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***Lecture on behalf of the book presentation of
thirty farewell speeches by Father Jan van Kilsdonk sj: for
victims of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Amsterdam in the late 1990s¹
Some general points of departure by
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In memory of my older friend

Introduction

Today is a highly touching moment for the family and friends of father Jan van Kilsdonk sj – who lived from 1917 until 2008 –, namely to celebrate the presentation by Armando Editore in Rome of relevant aspects of his words and work in the book ‘Addio Ragazzo di Luce’. It concerns thirty anonymised farewell speeches, held at funerals of young men who died because the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the late nineties of the past century in Amsterdam. He spoke, often at length, at the funerals of no less than 70 gay men, by far the hardest hit of this epidemic of any category in the Netherlands. Pierre Valkering presented a careful and extensive introduction including the theological aspects of his work and his words as beloved pastor in Amsterdam in the latest stage of his life. His farewell celebration with one and a half

¹ Jan van Kilsdonk sj (2016), ‘Addio Ragazza di Luce: per abbattere il muro dell’indifferenza’, *Introduzione di Pierre Valkering* (Rome: Armando Editore). First published in Dutch: Pater Jan van Kilsdonk sj, (2013), ‘Dag jongen van Licht: Toespraken bij het afscheid van homoseksuele mannen met een inleiding van Pierre Valkering’ (Farewell boy of Light; Farewell speeches for homosexual men, introduced by Pierre Valkering)), (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers), 2013, second print.

² The author met father Jan van Kilsdonk as pupil of the Ignatius College in Amsterdam in 1952. Since then started the friendship until his death in 2008.

thousand common men and women took place in Middle Age style in the oldest church of this city. The purpose of this lecture is – next to the book’s introduction – to briefly reflect on comparative elements of his thinking with supposed Dutch roots, the affinity of his thinking with current ideas of Pope Francis and a supposed affinity with the new social quality theory.³

As a result of the Italian translation the book and these elements may contribute to current debates about the outcomes of the Vatican Synod on Family, the political debates about the position of homosexuals and lesbians in Italy and beyond, and for example how to reflect in this context on the deeper causes of the awful shooting that recently took place in Orlando in the USA, June 2016.

A second reason that today is also a very touching moment concerns the invitation by Pope Francis to receive the book personally. In his life, father Jan van Kilsdonk was strand summoned to the Vatican to defend his words and work. It was contrary many doctrines and rules.⁴ This invitation – eight years after his death – may be seen as a gesture of love and great interest ‘by His Holiness’ in his words and work.⁵ It may demonstrate the extraordinary significance of the book for current debates on theological, political and normative levels. With this in mind it is of interest to refer to the words of the President of Eurispes about ‘Why this book is published in Italy’: *“Listening and respect. Two keywords. The pivot on which the whole relationship with the homosexual world is built by a famous Dutch priest, Father van Kilsdonk s.j.. A relation of great care, feeling, proximity, up to the participation in the suffering of those affected by the AIDS disease and to the accompaniment in the last farewell.. Listening and respect, therefore, as a condition for the better understanding; to process, on the one hand, a deep theological, moral, social reflection on the complex phenomenon*

³ The initiative to translate this Dutch book in the Italian language is made by the International Association on Social Quality (IASQ) in Amsterdam and Eurispes in Rome. Dutch friends and his family financed the translation by David Santoro (crowd-funding by the IASQ); Eurispes organised the production and publication of the book by Armando Editore in Rome. Valkhof Pers in Nijmegen took away her rights in order to pave the way for the publication. The Brotherhood of the Seventh Heaven assisted father van Kilsdonk to cope with his daily circumstances in the last ten years of his life and supported the organisation of this book. The author chaired this Brotherhood.

⁴ Paul Begheyn sj (2009), *‘Portret van een hartstochtelijk pastor (Portrait of a passionate pastor)*, (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers), p-78.

