser herre,
zu syngen, was got hat gethan
zu seinem lob und ehre
Zu brussel yn dem nidderland;
wol durch zwen yunge knaben
Hatt er seyn wunder macht bekant,
die er mit seynen gaben
So reichlich hat getzyret.

[2] Der erst recht wol²⁵ Johannes heyst
so reych an Gottes hulden²⁶
Seynn bruder Henrich nach dem geyst,²⁷
eyn rechter Christ on schulden,²⁸
Vonn dysser welt gescheyden synd,
sye hand die kron erworben²⁹,
Recht wie die frumen³⁰ gottes kind
fur seyn wort synd gestorben.
seyn Mertrer synd sye worden.

[3] Der alte feynd sye fangen liess
erschreckt sye lang mit dreuen.³¹
Das wort Gotts er sye leucken³² hiess,
mit list auch wolt sye teuben.³³
Von Löwen der Sophisten³⁴ viel
mit yhrer kunst verloren³⁵
Versamlet er zu dysem spiel;
der geyst sye macht zu thoren.
Sie kundten nichts gewinnen.

[4] Sye sungen suss, sye sungen saur,³⁶
versuchten manche lysteyn;
die knaben stunden wie eyn maur,
verachten die Sophisten.
Den alten feynd das seer verdross,

das er war überwunden
 Vonn solchen yungen, er so gross;
 er wart vol zorn; von stunden³⁷
 gedacht sye zuverbrennen.

[5] Sie raubten yhn³⁸ das kloster kleyd,
 die weyh sye yhn auch namen.³⁹
 Die knaben waren des⁴⁰ bereit;
 sie sprachen frölich Amen.
 Sie danckten yhrem vater Got,
 das sye loss solten werden
 des teufels larven spiel⁴¹ und spot,⁴²
 daryn durch falsche berden⁴³
 die welt er gar betruget.

[6] Das schickt Got durch seyn gnadt also,
 das sye recht priester worden⁴⁴,
 Sich selbst yhm musten opffern do
 und gehn ym Christen orden,⁴⁵
 Der welt gantz abgestorben seyn,
 die huch[e]ley ablegen,
 Zu hymel komen frey und reyn,
 die muncherey aussfegen
 Und menschen thandt⁴⁶ hie lassen.

[7] Man schreib yhn fur ein brieflein kleyn,
 das hies man sye selbst lesen.⁴⁷
 Die stuck sye zeychten alle drein,
 was yhr glaub war gewesen.
 Der hochste[e] yrthumb⁴⁸ dyser war:
 Man mus allein got glauben;
 der mensch leugt und treugt ymer dar,
 dem soll man nichts vertrauen.
 Des musten sye verbrennen.

[8] Zwey grosse feur sye zundten an;
 die knaben sie her brachten.
 Es nam gross wunder yderman,

das sye solch peyn verachten.
Mit freuden sye sych gaben dreyn,
mit Gottes lob unnd syngen.
Der muet wart den Sophisten klein
fur dysen neuen dyngen,⁴⁹
da sych Gott liess so mercken.

Der jüngere Liedschluss:

[9] Der schympff⁵⁰ sie nu gereuen hat,
sie woltens gern schon machen.⁵¹
Sie thurn nicht rhumen sich der that;⁵²
sie bergen fast⁵³ die sachen.
Die schand ym hertzen beysset sie
und klagens yhrn genossen.
Doch kan der geyst nicht schweigen hie:
des Habels blut vergossen,
es mus den Kain melden.⁵⁴

[10] Die aschen will nicht lassen ab,
sie steubt ynn allen landen.
Die hilft keyn bach, loch, grub noch grab,
sie macht den feynd zu schanden.
Die er ym leben durch den mord
zu schweygen hat gedrunge,
Die mus er tod an allem ort
mit aller stym und zungen
Gar frolich lassen singen

Der ältere Liedschluss:

[11] Noch⁵⁵ lassen sy yr lügen nicht,
den grossen mort zu schmucken.⁵⁶
sie geben fur eyn falsch geticht,⁵⁷
yhr gewissen thut sye drucken.
Die heiligen Gotts auch nach dem todt
von yhn gelestert werden.
Sie sagen, in der letzten not

die knaben noch auff erden
sych sollen han umbkeret.⁵⁸

[12] Die lass man liegen ymer hyn,
sie habens kleinen fromen.⁵⁹
Wir sollen dancken Got daryn;⁶⁰
seyn wort yst widderkommen.
Der Sommer yst hart⁶¹ fur der thur,
der winter yst vergangen;
die zarten blumen gehn erfur.
Der das hat angefangen,
der wirt es wol volenden.

