

WARD DE PRIL
ward.depril@kuleuven.be
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
ORCID: 0000-0001-6632-4620

SHARED CARE FOR LIBRARY COLLECTIONS THE ROLE OF THE MAURITS SABBE LIBRARY (KU LEUVEN) IN PRESERVING RELIGIOUS LIBRARY COLLECTIONS

DOI: 10.36155/PLib.12.00004

ABSTRACT

In the past 50 years the physical survival of book and manuscript collections in certain convent and abbey libraries in Flanders has become very precarious. Religious houses are closing down or divesting themselves of part of the buildings; there is often no staff left to take on the responsibility of managing the collections. Since its founding in 1974 as the library of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, the Maurits Sabbe Library has defined the preservation of the precious collections owned by religious orders and congregations as one of its core tasks. Over the past five decades, contracts have been signed with more than 80 ecclesiastical institutions or religious orders and congregations. These agreements were mutually beneficial: the Maurits Sabbe Library and KU Leuven in general guaranteed the religious partners, through substantial investments, a professional preservation, disclosure and valorisation of their endangered collections, but in its turn, thanks

to this collaboration, KU Leuven has again acquired a heritage collection with international stature, after the disastrous losses of its collections caused by two world wars. In this article the origins and history of the cooperation between the Maurits Sabbe Library and Flemish religious institutions are discussed together with the way in which the preservation, disclosure and valorisation of these collections was and is handled.

KEYWORDS: religious libraries; religious documentary heritage; secularisation; Maurits Sabbe Library

1. INTRODUCTION: RELIGIOUS LIBRARIES IN FLANDERS (BELGIUM)

Early modern Flanders was fertile ground for religious orders, especially the Jesuits. As early as 1542, when the Society of Jesus had been in existence for only two years, Jesuits settled in the Low Countries, first in Leuven; later other places followed, such as Antwerp in 1562, Bruges in 1570, Courtrai in 1588, Ghent in 1585, Ypres in the same year and Brussels in 1586. These Jesuits had important study houses and colleges with solid libraries of great scholarly value. Benedictines and Cistercians, Dominicans and Franciscans, Augustinians and Norbertines also developed study centres with libraries.

The end of the 18th century marked the first serious crisis period for religious libraries in Flanders. There were three major shock waves. When in 1773 the Jesuit order was abolished by Pope Clement XIV, the possessions of the Jesuits in the Low Countries – the books included – were confiscated by the State. The number of books from Belgian Jesuit libraries at the time is estimated at between 400.000 and 500.000. The manuscripts and valuable prints were transferred to the Royal Library in Brussels; the pedagogical books to schools and the other works were sold. More than 100.000 volumes were sold at auctions between 1777-1780, solely from the libraries of Jesuit colleges in the Southern Nether-

lands¹. In the Austrian era, under Emperor Joseph II (decree of 1783), a large number of contemplative orders were abolished and their books sold. The ensuing French Revolution caused a complete decline in church librarianship with the forced breaking up of convent libraries and the secularisation of church property. Many valuable collections were confiscated and dragged to Paris. Other libraries served as basic collections for city libraries (e.g. Bruges, Antwerp, Malines) or the Royal Library of Brussels. Many books also came into the possession of private collectors.

The Belgian independence (1830) ushered in a particularly successful period in the history of religious institutions in Belgium. Belgian monasticism recovered impressively from the difficult period it faced during the 18th and early 19th centuries. In the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, some five hundred autonomous congregations or independent abbeys and monasteries saw the light of day in Belgium. Many orders and congregations tried to recover part of their old possessions through auctioning. Sometimes partial collections also had ended up with sympathisers who returned them to their original owners. Thus, during the 19th century, the libraries of religious institutes and seminaries were well developed.

Due to Anticlericalism in France at the beginning of the 20th century, 20.000 French religious took refuge in Belgium and thus brought a number of French religious libraries to Belgium, further enriching them².

The era of revival and exceptional expansion of religious life during the 19th and the first half of the 20th century was brought to an end by the cultural revolution of the 1960s which destabilised the central position of the Catholic Church in Western European societies³.