⁵ The Prefect Georg Gaenswein (2016), ‘Invitation of the participation in the General Audience of the Holy Father of Wednesday, June 22’ (Vatican: Prefettura Della Casa Pontificia), 11th June 2016. Both - Pope Francis and father van Kilsdonk - are Jesuits. In the very past Pope Francis visited the Ignatius College in Amsterdam. Father Jan van Kilsdonk taught here for years (see note-4).

of homosexuality and, on the other, to prove with facts marked by a particular kind of behaviour the highest of the civic virtues: that of human solidarity.”⁶

14th Century roots of Jan van Kilsdonk’s work in ‘the Low Countries’

Father van Kilsdonk was born in Brabant, at that time a strong Roman Catholic Province in the South of The Netherlands (also called the Low Countries). Since centuries his family were millers in the village of Zeeland, thus played a leading and rather aristocratic role in their communities. Especially the orders of the Franciscans and the Capuchins were very active in Brabant at that time. Their strong relationships, especially with daily circumstances and their affinity for a pastoral orientation impressed the young Van Kilsdonk. Because his strong intellectual and literary needs he decided to become a Jesuit, though never losing his pastoral passion.⁷ In the 14th Century the Province of Brabant was the source of inspiration for the painter Jeroen Bosch, currently a world-famous painter of this century. With his angles, devils, farmers, citizens, beggars, cheats, and a myriad of monsters he expressed an interpretation of God’s creation. He confronted this with the good and love as well with the bad and squalor and the never ending unbearable constraints of daily life. His highly complex and transformative work – accentuating the humble humanity - was completely different from mainstream painting in Italy, Spain or in northern European countries. All this was unthinkable without the influence of the **Brethren of Common Life** in his birthplace.⁸ Essential for these Brethren was and is the recognition of the significance of individual people as actors in and dialectical influence by their societal wholes and conditions.⁹ This in fact age-old characteristic of The Netherlands – ‘the Low Countries’ as Delta of Western Europe – essentially formed father Jan van Kilsdonk. He repeated endlessly that individual people

⁶ Gian Maria Fara (2016), ‘Why this book in Italy: presentation of the Italian edition’ (Rome: Eurispes), in: see note-1.

⁷ Personal discussions. See also note-4.

⁸ Stefan Fischer (2016), ‘Jheronimus Bosch: *Het complete werk (The complete work)*’, (Köln: Taschen GmbH), p. 23

⁹ Albert Hyma (1965), ‘*The Christian Renaissance and the History of the Devotio Moderna*’, (Connecticut: Archon Books), second edition. The founding fathers all stipulated that “we are taught by nature to lead the common life, for man is indeed a social animal as Aristotle justly remarked.”, p-68. This is also the fundamental proposition of the social quality theory, see note-9.

could move him beyond measure¹⁰ This also echoes the Brethren of the Common Life who were inspired by these characteristics as well.¹¹ They were the pillars of the '**Devotio Moderna**' in the Low Countries. The founder was Geert Groote (1340-1384) who seriously influenced seriously the northern Italian Renaissance with comrades as Jan Cele, Florens Radewijns, Wessel Gansfoort, Gerard Zerbolt, Everard Eza, Thomas à Kempis, John Wycliff, cs.¹² Most of them were also inspired by the Italian Francis the founder of the order of the Franciscans.¹³

According to the American historian Albert Hyma, they paved the way for a real 'Christian Renaissance' by following the example of Jesus Christ's life: "*not as an inquisition (...), but to instill personal religion rather than mere doctrines.*"¹⁴ This adagium was followed by Erasmus "**who at times was a faithful child of the Devotio Moderna. What did he care [read: Geert Groote cs] if a certain man or woman erred in matters of doctrine as long as one tried to imitate the life of Christ?**"¹⁵ They started in Deventer, Zutphen and other places of the Dutch Yssel Valley connected with many German cities as far as Basel through the Rhine. One of their books, the '**Imitation of Christ**' is since its first print the most published book in the Christian world until the 20th Century.¹⁶ For a long time it was argued erroneously that this book was written by an Italian author because it is deeply influenced by the Italian religious culture in the 14th Century.¹⁷ They caused a change in schools (educational

¹⁰ This concerns also the essence of the 'social quality theory': Laurent J.G. van der Maesen and Alan Walker (2012), '*Social Quality: From Theory to Indicators*', (Basingstoke: MPalgrave Macmillan).

