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Servants of mankind

Catholic Mission.

Journalist and anthropologist Mar Oomen outlines special life paths in her family history, Catholic missionaries in her case, but also clearly describes how the world changed in those decades.

Rob Hartmans



Janus Oomen (center) at work in the missionary hospital in Sulawesi, Indonesia. Photo Erfgoedcentrum Nederlands kloosterleven. Collection Sisters JMJD

Family histories. Not so long ago they were hardly written, but nowadays you can fill the ditch with them. Sometimes they are little more than collections of equally strong and unverifiable stories, such as *De stamhouder* by Alexander Münnighoff, and not infrequently the ordinary reader gets the idea that he or she is an enormous loser if you do not come from a family that has done all sorts of extraordinary things. That is why this reviewer now and then starts to sigh despondently when another family history flops on the mat.

But sometimes this is not justified, because a good family history sheds light on an aspect of the past that is less well known. That may be the development of a particular region, or of a specific occupational group, or of a religious community. The latter is the case in *Missievaders* by journalist and anthropologist Mar Oomen (1961).

When it comes to the Catholic mission, the image immediately arises of priests and nuns in the colonies who tried to lure the darkness-wandering pagans into the warm and safe womb of the Catholic Church. This in itself is not surprising, because around 1930 no fewer than five thousand Dutch religious were living abroad to convert the local population, with which our country supplied the most missionaries in the world in proportion.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, more and more lay people felt called to help to propagate and spread the faith.

Shelter Church Mentality

Oomen's grandparents were among the Catholic youths who, around 1920, resented the "hide church mentality" of the older generation, which, in its desire to finally be accepted as full-fledged Dutchmen, was said to have adapted too much to the liberal-bourgeois culture.

After receiving his doctorate as a biologist, grandfather Janus Oomen refused an academic appointment in America, and announced, to the horror of those around him, that he was going to study medicine so he could help the poorest of the poor.

According to his dismayed family, this was whispered to him by his fiancée, Stans Küller, who studied law at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. She was deeply convinced of the superiority of the Catholic faith, which she believed was the only remedy against 'The Great Suffering in the World'. America stood for her as a symbol of materialism, hedonism and 'the sluggishness of the easygoing western decadence'.

Janus and Stans decided that they would serve the Lord and Mankind, and asked "Rome" for permission to perform a so-called Saint Joseph marriage, which would release them from the obligation as good Catholics to father children immediately.

Stans became director of the first Catholic School for Social Work in Sittard and Janus studied to become a doctor, while in the meantime he also founded the Catholic Boy Scouts. After a few years the first children were born, and at the end of 1933 the time had finally come: with their two sons, the Oomen couple left for the Dutch East Indies to work in a mission hospital in the north of present-day Sulawesi. Unfortunately for the zealous Catholics, this region had long since been Christianized, albeit by the 'heretical' Protestants. Nevertheless, there was a lot of work to be done for a doctor, while Stans founded a weaving school and taught the population so-called round dances, an alternative to the immoral dance forms from America and the native dances that were considered lascivious.

After the Japanese invasion, the family of five children was interned. Janus and Stans of course separated from each other, and after a while the two eldest sons were taken away from their mother. They survived the war and also the bloody Bersiap period between the Japanese defeat and the return of Dutch authority, during which radical nationalist Indonesians murdered many Westerners and Chinese. While Janus, who considered himself indispensable, remained in Indonesia for the time being, Stans returned to the Netherlands with her children

in the fall of 1946. Dries, the eldest son and father of Mar Oomen, went to the same Catholic boarding school that Janus had once before.

The bar was set very high for the intelligent progenitor and his parents assumed that he would follow in the footsteps of his successful and highly regarded father. Dries also went to study medicine and at the end of the fifties he left for Africa, together with his wife Pauke, as a missionary doctor. Several children were born here, including the author of this book.

Superiority thinking

The Africa of the 1960s, however, could not be compared to the East Indies of the 1930s, and Dries began to have more and more trouble with Western superiority thinking in general and the arrogance and short-sightedness of the Catholic mission in particular. The idea that Africa should develop in the same way as the industrialized world began to bother him more and more.

In 1968, the family drove from Ethiopia back to the Netherlands in six weeks, where grandfather Janus expected his brilliant son to live next door and soon become a professor. Dries, however, began to feel increasingly uncomfortable following in his father's footsteps, and after some time a bipolar disorder revealed itself in him, resulting in his never returning to work.

What makes Mission Fathers such a good book is that Oomen not only describes in an empathetic and well-documented way the life paths of her grandparents and parents, but also paints a clear and convincing picture of the changing world in which they operated. This gives emboss to her family's changing views - which sometimes went unspoken but certainly manifested themselves - and you begin to understand something of the tensions these idealists were exposed to, without tending to identify with them entirely. In addition, the author writes with great insight and sensitivity about her father's mental illness, which is still a taboo subject.