Colourful religious life in the Netherlands

Report on the internationalisation of religious institutions in the Netherlands

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Foreword

In 2000 the Centraal Missionair Beraad Religieuzen (CMBR, Central Missionary Council of the Religious Institutes, in the Netherlands) organised a seminar for foreign religious living and working in the Netherlands. The aim was to establish contact with these foreign religious, talk to them about their experiences and ideas on their mission in the Netherlands, and offer them a forum to share their experiences with each other.

The seminar manifestly met a need. Despite very different cultural and national backgrounds participants found recognition and support in their experience as foreign religious in the Netherlands. At the same conference they explicitly asked for dialogue with Dutch religious on the common task of Dutch and foreign religious in Dutch church and society. Accordingly it was decided to hold such a conference annually, to be organised by a group of foreign religious with the assistance of the CMBR secretariat.

At the request of foreign religious, therefore, Dutch religious have participated in these ‘Colourful Religious Life’ (CRL) conferences since 2001. Many of the Dutch participants were missionaries returned from abroad. Communication between foreign religious and returned Dutch missionaries is remarkably easy. Both groups have experience of ‘being a foreigner’, wanting to devote themselves to the cause of church and society in a new country. Indeed, returned Dutch missionaries know how much effort it takes to strike root in a foreign culture.

The CRL conferences offer them an opportunity to discuss often thorny issues such as ‘reversed mission’ \(^1\) by foreign religious. What is the point of foreign religious coming to the Netherlands? What is the value of their presence? How can their integration be guided so that it is fruitful and meaningful for the religious themselves, the congregation in the Netherlands and the Dutch church and society?

At the end of 2004 there was an international congress in Rome for religious from all over the world. The preparatory document, entitled ‘With a passion for Christ and a passion for humanity’, dealt extensively with the internationalisation of religious life around the world. For religious everywhere, that much is evident, internationalisation is no longer optional but a way of handling the reality of globalisation and multiculturalism. Because of the relevance of the topic the CMBR considered it important to make the insights gained at the CRL conferences available to the Conference of Dutch Religious (CDR), the forum of religious orders in the Netherlands. It should be realized that this forum is no longer just a conference of Dutch religious but of all religious in the Netherlands.

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\(^1\) The term ‘reversed mission’ has been current in missionary literature for some years. It refers to the contemporary missionary movement from South to North.
1 Introduction

In recent years a substantial number of foreign religious have been invited by their religious order or by a diocese to come to the Netherlands. Many of them are in managerial positions in the generalate of their religious institute. Others are doing pastoral work, often in migrant parishes. Yet others come with an explicit missionary mandate and work in metropolitan areas with and for the local community or marginalised people in society. Finally there are religious studying in the Netherlands, employed in caring for their sisters and brothers, or living in contemplative houses.

From a missionary point of view the presence of religious from other countries in the Netherlands is important for various reasons. For one thing, it shows that Indonesia, the Philippines, India and other countries where Dutch congregations once had ‘missions’ now have full-fledged provinces of their own with sufficient resources to send members to the Netherlands. It is one of the signs that by now the centre of gravity of Christendom has shifted to the South. In a number of religious orders members from Southern provinces constitute more than half of the General Assemblies. While the slogan ‘the Netherlands a mission country!’ may evoke irritated responses from many Dutch people, from the angle of mission as ‘mission on six continents’ it is perfectly acceptable.

Another important aspect from a missionary perspective is global migration. A large proportion of new immigrants in the Netherlands is Christian. They are people who introduce their own identity and religious expressions, cultural orientations and traditions into both the church and society. Dutch churches are becoming more colourful by the day. Hence the fact that Dutch religious life is rapidly becoming more multicultural is not surprising and may be seen as a gladdening development.

Yet the advent of foreign religious in the Netherlands is by no means uncontroversial, also among Dutch religious. Many are, to put it mildly, hesitant to appoint foreign religious to fill ‘vacancies’ that arise locally, for instance in parish pastoral work or the care of elderly co-religious. In this regard one could justifiably ask whether these foreign religious, often from countries where the need is even more acute than here, could not apply their energies and talents better elsewhere. Many are also sceptical about the time and energy required before foreigners are sufficiently integrated to contribute meaningfully to Dutch religious’ mission in church and society. Is it fair to expose them to this complex, secularised society, not to mention all the difficulties of obtaining residence and work permits?

These questions occupy not only Dutch but foreign missionaries as well. The culture shock on arrival in the Netherlands is invariably great, and reservations in their own community or the Dutch church certainly do not help. In the initial period many of them ask themselves what – in God’s name – they can or should do here. They have to contend with cultural prejudice: they are ‘just foreigners’ coming from a ‘primitive’ culture. Unlike Dutch missionaries that used to go abroad in

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2 According to CMBR data some 180 foreign religious live and work in the Netherlands at present (see appendix 1).
3 International communities among contemplatives are no exception, as may be gathered from appendix 1. The dynamics between foreigners and Dutch in monastic communities in many respects parallel that in communities of active religious. In some respects, however, it differs because of the secluded nature of monastic communities. So far, contemplative religious have been sparsely represented at CRL conferences. Accordingly this document does not deal specifically with the internationalisation of contemplative monastic communities.
4 According to the data of the National Catholic Organisation Cura Migratorum and SKIN, the Protestant umbrella organisation for migrant churches, an estimated 800,000 foreign Christians are currently living in the Netherlands, which means that fully 40% of all foreigners in the country are Christians.
the past, the foreign religious cannot expect financial and material backing from their home base. In a sense theirs is 'a mission without power’. They come empty-handed, bringing only themselves.

This report reflects the experiences and ideas that emerged from six CRL conferences. To supplement these the CMBR secretariat interviewed five foreign and five Dutch religious in the period from March to May 2006, on the appointment and preparation of foreign religious, their tasks and mentoring, intercultural relations and collaboration, and their perception of ‘reversed mission’. Chapters 2 and 3 describe the background to current internationalisation and perceptions of it in Dutch religious institutes. Chapters 4 to 6 centre on practical issues such as the preparation, mentoring and potential areas of work for foreign religious. Finally chapters 7 and 8 probe the question of intercultural dialogue in organisations and the source of mutual enrichment this could be for the parties.

