

Gerardus Eligii (1590-1641), Carthusian in Brabant with Jesuit roots

By: J.G.M. Sanders (2023 July)

Introduction

Gerardus Eligii or Eligius was born near Liège. There he received his first education at the village school. He then attended the humanities with the Jesuits in Antwerp. After his university studies in Louvain and Douai, he chose the Carthusians. He made his profession at the monastery in Brussels in 1612. In 1621, he was sent to the ailing monastery in 's-Hertogenbosch. A new monastery in that city did not materialise, but a new one in Antwerp did. Despite his choice of Carthusian life, his writings clearly express his admiration for his teachers, the Jesuits. He emphasises the connectedness of these two orders. In my contribution, I show the traces of the Jesuits in Gerardus's writings.

1 His childhood and education

The protagonist of this paper, Gerardus Eligii, got his biography from his Brussels friend and confrère, the Carthusian Petrus de Wal. Thanks to him, we know data that we have to miss from most other Carthusians. This biography forms the backbone of Gerardus's life.

Gerardus, according to his biographer, was born on 21 July 1590 to humble parents. Though simple folk, they were esteemed and rose above mediocrity. His birthplace was Petithan, a village in the seignior of Durby in today's Belgian province of Luxembourg along the river Ourthe, almost 35 km south of Liège. He had an uncle, Mauritius, who had entered the Benedictine abbey of Stavelot, located east of Petithan. He once visited it with his parents. At that time, abbey members there lived according to Bursfeld's rule, which placed strong emphasis on personal meditation and intellectual work. He had no other connection with monastic life at this young age, as far as we know.

He received his first education, learning the principles of Latin, from the local parish priest in the village school. There, sons of neighbouring noble families were also taught, according to his biographer. The latter mentions one by name: Thierry de Masbourg, lord of Somal. When Gerardus received the sacrament of confirmation, this Thierry became his godfather. Was Gerardus' descent really as humble as his biographer suggests?

Although some Jesuits had started a Latin school in Liège, he went to Antwerp in 1603 at the age of 13. We may ask why he chose the Jesuit school and precisely the one in Antwerp? In the last decade of the 16th century, the education of this young order was at a high level. They had opened schools in several cities. Possibly his uncle Mauritius admired their intellectual work and put young Gerardus on their trail. He may also have been influenced by his godfather Thierry de Masbourg. Thierry's younger brother Jean became a Jesuit, and perhaps the Jesuit Gilles Scouville was a cousin of Thierry. Liège Jesuit College would be an obvious place for Gerardus to continue his education. It was close by and French-speaking. Yet Gerardus was not placed in Liège. As a 12-year-old boy, he must surely have been impressed by the destruction of the neighbouring abbey of Saint-Hubert in 1602, whose abbot, Jean de Masbourg, was taken away by Dutch troops in a hostage and could only be ransomed from his captivity in Arnhem and Leiden at a huge ransom.



Spanish Fury of Antwerp 1576

What attracted him to Antwerp? The appeal of the Antwerp college was certainly as great as that of the Liège one. That the city was Flemish-speaking proved no problem for Gerardus: his biographer wrote that his Flemish did not reveal that he was originally Walloon-speaking. The Antwerp house had faced many problems in its short life. It had come into existence as early as 1562. In the Netherlands, after the Iconoclasm of 1566, a civil war arose between the north and south, a political struggle of rebels against the king, accompanied by a religious struggle of apostates from the Catholic Church. In Antwerp, this battle left deep scars. In particular, the looting of the city in 1576 by soldiers in Spanish service was unprecedented. Only from 1584 could the Counter-Reformation be taken in hand in the territories recaptured by Spain. The Jesuits, in the time of doubt between rebellion and loyalty to the government, had shown themselves warriors of the official church, and even afterwards they fought political and religious apostates in their writings. Under the protection of Archdukes Albrecht and Isabella, the Jesuit order was able to firmly establish itself in the regions of the Netherlands that remained Catholic.

For the Jesuits, Antwerp was the centre of the Counter-Reformation, with broad support among the urban population. Urban authorities were generally favourable to the establishment of a Jesuit college within their walls. The condition was that a Latin School was attached to it. The youth had to be well educated in the Catholic faith so that heretical influences could be warded off from an early

age. In Antwerp, the Jesuits were able to rebuild their house in 1585, after the city's reconciliation with Spain. So was their school there, which they had founded in 1575. In 1591 the school had 300 pupils, in 1613 more than 600. Possibly the Dutch incursions into Luxembourg had been the deciding factor for Gerardus in favour of Antwerp.



