

# Assistance in Dying: Accounts of Guidance Before and at Death in Late Medieval *Vitae*



Figure 1 Liedewij being shown the souls in purgatory by the angel. Woodcut from a printed life of Liedewij based on the version of Jan Gerlachs, which is held by the Rijksmuseum Het Catharijneconvent, Utrecht (1259 B 5) and which can be found on p. 14 Source: Digitale bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse letteren.

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## Abstract

In the Late Middle Ages, a great number of works were written that focused on themes related to death. When looking at these late medieval sources, studies have often focused on the popular *Ars moriendi* genre. Other popular genres, such as the lives of the saints and the biographies of members of religious communities, have received less attention. In this thesis, I will argue for the relevance of these other genres, by analysing three different late medieval Middle Dutch biographies. Two of them are saints' lives, and the other is a collection of lives of sisters that were part of the *Devotio Moderna* network. I argue for the relevance of these texts by focusing on how they describe different themes related to assistance in dying, since this is in essence the focus of the *Ars moriendi*. In addition to this, a comparison between the descriptions of the guidelines presented in the lives and in a Middle Dutch *Ars moriendi* text will be provided, where it will be analysed on what points they are similar and where discrepancies can be found. Reasons for the discrepancies and arguments concerning the relevance of the texts in relation to literature on death will be given.

# I. Introduction

## *Problem statement*

In this age, we live in a global society, in which everyone is connected to each other, and every news worthy event is publicized and can be accessed by almost everybody in the world. Headings in the news are often related to wars, attacks by extremists and brutal murders. In the last five years, epidemics and pandemics, such as the Zika-virus and the Corona-virus, have paralyzed our global society. It is in this light that we are faced with the finite nature of human life and our mortality.

However, this occurrence is definitely not unique. Even in a time of which we definitely do not categorize society as 'global', wars were waged, epidemics took the lives of great parts of the population on more than one continent, and people were confronted with their mortality, even more so than we are today.

The Late Middle Ages in particular were a turbulent time in which great numbers of people died of infectious diseases. Especially the Black Death (1347-1352) and the various manifestations of the plague after it, affected the population tremendously. For most countries, it would take more than two centuries before the populace returned to the same number of inhabitants as before the Black Death.<sup>1</sup>

It is not surprising that in this time when everyone was faced with an indiscriminating death, a great deal of literature was written on the topics of death and dying. From 1450 until 1530, literature on death was dominated by the *Ars moriendi* genre, which consists of manuals that teaches the art of dying.<sup>2</sup> At that time, priests felt a need for a clear manual to use when assisting the dying, since they were continuously confronted with mass deaths.<sup>3</sup> However, the genre became popular in all layers of society. The dominance of this genre explains why an abundance of studies have focused on the *Ars moriendi* when discussing dying and death in late medieval literature instead of other popular genres, such as the lives of saints.

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<sup>1</sup> Şevket Pamuk, "The Black Death and the origins of the 'Great Divergence' across Europe, 1300-1600", *European Review of Economic History*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (December 2007), 293.

<sup>2</sup> E.J.G. Lips, "'Om alle menschen wel te leren sterven': Een onderzoek naar het publiek en de receptie van Nederlandstalige *Ars moriendi*-teksten in de vijftiende en vroege zestiende eeuw," *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* Vol. 66, no. 2 (1986), 156.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

The cult of the saints had been part of the Christian tradition for centuries, and the written lives of the saints were an important and popular genre in medieval society, also in the time when the epidemic occurrences of the plague took place. Jost specifically illustrates the importance of a personal connection with saints as “a reassuring presence amidst the trauma of widespread sickness and death”. However, only few scholars have focused on late medieval *vitae* of saints in relation to the study of death.<sup>4</sup> In addition to there being little interest in the lives of the saints in death studies, other genres which address the themes of dying and death are also neglected. The biographies of religious communities are a good example.

Since there is a great imbalance between research on the *Ars moriendi* and the study of different types of *vitae*, I will examine two late medieval Middle Dutch saints’ lives and a Middle Dutch sister-book, in order to see how these works describe themes related to dying and death, with a focus on instructions on dying, and to see how they compare to each other. In addition to this, I will focus on how these descriptions compare to the guidelines surrounding death as prescribed in a Middle Dutch *Ars moriendi* text, in order to see how the descriptions relate to each other, and especially to prove their relevance to the field of medieval death literature.

### Sources

The chosen lives all focus on different types of exemplary persons. Firstly, I will focus on the lives of the lay, city saints St. Rochus and St. Liedewij of Schiedam, whose lives were respectively written in the last quarter of the fifteenth century and presumably between 1433 and 1455.<sup>5</sup> The life of Rochus is largely characterized by his perfect nature, and his power to cure others from the plague. This is in contrast to Liedewij’s *vita*, which largely focuses on her abilities to assist those who are dying or already dead. In addition to this, her life is characterized by her struggle to accept God’s will to make her sick. The version of the life of Liedewij that I have chosen to use is a new edition of a Middle Dutch text, which also

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<sup>4</sup> Jean E. Jost, “The Effects of the Black Death: The Plague in Fourteenth-Century Religion, Literature, and Art,” in *Death in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: The Material and Spiritual Condition of the Culture of Death*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 199.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Gerlachs, *Het leven van Liedewij, de maagd van Schiedam*, ed. Ludo Jongen and Cees Schotel (Hilversum: Verloren, 1994); *Vita van St. Rochus, 1475-1500*, ff. 309r-324v. MS I G 12, Allard Pierson Depot, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam.

provides a Modern Dutch translation. The editors have chosen to use one manuscript as their main source for this edition. They argue that although the Middle Dutch manuscripts and prints based on the first Middle Dutch life of Liedewij are all more or less identical, this manuscript, written around 1480 in the Priory of Zevenborren (Prieuré de Sept Fontaines), which was part of the Congregation of Windesheim, is the most reliable to use. They base this on the few grammatical mistakes.<sup>6</sup> The manuscript, written in the circles of the *Devotio Moderna*, is bound together with sermons on the liturgical year by the Dominican Peregrinus de Opol and on the life of Saint John the Evangelist. Additionally, it is bound together with the life of Christ and various other sacred biographies. The editors of the reproduction have added one chapter and chapter titles to the text of the manuscript. They copied these additions from a printed version of the life of Liedewij, since the manuscript from Zevenborren lacked these features. To stay as close as possible to the text of the manuscript from Zevenborren, I will not consider the titles and the added chapter in my analysis.

The manuscript of the life of Rochus I will study is the only vernacular life of Rochus in the Netherlands, as can be found in the database Bibliotheca Neerlandica Manuscripta & Impressa. Two other manuscripts containing his life in Middle Dutch can be found in Belgium. The text is most probable a translation and adaptation of a Latin text, catalogued by the Bollandistes as BHL 7276. Unfortunately, I was not able to link this identification number to an existing manuscript, thus making it impossible to prove this in this study.

The manuscript is part of a convolute, in which the life of Rochus is bundled together with the vita of St. Livinus, St. Hubert and St. Martin of Tours, *Vanden seven sloten* by Jan van Ruusbroec, *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit* of Henricus Suso and *Van vierderhande inwendige oeffeninge der zielen*. The convolute was produced in the women's monastery Maagdendries, in Maastricht. At least four of the texts in the convolute were copied by tertiary Katrijn van Rade, of which the life of St. Martin of Tours and *Büchlein der ewigen Weisheit* were respectively written in 1481 and 1498.

Although both *vitae* were written for usage in a monastery, they are useful to this study, because like the *Ars moriendi*, the saints and their *vitae* were popular among all layers of society in the Low Countries, and could therefore all fulfil the purpose to instruct the devout. This popularity was caused by several reasons. Firstly, the lives of the saints

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<sup>6</sup> The shelfmark of this manuscript is Ghent, University Library, HS. 1080. For the reasoning of Jongen and Schotel, see Gerlachs, *Het leven*, 107, 112.

appealed to the urban society, since these people could identify with the saints' lives lived in the world instead of in a monastery. Secondly, both saints were revered because of their special powers related to sickness and death. These powers were important to both their devotees in the city and in the monastery, since all of society was confronted with the horrors of the plague and the mass deaths. Rochus' life focuses on his ability to heal the sick and help the needy. The devout were drawn to Liedewij because of her power to help those who had already moved on from the earthly world to the afterlife.

Although the specific manuscripts studied were used in a monastery, the life of Liedewij shows that the content was not specifically altered for this purpose and is therefore useful to study when discussing how ideas about assistance before death were presented to the whole of society. Rochus was an extremely favoured saint, who was especially revered for his curing abilities. A great number of images of the saint were created, and many churches were built in his honour.<sup>7</sup> However, few copies of his life have survived to the present-day. Therefore, this study will be a great chance to examine the manuscript from Maastricht and to illustrate the saint's relation to death. In addition to this, Rochus is portrayed in his life as a lay saint who continually was in contact with the lay society, which made him accessible to the laity, and a great source to use to instruct the devout.

Since the saints' lives focus on persons differing in nature from ordinary persons, I have also chosen to study a different type of collected biographies, namely the biographies of the sisters of Diepenveen, written in 1524.<sup>8</sup> These lives will reflect on the deaths of more ordinary persons, although the sisters were celebrated for their special, extraordinary devotion. Moreover, their lives were specifically written down because of the sisters' outstanding exemplary potential. However, they do not only highlight their virtuous actions. They also illustrate the struggles the sisters face regarding their faith or regarding their fear of death. These lives are rich in their descriptions of customs surrounding dying in the monastery.

The manuscript containing the lives of the sisters of Diepenveen is comprised of about fifty biographies; almost all are about the sisters, whereas only one of them describes the life of one of the founders of Diepenveen, their rector Johannes Brinckerinck. Because

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<sup>7</sup> André Vauchez, "The Saint," in *The Medieval World*, ed. Jacques Le Goff, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (London: Collins & Brown, 1990), 332.

<sup>8</sup> Griet Essinchghes, *Zusterboek van Diepenveen* (Diepenveen: St. Maria en Agnes, 1524), MS 101 E 26, Athenaeumbibliotheek, Deventer.



fifty lives are too great a number to study in this thesis, I have chosen to follow the selection of lives put forward by Wybren Scheepsma in his book *Hemels verlangen*. In this book, Scheepsma, a leading scholar in the field of Middle Dutch spiritual literature, has provided us with the biographies of Brinckerinck and ten sisters in the Modern Dutch language.<sup>9</sup> These ten lives illustrate experiences of deathbeds of sisters that differ greatly from each other and contain some unique circumstances.

I will use one version of an *Ars moriendi* text as a reference point to compare the sources with an influential contemporary source, and specifically a text which closely relates to the milieu of the production and the usage of the other sources. By using one particular version, any references to the specific content will be solely gathered from this text. This means that there may be more to say in relation to this thesis when studying other Middle Dutch *Ars moriendi* texts. However, I will not broaden my research, and will keep my study of Middle Dutch *Ars moriendi* texts to one specific copy. This text, *Een scone leeringe om salich te sterven*, printed in Antwerp in 1500, was specifically altered to be used for a women's monastery, as can be seen in the last chapter of the text.<sup>10</sup> In this part, brothers and sisters are specifically addressed instead of Christian people in general, which is actually the practice in the rest of the book. A few pages into the last chapter, the sisters are specifically addressed, without mention of the brothers. Whereas *Een scone leeringe* is thus produced specifically for a women's monastery, the genre of *Ars moriendi* appealed to both the clergy as the lay people in the cities. The fact that this specific text combines both the attractiveness of the genre to the whole society and a focus on a women's community, makes this text a great addition to this thesis, because we can compare the lives of the city saints with the chapters that are not specifically altered, whereas the biographies of the sisters may specifically be studied by relating them to the last part of the text.

All in all, the sources are useful on the basis that they are all written in the same milieu, and share their purpose to edify others, a point to which I will return shortly.

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<sup>9</sup> Wybren Scheepsma, *Hemels verlangen*, (Amsterdam: Querido, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> B. de Geus, J. van der Heijden, A. Maat and D. den Ouden, *Een scone leeringe om salich te sterven* (Utrecht: HES Uitgevers, 1985), 16-17.

