

89. FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH I

Where to start or stop? The number of martyrs is so huge! These days people try to reduce the number of martyrs. Even Protestants join in with this. They reason: 'Rome is not so bad. Everyone is saved in their own way.' Those so-called Protestants would rather not talk about it too much, especially not with the children, because that is not wise; that is not 'Christian!' They believe we must ignore or deny that part of history.

But isn't it *history*?

We may not listen to such poor excuses. Oh no, our intention is not to sow hatred toward the poor, deceived Roman Catholic people. On the contrary, we must feel sorry for them. But with all our strength, we must warn against their ruinous false doctrines and point out that the *character* of the Roman Catholic Church has *not* changed.

It is a fact that the number of martyrs is much larger than we even suspect.

BURIED ALIVE

According to some writers, the first martyr in the Netherlands who died for her faith seems to have been a young woman in Gorkum. Her name is no longer known. But it is known to God. Rome condemned her to be buried alive. What a terrible, inhumane sentence. After binding her hand and foot, they laid her in a hole they had dug for her. A monk asked her if she would like to recant. Gently, she shook her head.

This response made the monk furious! He signalled to the grave digger standing ready with a shovel. The clods of earth fell and covered her feet and her body. Soon, only her head remained uncovered. For the last time, the Roman Catholic cleric asked her if she would recant. However, she couldn't answer any more. With her eyes raised to heaven, she lay panting under the weight of the soil pressing on her body.

"Then die," hissed the monk, gnashing his teeth with rage. Now the grave digger also tossed the clods of soil onto her face. The murderers stamped the ground down firmly and then left.

And what crime had this young woman committed? That is easy to tell. She no longer believed everything the Roman Catholic Church tried to make her believe. She placed her salvation in Jesus Christ alone, so she had to die. But her soul ascended to Him, Who had bought her with His precious blood. She had remained faithful unto death. Now she received the crown of victory.

BURNT AT THE STAKE - HENRY VOS AND JOHN VAN ESSEN

It is the summer of the year 1523. Some workers have erected two stakes on the marketplace in Brussels. This activity brought a large crowd of people together. Strongly guarded by several armed soldiers, two monks approach the stakes. The marketplace becomes very quiet. It is an oppressive silence. People crane their necks to see. The monks look thin, ill and worn. That's not surprising. They have sat locked in a musty cell for many months, deprived of sun and fresh air.



Henry Vos and John van Essen burnt at the stake in 1553. Wikimedia Commons

Despite all the attempts of the Roman Catholic clerics, they remained faithful and did not deny their principles. Finally, the Inquisition pronounced their sentence - death by fire!

But they must first be de-robed and desecrated to deter others and increase their humiliation. Piece by piece, the executioners rip the monk's robes from their bodies. Then, wearing only an undershirt, they ascend the stake and are tied to the post standing between the firewood. Silently they let it all happen. No, they don't hurl curses at their executioners. When everything is ready, they put fire to the stake, but the wood will not burn properly. Their suffering lasts for hours. But finally, the flames blaze up high and - listen! The crowd can hear singing!

*"We praise Thee, Lord our God!
We magnify Thy Name."*

These words float across the marketplace, over the heads of thousands of people! All the spectators are deeply affected with profound emotion. They all hold their breath while a shudder runs through them.

Finally, the flames and smoke choke their voices as the fire consumes their bodies. But their bodies shall rise again and praise God forever!

The stakes cave in. The flames die down. It is over. Deeply impressed with what they have seen and heard, the crowd disperses and heads home.

Another two martyrs! Who are they?
They are Henry Voes and John van Essen, two monks from the Augustinian monastery in Antwerp. That monastery no longer existed when Henry Voes and John Van Essen were burned. Roman Catholics had destroyed it.
Why?

Ask those Roman Catholic priests. They will tell you! A devious expression will slide over their face, and they'll say:

"That miserable monastery? It was a breeding place of heresy! We've had so much trouble with them. And so - away with it!"

FATHER JACOB SPRENG

Monasteries?

