

The Beggars Corner in Horebeke

The protestant community of Maria Horebeke goes back to the sixteenth century and, as such, is unique in the Flemish part of Belgium. Since the time of the reformation, when new doctrines influenced large sections of the population even in the most outlying parts of the Southern Netherlands, centuries of persecution and hostility have resulted in the survival of a few "small flocks". Horebeke is the only rural location where a Protestant community has survived uninterrupted since the age of the inquisition.

It is, of course, difficult to imagine how this community came into being, and survived so long. Historians tell us of a large, almost impenetrable forest, stretching, during the Middel Ages, from Oudenaarde to Geraardsbergen. where Vaudois heretics, Cathars and Dutch/flemish heretics sought refuge from persecution well before teachings of Martin Luther and John Calvin spread throughout the region. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the nearby town of Oudenaarde attracted German and French merchants, who came to buy the tapestries which made this town on the river Scheldt famous. This international contacts helped spread new ideas: in 1527, a certain Jean Castellan was burned alive in Tournai, having preached there since 1524.

A protestants church was founded in Maria Horebeke and in perhaps a half-dozen other villages in the area in about 1554; these were known collectively as the "Flemish Mount of Olives". From about 1566, open-air sermons (known as *hagepreken*, or hedge sermons) were held in the area around Oudenaarde, and indeed more or less throughout the Netherlands. Thousands of people would listen to such sermons. Iconoclastic fury then spread through the region, followed by a period of severe repression, when the infamous chief inquisitor Titelmans, supplied victims for the sake. Many nonconformists fled to the northern Netherlands, England (London) or Germany (Emden. Pfalz). Others returned to the Roman church; a minority, however, did neither, instead taking refuge in the above mentioned forest: These were the Wood Beggars, and a part of the forest which remains today is still called Beggars Woord.

The core of the protestant community in Maria Horebeke is formed by descendants of these refugees. Ancestral lines can be traced back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in spite of the fact that these ancestors did not really want to attract much attention to themselves, given the hostile nature of the authorities which still prevailed. At best, they were merely tolerated; on numerous occasions, through threats and other sorts of aggravation, attempts were made to force them to leave the country or to renounce their beliefs. In other words: to relieve the uniformly Catholic Flanders of this heretical thorn in its side. It is thanks to the aid and support received from the Northern Netherlands that this goal was not attained. Dutch pastors in disguise regularly visited these *Chuches under the Cross*, as they were called. They preached the Gospel, brought bibles, performed baptisms and weddings, and were occasionally harassed or even expelled by outraged local authorities. On return to their own country, they told of the problems of the reformed communities around Oudenaarde, and, particularly in Zeeland, the same treatment was given to the Catholics there, by way of reprisal, thus forcing the Southern authorities to be less harsh. Protestants were then allowed to hold their meetings at night, in the open air, or in some isolated barn: anywhere without drawing attention to themselves.

A quarter of a century later, in 1819, King William I's generosity allowed the building of a school. Lessons were given there, initially by Dutch teachers, and later by Belgians. The school now serves as a museum.

In 1836, a wealthy lady left her house to the church council on the express condition that it be used as a presbytery. The current pastor still lives in this house.

Finally, in 1872, the *new temple* was inaugurated, this time a real church, including two bells and a steeple. This neogothic building can accommodate some 150 people, which, it must be said, is more than sufficient for the current flock; after all, the motto of our community is: "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has pleased to give you the Kingdom".