## *Vitae*

In order to illustrate the relevance of the sources, it is important to have an understanding of the types of sources studied in this thesis, starting with the sacred biographies. The cult of the saints has been part of the Christian world since late Antiquity, when the veneration of martyrs became an ordinary practice in Christianity. Throughout the Middle Ages, the cult changed significantly. Although the martyrs long preserved their favoured position, new models of sainthood came into existence, such as the models of hermits, confessors, and monastic figures. In the Early Middle Ages, the notion that a saint could only be of noble birth was generally accepted in the West.<sup>11</sup>

In the eleventh and twelfth century, two changes affected the cult of the saints. Firstly, the very nature of sanctity was changing. Before this time, the status of a saint was often bestowed to one who contemplated “the infinite mystery of a totally ‘other’ and nearly inaccessible God”. However, around this time, imitating Christ characterized saintliness.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, devout people were no longer content to venerate saints from faraway lands, because the saints were removed from them by time and were inaccessible by their nature. Instead, the devout preferred saints that were familiar to them, either in time, status or space.<sup>13</sup> These two changes resulted in the flourishing of the lay saints. Yet, in the regions north of the Alps, the lay saint was still held to be a person from noble birth.<sup>14</sup> Local cults of saints flourished in Europe, and the majority of the new cults developed locally without being canonized. In the Late Middle Ages only a small group of saints passed the trial of worthiness of the Roman Church to receive the highest consecration.<sup>15</sup>

As new saints were venerated based on their closeness to their devotees, we can see how the cult of the saints reflected the needs and values of the believers. An example of this is the flourishing of the cult of St. Anne in the Low Countries in the Late Middle Ages; the reason that her cult flourished was because her life reflected the needs for examples of marriage, family life and motherhood. In addition to this, she was portrayed as a mediator

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<sup>11</sup> Vauchez, “The Saint,” 320.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>13</sup> André Vauchez, *Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 133.

<sup>14</sup> Vauchez, “The Saint,” 326.

<sup>15</sup> Vauchez, *Sainthood*, 32.

for salvation.<sup>16</sup> The adaptation of the cult to the needs of the believers further manifested itself in the hagiographical tradition. Hagiographies were adapted in such a way that they would be accepted by a wide audience, especially by exemplifying the values favoured in a community. Therefore, the lives of the saints often present the normative values of a society.<sup>17</sup> However, we cannot only read the lives as models of society, as stories reflecting society. The sacred biographies served the purpose to edify the devout and instigate them to live a good Christian life.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the lives should be able to represent models of behaviour that were worthy of imitation; they should serve the purpose to inspire people to imitate the actions of the saints, such as performing good deeds, being humble or embarking on pilgrimages. Because of this purpose, the lives also included propagated values that were believed should be held high, and therefore can be seen as models specifically made for society to follow.

The saints' *vitae* centre on their perfect imitation of Christ's life. Because Christ's death is the ultimate sacrifice, and his life can be seen as living towards his death, the ultimate moment for imitation would be on the saints' deathbed.<sup>19</sup> Since Christ's life is often read as the meaningful road towards the great destiny of his death, the biographies of the saints can also be read as always working towards the moment of death and preparing them for it.

In addition to this, hagiographies were believed to be continuations of the Bible, the Gospels and the life of Christ.<sup>20</sup> Vekeman demonstrates that since every saint tried to imitate Christ, every *vita* was based on the *vita Christi* and every saint could be seen as a *postfigura Christi*; their lives confirmed what God accomplished with Jesus.<sup>21</sup> Similar to the Bible, the

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<sup>16</sup> Anne Hilde Blanken, "Saint Anne: Functions of her *Vita* and *Miracula* for the Laity in the Low Countries in the Late Middle Ages," (Bachelor's thesis, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 18.

<sup>18</sup> Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1962), 54.

<sup>19</sup> Ineke van 't Spijker, "'Impressed by Their Stamp': Hagiography and the Cultivation of the Self," in *Hagiography and the History of Latin Christendom, 500-1500*, ed. Samantha Kahn Herrick (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 205.

<sup>20</sup> H. Vekeman, "Lezen als de Broeders en Zusters van het Gemene Leven: een cyclus van levensbeschrijvingen uit de Deventerkring," in *Wat duikers vent is dit!: Opstellen voor W.M.H. Hummelen*, ed. G.R.W. Dibbets and P.W.M. Wackers (Wijhe: Quatro, 1989), 95, 100.

<sup>21</sup> Vekeman, "Lezen als de Broeders," 95.

lives of the saints were read at different levels: the literal, tropological, allegorical, and anagogical.<sup>22</sup> They were seen as non-fictional texts in which God's voice had spoken.<sup>23</sup>

The saints' lives often share similar characteristics regarding their content. Heffernan discusses a few of these characteristics that add to the development of the sacred *vitae* as a genre. Firstly, the lives favour dramatized action over complex argumentation.<sup>24</sup> In this light, it follows the Gospel narrations of Christ's lives, which were paradigmatic. Since the saints' lives were believed to be an imitation of Christ, it is only logical they follow the style of the texts that were concerned with the life of Christ. Moreover, this preference for dramatized action over complex argument was suited to be understood by the intended audience, increasing the purpose of the lives to serve as examples of behaviour and actions. Secondly, certain structures for the narratives of the sacred biographies were established. These narrative models include certain *topoi* or actions which the hagiographers could employ in their texts, which were often copied from Scripture or earlier saints' lives. This repetition of actions or *topoi* would ensure the legitimacy and credibility of the saints' sanctity.<sup>25</sup> Thirdly, the lives do not only include the virtues of the saints. In order to instigate the readers to follow the example of the saints, the sacred biographies both contained the virtues and vices of the saints.<sup>26</sup> However, the latter were added to demonstrate the harm that sinful behaviour engendered and to stimulate the readers to virtuous behaviour, in order to avoid having the audience's souls corrupted. Through adding sinful behaviour or struggles with temptations, saints were not only portrayed as perfect human beings; the spectrum of saintliness expanded to include these struggling saints, whose lives could still serve the purpose to edify the faithful.

Because of the facts that the *vitae* reflect the beliefs and needs of society, that they were used as models for perfect Christian conduct by the commissioners of the lives, and that they illustrate how the virtues of the saints culminated at the time of death, we can argue the *vitae* to be relevant in the study of literature on death in the Late Middle Ages.

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<sup>22</sup> Mathilde van Dijk, "Travelling-Companion in the Journey of Life: Saint Barbare of Nicomedia in a *Devotio Moderna* Context," in *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, ed. Edelgard E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), 230.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>24</sup> Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 5.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 6, 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

This same reasoning can be applied to the sister-book of Diepenveen. Although Gertrud Jaron Lewis, who has extensively studied medieval sister-books from Germany, characterizes sister-books as its own genre, I find the contrast between the lives of the saints and the sisters to be less distinct, and argue the sister-book to be a continuum of the saints' lives, continuing from the struggling saint to struggling, but exceptional humans.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, I will identify all three biographical sources as lives or *vitae*.

Sister-books generally include a collection of written lives of exceptional and extremely devout sisters of one monastery. These books were produced by the sisters themselves. These sisters strove to Christian perfection and to imitate the Passion of Christ, resembling the saints.<sup>28</sup> Because of their exceptional personalities and accomplishments, the biographies emphasize the virtues of the sisters and the ideals they performed. However, they also illustrated their struggles with temptations. The inclusion of both exceptional virtuous behaviour and attempts to resist temptations was needed because of the edifying purpose of the sister-books. This purpose is highlighted in the sister-book studied in this thesis, which was produced in a monastery in Diepenveen that was part of the *Devotio Moderna* network. The lives were specifically intended to be used within the walls of the monastery, in order to provide the sisters with an ideal model for living, to give them lives with which they could identify, and to illustrate the tradition in which all the sisters were rooted.<sup>29</sup> The lives were written to stimulate the sisters to follow the tradition of both the monastery and of the devout sisters. In this edifying purpose and in the content focusing on exceptional human beings, the sister-book closely resemble the *vitae* of the saints.

Additionally, the sister-book follows the genre of the *vitae* of the saints in its division in a tripartite structure, where the first section focuses on the life in the world and the conversion of the person in question.<sup>30</sup> Whereas the second part provides us with a view of their life in the monastery, the third recounts their death and remarkable events after it. This focus between the different sections is not equally divided in the different lives; one

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<sup>27</sup> Gertrud Jaron Lewis, *By Women, for Women, about Women: The Sister-Books of Fourteenth-Century Germany* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1996), 54-55.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Wybren Scheepsma, "Devout Biography and Historiography," in *Medieval Religious Women in the Low Countries: The 'Modern Devotion', the Canonesses of Windesheim, and their Writings*, trans. David F. Johnson (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004), 145.; Jaron Lewis describes the same edifying purpose for the German sister-books. Jaron Lewis, *By Women*, 39-40.

<sup>30</sup> Scheepsma, "Devout Biograhpy," 142.

biography may focus more on the deathbed of a sister, whereas the other gives more information on the life in the monastery.

Sister-books generally include less miraculous occurrences as the lives of saints. In the *vitae* of the saints, miraculous events often add to the credibility of their saintliness. However, in the circles of the *Devotio Moderna*, where the sister-book was a popular medium used by both the brothers and sisters, mystical occurrences such as miracles and visions were supposed to be neglected<sup>31</sup> However, these occurrences do feature to a certain extent.<sup>32</sup> Van Dijk argues that the miracles and visions were only included when it was felt it would add to the education of the other sisters, for example when a sister was faced with temptations, but was released from her struggle after praying at the grave of a prioress.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>32</sup> Mathilde van Dijk, "Miracles and Visions in *Devotio Moderna* Biographies," in *Signs, Wonders, Miracles: Representations of Divine Power in the Life of the Church*, ed. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, *Studies in Church History*, 41 (Woodbridge, UK and Rochester, NY: The Boydell Press 2005), 241-242.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 246-248.

## II. Death and Dying in the Late Middle Ages: The Historical Background

### *The presence of death in unstable centuries*

In the Late Middle Ages, death was omnipresent in Europe and society experienced periods of great turmoil. Firstly, Europe experienced many conflicts and wars. These conflicts often arose between cities, bishops and other powerful parties. Civil wars were fought between different dynasties, such as the Armagnac-Burgundian Civil War, which would interweave with the Hundred Years' war, in which two royal families from England and France fought for the throne of the largest kingdom in Western Europe, the kingdom of France.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, the Western Schism (1378-1417) divided the Church in a literal sense. According to Delumeau, a French historian who was specialized in the history of the Catholic Church, this Schism did not instil fear among the masses; fear about this upheaval was mostly only present among the clergy and the elite.<sup>35</sup> Thirdly, and most remarkably, the plague took many civilians as its victims. Especially the Black Death, which passed through Asia and Africa and eventually arrived in Europe, left its dark mark on every aspect of daily life. It is estimated that between 1347 and 1352, 30 to 60 percent of the population on the European continent lost their lives due to the pandemic plague, which especially took fertile, working-age people as its victims.<sup>36</sup> After this pandemic, Europe would face repeated outbreaks of the plague.<sup>37</sup> However, none of them were as catastrophic as the Black Plague in their individual effect.

After the Black Death, it would take more than two centuries for most populations to recover to its pre-plague levels. Reasons for this incredibly slow recovery were the recurrent occurrences of the plague, the lethal effects of other diseases and the different wars that all costed large numbers of people their lives. Additionally, most people who died were of fertile age, meaning a large part of the population that was expected to generate new generations fell away. Although most might assume that the population numbers were lowest right after the Black Death, the lowest points in the population numbers in Europe

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<sup>34</sup> P. Groenendaal, "Liedewij van Schiedam," in *Liedewij van Schiedam*, ed. Het bestuur van de Wetenschappelijke Kring te Schiedam en Vlaardingen ([Schiedam]: De Wetenschappelijke Kring te Schiedam en Vlaardingen, 1975), 10.

<sup>35</sup> Jean Delumeau, *La Peur en Occident, XIVE-XVIIIe siècles: une cité assiégée* (Paris: Fayard, 1978), 21.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph P. Byrne, *Encyclopedia of the Black Death* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 45.

