



Embodied Piety

Sacrament Houses and Iconoclasm in the Sixteenth-Century Low Countries

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On the eve of the *Beeldenstorm*, a great number of churches in the Low Countries had a sacrament house, a shrine for the Corpus Christi, often metres high. These monstrel-like tabernacles were nearly all destroyed by iconoclasts between 1566 and 1585. This essay discusses the dialectics between the construction and destruction of sacrament houses before and after the *Beeldenstorm*. It argues against a strict divide between material devotion and spiritual belief by highlighting the intertwining of Catholic and Calvinist embodied pieties. Fuelled by their opposing conceptions of the Eucharist, Catholic devotees and Protestant iconoclasts both engaged with sacrament houses and other expressions of the Corpus Christi devotion (processions, miracle cults et cetera) in a deliberate and intensely physical manner.

Belichaamde vroomheid. Sacramentshuizen en iconoclasmie in de zestiende-eeuwse Nederlanden
Aan de vooravond van de Beeldenstorm stond in heel wat kerken in de Nederlanden een sacramentshuis, een vaak metershoge toren met het uiterlijk van een reusachtige monstrel, waarin het Corpus Christi werd tentoongesteld. Deze tabernakels werden haast allemaal vernield door iconoclasten tussen 1566 en 1585. Dit artikel bestudeert het samenspel tussen het optrekken en afbreken van sacramentshuizen voor en na de Beeldenstorm. De centrale stelling luidt dat we af moeten van een strikte scheiding tussen materiële devotie en spiritueel geloof. Zowel katholieken als calvinisten beleefden hun geloof op een belichaamde manier en hun handelingen waren steeds verweven. Vrome katholieke leken en protestantse beeldenstormers hadden sterk conflicterende ideeën over de eucharistie, maar juist daarom gingen ze op een heel bewuste en uiterst lichamelijke manier om met de sacramentshuizen en andere uitingen van sacramentsvroomheid zoals ommegangen en mirakelcultussen.

Evoking iconoclasm in his own parish church in Ghent, Marcus Van Vaernewijck, one of our most reliable and prolific witnesses to the 1566 *Beeldenstorm*, writes:

Also, the sacrament house, a sophisticated Gothic one (as mentioned) – polychromed in some places – that reached to the top of the arch of the church, was demolished right down to the pavement, just as one chops down a tree. Still, good little women were doing their devotion thereabouts.¹

The opposition is set between, on the one hand, the violent iconoclasts who tore down the sacrament house as if it was a sacrilegious tree and on the other, the simple but devout female parishioners who continued to kneel and pray in the midst of the debris. Although obviously partisan, Van Vaernewijck's remark demonstrates the point I want to make in this essay: the *Beeldenstorm* was a physical and material reaction of Calvinists to the physicality and materiality of Catholic devotion.² I use the words 'physical' and 'material' twice, because the evident opposition between iconoclasts and devotees must not conceal their common ground. Both experienced religion as an embodied piety: their spiritual belief was embodied in physical acts and material artefacts. The large-scale destruction of the monumental sacrament houses, miniature towers in churches sometimes exceeding ten metres in height, will serve as a case in point.

The controversy surrounding these pieces of micro-architecture was part and parcel of the furious debates about Eucharistic piety in the years leading up to the *Beeldenstorm*, not only among learned theologians but also among ordinary people. The major bone of contention was the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation or of the Real Presence, which claims that Christ is physically present in the Eucharist. This made the consecrated host an object of intense veneration for Catholics, to the outrage of Calvinists who propounded a symbolic reading of communion, understanding it as an act of remembrance instead of a transforming rite.³ These opposing theological

1 'Item tSacramentshuus, een constighe modeerne (zoo voorseijt es), ende in sommige plaetsen ghestoffeert met schilderje, dwelck tot boven an den boghe vander keercken reecte, was tot bij den pavemente afghebroken, ghelijc men eenen boom af haut. Goede vraukins deden noch haer devotie daer ontrent'; Marcus Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden in die Nederlanden en voornamelick in Ghendt 1566-1568* I, Ferdinand Vanderhaeghen (ed.) (Ghent 1872-1881) 147.

2 Cf. David Freedberg, *Iconoclasts and Their Motives* (Maarsse 1985); Alastair Duke, 'Calvinists and

"Papist Idolatry": The Mentality of the Image-Breakers in 1566', in: Judith Pollmann and Andrew Spicer (eds.), *Dissident Identities in the Early Modern Low Countries* (Aldershot 2009) especially 186-191.

3 Recent discussions in Lee Palmer Wandel, *The Eucharist in the Reformation: Incarnation and Liturgy* (Cambridge 2006); Amy Nelson Burnett, 'The Social History of Communion and the Reformation of the Eucharist', *Past & Present* 211 (2011) 77-119.



▲
Pieter Claeissins the Elder (1499/1500-1576), *The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple*. The painting shows the interior of the church of St. James in Bruges with north of the high altar a sacrament house.
Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of Chatsworth Settlement Trustees.

conceptualizations also had profound social implications.⁴ For these reasons sacrament houses, built for the constant spectacle of the body of Christ in the host, but also functioning as signs of status for aspiring individuals and groups, provoked fierce physical reactions from Calvinists that can be read as theological and social statements in their own right.

Sacrament houses are manifestly less studied than they should be, and this for two different reasons. The first reason is very material indeed: in the Low Countries only a few of the monumental sacrament houses remain in situ, and only a handful dates from before the *Beeldenstorm*. Still extant are the tabernacles in the church of St. Peter in Leuven (c. 1450, 12m), the village church of St. Lawrence in Bocholt (c. 1490-1500, 5m), the church of St. James in Leuven (1537-1538, 12m), the church of St. Leonard in Zoutleeuw (1550-1552, 18m) and the village church of St. Catharine in Zuurbemde (1555-1557, 7m).⁵ Nevertheless, there is enough evidence from textual and archaeological sources that the sacrament house was an essential feature in many churches from around the middle of the fifteenth century.⁶ Utrecht Cathedral seems to have sported a particularly impressive tabernacle (consecrated c. 1442).⁷ This proliferation on the eve of the *Beeldenstorm* is confirmed by the narrative accounts of the Ghent chroniclers Marcus Van Vaernewijck and Cornelis Van Campene who mention the presence and subsequent destruction of sacrament houses in almost every Ghent parish church and convent church and in the nearby Benedictine abbey of St. Peter. This is corroborated by Jozef Scheerder who in his detailed study of

4 The classics are Natalie Zemon Davis, 'The Sacred and the Body Social in Sixteenth-Century Lyon', *Past & Present* 90 (1981) 40-70; John Bossy, 'The Mass as a Social Institution 1200-1700', *Past & Present* 100 (1983) 29-61.

5 The sacrament house in the Basilica of the Holy Sacrament in Meerssen originally dates from c. 1510, but was largely reconstructed in 1912. Staf Van Gelder, 'Sacramentstorens in Brabant', *De Brabantse folklore* 193 (1972) 83-104; 194 (1972) 167-200; 195 (1972) 205-242; Jeremy Dupertuis Bangs, *Church Art & Architecture in the Low Countries before 1566* (Kirkville 1997) 105-107; Achim Timmermann, *Real Presence: Sacrament Houses and the Body of Christ, c. 1270-1600* (Turnhout 2009) 183-187, 324-329.

