The clerical life

by Debra Bendis in the November 22, 2000 issue

A Bishop's Tale: Mathias Hovius Among His Flock in Seventeenth-Century Flanders, by Craig Harline and Eddy Put

When Catholic Archbishop Mathias Hovius died on May 30, 1620, no crowds swarmed around to try to grab a piece of clothing or even a piece of the corpse itself. However holy his life had been, he was apparently not considered a potential saint. As authors Craig Harline and Eddy Put record, Hovius was "not beloved, but rather respected, and the quite routine ceremonies that followed his death reflected that."

Yet with the publication of this book, Harline and Put reveal a man who, if not saintly, is extraordinary in his zealous steadfastness and devotion to the Catholic Church, sustaining and shaping it through the chaotic times of the Counter-Reformation. While this is a nonfiction work based on 13 years of research, *A Bishop's Tale* is no dry recitation of archived records. Instead, it is an exciting narrative that drops the reader into the mess and color of daily life in 16th-17th century Belgium. What was then called the Spanish Netherlands was being tugged between Spain and independence, between Catholicism and Calvinism.

Harline is professor of history at Brigham Young University; Put is senior assistant at the Belgian National Archives and lecturer at the Catholic University of Leuven. In a "Word After" that is almost as fascinating as the rest of the book, they describe their summers traveling through the archives of Belgium, the Netherlands and the Vatican. Their previous work, *The Burdens of Sister Margaret*, delighted and impressed critics as an extraordinarily rich narrative shaped by sound historical research and discipline. They have done the same with *A Bishop's Tale* but have produced even more vignettes of the culture as the archbishop saw it.

Research began when Harline and Put discovered a daybook kept by Mathias Hovius, archbishop of Mechelen. In it, Hovius had carefully documented the details of the conversations, confrontations and conundrums that characterized his life and work (nine other volumes in the set were lost).

As the primate of the Low Countries, the archbishop "did it all." Hovius was "abbot, adviser to the prince, chaplain to thousands of soldiers, superior to hundreds of nuns, monks and other religious, and a regular correspondent of the mighty, but also a reformer of public health, a frequent dinner companion of small and great, diligent shepherd of more than 450 parishes, consecrator of hundreds of altars, confirmer of thousands of youthful Catholics, and gracious host of exhausting audiences with people from the entire social spectrum, who crossed his tile floor to tell the deepest secrets or recount the simplest troubles, most of which he dutifully recorded in his overflowing book of days." All of this has been absorbed and presented in a narrative marked by wit and a fast pace. Harline and Put tell tales of nuns trying to get free of convents, of canons quarreling over favorite seminary candidates, of parishioners complaining that their priest is living in the church--all transpiring in this poor, violent and precarious time.

One story takes place during a "cease-fire" between the Catholic King Philip of Spain and the independence-seeking States General of the Netherlands. Hovius was grateful for the break in the demolition of towns, murder of citizens and the persecution of Catholic leaders. But he noted that life was still anything but peaceful for him.

Stewardship, for example, was always a problem. Hovius understood the economic struggles of his poor rural pastors, and labored incessantly for the betterment of those in his care. But he could not erase "the fundamental ingredients in all pastorly woes: not enough income, not enough discipline, not enough pastors." In the case of Hendrik Heynot, pastor of Opwijk, the archbishop's skill and patience were severely tested. Heynot's parish farmers were to tithe one of every 33 sheaves of wheat to the local parish, but apparently they could never bring in the sheaves fast enough for Pastor Heynot.

Heynot would show up at each harvest with an accounting book in one hand and a pitchfork in the other. His mother, father and sister were likely to come along, pick up the sheaves due them, toss them from one family member to another and then over the hedge into the churchyard. On one occasion, Heynot argued with a parishioner about a beer tax, then struck the parishioner while Mother Heynot dumped "a warm liquid of unknown origin all over him."

When parishioners complained to Hovius, the archbishop took his time in responding to them. He knew that he must weight the need to support his clergy with the reality

of the flaws in the tithing system. He must retain the power of his office by demonstrating to the parishes that they could not so easily remove a priest, yet he needed to restore parish peace before the Protestants could make inroads among the disgruntled. And as always, he must balance his relationship with the local secular justices with the far-reaching tentacles of the church in Rome--a power that often challenged his own jurisdiction and attempted reforms.

There were the reported sins of Sister Cornelia of the Convent of Leuven, who was accused, tried and convicted of stealing 1,300 florins from a patient. Although she said that the dying man had told her to give the money to poor friends and relatives, Sister Cornelia could not explain the remodeling in her cell back at the convent, with its striking silk curtains and "leaden windows emblazoned with her motto." Nor could she explain reports that the money had appeared in the home of a nobleman, causing another nobleman to shout, "Jesus, aren't we overflowing in money here!"

But the archbishop's most chronic burden was his perpetual efforts to reform the canons of St. Sulpitius, whose patron saint, note the authors, may as well have been "Our Lady of Perpetual Trouble." There was the provost, accused among other things of "drinking himself into a stupor at the Archers Guild. Dancing himself into torrential sweats. Kissing women and men. Gorging himself at feasts. Kicking a magistrate in the shins. Head-butting one man to the ground . . . locking up guests in his house to drink with him."

And, most memorably, St. Sulpitius was home to Canon Arnold Cryters and Dean Arnold Wiggers, who arguably had the most fun of any Catholic priests in the 1600s. The two men attended matins and vespers rarely, and when they did, tended to laugh outloud or walk around the church during a boring hymn. "They especially loved to argue, right in choir, over how services should be performed. They argued with the boys from the Latin School over who should sing first . . . often skipping verses, mumbling through as fast as they could, and starting a new verse before the other side of the choir had finished the last. . . . Dean Wiggers boasted that he could say an entire Mass in 15 minutes." This last feat allowed them to begin their evening activities: gambling, drinking, dancing and brawling in the taverns of Diest.

In this case, Hovius's authority was pitted against the nobility of some canons, and against their powerful patrons. Given this culture and tradition, it was debatable whether he could prosecute or remove Wiggers or Cryters on his own authority. Yet Hovius was determined, and tried various measures on the scoundrels through the

years. He even overcame his distaste for Rome and threatened to bring in Rome's local representative, or nuncio. During one visit to St. Sulpitius, he succeeded in obtaining a written confession from Wiggers, but generally the penitence of dean and canon lasted only as long as the archbishop was in town, and concluded with the two mens' next excursion to the closest tavern.

These and other stories entertain as they educate, offering a close-up of day-to-day Catholicism, village life and the bawdy humor generated by human frailty and feistiness. *A Bishop's Tale* is an historical feast.