<sup>37</sup> Pamuk, "The Black Death," 293.

actually often occurred around a century after the Black Death. Jordan provides us with numbers that help us understand the magnitude of the troubling century after the Black Death. He describes that if we take the number 100 to indicate the pre-plague index of the population size in Normandy, then the index still stood at 75 in the 1350s, but had dropped to 25 in the 1420s. The populace of Normandy would only recover to its pre-plague level after 1600. Normandy was not a unique case in its slow recovery; England and Norway dropped to their lowest points in 1450, and would recover respectively around 1600 and 1750.<sup>38</sup>

Although the Southern Netherlands were highly urbanised, they were able to navigate the Black Death with relatively low numbers of casualties.<sup>39</sup> However, during the other waves of the plague, they too lost large numbers of their population. Estimates have indicated that the whole of the Low Countries lost a quarter of their population between 1300 and 1400.<sup>40</sup> In addition to the plague and the wars, the urbanised Low Countries faced another problem that influenced the difficult recovery from the other lethal upheavals. In most of Europe, peasant revolts occurred after the Black Death. However, the population numbers of the urbanised Low Countries also suffered from worker's uprisings.<sup>41</sup> The Low Countries did overcome the long, troubling period faster than many other countries; the population numbers flourished and already returned to its pre-plague level in the fifteenth century.<sup>42</sup>

The Black Death, in combination with the other waves of the plague, the wars and other lethal catastrophes, had its effect on the everyday life of the different societies in Europe. As Gurevich, who was specialised in the European culture in the Middle Ages, noted: "A decrease in economic activity and the colossal population decline that followed the Great Plague of 1348-49 (which was understood by contemporaries as a manifestation of divine wrath for the sins of humankind) prompted a serious psychological, social, and moral crisis that struck the merchant along with the rest of society. Death became a close acquaintance

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<sup>38</sup> William Chester Jordan, *Europe in the High Middle Ages* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 297.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Stabel, "Het alledaagse sterven: Demografische en maatschappelijke realiteit van de dood," in *Tussen hemel en hel: Sterven in de middeleeuwen, 600-1600*, ed. Sophie Balace and Alexandra De Poorter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press), 25.

<sup>40</sup> Pamuk, "The Black Death," 294.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 293-294.



and a permanent threat.”<sup>43</sup> All the catastrophic and destructive events of the second half of the fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth century made death omnipresent in Europe. Almost every family had to face a ‘premature’ death of one of their kin.<sup>44</sup> Death did not only kill the individual, but had the power to destroy whole communities.

### *The afterlife*

The places of heaven and hell became more clearly developed throughout the course of the Middle Ages, when, because of the ever presence of death in all layers of society, both clergy and lay folk became increasingly concerned with their fate after death. Although the Bible presented certain allusions to the description of heaven and hell, medieval people often found ‘topographic’ details on heaven and hell in apocryphal apocalypse stories and in images of the Last Judgement.<sup>45</sup> Especially the third-century Apocalypse of Paul influenced the medieval imagination of hell in art and literature.<sup>46</sup>

Although it already was one of the major achievements of late twelfth-century theology, purgatory only triumphed in the thirteenth century, as is illustrated by Jacques Le Goff, who is renowned for his historical study on the development of purgatory as an embedded idea in society.<sup>47</sup> However, purgatory only became a popular concept, that was promoted both in devotional practices and images, towards the end of the fourteenth and into the fifteenth century.<sup>48</sup> Because of the formulation of this intermediate place, not only the perfect could enter heaven; all righteous souls could gain access to paradise after they were purified in purgatory. The establishment of purgatory as an intermediate place between heaven and hell was developed together with the ideas of the division of the soul and the body, and of individual judgement immediately after death. Before the end of the

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<sup>43</sup> Aron Ja. Gurevich, “The Merchant,” in *The Medieval World*, ed. Jacques Le Goff, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (London: Collins & Brown, 1990), 274.

<sup>44</sup> Premature in this context means an unexpected death; a death caused by illness. Birgitte Dekeyzer, “Ars moriendi, de kunst van het sterven,” in *Tussen hemel en hel: Sterven in de middeleeuwen, 600-1600*, ed. Sophie Balace and Alexandra De Poorter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 218-221.

<sup>45</sup> Biblical passages making allusions to hell are for example Isaiah 66:24 and Luke 13:28. Allusions made to heaven can be found in Revelation 7:13-17 and Revelation 22:3-7. Mattie Cavagna, “De hel: een plaats van hoop,” in *Tussen hemel en hel: Sterven in de middeleeuwen, 600-1600*, ed. Sophie Balace and Alexandra De Poorter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 199.

<sup>46</sup> Jacques LeGoff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 35.

<sup>47</sup> Anca Bratu-Minott, “From the Bosom of Abraham to the Beatific Vision: On some Medieval Images of the Soul’s Journey to Heaven,” in *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, ed. Edelgard. E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), 189; Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, 289.

<sup>48</sup> Bratu-Minott, “From the Bosom of Abraham,” 189.

twelfth century, the belief in the Last Judgement was dominant. This meant that souls would be judged at the end of time if they were worthy of heaven or if they would be sentenced to spend eternity in hell, since it was not the body, but the soul who was believed to be able to sin. However, based on the Apocalypse of Paul, the idea of the individual judgement at death was introduced.<sup>49</sup> This doctrine signified that souls would directly get to experience their final destination, unless they had to wait in purgatory to be purified.<sup>50</sup> Instead of a collective court scene at the end of times, judgment became an individual account.

Although purgatory was a more hopeful place to be sent to as hell, one would try to shorten their stay as much as possible. For this reason, the people left behind on earth were expected to pray for the salvation of the soul of the deceased, which was expected to shorten one's time in purgatory. This expectation arose in a time when death was a close acquaintance and when people became extremely concerned with the fate of their soul. Because of this, people were increasingly trying to attain salvation. As a consequence, they tried to find solutions to attaining their individual salvation and to being allowed to visit paradise as quickly as possible after death. The fact that people were distressed about their fate explains the fact that much attention was put on purgatory at the end of the fourteenth century and into the fifteenth century.

Influential to this concern about one's fate were the beliefs held about the manner in which one could attain salvation or grace. The formulations on grace of Saint Augustine served as exemplary, leading beliefs in the Late Middle Ages. According to Augustine, man's soul was not capable to attain salvation without any help from God. Only through gifts of grace, the human will could be set free and could recognize the weight of choosing to follow the example of Christ's life.<sup>51</sup> However, to follow the Christian path still proved to be a heavy burden even when one experienced the gift of God's grace: one could only accomplish this goal if they had received the grace of God and was fully devoted to this goal.<sup>52</sup> Thus, humans needed to cooperate with God on attaining their own salvation, meaning that they themselves had control over their salvation to a certain extent. Augustine believed that

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<sup>49</sup> Cavagna, "De hel," 200.

<sup>50</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Western Attitudes toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 32.

<sup>51</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 334-335.

<sup>52</sup> Mathilde van Dijk, "Navolging van Christus voor vrouwen verklaard: Salome Sticken (ca. 1369-1449)," in *Ora et Labora: Twaalf opstellen over christelijke spiritualiteit in de praktijk*, ed. Jaap van Amersfoort, Pieta van Beek and Gerrit Schutte (Hilversum: Verloren, 2015), 31.

people performed good actions and followed Christ's example partly because of their free will. One instance in which one could work on their salvation was at the time of death, for example by administering the last rites, referring to three sacraments: the confession, the anointing of the sick, and the Holy Communion. To receive these last rites would ensure that the dead had died in a state of spiritual grace.<sup>53</sup>

Before I will continue to discuss death in the Late Middle Ages, I will consider the role reading and religion played in the daily life of lay society, with a focus on the Low Countries, since the role of literature played an important part in the development of certain ideas related to death.

### *Reading and writing in the Low Countries*

With the development of an agricultural society into an urban society, the Low Countries established new social classes, among them the burghers and the common people. The burghers mostly consisted of craftsmen, professionals and merchants, of which the last group dominated the hierarchy of city life.<sup>54</sup> The burghers acquired their wealth by practising their trade. Both the development of the urban society and the establishment of the new social class of the wealthy burghers brought with them the remarkable increase in the literacy levels of the Low Countries' population because of a few reasons.

Firstly, the numbers of schools for the laity rose vastly. Secondly, from the fourteenth century, increasingly more schools, even parish schools, came into the possession of cities, whereas before that time these schools were the responsibility of the patron of the local church.<sup>55</sup> Thirdly, children from all layers of society visited the schools.<sup>56</sup> The wealthier classes of for instance the burghers, that continued to grow into a large group in society in the Late Middle Ages, often visited private schools.<sup>57</sup> At the different schools the students learned to read the vernacular language, and depending on the level of the school or when continuing to a higher level of education, they had the opportunity to learn Latin.

In addition to the rise of the cities, the burgher class and the schools, new religious movements affected the rise of literacy levels. The new religious movements settling in the

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<sup>53</sup> Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London: British Museum Press, 1996), 29.

<sup>54</sup> Blanken, "Saint Anne," 6.

<sup>55</sup> R.R. Post, *Scholen en onderwijs in Nederland gedurende de middeleeuwen* (Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1954), 37.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 20, 65-68.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

cities transformed the medieval urban centres into privileged areas of devout activities.<sup>58</sup> The rise of the group of literate persons resulted in a considerable demand and supply of vernacular moralistic literature in the Low Countries in the fourteenth and fifteenth century.<sup>59</sup> In general, the demand came from the need the laypeople felt to nourish their spiritual life.<sup>60</sup> The new vernacular literature was inspired by the older manuscripts written by the clergy and focused on theology. However, the vernacular writers created and included their own visions in their treatises, promoting the new urban and burgher lifestyle. In addition to this, the laity discussed the Holy Scripture among themselves and could enrich their knowledge by joining lectures and gatherings of the adherents of the *Devotio Moderna*.

### *Devotio Moderna*

The *Devotio Moderna* greatly influenced the accumulation of human capital in the Low Countries. The devout reform movement started in the 1370s in the city of Deventer, and would hold the leading position in the religious life in the Low Countries and the Rhineland until the Reformation. The movement had as its aim to return to God's word and to live a life in agreement with God's intentions. In practice this meant that the adherents wanted to return to the devotion of the Early Church.<sup>61</sup> Characteristic for the *Devotio Moderna* were the objectives to stimulate the spiritual growth of the individual and to form one's religious *persona* through repentance and reflection.<sup>62</sup> To accomplish these goals, the devout withdrew from the sinful world by giving up material beneficences and interests in scholastic theology, astrology, astronomy and other useless sciences.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, Geert Grote, the founder of the Sisters and Brethren of the Common Life and a key figure in the

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<sup>58</sup> Sabrina Corbellini, "Introduction," in *Cultures of Religious Reading in the Late Middle Ages: Instructing the Soul, Feeding the Spirit, and Awakening the Passion* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 3.

<sup>59</sup> Petty Bange, Grietje Dresen and Jeanne Marie Noël, "De veranderende positie van de vrouw aan het begin van de moderne tijd," in *Tussen heks en heilige, Het vrouwbeeld op de drempel van de moderne tijd, 15<sup>de</sup>/16<sup>de</sup> eeuw*, ed. Petty Bange, Ton Brandenburg, Grietje Dresen, Lène Dresen-Coenders, Ellen Muller, Jeanne Marie Noël and Renée Pigeaud (Nijmegen: SUN, 1985), 19.

<sup>60</sup> Wim François, "The Catholic Church and the Vernacular Bible in the Low Countries: A Paradigm Shift in the 1550s?" in *Discovering the Riches of the Word: Religious Reading in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Corbellini, Hoogvliet and Ramakers (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 234.

<sup>61</sup> Wybren Scheepsma, "Geert Grote en Deventer," in *Vernieuwde Innigheid: Over de Moderne Devotie, Geert Grote en Deventer*, ed. Koen Goudriaan (Nieuwegein: Arko, 2008), 37; Van Dijk, "Miracles and Visions," 243.

