

64. PIOUS RESPONSES TO THE BLACK DEATH IN TOURNAI (1349)

The Black Death was the greatest natural catastrophe of the Middle Ages. Spreading from the Asiatic steppe, it hit Constantinople in 1347 and reached Italy the same year (probably carried by Italian merchants) where it rapidly swept across Europe, decimating large areas, leaving others unscathed. By late 1349 it had done its worst damage; by 1351 it had ebbed away. While historians still debate its death toll, most modern estimates suggest that somewhere between a third to a half of Europe's population was carried off, though the most recent studies now argue that the higher figure is probably more accurate. Whatever the numbers, in barely three years, millions of people died quite suddenly and painfully of a highly contagious pathogen which medieval medicine was helpless to fight. Though some people caught the plague and survived, most victims were dead several days after the onset of symptoms. The reactions of the people of Tournai in what is now modern Belgium shed light on how a crisis — here the onslaught of epidemic disease — could affect religious perceptions and practices. Gilles le Muisit (1272-1352), abbot of the monastery of St. Martin at Tournai, left an extensive account of the course of the plague in Flanders. Writing in 1350, the seventy-eight-year-old abbot reported how the plague reached Tournai in late August, peaked in September, and tapered off by early November. In that brief time, he claimed that it killed 25,000 in Tournai alone, a figure improbably high for a fairly small medieval city. In the following excerpt from his chronicle, he describes portents of impending disaster, the annihilation of local Jews suspected of causing the epidemic, the arrival of penitent companies in Tournai, and how the people of Tournai reacted to them.

Source: trans. J. Shinnars from J.-J. de Smet, *Chronica Aegidii li Muisit in Recueil des Chroniques de Flandre, Corpus Chroniconum Flandriae* (Brussels: M. Hayes, 1841), v. II, pp. 340-361, with some corrections from Henri LeMaitre, *Chronique et Annales de Gilles le Muisit, Société de l'Histoire de France* (Paris: Librairie Renouard, 1906), v. 323, pp. 221-252. Latin.

Three authorities agree [with the earlier prophecy of Master Jan de Murs] that religious sects would be destroyed, kingdoms change, prophets appear, the people rise up, novel rituals [appear], and finally a horrid and fearful blast of winds.

In the year 1345 and in the following years 1346, 1347, and 1348, many things happened, so it seems, that the above prophecies foretold, which those then living saw come to pass. Under the year 1349, I intend to mention how the destruction of the Jews came about, the death of people from an epidemic, the arrival of people doing public penance and scourging themselves, and many other things. But it is my concern to lend credence to the above prophecies or to the predictions of astrologers and mathematicians only inso-

far as belief allows, always bearing in mind the Roman See and the Catholic faith.

From Christmas to Easter of 1349 I can write little about the rule of Louis, Count of Flanders because the Flemish people are rash and fickle; nevertheless, the count reigned the whole time, and dispensed much justice — public and private — upon the weavers, fullers, and the others who bore themselves badly in the wars, according to what I have heard from many trustworthy people.

And I, Abbot Gilles, take stock of the many things worth recounting for the year 1349, and consider also that long ago I compiled, organized, and wrote a certain treatise about many ancient matters concerning the lord bishops of Tournai, the town itself, and the wars between the kings of France and England and Flanders from long past. In this treatise, many things are included up to today, the time of the young Louis, Count of Flanders, who married the daughter of the Duke of Brabant and came into Flanders. The Flemish people welcomed the count and countess peacefully and continually not just for a day, but for several days interspersed. From the time of their arrival, the country of Flanders was quiet, and there was little news about the wars between the kings of England and France. Merchants went safely to their markets, though the devalued currency circulating in France weakened their trade. As a result, everyone in common — rich, middling, and poor — complained bitterly about and were afflicted by the shortage of grain, wine, and all other victuals since those who worked profited little or not at all. A measure of grain sold for thirty sous¹ of devalued coin, and wine for two sous; everything cost more because of the devalued currency.

In 1349 there were many reports and widespread rumors that the Jewish race was trying to destroy the Christian people, if they could, by casting poison into springs, wells, and water supplies.

In addition, from spreading rumors and the reports of travelers and merchants who routinely visited these distant lands, there was reliable news about a mortality that began in the East and had spread over the Indies and all the territories of the Christians, pagans, Saracens, and other peoples, from the east to the north and the south. It was so bad that in many places a third, in many other places a quarter to a half of the people died; in many areas only one or two in ten were left alive. In a number of places the fields and vineyards lay uncultivated. Astrologers were saying that this disaster was caused by the conjunction of certain planets and stars which corrupted the air; this corruption of the air generated a malady, which they called an epidemic.

There were widespread rumors that in the cities, towns, hamlets, castles, and country villages of Hungary, Germany, and the duchy of Brabant, people

were stirring one another up and gathering in groups of sometimes two hundred, sometimes three hundred, sometimes five hundred or more depending on the locality's population. For thirty-three days they went through their lands twice a day, barefoot, naked but for breeches, wearing hoods, and whipping themselves with scourges until the blood flowed. Finally they arrived in Flanders. But I want to point out that I cannot prove the truth of this matter, how and why it began, and what its purpose was, since I have found no one who could give me information about these things. Later I intend to mention the deeds I have myself seen and heard.

