

**THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF THE COMMON LIFE**

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## THE BROTHERS AND SISTERS OF THE COMMON LIFE

Before the Protestant Reformation, St. Francis of Assisi, Jan Hus, John Wycliffe and others had attempted to initiate a reform within the Church.<sup>1</sup> One reform movement that receives little attention looked to reform the church by living out a Christian life in its own unique way. This movement is known as the Modern Devotion (Devotio Moderna), or the Brothers (Brethren) and Sisters of the Common Life. Their unique and dedicated way of life and their spirit integrity influenced leaders of other movements including Erasmus, Martin Luther, John Calvin and Ignatius of Loyola.<sup>2</sup> This movement began with the establishment of semi-religious houses in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> The movement flourished even under periodic political and religious harassment and peaked in the 1490s.<sup>4</sup> It withered dramatically after about 1525<sup>5</sup> and was officially disbanded by both Catholic and Protestant rulers in the 1560's.<sup>6</sup>

The founding figure of the Modern Devout movement was Geert Groote who was born on October 16, 1340 in the Netherlands town of Deventer.<sup>7</sup> Groote first began the movement with the establishment of a house for a group of women, who became known

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<sup>1</sup> "Reformation | History, Summary, & Reformers | Britannica.Com," accessed September 13, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Reformation>.

<sup>2</sup> John H. Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages*, The Middle Ages series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008). 315.

<sup>3</sup> "Brethren of the Common Life | Religious Community | Britannica.Com," accessed August 24, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Brethren-of-the-Common-Life>.

<sup>4</sup> *Sisters and Brothers*. 308.

<sup>5</sup> *Sisters and Brothers*. 308.

<sup>6</sup> *Sisters and Brothers*. 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Sisters and Brothers*. 11; "Geert Groote | Dutch Religious Leader | Britannica.Com," accessed September 13, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Geert-Groote>; "Geert Groote," *Reformation 500*, July 1, 2014, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://reformation500.csl.edu/bio/geert-groote/>.

as the Sisters of the Common Life. He influenced his followers through his translation of the Divine Office and writings which include 80 letters and 10 treatises.<sup>8</sup> The movement persevered well beyond the end of his life.

Groote was born of patrician parents, but was unfortunately orphaned by the age of ten by the plague.<sup>9</sup> In his mid-teens, he was sent to Paris and in 1358, earned a Master degree.<sup>10</sup> Like others during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Groote made his living as a “cleric.” In medieval times, a cleric was one who was educated in law and other higher learning and might earn a living as either clergy or laity. Thus Groote facilitated the business of church and society.<sup>11</sup>

Historians tell us that in 1374, under the influence of the prior of a Carthusian monastery in Monnikhuizen, Netherlands, Groote reported a spiritual conversion and chose to pursue a penitential lifestyle.<sup>12</sup> Although his conversion may not be as instantaneous or dramatic as Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, he none-the-less took a hard look at his life and found it “more unclean” than he cared to describe.<sup>13</sup> This personal transformation included the rejection of the pursuit of wealth in lucrative fields such as arts, medicine, astrology or law.<sup>14</sup> Groote was accomplished and successful in his professional life and yet, after this conversion, willingly gave up all benefices, patronages and incomes, and resolved to not pursue any further degrees.<sup>15</sup> Before his

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<sup>8</sup> Geert Groote.

<sup>9</sup> Sisters and Brothers.11.

<sup>10</sup> Sisters and Brothers.11.

<sup>11</sup> Sisters and Brothers.11.

<sup>12</sup> Geert Groote.

<sup>13</sup> Sisters and Brothers.12.

<sup>14</sup> Sisters and Brothers.12.

<sup>15</sup> Sisters and Brothers.12.

conversion Groote had also lived a decadent life, but after his conversion, Groote gave up his sexual impropriety and began attending worship regularly.<sup>16</sup>

In the late 1370's Groote spent three years with the Carthusian monks outside Arnhem, but did not take monastic vows.<sup>17</sup> He did eventually receive ordination as a Deacon and in the last portion of his life (1379-1383) obtained a special license to preach in various places across the Diocese of Utrecht.<sup>18</sup> His sermons to the clergy were in Latin, but his sermons to the laity were delivered in the vernacular.<sup>19</sup> This allowed him to attract followers to his penitential and devotional way of life. In 1383, Groote was invited to preach at the Diocesan Synod in Utrecht.<sup>20</sup> In his sermon, he didn't hold back, but rather berated those members of the clergy who were guilty of concubinage and living in mortal sin. This drew the ire of the clergy and as a result, his ability to preach within the diocese was suspended.<sup>21</sup> Groote made an official appeal to Rome, but unfortunately before it could be considered, he contracted the plague while visiting members of a community of Brothers, and died on August 20, 1384.<sup>22</sup>

Groote left an impressive legacy of followers who adopted his spiritual approach to the Christian life. After his death, one of Groote's disciples, Florentius Radewyns and several others became Augustinian Canons and established a community in Windesheim. This community, along with the first house for men that Groote established in Deventer, became the center from which sprang a group of schools and a method of spirituality that

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<sup>16</sup> Geert Groote.