<sup>62</sup> Leendert Breure, *Doodsbeleving en Levenshouding: Een historisch-psychologische studie betreffende de Moderne Devotie in het IJsselgebied in de 14<sup>e</sup> en 15<sup>e</sup> eeuw* (PhD diss., Hilversum: Verloren, 1987), 37-38.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

*Devotio Moderna*, believed the human sinful nature to need extreme penance in order to restore the bond between God and humanity.<sup>64</sup>

The adherents of the movement found knowledge about right conduct in the Gospel's examples of Christ and the apostles, in the examples of the Desert Fathers and in the various texts of Saint Augustine.<sup>65</sup> In the circles of the *Devotio Moderna* exemplary literature was held in exceptional high esteem: the devout should live their life according to the examples of respectively Christ, saints and virtuous brothers and sisters, and he should be able to read these examples himself. Partly because of this exemplary purpose, the brother- and sister-books were written.<sup>66</sup>

The awareness of death was perceived as an incentive to follow the difficult path of a virtuous life, since death characterized the tension between eternal rewards and eternal punishment. The fear one had held for this tension was supposed to make room for faith in grace and salvation.<sup>67</sup> Although Grote felt that mystical texts and ideas should be approached with caution, the devout were keen to learn from these texts and ideas. Moreover, visions and mystical occurrences often transpired within the circles of the *Devotio Moderna*.<sup>68</sup>

Most adherents of the *Devotio Moderna* were women. The movement saw the beguines as its reference point, a group who they believed had not taken into account the weakness of human nature enough, and whose adherents had enjoyed too much freedom. The *Devotio Moderna* believed that this freedom was especially dangerous to women: women needed the supervision of the pastor, the Brethren of the Common Life and the city council.<sup>69</sup> The female adherents of the movement renounced luxury in clothes and food, sexual behaviour and vain entertainment upon entering a sister house or monastery.

Grote believed that religion was a personal affair and concern, and thought that people should be able to read the Bible or other devotional productions themselves. His adherents stimulated this by investing time and money into the founding of schools and into

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<sup>64</sup> Scheepsma, "Geert Grote," 29.

<sup>65</sup> Van Dijk, "Miracles and Visions," 243; Anne Bollmann, Ulrike Hascher-Burger and Koen Goudriaan, "Arbeid en gebed, lied en tekst," in *Vernieuwde Innigheid*, ed. Koen Goudriaan (Nieuwegein: Arko, 2008), 98.

<sup>66</sup> Van Dijk, "Navolging," 29.

<sup>67</sup> Breure, *Doodsbeleving*, 42-43.

<sup>68</sup> Koen Goudriaan, "Een beweging met allure," in *Vernieuwde Innigheid*, ed. Koen Goudriaan (Nieuwegein: Arko, 2008), 68.

<sup>69</sup> Van Dijk, "Navolging," 34.

the production of books, also producing many vernacular texts.<sup>70</sup> Because of these ambitions and motives, the Brethren and Sisters of the Common Life were of tremendous significance to the rise of the literacy levels in the Low Countries, which were almost double the levels of Germany at the end of the sixteenth century.<sup>71</sup>

### *Ars moriendi*

In the Late Middle Ages, society was bombarded with both artistic and literary works focusing on death. The persistent presence of death influenced a surge of the production of artistic images related to death, such as those works that depict the last moment of one's life of earth, the Last Judgement or the Passion of Christ.<sup>72</sup> In addition to the increase of artistic images related to death, the production of devout literature focusing on death expanded in most of Europe.<sup>73</sup>

The publication of the *Ars moriendi* genre was shaped by the many deaths and the shift from the belief in collective judgement at time's end to individual judgement at the hour of death.<sup>74</sup> This genre can be understood to include any late medieval text concerning death and dying. However, it is often understood as any variation or translation of two Latin texts that demonstrate 'the art of dying'. These texts are essentially a manual that instructs a devout person in the most excellent way to die. If one followed the *Ars moriendi* texts, he would have less risk of being sentenced to damnation or a long trial in purgatory.

The first *Ars moriendi* text, the basis for *Een scone leeringe*, was written shortly after the Council of Constance approved it (1414-1418) and is divided in six parts discussing different aspects of the process of and instructions on dying. The second text, an abbreviated version of the second part of the first text, was first published around 1450. This text focuses on the tug of war between the devil and an angel respectively tempting the

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<sup>70</sup> İ. Semih Akçomak, Dinand Webbink and Bas ter Weel, "Why did the Netherlands Develop so Early? The Legacy of the Brethren of the Common Life," *The Economic Journal* Vol. 126, No. 593 (June 2014), 822.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 821, 855-858.; Stoop notes the influence sisters had on the production of devout literature, especially on the production of manuscripts filled with sermons. Patricia Stoop, *Schrijven in commissie: De zusters uit het Brusselse klooster Jericho en de preken van hun biechtvaders (ca. 1456-1510)* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2013), 28-41.

<sup>72</sup> Anne Clark Bartlett and Thomas H. Bestul, "Introduction," in *Cultures of Piety: Medieval English Devotional Literature in Translation*, ed. Anne Clark Bartlett and Thomas H. Bestul (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 2.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>74</sup> Donald F. Duclow, "Dying Well: The *Ars moriendi* and the Domition of the Virgin," in *Death and Dying in the Middle Ages*, ed. Edelgard. E. DuBruck and Barbara I. Gusick (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999), 379.

dying and guiding him in his choices. It is often characterized by the high quality of the artistic woodcuts illustrating the temptations and guidance. It is this scene that was extremely important at one's deathbed; this attempt at temptation was the final test of one's life, which would judge his or her eternal fate.<sup>75</sup>

The *Ars moriendi* texts were published at a time when the priests could not satisfy the need to help and comfort the dying. Before the plague, they did assist the dying by making them strong in their pious spirit as they met death, amongst others by administering the Last Rites. The longer *Ars moriendi*, mostly based on *De arte moriendi*, an essay of Jean Gerson published around 1408, was initially intended to be used as a manual for priests. However, shortly after its publication, it was translated into the vernacular, indicating a wide usage beyond the clergy. This meant other social groups than the priests or clergy were either deemed to take the responsibility upon them to care and comfort those at the end of life, or they took this responsibility upon them themselves.

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<sup>75</sup> Philippe Ariès, *Images of Man and Death*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, MA, and London, UK: Harvard University Press, 1985), 147-151.

### III. Saint Liedewij of Schiedam

#### *Saint Liedewij in the Low Countries and the Netherlands*

The life of Saint Liedewij of Schiedam, also known as Liduina or Lidwina, greatly fits in this study on the basis of its timeframe, location and audience. According to her biography, Liedewij lived from 1380 to 1433, a period in which everyone was confronted with their mortality, and also when the first version of the longer *Ars moriendi* text was written. In addition to this, Liedewij originated from the Low Countries, and was already used as a symbol for devotion during her life. Moreover, her life does not focus on a life in the monastery; her *vita* is characterized by her life in the city, as were the lives of most of her devotees. However, most importantly, her life illustrates a clear link to the themes related to assisting the dying and the dead.

Already before the end of 1436, the first Latin *vita* of Liedewij was written by Hugo of Rugge, a regular canon of the Windesheimer St.-Elisabeth monastery near Brielle, South-Holland. Taking this *vita* as their basis, both Thomas a Kempis (1380-1471) and Jan Brugman (1400-1473) wrote their own Latin version of the life of Liedewij, respectively around 1448 and 1456. Before Brugman completed his version, a Middle Dutch interpretation of Liedewij's life was already produced. This life, probably also based on Hugo's *vita*, was long ascribed to Jan Gerlachs, a family member of Liedewij. However, this authorship has been doubted and challenged.<sup>76</sup> Not only the authorship, but also the production date of the Middle Dutch life by Gerlachs is unclear. Caspers dates the work to shortly after 1450, whereas Jongen and Schotel present a date between 1433 and 1440.<sup>77</sup> For this thesis, I believe that the date and authorship is less important than the *vita* itself. Since I will use the Middle Dutch life as presented by Jongen and Schotel, I will choose to follow their conclusions on the authorship and the date of the manuscript.

As is the same for many saints, historical information about Liedewij's life, but also on her cult is mostly based on the information put forward in her different *vitae*. From the second half of the fifteenth century until 1572, Liedewij's grave was used as a pilgrimage site. However, after 1572, the church in which Liedewij was buried was put to use by the reformed congregation and her devotion diminished. Yet, this would not mean the end of

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<sup>76</sup> Charles Caspers, "Zes eeuwen verering van Liduina van Schiedam," in *Een bovenaardse vrouw* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2014), 14.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*; This information is provided in the introduction of Gerlachs, *Het leven*, 16.



the devotion to Liedewij. From 1615 onward, her popularity was revived in the Southern Netherlands through the religious politics of the Catholic archdukes.<sup>78</sup> Eventually, the relics of Liedewij were kidnapped and brought to the Southern Netherlands. Nevertheless, the memory of Liedewij still lingered in the Northern Netherlands too. Although she did not hold an official place in the Roman Catholic worship service in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, she was still identified as an important spiritual virgin.<sup>79</sup> Although a first attempt at the canonization of Liedewij had already been made in 1629, it is only in 1890 that she was recognized as a saint by the Catholic Church.<sup>80</sup> Until ca. 1960, the saint held a special position in the devotion in the Netherlands. After 1960, her favourite position quickly diminished, and only in the area of Schiedam, where she is part of the religious and cultural heritage, her memory is specifically treasured.

### *The vita*

The life of Liedewij, as supposedly written by Jan Gerlachs, follows numerous *topoi* and structures as presented in the tradition of hagiography. In this section, I will note some of these *topoi* and structures, in order to give a clear overview of the different aspects of Liedewij's life. I will focus on her experiences with assisting the dying and the dead.

Comparable to many other saints, as for example Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and Catharine of Siena (1347-1380), Liedewij's life follows the five stadia of the *via mystica*, the mystical road to holiness.<sup>81</sup> After falling seriously ill after breaking her rib when she was ice-skating with friends, Liedewij became confined to her bed, which she would be until her death. Because of this situation, she was in despair and struggled to accept her life and God's will.<sup>82</sup> Only after her confessor taught her how to surrender herself to God and how to focus on the suffering of Jesus Christ, Liedewij succeeded to come to terms with her situation and was able to put her fate in God's hands (*conversio*).<sup>83</sup> This gave her enough

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<sup>78</sup> Caspers, "Zes eeuwen," 29.

<sup>79</sup> Gerlachs, *Het leven*, 45-46.

<sup>80</sup> Liedewij was not recognized as a saint through canonisation. Pope Leo XIII signed a conformation of worship, meaning that Liedewij was allowed to be called upon as a saint in the public worship services, even though people had been calling her a saint for centuries.

<sup>81</sup> Gerlachs, *Het leven*, 12.

<sup>82</sup> The struggle to find God is another *topos* often featured in saint's lives. For more examples in the different *vitae*, see Gail Ashton, *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint* (London: Routledge, 2000), 26.

<sup>83</sup> Gerlachs, *Het leven*, 38-39.

spiritual peace and comfort that she could live a virtuous, patient and, especially, a sacrificial life (*purgatio*). One of the most prominent characteristics of Liedewij's life is her sacrificial nature. Liedewij sacrificed a wealthy life to share her riches with the needy, providing them with money, food, wool and linen. Moreover, at multiple occasions, she chose to suffer from sickness or other physical ailments in order that others could be freed from the tortures and pains in hell and purgatory. Especially in these cases her role in assisting the dying and the dead becomes clear.

In 1415, when she was thirty-five years old, an angel visited Liedewij, who was suffering from the third day fever. The angel asked her if she was willing to endure her sickness for even longer if that meant that her friends would be released from purgatory. When she agreed to this, the angel informed her that she would suffer from the fever until her death, but that because of her suffering, her friends, family and countless others would be freed from purgatory.<sup>84</sup> Liedewij thus actively assisted those who had died, by sacrificing her health for them, in order to improve their fate.

