

Confessing the Deaf:

A Visual and Material Approach to Religion and Disability in Belgium, c. 1750–1850

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In eighteenth-century Belgium, a peculiar technique was developed to allow “deaf and mute” people to take the sacrament of Confession.² Religious teachers drew or had them draw the different sins they could commit from a model. These drawings were put together in a book, which the deaf or mute person had to take to their confessor. They could then point to the sins they had committed and receive penance and absolution. In various archives, libraries and private collections, we have located twenty of these books. They have all been drawn in what is now Belgium, between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth century. We have not found examples of similar books in any other countries. They are not only interesting as a technology for confession of disabled people, but also reveal much about the visual and material aspects of religion and penance. In this chapter, we analyse discussions on religious communication through images in a period when the religious instruction of deaf people was professionalizing.

In the historiography of early modern and modern Catholicism, not much attention has been given to the implications of disabilities for the

¹ The authors express their warm thanks to everyone who helped in the search for the confession books, and especially to Inge Gheysen, Daniela Kromp, and Xavier Loppinet for generously sharing information and images.

² Although the term “deaf and mute” is generally considered outdated today, we have followed the historical usage of the term in our primary sources.

history of faith. Specifically for confession, its auricular character has been seen as self-evident. Penance was a key sacrament in the Catholic Church, which played an important role in people's everyday lives, especially so in a strongly Catholic region such as Belgium.³ Generally three or four times a year, people entered the confessional, where they encountered the priest who asked them about their sins since their last confession. In order to be absolved and receive the adequate penance, they needed to tell him their sins and profess contrition about having sinned. The oral character of this ritual ensured the secrecy of the confession and gave much power to the priest, who could autonomously decide on penance and absolution. Scholars of confession have debated the extent to which this ritual was an vehicle for social control, church power, individualization, and sexual improprieties.⁴ But they have generally taken the auricular character of confession for granted.⁵

Recently, religious historians have started to pay more attention to the experience of religion. Faith was not just an instrument of power, but something people felt and sensed. These experiences also have a history.⁶ In their studies on religious conversion and enthusiasm, scholars like Monique Scheer and Pascal Eitler have shown how emotional and sensory aspects were entwined: people experienced their bodies as they had learned through religious discourse and practices.⁷ With regard to the history of confession,

3 On the central place of confession in everyday life in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Belgium, see E. Hofman, "A Wholesome Cure for the Wounded Soul: Confession, Emotions, and Self in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Catholicism", *Journal of Religious History* 42 (2018), 222–241 [225–228], <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12455>.

4 Among many studies of Catholic confession, most influential have been J. Bossy, "The social history of confession in the age of the Reformation", *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 25 (1975), 21–38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3679084>; S. Haliczer, *Sexuality in the Confessional: A Sacrament Profaned*, Oxford 1996, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195096569.001.0001>; W. de Boer, *The Conquest of the Soul: Confession, Discipline, and Public Order in Counter-Reformation Milan*, Leiden 2001, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047400448>; J. O'Banion, *The Sacrament of Penance and Religious Life in Golden Age Spain*, University Park 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271060453>.

5 As is evidenced by the title of the archetypical study of confession: H. C. Lea, *A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences in the Latin Church*, Philadelphia 1896.

6 Eitler, B. Hitzer & M. Scheer, "Feeling and Faith – Religious Emotions in German history", *German History* 32 (2014), 343–352, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghuo63>; S. Cummins & M. Stille, "Religious Emotions and Emotions in Religion: the Case of Sermons", *Journal of Religious History* 45 (2021), 3–24, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9809.12726>.

7 Eitler & M. Scheer, "Emotionengeschichte als Körpergeschichte. Eine heuristische Perspektive auf religiöse Konversionen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 35 (2009), 282–313, <https://doi.org/10.13109/gege.2009.35.2.282>; M. Scheer, *Enthusiasm: Emotional Practices of Conviction in Modern Germany*, Oxford 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198863595.001.0001>. For a gendered approach to the expectations concerning (religious) emotions and the senses, see T. van Osselaer, "Sensitive but Sane. Male Visionaries and their Emotional Display in Belgium in the 1930s", *Low Countries Historical*

there has been some attention for its changing “emotional economy”, but wider experiences of confession have remained out of view.⁸ The importance of the sensory and emotional aspects of confession cannot be denied. The confessant was to express genuine feelings of repentance and only when the confessor believed them did they indicate the appropriate penance. In the confession practices for deaf people that we are studying here, the confessor would do so by pointing at the relevant picture in the confession manual. The books therefore offer us a glimpse of a confession practice that operated through a combination of visual and tactile elements, quite different from the auricular focus that has long dominated the study of confession.

