MARGARET VAN NOORT

Spiritual Writings of Sister Margaret of the Mother of God (1635–1643)

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Introduction

The Other Voice

In 1635, Margaret of the Mother of God, the forty-eight-year-old lay sister of the royal convent of Discalced Carmelite nuns in Brussels, asked her prioress for some writing paper (fig. 1; see “Carmelites,” “Discalced Carmelites,” and “Teresians” in glossary). The prioress duly issued Sister Margaret with this relatively expensive commodity, notwithstanding that she did not know why Margaret needed it. Margaret’s confessor, Father Gracián de la Cruz, had asked her to write a spiritual autobiography to “better know the state of her soul” (1635 Autobiography, Appendix B1, 261 and B4, 277; Appendix D, 277). Her autobiography is therefore an example of the *vida pro mandato* (autobiography by mandate), in other words, a narrative written at the behest of someone else, which was a common, female literary genre in early modern Europe. In 1635 Margaret wrote an autobiography describing her early childhood, adolescence, and early years in the convent. This text was followed by two diaries in 1636 and 1637 composed of individual entries that record the workings of her inner life and relation to God. Thus, these three texts have different temporal perspectives. While her 1635 text records significant life events from a forty-year period earlier in her life, the two subsequent texts are more immediate and detailed recordings of her daily or weekly spiritual experiences. We have therefore termed the 1635 text with its biographical emphasis an “autobiography” and the two subsequent texts “diaries.” In 1643, on the orders of her confessor, Margaret authored another text, a medical self-report documenting her illnesses. She also authored one devotional text, the date of which is unknown, but it seems to have been occasioned by the renewal of her vows, customarily celebrated at certain points in a nun’s life. The extent and scope of Margaret’s literary enterprise is impressive in light of her many exhausting tasks in the kitchen and the infirmary of the convent. Given that Teresian nuns were only allowed a bed (typically a pallet or mattress of straw), a prie-dieu (prayer-desk), and some simple, devotional prints in their cells, it is likely that Margaret wrote the diaries at night in her cell (possibly by candlelight) or during her spare minutes at the kitchen table.

1. It is unclear exactly under what circumstances Margaret wrote her diary, but, even as a lay sister, she seems to have had a private cell, as is evident from her remarks that the prioress directed her, “Daughter, go to your cell for a while,” and that she “was quite fond of sleeping alone” (1635 Autobiography, 79). There is evidence that she also wrote in the kitchen, as she prefaces one paragraph in her 1635 Autobiography, “Now that I am in the kitchen, I shall tell the rest” (1635 Autobiography, 89). On the interior furnishings of nuns’ cells, see St. Teresa, “Constitutions,” *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus*, ed. and trans. by E. Allison Peers, 3 vols. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1946), 3:222 (hereafter *CWST*).
Autobiographies and diaries by women were collaborative ventures which evolved from the original mandate, as Alison Weber argues for Saint Teresa’s autobiography, to a “casus extremus of the temporal and spatial expansiveness of the ‘social text.’ … [A] woman’s ‘private’ religious experience, when textualized, became a social event, or series of events, through which men and women negotiated their imperfectly convergent goals and beliefs.” Margaret’s diary was subject to the same process. The diary was a register for the emotional, spiritual, and theological guidance she received from her confessor, while it served, in turn, as a basis for discussion when they came together for informal, nonsacramental meetings at the grille (a grating separating the nuns from their visitors in the convent parlor), the confessional (a small, enclosed, wooden booth where priest and penitent, separated by a grid, meet for the sacrament of penance or reconciliation), or in the convent church. Writing was also a means for Margaret to document her experiences during the long periods when her confessor was absent, and frequently her text takes the shape of an imaginary conversation with him. Her writings therefore document the complex roles confessors played in the lives of early modern women. They were not only priests invested with the power to absolve sins through the sacrament of penance but also spiritual directors, role models, soul-mates, and champions of their confessants’ causes in life and after death. Margaret not only takes care to give evidence of the absolute obedience she owes to her confessor, but she also ever so tentatively asserts her authority in spiritual matters.