A new song of the two martyrs of Christ burned in Brussels by
the Sophists of Louvain⁶²

[1] A new song here shall be begun -
The Lord God help our singing!
Of what our God himself hath done,
Praise, honour to him bringing.
At Brussels in the Netherlands
By two boys, martyrs youthful
He showed the wonders of his hands
Whom he with favour truthful
So richly hath adorned.

[2] The first right fitly John was named,
So rich he in God's favour;
His brother, Henry - one unblamed,
Whose salt lost not its savour.
From this world they are gone away,
The diadem they've gained;
Honest, like God's good children, they
For his word life disdained,
And have become his martyrs.

[3] The old arch-fiend did them immune
With terrors did enwrap them.

He bade them God's dear Word abjure,
With cunning he would trap them:
From Louvain many sophists came,
In their curst nets to take them,
By him are gathered to the game:
The Spirit fools doth make them -
They could get nothing by it.

[4] Oh! they sang sweet, and they sang sour;
Oh! they tried every double;
The boys they stood firm as a tower,
And mocked the sophists' trouble.
The ancient foe it filled with hate
That he was thus defeated
By two such youngsters - he, so great!
His wrath grew sevenfold heated,
He laid his plans to burn them.

[5] Their cloister-garments off they tore,
Took off their consecrations;
All this the boys were ready for,
They said Amen with patience.
To God their Father they gave thanks
That they would soon be rescued
From Satan's scoffs and mumming pranks,
With which, in falsehood masked,
The world he so befooleth.

[6] Then gracious God did grant to them
To pass true priesthood's border,
And offer up themselves to him,
And enter Christ's own order,
Unto the world to die outright,
With falsehood made a schism,
And come to heaven all pure and white,
To monkery be the besom,
And leave men's toys behind them.

[7] They wrote for them a paper small,
And made them read it over;
The parts they showed them therein all
Which their belief did cover.
Their greatest fault was saying this:
“In God we should trust solely;
For man is always full of lies,
We should distrust him wholly:”
So they must burn to ashes.

[8] Two huge great fires they kindled then,
The boys they carried to them;
Great wonder seized on every man,
For with contempt they view them.
To all with joy they yielded quite,
With singing and God-praising;
The sophs had little appetite
For these new things so dazing.
Which God was thus revealing.

[9] They now repent the deed of blame,
Would gladly gloze it over;
They dare not glory in their shame,
The facts almost they cover.
In their hearts gnaweth infamy -
They to their friends deplore it;
The Spirit cannot silent be:
Good Abel's blood out-poured
Must still besmear Cain's forehead.

[10] Leave off their ashes never will;
Into all lands they scatter;
Stream, hole, ditch, grave - nought keeps them still
With shame the foe they spatter.
Those whom in life with bloody hand
He drove to silence triple,
When dead, he them in every land,
In tongues of every people,

Must hear go gladly singing.

[11] But yet their lies they will not leave,
To trim and dress the murther;
The fable false which out they gave,
Shows conscience grinds them further.
God's holy ones, e'en after death,
They still go on belying;
They say that with their latest breath,
The boys, in act of dying,
Repented and recanted.

[12] Let them lie on for evermore –
No refuge so is reared;
For us, we thank our God therefore,
His word has reappeared.
Even at the door is summer nigh,
The winter now is ended,
The tender flowers come out and spy;
His hand when once extended
Withdraws not till he's finished.

This first song by Luther was not a hymn for liturgical use, but a ballad, written in response to the martyrdom of Henricus Vos and Johannes van den Esschen. It is an ode thanking and praising God for the martyrdom of the two monks.⁶³ The tone of this “new song” is joyful and optimistic. Luther describes the martyrdom of his fellow Augustinians, who were the first to be found worthy of giving their lives for the good cause. The song shows clear parallels with the martyrs' hymns from the first centuries of the Church. Then too it was not the intention of the writers to raise a monument for the martyrs, but to thank God and praise Him for the exemplars of loyalty and resolution that he had given to his Church. What is important for Luther in this ballad is the proclamation of the Gospel of God's grace in Christ Jesus.

