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AXTERS Gerardus (Stephanus), Belgian Dominican, philologist, theologian, Church historian, archivist and paleographer (1901-1977).

Gerard(us) Axters was born in 1901 in Bruges, the son of a high-ranking civil servant. He completed his secondary education at Sint-Lodewijks School in his hometown. He joined the Dominicans in 1920 and took Stephanus as his religious name. Axters had chosen to join the Dominican Order out of Christian and Flemish idealism. Thanks to figures such as Jules Laurentius Callewaert, the Dominicans had adopted a strong Flemish profile. Axters had presumably become sympathetic to the political concerns of the Flemish movement during his secondary education, and he may have been influenced by Jozef Axters, his Jesuit uncle, who belonged to the circle of Albrecht Rodenbach in Roeselare. After being clothed in the habit of the Order in Ghent, Axters was sent to the novitiate in La Sarte near Huy, where he professed his simple vows. He was afterwards sent back to Ghent to study philosophy, and in 1925 he was sent to Leuven where he studied theology at the study house of the Order. In 1926, he made his solemn profession in Leuven, and was ordained a priest in the same year. Some years of preaching and apostolate followed, first in Ghent and afterwards (from 1928) in Antwerp.

In 1931, he was sent to Rome to be a member of the *Commissio Leonina*, which was responsible for the critical edition of the works of Thomas Aquinas. He remained in Rome until 1938, staying first in the monastery of the Dominicans at the Angelicum, and afterwards in that of Santa Sabina. When he returned to Flanders, he became a member of the convent in Leuven, where the house of studies was located. There, he was professor of the history of spirituality from 1939 until 1957. In 1945, he founded the *Tijdschrift voor Geestelijk Leven*, of which he was the editor-in-chief for a brief time. After teaching the students of his Order for almost twenty years, he was elected to become a member of the prestigious Royal Academy of Dutch Language and Literature (*Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde*) in Ghent in 1957. He was president of this Academy for one year, in 1964. Axters was also a member of the Society of Dutch Literature (*Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde*) in Leiden (Netherlands), the Belgian Commission for Comparative Church History (*Belgische Commissie voor vergelijkende Kerkgeschiedenis*), the Christian Flemish Association of Artists (*Christelijk Vlaams Kunstenaarsverbond*), the Southern Netherlands Society for Language, Literature and History (*Zuid-Nederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal, Letterkunde en Geschiedenis*), and the *Scriptores Catholici*. He was also a Grand Officer in the Order of the Crown and in the Order of Leopold. He died in 1977, at the age of seventy-five, in the hospital of the Dominican Sisters at Lubbeek, near Leuven.

Axters' interest in mystical literature was already evident in his earliest publications. From 1929, he wrote reviews of recently published editions or secondary literature on mystical theology. He continued to write reviews for several journals for the rest of his life, which contributed to his great erudition. He wrote a number of articles about Catherine of Siena for the first issues of the Dominican journal *Thomistische tijdschrift voor katholiek kultuurleven* (later: *Kultuurleven*), and in 1935, he published a Dutch translation of her *Dialogue of Divine Providence* (*Libro della divina dottrina*). In the same period – the beginning of the 1930s – he published a 'Bibliography of Dutch Dominican Piety' (*Bibliographie van de Nederlandsch Dominikaansche Vroomheid*) in seven parts, in *Ons*

Geestelijk Erf, the journal of the Ruusbroec Institute, which had been founded by the Flemish Jesuits.