6 Timmermann lists 38 places in Belgium that had one or more sacrament houses before the middle of the seventeenth century: Aalst,

Alseberg, Andenelle, Anderlecht, Antwerp, Aubin-Neufchâteau, Averbode, Bocholt, Braine-le-Comte, Bruges, Brussels, Diest, Dion-le-Val, Diksmuide, Ghent, Gistel, Groenendaal, Hakendover, Halle, Hasselt, Herentals, Heylisse, Hoogstraten, Kettens, Kortrijk, Leuven, Lier, Limbourg, Mechelen, Nieuwpoort, Nivelles, Soignies, Tongerlo, Walcourt, Walhorn, Wenduine, Wetteren, Zoutleeuw. For the Netherlands he lists fifteen places: Axel, Alkmaar, Anjum, Bergen op Zoom, Breda, Delft, Godlinze, Haarlem, 's-Hertogenbosch, Holset, Huizinge, Meerssen, Millingen, Utrecht, Woerden. See Timmermann, *Real Presence*, 429-442.

7 Arie de Groot, 'Beelden in de Dom van Utrecht in de zestiende eeuw', *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 45 (1994) 48-51; W.H. Vroom, *Financing Cathedral Building in the Middle Ages: The Generosity of the Faithful* (Amsterdam 2010) 647.

iconoclasm in Ghent lists no fewer than 25 lost sacrament houses in local churches and convents. Van Vaernewijck and Van Campene also refer in general terms to the demolition of tabernacles in other towns – Antwerp and Oudenaarde are named explicitly – and in the Cistercian abbey of Ter Duinen in Coastal Flanders.⁸ In sum, Johannes Eck's succinct statement from 1538 that 'a church without a sacrament house is not a church at all' seems to have reflected the contemporary situation not only in his own German lands but also in most parts of the Low Countries, Flanders and Brabant in particular.⁹ However, within a century the momentum of these elaborate receptacles of the body of Christ was definitely over: most were destroyed in the *Beeldenstorm* or in the iconoclasms of the 1570s and 1580s, or they were removed after the new rules of the Council of Trent had made them obsolete. In other words, the dialectics of Calvinist iconoclasm and Catholic reform had such a great impact in the Low Countries that they completely redressed the religious material landscape, and the sacrament houses are among their most prominent casualties.

A second reason for our lack of awareness is intellectual. Until recently sacrament houses, altars, fonts, choir screens and the like belonged to the exclusive domain of art history or, more precisely, of that of the odd student of church interiors.¹⁰ This is not only a matter of overspecialisation. The many studies of Eucharistic devotion in the late middle ages mention the stone embodiments of this piety only cursorily at best.¹¹ The real reason lies in the fact that historians of the late medieval and early modern period have created an antithesis between spiritual (inward) and physical (outward) devotion, branding the latter as superficial, ritualistic and mechanistic. For Flanders, the work of the French priest Jacques Toussaert is notorious¹², but even his critics use notions as *optelvroomheid* and *heilseconomie* (economy of salvation) when discussing the more materialistic features of popular devotion and highlight the movement of the *Devotio Moderna* or early humanist and evangelist

8 Cornelis Van Campene and Philip Van Campene, *Dagboek van Cornelis en Philip Van Campene (1566-1571)*, Frans De Potter (ed.) (Ghent 1870) 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 19, 62; Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, 1, 75, 131, 138, 147, 152, 188; Jozef Scheerder, *Het wonderjaar te Gent (1566-1567)* (PhD Catholic University of Leuven 1971, revised version) lxxxiv, 86-104.

9 Cited and translated in Timmermann, *Real Presence*, 324.

10 Bangs, *Church Art & Architecture*.

11 Charles Zika, 'Hosts, Processions and Pilgrimages: Controlling the Sacred in

Fifteenth-Century Germany', *Past & Present* 118 (1988) 47; Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge 1991) 292; Palmer Wandel, *The Eucharist*, 36. I found no references in Charles Caspers, *De eucharistische vroomheid en het feest van Sacramentsdag in de Nederlanden tijdens de Late Middeleeuwen* (Leuven 1992).

12 Jacques Toussaert, *Le sentiment religieux en Flandre à la fin du Moyen-Age* (Paris 1963). A recent appreciation in Judith Pollmann, *Catholic Identity and the Revolt of the Netherlands, 1520-1635* (Oxford 2011) 20-21.

circles as bearers of a more genuine, heartfelt piety.¹³ More generally, from the first Protestant historians to Max Weber and his followers, the Reformation has come to be represented as the classic watershed between material, magical devotion and spiritual, rational belief.¹⁴

These views have been challenged from different standpoints. Eamon Duffy's ground-breaking *The Stripping of the Altars* (1992) or Caroline Walker Bynum's provocative *Christian Materiality* (2011) among others have tipped the balance by rehabilitating the material aspects of late medieval religion.¹⁵ They refute any form of teleological reasoning – the Reformation needed not have happened – and invite us to take the often very physical engagement of ordinary believers with material objects seriously. Perhaps not surprisingly, similar ideas were already present in the earlier work of a number of art historians, most prominently David Freedberg, who has argued brilliantly for the universal *Power of Images* (1989) by analysing the dialectics between the acts of idolatry and iconoclasm.¹⁶ This relatively recent material turn in the study of religion has finally led to a first major study of sacrament houses, Achim Timmermann's *Real Presence* (2009), which discusses the still existing tabernacles from the late thirteenth until the early seventeenth century.¹⁷ This essay complements Timmermann's art-historical narrative by focusing on the contexts of iconoclasm rather than on the surviving works of art.

Contexts

Sacrament houses can be viewed nowadays in many churches in central and east central Europe and the Baltic. The tallest example belongs to the

- 13 Gerrit Verhoeven, *Devotie en negotie. Delft als bedevaartplaats in de late Middeleeuwen* (Amsterdam 1992); Paul Trio, *Volksreligie als spiegel van een stedelijke samenleving. De broederschappen te Gent in de late Middeleeuwen* (Leuven 1993). An excellent critique in Annemarie Speetjens, 'A Quantitative Approach to Late Medieval Transformations of Piety in the Low Countries: Historiography and New Ideas', in: Robert Lutton and Elisabeth Salter (eds.), *Pieties in Transition: Religious Practices and Experiences, c. 1400-1640* (Aldershot, Burlington 2007) 109-126.
- 14 Alexandra Walsham, 'The Reformation and "The Disenchantment of the World" Reassessed', *The Historical Journal* 51 (2008) 497-528.
- 15 Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars, Traditional Religion in England c. 1400-c. 1580* (New Haven, London 1992); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York 2011). For the Low Countries, see Llewellyn Bogaers, *Aards, betrokken en zelfbewust. De verwevenheid van cultuur en religie in katholiek Utrecht, 1300-1600* (Utrecht 2008).
- 16 David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago 1989); Mia M. Mochizuki, *The Netherlandish Image after Iconoclasm, 1566-1672: Material Religion in the Dutch Golden Age* (Aldershot 2008); Koenraad Jonckheere, *Experiments in Decorum: Antwerp Art after Iconoclasm (1566-1585)* (Brussels 2012).
- 17 See above; an older study is E. Maffei, *La réservation eucharistique jusqu'à la Renaissance* (Brussels 1942).

church of Our Lady in Ulm (c. 1460-1470, 26m).¹⁸ Particularly famous is the tabernacle in the Lorenzkerche in Nuremberg (1493-1496, 18m), commissioned by the patrician Hans IV Imhoff and executed by the master builder Adam Kraft, who included his own self-portrait at the monument's base.¹⁹ The oldest sacrament house in the Low Countries that survives to this day was built around 1450 in the church of St. Peter in Leuven. The Gothic tower with its breathtaking miniature spires was designed by the influential town architect Matheus de Layens and became a model for later works.²⁰ Its patron was the Confraternity of the Blessed Sacrament, a wealthy collective body founded in 1432, which developed a sophisticated programme of Eucharistic piety that also included the commission of Dirk Bouts' famous *Last Supper* (1464).²¹