¹¹ The famous Dutch painters in the 17th Century dedicated their attention to daily circumstances of people. It was not falling from the air.

¹² See note-9, p-36 and: https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geert_Groote.

¹³ Helene Nolthenius (1989), '*Een man uit het dal van Spoleto (a man from the valley of Spoleto)*', (Amsterdam: Querido).

¹⁴ See note-9, p-513.

¹⁵ "See note-9, p-513.

¹⁶ See note-9, p-158 and further: According to a notable Catholic author in America this book eminently contains the Christian philosophy: "*His view is supported by that of thousands upon thousands of other writers in all countries, and belonging to every religious denomination. For rich and poor, high and low, learned and simple – all who for the time being are weary of external, formal observances, or dissatisfied with the dry bones of dogma held out to them by many preachers may find the advice and instructions the need in turning over even the first few leaves of the 'Imitation of Christ'*", see note-11, p-159. According to Hyma, this book is not only written by Thomas a Kempis. The book is even to appreciate as an outcome of collective work of the first Brethren of the Common Life. Erroneously it was also ascribed to Bernard de Clairvaux, see note-8, p. 158. In the fifteenth century the book was printed in at Augsburg, Cologne, Nuremberg, Paris, Lyon, Rouen and Venice.

¹⁷ C.C. de Bruin, E. Pesoons and A.G. Weiler (1985), '*Geert Grote en de Moderne Devotie*', (Zutphen: De Walburg Pers), 2^e editie, p-137.

systems) for young people in also Flanders, France, German countries, Italy and accentuated that love is more than fighting. No one should study to acquire knowledge for its own sake. Imitation of Christ means to sympathise with the poor and affected, visit the sick, comfort orphans and widows and be always ready to perform the most humble tasks.¹⁸ According to the Brethren, not rules and doctrines but love for common men and women is essential. **We should respect human nature and its laws as creation of God** and to promote friendship and love; rules are totally subservient.¹⁹ For the Brethren *“love for their neighbour impelled them to work among the people of the cities. Their highest aim was the reformation of the church, which could most effectively be done, they thought, by education the youths of the land, and by instructing the common people in the essentials of the Christian religion (.....) [they] glorified in self-denial, poverty, humility, and obedience (...) but free from excessive asceticism (...) they lived very soberly.”*²⁰ Afterwards they influenced important well-known actors in endeavours to transform the official Church as Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Erasmus, Ignatius of Loyola. According to Hyma, it is incomprehensible that in all famous work on European history this powerful movement with its influence stretching until modern times (until the second part of the 20th Century) remained so invisible.²¹ This was also the case with Johan Huizinga in his famous ‘Autumn of the Middle Ages’.²²

About father van Kilsdonk

His words and works echoes the principles of the Brethren of the Common Life referred to above in actual pronouncements. In a ‘farewell book’ as pastor of students in Amsterdam many letters to

¹⁸ See note-9, page 51 and 56. They do not really agree with Hyma that this book is an outcome of collective work; it is really written by Thomas a Kempis.

¹⁹ See note-9, p. 70

²⁰ See note-9. P-120 and 121.

²¹ See note-9, p-507-517.

²² See note-9, p-530. According to Hyma, if Huizinga “had been aware of the Frisian sea power during the Middle Ages, he could not have spoken of the ‘autumn of the Middle ages and referred to the morbid mentalities of the people in the Low countries from 1330 to 1500. An if Gilmore and Ferguson had been aware of the environment that helped Erasmus 9an[and also the founding fathers of the Brethren] master Greek and Latin to perfection and fathom the minds of all the multitudes around him, they would have written a different account of the Northern Renaissance”, p-530. The comment is that the flourishing economic, political and therefore societal circumstances of the Dutch Yssel Valley did not play a role in the explanation of the sources of this Renaissance.