There were plenty of them in the Low Lands by the sea. The thousands of monks, usually too lazy to work, lived off the community. But the Augustinian monastery in Antwerp was inhabited by monks who lived differently. We



...too lazy to work... Etsi.com

know that Martin Luther had become a monk in the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt. We also know he was the inspector of those monasteries for a few months. Naturally, those monasteries came under Luther's influence. He also influenced the Augustinian monastery in Antwerp.

The name of the abbot or father superior was Jacob Spreng. This man earnestly preached against Roman Catholic errors and warned the people. The people heard him gladly. However, this was not to the liking of the Roman Catholic Inquisition. They wanted to silence him. So they arrested him and brought him to Brussels. Fearing the consequences, Father Jacob recanted. So they set him free, but he soon repented of his deed of recanting.

This made him preach even more fervently than before against Rome's errors. However, he realised that he was no longer safe in Antwerp. So he left that city. Yet the Inquisition managed to track him down, and they arrested him again. Nevertheless, he succeeded in escaping from prison and getting away. He fled to Wittenberg, where he became acquainted with Luther.

From there, he went to the German city of Bremen. Years later, as a fruit of his preaching, the Reformation blossomed in that city, and Rome missed out on catching her prey.

HENRY VAN ZUTPHEN

In the meantime, a new prior was chosen in the Augustinian monastery at Antwerp. Henry Van Zutphen became Jacob Spreng's successor. But Henry was also a friend and student of Luther!

As in Germany, selling indulgences also flourished in the Netherlands. There was plenty of money in that country. However, no specific salesman sold indulgences in the Netherlands, like in Germany and Switzerland. Instead, the Roman Catholic clerics sold them themselves and earned plenty of money that way. Henry Van Zutphen warned against that deceit with everything he had when indulgence sales increasingly flourished in Antwerp. The people flocked from far and near to listen to Henry. There was not enough room in the building for them all! Many had to stand outside. So the people outside could still hear what was said inside, they took the windows out of their frames!

That did not please the Roman Catholic clergy! They immediately arrested that brave preacher. When the people heard that, their indignation was boundless. The people rallied together, forced their way into prison, took prior Henry out of his cell and triumphantly brought him back to the monastery.

However, Antwerp's authorities did not intend to let them get away with that! They suddenly took the monastery by surprise. Several monks, who no longer trusted the authorities, had already

escaped. The prior, Henry Van Zutphen, was also able to escape. He fled across the border and preached in Bremen, where Jacob Spreng was also preaching.

One day, Van Zutphen travelled to a nearby village to preach the gospel. That night a crowd of people, stirred up by some priests, captured him, and they condemned him to death that morning.

All morning it rained steadily so that the wet wood wouldn't burn. Henry stood waiting for hours and was constantly mocked and taunted by the ranting crowd. Quietly he suffered that ridicule and scorn. Finally, the wood began to burn. They tied Henry Van Zutphen to a ladder and laid that across the fire. The flames went out again. One of the bystanders took a pike and tried to lift the ladder a bit so the fire would flare up again. But the weapon's point slipped from the rung and pierced the martyr. He was still alive. Then the executioner ended it by crushing his chest with a heavy hammer. That was the end of Henry Van Zutphen.

During the surprise attack on the monastery at Antwerp, various monks, including the prior, had fled. But the attackers had captured three other monks.

Two of them were Henry Voes and John Van Essen, who they burnt at the stake. The name of the third monk was Lambert Thorn. They imprisoned him, and nobody ever heard of him again. They demolished the monastery. Away with it! Then it couldn't give them any more trouble!



Selling indulgences <https://www.ncronline.org/>

JOHN PISTORIUS

The Inquisition also martyred the believers in Northern Netherlands. There is a little place called Woerden between Utrecht and Gouda. That's where John Pistorius was born in 1499. His parents allowed him to study, and he trained to become a priest. When John completed his training, he was ordained as a priest. He preached only from the Holy Scriptures. However, that did not last long. Very soon, Rome captured and imprisoned him. Rome does not tolerate

the light of God's Word shining brightly because that shows up their evil works and false doctrines.

However, when the people heard about it, they became so threatening that they soon let John go, fearing an uprising. John Pistorius left Woerden and travelled to Wittenberg, where he met Luther. When John returned to Woerden, he absolutely refused to remain a priest. He resigned from the priesthood, married, became a baker and worked in the fields in his free time to earn a bit extra. This occupation earned him the name John the Baker.