Small tabernacles that functioned as containers for the consecrated host had existed earlier, but the elaboration of sculpted towers was a fifteenth-century invention typical for the broad Germanic region from the Low Countries to Hungary.²² It was one of the many manifestations of an ever-growing Eucharistic piety since the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. The new dogma of transubstantiation generated an important shift for ordinary believers in their sensory experience of the holy wafer – from tasting to seeing.²³ The *elevatio* (the raising of the consecrated host) became the central moment in the mass. Officially, the *elevatio* signalled the importance of priestly mediation in the administration of the sacraments, but the frequent seeing of the host became in itself a matter of concern for many devotees.²⁴ Some of them believed that it protected them from becoming blind or from suffering a stroke on that day. Another popular idea was that while watching the consecration one did not get older, which apparently prompted some people to hurry from mass to mass.²⁵ This belief in the great powers of the host in the daily mass was mirrored by an enthusiasm for Eucharistic miracles, most often involving bleeding wafers or wafers turning into flesh.²⁶ For the Low Countries alone, more than thirty places with local host miracle cults are documented for the period from the late twelfth to the early sixteenth century,

18 Timmermann, *Real Presence*, 81-89.

19 *Ibid.*, 147-152.

20 Van Gelder, 'Sacramentstorens', 1, 92-104; Timmermann, *Real Presence*, 92-95.

21 Maurits Smeyers, 'De broederschap van het Heilig Sacrament', in: Maurits Smeyers (ed.), *Dirk Bouts (ca. 1410-1475). Een Vlaams Primitief te Leuven* (Leuven 1998) 341-343.

22 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 292; Timmermann, *Real Presence*, 9-10.

23 Timmermann, *Real Presence*, 1-5.

24 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 63-82, 131-134.

25 Zika, 'Hosts, Processions and Pilgrimages', 31; Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 95-102; Justin Kroesen, 'Pour veoir Dieu en passant. Het zien van de hostie in de late Middeleeuwen', *Madoc* 20 (2006) 200-208.

26 Zika, 'Hosts, Processions and Pilgrimages', 48-59; Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 108-129; Bynum, *Christian Materiality*, 139-145.

including for example, Meerssen where an impressive sacrament house was built c. 1510.²⁷

The veneration of the host was also enhanced by the institution in the middle of the thirteenth century of the Feast of Corpus Christi (celebrated eleven days after Pentecost) in the Prince-Bishopric of Liège – to which diocese Leuven with its early monumental sacrament house belonged.²⁸ The Corpus Christi Feast enjoyed rapid and widespread success due to its appropriation by urban communities. Especially from the late fourteenth century onwards, the local annual Corpus Christi procession became one of the most popular expressions of a burgeoning civic religion.²⁹ In the Low Countries, Corpus Christi processions with a wide regional appeal took place in Amsterdam, Antwerp and Oudenaarde.³⁰ In parallel, prestigious fraternities that acted as local protectors and promoters of Eucharistic piety were instituted.³¹

Scholars have rehabilitated the Corpus Christi devotion by stressing its communal and civic values. Less attention has been paid to the fact that in large parts of the continent the carrying of the consecrated host in procession on the feast day of Corpus Christi and during its octave – both in small church processions and in large city-wide pageants – found its complement in the year-round exhibition of the host in specially designed tabernacles placed in the nave, north transept or choir of the church. After mass, the consecrated wafer was kept there in a central shrine, usually in a monstrance that could be glimpsed from behind a succession of wrought grilles. These sacrament houses ranged from simply decorated niches integrated into the wall of rural parish churches to partly or completely freestanding towers in major city churches.³²

Most monumental sacrament houses had a complex sculptural programme (most often depicting the Passion of Christ), but arguably this was subordinate to their theatrical tracery and pinnacles and to their dazzling sensation of height. Ethan Matt Kavaler recently claimed that ornament was paradigmatic in the late (or *flamboyant*) Gothic as it conveyed religious

27 Caspers, *De eucharistische vroomheid*, 232-233. For the Netherlands, see also the database 'Bedevaart en bedevaartplaatsen in Nederland' of the Meertens Instituut (www.meertens.knaw.nl/bedevaart/). For the sacrament house of Meerssen, see Timmermann, *Real Presence*, 187.

28 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 164-212.

29 Mervyn James, 'Ritual, Drama and Social Body in the Late Medieval English Town', *Past & Present* 98 (1983) 3-29; Zika, 'Hosts, Processions and Pilgrimages', 37-48; Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 213-287; Caspers, *De eucharistische vroomheid*, 61-126.

30 Amsterdam: P.J. Margry, *Amsterdam en het mirakel van het Heilig Sacrament. Van middeleeuwse devotie tot 20e-eeuwse stille omgang* (Amsterdam 1988); Antwerp: John Cartwright, 'Forms and their Uses: The Antwerp Ommegangen, 1550-1700', in: Meg Twycross (ed.), *Festive Drama* (Cambridge 1996) 119-131; Oudenaarde: Bart Ramakers, *Spelen en figuren. Toneelkunst en processiecultuur in Oudenaarde tussen Middeleeuwen en Moderne Tijd* (Amsterdam 1996).

31 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 235-238; Caspers, *De eucharistische vroomheid*, 115-121.

32 Timmermann, *Real Presence*; Kroesen, 'Pour veoir Dieu', 203-204.

magnificence.³³ Here the symbiotic relationship between the spiritual and the material was clearest. The sacrament house drew the viewers' attention by what it meant – a tabernacle for the body of Christ – but also emphatically to what it looked like. This is curiously well illustrated in a miniature from a sumptuous Flemish prayer book from 1516, the so-called Rothschild Hours.³⁴ The scene shows a consecration of the host including the characteristic raising of the elevation candles, burning of incense, kneeling and clasping of hands.³⁵ Although worshippers are all intensely watching the *elevatio*, the miniature viewer's eye is drawn to the gilded shrine in the beautiful Gothic sacrament house. The miniature is framed with the words 'Caro mea vere est cibvs et sang [vis mevs vere est potvs]' (Joh. 6:56) ('For my flesh is meat indeed and my blood is drink indeed') from the liturgy of the Holy Sacrament, underlining that the image is all about the doctrine of the Real Presence.³⁶

Controversies

In the fifteenth century, the growing emphasis on the *elevatio* and on the prolonged exposition of the host, the enthusiasm for Corpus Christi processions and for pilgrimages to miracle host shrines gave rise to criticisms from reformers both inside (e.g. Nicholas of Cusa) and outside (e.g. John Hus) the established church.³⁷ In the early sixteenth century, Luther was adamant in his condemnation of these practices:

[...] one shall abolish the sacrament houses and the procession on Corpus Christi day, because they are of no use and value and (in both, A.-L.V.B.) the sacrament is subject to great hypocrisy and mockery [...]³⁸

– a position shared by Zwingli and Calvin. In his *De bijencorf der H. Roomsche Kercke* (1569), the Netherlandish polemicist Filips Marnix van Sint-Aldegonde condemned the carrying around of the host under a silk baldachin and the use of ciboriums, monstrances and 'Sacrament-huyskens'.³⁹ Although these fifteenth and sixteenth century reformers held very different convictions

33 Ethan Matt Kavaler, *Renaissance Gothic: Architecture and the Arts in Northern Europe, 1470-1540* (New Haven, London 2012) 4-5, 101, 185, 261.

34 Franz Unterkircher, *Het Rothschild-brevier. Miniaturen uit een Vlaams getijdenboek* (Amsterdam 1985) 70-71.

35 Zika, 'Hosts, Processions and Pilgrimages', 31; Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, 97; Kroesen, 'Pour veoir Dieu', 201-202; Palmer Wandel, *The Eucharist*, 23-25, 37; Timmermann, *Real Presence*, 4.