The CMBR has confined itself to the experience of religious organisation which are members of the Conference of Dutch Religious (CDR) and have participated in conferences that the CMBR, the missionary branch of the CDR, has organised for foreign religious and their Dutch counterparts in recent years. That also indicates the parameters of this document. The question of whether or not to invite foreign religious is also pertinent in the Dutch ecclesiastic province. Some dioceses have an active policy on inviting foreign fathers and sisters. There are also individual projects aimed at bringing foreign religious to the Netherlands to fill pastoral posts in parishes. However, diocesan policies and practices are beyond the scope of this advisory document.

It should be evident that foreign religious’ migration to the Netherlands is a radical undertaking for everybody involved. It is a relatively new phenomenon and in this area religious institutes are still in an experimental phase. They are feeling their way as they proceed. Some of these experiments in recent years have been problematic. On the other hand there are success stories of foreign religious who managed to find their feet in the Netherlands and whose input and presence undeniably enriched the Dutch church, Dutch society and religious life in the Netherlands. At this stage it is vital that religious organisations should share their experiences and the insights gained from it.

This report does not profess to furnish religious institutes with cut and dried advice. The process of internationalisation is far too recent and, in a sense, too recalcitrant for that. But we do consider it important that religious organisations engaged in internationalising their own ranks should share experiences and ideas. This document is in effect a collection of insights gained over the past few years. We believe that these can be useful for developing a sound, meaningful policy on the migration of foreign religious to the Netherlands, and on how to support and guide them.
2 Internationalisation of religious life

2.1 Bird’s eye view of the early history of internationalisation

Many religious organisations have been international for a long time. Over the past few centuries, at any rate, there has been a lot of interchange across national borders. In the 19th century many French and German religious settled in the Netherlands because political opposition made religious life impossible in their own countries. The Netherlands owes its many religious orders to that crisis.

The latter half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th saw tens of thousands of Dutch religious setting out for Latin America, Africa and Asia. They were closely involved in the establishment of new churches in these areas. In the course of time it led to the emergence of local provinces of their religious institutes, which in many cases flourished.

The second half of the 20th century saw two simultaneous developments: rapid growth of religious life in many Southern countries, and a steady decline in the number of religious in Western Europe. The combined result of these two developments was that nowadays more religious from the South are coming here than the other way round. This process got under way in the Netherlands as far back as the late 1960s, although the South-North migration remains very modest compared with the numbers of missionaries that left the Netherlands in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But the trend is clear: partly as a result of the arrival of foreign religious, Dutch religious life has become increasingly international and multicultural and will continue to do so in the years to come.

2.2 Definition of the concept

Wet should be a bit careful when using the term ‘internationalisation’, for at present it refers to two processes that, although not separable, are nonetheless distinct. The first meaning is that more and more religious communities have an international composition. This form of internationalisation has been under discussion at CRL conferences all along. But internationalisation also refers to the phenomenon of different national provinces of a religious order combining in a single, new, international province because of declining membership.

Regarding the first form of internationalisation, religious organisations vary greatly. Firstly, there are congregations – especially missionary congregations – that were international from the outset with internationally composed communities. Secondly, there are the older orders. Many of these have been international for centuries, with provinces everywhere but not necessarily with internationally composed communities. Internationalisation, in both these forms, is playing an increasingly important role in more and more religious institutes. Thirdly, many congregations in the Netherlands are of Dutch origin and initially focused on the local situation. They only became international later in response to the demand for overseas missionaries. Finally, over the past decade young, foreign congregations have settled in the Netherlands, usually at the request of a particular diocese. Their communities often have an international composition.

The early history characterises the internationalisation process in a religious order. By and large one could say that orders that were international from the outset, with internationally composed

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5 The late 1960s saw the election of the first foreigners to the general management of religious organisations, whose generalates were located in the Netherlands. In 1992 the Mission Sisters of the Holy Spirit (SSPS) started the first international community with a specifically missionary character in the Netherlands.
communities, cope better with internationalisation processes than orders that confined themselves to the Netherlands for a long time.

In the rest of this document, the expression ‘internationalisation of religious life’ refers to the international composition of many religious communities in the Netherlands, with all that it entails in terms of intercultural dialogue.
3 Reasons for internationalisation

3.1 Context of internationalisation

The presence of foreign religious cannot be divorced from the context of globalisation, worldwide migration and multiculturalism, not only in society but also in the church. People are travelling everywhere. New communication technology makes it easy to maintain contact and keep abreast of developments elsewhere in the world. The question, also for religious orders, is not whether to globalise or not, but how to set about it.

‘Reversed mission’ by foreign religious in the Netherlands acquires deeper meaning if it is conducted in solidarity with all the other migrants finding their feet in the country. These foreign religious experience the same problems of culture shock, learning a new language, residence papers and work permits. At the same time their experience of living in multicultural settings elsewhere can be useful in the Netherlands as well. Missionary congregations in particular often cite foreign members’ ability to help shape the missionary task in the present multicultural context as a major reason for their choice to internationalise.

3.2 Internationalisation: diverse perceptions and motives

A large proportion of foreign religious in the Netherlands occupy managerial posts in their religious institute. It is quite logical that as the centre of gravity of an order moves South, Southern members will take over the leadership of the organisation. Some religious orders of Dutch origin choose to move their generalate to the part of the world where the congregation is most numerous. In this respect orders make different decisions. But the fact that Southern members are increasingly being elected to the general management of their orders, and in some instances join the generalate in the Netherlands, need not surprise anyone.