Luther was deeply moved by their martyrdom. But rather than lamenting the sacrifice which they had had to make, he considered their faith unto death and martyrdom an honour. He was however angry at the rumours which were very quickly circulated by his enemies, that Henricus and Johannes had at the last moment forsworn their convictions and reconciled themselves with Rome. He wanted to have the martyrdom of these two men known, and the lies of his enemies exposed. Therefore he made use of a mass medium, the one most used in his day to spread important news. In an era without modern means of communication, in a time in which most people could neither read nor write, the popular song was the most frequently occurring form of mass communication. These ballads were printed on individual sheets of paper and sold everywhere. Travelling singers sung them in the markets, along the roadsides, and in pubs. Ballads made their way rapidly from city to city, and were quickly learned by heart.

There are two versions known of the song that Luther wrote in response to this event, namely one with twelve verses and one with ten. The version with twelve verses is found in the *Geystliche gesangbuchleyn*, the Wittenberg songbook of 1524, which was edited by Luther himself. What are the ninth and tenth verses in it are absent from the Erfurt *Enchiridion*, which also appeared in 1524. The printers in Erfurt must have worked from a loose-leaf edition of the song, because the title, with its identification of the event which the song is about and the name of the writer, is not present in the Wittenberg songbook of 1524.⁶⁴ Wilhelm Lucke is of the opinion that Luther intended to replace the eleventh and twelfth verses with the ninth and tenth, and that the printer included all four verses in error.⁶⁵ But assuming that this supposition is right, it seems strange that none of the later songbooks which appeared under Luther's authority correct this mistake.

Wilhelm Stapel seems to agree in part with Lucke when he writes that the tenth and twelfth verses both appear to be clo-

sing verses.⁶⁶ But in that case the tenth verse is the closing to the section on the failure of the plans of the sophists, and the twelfth regarding the lies that they are spreading. Because according to him every two verses in this song are coupled with each other and form one unit of thought, and because the tenth is an answer to the ninth and the twelfth to the eleventh, he believes that it cannot be argued that the ninth and tenth verses were added later. That becomes even clearer when one surveys the structure of the whole. The twelve verses form one entity. The song can be divided into three groups of four verses. The first part deals with the development of the conflict, through the verdict. The second deals with the death sentence and its execution, the third with the consequences. Each of these three larger units is constructed of smaller pairs of two verses each. The first group of the first section (the first and second verses) introduce the two heroes of the song; the second group (the third and fourth verses) describe their interrogation. The first group of the second section (the fifth and sixth verses) tell of the expulsion of the two young monks from the Augustinian order; the second group (the seventh and eighth verses) tell of the written confession of the two excommunicated men, and their condemnation to the stake. The first group of the third section (the ninth and tenth verses) tell of the failure of the attempt to trivialise the events; the second group (the eleventh and twelfth verses) tell of the failure of the attempt to justify the event through false assertions.

In the most recent critical edition of the song, Markus Jenny has placed the subtitles *Der jüngere Liedschluss* (the younger song ending) over the ninth and tenth verses and *Der ältere Liedschluss* (the older song ending) over the eleventh and twelfth.⁶⁷ The most serious objection to this is that there are no editions from which the eleventh and twelfth verses are missing, but only an edition with ten verses which is lacking the ninth and tenth verses. A further problem is that Jenny’s subtitles suggest that there is a contrast between the content of the

ninth verse and the eleventh. Indeed, in the ninth verse the inquisitors wish to cover up their deed, and in the eleventh it is said that they are spreading lies about the matter, and in particular that they are asserting that the two martyrs ultimately still recanted. However, these two verses do not have to contradict one another per se, because both touch upon the bad conscience of the judges. On the one hand the judges seek to hide the course of events from public knowledge, and on the other they seek to discredit the martyrs and cast themselves in a better light: only when it was too late and the fire was already alight, did the heretics repent. A third objection is that in any case Luther had too good a feeling for language, that it is not probable that he would have abandoned the inclusion of the first and twelfth verses, in which the reader is expressly involved in the praise of God through the use of the first person plural, for a new closing verse which, from the perspective of the poet, would weaken the text.