36 Franz Unterkircher, *Das Stundenbuch des Mittelalters* (Graz 1985) 48-54.

37 Zika, 'Hosts, Processions and Pilgrimages'.

38 Cited and translated in Timmermann, *Real Presence*, 321, 342.

39 Philips Marnix van Sint Aldegonde, *De bijencorf der H. Roomsche Kerke* II, A. Lacroix and A. Willems (eds.) (Brussels 1858) 36.

about the nature of true Eucharistic piety, they concurred that the overtly material and physical veneration of the host had paved the way for superstition and devilish rituals.

As theology mattered in those days, the debates these reformers instigated found their counterpart in the words and acts of ordinary people.⁴⁰ Reform-minded groups and individuals, in the Low Countries particularly, targeted the dogma of transubstantiation, defending a more spiritualistic stance on communion. Consecrated bread was no better than bread from the food-cupboard, was a commonly heard phrase.⁴¹ Consecration itself and the increasing elaboration of host shrines were particularly criticised. In 1525, a former priest from the village of Melsen in Flanders preached that masses were but spectacles, because the celebrants just showed the hosts without administering them to anyone.⁴² In 1539, during his trial, Gillis Damman from Ghent uttered the conviction that ‘neither God nor the Sacrament dwells in gold or silver, but they dwell in a virtuous heart alone’.⁴³

The dissatisfaction with the Corpus Christi devotion could also be expressed in various physical ways. A subtle manner for those who wished to remain faithful to Catholicism was to take seats during mass in the side aisle in order not to see the consecration, ‘believing that faith does as much as sight’.⁴⁴ More audacious was explicitly omitting to show respect for the host by not uncovering one’s head or not kneeling, both inside church or when the host was being paraded through the streets.⁴⁵ In the years leading up to the *Beeldenstorm*, people increasingly caused public scandal on the occasion of Corpus Christi processions by refusing to bow or take off their hat, turning their back, singing abusive songs, or even lowering their pants.⁴⁶ Similarly, in France in the 1560s, Protestants refused to decorate their houses on Corpus Christi day and even showered the procession with garbage.⁴⁷

The authorities were most outraged when church space itself was disturbed. In 1555, Joris van de Kathelijne, an engraver and damask worker who had recently returned from exile in the city of Emden, interrupted a

40 Koenraad Jonckheere, ‘Classical Architecture and the Communion Debate: The Iconography of Suggestion’, in: Bart Ramakers (ed.), *Understanding Art in Antwerp: Classicising the Popular, Popularising the Classic (1540-1580)* (Leuven 2011) 75-91.

41 Johan Decavele, *De Dageraad van de Reformatie in Vlaanderen (1520-1565)* I (Brussels 1975) 589-599.

42 *Ibid.*, 266.

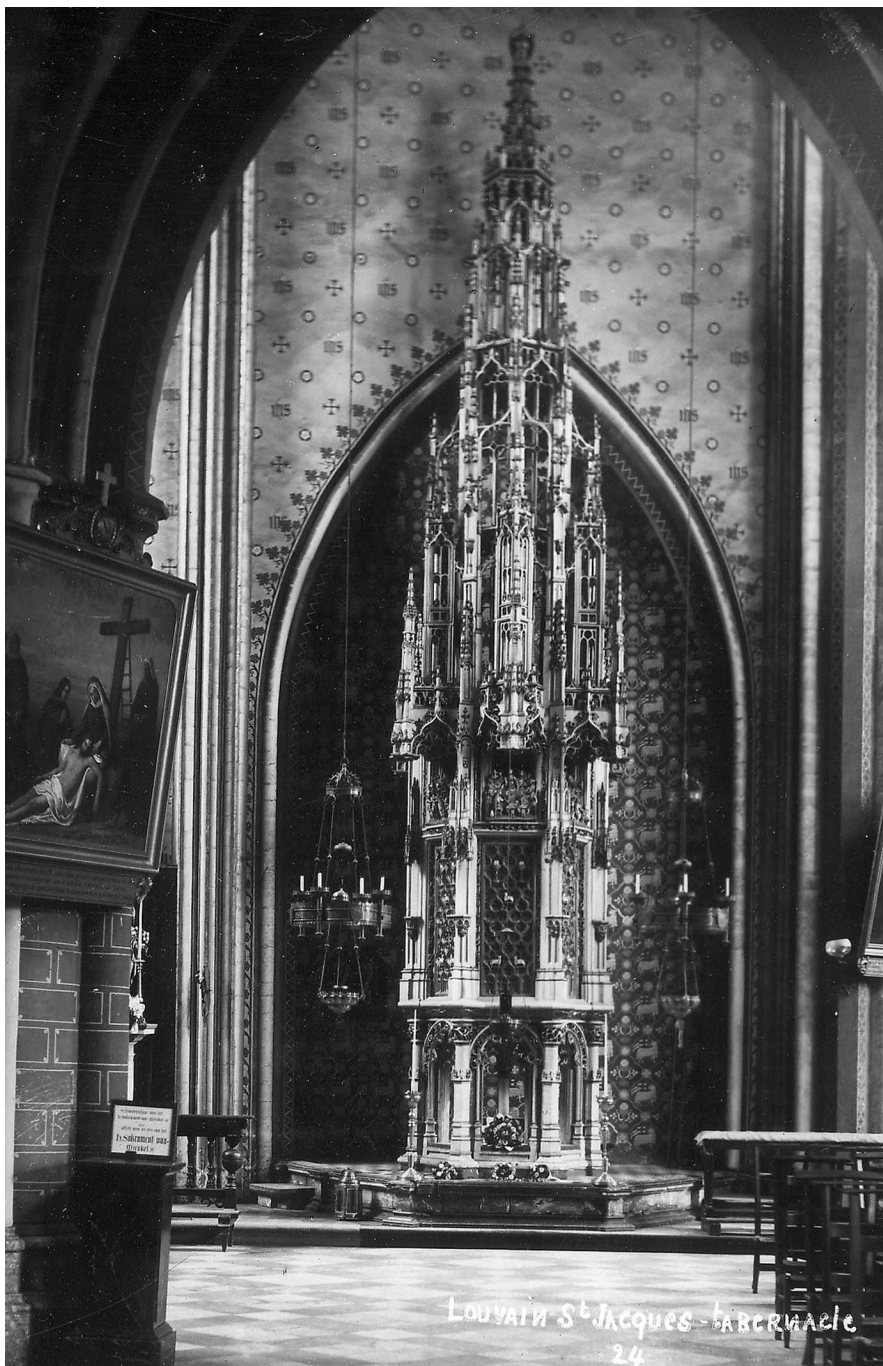
43 ‘God noch ’t sacrament en huusen in gout noch in selvere, maer huusen alleene in een duechdelyc herte’, cited in Decavele, *De Dageraad*, 599.

44 ‘dynckende dat ’t ghelove alzo vele doet als ’t ghesichte’, cited in Decavele, *ibid.*, 359.

45 Toussaert, *Le sentiment religieux*, 202; Jonckheere, *Experiments in Decorum*, 169-175.

46 Decavele, *De Dageraad*, 352, 363, 371; Johan Verberckmoes, *Schertsen, schimpen en schateren. Geschiedenis van het lachen in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, zestiende en zeventiende eeuw* (Nijmegen 1998) 149.