Opinions vary, however, about swelling the ranks of religious in the Netherlands for reasons other than these. Some are delighted that foreigners should take on tasks for which no Dutch candidates are available these days. In a sense it stands to reason, in a situation with an ever more desperate shortage of human resources, to invite reinforcements from provinces that are stronger and more populous. Others consider it a bad idea to bring foreign religious into the country to fill vacancies, especially for parochial pastoral work and the care of elderly brothers and sisters. In their view many of the developments in the Netherlands can be interpreted positively. Religious occupy a different position in the Dutch church and society nowadays. Lay people often contribute fruitfully to missionary or pastoral work. The aim should not be to reverse the trend by importing foreign religious. At CRL conferences this latter approach came across unmistakably as the majority view among both foreign and Dutch religious. On the same lines it is argued that inculturation should be a top priority. It is not a good idea to import foreign forms of religious life from abroad without a process of inculturation.

When asked whether it is in order to invite people from other provinces to come here to take care of elderly members, foreign religious respond more positively than Dutch ones. Here, respect for older generations is a factor. Foreign members have a sense of responsibility for their older co-religious, as children have for their parents. “As long as it’s not a one-way traffic!…” ⁶ Many religious orders maintain cordial links with provinces that were established in the South. In some instances the

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Southern province actually offers to send members to reinforce the community in the ‘mother country’.

Foreign religious that are sent abroad are usually among the more gifted members. It is quite a loss to a Southern province to let a talented, well qualified sister or brother go. But in honesty it must be said that financial considerations do sometimes play a role in transfers from South to North. Often the Northern province has financial and material means that are lacking in the South. For a Southern province it may open up good prospects to send members to the Netherlands.

Everyone can see that there are needs in the Netherlands that demand action. But it is important for a religious order to be clear what it has in mind when inviting foreign religious. What tasks will be assigned to them? Can these not be performed by anyone else? Is it not better to give their own community fresh impetus based on its own charisma? When foreign religious are deployed in existing projects, one should ask oneself whether it is a matter of reinforcing existing projects that would be difficult or impossible to keep going otherwise. In other words, it should happen only if the presence of foreign religious will really benefit the project. With their vitality and fresh slant on things foreign religious can add vital impetus to the religious life and mission of Dutch religious.

Some international religious institutes give as their reason for internationalisation that they want the international character of the order as a whole to be reflected in the composition of their own communities. And in some orders, the decision to invite co-religious from another country to the Netherlands is implicitly or explicitly prompted by the hope that their example will have an impact on the local youth. At the very least the presence of foreign religious, who are usually fairly young, breaks down the image of an aging order or congregation. It is a moot point, however, whether their presence will have such an impact on Dutch youth that they will seriously consider whether a religious life is worth their while as well.

The communities of a growing number of Dutch religious orders today reflect the multicultural society that the Netherlands, and the Dutch church, have become by now. Obviously this calls for mutual adaptation, and that is bound to cause tension. But there has always been tension – between old and young, between conservatives and progressives, et cetera. Encounter between cultures can have a tempering effect. After all, in such encounters one comes to realise that there are other ways of believing, assembling, experiencing, worshipping and thinking.
4 Preparation

4.1 Study of the Dutch language and culture

On the whole Dutch missionaries were (and still are) thoroughly prepared for their mission abroad. They learn the rudiments of the language and culture of the country where they will be going; they are given practical lessons; they devote time to theology and Bible study. Often their training serves as a kind of selection: Are they suitable candidates for missionary work? Are they good at teamwork? Are they physically fit for a different climate? Do they adapt easily? After their arrival in the other country they are often allowed time to gain experience and absorb necessary knowledge and skills required by the local situation.

Similar preparation is desirable for foreign missionaries coming to the Netherlands. It is recommended that even before their departure they start studying the Dutch language, culture and social and ecclesiastic developments. This basic knowledge will enable them to determine their own activities in the Netherlands. Most religious institutes make sure that foreign members do an intensive course in Dutch immediately after their arrival.

The importance of learning Dutch cannot be overemphasised. To a great extent language is basic to working and living in the Netherlands. It is not just a matter of vocabulary and grammar, but more particularly of getting to know local customs and conventions. That is best learnt in dealings with people. “As a foreigner (i.e. ‘someone coming from elsewhere’) we are only ‘viable’ if we form our own relations with ‘the here’ where we are now by respectfully becoming acquainted with the environment in which we have ended up”7 Some foreign religious have benefited greatly by studying in the Netherlands and in the process familiarising themselves with the language, church and society. “Get out there! Get to like the country where you’re living! Don’t isolate yourself in your own little world!” is their advice. The by law compulsory orientation course was a real help to many. Others did a diaconal training course that helped them enormously to understand the Dutch church. Contacts with people in their new country, study, new friendships and voluntary work all help them to feel at home.8 This calls for patience. Finding possibilities takes time. “Three years are not enough!”9

4.2 Motivation

Candidates’ motivation calls for special attention. Joining an international organisation should not be motivated by the choice of a higher standard of living or the opportunities that a sojourn abroad offers. But the reality is that Europe and the opportunities to be found here are an attraction for some people.

Apart from this, several foreign religious indicate that coming to the Netherlands was not their own decision. When your order calls on you, however, you obey. “I was not particularly motivated to

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7 Comment by Theo Vergeer OFM at closing service of CRL 2003.
8 It was suggested at CRL conferences that various courses could be arranged inter-institutionally. An example is the periodic courses for foreign religious that Kontakt der Kontinenten (Contact between Continents) has offered in recent years. The expertise in intercultural encounters of Urban Mission workers could also be utilised. Ultimately it is an essential feature of Urban Mission to cross boundaries. There are institutions in the Urban Mission network that have built up a store of experience in mentoring missionary workers who are trying to find their feet among the marginalised in Dutch society.
9 See CRL Report 2003, p. 16.
come to Europe, but out of gratitude for everything the European provinces have done for India I said ‘yes’.\textsuperscript{10} This is another difference from the foreign mission of Dutch religious, most of whom consciously chose to go into the field. The fact that they were highly motivated helped them through the inevitable bad patches.