The form which Luther used for his first song is a verse form of nine lines with the following syllable count: 8,7 / 8,7 / 8,7 / 8,7,7. The lines with eight syllables have masculine or strong rhyme, the lines with seven syllables have feminine or weak end rhyme. Luther leaves the final line of every verse unrhymed.⁶⁸

The song is a ballad, a folk song about a historical event; in a time in which there were no newspapers or such, word of important events went from mouth to mouth in hearsay and song, in the markets and alleys. It is no longer a dance tune in the strict sense, but a song in which news was passed on.

The opening line, "A new song we raise" bears witness to Luther's intention to spread news in a song. But this popular motif is immediately followed by "that the Lord God gives / to sing what our God himself hath done." The news that Luther is telling in the song is a trustworthy report of the events which took place in Brussels. Word of the events had spread quickly by pamphlets. Luther began to "weep in his heart"

when he heard the news. He found that he should have been the first to die a martyr’s death for the sake of the Gospel.⁶⁹

Thus the first verse indicates the occasion for the song. It is a song in which “we” thank God for the fact that He has revealed his wonderful power through two young men in Brussels. The two are introduced in the second verse. They have given their lives for the word of God and received a martyr’s crown.

The acting subject of the following three verses is the “old Enemy” and the theologians of Louvain (sophists) connected with him. In the third verse the “old Enemy” is brought onto the stage, having the monks taken prisoner, threatening them, and with wiles and deceit trying to get them to repudiate the Word of God. He brings in the “sophists” from Louvain in order to convince them with clever arguments. But the Holy Spirit makes fools of these theologians. They do not succeed in realising their schemes. The fourth verse describes how despite temptations and threats, the young men stand fast in their faith and scorn the theologians. It deeply vexes the “old Enemy” that these young men bested him. From that moment, he conceives the idea of having them burned. The fifth verse describes how they are stripped of their habit and degraded to secular status. The young men accept that. They thank God that they have been freed from the masquerade of the “old Enemy”, to whom the Louvain theologians have lent their services. The “old Enemy” is not further specified, but one may assume that Luther is thinking of the Devil. In the Gospel according to St. Matthew the Devil is identified with the “old Enemy” (Mat. 13:39) and in Luther’s writings the Devil is related to terms as trick, hypocrisy, lie and deceit, masquerade, game and trap. In this song most of these words are present.

The sixth and seventh verses are the hinge in the song. The subject of the sixth verse is God, who through his grace makes the degraded priests into real priests, who offer themselves to Him as a sacrifice, and thus belong to the order of true Christi-

ans. Depriving them of their monk's robes and their degradation, as described in the fifth verse, stands against what is said here of the true priesthood and the order of Christians. After their monk's garb and priestly ordination is taken from them they become real priests by the grace of God, just as every true Christian is (the priesthood of all believers), who offer (sacrifice) themselves to God. They despise the world, take no part in its hypocrisy, mop the floor with that which (according to Luther) monkery stands for, namely an orientation to works, seeking justification on the basis of one's own good works and not by God's grace alone. In the seventh verse the martyrs are the subject. It describes how the sophists lay before them a brief declaration which sums up the (Lutheran) opinions for which they would give their lives. Their greatest error is that they teach that men must place their faith in God alone, and that man, after the Fall, is not to be an object of trust, being only able to lie and deceive. For these opinions they are condemned to the stake.

The sentence is executed at the beginning of the eighth verse. The inquisitor and the theologians of Louvain (sophists)⁷⁰ supporting him, place the young men on two pyres and ignite them. But this verse is not about them, as it might seem. Rather, the reaction of the spectators is: they experience it as a great wonder that the martyrs give no sign of the pain they must endure. They die while singing praises to God. That God reveals himself thus in these new things, this new manner of living and dying, namely that men can praise God even as they are being persecuted, causes the sophists' hearts to sink to their boots. Thus the acting subject is God, and therefore the sixth, seventh and eighth verses are a coherent whole.

While the inquisitors perform their acts openly in the third, fourth and fifth verses, in the ninth, tenth and eleventh verses the subject is primarily that they try to disguise their deed. The ninth verse tells how they come to regret what they have done and try to put the best gloss on the course of events. They dare

not stand up and take responsibility for their deed, and try to hide it. They are ashamed, and infamy gnaws at their hearts. But the Holy Spirit can not be silenced here: the blood of Abel cries out against Cain. Their deed can not remain hidden because, according to the tenth verse, the ash of the pyres blows to all lands. The enemy will be disgraced; nothing can stop it from happening. Now that they are dead, those who were silenced by murder sing everywhere in joy. Yet, we read in the eleventh verse, the theologians from Louvain cannot cease from trying to put the best face on their murder. They spread the false rumour that at the last moment the young men repudiated their views. That they slander God’s saints even after their death oppresses their conscience.