-
- 1 Leo Kenis, "The Maurits Sabbe Library and Its Collection of Jesuit Books", in Paul Begheyn *et al.* (ed.), *Jesuit Books in the Low Countries 1540-1773*, Peeters, Leuven, 2009, XI-XIX, p. XIV.
 - 2 E. D'HONDT, *Auflösung und Zusammenschluß von Kloster- und Abteibibliotheken in Belgien*, in *Mitteilungsblatt der Arbeitsgemeinschaft katholisch-theologischer Bibliotheken (AKTHB)* 42 (1995) 33-45, p. 34
 - 3 Katrien Weyns and Kristien Suenens, *Negotiating a Future for Convent Libraries: KADOC-KU Leuven and Heritage Partnerships in Belgium*, in Leo Kenis *et al.* (ed.),

For the Belgian Catholic Church the 1960s were marked by the beginning of a very noticeable numerical decline of religious: the number of male and female religious decreased from over 62.000 at its height in 1947 to approximately 40.000 in 1973 and 7.985 in 2021⁴. When the Maurits Sabbe Library was founded in 1974, there was already a decrease of more than 35% in the number of male and female religious. In the second half of the 1960s the decline in the number of new candidates for the religious life and the priesthood was steep. In 74 years that is a decline of more than 86%, which is of course highly disruptive.

Religious superiors are faced with issues of reorganisation, both for financial reasons and to maintain dynamic communities. Many orders and congregations centralise their activities and re-group members. This means that religious houses, monasteries and abbeys are abandoned and often sold. Solutions have to be found for the library collection of those religious communities. Libraries always occupied a lot of physical space in the monasteries and in the new properties that are moved into, there is usually no room for an extensive collection⁵.

2. THE MAURITS SABBE LIBRARY: HISTORY AND MISSION

Since its inception in 1974 the Maurits Sabbe Library has served as an independent research facility for the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at KU Leuven. Before 1974, the theological book collection was part of the Louvain University Library. At the beginning of the 20th century this library had grown into a very valuable collection, including ca. 300 000 books, 800 incunabula and 1000 manuscripts. In the four decades to come however, it was twice almost completely destroyed by acts of war. Furthermore in 1968

Theological Libraries and Library Associations in Europe. A Festschrift on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of BETH, Brill, Leiden, 2022, 333-356, p. 333.

4 *De Katholieke Kerk in België. Jaarrapport 2022*, p. 85. <https://www.kerknet.be/sites/default/files/2022%20Jaarrapport%20katholieke%20Kerk.pdf>

5 Weyns, *Negotiating*, p. 334 (See n. 3).



Fig.1. Maurits Sabbe Library. ©Alexander Dumarey

the University of Louvain was split into separate Dutch-speaking and French-speaking universities. The library collection was then divided between the two university libraries in Louvain and Louvain-la-Neuve⁶. Upon that occasion the University library in Louvain adopted a new library policy, largely decentralising its library facilities. Henceforth every faculty got its own research library. The new library for the Faculty of Theology was to become something special for the Dutch-speaking Catholic University: namely it was to be a model library, destined to be a kind of confession of faith of the University community. Sure, the Catholic University had emancipated itself in 1968 from episcopal authority, but at the same time wanted to invest in its Catholic identity.

6 On the history of the Louvain University Library, see Chris Coppens, Mark Derez, Jan Roegiers, eds., *Leuven University Library 1425-2000: Sapientia aedificavit sibi domum*, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2005.

In an undeniably disruptive period in the history of the Catholic Church in Belgium and Flanders in particular, marked by an increasing process of secularisation, the new library was of great importance to guarantee both the continuation of theological research and the preservation of precious book collections owned by religious orders and congregations⁷. It was clearly a win-win situation. The University took on the task of contributing to the preservation of Flemish religious heritage, but it also allowed it to rebuild a heritage collection and reshape its reputation as a heritage institution after the dramatic losses in two world wars. Indeed, over a period of 60 years, being part of the entire University Library, the theological book collection had to be completely or basically restored three times (in 1914, 1940 and 1968). The best way to up-build a valuable new collection of books was to bring together already existing collections from outside the University. Already in 1969, two fundamental agreements could be concluded with external partners.