4.3 Spiritual maturity

It requires a lot from a person to get her or his bearings in a new country. Hence congregations should not look only at candidates’ professional qualifications, but also at their emotional and spiritual maturity. A mature prayer life, moreover, helps people to keep their balance in trying circumstances. Stress and problems can be shed in prayer. It also sharpens powers of discrimination, which are helpful in situations where there are no easy answers. Besides, a congregation’s specific spirituality creates a sense of solidarity between members from different backgrounds.

Lack of these inner resources entails a risk that people will hang on to their own culture and ways of thinking, which will seriously hamper any meaningful input in the Netherlands. After all, such input requires openness to the other culture. It means that one must first be fully at ease with oneself and rooted in one’s own culture. That is a cardinal reason not to leave one’s own environment too hastily.\textsuperscript{11}

In their selection religious orders appear to balance various considerations. On the one hand they require a measure of psychological and spiritual maturity, on the other a flexible disposition is essential. Older priests in particular often find it difficult to come to terms with the totally different status they have in Dutch society. Some institutions have had positive experiences with young foreign members who go on courses in Europe.

4.4 Permits

A very prosaic but, alas, major problem is the residence and work permits needed for foreign religious. In the Netherlands they come up against a political climate that is inhospitable to foreigners. To foreign religious the Dutch bureaucratic system and intricate rules are a nasty surprise. “I expected to get cracking right away but soon discovered that in the Netherlands everything is regulated by law, and I couldn’t get a work permit.”\textsuperscript{12}

Of late government appears to have reservations about the entry of religious workers (priests, imams, pandits, missionaries, etc.) from other countries. All religious organisations complain about the abstruse and cumbersome procedures. To foreign sisters, brothers and pastors who want to prepare to come to the Netherlands this uncertainty is extremely trying. More than once paperwork and red tape were the reasons why a proposed appointment did not materialise. In the long run the frequent refusals of a work permit are experienced by foreign religious as a hurtful lack of recognition of their input on the part of Dutch society.

In recent years CMC has persistently petitioned the Dutch government for greater flexibility in the granting of residence permits to foreign religious. The lobbying the CMC has done along with other religious groups under the umbrella of Interchurch Contact in Government Matters appears to be bearing some fruit at long last. In the spring of 2006 the minister of immigration finally instituted

\begin{footnotes}
\item[10] Sr Elsy Varghese SSPS, introduction at CRL 2000.
\item[12] Sr Elsy Varghese SSPS, introduction at CRL 2000.
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new regulations for the admission and residence of foreigners coming to the Netherlands to spread a religious message. In these regulations they are referred to as ‘spiritual ministers’. The term comprehends priests, ministers, imams and missionaries. It excludes religious who work mainly within the walls of a religious house and do not spread their religious vision to others. For the latter category the regulations have become slightly more lenient, for instance in that they need not meet all the requirements of the specific Act. There is a supplementary naturalisation requirement for spiritual ministers, both long-standing ones and newcomers. A positive feature of the new regulations is that a spiritual minister can apply for an indefinite residence permit after five years.

4.5 Managers

In regard to preparation, people chosen for a position in their general council are in a different situation from contemplatives or members with a missionary or diaconal task. As a rule, counsellors have a limited period – often only a few months – to arrange the move and prepare themselves. Actually these new counsellors find the transition too abrupt and difficult to absorb. It helps if Dutch co-religious realise what a major change it entails and deal with it sensitively, allowing their foreign sister or brother scope and time to settle in.

4.6 Preparation of the Dutch community

Another aspect calling for attention is that religious institutes that invite foreign members need to prepare their Dutch members for the arrival of the foreigners. Their life also changes when co-religious from another country and a different culture – usually much younger people – join the community. One embarks on a process when one becomes international. There must be enough willingness withing the religious institute to do so. Sometimes it takes years to establish the necessary support base in an organisation. But it would be a sorry state of affairs if foreign religious arriving in the Netherlands were to meet with resistance.

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13 In the cabinet’s response to the advice to the Advisory Committee on immigration matters ‘spiritual minister’ is defined as [our translation] “a foreigner holding a spiritual, religious or worldview-related office, working as a spiritual director or minister of religion, or performing activities of a predominantly religious, spiritual or worldview-related nature on behalf of a denomination or spiritual or worldview-related organisation, or disseminating a religious or worldview-related message in some other way”.

14 The cabinet’s response explicitly states [our translation]: “Foreigners that perform activities exclusively on behalf of the organisation without spreading a religious or worldview-related message do not fall in the category of spiritual minister. Here one thinks of the performance of a managerial task, meditation and contemplation.”

15 At the time of writing it is not known exactly when the new regulations will come into effect. For the latest information, contact the head of CMC’s Services department.
5 Mentoring

5.1 Culture shock
Any foreigner arriving in the Netherlands experiences culture shock. There is so much that is different: the climate, ways of understanding and thinking, the way decisions are taken, customs regarding hospitality, eating habits, ways of praying, the role of the family. “At home you live in a network of relations, while in the Netherlands you find yourself in an individualistic world of privacy and anonymity. At home you are known by name, you are needed; here you experience yourself as redundant, not known for what you are and what you have done.”

Foreign religious have to let go of a lot of things. Most of them find the transition to a highly secularised society difficult and problematic. Their identity as father, sister or brother is contested in the Netherlands. They have to give up their original image of their religious status, for most Dutch people care little about that. Things that seemed assured in their own country cannot be taken for granted over here. They find the polarisation in the Dutch church extremely painful. At first the ecumenical attitude of many of their Dutch co-religious and their views on all sorts of religious and social issues strike them as strange. What is required is nothing less than kenosis – a total self-emptying. An Indonesian sister commented: “Coming here was a process of letting go … It sounds very lovely, ‘empty-handed mission’, but it costs a lot of effort and tears.” Dutch religious have difficulty appreciating how hard their foreign brothers or sisters find life in the initial period.