Shortly after Margaret died, on March 11, 1646, at the age of fifty-nine, Father Gracián started to promote her diary, the existence of which was hitherto unknown (even to Margaret, who thought he had burned the notebooks once they were no longer required). This campaign generated various testimonies and letters, which are reproduced in appendices A–D. These documents suggest that her confessor saw in Margaret a potential case for beatification, if not sanctification. Appendices A–C are testimonies by Father Gracián himself, fellow nuns, and Margaret’s brother, indicating the veracity of her diaries, her virtues, and her providential and intercessory powers in life and death. Appendix A is an undated report on the progress of Margaret’s final illness and death. It was probably commissioned by Father Gracián at the time of his wider dissemination of Sister


3. See, for example, the passage in her 1637 diary: “When you repeated to me the heavenly favors I had received in my life it was very painful and disconcerting, especially when you repeated what I had written,” 176.

Margaret's diary in the 1650s. Consequently, the author is likely to be either Sister Teresa de Jesús or Sister Margarita de Jesús, who both served as prioress during this decade. This report not only gives valuable information on Margaret's medical history, but also on how Margaret, in the eyes of her fellow nuns, lived up to the ideals of a virtuous Christian death during her final days and hours. Appendix B compiles five posthumous testimonies to Margaret's virtues by Father Gracián himself, the two prioresses, Teresa de Jesús and Margarita de Jesús, one fellow sister, Magdalena Florencía de la Cruz, to whom Margaret was particularly close, and Friar Jacobo de Santa María de la Victoria, the Discalced Carmelite friar, who dispensed the Last Rite to Sister Margaret on her death bed (for “Last Rite” see Appendix A, n. 7). Appendix C brings together three testimonies by an anonymous author, her brother Antonio, and Sister Margarita de Jesús, all stating that Sister Margaret appeared to them after her death and that she had entered heaven. Appendix D presents texts which are not primarily concerned with providing evidence of Margaret's sanctity and salvation, but they testify to the wider circulation of her texts. A few years after Margaret's death, Father Gracián organized the making of copies and abridged translations of Margaret's original Spanish text into French and Dutch. These texts were distributed to female convents within Brabant and also further afield to the male branch of the order in Rome, Vienna, and France. This dissemination entailed a lively correspondence (reproduced in Appendix D), which presents unique and compelling testimony to the wider reception and shared vision of Margaret's writings by the broader Teresian community. Paul Arblaster's essay in this volume examines the surviving French and Dutch translations of her texts, which circulated beyond Teresian convents, and offers a detailed discussion of the editing of these translations, their dissemination, and the reactions of their wider audience. Arblaster's essay not only complements the texts in Appendix D, but also reveals in greater detail the editorial practices which male clerics applied to Margaret's texts. The surviving translations and the material on the reactions to Margaret's text offer the historian a unique opportunity to gain further insight into the afterlife of early modern female texts. In this way, this volume hopes to provide a general overview of all of Margaret's writings, their copying, and their reception.

In its scope and format, Margaret's spiritual autobiography is unique for the first generation of Discalced Carmelite nuns in the Low Countries, who carried forward the torch after St. Teresa had died in 1582. Her voice is from the bottom of the convent's hierarchy. Margaret came from a lower-middle-class family in
North Brabant, today a region of the Netherlands. When she entered the convent, Margaret was fluent only in Dutch. It is difficult to ascertain whether she learned Spanish in the convent. However, given that she grew up in military and aristocratic circles where some knowledge of French or Spanish was customary, she may have already had a basic competence. Nevertheless, her main duty as a young lay sister was to serve the community through her manual labour in the kitchen as cook and cleaner. The communal duty of her fellow sisters as choir nuns was the singing of the liturgy and the canonical hours (the eight prayers of the day, see “Canonical hours” in glossary), a duty which was deemed higher in status than manual labor. For example, Margaret documents her exclusion from the duties of a choir nun when writing that she was “quite fond also of going to the Divine Office and hearing the sisters sing” (1635 Autobiography, 92). These divergent values placed on manual and spiritual work are also reflected in the superior social and financial status of choir nuns, most of whom came from affluent families and were supported by sizable dowries. The hierarchy of age and offices (older nuns held more senior and responsible offices) among the choir nuns overlaid this basic polarization between lay sisters and choir nuns.\footnote{Sister Margaret mentions the office of the “novice mistress,” the “cellaress,” the “clothing mistress,” and the “turn keeper,” who answered the bell at the visitor’s gate.}