The final verse begins by observing that we should ignore what has been described in the ninth, tenth and eleventh verses, as it has been of no advantage to the inquisitors. “We” must praise God for this tragic event, because through it God’s word will be heard again. The closing of the song is, at first encounter, very surprising: “Summer stands before the door, / winter now is ended, / the tender flowers now appear. / That which is once begun / shall never be abandoned.” The execution of the martyrs of Brussels was on July 1, 1523; “summer stands before the door”. It was the eve of the feast of the Visitation of Mary, July 2. Luther, who grew up with the saints’ calendar, from his years in the monastery was familiar with the liturgy for that feast. The first nocturne of the matins for the Visitation of Mary includes the reading from the Song of Songs: “For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone, the flowers appear on the earth, the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land” (2:11-12).⁷¹ Here we have the same theme that we discovered in *Eyn brieff an de Christen ym Nidderland* (“A Letter to the Christians in the Netherlands”). The circle is complete.

Notes

¹ There are many editions of Luther's hymns. The most recent one is *Luthers geistliche Lieder und Kirchengesänge*. Vollständige Neuedition in Ergänzung zu Band 35 der Weimarer Ausgabe bearbeitet von M. Jenny, Köln, 1985. (=Archiv zur Weimarer Ausgabe der Werke Martin Luthers. Band 4). Henceforth references are made to this edition as follows: AWA, Bd. 4.

² Besides the Augustinian Hermits the other three other mendicant orders are the Franciscan, the Dominican and the Carmelitan friars.

³ The precise spelling of their last names can no longer be determined. In the report by Johannes Pascha, the prior of the Carmel at Mechlin, who was present at the execution as an inquisitor, one of the two martyrs was named Henricus Vos, who according to these notes seems to have come from 's-Hertogenbosch, and the other Johannes van den Esschen. P. Fredericq, *Corpus documentorum inquisitionis haereticae pravitatis Neerlandicae*, 's-Gravenhage, 1900. Deel IV, nr. 145. In the *Chronycke van Antwerpen* (see 19) it is reported that both came from 's-Hertogenbosch. Cf. here the note with P. Fredericq, *Corpus documentorum*, Deel IV, nr. 138. Elsewhere in the *Chronycke van Antwerpen* (see 22) it is said that one came from "de Kempen" and the other from Zeeland. P. Fredericq, *Corpus documentorum*, Deel IV, nr. 139. Combining this information points in the direction of 's-Hertogenbosch and its vicinity as the place from which Vos and Van den Esschen came. In that case, we must think of Zeeland not as the province, but the village with that name in the east of the province of North Brabant, in the neighbourhood of Uden. Cf. also L. J. A. van de Laar, "De opkomst van de reformatie in 's-Hertogenbosch c. 1525-1565", in *Archief voor de geschiedenis van de katholieke kerk in Nederland* 20 (1978), 115.

⁴ For the following, see M. Gielis, "Érasme, Latomus et le martyre de deux augustins luthériens à Bruxelles en 1523", in J. Sperna Weiland and W. Th. M. Frijhoff (ed.), *Erasmus of Rotterdam. The Man and the Scholar*. Proceedings of the symposium held at the Erasmus University, Rotterdam, 9-11 November 1986. Leiden, 1988, 61-68; M. Gielis, "Augustijnergeloof en predikerengeloof. Het conflict tussen de reformatorische verkondiging van de Antwerpse augustijnen en de scholastieke leer van de Leuvense theologen (ca. 1520)", in *Jaarboek van de Provinciale Commissie voor Geschiedenis en Volkskunde*, Deel VI, 1996, 198-205; also published in *Lutherbulletin, Tijdschrift voor interconfessioneel Lutheronderzoek* 6 (1997), 46-57. See also J. Decavele, *De eerste protestanten in de Lage Landen. Geloof en heldenmoed*, Zwolle, 2004, 41-52. On martyrdom in Europe in the 16th century in general see B. S. Gregory, *Salvation at Stake. Christian Martyrdom in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1999 (= Harvard Historical Studies 134).