5.2 Cultural conflict within communities
It is not just the climate, culture, society and church that are different; their own congregations or orders are unfamiliar. The latter can be particularly painful. Most religious institutes ensure that necessary information about the community in the Netherlands is furnished in advance. But the different mentalities of Westerners (highly goal-oriented, businesslike) and Southerners (more person-oriented) remain a source of friction in communities. At CRL conferences it has been mentioned that Westerners tend to be domineering, know all the answers, have the first word and thus stop Southerners from initiating projects. Highly qualified people suddenly feel helpless because they cannot communicate fluently. Some have even said that they sometimes feel more like objects for assistance than subjects able to offer help.

5.3 Need for mentoring
Mentoring is extremely important for foreign religious and international communities. On the whole, most religious institutes see to it that foreign religious have a personal mentor, with whom they can discuss everything confidentially. It is advisable that mentors should have some experience of intercultural communication. Most communities also provide an external mentor for the whole group, with whom they can discuss diverse issues that arise in the group.

Many religious institutes encourage their foreign religious to go for some kind of course or training in the Netherlands. As pointed out already, this is an excellent way to find their feet. It also provides foreign religious with new resources that they can take back home with them and put to good use.

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16 Carla van Thiel, introduction at CRL 2001.
5.4. Contact with their own roots

‘Reverse mission’ tends to be a quest fraught with apparently insoluble problems. Hence it is reassuring to know that there are others pursuing a similar course. Many participants in CRL conferences have indicated how important gatherings with other foreign religious are to them. They provide an opportunity for discussion with others contending with similar experiences and learning from one another.

In addition many find it wonderful occasionally to make a sortie into their own culture: to attend a Philippine mass, eat Indonesian food, chat to compatriots. It is good to have occasions to experience their identity, to engage with each other and their own traditions. It relieves the loneliness that everyone feels from time to time. In the end one’s mother tongue speaks the language of one’s heart.

Finally it is important to maintain ties with their native countries. Modern communication media make this easy. Most organisations also have a rule that foreign religious have a few months’ home leave every second or third year.

5.5. Inculturation: an ongoing process

It has been pointed out at CRL conferences that new challenges arise as one proceeds. Dealing with the challenges of embarking on the new culture requires effort. An Indonesian sister comments: “It remains a huge stride. But it proceeds in small steps day by day.”

Some foreign religious who have been in the Netherlands for some time describe a development process from adaptation to acceptance of their own identity. The first few years they put a lot of effort into learning the language and getting to know the culture. During this initial period they tend to adapt as much as possible. They only manage to rid themselves of these ‘adaptive tendencies’ once they feel less insecure about their environment and their functioning in it. They come to accept that they are different in certain respects, with a foreign accent and a different cultural background. “The older I get, the more Antillian I feel,” says one sister who has been in the Netherlands a long time. They also discover that they can contribute new things from their own background and personalities that are enriching to everybody. It takes pain and trouble to reach that point, but these religious also indicate that they experienced tremendous personal growth in the process. Living in another culture and another country creates openness. It affords a broader outlook on life and makes it easier to see things in perspective. “And when you get to the nitty-gritty of life – the joys and sorrows, the strengths and fears of human beings, or whatever – it is recognisable across all cultural differences, religions and situations. That way you retrieve your own core, you are at home with yourself and therefore with life, with your own Creator and the other person’s God.”

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17 Sr Johanna Ketelaar, introduction at CRL 2003.
6 Areas of work

6.1 Pioneering work

In a sense, foreign religious coming to the Netherlands are pioneers. Often their task is not circumscribed in advance. They have to determine creatively what they can mean to the Dutch church and society. Many tend to want to launch into action too precipitately. But without a solid foundation in the form of a good command of the language and culture it is not really possible to make a meaningful contribution. Language remains a handicap for a long time. A Philippine father who has been in the Netherlands for close on ten years observes: “Sometimes I feel helpless and frustrated. I don’t always manage to express my thoughts and feelings in Dutch.” And a Nigerian father comments: “The drawback of working in a foreign culture is that everything costs far more time and effort. I always have to spend a lot of time preparing for things. At first it was also complicated because people were not accustomed to having a black priest. They are beginning to get used to it.” An Indonesian sister warns others not to have excessively high expectations. “If you set too many goals, you just incur stress and forget the process you are engaged in. My road is not a highway, it is more like a path in a jungle. Sometimes I wonder if it does not still have to be cleared. But it is on that small path that you hear the birdsong.”

Below we mention some of the areas in which foreign religious are active. We include comments made at CRL conferences.

6.1.1 Managerial work for their own religious organisation

The best way of finding your feet in Dutch society is to plunge straight into it: take on activities, study, et cetera. Religious that are part of their general council have a problem, however, in that their work demands so much time and energy that they cannot really undertake any other activities. The danger is that foreign members of the general council will serve their whole term in a kind of vacuum: uprooted from their own country with no opportunity to find their feet in the Netherlands, exclusively occupied with their own religious institute. Their council term is a kind of ‘hibernation’, when it is over spring will start anew. “And woe betide you if you are re-elected…” The art, also for managers, is to see their time in the Netherlands as a mission, not just a job. A recommendation regularly heard at CRL conferences is to give counsellors a chance to take on other tasks in addition to their managerial work.

6.1.2 Missionary or diaconal work

A number of foreign religious have specific missionary or diaconal assignments in the Netherlands. They try to shape their mission in solidarity with people who have little or no say in Dutch society: people in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, migrants, refugees, the homeless, drug addicts. The fact that they themselves have been through, or are in the midst of, a process of settling in reduces the distance between them and other migrants. In addition, as noted already, many foreign religious come from parts of the world where people are accustomed to living in multicultural and multireligious situations. This gives them opportunities to make a distinctive contribution to intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Dutch religious observe that because of their origins and mentality their co-religious are often better able to reach other foreigners. They fulfil a bridging function between foreigners and native Dutch.