<sup>17</sup> Geert Groote.

<sup>18</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 13; Geert Groote.

<sup>19</sup> Geert Groote.

<sup>20</sup> Geert Groote.

<sup>21</sup> Geert Groote.

<sup>22</sup> Geert Groote.

stressed meditation and the inner life.<sup>23</sup> This kind of spirituality influenced others besides just the Brothers and Sisters. It also influenced prominent figures such as John Calvin and Ignatius of Loyola who incorporated an interior focus into their religious exercises.<sup>24</sup>

According to John Van Engen, author of Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life, the Modern Devout, the Sisters and Brothers marked a turning point in history.

They

absorbed the wisdom of the ancients, the essence of Christ's teachings, the mystic religion of the fathers and the saints of medieval Europe, as well as the learning of the Italian humanists; ...assimilated all these ingredients and presented them in a new dress to the old world and the new...<sup>25</sup>

He goes on to say that the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life could be seen as "reformers before the Reformation, educators before the Renaissance, pious ascetics before Catholic Reform, democrats before the Revolution, laity before the bourgeois piety."<sup>26</sup>

### **Conversion to Holy Life**

During the medieval period, Christianity was ubiquitous. It was such a part of the culture that one didn't have to make a choice – everyone was baptized a Christian.<sup>27</sup> This meant that religion was somewhat taken for granted and more often than not, people slipped into a kind of neglectful indifference.<sup>28</sup> But the people who became known as the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life longed for something more. They surveyed the

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<sup>23</sup> "Brethren of the Common Life | Religious Community," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed September 16, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Brethren-of-the-Common-Life>.

<sup>24</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 318.

<sup>25</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 14.

<sup>28</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 14.

abuses that were all around them and strove for a transformative way of life – a life that took one’s faith seriously. What they sought and what they longed for was “conversion.”

The Devout understood that the human condition was one of “inconsistency, and misery due to having lost peace, tranquility, joy, happiness and quietude.”<sup>29</sup> They believed that in order to regain one’s rightful state, one must work diligently following what they called “spiritual exercises.”<sup>30</sup> These exercises included extensive reading of not only religious texts, but also the writings of the Church Fathers and exemplars of the faith.<sup>31</sup> They recognized that ancient fathers offered a meaningful pattern of spiritual conversion.<sup>32</sup> This pattern of conversion included disciplines such as penance, obedience, and labor, as well as the engagement of an intensive battle with one’s own vices.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps one of its most unique features was that it included a thorough and honest examination of one’s shortcomings.<sup>34</sup>

The conversion process that the Devout undertook was difficult, and some were not able to sustain its intensity. Whereas mystics might retreat into a kind of detached spirituality, the Devout remained decidedly connected to the world and the everyday struggles of life.<sup>35</sup> Their energy was focused on remaking themselves rather than retreating into the spiritual abyss of God. Their efforts therefore had to be vigilant and one of continual monitoring and assessing. The Devout were influenced by the theology of the day, and thus they felt the need to continually contemplate the judgement of God.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 78.

<sup>30</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 78.

<sup>31</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 78.

<sup>32</sup> Ross Fuller, *The Brotherhood of the Common Life and Its Influence*, SUNY series in Western esoteric traditions (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). 89.

<sup>33</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 78-79.

<sup>34</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 78.

<sup>35</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 79.

<sup>36</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 79.

According to Van Engen, “The point ultimately was not to frighten people (though this happened) but to shake them out of their complacency, to stir up in them a resolve for making spiritual progress.”<sup>37</sup>

Those who became known as the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life sought to live together with their fellow companions in either a house or community where peace and quietude could be cultivated and where God would be the center of their focus.<sup>38</sup> Some might assume that they were merely creating another form of monasticism, but these were not traditional communities. Groote lived for a time in a monastery and was keenly aware that entering a cloistered life brought with it its own trials and temptations.<sup>39</sup> Many monastic communities during the medieval Europe were rife with corruption. The Brothers and Sisters sought a way to live their lives together in a different way -- they sought to make their communities those that were based on choice rather than imposed obligation. Thus, the Devout tended to eschew taking vows. This tendency was instilled from the beginning since much of Groote’s writing included comments that were meant to dissuade folks from taking on vows of the professed life.<sup>40</sup>

But like the monastery, entering into a community of Brothers or Sisters brought its own struggles. One of the main struggles was the opposition that they faced. The Brothers and Sisters were regularly criticized on many fronts. Because they chose to live in this unique way – neither fully lay, nor fully religious – they were often the target of suspicion, slander, and attack from city aldermen, parish clergy and family. In chapter three of his book, Van Engen describes the Devout this way,

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<sup>37</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 79.

<sup>38</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 83.

<sup>39</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 46.

<sup>40</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 47.