⁵ For the following, see Th. Kolde, *Die deutsche Augustiner-Congregation und Johann von Staupitz. Ein Beitrag zur Ordens- und Reformationsgeschichte*, Go-

tha, 1879, 260-262; A. de Meyer, “Adriaan Florisz. van Utrecht in zijn contacten met de augustijnen”, in *Archief voor de geschiedenis van de katholieke kerk in Nederland* 2 (1960), 7-10; 60-62. Johannes de Essendia (Johannes van den Esschen) was also among the first seven monks who founded the Augustinian convent in Antwerp in 1513. See here H. Q. Janssen, *Jacobus Praepositus, Luthers leerling en vriend, geschetst in zijn lijden en strijden voor de hervormingszaak in Nederland en in Duitschland*, Amsterdam, 1866, 12.

⁶ Johannes van Mechelen himself took the doctor’s degree in Wittenberg September 16, 1511. That he has attended Martin Luther’s lectures, is not likely. In 1516 Johannes consigned two monks from the Antwerp monastery, Nicolaus and Hadrianus, to study in Wittenberg. In 1517 again three monks were send to Wittenberg, Johannes Aumann, Christophorus Blackhoffen and Johannes Umaus. In 1520 Cornelius Bester was send. Jacobus Praepositus and Henricus of Zutphen were also “alumni” (graduate ex-students) of the Wittenberg “studium generale”. Cf. here J. Vercruysse, “Was haben die Sachsen und die Flamen gemeinsam?” in P. Freybe (ed.), *Wittenberg als Bildungszentrum 1502-2002. Lernen und Leben auf Luthers Grund un Boden*, Wittenberg, 2002, 9-32; here 12-13.

⁷ Cf. here D. Gutierrez, *Geschichte des Augustinerordens*. Bd. 2. Die Augustiner vom Beginn der Reformation bis zur katholischen Restauration 1518-1648, Rome, 1975, 18-23.

⁸ Desiderius Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum denuo recognitum et auctum per P. S. Allen*, Oxford, 1906-1958, Vol. III, nr. 980, 54-57.

⁹ The warrant from Emperor Charles V empowering Frans van der Hulst as inquisitor for the duchy of Brabant and all his Dutch territories is found in P. Fredericq, *Corpus documentorum*, Deel IV, nr. 72 and 73. The bull of Pope Adrian VI in which he elevates Van der Hulst to the office of general papal inquisitor in the Low Lands of Emperor Charles V is dated June 1, 1523. See P. Fredericq, *Corpus documentorum*, Deel IV, nr. 136. Van der Hulst, who was a Councilor of Brabant, was a layman. The Pope grants him powers equal to those of episcopal and papal inquisitors on the condition that he take action against suspect members of the clerical estate only in consultation with two men of the Church, who are invested with ecclesiastical office or are doctors of theology (so-called sophists). He must refrain from pronouncing spiritual punishments, and for the degradation of heretical clergy from the clerical estate he must call on the aid of one bishop or two abbots or other holders of high church office.

¹⁰ Cf. here the open letter from Jacobus Praepositus, in which he expatiates on what happened to him. P. Fredericq, *Corpus documentorum*, Deel IV, nr. 116. The text of his renunciation is to be found in P. Fredericq, *Corpus documentorum*, Deel IV, nr. 65, and contains thirty theses derived from the thought of Luther which are abjured.

¹¹ Luther had suspected the influence of Pope Adrian VI, at the least. He accuses the Pope of having canonised the medieval bishop Benno, while having burned the true saints Johannes and Henricus at Brussels. Martin Luther, *Wider den neuen Abgott und alten Teufel der zu Meissen soll erhoben werden*, 1524, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Weimar 1883, (WA) Bd. 15, 184, 33-35; see also 14-21.

¹² Cf. Bernd Moeller, "Inquisition und Martyrium in Flugschriften der frühen Reformation in Deutschland", in *Ketzerverfolgung im 16. und frühen 17. Jahrhundert*, hrsg. von S. Seidel Menchi, Wiesbaden, 1992, 21-48.

¹³ The text has been published in F. Pijper in *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica*, Deel VIII, 's-Gravenhage, 1911, 13-19.