In addition to sacrificing her health for those close to her, she sacrificed her time to assist the dying. When her mother had fallen ill, Liedewij advised her mother to bear her sickness and death patiently. She also promised her mother that she would help her please God. After her mother had died, she realised that by helping her mother, she had neglected her duty to perform virtuous deeds. Because of this, she decided to wear a penalty belt for the remainder of her life.<sup>85</sup>

Not only her mother received her advice on her deathbed, but Liedewij also gave her advice to two pastors of Schiedam before they died. Liedewij had warned Master Andries that he would die soon and that he needed live the remainder of his life in such a way that he could appear before the Lord without any fears. However, Master Andries decided to neglect Liedewij's words, since he did not believe he would die in the near future. When he indeed fell ill, he remembered Liedewij's advice and asked her for forgiveness, since there had been many times that he had not been kind to her and also had not believed her words. Liedewij, who felt sorry for the pastor, told him he should prepare for his judgement and return all goods that he had wrongfully acquired.<sup>86</sup> The pastor neglected her advice again

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 30-33.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 56-59.

and died, still possessing the wrongfully obtained goods. After his death, Jan Engel succeeded him as pastor of Schiedam. Liedewij learned that this pastor was guilty of sinful behaviour too and confronted him with his sins as well. She advised him to confess and to repent for his sins. After he did this, he fell ill and received the communion and the Holy Anointment his death.<sup>87</sup>

Through God's grace, Liedewij received special gifts of grace, such as knowledge, in the form of an *illuminatio*. She would be visited by an angel. This angel would lead her spirit away and let her experience visions because of her intense love for God. These visions would give her the strength to endure her sickness. During these visions, she visited various places, such as the church in Schiedam, holy places on earth, but also heaven, purgatory and hell. Every time Liedewij would be lifted out of her body, a bright, divine light and a sweet, pleasant aroma would arise around her. At various times during her out-of-body experiences, she rescued large numbers of souls from the punishments and tortures of hell and purgatory, often at the cost of her own comfort and health. During her visions, she also saw the two pastors to whom she had given advice before they died. After the death of Master Andries, she saw the pastor being tortured in hell by the devils. However, there is no mention of Liedewij releasing him from his punishment. She did get the chance to improve the fate of Jan Engel, whose soul was punished to spend time in a well close to hell. The angel told her that souls whose fate had not yet been decided stayed in these wells. Liedewij, who felt sorry for the soul, guided the soul from the well to purgatory to repent for its sins.<sup>88</sup>

Although Liedewij had received the grace of God, her suffering did not end and she was still confronted with the mortality and the suffering of those around her. The reasons for this was that she was still too much concerned with her mortal life (*ariditas*). After the death of her father, devils tried to tempt her to believe that her father did not go to heaven, but that he was sentenced to damnation in hell. When the angel lifted her to heaven, Liedewij witnessed the devils tormenting a man identical to her father. However, her faith proved to be strong and she opposed the devils by saying the man was not her father, after which the devils left her alone.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 58-59, 74-77.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

Before her lonesome death, she accused God he had abandoned her, and still struggled to accept her fate. However, shortly before she died, she remarked to a loved one she had already received the grace of God.<sup>90</sup> In this way, she finally succeeded in letting go of her mortal life (*unio mystica*).

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 92-95.

## IV. Saint Rochus

### *Saint Rochus in Europe and the Low Countries*

Unlike Liedewij, Saint Rochus was not from the Low Countries. According to his *vita*, he was born in Montpellier, France. He became an important saint during the Late Middle Ages in most of Europe, including the Low Countries. Reason for this was that his life resembled the circumstances in Europe and spoke to the needs of the societies of that time. During his life, he not only aided and cured a great number of people from pestilence when he set out on pilgrimage to Rome, but he also fell ill with the disease himself. He was eventually cured by God. Because of these remarkable incidents, Rochus became one of the most venerated plague saints. These saints were venerated more than others when people were faced with the destructive nature of the plague, on the account of their ability to aid the sick. Second to Saint Sebastian, Rochus was Europe's most prominent plague saint; people sought his aid so that they might be spared from death, like God had spared Rochus. In addition to this, Rochus himself did not belong to a religious order or movement and did not live in a monastery. His life is characterized by the daily life in the cities, and his deliberate encounters with ordinary city folk, especially those suffering from the plague. It is because of this that people were attracted to venerate him: his closeness made his life accessible and identifiable. Although numerous churches and chapels had been built in the honour of the plague saint, he would only attain an official canonical status in the seventeenth century. For a saint so incredibly important for his contemporaries, his *vita* is not widely available and has not often received a detailed study.<sup>91</sup> Because all of this, Rochus' life is a grand addition in this study and the study of his *vitae* will be broadened.

### *The vita*

Although Rochus' life is characterized by his ability to cure people from the plague and by his inclination to help the needy, there are still various useful passages that relate to themes surrounding assistance at death. Rochus' life as aid of the poor, the sick and the dying was prompted by the death of his father. His father called Rochus to him when he felt that the end of his earthly life was nearing and he asked Rochus to perform four tasks to complete after he had died. The first command he gave his son was to continue honouring

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<sup>91</sup> Vauchez, "The Saint," 332.

and serving Christ as Rochus had already done before. The second point instructed Rochus to help widows, orphans and the impoverished. Following the third order, he would have to use his father's wealth for works of mercy and kindness. The last command given was to visit the houses of the needy and the poor. Rochus promised his father to carry out these commands. Shortly after making this promise, the immortal soul of his father left his mortal body, after which Rochus buried him. Within a number of days, he had already finished his father's wishes. He not only visited the poor and ill, but often also cured them, and the needy were comforted by his goods.<sup>92</sup>

After completing these tasks, he embarked on a pilgrimage to Rome and stopped in several cities to cure the population suffering from the plague, at the risk of becoming infected himself. After curing many people suffering from the plague, he did eventually become infected with the disease himself when he was staying in a guesthouse in Piacenza. Heavy pains tormented him in such a way that he could not lay comfortable in any position. He decided to leave his bed and to lie in front of the gate of the guesthouse as not to disturb any others with his pains and suffering, illustrating his patient nature. However, Rochus was driven out of the city in the morning, because the city folk were concerned that he would infect other people.<sup>93</sup>

He went into a forest near Piacenza, where he prayed to Jesus Christ in order to thank him for making him suffer of the plague like those he had cured, demonstrating his humble character. In addition to this, he asked if Christ would grant him mild grace and heal him likewise to the needy. Immediately after Rochus had ended his prayer, a fountain sprang near the hut he had built. After drinking the water of this fountain, his pains softened. Only later during his stay in the forest, he was healed from the plague.<sup>94</sup> At that time, he was staying in the forest together with Goddaart, a man from a neighbouring village who decided to stay with Rochus in order to be taught the works of Jesus Christ.

After spending a long time in the forest, Rochus travelled back to Montpellier on the advice of an angel. On his way home, he travelled through an area in which a war was waged and Rochus was captured on the accusation of being a spy. He did not hold his wrongful

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<sup>92</sup> *Vita van St. Rochus*, ff. 311v-312v.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 316r-317v.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 320v-320r.

imprisonment against his captor, but saw it as an occasion in which he could devote all his time to his love and service of God.<sup>95</sup>

When describing the last moments of Rochus' life, the *vita* illustrates the importance of the last rites. As soon as Rochus realised his death was near, he requested the prison keeper if a priest could come to take his last confession before his death. After his last confession, he asked not to be disturbed for the next three days so that he could contemplate the life and Passion of Jesus Christ. At the end of these three days an angel came to take his soul to heaven. However, before this would happen, the angel informed Rochus that he could ask God for one thing he desired, and that this would be granted. Rochus prayed that all devout people who prayed to him would be redeemed from all the pains of the plague. After he finished his prayer, he died without any witnesses.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., ff. 322v-322r.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., ff. 323v-324v.

## V. The sister-book of Diepenveen

### *The sister-book and its origins*

The previously discussed *vitae* can be used to understand the customs and practices around the death of saints and the people close to them. Since saints generally live a life different from ordinary people, their deaths can be unique accounts or happen in peculiar circumstances. From studying the biographies of the sisters of Diepenveen, we can learn more about how ordinary people in the Low Countries died, and what the prescribed practices were around dying and death.

The monastery in Diepenveen was founded by Zwedera of Rechteren and Johannes Brinckerinck, a famous man in the circles of the *Devotio Moderna*, who had been close to Geert Groote. Not only Brinckerinck attained fame, but the sisters living at Diepenveen were also celebrated because of their impressive devout practices which expressed the ideals of the community of the *Devotio Moderna*. This differentiates them to a certain extent from ordinary, devout people. In the biographies, the most virtuous sisters serve as examples to the other sisters.

The scribe of the sister-book has identified herself on the pastedown of the manuscript. Griet Essinchghes, a sister of the monastery, noted that she wrote and completed the work on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, 14 September 1524. However, the decision to write down and collect the lives of the sisters probably was taken sometime after 1450. Griet did not only play the role of scribe when writing the manuscript; in addition to copying parts of earlier biographic works, she edited her sources and wrote new lives.<sup>97</sup> In *Hemels verlangen*, Scheepsma has continued the role of the scribe and editor of the sister-book. In the rest of this chapter, I will analyse the ten lives Scheepsma selected for his Modern Dutch translation, and will highlight recurring themes, especially those related to assistance at the moment of death.

### *Temptations*

The sisters' struggles with temptations are repeatedly recalled in the biographies, and when facing these temptations, the sisters often needed assistance. During their lives before entering the monastery, the sisters often struggled with the attraction of the vain and

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<sup>97</sup> Scheepsma, "Devout Biography," 153-158.



materialistic world. Liesbeth of Delft fancied the worldly life when she was young. However, she also already possessed the virtues of being honourable, decent and sedate and had requested a Father from the Brethren's house in Doesburg to secure a place for her in Diepenveen, which he did. Shortly after she made her request, a procession was held in the city and Liesbeth was wearing proper clothes and jewellery for this occasion. The Father saw her, which made her feel ashamed for her inclination to the materialistic world and she immediately decided to join the sisters at Diepenveen.<sup>98</sup>

The father of Salome Sticken was a noble man, but decided to neglect his descent and to focus to be of service to God. However, Salome was tempted by the riches of the world and she often wore beautiful clothes and jewellery. When she wished to join the sisters at the Meester-Geertshuis, the sisters did not want to take her in immediately, since she looked showy and gaudy. Therefore, she first needed to prove her spirit and resistance. Already soon after this, the sisters saw her honourable nature. However, the devils did not want to lose her and tormented her both physically and mentally. However, through her exceptional faith and the advice of others, she was able to overcome the harassment of the devils.<sup>99</sup>

The biographies illustrate that the sisters not only faced temptations before they entered the monastery in Diepenveen, but also while living there. The most prominent and elaborate account is present in the life of Gertrude of Rijssen. Gertrude's life clearly illustrates the struggles with temptations one can face and the consequences of being tempted. In addition to this, it also highlights the need for others to help face the temptations, a point to which I will return later. When Gertrude went to take care of her mother who had turned ill, she had the desire to stay living at home after her mother's death, so she could honour God at home together with her father, sister and brother. However, when her mother's health improved, she returned to the monastery. There, she often thought back to the moment she considered turning away from God. She confessed her improper thought and contemplated it with great sadness. When she was about eighteen or nineteen years old, she started throwing up blood and was informed by doctors that she would soon die.

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<sup>98</sup> Essinchghes, *Zusterboek*, f. 55v.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 193v-194v.

During her sickbed, she confessed often and extensive. In preparation for her death, she contemplated her life, and confessed every immoral deed to a sister, no matter how small or big a deed, so the sister could confess them if Gertrude were to die at night. When the hour of death finally arrived, she started speaking, telling that it saddened her she had turned her heart away from the Lord. She told a sister that there was one sin the devil accused her of. The sister asked her what sin it was that she spoke of, and Gertrude answered that she could not answer this in public. When the sister noted that Gertrude had confessed everything already, she replied that she indeed had confessed everything and that she had only thought about it. However, the devils denied that this was what had happened. Gertrude was asked by the sisters if she wanted to confess, to which she agreed. After her confession, her battle with the devil continued; amongst others, she spoke of the reproaches the devil made on her life. She remarked how the devil said she chattered too much and that she had not been obedient. Shortly before her death, she wondered if she was already doomed because of her thought to turn away from God.<sup>100</sup> After this, she would finally die after what had been a long battle with the devil, and after various attempts of the sisters to help and guide her in her last hours.

### *God's will*

The lives often feature the wish of the sisters to only die if this was in accordance with God's will. The scribe notes that God wished to gift Jutte of Culemborg eternal benefits because of her wealth in virtues. For this reason, he gathered some ripe grapes from his vineyard, causing thirty-one people in Diepenveen to die from a disease. Jutte was among them. Even though she feared death, she lay her fate in the hands of the Lord.<sup>101</sup> About a year after her abdication from the position of prioress, Salome became ill more frequently, her conditioned worsened and she was confined to bed. Fifteen weeks before her death, she received the Last Sacrament, full of devotion and desire. She hoped to finally separate from her body. When her health was on the mend, she was disappointed that she would not yet be reunited with Christ, and was afraid that she would have live until she would be a hundred years old. Yet, she only wished to die if the Lord wished her to.<sup>102</sup> The sisters also

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., f. 188v.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., ff. 383r-383v.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., ff. 219r-220v.

urged others to see their death as God's will. In the lives of Katharina of Naaldwijk and Griete of Opstal, who were sisters by blood, Katharina was sad to see that her sister would not survive her sickness. Although Griete declared that Katharina should not feel sorry for herself and should let her rest in peace, her sister remarked that she wished to enjoy the presence of Griete as long as God allowed her to. As soon as he would decide differently, she would let her rest.<sup>103</sup> Later, when Katharina herself was dying, a sister told her that she was sad to see this happen. Katharina told her that her suffering was needed to please God and to be able to live eternally, implying her suffering was caused by God.