His work as a researcher for the *Commissio Leonina* resulted in articles published in specialized journals of scholastic theology, such as *Angelicum*, *Divus Thomas*, *The New Scholasticism* and the *Revue Thomiste*, on subjects such as the *Adoro te devote* and Aquinas' *Quaestiones disputatae* and *Quodlibetica*. When the Flemish Dominicans initiated the project of a Dutch translation of Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*, Axters was asked to draw up a list of scholastic terms with suitable Dutch translations. This was initially intended to be an instrument for the translators, but it became a 'scholastic lexicon' in its own right, and it was published in 1937. The introduction (which is almost two hundred pages long) to this lexicon contains an extensive original study of specific philosophical and theological terms from Middle Dutch literature. The then archbishop of Mechlin, Cardinal Ernest-Josephus Van Roey congratulated Axters on his lexicon, saying: "This is very scholarly work, the fruit of much erudition and labor; it will be of great service because it responds to a need and lacuna ("Het is een zeer geleerd werk, vrucht van veel belesenheid en van veel arbeid; het zal veel diensten bewijzen, want het beantwoordt aan een behoefte en vult een leemte", letter of 4 November 1937).

After his return from Rome, Axters increasingly devoted himself to studying the history of spirituality in the Low Countries. He researched both well-known authors (Hadewijch, Ruusbroec, Beatrice of Nazareth...) and lesser known figures, and published countless articles and lemmas (such as in the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, the *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* encyclopedia, and the *Nationaal Biografisch Woordenboek* of Belgium). In 1943 he published an anthology of the works of Jan van Leeuwen, 'the good cook of Groenendaal'. For this anthology, he used a manuscript from the library of the Dominican convent in Lier (today in the Royal Library of Brussels, KB IV 401), which he had discovered – a discovery which he considered to be the most important achievement of his career. His research in countless libraries and archives, both in Belgium and abroad, and his many years of teaching ultimately resulted in two major works: *Mystiek brevier* ('Mystical Breviary') and *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid in de Nederlanden* ('History of Piety in the Low Countries'). Only the first and third volumes of his anthology *Mystiek Brevier* were published, on mystical prose (1944) and mystical poetry (1946). The second volume, which was to contain an anthology of mystical epics, was never published.

Without any doubt, Axters' *magnum opus* is his four-volume *Geschiedenis van de vroomheid in de Nederlanden* (1950-1960), of which summaries in English (*The Spirituality of the Old Low Countries*) and French (*La spiritualité des Pays-Bas. L'évolution d'une doctrine mystique*) were also published. The concept of this publication is somewhat comparable to that of the famous *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France* by Henri Bremond. This work continues to be the most comprehensive study on this subject and of this breadth (stretching from the era of Christianization until the Counter Reformation) that has ever been published. Axters not only provided extensive discussions of all the authors who were known, but he also revealed and analyzed many previously unknown sources. His study thus initiated numerous new research domains.

In 1971, five hundred years after the death of Thomas a Kempis, Axters published a list of manuscripts of *De imitatione Christi*. This inventory lists 737 manuscripts, to which he added about one hundred more over the following years. He also wrote important contributions to the historiography of his Order with his *Bibliotheca Dominicana Neerlandica Manuscripta* (published in 1970, in the *Bibliothèque de la Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*), and his research on two major German mystical Dominicans, Johannes Tauler and Heinrich Suso. He was otherwise skeptical regarding the attempts to secure the beatification of the latter (cf. his letter of 20th September 1966).

He published several interesting meta-reflections on his scientific work, concerning methodology, lexicography and textual criticism. His reflections on the scientific research of the history of spirituality were pioneering in several respects. Among other things, he indicated that the renewed interest in the history of spirituality was apparent among scholars of literature, even though spiritual literature had also made its own particular contribution to theology. Many of the desiderata in research that he had formulated as early as 1957 and 1962 are still valid today, such as the need for deeper knowledge of the spirituality of the early Middle Ages and of the laity, the development of a specifically mystical-theological terminology, the need for research that integrates both literary and iconographic sources, etc.

Axters was not only a researcher, he was also a poet. He regularly published poems, which were collected in 1967 under the title *Inkeer* ('Turning Inwards'). Thus, he joined the tradition of West-Flemish priest-poets (such as Guido Gezelle and Cyriel Verschaeve) who had marked his education as a young man, and about whom he regularly published short articles.

Rob FAESEN & Anton MILH

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The archive of Axters is kept at the Dominican monastery in Leuven.

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