His friends often visited him in the evenings, and he explained God's Word to them during those visits. He even preached in their houses. He couldn't stop talking about the gospel. That became public, and Rome arrested John the Baker again. Because they were afraid that the people would react against it, they quickly brought him to The Hague, where he was locked up in the gatehouse. There he survived some terrible months. They tried everything to get him to recant. He *had* to retract his teachings! They even reminded him of his wife and children. They asked him if he didn't love them. What a painful

question for him! Of course he loved them! But he answered boldly:

"If any man comes to Me and hates not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers, and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he can not be My disciple." (Luke 14:26)

What an answer! Of course, this text does not mean that he hated his relatives and family but that he loved the Lord above all. Then the Roman Catholic torturers tried something else. His father, a warden in Gouda, received permission to visit him. They hoped that his father would try to persuade him to retract everything. How they would have chuckled if their subtle plan succeeded! But they made a big mistake. Instead of causing him to weaken, his father strengthened him. He said;

"My dear son, I am ready to offer you up to God, just as Abraham was ready to offer his son Isaac."

The devil entered the Roman inquisitors when all their efforts failed to make him recant.

"Then die, heretic," they hissed. They condemned John to death by fire.

On September 15, 1525, they prepared a stake in The Hague to put him to death.



The Prison Gate where Pistorius was kept. The prison is now a museum.

See him leaving the prison where he has suffered for many months. There is a joyful look on his face. Walking past the prison, he cries to his fellow prisoners, "I have set my foot upon the threshold of martyrdom. Keep courage, brothers!"

When they hear these words, his fellow prisoners, all locked up in musty, dark cells, sing a hymn!

When they arrive at the place of execution, a monk preaches a long sermon, demanding that John must repent. He calmly lets those empty words pass over him. They dress him as a priest, and then, item by item, they jerk those clothes from his body again. They cast a curse at him with every piece of clothing they rip off him. When they have completed the desecration of de-robing, they dress him in a yellow garment of mockery.

"Now I look more like a Christian than before," the martyr says calmly. Then they put a cap with earflaps on his head, trying to make him look ridiculous to everyone who has curiously come crowding around. John's undaunted answer is:

"It is good. Jesus also wore a garment of mockery and a crown of thorns." Dignified and calm, he ascends the stake. Nobody sees a trace of fear.

It becomes oddly quiet among the crowd of curious people. The gravity of this moment overpowers them. The executioners tie him to the stake, and John bares his chest so they can hang a bag containing gunpowder on his bare chest. While the flames leap up and the smoke billows around him, he cries out with a powerful voice:

"O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? Death is swallowed up in victory!"

Do you hear that? He does not fear death! For him, death is only a passage to eternal glory.

The flames blaze up higher. The crackling of the wood causes many to shudder. Listen! They hear his voice again! It is a prayer for his enemies and himself.

"Lord Jesus, forgive them! Remember me!"

Suddenly, amid the flames, the bang of an explosion and a bright flash of light! The bag of gunpowder explodes and rips his chest open. His voice breaks and is forever silent on this earth. But in heaven, that voice is not silent. While the fire consumes his body, his soul ascends to God, and he may join in song forever with the Redeemed.

Finally, the fire and flames die. The people disperse. They are impressed by all they have seen and heard! They have witnessed the heroism with which John the Baker entered death. One day God will reveal how many have been converted by that death!

But woe unto you, Rome! God will require that blood of you!

Exterminate that brood of heretics?

Impossible, Rome! It would be easier for you to pluck the stars from the sky than destroy God's work. God is faithful to His cause and people!

Rome achieved the opposite of what she intended!

QUESTIONS

1. How did the first female martyr meet her end in the Netherlands?
2. What was unique about the Augustinian monastery in Antwerp?
3. Identify the following:
 - a. Henry Vos and John Van Essen
 - b. Jacob Spreng
 - c. Henry Van Zutphen
4. Give the background of John Pistorius, also known as John the Baker.
5. Why did he refuse to recant? What was his last prayer?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Why did persecution fail to destroy the work of the Reformation?