To the inquisitor, they looked like a sect, a conventicle in flagrant violation of papal law. To friars the Modern-Day Devout looked like a self-made religious order. To the local parish rectors their gatherings (“congregations”) looked like potential rivals offering alternative and apart ministries. To the city aldermen such gatherings looked all too likely to slip away into ecclesiastical immunity. Yet the Modern-Day Devout survived, even flourished in places, and secured privileges to protect this way of life.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps it was fortuitous that Groote had an extensive clerical education. He demonstrated wisdom when he first began setting up houses for Devout Sisters because he perceived that they needed to find a way to protect themselves legally. During the medieval period, women had difficulty maneuvering the legal system. They could not act as their own agent but were required to use the assistance of a legal advocate or guardian, called a “mombaer.”<sup>42</sup> The Brothers, did have more latitude and were able to act a bit more independently. By common legal statutes they could form “societies” and households without the need for advocates.<sup>43</sup> But this did not mean the Brothers were exempt from attack. They too had difficulty setting up their houses or communities. Once again, they had to be proactive and find ways to circumvent resistance. In one instance, in the city of Zwolle, three laymen decided to establish a new house and commit themselves to living a spiritual life together.<sup>44</sup> In order to prevent relatives from laying claim to their combined goods, they sold their house to Groote. Groote in turn deeded the house to two priests to hold in trust. The house was then subsequently “loaned” back to the three laymen to use.<sup>45</sup> This maneuvering thwarted the attempts of others to lay claim to the property these individuals brought with them to the household.

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<sup>41</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 305.

<sup>42</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 60.

<sup>43</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 69.

<sup>44</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 73.

<sup>45</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 73.

The practice of giving up their worldly goods was part of the Devout's spiritual practice. They saw this as a way to emulate the early Christians who held everything in common. Thus, when a Brother or Sister entered a house or community, they were required to relinquish all possessions.<sup>46</sup> While it may seem drastic, the practice was seen as being helpful. It encouraged the individual overcome the lure of greed and reinforced the spiritual practice of letting go. It also had a secondary benefit of protecting the household from legal claims by family members.<sup>47</sup> To further safeguard what was given to be shared in common, the Brothers often made out a Last Wills and Testaments bequeathing any and all goods or inheritances to their spiritual companions.<sup>48</sup> Without the practice of sharing their assets, it is doubtful that the Devout would have been able to fund their way of life. Of course, some Brothers or Sisters came into the community with more wealth than others. There were many who entered with nothing to contribute but their willingness to work.

As anyone who has studied Church history knows, the Church was rife with abuses during the medieval period. Clergy and the professed religious were notorious for their sexual impropriety and corruption. Church positions could often be bought and sold. The Devout wanted to offer something different -- they wanted to offer a community of like-minded individuals who took their faith seriously. One Brother by the name of Egbert ter Beek, was urged by his father to leave the Brotherhood and become a prelate in the church. The father felt that his son's involvement with the Brotherhood besmirched the family's good name. He thought it would increase his son's social

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<sup>46</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 165.

<sup>47</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 166.

<sup>48</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 166.

standing and respectability if he'd find a more appropriate way to practice his faith.

Egbert responded to his father's urgings:

Your secular priests carry on from day to day, as is apparent to all, alas, in drunkenness and intoxication of their hearts and bodies contrary to the evangelical precepts and, what is even worse and usually follows from this, they proceed to luxurious indulgence of the flesh. There is no doubt, taking into consideration my natural weakness, that it would be impossible for me to live with such men and not become as they are.<sup>49</sup>

### **The Devout Encounter Resistance**

To the average lay Christian, the Brothers and Sisters were no doubt seen as being hyper-pious or perhaps even fanatical.<sup>50</sup> Their pious dress and customs caused them to stand out and they became the brunt of jokes and derision. The Brothers were often accused of being "Lollards." Lollards were originally followers of John Wycliff.<sup>51</sup> The term seems to have derived from the Dutch word for "mumbling."<sup>52</sup> While the Brothers did not follow the teachings of Wycliff, they were known for reciting the psalms, or the little hours of the Virgin under their breath.<sup>53</sup> This practice of reciting scripture or prayers mirrored the practice of the Desert Fathers, who offered short and numerous prayers so that they might always be connected to the Lord.<sup>54</sup> Like their counterparts, the Sisters were also derided and were often referred to as "Beguines." Beguines were essentially known for being able-bodied beggars.<sup>55</sup> According to Ross Fuller, author of

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<sup>49</sup> The Brotherhood. 84.

<sup>50</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 2, 22.

<sup>51</sup> "Lollard | English Religious History | Britannica.Com," accessed September 17, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Lollards>.

<sup>52</sup> Lollard.

<sup>53</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 21.

<sup>54</sup> Brotherhood of the Common Life. 91.

<sup>55</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 188.

The Brotherhood of the Common Life and Its Influence, both of these terms were generic terms used in this period for “heretic.”<sup>56</sup>

The Modern Devout were keenly aware of the scandalous practices that some religious employed and understood the resentment many felt regarding those who continuously sought a hand-out or relied too heavily upon donations. So, from the beginning, the Brothers and Sisters were determined to live in a self-sustaining way and not be a burden to society. This self-sustaining ethic set the Devout apart from other religious communities and no doubt helped them be a bit more acceptable to the public.<sup>57</sup>

In many women’s religious orders, those who came from patrician or gentry families were given a pass and were not expected to work along with the poor. But in the Devout households everyone was expected to do their part, taking on manual labor.<sup>58</sup> Likewise, the Brothers made it clear that if a Brother did not work, he would not eat.<sup>59</sup> Most of the Sisters’ households were known for producing textiles.<sup>60</sup> The Brothers were skilled and trained as clerics so they made their living copying books and manuscripts.<sup>61</sup> While time was set aside for study, prayer and worship, each brother and sister was expected to be productive and dedicate several hours each day to work.