Jan de Tollenaere (1582-1643)

One of his schoolmasters in Antwerp was Father Jan de Tollenaere. Gerardus' biographer lists him as the only one of his teachers by name. From his native Bruges, De Tollenaere had left for Douai to study philosophy. He then entered the Jesuits. After his novitiate, he was entrusted with teaching the humanities. In that position, he will have taught Gerardus. As an authoritative Jesuit he had dealings with the most important humanists of his time and surroundings. The biographer lists Ecclesiasticus, the Bible book of Jesus Sirach, as another teacher of Gerardus.

For his education at university, he chose Louvain. There he became a boarder with the professor Erycius Puteanus, Eric de Put. From his birthplace of Venlo, the Jesuits' humanities course in Cologne was an obvious choice for Puteanus. After being appointed professor in Louvain to succeed Lipsius, he remained in close contact with the Jesuits. He also corresponded with De Tollenaere, who would later rise to provincial.



Erycius Puteanus (1574-1646)

The continuation of Gerardus's education also took place with the Jesuits. From Louvain, he went to Douai. There he entered the service of Lord Balthazar de Robiano. He was the son of Balthazar de Robiano, treasurer-general of the Low Countries. With this treasurer, Puteanus was in correspondence. Although the universities held their rights to higher education firmly in their hands, the Jesuits in Douai had managed to be allowed to teach philosophy at the academic level. De Tollenaere, his teacher in Antwerp, had also studied philosophy at Douai before entering as a Jesuit. Yet, according to his biographer, Gerardus had had enough of philosophy at one point. Consequently, he did not finish his studies. As a continuation of his education and the environment he had been in as an adolescent, it is natural to assume that he entered the Jesuits. Perhaps not only did he not like his studies, but he did not find what he was looking for in life with the Jesuits. According to his biographer, his desire for a purer life and especially seclusion was the reason he chose the Carthusians.

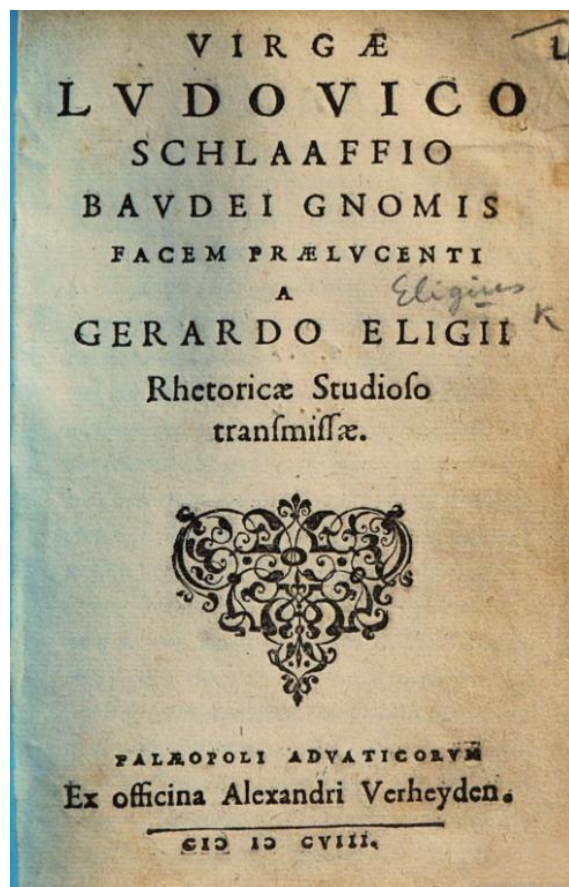


Jesuit College in Douai

2 His writings in Antwerp

Especially in Antwerp, the Jesuits were strongly associated with the humanist milieu. His education there at the Latin School from 1603 onwards will have fostered an admiration for humanism as a spiritual-literary movement. Latin and Greek in particular were on the curriculum. In 1608, he took the final class, rhetoric. The northern regions of the Low Countries had officially seceded in 1581 from the southern regions, which had remained loyal to the Spanish king. In 1572, they had already founded their own university in Leiden. In several areas, the two sides fought each other, by fire and sword.