Van Kilsdonk are published. In one of the letters, three authors tried to grasp the essence of Van Kilsdonk's belief. Earlier and better than current leading and brilliant theologians father van Kilsdonk observed, experienced, articulated and elaborated the idea that the place to find the so-called Mystery of God is in the eyes of our fellow creatures. It is there - where a person who ask your help and support, and in the answer you give - God will be 'manifested'. They continued with the words, that just thanks to his poetic gift to see something of the majesty and splendour of God in the eyes of especially battered and vulnerable men and women delivers the basis and the Leitmotiv of his pastoral work. In other words, God is recognisable in individual people coping with their daily circumstances and especial poor and broken people. In his consequent faithfulness to this religious oriented humanism Van Kilsdonk was unmercifully critical concerning the powers in the church and society. He commented endlessly the idols of institutions, facades, authorities and hierarchies.²³ In connection with this, another author of a letter wrote that Van Kilsdonk changed his dedication from public activities to the private and many times vulnerable human domain. He made a choice for the most individual emotions of people . He tried to bridge the distance between himself and the face of the other and started to look for people in need for help until late at night. And in the following morning he wrote a letter to reflect on the intimate contact, the sorrow, pain and sometimes miserable feelings. He wrote countless letters. For him it was like understanding God.²⁴

Van Kilsdonk argues in the interview published in the Communists Dutch Newspaper 'The Truth', in 1980, published in this farewell book that God in the 'Jewish-Christian experience' never presented arguments how to explain the world. Van Kilsdonk was strongly connected with this experience, also for understanding the person of Jesus Christ. In his view God is not an explanation but an incessant, irresistible and voice calling to change the world, to make it

²³ Henk Gereadts, Hein Lagerberg, Jan Ruijter, 'Farewell-letter of the inseparable.' , in: Lambert Quant and Bernard Rootmensen, (1982), 'Letters to Father van Kilsdonk', (Delft: Meinema), p-74.

²⁴ Henk Hillenaar 'Good Day Jan', see note-23, p-46.

more human, and to support people who live in dreadful circumstances. Not a principle of order and thankfulness - see for example the Antique Greeks – but to liberate people.²⁵T

The interview continues with some words on homosexuality. Van Kilsdonk asks himself how to explain the rejection of all not-ordered and all not recognisable erotic feelings?

Homosexuality is of all times, in all cultures, in all societies, in all religions, always and everywhere a constant. As early as 1980 he argued, that it is not an accident, not a casualty, not an incident, not even a deviation; it is invented by the Creator for multiplying different intense expressions of love and tenderness. In other words it is an aspect of natural laws and we have to respect this: it refers to a need as deep as the relationship between a man and a woman.²⁶ And the Brethren of the Devotio Moderna already addressed the issue of reciprocity and tension between natural law and the rules and doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church throughout their lives. Above we referred to their words that: ***'We should respect human nature and its law as Creation (and invention) of God'***. According to Van Kilsdonk, this is expressed in the interpretation of the nature of Jesus Christ in the 'Jewish-Christian experience', as not only a 'Son of God', but also as a 'Son of Men' and a 'tsaddik' (a righteous). The second and third concept have disappeared since the meeting in Nicaea, three centuries after his death. However, they are indispensable to understand the adagium of the Devotio Moderna as well.²⁷

During his work as student pastor in Amsterdam he criticized scientific positivism. He believed that it makes scholars infantile ²⁸, and that it reduces all intimate qualitative aspects of life which are the outcomes of – in terms of the social quality theory - the dialectic between processes of self-realisation and structures in daily circumstances. ²⁹ In the same vain he criticised Freudian oriented psychotherapy, also applied 'to save homosexuals from their

²⁵ Ton Regtien, 'Individual building blocks of a biography', see note-23, p-133.

²⁶ Ton Regtien, see note-25, p-138.

²⁷ See note-4, p-61.

²⁸ See note-25, p-136.