The history of the intersection between disability and religion offers an exciting opportunity to reflect on the role of the senses in the history of confession. Disability history is a relatively young field, having come to maturation in the past decade with several overviews and handbooks.⁹ Disability history often intersects with religious history, particularly because of the important role religious institutions have played in many regions in providing care and education for disabled people. Yet the religious experiences of disabled people, nor the practical implications of disability for religious life and rituals have often been studied. Only a few recent studies analyse specific practices, such as disabilities in convents, pastoral care for disabled people and the role of signing language in the development of preaching culture.¹⁰ This chapter seeks to add to this literature by analysing the ac-

Review 127:1 (2012), 127–149, <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.1567>. See e.g. also the work on the perception of the divine (“hagiosensorium”): H. H. L. Jørgensen, “Into the Saturated Sensorium. Introducing the Principles of Perception and Mediation in the Middle Ages”, in H. H. L. Jørgensen, H. Laugerud & K. Skinnebach (eds.), *The Saturated Sensorium. Principles of Perception and Mediation in the Middle Ages*, Aarhus 2015, 9–23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.608130.4>; on religious visual culture: D. Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice*, Berkeley 2005, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520938304>; and on haptic piety: N. Hallett, *The Senses in Religious Communities: Early Modern “Convents of Pleasure”*, Burlington 2013.

⁸ Hofman, *A Wholesome Cure for the Wounded Soul*, 2018.

⁹ S. Bursch, A. Klein & Verstraete (eds.), *The Imperfect Historian: Disability Histories in Europe*, Frankfurt am Main 2013; S. Burch, M. A. Rembis & F. L. Bernstein (eds.), *Disability Histories*, Urbana 2013; R. Hanes, I. Brown & N. E. Hansen (eds.), *The Routledge History of Disability*, London 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1201/9781315198781>; M. A. Rembis, C. J. Kudlick & K. E. Nielsen (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Disability History*, Oxford 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190234959.001.0001>.

¹⁰ J. Kuuliala & R. Välimäki, “Deafness and Pastoral Care in the Middle Ages”, in S. M. Williams (ed.), *Disability in Medieval Christian Philosophy and Theology*, New York 2020, 179–202, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429202919-6>; S. T. Strocchia, “Disability Histories from the Convent”, *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 15 (2020), 74–83, <https://doi.org/10.1353/emw.2020.0005>; R. Oates, “Speaking in Hands: Early Modern Preaching and Signed Languages for the Deaf”, *Past & Present* 256 (2021), 49–85, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtab019>.

commodations made to deaf people in confession, and by adding a sensorial perspective to these practices.

As we will see, when they interacted with people with auditory and speech impairments, priests and theologians had to make explicit and reflect on assumptions they often believed to be self-evident. While some stressed the superiority of words, in practice, a more visual approach to faith was often proposed, especially for less well-off people. The confessional aids for the deaf and mute show that in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Belgium, the essence of the Catholic faith was not in words, but in certain attitudes, self-reflections and feelings. The penitent needed to communicate their sins and feel remorse – not necessarily orally express it.

1. Can a Deaf Person be Saved?

Taking a confession from deaf people was a difficult enterprise. Since the middle ages, theologians and other religious writers had discussed whether deaf and mute people could take the sacrament of penance and, even more fundamentally, whether their souls could be saved. Raymond of Penyafort voiced the most common view, listing the deaf and mute among the “dubitabilia” in his *Summa de casibus poenitentiae* (1224–1226). A priest should do what he could to instruct deaf and mute people and lead them to contrition and penitence over their sins, using means such as words, texts, gestures and signs. He could give absolution when this seemed successful. Penyafort’s opinion was influential into the fifteenth century.¹¹ Others suggested that mute persons who were literate could write down their sins in lieu of an auricular confession, and that this confession was equivalent to that of a hearing person.¹² Not all authors were so flexible, however. If Saint Paul’s maxim was that “faith comes by hearing”, and there could be no salvation without faith, this effectively damned deaf people.¹³ How could confessors ever be sure that deaf people properly understood religious teachings? Some scholars even believed that prelingually deaf people were incapable of abstract thought; let alone the finer points of theology. Confessors should not give them absolution.¹⁴

These questions led to continuing debates on whether deaf and mute people could and should confess and be saved, in the early modern period and in the nineteenth century. The predominant view remained that deaf or mute people should not be excluded from the sacraments.¹⁵ But even in

11 Kuuliala & Välimäki, “Deafness and Pastoral Care in the Middle Ages”, 189.

12 Kuuliala & Välimäki, “Deafness and Pastoral Care in the Middle Ages”, 190.

13 See more extensively on this topic Oates, “Speaking in Hands”.

14 Oates, “Speaking in Hands”, 6–7.

15 J. A. Fleming, “Seventeenth-century Casuistry Regarding Persons with Disabilities:

1830, for instance, the Abbé de Montaigne argued that prelingually deaf and mute people should be treated as children: since they were unaware of sin, they did not need to confess or receive absolution. Only if the deaf or mute person gave clear indications that they were aware of basic religious doctrines, they should be allowed to take the sacrament of penance.¹⁶