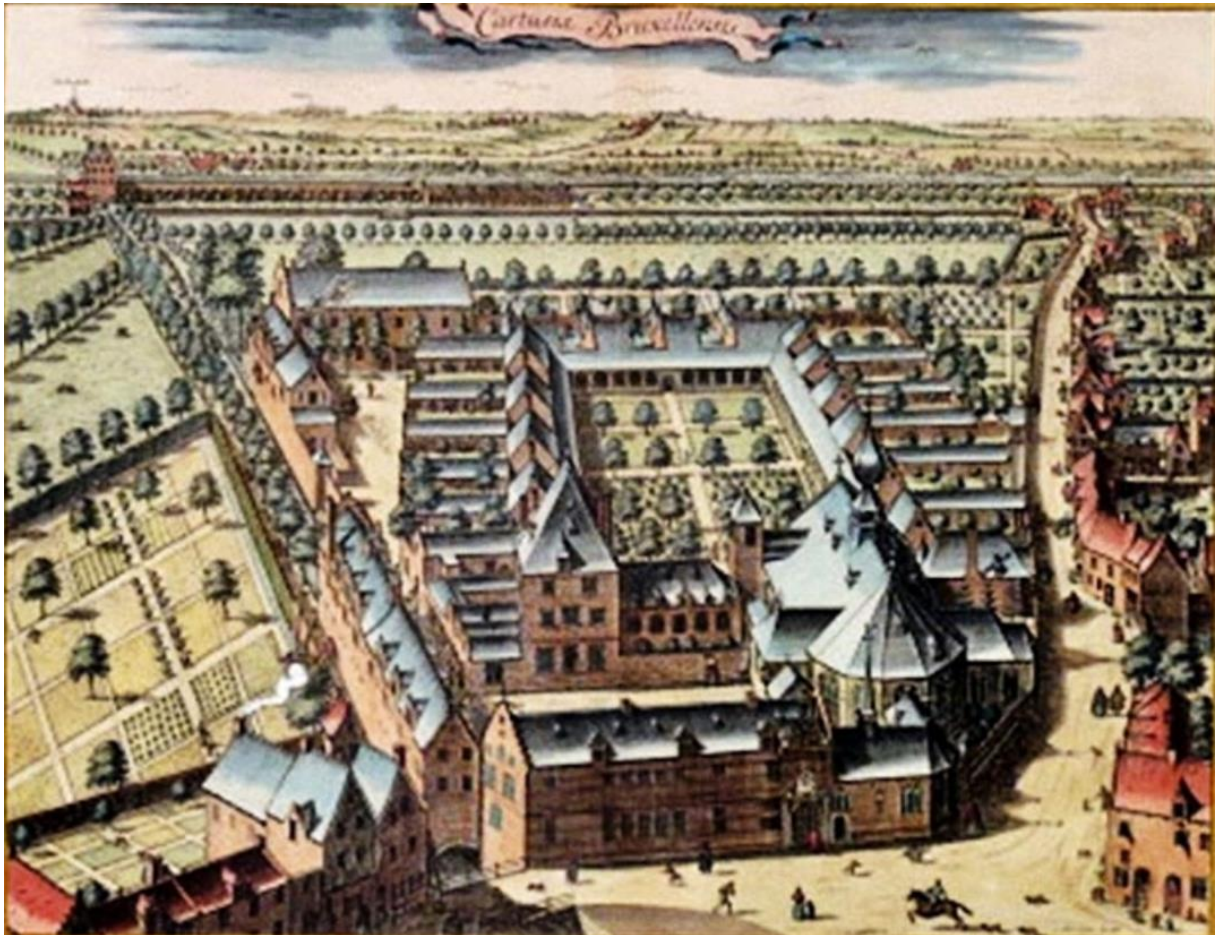
The Antwerp priest Carolus Scribani and the Leiden professor Dominicus Baudius fought a pen war in the years 1605-1608. In 1608, to defend his professor, a Leiden student, Ludovicus Schlaaffius, attacked Scribani and thus the Antwerp Jesuits. He published his writ in which he made many accusations against the Jesuits. The rhetoric students of the Antwerp college rebelled against this. In a vicious writing, they gave him the rod (*virgae*) by ridiculing him for his many follies and errors in reasoning, style and grammar. Writer and narrator herein is Gerardus. Besides prose, his writing contains many verses. His biographer mentions his skill in poetry and the publication of some of his verses in print. Perhaps a reference to this work. Gerardus tells how, while walking on a hot day along the ramparts of Antwerp, he and some classmates conceived this plan as a kind of roast. All make their contributions in prose and/or poetry in this publication. Besides Schlaaffius himself, they mocked Leiden University (the Batavian eagle's nest) in general and reported Baudius's drinking and penchant for pleasure widely. It is possible that this publication by Gerardus constituted a good introduction to Puteanus in Louvain.