Margaret, however, successfully broke down the social, spatial, and linguistic barriers that prevented her from having a voice within the female community of the Brussels convent and patriarchal society at large. She learned Spanish and formulated an idiosyncratic yet empowering form of piety in response to her social standing. The kitchen became for her a spiritual space where bodily labor was translated into a means of accessing the divine.\footnote{Cristina Mazzoni argues that kitchens in convents were “a theological space, a mystical room” where “manual labor nourishes the bonds of community and nurtures the life of the mind.” Cristina Mazzoni, *The Women in God’s Kitchen: Cooking, Eating, and Spiritual Writing* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2005), 144.} For Margaret, bodily labor was an expression of her spiritual ideal of simplicity and nakedness; an ideal “cooked up” from her own eclectic blend of Franciscan and Teresian spiritual principles. Her voice from the kitchen developed to express her individuality and authority.

The body, for unprivileged women like Margaret, was a “territory” of spiritual power and problems. St. Teresa promoted an idea of body and soul as complementary rather than conflictive parts in the struggle to ascend to God. Margaret’s diary records the constant challenge she faced to adjust and correct the balance between them. Her bodily and olfactory penitential exercises, for example, function as a psychological stabilizer by harmonizing body and soul in moments of contemplation. This foregrounding of the body meant that unprivileged women like Margaret could forge feminine forms of an intensely physio-somatic mysticism independent of the theological erudition and ecclesiastical institutions.
which were not accessible to them. And it was not merely cooking and cleaning that were spiritual experiences for Margaret, but also her bodily humors and chronic disease. As lay sister of the royal convent in Brussels, Margaret was a servant of the Habsburg court, and as such she had access to the best medical care in the land. For example, during the acute stages of her illness, she was treated by a team of top doctors, Dr. Alvarez, Dr. Paz, and Dr. Pons, the three personal physicians to the rulers of the Spanish Netherlands, who at this time was the Cardinal Infante Ferdinand of Austria, younger brother of King Philip IV of Spain. Her careful documentation of her illnesses and the therapies she received offers us new insights into the interlacing of medicine and female sanctity in early modern Europe.

In her diary, the topography of the kitchen, writing, medicine, and spirituality are closely related themes. Hence Margaret’s bodily mysticism challenges conventional notions of the physiological boundaries of the human body and the interchange with its material environment in early modern society. Her voice can only be properly located by investigating the osmotic process between herself as


10. In the past two decades, scholars have begun to explore the spiritual and social role of disease and illness in convent communities; see Electa Arenal and Stacey Schlau, eds., *Untold Sisters: Hispanic Nuns in Their Own Works*, a bilingual anthology with translations by Amanda Powell (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 75–76 and 374–78 for excerpts from the diary of Madre Maria Magdalena de Lorrravaquito Muñoz, who suffered from a variety of illnesses for thirty-three years. For more references on the topic of nuns and disease, see the section “Studies in the History of Medicine—Medicine and Sanctity” in the bibliography.

11. See 1635 Autobiography, 125, nn. 153–155; and 1643 Letter to Her Confessor, 236 n. 265. For the specific treatments she received, see 1635 Autobiography, 121–127 and notes.

perceiving subject and the perceived environment. This requires us to replace the dualist view of body and mind with a notion of her body as an interlaced system in which, as Andrew Weir phrases it, “different parts were connected to each other by veins, arteries … and canals like the bile duct. Solids, such as food and faeces, liquids such as the humours (including blood), … and more tenuous matter such as air, vapours, smokes and the vital and animal spirits all travelled through the body bringing life, health and disease.”