### **Clothing**

The Devout sought to resist pride and to build up the virtue of modesty. At first, they simply gave up wearing the fashionable dress of the day. In a letter written to her Sisters, Salome Sticken advises her companions, “Dearest sisters, I ask as well that you

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<sup>56</sup> Brotherhood of the Common Life. 91.

<sup>57</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 188.

<sup>58</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 188.

<sup>59</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 190.

<sup>60</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 190.

<sup>61</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 190.

wear humble and plain garb and that its cloth be crude and plain, as it is among your sisters in the house of Master Geert Grote, for external shapelessness and ugliness covers the Lord Jesus within.”<sup>62</sup> Eventually the Devout adopted a kind of simple, plain garb that was designed to be neither explicitly religious nor explicitly secular.<sup>63</sup> This strange and unique garb soon became a point of both derision and contention. Many people found the semi-religious style confusing. Lay people should look like lay people, they argued. Both civil and religious leaders urged the Brothers and Sisters to stop making a spectacle of themselves, but rather to simply conform to the day’s standards.<sup>64</sup> The Brothers and Sisters persisted and in due time were known for their unique and non-conforming style of clothing.

### **Resistance to Taking Vows**

During the medieval times, the Church placed a high value on monastic life and asserted that it was a state more holy than the average lay person.<sup>65</sup> But the Brothers and Sisters were uncomfortable with the monastic life as they saw it. Their resistance to assume the vows of religious life was instilled within them early on. In 1379, Groot specifically articulated to the city aldermen, in Deventer, that the house he was founding would remain a house of laity and would not evolve into a “new religion.”<sup>66</sup> A hundred years later this same sentiment was echoed by Gabriel Biel, who, in defense of the Devout way of living, stated the following: “We are not an order, for we do not profess vows or wear a habit. To us, ‘it suffices for all perfection to stand and live in the freedom

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<sup>62</sup> John H. Van Engen, ed., *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings, The Classics of Western spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988). 183.

<sup>63</sup> *Sisters and Brothers*. 97.

<sup>64</sup> *Sisters and Brothers*. 98.

<sup>65</sup> *Brotherhood of the Common Life*. 83.

<sup>66</sup> *Sisters and Brothers*. 182.

of Christian law under Abbot Christ.”<sup>67</sup> It must be stated, that although the Brothers and Sisters resisted taking vows, that does not mean they were against religious life. In fact, the Brothers and Sisters held religious life in high regard.<sup>68</sup>

The Devout also appreciated and aspired to the ideals of poverty, chastity and obedience. But rather than taking vows, the Brothers and Sisters each made their own “resolutions.”<sup>69</sup> The Devout thought this was a better approach because it allowed each person to independently choose the discipline of obedience for him or herself rather than to have it forced upon them. So, upon entering the household each Brother or Sister made a personal resolution to abide by the customs of the house and to submit to the leadership of the “Mother” (for women) or “Rector” (for men) who were identified as the head of the community.<sup>70</sup> Again, these resolutions were seen as being something each member willingly accepted. If one eventually found the Devout way of life too demanding they were free to walk away without having to break a solemn promise.<sup>71</sup>

While a few individuals eventually found themselves drawn to the religious life, the Brothers and Sisters continued to resist taking vows until the end of the fifteenth century, when the pressure became too great. Fearful of church threats, some of the communities within the movement were assimilated into existing religious orders.<sup>72</sup> The practice of resisting vows meant that the Brothers and Sisters were not officially religious and thus dwelled in an “in-between” state. Church law at the time, as outlined in the Sancta Romana, prohibited the establishment of any new, unauthorized religious

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<sup>67</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 182.

<sup>68</sup> Brotherhood of the Common Life. 83.

<sup>69</sup> Brotherhood of the Common Life. 88.

<sup>70</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 182.

<sup>71</sup> Brotherhood of the Common Life. 88.

<sup>72</sup> Brotherhood of the Common Life. 89.

order that required a vow of obedience to a superior and the submission of a Rule. Under this edict, the Devout were in essence prohibited from having their way of life recognized as a new religious movement. Interestingly, however, this law explicitly stated that it did not apply to “people living together as companions,” as long as they did not “promise obedience to anyone, assume a Rule, make profession, or don a distinct habit.”<sup>73</sup> So, on the one hand, the church law provided a narrow opportunity for the Devout to avoid the thorny issue of being classified as a new religious order, and thus safe from being regulated by the Church. On the other hand, it placed the Brothers and Sisters at risk of being attacked and thwarted by the civil authorities.