First Publication of Gerardus Eligii, 1608

3 His life as a Carthusian

To follow his vocation, Gerardus applied to the Carthusian monastery of Saint-Omer. As there was no place available for him there, his employer Balthazar de Robiano called on his network. Balthazar's father, treasurer-general of the Low Countries, secured a place at the Carthusian monastery in Brussels, where Jan van Emmikhoven was then prior. In early 1612, Gerardus entered the Carthusians there. He was 21 years old at the time.



Gerardus Eligii enters the charterhouse of Brussels, 1612

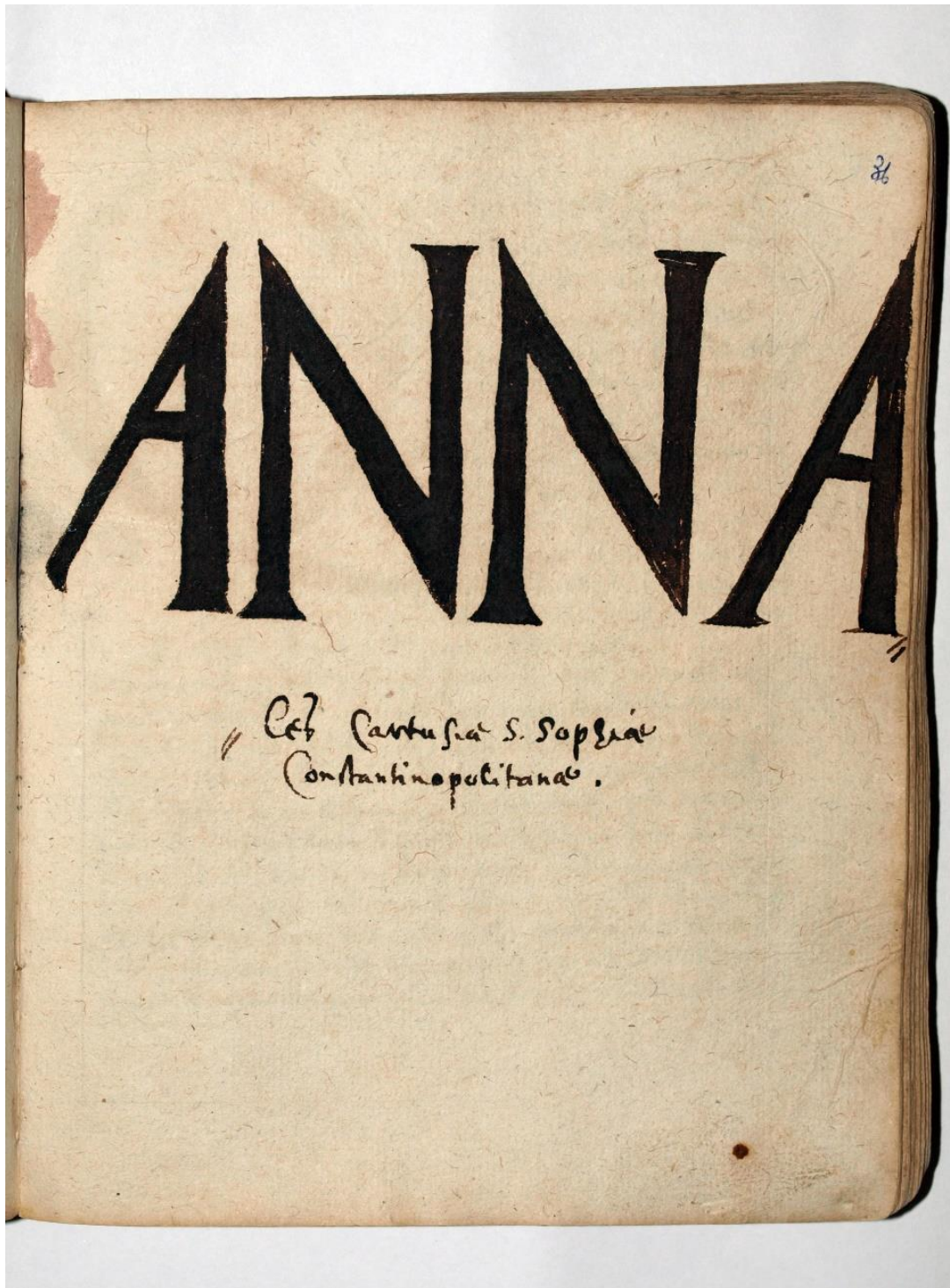
As early as 1616, he was sent to Bruges as coadjutor to the vicar of the Carthusian nuns there. This assignment stopped when the vicar was dismissed in 1621 due to his advanced age. Once back in Brussels, prior Jan van Emmikhoven was replaced by Bruno d'Outelaer. Van Emmikhoven was sent to the charterhouse in 's-Hertogenbosch as prior and appealed to Gerardus to follow him to 's-Hertogenbosch as procurator. So he did in November of that year. In 1623, the convent decided to leave the city. They could not find a new convent within the walls of 's-Hertogenbosch and got a new and temporary home in the castle of Boxtel.