Most confessors, however, tried to accommodate deaf and mute people as much as possible. If deaf penitents presented themselves, Jean Charles Pallavicino stressed in his conduct manual for priests (1827), the confessor should not send them away, unless he knew of a specialized confessor in the vicinity.¹⁷ For advice on how to proceed, many manuals for the clergy referred to the guidelines of Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1789), founder of the Redemptorist order and the go-to authority regarding confession. In several of his writings, Liguori reflected on the conditions of confession and what this meant in the case of a deaf parishioner. Proper confessions had to fulfil four key conditions, he argued: they had to be oral, secret, sincere and complete. Deaf and mute people could not satisfy all these conditions, but should still be accommodated. Literate people who could not communicate their sins orally, could do so in writing. For illiterate people, Liguori recommended that the confessor visited the household of the confessant in advance. There, he would be able to acquaint himself with the best ways to communicate with the deaf or mute person, for instance through signs. He could then take the confession of the deaf person in a private space. In these cases, Liguori believed that it sufficed if they confessed a single sin with signs at Easter and near death.¹⁸

Some of the accommodations confessors had to make were also to ensure the seal of the confession. Several authors provided practical advice on this matter. Some argued that due to the risks of exposure, deaf and mute people could not be obliged to confine their sins to paper. Others proposed solutions to reduce this risk. The seventeenth-century Jesuit Jacobus Granadus advised to use two papers, one with numbers and one with the corresponding sins, so that it only became clear which sins the deaf or mute person had confessed if one had both papers.¹⁹ Manuals such as Chrisoph

Antonio Diana's Tract 'On the Mute, Deaf, or Blind', *Journal of Moral Theology* 6 (2017), 112–137.

16 A. Montaigne, *Recherches sur les connoissances intellectuelles des sourds-muets considérés par rapport à l'administration des sacrements*, Paris 1829, 54–56.

17 C. Pallavicino, *Le prêtre sanctifié par la juste, charitable et discrète administration du Sacrement de la Pénitence*, Avignon 1827, 14–15.

18 A.-M. De Liguori, *Le confesseur des gens de campagnes ou Abrégé de la théologie morale*, Liège 1833, 226–229; idem, *Œuvres complètes* vol. 26, Paris 1837, 200; idem, *Theologia moralis* vol. 6, Mechelen 1852, 390, 394, 574.

19 Fleming, "Seventeenth-century Casuistry Regarding Persons with Disabilities", 129.

Leutbrewer's *Industria spiritualis* (1634), which contained little flaps with sins that a penitent could fold or unfold depending on whether they had committed this sin, could serve a similar purpose.²⁰ Cardinal Gousset, archbishop of Reims, writing 1853, instead advised the use of a “slate and chalk”. The penitent wrote down their sins under the eye of the confessor and could erase them afterwards.²¹

Apart from changing the means of communication from speaking to writing or signing, the confession of the hearing impaired also demanded practical changes to material setup of the church. A well-prepared parish priest, so the Jesuit José Mach believed, had a confessional with a grid in his sacristy or at another location that was visible but not part of the general circulation route. This setting would allow him to hear the confession of deaf women, especially in dioceses where hearing the confession of women without a grid in between the parishioner and the priest was forbidden.²² By the late nineteenth century, some churches – particularly in or near institutions for deaf people – installed special confessional boxes to allow for seeing penitents communicating with sign language and with enough light to be able to read what they wrote.²³

2. Instructing the Deaf

Even with these accommodations, the key to a successful confession was still that deaf people were sufficiently instructed in religion, that they knew what sinning was and how it could damn their souls, which sins existed, and how they could receive absolution. Up to around 1800, the religious instruction of the deaf was mostly an individual affair.²⁴ Alexandre Rodenbach, a

²⁰ C. Leutbrewer, *Industria spiritualis: in qua modus traditur praeeparandi se ad confessionem aliquam plurimorum annorum*, Cologne 1634; L. Ceysens, “La pratique de la confession générale: ‘la confession coupée’ suivant le Christophe Leutbrewer”, in J. Van Bavel & M. Schrama (eds.), *Jansénius et le jansénisme dans les Pays-Bas*, Leuven 1982, 93–113.

²¹ T.-M.-J. Gousset, *Théologie morale à l’usage des curés et des confesseurs* vol. 2, Brussels 1853, 189–190.

²² José Mach, *Le trésor du prêtre: répertoire des principales choses que le prêtre doit savoir pour se sanctifier lui-même et sanctifier les autres* vol. 2, Paris 1874, 114. Similar advice for all deaf and mute penitents in R. Knoll, *Katholische Normalschule für die Taubstummen, die Kinder und andere Einfältigen: zum gründlichen sowohl als leichten Unterrichts in dem Christenthume, durch vierzig Kupferstiche; nebst einem dreyfachen Anhang, besonders der Anweisung zur praktischen Beicht*, Ausburg 1788, 179.

²³ B. Demuyne, *Hulpmiddelen met een geschiedenis (1800-1985). Doven- en blindeninstituut Spermalie*, Bruges 2009, 40. One such confessional box from c. 1900 has been preserved, for instance, at the institution of the Zusters van Liefde in Ghent.