### **Spiritual Practices**

One of the things that made the Sisters and Brothers somewhat progressive for their time was their use of the common vernacular in worship and devotions. Nuns, clergy and the professed religious of the medieval period used Latin for their worship, but Groote felt the liturgy should be more accessible and thus translated many texts into the common language.<sup>74</sup> This bold move was seen as troublesome because it did not adhere to prescribed church liturgy and thus opened them up to another avenue for attack. Because their liturgy did not strictly conform to the Latin Divine Office, some clergy accused the Devout of creating a new kind of religion.<sup>75</sup> As we will see, these claims, along with others, eventually led to the claim that the Devout were practicing a heretical religion.

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<sup>73</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 182.

<sup>74</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 100.

<sup>75</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 101.

Admission into a house as a Brother or Sister required a time of testing. For Brothers, this testing lasted between ten to twelve months.<sup>76</sup> This probationary period gave the Brothers time to evaluate a candidate based on his conduct, manner of life, obedience, openness to correction, humility, and his ability to resist temptations.<sup>77</sup> Their manner of life was not easy, so this also gave the candidate an opportunity to try on and discern whether this form of life was agreeable. Those who found it too difficult were free to leave and those who did not meet expectations and live a praiseworthy life during this time were not admitted into the household. All those who were admitted into the brotherhood were expected to live by the common customs of the house. Those who failed to live in peace with their fellow Brothers could be expelled.<sup>78</sup>

Geert Groote taught the Brothers and Sisters that spiritual transformation begins with conversion, or a “turning toward” a spiritual path.<sup>79</sup> This conversion was not seen not as a one-time event, but a kind of daily, on-going conversion.<sup>80</sup> According to Van Engen, in his book, Devotio Moderna, the Brothers and Sisters recognized that conversion was difficult. It meant that one had to “break one’s own will” through the submission of the human will.<sup>81</sup> They continually worked on “subduing the old nature and carnal impulses.”<sup>82</sup> They develop practices that were known as “Spiritual training,” which were systematically geared to help reinforce one’s personal resolutions.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 194

<sup>77</sup> Devotio Moderna. 167.

<sup>78</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 194.

<sup>79</sup> Devotio Moderna. 28.

<sup>80</sup> Devotio Moderna. 28.

<sup>81</sup> Devotio Moderna. 29.

<sup>82</sup> Devotio Moderna. 27.

<sup>83</sup> Devotio Moderna. 30.

The Brothers and Sisters understood that the best way to make progress was for them to know themselves and to deal honestly with their struggles. They practiced a thorough examination on a regular basis and in a customary for the brothers we read:

We should learn therefore to know ourselves first of all, to see without self-deception the vices and passions of our soul and to try with all our strength to root them out, to check gluttony, to restrain concupiscence, to overcome pride, to despise temporal things, to break our own wills, and to fight against any other seemingly invincible vices.<sup>84</sup>

The Sisters and Brothers endeavored to elevate virtues and do battle with vices. Time and time again the Brothers and Sisters were admonished to regularly practice humility. The Devout believed that developing humility while combating pride was a way to promote peace within the household -- and peace within the household was paramount. Those who struggled with humility were often assigned menial or demeaning tasks.<sup>85</sup> In a writing from Salome Sticken, she admonished her fellow sisters to not resist doing tasks that might promote humility, rather, she urged them to “vie with each other to be the first in taking up humbling and vile work, competing with one another in this regard in a loving contest.”<sup>86</sup> This mirrors what Paul advised in his letter to the church in Rome when he wrote: “Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom 12:9-10).

Obedience was also a virtue to be promoted within the household because it too promoted peace. In the Brothers’ customary, we read,

We intend to obey, in the first place, the commandments of God and the Church as well as our prelates and of the sacred canons so far as we know them and are able additionally, to acquiesce willingly in the admonishments and counsel of our

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<sup>84</sup> Devotio Moderna. 156.

<sup>85</sup> Devotio Moderna. 169.

<sup>86</sup> Devotio Moderna. 180.

priest (to whom in the governing of our house has been committed the place of the head of the household), according to the counsel of the blessed Peter, 'Chastening our hearts in the obedience of charity' (1 Peter 1:22).<sup>87</sup>

### Daily Life

The daily spiritual life of the Brothers was somewhat regulated. While each Brother may determine what to read or study in his own quiet time, the Brothers followed a daily regimen of work, prayer, study, self-improvement, and of course rest. The Brothers rose from their sleep and midway between the third and fourth hour began their morning prayers.<sup>88</sup> On feast days and on ordinary days the priests and clerics observed the appropriate reading of the hours.<sup>89</sup> Throughout the day the Brothers read, studied or meditated on some sacred writing that might nourish their soul.<sup>90</sup> Both the Brothers and Sisters were expected to attend daily mass. The Brothers and Sisters might not have taken communion every day, but they were however, admonished to prepare themselves to receive Holy Communion on feast days and at least one time per month.<sup>91</sup> In a writing by Brother John Brinckerinick, he expounds on the seriousness to which the Devout were to prepare themselves to receive the Eucharist.<sup>92</sup> He speaks of receiving the Eucharist both spiritually and sacramentally. One can only receive the body and blood of Christ spiritually if one has prepared oneself. He writes:

When we receive him sacramentally, we do so in great danger whenever we approach him without any inwardness. We approach without inwardness when we do not confess our faults nor wish to and have for that non remorse, nor again when we stand firm in certain serious faults and do not wish to turn away. But the more we are ready to confess our faults and make affirm resolution to better ourselves, the more inwardly we approach the holy sacrament.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Devotio Moderna. 170.