The agreement with the Flemish Jesuits of March 1969 was innovative and set the tone for several dozen other agreements with religious institutions in subsequent decades. The March 19, 1969 agreement was a lease agreement. It should be noted that in the initial agreement the demand came primarily from KU Leuven and was not motivated by a precarious situation of the Flemish Jesuits, as was the case in many later agreements.

The agreement states, “Starting from the consideration that in Leuven and its surroundings the necessary forces are present to build a scientifically sound Faculty and research centre for theology in the Flemish part of Belgium and that this centre should be of a nature to exert an international appeal, the Faculty of Theology of the KUL has endeavoured to combine these forces to the extent possible. To build a library with an international appeal, the Faculty appealed to the SJ Fathers to rent out their library. The Fathers

7 Mathijs Lamberigts, “De Faculteitsbibliotheek,” in *De Faculteit Godgeleerdheid in de KU Leuven (1969-1995)*, ed. Lieve Gevers and Leo Kenis, *Annua Nuntia Lovaniensia* 39, Leuven: Leuven University Press - Uitgeverij Peeters, 1997, 267-288, p. 283

of the Society of Jesus who wished to contribute in the largest possible way to the viability and international appeal of the research centre designed by the KUL were found willing to accept this proposal. The KUL or the tenant of the collection must maintain the collection in perfect condition”⁸.

So in this case, the University was the requesting party to take over the library with a view to realising its international ambitions. The form of a lease agreement differed from, for example, the Dutch context, where universities bought up convent libraries⁹. The advantage of this system was that the Flemish Jesuits retained ownership of the collection, which could now be preserved, accessed and valorised in a more professional manner.

The second foundational agreement dates from December 5, 1969 and was concluded with the Archdiocese of Malines. The occasion was the fact that the Grand Seminary ceased to exist as a training centre for priest-candidates in Malines after the 1969-1970 academic year. In transferring its valuable heritage collection, the archdiocese also wanted to meet the desire of the Faculty of Theology to develop a research centre for theology. No lease in this case, but a deposit with the obligation to preserve the collection well and ensure optimal usability. This collection was particularly interesting because it was partly composed of old monastic libraries (in particular also of the Jesuits) and the libraries of the Leuven University colleges that were suppressed in 1797. In this way, a piece of the collection of the ancient Louvain University ended up back in Leuven after 170 years.

These two agreements had a major impact in the following years. The approach became less about supporting the KU Leuven’s ambition to build an international research centre in theology, but about

8 ARCHIEF FACULTEIT THEOLOGIE EN RELIGIEWETENSCHAPPEN, *Huurcontract betreffende de theologische Bibliotheek van de Waversebaan 220, te Heverlee*, p. 1.

9 See for instance Otto S. Lankhorst, *Heritage Management in Monastery and Seminary Libraries in the Netherlands*, in Leo Kenis et al. (ed.), *Theological Libraries and Library Associations in Europe. A Festschrift on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of BETH*, Brill, Leiden, 2022, 203-227.

finding a meaningful use for collections for which lacked sufficient space, personnel or financial resources. The most important reason was that these collections would be preserved and cared for to a much higher standard than would ever be possible in their current location. The great advantage of the Louvain model was that religious institutions remained the owners of their collection which made the decision to move the collection less drastic and emotional.

A number of other libraries from religious congregations (in particular the Oblates, the Scheut Fathers, the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, the Redemptorists) have been completely or partially incorporated. The most important later acquisitions concern the library of the Franciscan Friars Minor at Vaalbeek, donated in 1989 and the Marian Library of the Belgian Montfort Fathers in 1995. Relocations and liquidations of convent libraries have continued apace into the first two decades of the 21st century. Religious continue to seek new destinations for collections that monasteries no longer want and which they can no longer accommodate.

In 2004 the Flemish Jesuits also deposited their Jesuitica and Ignatiana collections into the Maurits Sabbe Library. In 2008 the collection was extended by the acquisitions of the library of the Flemish Capuchins and with the library of the Josephites. More recently the first major Benedictine collection was added from the Sint-Andriesabdij of Zevenkerken. In sum, the arrangement with the Jesuits and the Archdiocese of Malines marked the beginning of a history of deposits and donations from about 80 religious institutions in the following decades. It turned the Maurits Sabbe Library into the Flemish deposit library for religion.