It is this expanded, multilayered body which pervades Margaret’s writings as her conduit to God. She experienced her body as a porous matter deeply affected, as will be shown in this introduction, by her bodily fluids, food, and environment, as well as by nonphysical forces such as demons, the devil, Christ, the dead, and others who could concurrently or intermittently inhabit it. The vocabulary with which she described the resulting sensations emphasizes this experience of her body as permeable and transmutable. She felt her body, for instance, on occasions to have been exchanged for another, to have been pierced or turned inside out, or the heaviness of pain pouring through it (1635 Autobiography, 88, 97, 98, 107, 122; 1636 Diary, 161, 1637 Diary, 228).

Within the series The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe, Sister Margaret therefore addresses rarely treated topics and issues of female writing. Her texts and the documented reactions to them are an important heritage of female religious culture in the seventeenth-century Low Countries. They record the experience of conflicting entities such as Protestant vs. Catholic, burgher vs. nobility, Flemish vs. Spanish, convent community vs. individual, the medical and religious communities and their understanding of the healthy vs. the sick, the sacred vs. raw biology, etc. Margaret’s writings register this encounter of differing groups and experiences at the social, linguistic, and spiritual-emotional levels. However, Sister Margaret also shows us that these demarcations are not absolute. Their blurring creates the picture of an extraordinarily complex historical reality in which an individual such as Margaret could creatively forge an identity that transgresses boundaries. For example, the attestation of the nobly born Sister Magdalena Florencia de la Cruz of Margaret’s divinely inspired assistance to her miraculous cure from muscle weakness illustrates how a lowly lay sister like Margaret could become a spiritual role model and inspirational friend to a woman who was so decidedly above her in station and rank (Appendix B5). The geography of the kitchen and her detailed recording of illness and pain disclose the indelible meshing of spirituality and medicine in female religiosity beyond generalized, bodily experiences down to the microlevels of the very fluids and fibers of her body. For Margaret, her body was a mere sack of putrefying matter whose indomitable desires had to be battled. Yet, her flesh could also transmute into much more. Whether in its very pain-wracked state of physical and mental

illness or in its strong state of health, Margaret ultimately took pride and joy in her body as a tool for God.

A Life in the Midst of the Eighty Years’ War

Margaret’s early family life was profoundly affected by the Eighty Years’ War (also called the Dutch Revolt), so called because it lasted from ca. 1568 to 1648. This protracted conflict pulverized the old religious-political structure of the Low Countries. Like other conflicts in early modern Europe, the Dutch Revolt had a myriad of intertwined constitutional and religious causes. At the end of the fifteenth century, the Low Countries were not a political unity, but a loose conglomerate of seventeen provinces, each consisting of quasi-independently ruled counties and cities, roughly the area of present-day Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and part of Northern France, ruled by the dukes of Burgundy of the House of Valois. The most important areas were the county of Flanders and the Duchy of Brabant in the south and the counties of Holland and Zeeland, the Prince-Bishopric of Utrecht, the Duchy of Guelders (roughly present-day Gelderland), and the Lordships of Friesland and Groningen in the north (see fig. 2). With the marriage of the last descendant of the house of Burgundy, Mary I of Valois, Duchess of Burgundy (1457–1482), to Maximilian I of Habsburg (1459–1519), emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, in 1482, the provinces were absorbed into the domains of the House of Habsburg.14 Through a two-pronged strategy of negotiation and military coercion, Maximilian’s grandson, Charles V of Habsburg (1500–1558), emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and king of Spain, had united all seventeen provinces under his rule by 1543.15 The cornerstones of his political approach were administrative centralization, the enforcement of taxation, an organizational reform of the Catholic Church in the Netherlands and

14. This excluded the Duchy of Burgundy itself, which, with an appeal to Salic law, had been reabsorbed into France upon the death of Mary’s father, Charles the Bold.