In all these instances we can see the importance of understanding death as God's will. The sisters themselves often struggled with coming to terms with their own death or the death of other, and others had to help them accept death at times.

#### *Assistance in Dying*

The most important theme for this study that can be found in the lives of the sisters, is the provided assistance shortly before and at the moment of death. In the lives, we can clearly see that there were certain prescribed rules that needed to be followed in the monastery when a sister was dying. The presence of the sisters at the deathbed of another sister is often highlighted. We can see this in the many accounts that note how the whole monastery was awoken by the sounding of bells or a rattle when a sister was close to death. One of these accounts can be found in the combined life of Katharina of Naaldwijk and Griete of Opstal, where it is written a rattle was sounded to notify the sisters when the two were close to their respective deaths.<sup>104</sup> Liesbeth of Heenvliet is described as being surrounded by sisters at the time of her death: a sister had asked her if she needed to request all the sisters to come, to which she agreed.<sup>105</sup>

In addition to this, one or two sisters normally kept watch on the side of the sick and dying sisters before the others were called. The reason for the presence of these sisters was the fact that they could provide assistance at the hour of death. This assistance could be different types of actions, of which some are described to be the prescribed tradition practiced in the monastery. We can see this in the life of Salome, where it is mentioned that

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., ff. 244r-245v.

<sup>104</sup> For the mention of the rattle at Griete's deathbed, see *ibid.*, f. 245r. For this occurrence at Katharina's death, see f. 256v.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 287v.

two sisters were waking at her side and were guiding her in her last hours. The night Salome died, a sister kept watch at her side and spoke to her, instructing her to remember the suffering of Christ. When the time arrived for Salome's soul to depart from her body, the rest of the sisters were woken to witness her death. The death of Gertrude of Rijssen both describes the presence of others and their guidance at her death. When the moment of her death neared, the sisters were called to Gertrude's bed. One of the sisters asked if she wanted to confess, and asked if she was satisfied. The sisters tried to help her in her struggle with the devil by comforting her when Gertrude was in despair. They told her that her suffering served a purpose and that the sisters were praying for her. Additionally, the sisters read devotional texts to her, aiming to increase the grace gifted to Gertrude. Gertrude tried to repeat these texts as best she could.<sup>106</sup> We can wonder if Gertrude's fate had been different if the sisters had not urged her to confess, and had not guided and comforted her. If it had not been for the sisters, Gertrude's faith may not have been as strong and she may have fallen to despair by the devil and given in to his wishes.

The lives also mention the assistance at deathbeds of those suffering from contagious diseases, such as the plague. Liesbeth of Heenvliet was one of the first to die when the plague struck Diepenveen. A Father comforted her, as he did with all the sick, even when there was a great risk of being infected with the disease himself, for which he is praised in the sister-book.<sup>107</sup> Resembling the actions of this virtuous Father is the reaction of Salome van der Wiel's brother when the plague struck the Brethren house that he was staying in and other houses in the neighbourhood.<sup>108</sup> At this time, many of the other students went back to their family homes, while Thonis, the brother of Salome, stayed to comfort and assist the sick and dying. He provided the sick with everything they needed and singlehandedly lifted the dead from their beds into their coffins.<sup>109</sup> From these accounts we can conclude the purpose of the inclusion of these accounts was to send a message that the sisters should not fear the sick, but should help them even when their own health was at risk.

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<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 183r.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 286r-287v.

<sup>108</sup> This Salome van der Wiel is recalled as the elder, since there is also a life of a younger Salome van der Wiel included in the sister-book.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 307r-308v.

## *Visions*

Some of the biographies do not end after the death of the sister, but end with a note about a vision of the dead sister. Gertrude of Rijssen appeared to the vestiaria, who asked her how she had endured her horrible death and if the devils had troubled her after her death. She replied the devils had made her deathbed incredibly difficult, but that this experience was her purgatory. After her death, the devils had harassed her with fiery flames, but Saint John the Evangelist and Saint Augustine had saved her from the devils.<sup>110</sup> Gertrude is not the only one to describe her experience of purgatory in a vision. Katharina of Naaldwijk appeared to both a mendicant and a devout woman from Holland. Both learned from Katharina that she only had stayed in purgatory for five hours after her death. She told the mendicant she would have to stay in paradise until Candlemas, which would be celebrated within two months of her death, before she would be allowed to enter heaven. The reason for this short period in both purgatory and paradise was the fact that she had suffered so much already during her life.<sup>111</sup>

Salome Sticken's life describes multiple instances of interventions or appearances of the sister after her death. Two sisters visited the grave of Salome, complained about their sorrows to her and requested her help, after which they were gifted the grace and mercy of Salome and were released from their weaknesses. Shortly after her death, Salome herself appeared to a sister, letting her know she felt great joy and was content.

As already discussed earlier, visions were added to the lives of the sisters when it was felt that they could edify the living sisters. In these visions, we see messages that could urge the sisters to successfully battle devils at the end of life. In addition to this, the content illustrates that the sisters should not fear death, since it could bring them far more joy than they had felt on earth.

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 189v.

<sup>111</sup> Katharina of Naaldwijk died on 12 December 1443. Candlemas is celebrated annually on 2 February. *Ibid.*, ff. 257v-257r.

## VI. *Een scone leeringe om salich te sterven*

Before I will start comparing the sources on the basis of their descriptions of assistance at deathbeds, it is important to gain a better understanding of the content of the last point of reference, *Een scone leeringe om salich te sterven*. This incunable containing woodcuts was printed in Antwerp in 1500, probably by Adriaen van Berghen. The original printed version is held by The Royal Library in The Hague. For this study, I have used a modern reproduction of the original version, which has copied the Middle Dutch text, to which an introductory chapter is added.

*Een scone leeringe* is divided into six parts or chapters, following the chronological order before death. The first part explains the art of dying. This part uses citations of ancient philosophers and biblical figures illustrating the importance of death for the soul. It starts off by remarking how Aristoteles explained that the death of the body should be considered to be the worst thing in the world, but the text disproves this by explaining Ezekiel's belief on death, remarking how dying in the grace of God actually means that one has the chance to live on in the afterlife.<sup>112</sup> After this, the manual continues with describing how death signifies the end of the banishment of the soul to the body. At the moment of death, the soul is released from the burdens of the body, such as the burden of experiencing sickness. Before one's soul will be released from its body, it is of importance that he knows how to die a good death, which according to *Een scone leeringe* means that one should hold God in his heart and soul at all times. It is only in this way that one is prepared to die at all times. Additionally, it is of great importance that one should not fight death nor fear or bemoan it, since one death is according to God's will, which is good in its nature.<sup>113</sup>

The second chapter notes the five fundamental temptations with which the soul will be faced at the end of life, although one can also be faced with many other tempting sins. The five principal temptations include lack of faith, despair, impatience, pride and greed. *Een scone leering* provides advice to fight the tempting thoughts, often by illustrating how one can use scripture or other devotional texts to overcome temptations or to ward off the devil. For example, it is advised to read the profession of faith to the dying, so that he can strengthen his belief and face his disbelief. In addition to this, the devil may hear the

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<sup>112</sup> De Geus, et al, *Een scone leeringe*, 34-36.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-40.

profession and be driven away by it.<sup>114</sup> The text also illustrates that the devil will try to drive a person to despair by facing the dying person with all his past sins. *Een scone leeringe* urges the reader to keep in mind the forgiving nature of God, because as long as one remembers this, he will not be tempted to fall into despair.<sup>115</sup>

After this struggle, a series of questions is presented, which the dying person should be asked when he is still able to speak and is of sound mind. Among these questions are those asking if the dying is content to die in the faith of Christ, and if he believes Christ died for him.<sup>116</sup> In the fourth chapter, prayers to God, Christ, Mary and other heavenly figures are presented which the dying should perform when he can still speak and think clearly. These prayers should help the dying with their fate and guide them at the moment of death. Among these prayers is a prayer to the angels. The dying person should ask the angels to assist him when he shall leave the earthly world, and to receive his soul among them in heaven.<sup>117</sup>

In the last two chapters, the responsibility of those present at the deathbed is called upon again. The fifth part specifically contains advice that one can give to the dying. This part starts by explaining the importance of the care for the soul. It is said that often a sickness of the body comes from the sickness of the soul. Therefore, a worldly doctor should be sure that the sick is taken care of in a spiritual sense, so too before his death. This means that one should receive the Holy Sacraments, confess and have taken care of his testament. In addition to this, the dying should be assisted during his last moments by helping him during his struggle with the devil, by reminding him that he should not fear death, and by asking him the questions that were introduced in the third part of the text.<sup>118</sup>

The sixth and last part considers the last acts that should be performed shortly before a person dies, specifically mentioning the prescribed practices for those living in a monastery. When one is close to death, the monastery should be gathered, after which the community should pray the last prayers.<sup>119</sup> After these prayers, the commendation of the soul is provided that should be said at the exact moment the soul is leaving the body. The

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 45-47.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 55-59.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 63-64.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 65-69.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 73.

text ends with an example that illustrates the importance of assisting the dying. In this example, a pope asked his chaplain to pray three *Pater Nosters* at the moment of his death. The example shows that prayers even better the fate of the pope, after which these *Pater Nosters* are presented, including prayers that should be read along with them. These *Pater Nosters* respectively ask Christ to preserve the lives of the people and to help them, to protect the people from enemies, and to free everyone who serves Christ from both their sicknesses of mind and of the soul.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-86.



## VII. Comparing the Sources

In this chapter, I will highlight different themes related to assistance in dying as described in the *vitae* of Liedewij, Rochus and the sisters of Diepenveen, and in *Een scone leeringe om salich te sterven*, and I will reflect on their differences and similarities in the description of these themes. I will start by focusing on the acceptance of death as God's will and will look at the contrasting descriptions in the sources. After this, the descriptions of temptations and the virtue of patience at the end of life in the different sources will be analysed, since *Een scone leeringe* describes the struggle with temptations as an occasion in which one may need assistance, and needs to be able to be patient. I will continue with reflecting on specific instances of guidance at death. These refer to instances where the role of others at dying is described. Before the recurring theme of the last rites will be considered, I will focus on the role of the worldly doctors at death. Lastly, I will discuss the question if dying is presented as an occasion one should experience on their own or in the presence of others, and the question how the soul and the body are portrayed at the end of the earthly life.

### *God's will*

An important theme emphasized in *Een scone leeringe* is the fact that one should not fight their death or be fearful of it, since one's death is always according to God's will. In this way, one can imitate the example of Christ, whose death was in accordance with of God's will and who aligned his own resolutions with those of God.<sup>121</sup> The attitudes towards dying that can be found in the sources can often be characterized as following the same theme, which I will illustrate.

Firstly, Liedewij's life shows the struggle of the saint to come to peace with her sickness. She had trouble coming to terms with her sickness, and believed that God had abandoned her at several moments in her life. Liedewij's confessor had to assist her in finding her belief in order that she could strengthen her faith and patience. He taught her how to embrace God's will, after which she learned to cherish her sickness.<sup>122</sup> However, at the end of her life, when she was suffering from great pains caused by a stone in her body,

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<sup>121</sup> De Geus, et al., *Een scone leeringe*, 37-39.

<sup>122</sup> Gerlachs, *Het leven*, 38-39.

she was crying and saying that God had abandoned her. This illustrates that she still found it difficult to accept her sickness and to suffer patiently shortly before her death.<sup>123</sup> The *vita* also describes the attitude of Pieternel, Liedewij's mother, towards her own death. When she fell ill, she began to regret that she had not lived as virtuously as she should have. However, she submitted herself completely to God during her sickbed and death.<sup>124</sup>

Dying in accordance with God's will is emphasized in the biography of Salome Sticken, whose health had already started to decline years before her death, but who still survived for many years. She expressed that she only wished to die if that was in accordance with the desires of God, even if that meant she would live to be a hundred years old. The life of Jutte of Culemborg makes a similar observation at the deathbed of the sister, who, although she feared death, still lay her fate in the hands of God. The same theme is present in the life of Katharina of Naaldwijk, to whom a different sister said that she would be sad if Katharina died. By highlighting how Katharina told this sister that she needed to suffer in order to please God and that one could not possibly attain eternal life without suffering, we can conclude other sisters needed instructions on accepting sickness and death as God's will, and therefore as something good.<sup>125</sup>

From these examples, we can see the importance of the theme of accepting death as God's will. Yet, this acceptance was at times difficult to master. Both Liedewij and the sisters struggled with it, and needed others to teach them and to remind them the ways in which they could learn this acceptance. Although death was believed to be according to God's plan, both life and death were not only the territory of God. The devils were always lurking and trying to tempt the devout. Since all sources portray people faced with temptations, it is important to highlight these struggles.