²⁹ See note-10, Chapter-3. Van Kilsdonk implicitly elaborated an aspect of this theory, namely the 'constitutional factors' of social quality.

deviations'.³⁰ He equally criticised the dominant economic proposition that people are atoms of large aggregates, only striving for individual profit and preventing losses.³¹ In his Preface of a book on individual and family therapy he made a distinction between the myth of **Oedipus** and the myth of **Aeneas** in order to deepen his critic on positivism as well. He argued: *“the myth of Oedipus has captivated and driven depth psychology [and economics] to portray the deadly threat, rivalry and jealousy between successive generations. [According this interpretation] In every human being there is hidden such an Oedipus, and there are many talented people who feel free only when they think they have pushed, either physically or mentally, their fathers or their mothers out of the centre of their existence”*. According to Van Kilsdonk, another myth is totally overlooked, namely of Aeneas: *“when Troy is ablaze and on the point of destruction, Aeneas, one of its great heroes, flees the city with his wife and son, but not without bearing on his shoulders his aged father, Anchises (...) Yet Aeneas carries him – and on his way to founding the Empire (...) It is not an easy task to bear with aging parents, especially as they are seldom blameless. But it is perhaps the only way for a young person to grow up and become a mature human being. Bearing this burden, rather than casting it off, is the price to be paid for future freedom, for a life free of complex.”*³²

Pope Francis and the social quality approach

Of course, Van Kilsdonk was able to go beyond the ideas and work of the Brethren of the Common Life because he could build on their work. In another way this is also the case for Pope Francis, his co-brother in order of Jesuits. In the new book *‘The name of God is Mercy’*, Pope Francis demonstrates his affinity with the ‘Jewish-Christian experience’ of the first Christian communities.³³ In all probability, Van Kilsdonk would have chosen the title ‘The name of God is Love and Tenderness’. At least two issues - put forward by Michiko Kakutani -

³⁰ See note-25, p-138.

³¹ Personal discussion, see also the Preface by Laurent van der Maesen and Marco Ricceri, see note-1.

³² J. van Kilsdonk sj (1987), ‘Preface’, in : A. van Heusden and E-M van den Eerenbeemt, *‘Balance in Motion, Ivan Boszomenyi-Nagy and his vision of Individual and Family Therapy’*, (New York: Brunner/Mazel).

³³ Pope Francis (2016), *‘The Name of God is Mercy’* (translated from Italian by Oonagh Stransky), (New York: Random House).

are important in the context of this lecture. First, Pope Francis criticises *“the self-righteous bureaucrats who would glorify themselves rather than Christ*, This issue is mentioned different times in this lecture. Second Pope Francis says, *“we touch the flesh of Christ in he who is outcast, hungry, thirsty, naked, imprisoned, ill, unemployed, persecuted and in search of refuge.”*³⁴ It does not refer only to Francis of Assisi, but also to the Brethren of the Common Life and in our time to Van Kilsdonk. In political terms it is echoed in the ‘Amsterdam Declaration on Social Quality’, signed by thousand scientists in 1997 and also based on equal European sources.³⁵ Especially Pope Francis adds a new step here. He challenges not only the bureaucrats of the Church, he also challenges political leaders and their political-economics systems, stimulating unbearable inequality and injustice, destructing human solidarity and dignity and causing the misery of millions of people; men, women, children in all countries, in all cultures.³⁶ He immediately connects this with the challenge to develop overall sustainability in order to transcend the current lack of guarantee on sustainable human existence.³⁷ In other words Pope Francis makes a plea to upgrade theological thinking and reflections and to connect this with new political and economic propositions to reintroduce – in terms of Van Kilsdonk - the myth of Aeneas. ³⁸

According to a Vatican specialist, at this stage the outcomes of the Synod on the Family are clear. For example divorce and remarried Catholics are not readmitted to communion notwithstanding all positive individual and societal arguments for these people who try to ‘imitate the life and ideas of Jesus Christ’. For homosexuality the first outcomes do not seem to change much. For example, the powerful African Cardinal Robert Sarah described gay

³⁴ Michiko Kakutani (2016), ‘In a new book, Pope Francis calls mercy essential’, *International New York Times*, Wednesday, 13 January, p-10.

³⁵ **‘The Amsterdam Declaration on the Social Quality of Europe’**, in: Wolfgang Beck, Laurent J.G. van der Maesen, Fleur Thomése and Alan Walker (2001), *‘Social Quality: A vision for Europe’*, (The Hague/London/Boston: Kluwer Law International), pp.385-387.

³⁶ This refers to the normative factors of social quality: social justice, solidarity, human dignity and human equality, see note-10 and note-35.