²⁴ O. Claeys, “De eerste decennia van dovenonderwijs in schoolverband in België”, in *Liber Amicorum Professor Dr Victor D’Espallier*, Leuven 1979, 187–209 [187]; H. G. Lang, “Perspectives on the History of Deaf Education”, in M. Marschark & E. Spencer (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Deaf Studies, Language, and Education*, Oxford 2011, 7–17 [9], <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199750986.013.0002>.

blind man who wrote an extensive treatise on the situation of deaf and mute people in 1829 (and later a member of the Belgian parliament), discussed some examples of this type of education. He spoke to a deaf man in Moorslede, François Delefotrie, by then a septuagenarian, who related that he had been instructed in religious teachings by a deaf cousin in Heule and by a deaf family in Kortrijk.²⁵ This seems to have been a typical situation: older deaf people often instructed younger people, usually in an informal way. They taught both religious principles and sign language.

This informal instruction occurred in small, local and regional networks: all the places Delefotrie mentioned were in the western part of Belgium, near the French border. Heule was a small village about 14 kilometres from Delefotrie's Moorslede, and Kortrijk a provincial town 16 kilometres away. These local networks of deaf people who knew each other and shared teaching materials facilitated the transmission of a local deaf culture. When the first experiments started, in the eighteenth century, with teaching deaf people in small groups, this was also mostly a regional affair. Much like in classrooms for hearing people, teaching was still mostly individualized, and more advanced students could help their novice peers.²⁶ In Heule, for instance, Maria-Josepha De Brabanders taught several deaf children in 1762. One of her pupils, Joseph de Caigny, later continued her work as a religious instructor for deaf people.²⁷

For this instruction, deaf people primarily relied on images. Delefotrie said that his fellow deaf instructors had lent him forty volumes of engravings, which had been "very useful for my instruction".²⁸ He himself owned a collection of religious books (including volumes about saints and martyrs, church history and religious dogmatics), replete with images. Although Delefotrie could not read or write, the combination of picture books and sign language had sufficed to allow him to fulfil all his religious duties. He went to confession every month.²⁹ Methods for teaching religion using images largely developed independently from each other, and we find them in different countries.³⁰ In early-eighteenth-century France, for instance, Jean Pontas argued that to educate deaf people, "one of the means that seems to us to be the best, is that of images".³¹ A practical elaboration of this method

25 A. Rodenbach, *Coup d'oeil d'un aveugle sur les sourds-muets*, Brussels 1829, 205.

26 A system which Rodenbach favoured: *ibid.*, 183–199.

27 Claey's, "De eerste decennia van dovenonderwijs in schoolverband in België", 192.

28 Rodenbach, *Coup d'oeil d'un aveugle sur les sourds-muets*, 206.

29 *Ibid.*, 207–210.

30 M. Buyens, *De dove persoon, zijn gebarentaal en het dovenonderwijs*, Antwerpen 2005, 32.

31 J. Pontas, *Dictionnaire de cas de conscience ou Décisions des plus considérables difficultez touchant la morale & la discipline ecclesiastique* vol. 3, Paris 1734, 968.

Overview of Confession Books
<i>This overview includes the short references we use in the text, the date of production (if known), and the current location of the books (if known). Unless otherwise noted, the information is taken from the books themselves or the catalogues.</i>
Bridwell: Date unknown. Texas, Southern Methodist University, Bridwell Library, BRMS 150.
Cursief: c. 1820. Current location unknown. Auctioned in 2006 by Cursief Auctions, Bruges. ⁱ
Carton 1: 1767 (?). Bruges, Spermalie Library, BC D3.2.3.2.1 BIEC.
Carton 2: Late eighteenth century. Bruges, Spermalie Library, BC D3.2.3.2.2 BIEC.
Carton 3: 1851. Bruges, Spermalie Library, BC D3.2.3.2.3 DiRAE.
EHC: Late eighteenth century. Antwerp, Hendrik Conscience Heritage Library, 760495 [C2-561 h]. Available online: https://dams.antwerpen.be/asset/OtTgQekD8KjWcQUaNKxPKio8 .
English: Late eighteenth century. Current location unknown. In private possession of Michiel English, archivist of the Bruges bishopric, in 1953. ⁱⁱ
Goetgeluck: 1791. Current location unknown. In private possession of René Vander Plaatsen in Deurle in 1960. ⁱⁱⁱ
Izegem: Late eighteenth century. Kortrijk, State Archives, Izegem Church Archives.
Kromp 1: 1803. München, Antiquariat Daniela Kromp.
Kromp 2: 1819. Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, W.963.
Kromp 3: 1821. München, Antiquariat Daniela Kromp.
Kromp 4: 1861. Charlottesville VA, Small Special Collections Library, MSS 16803.
Major Seminary: 1826. Bruges, Archives of the Major Seminary.
Platteau: Date unknown. Current location unknown. In private possession of R. Maes in Gent-brugge in 1976. ^{iv}
Ruusbroec: 1821. Antwerp, Library of the Ruusbroec Institute, Manuscripts, Neerl. 60. Available online: http://www.flandrica.be/items/show/1324/ .
SA Bruges: c. 1831–1846. Bruges, City Archives, Hs 31.
Slosse 1: 1748. Kortrijk, State Archives, Goethals-Vercruysse (925), 392. Available online: https://www.flickr.com/photos/bibliotheekkortrijk/sets/72157610078715358/ .
Slosse 2: 1821. Kortrijk, State Archives, Slosse (927), 33/BIS.
Van de Wiele: 1816. Current location unknown. Auctioned in 2006 by Van de Wiele Auctions, Bruges. ^v

i P. Elsen, “Drie biechtboekjes voor doofstommen. Archief Charles-Louis Carton Spermalie Brugge”, *Brugse Gidsenkronek* 39 (2006), 48–56 [56].