<sup>88</sup> Devotio Moderna. 157.

<sup>89</sup> Devotio Moderna. 157.

<sup>90</sup> Devotio Moderna. 157.

<sup>91</sup> Devotio Moderna. 174.

<sup>92</sup> Devotio Moderna. 231.

<sup>93</sup> Devotio Moderna. 231.

As stated above, work was an important part of the Common Life. Thus, interspersed between those periods dedicated to prayer and study, each Brother was expected to be engaged in some work with their hands. No one was excused, and unless a Brother or Sister was ill, or in poor health, each was expected to be self-sustaining.<sup>94</sup>

At a prescribed time during the day, a bell was rung, and the Brothers gathered for a shared meal. Silence was maintained while they ate so that they might be attentive to the sacred texts being read to them.<sup>95</sup> After the evening meal, the Brothers were permitted to return to their rooms. This was somewhat their free time. They might take the opportunity to do personal chores, such as washing or mending their clothes. Most often though, they spent this time in study, meditation, prayer, or seeking council or edification from another Brother.<sup>96</sup>

At the eighth hour, all visitors were asked to leave, and the doors of the house were locked. It was during this quiet time that each Brother was urged to spend time reviewing their thoughts and actions during the day.<sup>97</sup> As discussed above, self-knowledge was important. At the end of each day the Brothers were to hold “chapter” with themselves.<sup>98</sup> The Brothers were encouraged to be brutally honest with themselves regarding their spiritual struggles. The Brothers believed that in order to “reform the powers of the soul a person had first vigorously to ‘have it out’ with himself to truly see what he was.”<sup>99</sup> They understood that the best way to know oneself was to “take up

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<sup>94</sup> *Devotio Moderna*. 158-159.

<sup>95</sup> *Devotio Moderna*. 159.

<sup>96</sup> *Devotio Moderna*. 160.

<sup>97</sup> *Devotio Moderna*. 160.

<sup>98</sup> *Sisters and Brothers*. 295.

<sup>99</sup> *Sisters and Brothers*. 295.

personal battle with your vices, confront first-hand their resistance, come thus truly to know what you were made of, even, as it were, to touch it.”<sup>100</sup> They were urged to share their struggles with one another. They were also expected to submit themselves to admonishment and to correct one another in brotherly love.<sup>101</sup>

According to Van Engen, the author of Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life, the practice of sharing one’s struggles with a Brother and reproofing one another was never supposed to undermine the authority of the priest in the confessional.<sup>102</sup> Rather the practice of admonishment and correction was a way to aid a Brother in his pursuit of the virtues and to perhaps receive helpful advice, recommendations, or solutions to help him overcome a personal vice.<sup>103</sup>

In order to reduce a sense of ill-will, and to gain insight into how others perceived them, each Brother was encouraged to approach another Brother every fortnight begging him to offer a word of correction. This made the practice of reproof more common place and thus, perhaps less intimidating. In addition to the practice of mutual reproof, the rector of each house, bore the responsibility of offering his own spiritual correction to each Brother. And, in addition, with the permission of the local priest, the rector often served as the confessor for each of his Brothers.<sup>104</sup>

The shared life of the Sisters and Brothers was not an easy one. Some struggled with the restraints on their semi-religious life and bristled or chafed at the burden. In order to help spur their Brothers and Sisters onward, the Devout often retold accounts of

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<sup>100</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 295.

<sup>101</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 289.

<sup>102</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 289.

<sup>103</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 290.

<sup>104</sup> Devotio Moderna. 162.

other companions and the struggles they faced. These stories about notorious Brothers or Sisters were recounted as one might recount a saint's hagiography but without embellishment. Instead they valued honesty. Thus the stories were frank about the struggles each Brother or Sister faced. These "edifying points" served as real-life examples for the Brothers and Sisters to emulate.<sup>105</sup>

### **Public Admonitions and Addresses**

The Brothers not only strove to promote virtues among themselves, they also strove to impart spiritual advice to others. They were known for their practice of making public "admonitions" or "addresses."<sup>106</sup> While they were technically different, these spiritual talks were very much like a sermon. Many accused them of usurping the privilege of the parish priest.<sup>107</sup> On feast days, after Vespers, it became customary for students and visitors to make their way to the Brothers' house for these "admonitions." A passage of scripture might be read and then an address was given. The addresses urged the listeners to improve their lives.<sup>108</sup> After the main speech was made, the Brothers, according to their ability, divided up to speak to smaller groups or to individuals. In these small clusters the Brothers continued their admonitions.<sup>109</sup>

### **Education and Schools**

Knowledge was important to the Brothers.<sup>110</sup> Knowledge is more than book smarts; it includes knowing one's self through the study of wisdom and insight from others. The Brothers understood that knowledge should serve the more than just the

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<sup>105</sup> *Devotio Moderna*. 121-13

<sup>106</sup> *Devotio Moderna*. 92-97.