Gerardus, however, was given shelter with the Clare Sisters there. The order's leadership had decided that the convent in the Bailiwick of 's-Hertogenbosch had no future. It wanted a new charterhouse to rise in Antwerp that would accommodate Carthusians from Liege and 's-Hertogenbosch, among others. Gerardus was one of the first to be sent to Antwerp, the city where he had spent his youth. In 1630, he returned to his house of profession in Brussels. There he held the office of vicar until his death in 1641.



Boxtel, monastery of the Clare Sisters

4 His writings as a Carthusian with his praise of Jesuits



History of the Charterhouse of 's-Hertogenbosch

In his early years in the monastery of Brussels, he copied books and helped others with their publication. The General Chapter of 1616 prescribed that each house describe its own history. Gerardus was instructed by his prior to do so for the Brussels monastery. Arriving in 's-Hertogenbosch, he started working on the history of that monastery, the *Annales Cartusiae S. Sophiae Constantinopolitanae*. In 1624, he published in Latin the biography of the Carthusian Joost van Schoonhoven from Delft, who had died a martyr's death. It was printed in Brussels with a preface

by Bruno d'Outelaer and Puteanus. Works by Spanish Carthusians, such as Juan de Madriaga and Antonio de Molina, he translated from Spanish into Latin. Some other works are also to his credit.

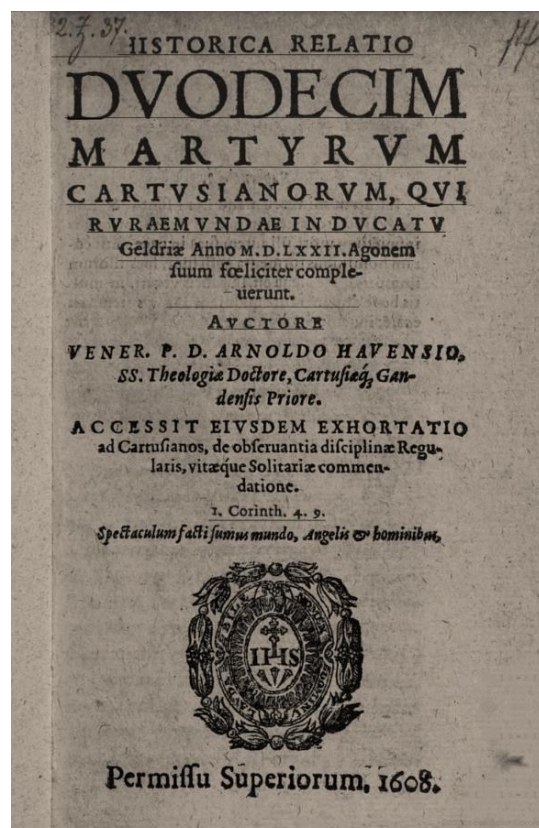
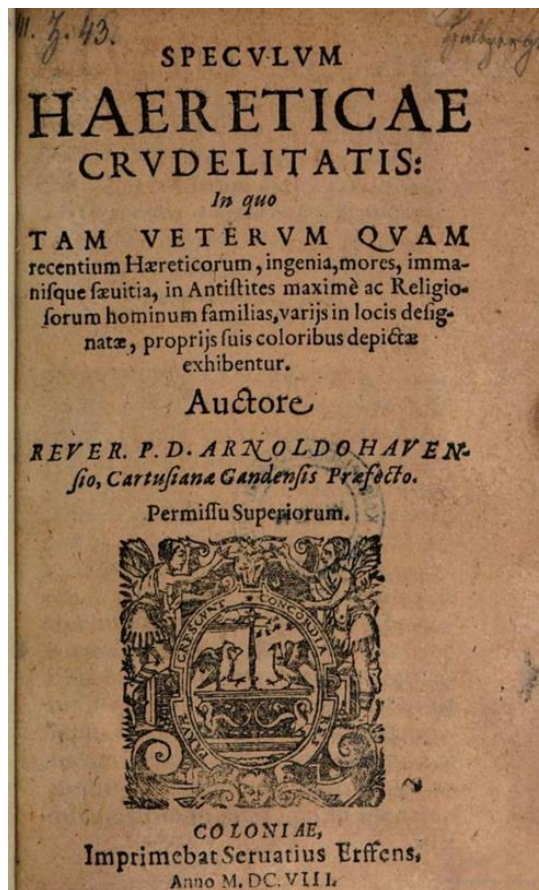
His bond with the Jesuits is most strongly expressed in the history he wrote of the monastery in 's-Hertogenbosch. Full of praise, he wrote about Denis the Carthusian who travelled from his monastery in Roermond with some companions to the hamlet of Olland in the Bailiwick of 's-Hertogenbosch in 1466 to found a new monastery. Everything was growing and flourishing, but from about 1525, spiritual life there was in decline. Guests were welcomed into the monastery without measure, alchemy was practised, and lavish food and drink were more important than monastic discipline. In black terms, he accused his confreres from the previous century, saying that the monastery's decay and miserable condition was their own fault. God had punished them for their dissolute lives.