Due to this policy, the holdings of the Maurits Sabbe Library increased from 5.000 in 1969 to the current sum of approximately 1.3 million volumes, including next to the majority of present day research books ca. 900 manuscripts and ca. 180.000 early printed books: 600 incunabula, 1.600 post incunabula, 5.000 items from the late 16th century, 55.000 volumes from the 17th century and 110.000 from the 18th century. As a whole, it is an exceptional cultural patrimony.

3. PRESERVING, CATALOGUING, DIGITISING AND VALORISING THE DEPOSITED COLLECTIONS FROM RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

The aim of the Maurits Sabbe Library is to preserve and unlock the cultural patrimony it has acquired from church institutions.

3.1. PRESERVATION

In the last ten years, awareness of the material condition of collections taken over from religious institutions has increased significantly. These collections were often kept in non-optimal conditions in terms of temperature, humidity and dust, and moving to a new location can trigger the outbreak of mould. The presence of silver and paper fish is also a problem in poorly maintained collections. While previously incoming collections were often catalogued immediately and placed in their final place in the closed stacks, they are now first quarantined and checked for traces of mould or vermin. It is our commitment to our religious partners that the collections are not kept in an external depository but in one of our four underground storerooms under the library itself, so that maximum availability can be guaranteed. The Maurits Sabbe Library works closely together with KU Leuven's technical services and researchers from the Department of Building Physics to control the climatic conditions in these in itself not ideal buildings. In addition, since 2016, we have been assisted in our collection management by a Book Heritage Lab housed in the Maurits Sabbe Library.

The Book Heritage Lab (BHL) carries out research into the material aspects of book and documentary heritage. The performed heritage research using the latest digital and digitisation technologies results in expertise about conservation of valuable books and manuscripts and supports the library in developing strategies for the preservation of its heritage and legacy collections. The Book Heritage Lab also offers services to church institutions that still manage their own collections. Not infrequently, these include masterpieces in need of conservation. Such pieces then sometimes come to



Fig. 2. Preciosa room of the Maurits Sabbe Library. ©Alexander Dumarey

the BHL in the Maurits Sabbe Library for several years for conservation and research and, after completion of the project, return to the religious institution keeping the object. Offering such expertise to religious institutions is of great importance, not only for the conservation of these pieces, but also to make collection managers and the general public aware of the sometimes exceptional value of objects in these religious collections.

3.2. CATALOGUING

Collections of religious institutions are rarely well disclosed. Digital registration of these collections is a huge challenge. Efforts are made to process incoming collections as quickly as possible, including through projects where we get support from central University Library services or volunteers. Nonetheless the Maurits Sabbe Library was faced with an immense backlog of more than 350.000 volumes in 2010. To solve this issue the Maurits Sabbe Library received help from the University Library to set up a project to eliminate the backlog. The project was launched on 1 July 2011. It took more than seven years and the employment of more than

a hundred collaborators (staff, volunteers and job students) to add 266.280 records in the catalogue. A wealth of new research materials had been made accessible to scholars, but of course since 2018, a backlog has again developed due to incoming collections. When cataloguing collections, provenance is always included in the holding information so that religious libraries can be reconstructed at least virtually.

3.3. DIGITISATION

The Maurits Sabbe Library started digitising its heritage collections in 2010. When entering into new agreements with religious institutions about a deposit of their library, the right to digitise the collection is explicitly mentioned in the deposit contract. In 2016 a structural digitisation program was launched, namely to digitise 17th-century *Jesuitica* printed in Flanders. Recently an agreement with Google Books was concluded as to make a part of the heritage of Flemish religious institutions managed by the Maurits Sabbe Library (about 30.000 volumes) available in digitised version.