ii A. De Meester, “Oude biechtboekjes voor doofstommen”, *Biekorf* 54 (1953), 31–7 [32–3].

iii R. Van den Abele, “Het biechtboekje Goetgeluck”, *Jaarboek Kunst- en Oudheidkundige Kring Deinze* 27 (1960), 153–62.

iv Claey, “De eerste decennia van dovenonderwijs in schoolverband in België”, 193.

v Elsen, “Drie biechtboekjes voor doofstommen”, 55.

has been preserved from Innsbruck in 1788, when Romedius Knoll, a Franciscan monk, published a set of 40 copper engravings, specifically designed for teaching deaf people core catholic principles.³²

In Flanders, one of the books that was used by instructors for the deaf, including probably by Maria-Josepha de Brabander and certainly by Joseph de Caigny, was Joannes Steeghius' *De christelijke leeringhe*, originally published in 1647.³³ This book was inspired by the so-called "Peasant's Almanachs" (Boeren-Almanachen), which replaced written text with images for those who could not read or write. Short texts in the forms of questions accompanied the images, so that those who could read could help those who could not.³⁴ Joseph de Caigny used Steeghius' book to prepare many (some suggest 300 to 400) deaf children for confession and communion. He also used sign language, an illustrated Bible and history book (apparently he loved teaching the French Revolution) and, somewhat surprisingly, two walking sticks. He had cut the artworks himself: one walking stick showed passages from the Old Testament, the other the Passion of Christ.³⁵ The rich existing visual Catholic culture, sometimes destined for children or illiterate people, could therefore be repurposed and added upon for the instruction of deaf people.

Despite these local initiatives, many priests worried in the eighteenth century that only few deaf and mute people received a proper religious education. This concern led to two related evolutions: the development of alternative methods for religious education, including those using a more advanced sign language, and the establishment of dedicated schools for deaf and mute people. A pioneer in this respect was the French priest Charles Michel de l'Épée (1712–1789), who was the first to create an institute for deaf students in Paris in 1770. He taught by means of signs (he had learned the Italian hand alphabet) and writing, and developed a sign language that was later deemed rather artificial. His successor at his school in Paris, abbé Roch Sicar (1712–1822) further developed his method, later called the "French method". Around the same time, Samuel Heinecke (1729–1790) opened a rivalling institute in Leipzig in 1778. Unlike de l'Épée, Heinecke did not be-

³² Knoll, *Katholische Normalschule für die Taubstummen, die Kinder und andere Einfältigen*.

³³ J. G. Steeghius, *De christelycke leeringhe verstaenelycker uyt-geleyt door eene beelden-sprake*, Antwerp 1647. See C. L. Carton, *Mémoire en réponse à la question suivante: Faire un exposé raisonné des systèmes qui ont été proposés pour l'éducation intellectuelle et morale des sourds-muets; [...]*, Brussels 1847, 13; Claeys, "De eerste decennia van dovenonderwijs in schoolverband in België", 191–192.

³⁴ Claeys, "De eerste decennia van dovenonderwijs in schoolverband in België", 192.

³⁵ C. de Baere, "Het instituut der doofstomme en blinde van Moorslede 1834", *Biekerf* 70 (1969), 193–202.

lieve that sign language was a good alternative to spoken language. Instead, he focused on teaching deaf people how to speak – the “German method”. It was a purely oral method based on speaking and lip-reading. He believed that thoughts could only be stimulated via spoken language and his students needed to be able to speak before they were taught how to write.³⁶ For all their rivalry, both de l’Epée and Heinecke agreed that religious teachings with images were too imprecise. This was one of the main reasons for developing a special educational system.³⁷

In Belgium, the first enduring institutional initiatives for teaching deaf and mute people took root in the early nineteenth century. The most important ones were a school in Ghent, established by canon J. Triest in 1825, and in Bruges, established by the priest Charles Louis Carton in 1838.³⁸ Like their international examples, these schools were established by clerics hoping to improve the religious education of people with disabilities. Convinced of the limitations of teaching through images, staff at both of these schools adopted L’Epée’s sign system. Carton explained his views on deaf education in a prizewinning essay in 1845. He noted that all teachers of deaf people had had the “simple and natural” idea to use prints and images when starting the instruction of deaf students.³⁹ For him, however, images worked best in combination with signing. Images, he believed, could only help to communicate something that was already known, they supported the materialization of an idea that was already there. Images could not teach deaf people something new or increase their intellect. On the contrary: they could lead to grave errors and misunderstandings, especially in religious matters.⁴⁰

It is therefore not a coincidence that when Carton explained his plans for a new catechism for deaf people in 1838, he explicitly mentioned that while he would include images, these were not the means to communicate religious truths:

³⁶ Buyens, *De dove persoon, zijn gebarentaal en het dovenonderwijs*, 32–39; Lang, “Perspectives on the History of Deaf Education”, 10–11. On the debate between both schools, see also M. Rietveld-van Wingerden, “Educating the Deaf in The Netherlands: a Methodological Controversy in Historical Perspective”, *History of Education* 32 (2003), 401–416, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00467600304146>.