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the defeat of Protestant heresies which, after initial repression, were tolerated by local authorities and had rapidly gained ground, in particular among the lower nobility. The imposition of a more centralized system of government infringed

16. The Protestant heresies in question were those of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the Anabaptists (who rejected the baptism of infants), who had attacked the basic tenets and structures of the Catholic Church as part of the European-wide Protestant Reformation. This vast and diverse movement is generally believed to have been inaugurated when Luther, a German monk and professor of theology,
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upon the customary laws and traditions, the so-called ancient liberties, of the individual provinces. These charters of freedom had been granted to them by their Burgundian and earlier medieval lords. Gradually yet inexorably, the implementation of Charles’s policies laid the seeds for revolt, which ignited in 1564, nine years into the reign of his son Philip II, king of Spain (1527–1598). Philip pursued a more rigorous enforcement of antiheresy laws and sought to establish an autonomous ecclesiastical organization in the realm via the creation of fourteen new bishoprics (instead of the old three) spearheaded by bishops appointed by the Crown. This push towards an ever more absolutist-leaning royal power threatened to curtail the influence and patronage of the patrician leaders of the towns and the lower and upper nobility.17 In a New Year’s Eve speech, William of Orange (1533–1584, also called William the Silent), one of the foremost nobles of the land, demanded freedom of religion and the abolition of the Spanish Inquisition. The nobility around William, however, soon lost control of Calvinist preachers, who had been incensed by the brutal persecution of Protestants. In the summer of 1566, the preachers called for an all-out attack on the very fabric of Catholic life by inciting the crowds to destroy the numerous religious images found in the churches of the Low Countries. This iconoclasm was followed by two more rebellions against Spanish domination, which erupted successively in 1572 and 1576.

The secession of the provinces from the Spanish Crown deepened when on January 23, 1579, the counties of Holland, Zeeland, and parts of the Prince-Bishopric of Utrecht signed an alliance, the so-called Union of Utrecht, declaring their commitment to act in unison in matters of war and peace. In the same year, this confederation was joined by the city of Ghent, parts of the county of Guelders, the cities of Antwerp, Breda, Ypres, Brussels, and others. The Union of Utrecht was a reaction to the Union of Arras in which southern cities and counties, such as the states of Hainaut, Artois, and later also the Walloon provinces, Namur, Luxembourg, and Limburg, declared their loyalty to the king of Spain. The Union of Utrecht and the Union of Arras were the inception of the split of the seventeen provinces of the Low Countries into the seven seditious northern provinces and the “obedient,” mainly Catholic, southern provinces controlled by Spain. Two years later, on July 26, 1581, the provinces in revolt, Brabant, Gelderland, Zutphen, Flanders, Holland, Utrecht, Friesland, Overijssel, and Mechelen, took the radical and unprecedented step of ratifying the Act of Abjuration, which


officially deposed Philip II of Spain as sovereign and de facto declared the seven, more northerly provinces as independent. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Dutch Revolt merged into the greater European conflict of the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648) and was ultimately resolved only two years after Sister Margaret’s death with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. A series of peace treaties formally recognized the independence of the seven northern Protestant provinces of the Low Countries from Catholic Spain and their status as a new nation state, henceforth known as the Dutch Republic, while the “obedient” southernmost provinces evolved into modern Belgium with the constitutional concept of monarchy preserved.