47 Philip Benedict, *Rouen during the Wars of Religion* (Cambridge 1981) 61, 63, 67.



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Gabriel van den Bruyne, *Sacrament house in the church of St. James in Leuven, 1537-1538.*

KIK-IRPA, Koninklijk Instituut voor het
Kunstpatrium, Brussels.

sermon on the Real Presence in the church of St. Michael in Ghent by loudly exclaiming that it was all falsehood. In 1564, the tailor Pieter Geeraerts, also returning to Ghent from Emden, ridiculed the consecration in the church of St. John.⁴⁸ The most dramatic physical performance in the years and months leading up to the *Beeldenstorm* was the desecration of the mass itself. In May 1566, in the church of Pamele near Oudenaarde, the tapestry weaver Hans Tuscaens grabbed the host from the priest's hands during the *elevatio*, broke it in pieces and threw it on the ground. He was probably inspired by a similar incident in Brussels a few months earlier.⁴⁹ On 13 June 1566, on the day of the Corpus Christi procession in Antwerp, the rumour went around that during the pageant someone would snatch the host out of the priest's hands.⁵⁰

How did Catholics respond? In her recent book, Judith Pollmann has masterfully described how in the early decades of the Reformation many Catholics in the Low Countries remained passive in the face of the criticism and provocations of the reform-minded. Using textual sources she stresses the penitential character of Catholicism in this period, with the central idea that 'each should tend his own garden'.⁵¹ This conclusion is in line with older observations that after 1520 traditional religion in the Low Countries declined rapidly.⁵² Material sources however, nuance this overall picture. The sacrament houses in particular offer a good case in point, since Timmermann distinguishes a new peak in their construction between the 1530s and the 1560s, particularly in the county of Flanders and duchy of Brabant. In a number of cases older tabernacles were replaced with newer ones that were more magnificent and elaborate.⁵³ Read in their broader local contexts, a number of surviving contracts from this period documents the range of motives and the varying backgrounds of the patrons. A showpiece of orthodoxy that had never been without its controversies, the sacrament house now became at the heart of a material dialogue between Catholics and Protestants.

In 1537, a new sacrament house (replacing an older one) was ordered for the church of St. James in Leuven by its pastor Franciscus de Campo (alias Sonnius), assisted by two churchwardens and a number of prominent parishioners. Remarkably, the contract with sculptor Gabriel van den Bruyne stipulated that the tabernacle in the north transept should be a copy of the,

48 Decavele, *De Dageraad*, 328-329.

49 *Ibid.*, 387-388; Verberckmoes, *Schertsen, schimpen en schateren*, 149.

50 Godevaert Van Haecht, *De kroniek van Godevaert Van Haecht over de troebelen van 1565 tot 1574 te Antwerpen en elders* I, Rob van Roosbroeck (ed.) (Antwerp 1929-1930) 48.

51 Pollmann, *Catholic Identity*. See also the discussion dossier in *BMGN-Low Countries Historical Review* 126:4 (2011) DOI: 10.18352/bmgn-lchr.7443; DOI:10.18352/bmgn-lchr.7444; DOI:10.18352/bmgn-lchr.7445; DOI:10.18352/bmgn-lchr.7446.

52 Koen Goudriaan, 'Het einde van de Middeleeuwen ontdekt?', *Madoc* 8 (1994) 66-75.

53 Timmermann, *Real Presence*, 324-325.



Cornelis Floris de Vriendt, *Sacrament house in the church of St. Leonard in Zoutleeuw, 1550-1552.*
KIK-IRPA, Koninklijk Instituut voor het Kunstpatrimonium, Brussels.

by then famous, sacrament house in Leuven's church of St. Peter.⁵⁴ In fact, the result was a stylistic update, aptly termed by Timmermann as a form of 'conservative innovativism'.⁵⁵ The reasons for the church fabric's initiative are not stated in the contract, but there is enough evidence to suggest that it was a bold theological statement of its young curate. Sonnius was at the start of a brilliant career as a staunchly Catholic theologian, and later became inquisitor and bishop of 's-Hertogenbosch and Antwerp.⁵⁶ Around 1537 the university town of Leuven was seriously challenged by reformed thought, which would eventually lead to a big heresy trial in 1543 in which Sonnius was heavily implicated. In the 1520s and 1530s not only had many people expressed doubts about the sacraments, but also a number of robberies had taken place in the churches of St. Peter and St. James that had especially targeted the sacred vessels.⁵⁷ Sonnius' plan for a new but at the same time traditional sacrament house was very likely in retaliation to heresy in general and against these minor acts of iconoclasm in particular.

Another impressive sacrament house from this period was commissioned in 1550 for the collegiate church of St. Leonard in the small Brabantine town of Zoutleeuw by Maarten van Wilre, lord of Oplinter, who belonged to the regional nobility. The artist who executed the commission was Cornelis Floris de Vriendt, who ran a large workshop in Antwerp. The Zoutleeuw tabernacle, which was installed in 1552 in the north transept and soon after received a brass railing, was remarkable not only for its height (18m) but also for the antique style of its elaborate sculptural programme.⁵⁸ In fact, the sacrament house replaced an older tabernacle from 1469-1470, indicating that its building, at a high cost, was a very conscious decision on the part of the donor and his wife, a childless couple. Ruben Suykerbuyk has recently unravelled the intricate patronage of Van Wilre for the church of Zoutleeuw, which included the financing of a wide range of liturgical services and the commissioning of many religious works of art (a monstrance, a cope and a number of altarpieces by influential painters such as Frans Floris and Pieter Aertsen). Interestingly, these material objects combined a fashionable

54 Edward Van Even, 'Renseignements inédits sur les artistes qui ont exécuté le tabernacle et la balustrade en cuivre de l'église de Saint-Jacques, à Louvain', *Bulletin des Commissions Royales d'Art et d'Archéologie* 16 (1877) 393-428; Van Gelder, 'Sacramentstorens', II, 167-180.

55 Timmermann, *Real Presence*, 325-326. In 1536, a sacrament house was ordered for the church of St. Gommaerus in Lier with similar stipulations; Kavalier, *Renaissance Gothic*, 10.

56 Gert Gielis, 'Franciscus Sonnius, "vader aller nieuwe bisschoppen" en eerste bisschop van

's-Hertogenbosch en Antwerpen', *Post Factum. Jaarboek voor Geschiedenis en Volkskunde* 2 (2010) 37-60.

57 Raymond Van Uytven, 'Bijdrage tot de sociale geschiedenis van de Protestanten te Leuven in de eerste helft der xvii eeuw', *Mededelingen van de Geschied- en Oudheidkundige Kring voor Leuven en omgeving* 3 (1963) 3-38, especially 4-5.