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6.1.3 Pastoral work in migrant parishes
Another area is pastoral work in migrant parishes. Many foreign Christians do not feel at home in
Dutch parishes. Missionaries have always played a major role in ministry to foreigners because of
their familiarity with other cultures. Of late foreign religious are increasingly taking on tasks in this
pastoral area.

6.1.4 Tasks in the area of spirituality and religious formation
Virtually all foreign religious notice that people in the Netherlands are spiritually searching. The
future of the church and the Christian faith in the Netherlands concerns them. They often emphasise
that religious in the Netherlands should reach the youth in particular. Some foreign religious have
taken on tasks in the field of religious formation that their institute offers for lay people and youths.

6.2 Presence
At CRL conferences, it is often said that the mission of foreign religious is best described as ‘being
there’: “Listening without judging, waiting, that is the way to find your mission over here.
Openness is a precondition for establishing rapport with people. Set your own ideas and
background aside. Learn to listen with your heart. People notice when you are really interested.
The main thing is not so much to achieve as to be there, especially among the poor. By hanging out
with them, you discover there is a lot going on at the grassroots in the Netherlands. Your mission
could be to join in with this, not as a social worker but as a human being. Being close to the people,
empty-handed maybe, but in solidarity. Trying to feel what they feel. That moves people. And
empty-handed you receive a lot. In this culture where time is money, spending time on others means
something.”\(^{19}\)

A classical mistake foreign religious make is that they are too quick to condemn secularisation and
modern, individualistic life. If they do not learn to deal with and understand ecclesiastic and social
developments in the Netherlands, the chances are that they will not make much headway. A
Nigerian father explains how he discovered the positive side of the Dutch church and society:
“Over here government does a lot of the work that the church is doing in Nigeria. There the church
is extremely important. I don’t mind that as a priest I don’t have the status that priests have at
home. I am forced to adopt a professional approach, which is a good thing. At home whatever you
do is readily accepted, because you are a priest. My contacts with diaconal centres have also been
enriching. I have learnt that there is poverty in this country too, even though at first glance it looks
so rosy. But everybody is respected in the diaconate. People don’t have to crawl to get something.
It is service with respect and concern.”

6.3 Individual mission or collective mission
Working at an international level can offer a new perspective on maintaining prestigious
institutional forms of the order’s mission (e.g. schools and hospitals). In the South these institutions
are still vitally important to most religious organisations, but in the Netherlands foreign religious
learn to relativise their importance. That is significant, because many new members – in their own
countries too – are not much attracted by the traditional institutional forms of apostolate.

Hence although one should guard against attaching undue importance to traditional institutions, the
idea of collective mission, over and above individual mission, remains worthwhile. The policy of
most religious organisations is that their foreign members must find the form of apostolate that

\(^{19}\) CRL Report 2003, p. 16.
appeals to them and that they want to do for themselves. Foreign religious, on the other hand, often say that they would like to have clearly defined tasks in the early stages. One foreign father describes his experience thus: “We get thrown in the deep end before we know how to swim!” Some international communities are exploring this question: what are the needs of this society and how can we as an organisation best help to alleviate them?
7 From multicultural to intercultural

7.1 The concept ‘culture’

The concept of culture is being given a lot of attention in diverse scientific disciplines. It is defined as an evolving system of values, norms and ways of life.20 To members of a particular group their culture, often unconsciously, directs their behaviour and outlook on life. A simple but astute definition of culture once offered at a CRL conference is “that which you take for granted”. It makes it clear that, say, Dutch ‘culture’ comprises a multitude of cultures: one thinks of the difference between urban and rural culture, or the various ‘subcultures’ among young people. Hence when speaking about contacts between people of different origins some people nowadays prefer to speak of ‘interculturation’, indicating that there is interaction between the specific cultures of actual human beings.

Within the same religious order there could be a culture that suits the older members but not the younger ones. That is not in itself connected with their nationalities.

7.2. Interculturalism presupposes openness

A community’s international or multicultural composition does not automatically mean that it is intercultural. Intercultural life means that each of the various cultures represented makes a real contribution to the life and work of the community. That presupposes openness and scope for the cultural distinctiveness of foreign members who have to reinforce the local community. If the congregation is of European origin, the local component will have to make a conscious distinction between the original inspiration (charisma) and its traditional embodiment.

Newcomers’ perception of mission may differ from that of Dutch members. Sometimes newcomers are very quick to judge the new situation (secularisation, aging religious communities) without properly understanding or appreciating developments in the Dutch context. On the other hand Dutch members sometimes refuse to do things differently from the way they have always been done. But it is disastrous to compare things with what they used to be or what they are elsewhere. Openness is a condition for fruitful coexistence and collaboration. For foreign religious, openness implies acceptance of the ways things have evolved and the good that has been accomplished. On the Dutch side, it means genuine willingness to listen to foreign co-religious and looking for new ways together. A foreign sister describes how mutual trust had to develop: “At first it was an obstacle that Dutch sisters kept saying: ‘That’s how it’s done here, that’s how it’s always been done.’ To me that was a negative experience. But now receptiveness has grown on both sides. Trust has to grow. They must also have found it difficult, we being younger people.”

7.3 Cultural dominance

Intercultural communal life and work become very difficult if a particular cultural group, wilfully or unwillingly (e.g. numerically), dominates the occupancy of responsible positions, control of material means, et cetera. A community’s diverse composition can prevent a particular nationality from dominating. It takes great sensitivity to handle power relations in a transitional phase. Intercultural life and work require equal treatment and contributions from all the nationalities and cultures represented. Experience has shown that people with missionary experience abroad are

often better able to function in an international group, since they know what it is like to be a stranger and have learnt how to handle cultural differences. It is important to be aware of one’s own racist and cultural prejudices. The point is to learn to accept other as equals.