The conflicts underlying the Eighty Years’ War revolved around the basic ideologies, practices, and beliefs of early modern societies, in short, the (funda) mental grid of a person’s identity in this period. Not only the very nature of the constitutional relations between prince and subject were debated, but the tenaciously fought military struggle ripped communities apart and generated ever-changing frontiers and borders. For example, Antwerp, the largest city and the Low Countries’ economic and financial center, was sacked November 4, 1576, when unpaid Spanish soldiers mutinied. They plundered the city killing more than eight thousand people and burning down eight hundred houses in what has become known as the “Spanish fury.” Consequently, Antwerp became proactive in the anti-Spanish revolt and joined the Union of Utrecht only to be reconquered by Alessandro Farnese (1545–1592), governor general of the Spanish Netherlands, after a year-long siege lasting from July 1584 until August 1585. The borders imposed by military outcomes cut across confessional and linguistic divisions, thus reinforcing political fragility and generating large refugee populations and exiled communities beyond the Low Countries throughout the period.


19. For example, the 1581 Act of Abjuration stated that the power of the prince rested in his subjects. In short, royal authority was contractual and not absolute: “God did not create the people slaves to their prince, to obey his commands, whether right or wrong, but rather the prince for the sake of the subjects (without which he could be no prince), to govern them according to equity, to love and support them.” The Library of Original Sources, Volume 4: 9th to 16th Century, ed. Oliver J. Thatcher (1904; repr. Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific, 2004), 190.


Religious institutions such as convents and monasteries were no exception. Many convents in the Low Countries and neighboring Germany were invaded and plundered, leading to a significant number of uprooted religious communities. Nuns recorded their experiences of war. A nun from ’s-Hertogenbosch (also called Den Bosch), a town in northern Brabant, left us with one of the most graphic accounts of the Spanish sack of the city of Mechelen on October 2, 1572, a royally sanctioned revenge for hosting rebel troops:

And then they entered the city of Mechlin and took everything that they could get. They could have filled 80 ships with the goods they took. This lasted for three days…. They pulled the clothing from the women, the children, the men, the priests, and cut off women’s fingers for their rings…. Oh, the lamentation and oppression there was cannot be expressed by any tongue! … they took all of it, leaving nothing, and great hunger was suffered…. the cold winter is coming and they have little to wear nor beds to sleep in nor money to purchase, for anyone with debtors or rents could not collect, because it was forbidden. Oh, many went away to Antwerp and elsewhere, begging at doors, who had been rich and wealthy. Oh, our dear Lord comfort them and all oppressed hearts!

This account illustrates the social fluctuation caused by war where overnight the rich joined the armies of the destitute. However, not only nuns, but also secular Catholic women in the Low Countries picked up their pens to intervene in the religious debates and political events they witnessed. For example, Anna Bijns (1483–1575), an unmarried Antwerp schoolteacher, was a widely celebrated author of anti-Lutheran poems and other verses. Indeed, Sister Margaret’s 1635


autobiography has to be counted among these valuable textual source materials on the religious-political conflict of the Dutch Revolt and the Thirty Years’ War authored by women.\textsuperscript{25} The trauma of war and the striving for material and physical security dominate the first part of her 1635 autobiography. It gives an important insight into the political and religious choices individuals and families made in a society undergoing a dramatic shake-up of ancient loyalties and localities.

The spectrum of religious identities in the Low Countries was complex as a result of the European-wide Protestant Reformation.\textsuperscript{26} Protestants openly criticized and contradicted the Catholic doctrines about life, death, and salvation, which the Church had taught to be unalterable and sacred. Conversions from Catholicism to Protestantism and back again within one family were not uncommon.\textsuperscript{27} Margaret, however, came from a family with a deep-seated commitment to Spain and the orthodox faith, allegiances which strengthened rather than buckled under the ideological and physical attack by Protestant forces.\textsuperscript{28} Families like these were particularly motivated by the intense and strict piety of the Catholic Reform (or Counter-Reformation). The cornerstone was the Council of Trent (1551–1563), which reaffirmed the articles of faith, condemned Protestant heresies, and issued reform legislation in response to Protestant criticisms.\textsuperscript{29} How-
ever, the simple yet fervent Catholicism that Margaret’s parents practiced seems to have been born out of family tradition rather than the conscious, intellectual engagement with opposing doctrinal points of view.