58 Van Gelder, 'Sacramentstorens', II, 181-200; Timmermann, *Real Presence*, 327-328. See also the extensive restoration dossier in *Monumenten, Landschappen & Archeologie* 28 (2009) nrs. 3 and 4.

antique style with an emphatically orthodox iconography centring on the Passion of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Van Wilre's project thus combined a wish for the commemoration of his soon to be extinct family line with an early Counter-Reformation artistic programme.⁵⁹

Equally intriguing is the contemporary construction of a sacrament house in the choir of the parish church of St. Nicholas in Ghent.⁶⁰ There are striking similarities with the Zoutleeuw project: in both cases the donors' childlessness seems to have been an important motivation for building a monument that would ensure their memory and salvation through the prayers of ordinary devotees. Like Maarten van Wilre († 1558) and his wife Maria Pylepeerts († 1554), the Ghent donor Andries Seijs († 1557) and his wife Anne Wymeersch († 1562) were buried at the foot of their Eucharistic shrine.⁶¹ Nevertheless, their social profiles were very different. A rich salesman of linen cloth, Seijs was an offspring of a guild family that accumulated political mandates in the city magistracy.⁶² Status aspirations played an important role in the commissioning of the sacrament house, which was probably built in a more traditional Gothic style. The 1553 contract with local sculptors from the Moerman family stipulated not only that the tower be 'somewhat more pious and higher' than originally planned, but also that the construction would be 'thirty pounds *groten* better than any other sacrament house in Ghent built in the same stone'.⁶³ Other sources, including the acrimonious epitaph on the gravestone Seijs' widow ordered around 1560, suggest that the childless couple lived on very bad footing with their heirs.⁶⁴ Antagonism based on money and religion seems to have been closely intertwined in the Seijs family. Andries' nephew Joos, also a prosperous linen cloth seller, is named as one of Ghent's leading Calvinists in the 1560s and 1570s.⁶⁵

Like Leuven, Ghent was a city marred by religious unrest at the time of the building of the new sacrament house; book burnings and executions of heretics had become common occurrences.⁶⁶ One year earlier, in 1552, the Calvinist exile from Ghent Maarten Micronius had published in London *Een claer bewijs, van het recht gebruyck des Nachtsmaels Christi, ende wat men van de misse houden sal*, a polemical treatise on the Lord's Supper and the abuses of

59 Ruben Suykerbuyk, 'Novelties for a Nobleman: Stylistic Aspects of Religious Patronage in Zoutleeuw's St Leonard's Church (1548-1558)', *North Street Review* 18 (2015) 35-46.

60 Firmin De Smidt, *Twee H. Sacramentstorentjes in de Sint-Niklaaskerk te Gent* (Brussels 1971).

61 Jan Frans Willems, 'Berymde grafschriften te Gent', *Belgisch Museum* 2 (1838) 375.

62 Dambryne, *Corporatieve middengroepen. Aspiraties, relaties en transformaties in de 16de-eeuwse Gentse ambachtswereld* (Ghent 2002) 293, 532.

63 'wat vromere ende hooghere' and 'derdich ponden grooten betere dan eenich Sacraments huus binnen Ghendt van gelijcke steene', see the transcription of the contract in De Smidt, *Twee H. Sacramentstorentjes*, 9-10.

64 Willems, 'Berymde grafschriften', 375; University Library Ghent, ms. 2693 (genealogical notes Seys family).

65 Dambryne, *Corporatieve middengroepen*, 658-659, 831.

66 Decavele, *De Dageraad*, *passim*.

the Catholic mass. According to Micronius sacrament houses were a clear proof that the dogma of transubstantiation had led to idolatry: ‘But now they dare to paint on their sacrament houses: worship God here’.⁶⁷ Micronius also directly connects sacrament houses with the other manifestations of the Corpus Christi devotion:

And to worship this adorned and fake idol, they make small houses, (and, A.-L.V.B.) ciboriums. They lift it up and carry it around. They make costly chapels, institute confraternities and pagan processions, in particular where they think a miracle has taken place. As it happens in Brussels, Leuven, Ghent, and other places, God forbid.⁶⁸

Whatever the social aspirations of the donors of the new sacrament houses of the mid-sixteenth century, there is no doubt that they were well aware of the controversies. Their undertaking was certainly no unwitting act of ritualistic piety; it was a Catholic manifesto.

Iconoclasm

While every well-informed citizen was acutely aware that Catholic dogma had become highly contested, the advent and the scope of the *Beeldenstorm* were unexpected. Iconoclasm was not a new phenomenon in later sixteenth century Europe and there had been some minor incidents in the Low Countries, but we have to beware of any form of teleological reasoning by seeing it as an inevitable rejection of the exuberance and even decadence of late medieval material devotion. Iconoclasm in itself was a quite dramatic physical reaction to the physicality of Catholicism. Smashing a stone tabernacle with a hammer was as much an expression of embodied piety as were kneeling and praying before a sacrament house. We have to avoid seeing Catholics and Protestants as necessarily antithetical, also because in this period both groups still shared a common religious background.⁶⁹

67 ‘Maer nv doruen sij aen haer Sacrament huyskens schilderen, Aenbidt hier God’, *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica. Geschriften uit den tijd der Hervorming in de Nederlanden. Eerste deel: Polemische geschriften der Hervormingsgezinden*, S. Cramer and F. Pijper (eds.) (The Hague 1903) 486.

68 ‘Ende om desen versierden ende valschen afgod te aanbidden, so maectmen huyskens, ciborien: Men heft hem op, ende men draecht het omme. Men maect hem costelijcke capellen, men stelt

broederscapen in, ende heydensche processien ende ommeganghen, sonderlijck daermen denct een mirakel ghedaen te sijne. Als te Brusel, Loeuen, Ghendt, ende in andere plaetsen meer geschiet, god betert’, *Bibliotheca Reformatoria Neerlandica*, 1, 522-523.

69 Peter Arnade, *Beggars, Iconoclasts, and Civic Patriots: The Political Culture of the Dutch Revolt* (Ithaca, London 2008) 90-165; Alastair Duke, ‘Calvinists and “Papist Idolatry”’.

The fate of the sacrament houses in the early iconoclasm of the sixteenth century was mixed. In the Swiss region many were broken up, most notoriously in Zurich in 1526, where Zwingli had a direct hand in their destruction.⁷⁰ More cautious Lutheran reformers took a different stance. In Nuremberg the sacrament houses and other religious objects were spared because they were seen as symbols of urban pride. In Ulm the city magistracy decided in 1531 that only the most contested elements – the grilles of the host shrine and the surrounding rail – needed to be removed, an order that was never executed. In other places such acts of selective iconoclasm were indeed undertaken. There is no doubt however, that the most comprehensive destruction took place in the Low Countries.⁷¹

Yet exactly how many sacrament houses were demolished in the *Beeldenstorm* is impossible to assess.⁷² A year after the events, in a public sermon in Antwerp attended by the Duke of Alba and other authorities, a Spanish monk raged against the ‘image breakers and repudiators of the sacraments’.⁷³ Effectively, according to Cornelis Van Campene, all sacrament houses in Antwerp’s parish churches, convents and chapels had been ravaged.⁷⁴ In the cathedral of Our Lady, iconoclasts had also shattered the prestigious altar of the Holy Sacrament and had trampled underfoot the consecrated host, saying ‘that is the Papists’ God’.⁷⁵ In a similar vein, the account of Nicolas Soldoyer narrates that in the episcopal city of Tournai all ‘repositories of the venerable Holy Sacrament’ were broken and that in many churches the consecrated wafers were trampled on or abused.⁷⁶ Ghent has the most detailed descriptions of the wreckage of sacrament houses and, as mentioned above, none survived, including Andries Seijs’ tabernacle that is explicitly referred to for its relative newness and expensiveness.⁷⁷

Both Marcus Van Vaernewijck and Cornelis Van Campene make it abundantly clear that sacrament houses were among the preferred targets of iconoclasts. Van Vaernewijck sums up his long and detailed account of the *Beeldenstorm* with this measured judgment of the iconoclasts:

70 Lee Palmer Wandel, *Voracious Idols and Violent Hands: Iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basel* (Cambridge 1995) 98.

71 Timmermann, *Real Presence*, 321-324 and 330.

72 Scheerder refers to the destruction or damaging of the sacrament houses in Lestrem, Roeselare, Tournai, Breda, Axel, Hulst, Middelburg, Amsterdam, Culemborg and Leeuwarden; Jozef Scheerder, *De Beeldenstorm* (Bussum 1978) 25, 32, 48, 64, 68, 70, 71, 80, 86, 94.

73 ‘beeltstormers en sacramentenverworpers’; Van Haecht, *De kroniek*, 1, 238.