Yet God gave them a ray of hope, Gerardus wrote. In 1544, the prior general of the Carthusians and the general chapter addressed Ignatius of Loyola and his Brothers of the New Society of Jesus. They asked for an association between the two orders to strengthen each other's purposes. They made each other sharers in their prayers and good works. By 1540, the Pope had approved the Jesuit order. They were to become the champions of the Counter-Reformation.

Gerardus travelled from Brussels via Antwerp to 's-Hertogenbosch in November 1621. The canonisation of Ignatius and Francis Xavier was in the air by then. When the two Jesuits were canonised in 1623, this was celebrated exuberantly in Antwerp. Between 1615 and 1621, the imposing Jesuit church in Antwerp had been built. Of both matters, Gerardus was undoubtedly aware. He therefore reverted to the prayer association to underline the link between the languishing Carthusian order and the flourishing Jesuit order.

At length, he elaborated on this sharing association. He explained that in response to this partial society, the Jesuits had decided that Jesuits who wanted to leave their order were only allowed to transfer to the Carthusians. The statutes, he claimed, had been drawn up by the Jesuits in imitation of the Carthusians. After all, they had no rule either. In a revelation, Saint Therese of Avila had seen the heavens opened and beheld a procession of Jesuits carrying gold banners and immediately behind them Carthusians carrying silver banners because of this association. He then listed all the areas where the Jesuits owned provinces and houses. He thus arrived at seventeen provinces and one hundred and eighty houses. The Carthusians could also consider these provinces and houses as theirs, according to Gerardus.

The monastery of 's-Hertogenbosch had met the Jesuits before. In 1590, they had received Arnold Havens as their new prior. This native from 's-Hertogenbosch left for the Jesuit school in Cologne after studying at the Latin School in his native town. In 1558, he entered the Jesuits. He continued his studies in Cologne and Trier and completed his university studies with a doctorate in theology in Cologne in 1573. He became rector of the Jesuit college in Cologne one year later. In 1584, he headed the Jesuit College of Bruges. But ... after a one-year novitiate, he entered the Carthusians of Louvain in 1586. Gerardus recounted the announcement of his sudden transition: from the pulpit of St Donatian's church in Bruges, he is said to have announced his decision to the faithful present. It has been suggested that under his leadership some problems occurred in Cologne that made it better for him to look out for another order. Gerardus also mentioned that Arnoldus Havens said he had received honours alongside disgrace from both the Jesuits and the Carthusians.



Arnold Havens, Jesuit (1558-1586), Carthusian (1586-1610)

In the library of the Carthusians of 's-Hertogenbosch covering about 500 works, there are about 15 that come from authors of the Jesuit order. Gerardus must have been pleased that among them was the work by Carolus Scribani, *Amphiteatrum Honoris in quo Calvinistarum in Societatem Jezu criminationes iugulatae*, from 1606. This was the work that caused a pen dispute between the Jesuit college in Antwerp and the University of Leiden. As a result of this conflict, the later Carthusian Gerardus Eligii took his first steps on the literary path.

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