By the time Margaret came of age, the spirit of Catholic renewal resonated in the southern Netherlands. In 1598, Philip II settled on consolidating Spanish rule over the remaining ten loyal Netherlandish provinces by devolving power to his eldest daughter, the Infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia (1566–1633) and her husband, the Archduke Albert of Austria (1559–1621), fourth son of the Emperor Maximilian II (1527–1576), who were appointed as co-sovereigns of the Netherlands. Albert and Isabel’s primary goal was to secure their subjects’ confessional allegiance to the Catholic Church and political allegiance to the Spanish crown. The archdukes spearheaded a comprehensive restoration of Catholic life that quickly erased all trace of the destruction that various waves of iconoclasm and war had wrought upon churches and convents since 1566.

Albert and Isabel brought a Spanish flair to Catholicism in the Low Countries through the promotion of Iberian saints and Spanish spirituality. The importation of the order of St. Teresa of Ávila and her Discalced Carmelite nuns (also later known as the “Spanish Carmel”) to Brussels was a cornerstone of this hispanicization of the religious life in Brabant and beyond. St. Teresa, issuing her call for the return to the primal, monastic values of the Carmelites, had become the most prominent, female figurehead within the Catholic Reform movement. Not surprisingly, patronage of the Discalced Carmelite order was a Spanish Habsburg tradition. The foundation of the convent of Teresian nuns in immediate proximity to the archducal residence in Brussels in 1607 was a high profile campaign mounted personally by the Infanta Isabel. This royal convent had a symbolic and practical function: it was, spiritually and socially, an elite foundation under the auspices of the archdual court and a mother house from where the spread of the order into other cities in the Low Countries and Germany was organized. The royal convent was therefore not a frontline community situated in or close

Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent (London: Dolman, 1848), Hanover Historical Texts Project, Hanover College Dept. of History, http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent.html.


31. For the confessional and dynastic motivations of the archdukes, see specifically Luc Duerloo, Dynasty and Piety: Archduke Albert (1598–1621) and Habsburg Political Culture in an Age of Religious Wars (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012).
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to Protestant territories, but one of the epicenters of the Catholic Reform movement at the heart of the administrative hub of the Spanish Netherlands. On one level, however, Margaret’s entry into this convent in 1607 represented a continued engagement with war and its religious dissension. After all, she had joined the aristocratic corps of the Infanta’s personal prayer force. This idea of the convent as a powerhouse of prayer cast the nuns into the role of being warriors for God, who prayed for the concerns of the country. Jacques Blaseus (1540–1618), bishop of Namur, expressed this clearly in his funeral oration for King Philip II when declaring that the colleges and convents he founded were “Arsenals and Magazines of munitions and arms … against the armies of errors and heresies.”32 Yet, on another level, the protection of the convent walls and the fervent quality of her faith were for Margaret the comfort and stability she needed to overcome the trauma of her childhood and the ravages of war beyond.

**From Soldiers’ Camp to Convent: The Early Life of Sister Margaret**

Margaret was born in 1587 at the height of an intense Spanish military offensive during the Eighty Years’ War led by Alessandro Farnese against the Dutch rebels. Margaret’s father, Sebastiaan Van Noort, was junior officer (ensign) in a German regiment of the Habsburg forces under the command of Colonel Francisco Verdugo (1537–1595). Between 1581 and 1597 Verdugo, in his position as governor of the northeast, led a prolonged attempt to reconquer the northeastern part of the Low Countries for King Philip II of Spain. The campaign, however, began to falter when Alexander Parma’s troops were called to France and, under pressure from a rebellious local populace, the city of Groningen fell to the enemy in 1594. Margaret’s birthplace, the village of Farmsum (or Formeshem), is situated directly south of Delfzijl on the very edge of the Netherlands (just across the river Ems from the German town of Emden). It is very likely that at the time of Margaret’s birth her father was stationed at the royal garrison in Delfzijl (fig. 2), which had been responsible for the control of the province of Groningen since 1568.33