74 Van Campene, *Dagboek*, 11.

75 ‘dat is den Papen Godt’; *Antwerpsch Chronykje* (Leiden 1743) 87.

76 ‘repositaires du vénérable Saint-Sacrement’; *Mémoires de Pasquier de le Barre et de Nicolas Soldoyer pour servir à l’histoire de Tournai, 1565-1570* 11, Alex Pinchart (ed.) (Brussels 1865) 191, 241, 266, 293.

77 Van Campene, *Dagboek*, 17; Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, 1, 152.

[...] there were ugly rumours, that they had pissed in the holy water fonts and had defecated in the baptismal fonts, which was possibly a lie; but that they had completely broken up the altars, the pipe organs and the sacrament houses: this was true.⁷⁸

He also gives a clue about the motives of the iconoclasts, ranging from very materialist to deeply theological concerns. Iconoclasts objected to the sacrament houses' costliness – one image-breaker casually remarked that with the debris one could easily build real houses⁷⁹ – but above all they rejected them because they so magnificently communicated the doctrine of the Real Presence. Van Vaernewijck recounts a rumour – which he disclaimed – that iconoclasts wreaking havoc in Ghent's mendicant convents battered the Eucharistic wafers taken from the sacrament houses, not knowing however that the monks had been so sly as to put unconsecrated hosts in the shrines to mislead them.⁸⁰ The rumour itself of course is reminiscent of many older miracle stories in which the Jews were the villains who had physically attacked the host in order to re-enact Christ's murder.⁸¹ Calvinists however, did not want to kill Christ; they challenged the dogma of transubstantiation. A few iconoclasts joked in their defence that they had done nothing wrong; they had knocked at the doors of a number of small houses, and since no one had answered, they had banged so hard that they unfortunately had wrecked them.⁸²

Not all sacrament houses were broken up, however. In some towns special measures were taken to protect the prestigious tabernacles. In Diksmuide the magistracy was able to avoid the complete destruction of the church interior, and took particular care to safeguard the rood loft, the sacrament house and a number of sepulchres.⁸³ In Bruges – where eventually no iconoclasm took place in 1566 – a barrier was placed before the tabernacle in the church of St. Saviour.⁸⁴ Yet this civic care was mirrored by Protestant rage. In Roeselare, iconoclasts promised to leave the dismantling of the sacrament house to the local authorities, but as soon as they entered the church they destroyed it anyway.⁸⁵ In Leeuwarden, the cleansing of the church of St. Vitus

78 'daer quamen leelicke maren van daer, als dat zij zouden in de wijwatervaten ghepist ende in de vonten haers ghevouch ghedaen hebben, dwelc ooc moghelic ghelogen was; maer dat zij die autaren totter gronde afbraken, die hurghelen ende sacramentshuijsen, dat bevant hem waer te wesen'; Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, I, 188.

79 *Ibid.*, IV, 97.

80 *Ibid.*, I, 182.

81 Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 126.

82 Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, II, 250.

83 Brussels, State Archives of Belgium, Council of Troubles, inv. 55, especially f. 59-62; see also the contribution of Ruben Suykerbuyk.

84 Ludo Vandamme, 'Het Calvinisme te Brugge in beweging (1560-1566)', in: Dirk van der Bauwhede and Marc Goetinck (eds.), *Brugge in de geuzentijd. Bijdragen tot de Geschiedenis van de Hervorming te Brugge en in het Brugse Vrije tijdens de 16de eeuw* (Brugge 1982) 114.

85 Scheerder, *De Beeldenstorm*, 32-33.

was an orderly affair under the control of the local magistracy, but nevertheless the tabernacle was smashed by a small group of outraged iconoclasts.⁸⁶

However while Calvinist iconoclasts hated sacrament houses, many lay Catholics seemed to have loved them. When the so-called ‘Wonder Year’ came to an end in the spring of 1567, the redressing of the religious landscape became a high priority. As Andrew Spicer has recently established, higher secular and ecclesiastical authorities called for the rapid restoration of the church interiors in order to reinstate political stability.⁸⁷ Local authorities followed with more specific directives, sometimes explicitly referring to the tabernacles.⁸⁸ It is revealing that parishioners often singled them out for quick renovation. In Ghent this was the case for those in the churches of St. James, St. John, St. Michael and St. Saviour. Marcus Van Vaernewijck was directly involved as a churchwarden of St. James; a parish collection was organised to raise money.⁸⁹ The contractors he and his fellow wardens hired in October 1567 were allowed to reuse the remaining fragments of the old tabernacle, but had to make sure that the new one was better.⁹⁰ These material concerns seem to have caused some friction between the clergy and the Catholic laity. One of the first to be finished – only the upper half had been damaged – was the sacrament house in the collegial church of St. John, but Van Vaernewijck was displeased with the result: the tower was lower and smaller than it had been. He blamed the canons of St. John for having ‘little knowledge of the Gothic style’ and accused them of having intended to make the new upper half even smaller.⁹¹

On 12 August 1568, almost exactly two years after the *Beeldenstorm*, the restored sacrament house in Ghent’s church of St. James was consecrated. After a Corpus Christi mass, a procession with torches and candles went around in church and brought the ciborium with the host back to its tabernacle.⁹² A similar ceremony took place in Antwerp in February 1569 when in the cathedral of Our Lady the host was returned to its ‘old place’ behind the altar of the Holy Sacrament.⁹³ Sometimes parishioners had to satisfy themselves for a while with a substitute. The churchwardens of St. Barbara in Culemborg showed particular creativity when in 1569 they hung up in church a design of the new tabernacle ‘to incite the good people and their hearts all the better to devotion and to give money’.⁹⁴ Although the refurbishment of the church

86 J.J. Woltjer, *Friesland in hervormingstijd* (Leiden 1962) 151-152.

87 Andrew Spicer, ‘After Iconoclasm: Reconciliation and Resacralisation in the Southern Netherlands, c. 1566-1586’, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 44 (2013) 411-433.

88 Van Campene, *Dagboek*, 63.

89 See also the contribution of Michal Bauwens.

90 Van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden*, III, 91-92.

91 ‘cleen verstant van zulcke modeerne’, *ibid.*, 92.

92 *Ibid.*, IV, 203.

93 *Antwerpsch Chronykje*, 184.

94 ‘om de goede luyden ende herten des te beter tot devotien te verwecken ende de hant daertoe te reycken’, cited in Liesbeth M. Helmus, *Schilderen in opdracht. Noord-Nederlandse contracten voor altaarstukken 1485-1570* (Utrecht 2010) 125-126.

interiors was often financed by the parish community, wealthy individuals continued to donate sacrament houses, as for example the rich bourgeois Loys Jappin, who did so for the church of St. Nicholas in Valenciennes in 1577.⁹⁵

The sacrament houses were definitely considered as more than a mark of tradition, since in the politically tense decade after the *Beeldenstorm*, the controversies over the Corpus Christi devotion only intensified. As in France, both the annual Corpus Christi processions and the general processions with the consecrated host that were frequently imposed by the central authorities became the most important public manifestations of Catholic restoration.⁹⁶ In 1569, a Jesuit preaching in Ghent on the history of the Feast of Corpus Christi and on its affirmation by the Council of Trent reasoned that the sight of the processions' true devotion would bring heretics back to the Church.⁹⁷ Contemporary chroniclers pay a lot of attention to these ceremonies and show a heightened awareness of the material and physical details, such as the number of torches in the Corpus Christi processions or the bell ringing in the smaller processions accompanying the viaticum.⁹⁸ Critics of the devotion reacted in an equally physical manner: when a procession passed they turned their backs, pissed against a wall or quickly entered a side street; in church they avoided communion or the kiss of peace.⁹⁹ Godevaert Van Haecht, a Lutheran in Antwerp, was appalled that secular and ecclesiastical authorities increasingly proclaimed ordinances that forced people to receive communion in their parish church and to show respect for public processions with the host.¹⁰⁰ These were not empty dictates: in 1577 for example, the young mason Jan Klincke was whipped and banished from Ghent for fifty years, because he had refused to remove his cap in devotion for the Corpus Christi procession.¹⁰¹

With the outbreak of the Dutch Revolt again the tables were turned. In the early 1570s the *geuzen* in Holland and Zeeland banned Catholicism. In the late 1570s, Calvinists also seized power in the major cities of the southern Low Countries. As a consequence, processions no longer took place and were replaced by Calvinist prayer days, to the despair of many lay Catholics.¹⁰² In Brussels

95 Simon Le Boucq, *Histoire ecclésiastique de la ville et comté de Valenciennes*, Arthur M. Dinaux (ed.) (Valenciennes 1844) 69; Spicer, 'After Iconoclasm', 426.