7.4 Integration has to come from both sides

How sensitive these things are is evident in the resistance that the word ‘integration’ evokes among foreign religious. It has a marked implication that they have to adapt and relinquish their own identity. One joins in, somehow without changing the overall situation much. That is not what they would like. Integration has to come from both sides. Those who demand adaptation only on the part of foreign religious fail to see that the receiving Dutch communities have to adapt as well to make room, not only literally but especially figuratively, for foreign members. Some people prefer the word ‘participation’, which suggests scope to make one’s own contribution without forfeiting one’s identity. One also hears the expression ‘fitting in with’. Becoming part of a new society goes deeper than simply participating in it. You slot into the whole, with the other making room for you. The process cannot be one-sided. Without mutual openness and respect, without good communication, the internationalisation process is doomed to failure.

7.5 Pointers for living in an international community

The arrival of foreign religious changes the ordinary course of community life. Sharing the same spirituality does not guarantee unity, since each member expresses it in her or his own way. By no means everything can be taken for granted. Celebrating birthdays, for example, is not customary in all cultures. The interpretation of the three vows differs. Whereas Dutch religious may see the use of second-hand goods as indicative of evangelical thrift, foreigners may find it problematic at first. Some Dutch religious observe that their foreign peers are very spontaneous and informal at a personal level, but when it comes to liturgy and community structures they are not and adhere rigidly to formal authority relations. Ceremonies, pomp and pageantry are important. The Dutch scene is far too austere, too Protestant.

International communities should realise that their life is influenced by unconscious factors. Besides, it is often not the big things that cause strain in a community but everyday issues. Pointers for community life include the following:

- Language: there should be explicit agreement on the use of language in a group or community. Dutch speakers should also make sure that foreign religious understand them properly. In many Southern cultures people tend to concur politely or deferentially, even when they don’t really know what is meant or don’t actually agree.
- Food: foreign religious should be able to eat their own kind of food fairly regularly.
- Liturgical forms: the signs and symbols used should reflect the composition of the group.
- Family ties: these carry far more weight in Southern cultures than in the Netherlands. Many foreign religious have family responsibilities and contact with the family is important.
- Good communication: community life is always a challenge, since it calls for adaptation. Make sure that all members can voice their opinions and make an input in community life. Differences of opinion and approach must be thrashed out thoroughly. There should also be scope to express emotion without feeling threatened. As noted already, it is often helpful to have an external mentor.
Having said all that, the fact of the matter is that most of the problems arising among members of multicultural communities stem from character and temperamental differences rather than cultural ones.

7.6 Pointers for the functioning of international religious organisations

Internationalisation has implications at various organisational levels. Those responsible for formation must ensure that the international character is constantly sustained and developed. As part of their training, new members should if at all possible learn a second language, if necessary by doing a course in another country. It is also a good idea to have the writings of the founder translated so as to make them accessible to everybody in the religious institute. The institute as a whole should have a clear policy on the lingua franca in general chapters, as well as reports and publications intended for the organisation as a whole. While this costs time, money and effort, it is of vital importance.

7.7 Mutual enrichment

It takes courage and creativity to establish international communities in the face of diversity and to regard the diversity as enriching. Religious directly involved in the internationalisation of their religious institute say that it is costly in terms of input, time, effort and money. Internationalisation is a risk, whose success cannot be guaranteed in advance. But many religious engaged in internationalisation unhesitatingly declare it a risk worth taking. Foreigners who have been here for some time say that they have come to appreciate many aspects of life in the Netherlands. Enrichment also requires honestly valuing their own culture while at the same time learning to relativise it.

Dutch religious often say that the advent of foreign religious injected fresh vitality into their community. Their religiosity is an essential ingredient of daily life and a source of inspiration to their Dutch peers. Many Dutch religious are profoundly influenced by polarisation in the Dutch church. Foreign co-religious are often able to break free from set views and patterns in the thinking and worship of the community. In community life they spend time on worship, fellowship and exuberant feasting. Qualities commonly attributed to them by Dutch religious are spontaneity and warmth, blowing like a fresh breeze through the community. Many members of internationalised communities indicate that they do not want to and cannot do without their foreign co-religious any more.
8 Back home

8.1 A fresh culture shock

A final point is the return home. The experience of missionaries all over the world is that in the course of time they become alienated from their own countries and cultures. When they go home on leave, they know it is only for a short time. They meet family and friends and prepare themselves for the next spell abroad. Maybe they do a brief course, but they do not become wholly part of the life there. And even while on leave, they discover how they have become strangers in their own countries. They understand the language, but many other things are new to them. Often it is difficult to tell their stories. They are suspended between two worlds.

For foreign religious who have lived in the Netherlands for a long time a new culture shock awaits them on their return home. Many of them say that they came to appreciate the democratic leadership style in the Netherlands, efficient ways of congregating, quality input in all kinds of voluntary work, punctuality in keeping appointments, ecumenical attitudes, forthright communication, and so on. They take all this luggage home with them. They have changed and must find their feet anew in their native land.

In this respect the experience of Dutch missionaries on their return home is relevant. They find that there is a gap in their lives. There are so many things they have not shared in their own country. At the same time they battle to tell the story of what they did experience overseas. They find it helpful to be in touch with others who have had the same experience: sharing memories, telling stories that are properly understood, swopping yarns with people who know what they’re talking about.

8.2 Experience of a returned foreign missionary

By now there is a sizeable group of foreign religious who have returned home after a lengthy stay in the Netherlands. After twelve year in the Netherlands Elsy Varghese SSPS returned to her native country, India, in 2003. In a letter to her fellow sisters she evaluates her stay in the Netherlands:

“If I look back on these twelve years I have a sense of satisfaction and gratitude, a truly happy feeling and even a measure of pride. I’d like to see these twelve years of my life as valuable, instructive and rich in experience, because in my work here in India I notice that people regard me as a person with broad experience. I feel that my horizons have been broadened regarding the way I think and see things, and I’m glad about that. Naturally I had difficulty adapting at first, especially to the food. And the climate continued to be a problem. But looking back I regard the pain and the problems as valuable.