3.4. VALORISATION - FACILITATING RESEARCH ON COLLECTIONS OF RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS

The transfer of extensive collections to the Maurits Sabbe Library has given rise to the creation of projects and research centres. For the Louvain Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, it is certainly true that not only research has determined collection development, but also that the contingency of incoming collections has given rise to new research *foci* of the Faculty. For instance, the library of the Jesuits and the library of the seminary of Malines both contained rich subcollections on Jansenism. As a result, the Maurits Sabbe Library has the largest collection on Jansenism in Belgium. The richness of such a collection invites further research and consequently developed into an important research focus at the Louvain Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies.

The transfer of the library of the Flemish Capuchins in 2008 resulted in the creation of a study and documentation centre

‘Capuchins in the Low Countries’. The purpose of the centre is to stimulate research in this collection in its integrity, first of all by cataloguing the collection, but also by digitising parts of it, by hosting a website creating a virtual research community, etc.

Most elaborate is the research support offered on the Jesuitica collection. This is the most valuable part of the Flemish Jesuit collection, which was only deposited to the Maurits Sabbe Library in 2003. The agreement about this deposit came with a clause. The library had to start a project dealing with the disclosure of the Jesuitica collection and finding new means to stimulate research in the field of Jesuitica. In order to make the Jesuitica book collection more accessible to the research community a website has been created: www.jesuitica.be. This site provides easy access to the volumes that have been catalogued thus far. Moreover one can find more detailed information, such as news concerning international Jesuitica research, prosopographic and bibliographic data and books that have been completely digitised. As already mentioned a structural digitisation program was set up in 2016 to digitise 17th-century Jesuitica printed in Flanders. Also an online discovery tool was created to search in one discovery environment in Jesuit collections held by different institutions in Flanders¹⁰. In this way the discovery platform virtually unites a very large part of the book collections of the Jesuit region of the European Low Countries.

4. CONCLUSION

When the Maurits Sabbe Library was created in 1974 the theological book collection had to be completely or basically restored. The only way to up-build a valuable new collection of books was to bring together already existing collections from outside the University. Due to the specific historical context in the late 1960s and early 1970s - a highly disruptive period in the history of the Belgian Catholic Church - full efforts were made to acquire religious collections. These were not purchased but, in the case of the Jesuits,

10 <https://jesuitica.be/tools/jesuit-armarium/>

leased and, in most other cases, included in deposit collections. It was a model that proved attractive to 19th-century congregations, which were already the first religious communities in the 1960s and 1970s to encounter problems in maintaining their libraries. The older orders, such as Benedictines, Franciscans, Capuchins and Dominicans have been able to find solutions for their libraries for longer, but in the 1990s they too have increasingly turned to external heritage partners, such as the Maurits Sabbe Library. After integrating so many religious collections in the past decades, solutions are increasingly difficult to find for collections with a lot of ordinary material: books in theology, church history, meditation, reference works that are present in so many collections. Evidently there is a lot of overlap and integrating complete collections is less and less an option.

Fortunately, a network of organisations committed to preserving religious heritage collections has really emerged in more recent years. In 2008, the non-profit organisation Flemish Heritage Libraries - of which the Maurits Sabbe Library is a member - was established, a service organisation funded by the Flemish Community, which sets up large-scale projects to catalogue, digitise and valorise documentary heritage in Flemish heritage libraries¹¹. This organisation also pays attention to collections in religious institutions: the intention is not to repurpose collections, but to assist religious libraries that are still *in situ* to disclose their collections. Sometimes projects are set up by local heritage cells to preserve the religious library *in situ* in the context of a complete redevelopment of a monastery site as a heritage site.

Nevertheless, the Maurits Sabbe Library continues to integrate collections or collection items that otherwise risk being lost. The benefit for both partners in an agreement is clear: the partnership with religious institutions has enabled the Maurits Sabbe Library to realise its ambition to grow into an international research centre, and KU Leuven has reconnected with its past as a heritage in-

11 <https://vlaamse-erfgoedbibliotheken.be/>

stitution. The religious institutions, from their side, retain ownership of their collections, which are professionally preserved and accessed for current and future generations. But the greatest benefit is for the researcher and user who, through the Maurits Sabbe Library, has efficient access to an exceptionally large collection of religious heritage of the Low Countries.