<sup>107</sup> *Devotio Moderna*. 160.

<sup>108</sup> *Devotio Moderna*. 160.

<sup>109</sup> *Devotio Moderna*. 160.

<sup>110</sup> *Brotherhood of the Common Life*. 89.

intellect, it should also benefit the wholeness of an individual.<sup>111</sup> Knowledge gained without linking it to personal insight was in essence “of the world” and thus potentially harmful.<sup>112</sup> This search for knowledge meant that the Brothers had a strong connection to education. At first, the Brothers sought to support the local schools by serving as spiritual guides or as confessors.<sup>113</sup> During the fourteenth century Latin schools were springing up in many towns across the Netherlands. Parents often paid handsomely for their son’s education because they saw it as a way to enhance their son’s prestige and future aspirations.<sup>114</sup> The Brothers recognized that these teenagers needed guidance since without it, they would no doubt be plunged into a world of vain ambition. So the Brothers sought a way to take impressionable students under their wing.<sup>115</sup>

Some of the students coming from lower class families struggled to afford housing, so the Brothers began working to find placement for them and urged some of their followers to consider taking them into their homes. Eventually the need led to the establishment of hostels for these students. According to John Van Engen, the Brothers not only saw this as a community need, but also saw this as an opportunity for “winning souls, turning young clerics way from rampant careerism to a more spiritual life.”<sup>116</sup>

The relationship between the schoolboys and the Brothers grew to the point that, by the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Brothers had begun establishing their own schools throughout Germany and the Netherlands.<sup>117</sup> According to Julia Henkel, the Brothers

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<sup>111</sup> Brotherhood of the Common Life. 93.

<sup>112</sup> Brotherhood of the Common Life. 96.

<sup>113</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 143.

<sup>114</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 144.

<sup>115</sup> Brotherhood of the Common Life. 89.

<sup>116</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 151.

<sup>117</sup> “Catholic Encyclopedia: Brethren of the Common Life,” accessed September 16, 2019, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04166b.htm>.

followed the earlier trajectory of the development of “catechumenal” schools.<sup>118</sup> Regarding the Brothers, Henkel states, “Sometimes they taught in homes, sometimes in courts, sometimes in churches, and sometimes in specially constructed educational buildings.” She goes on to say that rather than waiting for an invitation, they forged ahead with their own “missionary work.”<sup>119</sup> The Brothers did seem to see education as a kind of recruiting tool. The system of education that they founded was organized in such a way that it allowed them to structure the student’s lives. The Brethren frequently induced pupils to wear a gray garb similar to their own.<sup>120</sup> Henkel claims that by 1555, the Brothers had the monopoly on schools in Utrecht for boys twelve and older and they were also in charge of the secondary schools in Amersfoort.<sup>121</sup>

While some of the students that the Brothers attracted to their schools were able to pay for their education, others were not. It was one of the Brother’s principles to never turn one away because they could not afford the tuition.<sup>122</sup> Instead they employed a sliding scale regarding tuition. Wealthy pupils payed the full price. Others paid less and still others did not pay anything.<sup>123</sup> The same sliding scale approach was applied to room and board.

### **Claims of Heresy**

Fairly early on in the history of the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, the controversy and uneasiness surrounding them increased to the point that, in 1394, a

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<sup>118</sup> “School Organizational Patterns of the Brethren of the Common Life,” in *The Dawn of Modern Civilization; Studies in Renaissance, Reformation and Other Topics Presented to Honor Albert Hyma* (Ann Arbor Publishers, 1962), 323–337. 324.

<sup>119</sup> School Organizational. 325.

<sup>120</sup> School Organizational. 326.

<sup>121</sup> School Organizational. 325.

<sup>122</sup> School Organizational. 328.

<sup>123</sup> School Organizational. 328.

petition was sent to Pope Boniface IX requesting that an investigation be undertaken against certain devout persons.<sup>124</sup> The critics made claims against the Devout saying that they had founded a new, illegitimate religion, that they had assumed a religious habit, and that they had adopted the beguine practices that had been banned.<sup>125</sup> The following year, in 1395, the pope responded by stating that he had learned of “Beghards,” “Lollards” and Swestriones” who were protecting themselves with papal law.<sup>126</sup> He spoke of his “beloved brothers the inquisitors” and the need to stamp out the “cancer of heresy.”<sup>127</sup> Thus Pope Boniface revoked laws protecting unofficial religious organizations, re-established the office of “Inquisitors in the German Territory” and insisted that anyone found guilty of these offences should be punished.<sup>128</sup>

After a period of investigation the Inquisitor proclaimed that there was sufficient evidence to indicate that Devout could be condemned as being heretical.<sup>129</sup> The Devout mounted a response. They raised legal objections insisting that the inquisitor must demonstrate how it is that he found their practices heretical. They demanded that all charges be presented plainly so that they could be addressed.<sup>130</sup> In one hearing the defender on behalf of the Devout argued that even though the inquisitors may prove a claim that some of the Devout practices were questionable, they did not rise to the level of heresy because the main complaint – the practice of holding goods in common -- was in fact, an imitation of the practice found in the early church.<sup>131</sup> Thus if the practice was

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<sup>124</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 103.