### *Temptations*

To face temptations and to overcome them is portrayed as such an important and difficult task, that *Een scone leeringe* dedicated an entire chapter to this and to how one can help another in their struggle with temptations. This chapter focuses on the discussion of the struggle with temptations. Of course, temptations are often not only faced at one's

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>125</sup> Essinchghes, *Zusterboek*, ff. 254v-254r.

deathbed, but also during life. Since the lives of both the saints and the sisters can be read as working towards their death, some temptations faced during their lives will be highlighted together with those faced at death.

The most obvious example out of all the lives is that one of Gertrude of Rijssen, in which the devils tormented her at her deathbed for thinking of staying with her family if her mother were to die. At her family home, she could serve the Lord together with her father, brother and sister at home, of whom the latter spoiled her during her stay with food and drinks. At her deathbed, she was faced with her thought to turn away from God and the monastery by the devils. They told her that she did not confess to thinking her sinful thought of staying at home to be spoiled and to leave the strict rules of the monastery. At that moment, the devils tried to tempt her to despair by confronting her with her past sins of chattering and being disobedient. This method of confronting one with their past sins is actually described as generally used by the devils in *Een scone leeringe*.<sup>126</sup> On the instigation of the sisters at her deathbed, Gertrude chose to confess her sins another time. The sisters also helped Gertrude to remain strong in her faith and to not fall for the tricks of the devil.

Another biography illustrating the struggle with temptations is the one of Salome Sticken. Before she entered the monastery, she acquired a taste for the worldly life, but she learned to resist the temptation of greed during her life, as was the case for several other sisters. However, the devils still tried to tempt her, since they did not want such an exceptional woman with such a great devotion to the Lord to slip through their hands. This was mostly because they knew Salome would guide many others to the grace of God. Yet, because of the advice of other in combination with her strong faith, she overcame these attempts. Salome would use her experiences with the devils to guide others and advise them at various times in her life.<sup>127</sup>

Rochus' life does not describe devils tempting him in any way. On the contrary, Rochus is portrayed as practicing good deeds without being tempted. Especially his virtue of modesty and humility is emphasized, which are the counterparts of the temptation of pride. At two instances, the *vita* notes Rochus did not want people to know his name, because he did not desire the fleeting honour and glory of mortals. One of these people was

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., ff. 181r-189v.; De Geus, et al., *Een scone leeringe*, 45-47.

<sup>127</sup> Essinchghes, *Zusterboek*, f. 194v.

the pope, showing the saint did not give up his wish even when the person with the highest authority on earth asked him to.<sup>128</sup>

Although there is no account of Rochus being tempted by the devils, there are implicit remarks about this own struggle with patience when he was suffering from the plague. After he sought refuge in the forest, he thanked God for granting him the same experience as the impoverished and others that had to endure the plague. However, he did not wait passively and patiently for death, but prayed to God to cure him from his pains like God had done for the people Rochus had helped. Yet, he did not complain about his sickness; instead of praying to God immediately or protesting his sickness in the guesthouse, he went outside as to not disturb any others with his pains and suffering.<sup>129</sup> From this, we can also argue that Rochus put his fate in God's hand, not by accepting his disease, but by requesting God to cure him.

Although Rochus himself did not face the devils or many temptations, it is shown how others in his stories were tempted by feelings of greed and pride. When Goddaart was forced to beg for food, he went to a neighbouring village, because he was too proud to beg in his hometown, since this would bring shame to both him and his name.<sup>130</sup>

In Liedewij's life, we can find more struggles with temptations. Liedewij's life is one in which the saint both expressed patience and impatience. After the first few years of her illness, she was taught to have patience by contemplating the Passion of Christ. Additionally, Liedewij chose to suffer great pains in order that a great number of souls could be freed from their pains and suffering in hell and purgatory. She did this with great pleasure. However, at the end of her life, when a stone in her body caused her to suffer horrible pains, she cried God had abandoned her.<sup>131</sup> Yet, it is in this light, she imitates Christ, who had felt that God had abandoned him when he was dying on the cross.

In addition to her struggles with patience and belief, Liedewij was tormented by the devils after her father's death. The devils tried to drive her to despair by expressing her father did not go to heaven, but to hell. The death of Master Andries illustrates the effects of dying when having lived a greedy life. Liedewij advised the pastor to give away his wrongfully

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<sup>128</sup> *Vita van St. Rochus*, ff. 314v-314r

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 315v-316r.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 319v.

<sup>131</sup> Gerlachs, *Het leven*, 92-93.

acquired goods before his death. The pastor did not listen to her, and Liedewij witnessed him suffering in hell.

The theme of the struggle with the devils has been part of the hagiographical tradition for centuries. It is especially a prominent theme in the lives of the Desert Fathers, who were regarded as great exemplary figures in the circles of the *Devotio Moderna*. The conflict between the desert monks and the demons or devils formed the identity of the monks greatly.<sup>132</sup> This theme is thus followed in the sister-book, written by members of a group who venerated the Desert Fathers. This same reasoning can be applied to the life of Liedewij, which was written in a monastery that was part of the *Devotio Moderna* network.

From all lives we can gather that the struggle with the devils is an extremely prominent and important feature in the sources, which could enlighten the readers that assistance may be needed to overcome the devils and their temptations. In addition to this, when overcoming a struggle with temptations and devils at the end of life, one proved their worth at the last and most important moments of life. One's actions at these moments could alter their fate, and could decide whether he was worthy of heaven or should be sentenced to damnation in hell. In addition to the struggle with the devils and temptations, all lives specifically emphasize the struggle with patience. The different lives illustrate that patience is sometimes even difficult to master for a saint or those celebrated for their exceptional virtuous nature. However, since there is a great emphasis on this virtue in all sources, we can conclude having patience during one's life, sickness and death is essential in order to die a good death, even if this meant that one should receive help to guide them towards their goal of being patient.

#### *Assisting and guiding others*

Since *Een scone leeringe* is in its essence a manual with the purpose to assist others while they are dying, it is least surprising three of the six chapters are dedicated to providing instructions for those people that are assisting the dying. The chapters are respectively focused on questions that one should ask the dying, the advice one should give them, and prayers that should be said at the moment of death.

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<sup>132</sup> David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 5-6.

The theme of guiding and assisting others is distinctly present in the lives of both the sisters of Diepenveen and Liedewij. There is an abundance of examples to be used from the sister-book, since it was a custom in the monastery for the sisters to die in the presence of the other sisters. Generally, a sister would watch the dying sisters and call the others when the moment of death was nearing. The sisters would then try to help the dying sister by for instance asking her questions. In the life of Salome Sticken, Gertrude of Rijssen and Jutte of Culemborg, the sisters are asked the question if they are content.<sup>133</sup> In addition to this, Salome is given advice by another sister at the end of her life, saying she should keep in mind the suffering of the Lord and she should walk into the heart of the Lord.<sup>134</sup>

Praying to help attain salvation at the end of the life of the sisters was a common practice as described in the biographies. At the end of the life of Griete of Opstal, the scribe has written that every sister prayed a hundred *Our Father's* for a dying sister. Additionally, the life describes Griete's request to her sister to pray for her, in order that she could arrive in heaven as quickly as possible.<sup>135</sup> In the life of Gertrude of Rijssen, it is recounted how the sisters were reading the seven penalty prayers at the deathbed of the sister, which was said to be prescribed to do in such a situation, when Gertrude started yelling and startled the reading sisters.<sup>136</sup>

In Liedewij's life, we see the importance of guiding both those alive and dead towards salvation. As already noted earlier, Liedewij released great numbers of souls from their sentence of damnation and torture in hell and purgatory. In addition to this, she advised two of Schiedam's pastors on what they should do before they died, in order that they could die a good death and their soul could be rewarded. However, both of their souls were punished for their sins on earth. We can gather from these examples that the men were not only punished because of their sins, but also for neglecting the advice of another.

Guiding the dying is generally perceived as a good Christian deed. However, in the life of Liedewij we also see the negative side of assisting someone during their last moments on earth. Liedewij helped her mother when she fell ill and died. She advised her mother how she should regard her sickness and death, and that she should put her fate in the hands of

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<sup>133</sup> For this description in the life of Salome, see Essinchghes, *Zusterboek*, ff. 223v-223r. For the life of Gertrude, see f. 184v. Regarding this case in the life of Jutte of Culemborg, see f. 383r.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 223v-223r.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, ff. 245v-245r.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 185v.

God. After her mother had died, Liedewij realized the time she spent helping her mother distracted her from continuing to practice good deeds as she had done before her mother's death.<sup>137</sup>

From the various examples, we can see that it was a normal and important practice to provide guidance at death. The assistance or advice of others could prove to be decisive in the judgement of the fate of one's soul. In the life of Gertrude, we see the positive result of the assistance of the sisters. With the help of the sisters, Gertrude bore the harassment of the devils. She later appeared to a sister and told her that her struggle was her experience of purgatory, meaning that she was already purified from her sins before her death. Because of the help of the sisters, Gertrude was able to go to heaven immediately after her death. In contrast to Gertrude's life, Liedewij's life sends the message that if one does not follow the advice of another, especially that of someone as special as Liedewij, this may have consequences for the fate of their soul. In addition to this, the life illustrates how assisting another can distract you from performing other virtuous deeds. A good balance between the two is therefore needed.

All sources also emphasize the duty one has to care for the sick and to assist them in their last hours, even if they are suffering from a contagious disease. Rochus' life is characterized by his choice to help those suffering from the plague. Even when the master of several guesthouses forbade him from helping the sick in his houses, Rochus decided to help others in the city that are suffering from the contagious disease. He cured a great number of people, even if that means he risks to be infected himself.

The same is true for two characters in the sister-book. Both the brother of Salome van der Wiel and a Father risked their own health to care for the sick, and specifically those suffering from the plague. Both men are celebrated in the lives for these deeds. In the life of Liedewij, a contrasting story is told. Here, Master Andries reluctantly went to Liedewij, who was suffering from the bubonic plague, because he was afraid to be infected too. At his departure, Liedewij noticed that he was covering his mouth and nose out of fear for the disease. Because of this, Liedewij called him and remarked that no one would die because of her. After this, she noted he would die soon, but that this was not because of her.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Gerlachs, *Het leven*, 32-33.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

The sources provide the message that one should not fear the sick and dying, and should not leave them to suffer on their own during their last moments on earth. It may even be argued that one should see the disease and the chance to provide assistance as a blessing, because death signified the moment the soul is set free and may finally attain salvation. By assisting others at death, one can be an aide and a witness to this moment. If one does in fact become infected with a disease, their salvation may therefore come sooner as expected.

### *Doctors*

Since salvation was greatly related to dying a good Christian death, and was therefore a spiritual matter, the involvement of worldly doctors may have been a conflicting case in the Late Middle Ages. The sources, except for the life of Rochus, all refer to a visit or the role of a doctor. During Liedewij's sickness, a doctor came to examine her when he was visiting Schiedam with the countess of Holland, Margaretha. He revealed the state of her bone marrow and stated that he could not help her condition. However, he did predict that she would suffer from dropsy in the near future.<sup>139</sup>

In three lives of the sisters, doctors are mentioned to have examined the sisters. In all these lives, the doctors could not cure their patients.<sup>140</sup> In the case in Salome's biography, the sick person was not Salome, but a sister Salome cared for. This sister suffered from a disease that even the doctor could not explain. Salome did not believe this and visited the doctor for a second time, in case he now could find what the sister was suffering from. However, he still was not able to find an explanation for ailments of the sisters. In the life of Liesbeth, the doctor indicated that he could not save Liesbeth, who was suffering from the plague, and who had a growth in her neck. Therefore, he advised the sisters to start administering the last rites.