³⁷ B. Beelaert, C. Bruyneel & K. Leeman, *Vive la parole? Milaan 1880 als scharniermoment in het dovenonderwijs*, Gent 2009, 36.

³⁸ For more details on schools for the deaf in Belgium, see Claeys, “De eerste decennia van dovenonderwijs in schoolverband in België”; Verstraete, “Een bijzondere zorg voor het zelf: Bijdrage tot de geschiedenis van het Buitengewoon Katholiek Onderwijs in België”, *Tijdschrift voor orthopedagogiek* 54 (2015), 272–277.

³⁹ Carton, *Mémoire en réponse à la question suivante*, 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

These engravings are, neither in my intention, nor in the principles of my method of instruction, a means of making a truth understood, they are only a means of conveying more easily the explanations given by the written word.⁴¹

While institutions such as Carton's did not outright reject the use of images in religious instruction, they found that they did not suffice for proper religious instruction and relied much less on them than in traditional deaf education. Their preferred means of communication and instruction was through sign language. This continued up until the Milan Conference of 1881, when a preference for the German, oral method was made explicit.⁴²

The high-level religious education that deaf institutions sought to provide in the early nineteenth century was not for everyone, however. The education they provided was expensive and lengthy, and only a select elite could afford it. Paul Thérèse David d'Astros, the archbishop of Toulouse from 1830 to 1851, was well aware of this. An elite education, he believed, was impossible for many common deaf people. He therefore officially sanctioned the use of images to teach less fortunate deaf people at least the basics of religion. He designed a catechism with images for deaf and mute people, focusing on baptism, confession and eucharist. He left other sacraments to the side to reduce the costs and still teach what was necessary for their salvation.⁴³ With d'Astros' blessing, many local, more informal initiatives to instruct deaf people, primarily using images, continued in the nineteenth century.⁴⁴

3. A Special Technology for Confession

It is as part of these local initiatives that the confession books for deaf and mute people first occurred. Although it seems self-evident, given the pervasive use of images for teaching deaf people throughout Catholic Europe, to use picture books for confession, this does not seem to have been very common. All such books we have found are closely related, evidently cop-

⁴¹ "[C]es gravures ne sont, ni dans mon intention, ni dans les principes de ma méthode d'instruction, des moyens de faire comprendre une vérité, ils sont seulement des moyens de rapporter plus facilement des explications données par la parole écrite." Bruges, Archives of Charles Louis Carton, 117 (2.80 A 6), 15 Apr. 1838, Proposal for an adapted catechism for the deaf, 12–13. Similar objections against relying on images in Montaigne 1829.

⁴² Beelaert et al., *Vive la parole? Milaan 1880 als scharniermoment in het dovenonderwijs*.

⁴³ D'Astros, *Catéchisme des sourds-muets qui ne savent pas lire*, Paris 1839, viii.

⁴⁴ Others were of a similar opinion as d'Astros, referring to the high costs and long duration of a professional education in the apologies of basic education with images, e.g. J. Valentin, *Le Prêtre juge et médecin au tribunal de la pénitence, ou méthode pour bien diriger les âmes*, Brussels 1845, 335; A.-R. Devie, *Rituel du diocèse de Belley*, Lyon 1834, 540; A. Rodenbach, *Les aveugles et les sourds-muets: histoire, instruction, éducation, biographies*, Brussels 1853, III–20.

ied from one another. Moreover, in those case where there was an indication to their place of origin, they all referred to places in the south of what is currently the Belgian province of West-Flanders: Kortrijk, Meulebeke, Izegem, Ledegem, Bavikhove, Aarsele, Sint-Denijs. The practice seems to have spread bottom-up, through local networks of deaf people, rather than through institutional initiatives.

The oldest of the books we have been able to date with some precision (because the date of production was either mentioned in the front matter or in one of the coins depicted in the book), was produced in Kortrijk in 1748.⁴⁵ It was the property of Guillelmus De Deurwaerdere, who lived in the house called “Wit Ketelken” on the Kortrijk market square. The De Deurwaerdere family was a well-known family with many deaf members. It was with them that François Delefotrie learned about religion, as he related to Alexandre Rodenbach. “These people were wealthy”, he knew, and they had lent him many volumes with pictures.⁴⁶ Possibly, then, they also started the tradition of using a dedicated book with hand-drawn pictures to use during confession, and stimulated others to do this as well.