<sup>125</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 105.

<sup>126</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 103.

<sup>127</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 103.

<sup>128</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 103.

<sup>129</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 313.

<sup>130</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 110.

<sup>131</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 111.

approved in the early church, then it must be approved now. The Devout's counter claim was that since holding goods in common was biblical it could not be heretical, therefore the inquisitor had no right to pass judgement upon the Brothers and Sisters.<sup>132</sup> The dispute regarding the Brothers and Sisters was beyond his purview because the inquisitor was only given jurisdiction regarding heretical matters.<sup>133</sup>

The Devout prevailed in their argument and the decision regarding the legitimacy of the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life was left to the Bishop of Utrecht.<sup>134</sup> Although Bishop Frederick was glad to be able to uphold his own jurisdiction and ward off the inquisitor, he was not quite sure what to do about the Devout and delayed making any decision. It was almost two years later, when in 1401, the Bishop finally was convinced and issued a license for the Devout, ruling that it was not only "licit" but also "meritorious."<sup>135</sup>

It was a long, hard-won battle, but it was worth the fight. The bishop's ruling permitted the Devout the following seven practices:

(1) to live together; (2) to share meals and labor in common; (3) to acknowledge one or two "heads of household," in which whose counsel they acquiesced without obligation or vow, as students to a master; (4) to organize their day in "customs" fostering devotion and labor, without becoming a new religious order with a Rule; (5) to admonish and correct one another, so long as they remained subject to the curates; (6) to seek spiritual guidance from an "expert," so long as they did not contravene priestly confession; and finally, (7) to read books in the vernacular, so long as they avoided problematic materials.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 111.

<sup>133</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 111.

<sup>134</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 115.

<sup>135</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 116-117.

<sup>136</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 118.

Once again, following the lead of their founding father, the Devout were wise. Recognizing how easily a license could be lost or destroyed, and how their rights might be thwarted, they dispersed notarized copies among the various houses in Deventer, Windesheim and Amersfoort. And just as they suspected, these privileges were subsequently challenged again and again. The good news is that the Devout were able to continue their way of life for generations.<sup>137</sup>

### **Downfall and Demise**

During the period when the Reformation swept through Europe, the Reformers didn't exactly know what to do regarding the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life. As stated above, the Devout met criticism for not conforming. To Calvinists, they simply seemed too similar to the medieval religious.<sup>138</sup> Protestant governments tried, time and time again to confiscate their land and close their houses.<sup>139</sup> Luckily, in 1532, when they were being threatened by Protestant leaders, the Devout had someone they could turn to. In his earlier life, Martin Luther, the founder of the Reformation movement, had stayed in the Brother's school at Magdeburg.<sup>140</sup> The Brothers wrote to Luther seeking his assistance, asking him to intervene on their behalf.<sup>141</sup> Unfortunately, although Martin Luther did write to the city leaders on behalf of the Brothers and Sisters, his support didn't settle the matter.

For ten years the struggle continued, and Luther spoke on their behalf numerous times repeatedly urging the city and church leaders to not molest the Brothers. In one

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<sup>137</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 118.

<sup>138</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 5.

<sup>139</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 5.

<sup>140</sup> William M Landeen, "Martin Luther's Intervention in Behalf of the Brethren of the Common Life in Herford," Andrews University Seminary Studies 22, no. No 1, The Journal of the Seventh-Day Adventist Theological Seminary (Spring 1984). 82

<sup>141</sup> Luther's Intervention, 93.

letter to the city leader he wrote, “They are old, honorable persons whom we should spare, as men of understanding we should not permit anyone to practice malice toward them, for God has individuals among them who are “His.”<sup>142</sup> The final blow for the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life came in 1568. After the Council of Trent, Pope Pius V ordered all those living in semi-religious communities must take vows or dissolve.<sup>143</sup> The semi-religious community of the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life were no more.

### **Conclusion**

The Brothers and Sisters serve as an example to those of us who find that we just do not quite fit into rigid ecclesiastical categories. Those who took part in this movement surveyed the religious options available to them and somehow found them lacking. They felt called to a different way of living, a different way of organizing themselves, and a different approach to spirituality and truth. They struggled to find their own identity and their own way.

The seriousness they applied to their faith, and the spiritual exercises they practiced, helped them remain steadfast in the face of unbelievable pressure. It would have been so much easier to just conform. They could have dressed like other folks; they could have eased up on their spiritual practices, but they didn't. They remained steadfast and committed themselves to striving for spiritual progress. They realized that in order to withstand the temptation and pressure swirling around them, they needed a community. They needed an anchor -- the support of understanding Brothers and Sisters that they could trust and rely upon to help them remain on the narrow way.

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<sup>142</sup> Luther's Intervention, 93.

<sup>143</sup> Sisters and Brothers. 5.

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