³⁷ The Holy Father Francis (2015), *‘Encyclical Letter ‘Laudato Si’: On care for our common home’* (http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

³⁸ This refers to the four normative factors of social quality: social justice, solidarity, human dignity and human equality.

rights and ISIS as twin evils threatening Christendom.³⁹ Indeed, Pope Francis acknowledged : *“that we have also seen that what seems normal for a bishop on one continent, is considered strange and almost scandalous for a bishop from another: what is considered a violation of a right in one society is an evident and inviolable rule in another; what for some is freedom of conscience is for others simply confusion”*.⁴⁰

He, and ex ante Van Kilsdonk, will interpret the pronouncements of Baptist pastor Roger Jimenez from Sacramento (USA) - praising the massacre of 49 people in an Orlando gay nightclub - as totally against the ‘Imitatio Christi’ and a disgusting aberration. According to this pastor, *“if we lived in a righteous government, they should round them all up and put them up against a firing wall, and blow their brains out”*.⁴¹ And in the same vain the funeral of some of the victims was boycotted by this type of believers in Jesus Christ. If all of this has to do with the devil and we should combat the devil as much as possible, are their words and actions not remarkable? Of course they are, because this deviation of Christian thought is completely alienated from daily circumstances people live in. The point may be, that in our times religious belief should be strongly connected again - and see the plea of the initiators of the Devotio Moderna - with acceptable propositions concerning the economic, political and cultural dimensions of modern civilisations. It is here where for example the new theory of social quality should be put into the footlights.⁴²

The theory of social quality

Both, the International Association on Social Quality (IASQ) and Eurispes took the initiative to translate the book on the farewell speeches by Jan van Kilsdonk into the Italian language. As argued in the Preword by Laurent van der Maesen and Marco Ricceri, Van Kilsdonk implicitly

³⁹ Damian Thompson (2015), ‘The Vatican Synod on the Family is over and the conservatives have won’, (<http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2015/10/the-vatican-synod-on-the-family-is-over-and-the-conservatives-have-won>).

⁴⁰ See note-39.

⁴¹ Lindsey Bever (2016), ‘Pastor refuses to mourn Orlando victims: ‘The tragedy is that more of them didn’t die’’, Washington Post, June 15, (<http://www.cbs.news.com/news/sacramento/baptist/pastor-roger-jiminez-post-orlando-anti-gay-preaching>)

⁴² See notes-10 and 35.

discussed essential aspects of 'social quality thinking' concerning daily circumstances of people. In his thinking people are 'social beings' and not atoms of large aggregates. Therefore he made a plea to take on board the myth of Aeneas and to combat the increasing egocentric and hedonistic tendencies as stimulated by the myth of Oedipus. In his pre-word of this book, Gian Maria Fara argues that we notice a sign of regressive trend and attest a decrease of the opening to the new sensibilities in Italy, which are a widespread heritage of the most advanced societies which Italy compares to. This regress concerns the rights of homosexuals. He refers to the ethics of solidarity as essential point of orientation to address this and also related questions. With the social quality theory we should add the ethics of social justice, of human dignity and of equal value. Together they encompass the four normative factors which deliver points of departure for judging the outcomes of the objective and subjective factors of life. Ethics can be not alienated from these factors if we will prevent inhuman aberrations as presented in Orlando (or Paris, or Brussels) and the reactions in Sacramento. Exactly this interrelationship will confront us with the nature of people and natural values which cannot- in the words of the *Devotio Moderna* - be denied or overruled by bureaucratic attitudes and its rules. This new theory will also connect the analyses and policies to save human existence as expressed in the plea by Pope Francis.⁴³ This is expressed in the 'Manifesto on climate Change' supported by also the IASQ and Eurispes.⁴⁴ To elaborate this context will deliver new inspiration to discuss also the recent outcomes of the Synod on the Family and to defend the position of homosexuals and lesbians and to enhance the encyclical letter 'Laudato Si' as well.

⁴³ See note-37.

⁴⁴ L.J.G. van der Maesen, Des Gasper, Tim Cadman et al, (2015), '*Manifesto on climate change*', (Amsterdam/The Hague: IASQ/ISS): www.socialquality.org.