96 Pollmann, *Catholic Identity*, 80-93. For France, see Natalie Zemon Davis, 'The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France', *Past & Present* 59 (1973) 51-91.

97 Van Campene, *Dagboek*, 225; Pollmann, *Catholic Identity*, 91.

98 Van Haecht, *De kroniek*, I, 219, 222, II, 29; *Antwerpsch Chronykje*, 133, 135-136, 171; Margit

Thøfner, *A Common Art: Urban Ceremonial in Antwerp and Brussels during and after the Dutch Revolt* (Zwolle 2007) 96-102.

99 Van Haecht, *De kroniek*, II, 108.

100 *Ibid.*, 11-12, 47, 92-93, 108, 121, 128, 210.

101 Johan Decavele, "'Genève" van Vlaanderen', in: Johan Decavele (ed.), *Het eind van een rebelse droom. Opstellen over het calvinistisch bewind te Gent (1577-1584) en de terugkeer van de stad onder de gehoorzaamheid van de koning van Spanje (17 september 1584)* (Ghent 1984) 40.

102 Pollmann, *Catholic Identity*, 116.

on Corpus Christi day many people quietly walked the traditional route of the procession, a striking example of Catholic embodied piety.¹⁰³ Calvinist rule also entailed new iconoclasm, imposed or at least tacitly supported by local authorities. In the wake of this destruction, churches were whitewashed and rearranged for Reformed services or were simply used as storehouses.¹⁰⁴ We are much less informed on what was lost in this second wave of iconoclasm, let alone how many sacrament houses – old or new – perished. In Amsterdam, the tabernacle of the ‘Heilige Stede’ in which a famous miracle host was exposed, was wrecked in 1578.¹⁰⁵ In the same year in Haarlem in a confusing reversal of things, the guilds pulled down the sacrament house and the altars in the main church, in order to prevent their complete demolition by Protestant soldiers who were impatiently waiting outside.¹⁰⁶ In St. James in Ghent the new tabernacle from 1568 was levelled in 1579; the church itself was left in ruins until the fall of the Calvinist regime in 1584.¹⁰⁷

After the Fall of Antwerp in 1585 Catholicism was quickly restored in the southern Low Countries. Due to the militancy of the returning Catholic exiles and of religious orders like the Jesuits, a new, much more combative and triumphalist religious identity was adopted.¹⁰⁸ Initially, sacrament houses played their role as material signs of a new found Eucharistic piety. In Kortrijk, the old sacrament house that was knocked to pieces in 1578 was rebuilt in Gothic style in 1585-1586, using Matheus de Layens’ famous design for Leuven as an example. In Ghent, new sacrament houses were sculpted for the churches of St. James and St. Nicholas in the 1590s, while the city slowly recovered from the disastrous ending of the Calvinist regime. These sacrament houses, like those in a number of other towns built around 1600, were in a more contemporary late Renaissance or early Baroque style.¹⁰⁹ However after the 1610s, due to the implementation of the rulings of the Council of Trent, the use of smaller tabernacles on the altar was promoted, leading in some cases to the Catholic destruction of sacrament houses. Although Eucharistic piety did not diminish, in the seventeenth century the monstrance-like, towering sacrament house finally fell out of fashion.¹¹⁰

103 Jan de Pottre, *Dagboek van Jan de Pottre, 1549-1602*, B. de St. Genois (ed.) (Ghent 1861) 111, 116-117.

104 Olivier Cammaert, ‘L’iconoclasmisme sous la République Calviniste à Bruxelles’, in: Monique Weis (ed.), *Des villes en révolte: Les ‘Républiques urbaines’ aux Pays-Bas et en France pendant la deuxième moitié du xvii^e siècle* (Turnhout 2010) 47-52.

105 Margry, *Amsterdam en het mirakel*, 37.

106 Willem Janszoon Verwer, *Memoriaelbouck. Dagboek van gebeurtenissen te Haarlem van 1572-1581*, J.J. Temminck (ed.) (Haarlem 1973) 204.

107 Anne-Laure Van Bruaene and Michal Bauwens, ‘De Sint-Jacobskerk te Gent. Een onderzoek naar de betekenis van de stedelijke parochiekerk in de zestiende-eeuwse Nederlanden’, *Handelingen der Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent* 65 (2011) 120.

108 Pollmann, *Catholic Identity*, 125-158; Geert H. Janssen, *The Dutch Revolt and Catholic Exile in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge 2014).

109 De Smidt, *Twee H. Sacramentstorentjes*, 23-46.

110 Timmermann, *Real Presence*, 332-342.

The sacrament house of course is only one specimen of the many pieces of micro-architecture in the late medieval church – think of the fonts, pulpits, choir screens and choir stalls, pipe organs, altars and tombs. In addition, there were the stained-glass windows, painted and sculpted altarpieces, statues, reliquaries, lecterns, candlesticks and so forth. Through costly materials, sophisticated ornament and elaborate imagery they vied for the churchgoer's attention. These material objects simultaneously embodied a transgenerational communal spirit, this-worldly social aspirations and a clear set of religious beliefs. These relations were obvious but intricate in the case of the monumental sacrament house, which literally drew the eye since it exposed the consecrated host for the *manducatio per visum* (eating by sight). Its construction was often an undertaking not of the church community but of wealthy lay patrons – rich individuals or influential confraternities. Paradoxically, it seems that sacrament houses became more communal after the *Beeldenstorm*, when their restoration was funded by parish collections. Also, the study of material culture brings some necessary nuances to the perceived immobility of lay Catholics in the face of Protestant criticism in the sixteenth-century Low Countries. Precisely because the material was so central to popular theological debates, investments in sacrament houses or other church objects can be read as clear confessional statements that are often absent in the written sources.

Protestants blasted the Corpus Christi devotion for its central doctrine of the Real Presence, but they also condemned its more direct physical and sensory aspects – the kneeling, walking, clasping of hands, ringing of bells and burning of candles and incense. The point is that they were just as physical in their rejection, from simply turning or walking away to engaging their whole bodies in the iconoclast destruction of the sacrament houses. Therefore it is not a matter of ratio versus superstition or of modernity versus tradition, whether one would see this as a good or a bad thing. The *Beeldenstorm* and the subsequent iconoclasm of the 1570s and 1580s are first and foremost illustrative of an age when spiritual belief was embodied in physical acts and material artefacts. In sum, although they would have vigorously denied it, the aggression of the iconoclasts who tore the tabernacles down with their work tools was not so remote from the devotion of the good little women who daily flocked around the sacrament house, maybe hoping for a true miracle but contenting themselves with the sight of the Eucharistic wonder.

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