¹⁴ *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Briefwechsel (WABr), Bd. 3, Nr. 635, 12-13. In a letter to Zwingli dated August 31, 1523, Erasmus writes that the rumour has reached him that the third Augustinian was also executed on the day after the Visitation of Mary (i.e., July 3, 1523). Desiderius Erasmus, *Opus Epistolarum*. Allen, Vol. V, nr. 1384, 2-7.

¹⁵ *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, WABr, Bd. 3, Nr. 707.

¹⁶ This assumption rests on a note dated September 15, 1528, in P. Fredericq, *Corpus documentorum*, Part V, nr. 371, in which a payment to the executioner of Brussels is described as being for digging a grave under the gallows on the Flotzenbergh for "Lambert the Augustinian, who died persisting in *Lutherije* [Lutheran opinions] without confession". The same account describes a payment to a carter for conveying the corpse there. Lambertus thus did not die on the scaffold. That Erasmus, in his letter to Carolus Utenhovius dated July 1, 1529, says that he "was killed in secret" might indicate that the rumour had reached him that Lambertus of Thorn had recently been killed in prison.

¹⁷ Published by F. Pijper in: *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica*, Deel VIII, 33-54; the German translation is entitled: *Dye histori, so zwen Augustiner Ordens gemartert seyn tzu Bruxel. Dye Artickel darumb sie verbrent seyn mit yrer auszlegung vnd verklerung* [1523], in *op. cit.*, 65-114.

¹⁸ The eyewitness speaks of "M.[agistri] N.[ostri] Lovanienses" (our Lovain masters). *Historia de duobus Augustinensibus*, in *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica*, Deel VIII, 35.

¹⁹ *Historia de duobus Augustinensibus*, in *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica*, Deel VIII, 38.

²⁰ We encounter this thought already in a sermon by Luther given on March 24, 1523.

²¹ Martin Luther, *Eyn brieff an die Christen ym Nidderland*, in *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, WA, Bd. 12, 77-80.

²² The text is reproduced here as it was published by Markus Jenny, M. Jenny, *Luthers geistliche Lieder und Kirchengesänge*, AWA Bd. 4, 215-222.

- ²³ “Eyn newes lied wir heben an”: this line is often the beginning of popular songs in which events are being narrated to the people.
- ²⁴ “des wald Gott”: that God gives.
- ²⁵ “recht wol”: rightly.
- ²⁶ “Der erst recht wohl Johannes heyst,/ so reych an Gottes hulden”: the word “huld” is a term for the relation between a liege lord and a vassal. Seen from the perspective of the lord it means “favour” or “grace”; from the side of the vassal, “allegiance”. Luther is here playing with the name Johannes, because Johannes means “God is gracious”.
- ²⁷ “nach dem geyst” belongs with “seynn bruder”. One should read: Henricus, his brother in the spirit.
- ²⁸ “on schulden”: without sins, perfect.
- ²⁹ “sy hand die kron erworben”: they have won the crown of life; see Rev. 2:10.
- ³⁰ “frumen”: pious; for Luther, pious often means justified.
- ³¹ “dreuen”: threaten.
- ³² “leucken”: disavow.
- ³³ “teuben”: benumb, soothe to sleep.
- ³⁴ “Sophisten”: sophists, a derisory term for Scholastic theologians, who with the aid of their rhetorical tricks discuss all sorts of unimportant things.
- ³⁵ “mit yhrer kunst verloren”: with their useless rhetorical art.
- ³⁶ “Sye sungen suss, sye sungen saur”: they entice sweetly and they threaten.
- ³⁷ “von stunden”: from that moment.
- ³⁸ “yhn”: read “ihnen”.
- ³⁹ “die weyh sye yhn auch namen”: they degrade them to the status of laymen. That was customary in the burning of heretics who had received ordination as priests.
- ⁴⁰ “des”: for that.
- ⁴¹ “larven spiel”: hiding themselves behind all sorts of masks; deceit.
- ⁴² “spot”: contempt (from God).
- ⁴³ “falsche berden”: mendacious conduct.
- ⁴⁴ “recht priester worden”: the church has robbed them of their priestly rank; now they become priests as God intends; they offer themselves up to God.
- ⁴⁵ “Christen orden”: the community of true Christians. Here the “order of Christ” is clearly being opposed to the monastic order; because they have been cast away by the church they are now members of the true order.
- ⁴⁶ “menschen thandt”: fiddling around on the part of men. What is undoubtedly intended is the view rejected by Luther that by the performance of good works one can earn God’s grace.
- ⁴⁷ “Man schreib yhn fur ein brieflein kleyn,/ das hies man sye selbst lesen”: A short declaration was drawn up for them and read aloud to them. In it

were all the points in which they believed (i.e., the Lutheran views that they confessed).