From the different accounts, we conclude that doctors are valued. However, as both *Een scone leeringe* and the life of Liesbeth of Heenvliet indicate, as soon as it was clear one would not survive an illness and would die shortly, the priest or others should come to care for the spiritual welfare, meaning they should provide the last rites.<sup>141</sup> The sources' mention

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

<sup>140</sup> These are the lives of Salome Sticken, Gertrude of Rijssen and Liesbeth of Heenvliet. For the respective accounts, see Essinchghes, *Zusterboek*, ff. 211r-212v., 183v and 286v.

<sup>141</sup> De Geus, et al., *Een scone leeringe*, 65-66.



of the doctors also adds to the belief one should have that dying is according to God's will, and that mortals do not have and should not have a say in the matter. Dying is the realm of God. Therefore, assistance at dying should not come from a worldly doctor, but from a spiritual doctor or a different person who provides care for the soul by administering the last rites, which are the confession, the anointing of the sick and the Holy Communion.

### *Last rites*

The confession is a theme present in all three sources. After Rochus learned that his death was near, he requested to have a priest come to him, in order that he could administer his last confession.<sup>142</sup> The life of Liedewij does not note her last confession, but does mention her urging Jan Engel to confess his sins, in order that he may be forgiven for his actions before his death. In the life of Salome Sticken, it is written the sister found the strength to confess shortly before her death, when she heard the priest would come to her to administer the last rites.<sup>143</sup> The life of Gertrude of Rijssen is the clearest example of the importance of the confession for one's salvation. Although her improperly confessed sin resulted in her struggle with the devils, she would attain salvation after her confession at her deathbed.

The anointing of the sick is the least discussed rite in the sources. In the lives of Liesbeth of Heenvliet and Katharina of Naaldwijk it is only written that the sisters would receive all last rites, not specifically referring to the anointment.<sup>144</sup> Clearer remarks about the anointing of the sick are not made in this source. The life of Liedewij does refer to the anointment at two instances: Jan Engels received the Holy Anointment before his death on the advice of Liedewij, and Jan Wouterszoon asked for a sign from Liedewij if she wished to receive the Holy Anointment when he noticed Liedewij's death was close. However, she had already died at that time.<sup>145</sup>

The Holy Communion features more distinctly in the different lives. Jan Engel did not only confess and receive the anointment on the advice of Liedewij, but also received the communion because of her. Salome received the Holy Communion as her last nourishment. When she heard Christ would come to her in the form of the communion, her conditioned

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<sup>142</sup> *Vita van St. Rochus*, ff. 323v-323r.

<sup>143</sup> Essinchghes, *Zusterboek*, f. 222r.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 253r.

<sup>145</sup> Gerlachs, *Het leven*, 96-97.

improved.<sup>146</sup> Liesbeth of Heenvliet could not swallow the Holy Sacrament because of her sore in her throat, caused by an infection of the plague, to which the priest decided to show her the Holy Host, the body of God, so she could still experience this last rite and die a good Christian death.<sup>147</sup>

In the several lives, we can see how the last rites, which are provided to the dying by others, are often highlighted. We can conclude that through the last confession, one can repent for his sins, and be forgiven. In addition to this, one can be strengthened to bear the pains of the last moments of mortal life after receiving the last rites. However, in the life of Liedewij, we can see that the last rites do not play a decisive part in her death. This may be both because she is a saint and because her life notes she requested to confess and to receive the communion many times during her life. Since she is a saint, her whole life works towards the ultimate goal of death. Therefore, all the times she did receive the communion and confessed may be seen as her last rites. Additionally, as a saint, she was deemed to be perfect in nature, and would not need rites to attain salvation. However, we cannot be certain why Liedewij is not portrayed to receive the last rites, especially since Rochus, who is characterized by his perfect nature, is in fact portrayed to request a priest to come to administer the last rites.

#### *Dying alone or dying in the presence of others*

*Een scone leeringe* and other *Ars moriendi* texts had as their purpose to be used as a manual to prescribe how one should die. They could be used at one's deathbed by a priest, a family member or another person present at that time, to help the dying in order that they could die a blissful and blessed death, especially if they were anxious during their last moments.<sup>148</sup> It is not surprising that the text, specifically altered for usage in a women's monastery, describes who in a monastery should be present to witness a death. The text prescribes that the sisters should be notified when a sister was nearing the moment of death, and that everyone should hurry to the ill. This would mean that ideally no person in a monastery died alone. This is something we can also conclude when reflecting on the deaths of the sisters in the biographies.

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<sup>146</sup> Essinchghes, *Zusterboek*, f. 222r.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 286r.

<sup>148</sup> De Geus, et al., *Een scone leeringe*, 33.

When Salome Sticken had fallen ill and was nearing the moment of death, her biography remarks that two sisters were keeping watch over her and carried out what the order prescribed the sisters to do for the dying. It does not go into more details than this, but it probably refers to saying prayers to the sister, since this is what is described to be a custom in the life of Griete of Opstal. The life of Salome also remarks that the sisters alerted the other sisters when Salome's life was close to an end.<sup>149</sup> The lives of Liesbeth of Heenvliet and Gertrude of Rijssen describe the calling of all the sisters at the moment of death as well.

From these examples, the importance of the presence of the sisters at the deathbed of another becomes clear. However, the lives of the saints do not necessarily reflect this need to die in the presence of others. When considering the deaths of others in the lives of the saints, we can see that the involvement of the saints in the deaths of their loved ones is in fact emphasized. Rochus' father called his son to him to tell him his testament, after which he died and Rochus buried him.<sup>150</sup> Liedewij both comforted her mother and her niece at their respective deathbeds.<sup>151</sup> However, in both lives there is an emphasis on the fact that the saints die alone, without the presence of others. Rochus specifically asked to be left alone for three days when he felt his end to be near.<sup>152</sup> Like Rochus, Liedewij requested to not be disturbed by anyone except for her caregiver, her nephew Boudewijn, on the day of her death.<sup>153</sup>

Dying alone was not an unusual occurrence during outbreaks of the plague. In the time of the Black Death, many people died without any witnesses and were buried with a small group attending.<sup>154</sup> This is one thing that could explain the theme in the *vitae*. However, this is not the most probable reason. We should not forget the difference in nature between saints and common people and the purposes of the different genres of the sources. All three genres were meant to edify and instruct others in their devout practices. However, the *vitae* illustrate Christian perfection in the deeds of the saints. Since their deaths are the highpoint of their imitation of the Passion of Christ, and they are models for perfect Christians, saints ideally do not need help at the moment of their deaths. They were

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<sup>149</sup> Essinchghes, *Zusterboek*, ff. 223v-224v.

<sup>150</sup> *Vita van St. Rochus*, ff. 310v-310r.

<sup>151</sup> Gerlachs, *Het leven*, 32-33, 70-71.

<sup>152</sup> *Vita van St. Rochus*, ff. 323r.

<sup>153</sup> Gerlachs, *Het leven*, 96-97.

<sup>154</sup> Jost, "The Effects of the Black Death," 206.

modelled to be perfect in nature at the end of their lives and were favoured by God, meaning they were taken to heaven immediately after their deaths. The nature of the saints and their *vitae* indicate that they did not fear death nor needed to prepare for it, whereas the *Een scone leeringe* and the sister-book illustrate the unreliable nature of humans, even when imitating the life of Christ.

### *The soul*

*Een scone leeringe* describes how the soul, after its creation, is given to the body, and send from heaven to the horrible world. In medieval society, it was believed that the soul would be judged at death, instead of the mortal body. The death of a good person signified the moment at which the banishment of the soul ended, it was freed from the heavy burden of the body and it would fare towards heaven.<sup>155</sup>

The other sources affirm the notion that this was a widely accepted idea held in society, but more clearly illustrate that this was an established theme in the literature on death. The sources all confirm the notion of the duality between the soul and the body, the immortality of the soul and the faring of the soul towards heaven. In the life of Rochus, the death of Rochus' father characterizes an important turning point in his devout life. Furthermore, the death of his father proves the embeddedness of the notions about the soul. After Rochus promised his father to complete his last will, the immortal soul of his father fared from his mortal body.<sup>156</sup> As already described, Liedewij saved many souls from hell and purgatory, some of which she guided herself to their next resting place. Not only the soul of a pastor of Schiedam fared to heaven in her *vita*, but Liedewij herself witnessed another soul being guided by angels to the joys of the eternal life.<sup>157</sup>

Both the lives of Salome Sticken and Katharina of Naaldwijk describe the same division between the soul and the body at the moment of death. The biography of Salome describes a moment at which Salome longs for her soul to be separated from her body, which would give her the opportunity to be united with her Groom Jesus Christ.<sup>158</sup> The biography of Katharina describes the moment of her death, at which it is written that her

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<sup>155</sup> De Geus, et al, *Een scone leeringe*, 37.

<sup>156</sup> *Vita van St. Rochus*, f. 311r.

<sup>157</sup> Gerlachs, *Het leven*, 74-77.

<sup>158</sup> Essinchghes, *Zusterboek*, f. 221r.

soul was released from her body.<sup>159</sup> In the life of Gertrude of Rijssen, we read that the sister died at a young age after throwing up blood. Although at first she felt sad she would not live a long life within the monastery, she was happy that her body would die, since this meant her soul could go to God.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 256r.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 183v.

## VIII. Conclusion

In a time where death triumphed and left society paralyzed, we find sources that reflect on and emphasize death and dying. In this thesis, I have examined three *vitae* and compared them with a source that is already heavily focused on in the study of late medieval literature on death. These three sources were used to highlight the relevance of other sources than the *Ars moriendi* to the study of death literature. After my reflection on these sources, and how they compare each other and to themes discussed in *Een scone leeringe*, several conclusions can be made.

Firstly, it can be argued that the different lives reflect the ideas put forward in *Een scone leeringe*. Although passages of *Een scone leeringe* are not specifically copied, the lives do highlight the same themes and at times the same ideas as the text. Because they resemble such an influential source and because the lives share their edifying purpose with *Een scone leeringe*, they are just as relevant to the study of medieval literature on death as *Een scone leeringe*. Especially regarding their descriptions of assistance in dying, the lives can also be seen as a manual guiding the medieval people in the process of dying, by providing them with examples in the lives of other persons.

Secondly, although the descriptions regarding assistance at death in the lives of the saints and the sisters do resemble each other, they do show discrepancies on two important points regarding the need for assistance in dying and at death. In the lives of the saints, Rochus and Liedewij both die a lonesome death on request, while in the lives of the sisters and in *Een scone leeringe* it is clearly emphasized that one should not be alone at death, since he may need guidance or assistance. Additionally, Liedewij does not receive the last rites before her death. She was asked if she wanted to receive the anointment, but had already died at that time. However, Rochus does receive the last rites. Moreover, he himself requested a priest to come specifically for this goal. One of the reasons for these discrepancies is the difference in the nature of the saints and ordinary people, as I recalled earlier. Since the saints' lives are meant to illustrate the perfect nature of the saints, even if they are struggling as Liedewij, the saints may not need assistance or guidance at death, which the sisters do need because of the unreliable nature of humanity. The lives of the sisters clearly illustrate how even extraordinary sisters still struggle with temptations and fear therefore do need assistance at death. This point can in fact explain the accounts of the

lonesome deaths of the saints. However, it is not a satisfactory reason for why Liedewij did not need the last rites to attain salvation, when Rochus, who is less inclined to struggle with his sickness and his belief of God, does receive the last rites. A larger study may be needed to see if saints were more often portrayed to not need the last rites in late medieval Middle Dutch lives or if the accounts differ on other lives of Liedewij and Rochus.

Lastly, as noted in the first chapter, the lives of saints and the lives of the sisters can be read as models for society. This point becomes clear in this study. The sources are often extremely clear in their descriptions of the dying process, and give a clear description on how death was supposed to happen in the circles of the *Devotio Moderna*. These clear descriptions lead me to the conclusion that the lives were extremely useful for contemporaries to learn about dying and death, as was the purpose of the lives. The lives are also greatly useful when one wants to know more about what the clerical circles and others wished to instruct the devout, since they can be understood as models for society.

Questions remain that are concerned with the extent in which the sources can be seen as reflections of society, and thus can be read as models of society. The sources cannot give a clear answer to this question on their own, especially since they sometimes differ in their descriptions of the need to be assisted in dying. A more historical oriented study may answer the questions related to how we can understand the function of these lives as models of society.

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