De Deurwaerdere’s book started with a request to the confessor, written in Latin, revealing that the user of the book was deaf and mute and wanted to confess his sins. The text asked to take him to a secluded space to declare his sins and receive a suitable penance in hope of receiving absolution. He regretted with his whole heart to have offended God with his sins. On the page next to this statement, there was a picture of a man kneeling before a priest in a chair, with a book in his hand. The confessant is wearing a skirted knee-length coat, breeches and a wig. Over the next pages, different sins are depicted, drawn in ink and painted grayscale, with occasional red accents for hearts or crosses. A Latin caption describes the sin in question for the confessor. The sins depicted ranged from distraction during mass over hating close ones to dishonest thoughts. After 36 sins, several blank pages followed, possibly leaving the option to include additional sins. Then followed possible penances: giving to the poor, hearing masses, fasting, or hitting the chest five times as an act of contrition.

Several other of the books are very similar to the book of De Deurwaerdere, with greater or lesser variations in style or contents, but all in greyscale with red accents. Most were created in the late eighteenth century, some in the first decades of the nineteenth. In the most similar one, the date in the coin has faded (possibly 1767). It was possibly drawn by the same hand and

45 Slosse 1. (See the overview at the end for an explanation of the short references.)

46 Rodenbach, *Coup d’œil d’un aveugle sur les sourds-muets*, 206.



Figure 1. The first page from De Deurwaerere's confession book, with a request to the confessor in Latin and a drawing of the ritual of confession with the book. Photo: Slosse 1.



Figure 2. Eating meat on a day when it is not allowed. A sin depicted in the Ruusbroec copy from 1821. Note the hands signing that only “a little” meat was eaten, as well as the triangle with a dot, a common sign in almanacs referring to vigil days, the days when people had to fast in preparation of a holy day.

contained the exact same texts, albeit with a Dutch translation.⁴⁷ After the catalogue of sins, however, this book also contained a catechism in pictures, introducing the Holy Trinity, the Ten Commandments and the Five Commandments of the Church, the sacraments, the seven virtues and the seven deadly sins, death, the last judgment, hell and heaven. Only then did the book proceed (after some blank pages) with penances. Other books variously included or excluded such a catechism, sometimes in abbreviated forms.

Other books deviated more from the De Deurwaerdere copy. Several books were painted with watercolours. There is greater variation among these books, both in the colours used, the clothes worn and the sins included.⁴⁸ Overall, these were created slightly later than the greyscale ones, mostly in the early nineteenth century. Other copies have an entirely unique style: one is drawn entirely in pencil and not coloured, another was coloured using crayon.⁴⁹ The accompanying texts were most commonly written in Latin, sometimes in French or Dutch (or a combination of Latin with a translation). The introductory note announcing that the penitent was deaf and mute was sometimes absent or rephrased. These books mostly date from the early nineteenth century, with the most recent copies produced in 1851 and 1861. This was well after the deaf institutions had been established, but they were seemingly produced outside them.⁵⁰ There were no references to the deaf institutions in the books.

Only rarely do we get concrete information about how the books were produced. We know that some copies were drawn by a priest or religious instructor and sometimes gifted on the occasion of the first communion of the deaf person.⁵¹ For instance, Joannes Petrus Platteau, a local priest in Meulebeke who took a particular interest in deaf people in the 1820s, drew several of the water-coloured books, including one for Theresia De Wulf.⁵² Another book, drawn in 1851, was drawn by François de Raedt in Izegem.⁵³ Others, however, drew the pictures themselves after a model. Theresia Van Daele's book, drawn in 1816, noted that she had made the book herself.⁵⁴ In

47 Carton 1. Other copies in a similar style are EHC and SA Bruges.

48 These include Bridwell, Kromp 2, Kromp 3, Slosse 2.

49 Carton 3, Izegem.

50 Although Carton was clearly interested in them, for he collected three examples in his institute's library: Carton 1, Carton 2 and Carton 3.

51 The Major Seminary copy from 1826 mentions that Jan Baptiste Verhaeghe, deaf and mute, received the book for his first communion.

52 Slosse 2, preamble. See also Claeys, "De eerste decennia van dovenonderwijs in schoolverband in België", 193.

53 Carton 3. We have not been able to find information on De Raedt's background.

54 Van de Wiele.

such cases, the drawing of the sins and penances could itself be part of the religious instruction.

In any case, all the books were individualized. The main protagonists were men or women, depending on their user. Most of them wore nice clothes, suggesting the users were among the better classes. In some cases, clothing changed with the times (although men were depicted in breeches longer than they were fashionable; only in two of the books, one from 1826 and one from 1851, did the men wear trousers). Sins were sometimes added or removed, possibly to reflect the users' disposition. One book dating from c. 1830, for instance, gives particular attention to sins of indecency, including masturbation.⁵⁵

The visual language these books use to depict sins and religious principles clearly drew from a tradition of devotional images for the general population. If we compare them with Steeghius' popular visual catechism, we see that some scenes such as Hell or the Holy Trinity were quite similar. Some of the symbols Steeghius' and other devotional books used, such as a triangle to denote a day, also returned in the confession books.⁵⁶ The visual sources the books used could also change. Some devotional books depicted hell in a different way (see figures 3 to 6). This different visualization also returns in some of the confession books. It indicates that the confession books were not always just copied from one another, but that their creators also returned to other visual sources of inspiration.