⁴⁸ “yrthumb”: error, heresy. The heresy of which they were accused was that they believed in God alone and thought that man was radically lost in sin.

⁴⁹ “fur dysen neuen dyngen”: the new thing is that men can praise and glorify God even when they are being persecuted and suffering pain, that they can rejoice in the midst of suffering.

⁵⁰ “schympf”: joke, game.

⁵¹ “schon machen”: undo.

⁵² “Sie thurn nicht rhumen sich der that”: they dare not admit what they have done.

⁵³ “bergen fast”: bury deeply, keep very secret.

⁵⁴ “des Habels blut vergossen, / es mus den Kain melden”: the martyrs are compared with the justified Abel. The blood of Abel is an indictment against Cain.

⁵⁵ “Noch”: still, yet.

⁵⁶ “schmucken”: put the best construction on something.

⁵⁷ “falsch geticht”: fiction, lie. Refers to the rumour reported at the end of the verse, which was later spread by their torturers, that the two martyrs abjured their views with their last breath.

⁵⁸ “sych sollen han umbkeret”: they turned from their false ways; what is meant is that they recanted their views.

⁵⁹ “Die lass man liegen ymer hyn, / sie habens kleinen fromen”: nevertheless, let it be; they have had little advantage from it.

⁶⁰ “Wir sollen dancken Got daryn”: we must thank God in and because of this in itself tragic event.

⁶¹ “hart”: almost.

⁶² The standard English translation is quoted from *Luthers Works*, Vol. 53, Liturgy and Hymns. Philadelphia, 1965, 214-216. It is not a literal translation.

⁶³ Cf. here Luther, in a letter to Jakob Montanus dated July 26, 1523, *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, WABr, Bd. 3, Nr. 637, 9-11.

⁶⁴ See here R.W. Brednich, *Die Liedpublizistik im Flugblatt des 15. bis 17. Jahrhunderts*, Baden-Baden, 1974, Band I, Abhandlung, 86-87.

⁶⁵ W. Lucke, *Die Lieder Luthers herausgegeben und eingeleitet*, Weimar, 1923, WA 35, 10-11; 94. In most cases, for his edition of Luther's songs in WA 35, Lucke follows the text as it is found in the *Geystliche gesangbuchleyn* (Wittenberg 1524). For the text of our song however he proceeds from the text of the Erfurt *Enchiridion* (1524). This lacks the ninth and tenth verses, according to the count of Markus Jenny in AWA. These two verses follow immediately, and are taken from the *Geystliche gesangbuchleyn* (Wittenberg

1524). O. Schließke, *Handbuch der Lutherlieder*, Göttingen, 1948, 111-124, follows Lucke in this.

⁶⁶ For the following see W. Stapel, *Luthers Lieder und Gedichte*. Mit Einleitung und Erläuterungen, Stuttgart, 1950, 197-203.

⁶⁷ M. Jenny, *Luthers geistliche Lieder und Kirchengesänge*, AWA, Bd. 4.

⁶⁸ For the following see also T. H. M. Akerboom, “Nun frewt euch lieben Christen gmeyn’. Een spiegel van Luthers theologie”, in *Voor de achtste dag. Het Oude Testament in de eredienst*. Een bundel opstellen voor prof. Dr. J. P. Boendermaker ter gelegenheid van zijn 65^e verjaardag onder redactie van K. van der Horst, D. Monshouwer en G. H. Westra. Kampen, 1990, 239-250.

⁶⁹ See Martin Luther, *Ausgewählte Werke*, Hg. von H. H. Borchert und G. Merz. 3. Aufl., München, 1950, Bd. 3, 378. (Erläuterungen bei “Sendbrief an die Christen im Niederland”).

⁷⁰ See note 9 for their presence and note 34 for the term.

⁷¹ The same text is read as epistle in the Mass for the feast of the Visitation of Mary.