I don’t know if I came with the notion that I was a missionary, like some of you who came to India. I simply kept an open mind and an open heart: let come what may. Obviously I was a stranger in a strange land. In a sense that was unique, but I felt welcome and I had the feeling that the sisters and those I met did everything possible to make me feel at home. My fellow sisters gave me every freedom to do what I wanted to do, which I consider one of the best things about my stay in the Netherlands.

Maybe my ‘dancing mission’ provided plenty of opportunity to become part of the Dutch community by exercising my talent. I believe the fact that I was a sister influenced people’s lives.”
Probably this influence was also noticeable in my mission among disadvantaged women who ended up in brothels.

I was happy and grateful to be able to work as a nurse. After all, I was trained for that and it made me feel part of a professional group. When I got up in the morning I knew what I would be doing that day and the day after. That is why I think some sort of qualification is important. I was also glad to be able to contribute financially. I know money is not the main thing, but emotionally it is an important aspect.

I think I was able to share my Indian spiritual wealth through meditation, Indian music, religious dancing, et cetera. Everything I learned in my formative years I could share in the Netherlands. My grassroots spirituality I got at home from my parents, brother and sister. In the course of my education I built on that. I think I communicated these aspects of spirituality personally by praying with people, through personal conversations and by listening to them. To me, those were moments of shared spirituality.

When I arrived in the Netherlands I felt welcome. You feel you are the centre of attention. Yet the preparations for my arrival were limited. I had to find my own way, although naturally with the help of the mother superior. It would also have been easier if I knew the language better. The younger you are, the more easily you learn it, especially the Dutch language.

[…] This has been an important period for my future life. I think it may be the years (between 30 and 45) when everybody wants to do something. One could call it ‘blooming’, the most creative period in a human life. But one can also bloom and be creative in other phases. When I look back on my life and time in the Netherlands I see it as a time of blooming. That is only possible if you receive acceptance and love from others and I was fortunate to have that in plenty… Thanks be to God and all of you.”
9 Epilogue

One of the religious whom we interviewed for this report commented on the internationalisation in his community, with a due sense of understatement, that it is ‘not nothing’. It clearly involves a lot to bring foreign co-religious to the Netherlands. The host community must be prepared to make a fresh start with, often, much younger people from other cultures. That calls for an openness and flexibility that not everybody can muster. The foreign religious faces the challenge of settling into Dutch society, the Dutch church and, by no means the least, into her or his own religious institute. Experience has shown that not everybody manages to do so. Foreigners have difficulty mastering the language and culture sufficiently and to find their way through the complexities of Dutch religious and cultural life. It is not easy for a person in the prime of life to discover that he or she cannot connect with life in the Netherlands.

The CMBR realises that internationalisation is not an option for every religious organisation. Neither does it present internationalisation as a panacea to assure a future for religious life in the Netherlands. In our view internationalisation is always an adventure. It is an adventure that a growing number of Dutch religious institute are embarking on and in which they are still feeling their way, making mistakes but nonetheless gradually making progress. Significantly, everybody that was interviewed for this document said that as far as they were concerned the adventure was worthwhile and they felt enriched by it. Hence, although we as a missiony comitee realise that internationalisation is not a panacea for Dutch religious organisations, we nonetheless make bold to say that it is an important development that will help to determine the future of religious life in the Netherlands.

As mentioned earlier, internationalisation of Dutch religious life should be seen against the background of globalisation, worldwide migration and multiculturalism in the Dutch church and society. It entails complex processes at work around the world that are no longer reversible. In this context the CMBR finds it only logical that religious institutes, too, will become ever more ‘colourful’. It is an exciting and thrilling development in present-day religious life, not only in the Netherlands but elsewhere in the world as well. It also presents religious with a new task and a new challenge. By living together as brothers and sister in international communities they bear tangible witness that dialogue and intercultural sharing of things and dreams are values in themselves, an enrichment of human history.

For some decades now, we hear about ‘mission on six continents’. That expresses the idea that there is a missionary mandate in every country and culture. Foreign religious in the Netherlands exemplify par excellence that mission is no longer a traffic from North to South. A major task in coming years will be to work out the theology of such a ‘mission on six continents’ in greater depth and actualise it on the basis of the real-life experience of foreign religious currently active in our part of the world. The CMBR would like to continue to provide a forum for religious in the Netherlands to accomplish this theological deepening and actualisation together.
Appendix 1: Data on foreign religious in the Netherlands: numbers, work areas, nationality

This overview is but a picture of the given situation at a specific time. People come and go. Each religious institute operates independently. There is no central body who keeps statistics. This overview was made by contacting all religious institutes in the Netherlands which the CMBR suspects has foreign religious in their midst. This appendix gives an indication of the situation on September 1st 2006.

*****

a = general council members
b = missionary tasks
c = different forms of pastoral work
d = contemplative life
e = study
f = care of the elderly
g = youth ministry
h = work in parish/seminary/convent
i = unknown

Active women religious

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### Priests and brothers of new religious congregations

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### Priest religious

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25
Monks

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Brothers

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**Total: 130 female religious**

**55 male religious**

*****

Foreign religious in the Netherlands and their nationalities

**Latin-America**
- Argentina: 4
- Aruba: 2
- Brezil: 3
- Chili: 1
- Colombia: 2
- Mexico: 2
- Paraguay: 1
- Dutch.Antilles: 3
- Surinam: 2

**Total: 20**

**North-America**
- Canada: 2
- U.S.A.: 5

**Total: 7**

**Asia:**
- Filipines: 9
- India: 39
- Indonesia: 60

**Total: 108**

**Africa**
- RD Congo: 2
- Ghana: 2
- Cameroon: 2
- Kenya: 1
- Madagascar: 1
- Nigeria: 2
- Tanzania: 1

**Total: 11**

**Europe**
- Albania: 1
- Belgium: 6
- Denmark: 2
- Germany: 7
- France: 7
- Croatia: 1
- Norway: 1
- Austria: 5
- Poland: 2
- Russia: 1
- Slowakia: 1
- Switserland: 4

**Total: 39**