Interestingly, the books also contain traces of sign language: occasionally, hands are drawn that sign an added meaning, such as "a little bit" (one index finger near the top of the other), "give back" (a hand held out) or "a year" (a circle with the index finger). They do not conform to the sign language proposed by de L'Epée, so these signs may refer a local sign language developed within the deaf community.⁵⁷ The combination of visualization based on religious traditions with common symbols and hand signs shows that the books for confession were part of an exchange between priests trying to accommodate deaf people and a larger deaf culture.

The books also visualized the ritual of confession itself. In several books,

⁵⁵ SA Bruges.

⁵⁶ See also I. Gheysen, "De biechtboekjes uit de Bibliotheek Carton (Spermalie)", Brugge in 100 objecten, <https://bruggein100objecten.wordpress.com/2017/04/21/de-biechtboekjes-uit-de-bibliotheek-carton-spermalie/>+&cd=3&hl=nl&ct=clnk&gl=be, accessed 2020-05-06.

⁵⁷ For comparison with de l'Epée's sign language, we have consulted R. A. C. Sicard, *Théorie des signes pour l'instruction des sourds-muets*, Paris 2008. Other sign languages referred to in Belgian sources also use other signs, e.g. L.-M. Lambert, *Le langage de la physionomie et du geste mis à la portée de tous suivi d'Une méthode courte, facile et pratique d'enseignement des sourds-muets illettrés qui sont hors des institutions spéciales, et des élèves arriérés de ces mêmes écoles*, Paris 1869.



Figures 3–6. Depictions of hell in Carton 1, Ruusbroec, Steeghius and a detail of a devotional image preserved at the Ruusbroec Institute, Zinnebeelden, Uitersten (by A. Voet and M. Volders)

the deaf person is kneeling with a book in his hands, while opposite the confessor sits in a chair, admonishingly waving a finger.⁵⁸ In others, the confessor sits in an open box or confessional, but the setup is otherwise similar.⁵⁹ How this worked in practice remains unclear in most cases, but it reveals something about the corporeal nature of confession. Even in their special circumstances, they had to embody contrition before their confessor.

4. What Matters in Confession

Many proponents of deaf education stressed that religious education through pictures could never reach the same level as religious instruction with sign language or through writing. In practice, deaf people and local priests in West-Flanders found that hand-drawn picture books could ameliorate deaf people's religious lives, helping those who could not read and write to confess and receive absolution. As such, they complicated the "auricular" in the "auricular confession". That this practice existed, and continued for over a century, shows the flexibility of confessional practice. The ritual could play to different senses when necessary. Its essence lay in the acknowledgment of sins and in penitence, not in the verbal recitation of sins.

The confession books owed their success in part, perhaps, to the agency they gave to deaf confessants. The confessor no longer needed to check in with the deaf person's friends or family to find out how to communicate with them, as Liguori had recommended. They could be more independent through the use of a book with both text and images. At the same time, their privacy and the secret of confession were guaranteed. The books, moreover, allowed for some individualization. While they could only contain a selection of possible sins, a confessor who knew the deaf person in question well could add new sins if needed.

It should be no surprise that some deaf people developed a strong emotional attachment to these confession books and other visual religious aids. François Delefortrie, whom we already mentioned above, testified about this to Alexander Rodenbach. He had borrowed several religious books with pictures, but they had been stolen by French soldier during the Revolutionary Wars in 1794. Delefortrie's brother added that "this loss had caused him so much grief, that he had cried for more than a fortnight".⁶⁰ It shows how material and visual religious culture was deeply embedded in the affective lives of deaf people.

Images, and the books that contained them, were a crucial element in

⁵⁸ Carton 1, EHC, Slosse 1.

⁵⁹ Confessional: Carton 3. Box: Carton 2, Kromp 2, Major Seminary, Ruusbroec, Slosse 2.

⁶⁰ Rodenbach, *Coup d'oeil d'un aveugle sur les sourds-muets*, 206.

the accommodations the Catholic Church allowed to include people with disabilities in faith. The view that the Church often preferred the spoken and written word in confession is not entirely misguided, but the confession books show that the reality was often much more complex. Showing an awareness of sinful behaviour and revealing one's sins to a priest put them on the track to salvation, not writing or speaking about them. ▲

SUMMARY

In eighteenth-century Belgium, a peculiar technique was developed to allow deaf people to take the sacrament of Confession. Religious teachers drew or had them draw the different sins they could commit from a model. These drawings were put together in a book, which the deaf person had to take to their confessor. They could then point to the sins they had committed and receive penance and absolution. We have located twenty of these books, all created between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth century, a period in which education of deaf people was increasingly professionalizing and institutionalizing. In the context of schools for the deaf, teaching through images was controversial. In practice, however, the methods using images continued to be used, as not everyone could afford the expensive schools that provided more advanced deaf education. The confessional aids complicate the “auricular” in auricular confession and show how the ritual could play to different senses when needed. Its essence lay in the acknowledgment of sins and in penitence, not in the verbal recitation of sins.