The seizure and destruction of the Jews.

In 1349 the Jews were all seized and put into jails and prisons wherever they lived. The reason for their arrest was the grave suspicion that they were maliciously attempting to destroy the Christian people by poison; that, as they could, they had secretly tossed poison into wells, springs, and water supplies. They did this in many places, or so news and rumor in general had it. Furthermore, there were some members of their religion — discerning and learned astrologers — who made predictions for them that, according to the course of the stars, at a future time there would be death on a large scale. Because of this prediction, they hoped to achieve their evil purpose more surely and insidiously. They also saw by the course of the stars that one religious sect would be destroyed — they hoped that it would be the Christian one. They further predicted that people would appear wearing red crosses, which set them wondering whether their own sect would be destroyed. They said many other things that it would take too long to repeat.

Now in the kingdom of France since the time of St. Louis the King there had been few if any Jews. But in other kingdoms and regions all those who were found there were seized, so it is said, and it was put to them what they intended to do. Many of them denied it, but others confessed their plan. I cannot say in truth what happened to them in distant regions, but it was rumored that all over Germany and in other regions they were either burned, beheaded, or killed in various other ways. It is a fact that in the counties of Lotharingia and Bari all who were found there were burned.

In the duchy of Brabant, in the town called Brussels, lived the Duke of Brabant and his eldest son. In that town was one very wealthy Jew. This man had known the duke for a long time, and the duke loved him very much and confided in him, since this Jew pretended that he was baptized. Seeing men arriving in the town doing penance and carrying red crosses, he went to the duke and said, "My lord, because these men have appeared doing such things,

it is a certainty that I and the whole Jewish sect will be destroyed wherever we are found." The duke told him, "Don't be afraid — I don't know a man alive who would try to destroy you." But he responded, "O good duke, you cannot undo this, for it is ordained from on high."

In the town there were a large number of Jews. The duke, out of friendship for this Jew and for a price, aimed to defend them and guard them from death. But the commune and the inhabitants of the town, hearing the rumor about the poison, went to the duke's son wishing to have all the Jews destroyed, but not daring to do this since his father, the duke, wanted to protect them. Yet in spite of his father's wish, this eldest son, out of his love for the Catholic faith, goaded them on and ordered them to kill them all: afterwards he would make peace between them and his father. So the town's commune and its inhabitants sought out the Jews everywhere, slaughtering whomever they could find. It was reported that more than six hundred people were slain, but the wealthy Jew was captured alive. He acknowledged that he had received baptism unfaithfully, had consented to spreading the poison, and that the Jews had intended to do this because they trusted the message of the stars, hoping that the Jews would prevail. He also acknowledged that he had unworthily received the body of our Lord Jesus Christ at the altar three times; he then sent these three hosts to the Jews living in Cologne, who had pricked them and blood flowed from them. He admitted many other horrible things, which the knights and other faithful people assisting them reported. (I say this by word of mouth, since I was not present.) Finally he was sentenced and burned. During that time in many towns in the duchy of Brabant and in other counties and duchies, justice was rendered against them.

I should not omit what happened in the city of Cologne [in 1349], which is the metropolitan see. In this city there were a large number of Jews. They had an area set aside for them and streets where they lived separated from the Christians. It happened that many Jews, fleeing other places where they were being put to death, came to Cologne and stayed there with other Jews. Thus, there was a vast multitude of Jews there. Seeing this, the citizens and inhabitants of Cologne took counsel and, as in other places, decided to destroy them. But the Jews protected themselves, searching out and arming themselves with the weapons that they held as pledges for loans made to Christians. Many resisted manfully. The citizens and other inhabitants were not strong enough to overcome them; they hesitated to set their houses on fire since that might burn down the whole city. But it happened that the butchers and many others from the city feigned sympathy for the Jews and allied themselves with them. One day the Jews prepared to attack with the help of these people; but the Christians, knowing this, held back and there was a

huge battle there. Through God's will the Jews were defeated. They generally say that more than 25,000 Jews were slain; but many of the Christians were cut down and died. The Jewish neighborhood and its dwellings were pulled down; its houses were burned to ashes. The Christians took this victory.

What has been written above about the destruction of the Jews — how and in what manner they were destroyed in which places — must suffice for my readers since on the feast of All Saints [Nov. 1] 1349 news about them ceased. And if those who told me these stories were speaking the truth, then I am not fabricating in putting this into writing. But if the contrary proves true, posterity should not put the blame on me because I did not witness this event, I was told about it.

In the year 1349 sometimes people spoke falsely, sometimes truthfully. But it seems appropriate to me to make some mention of things that happened that are not true or are doubtful.

Since one cannot avoid evil unless it is first recognized, and since the human senses are prone to sin from the age of adolescence, and since men and women easily believe often dubious things professing them to be true, some things that happen ought not be regarded as true, since a thing is designated by its end, and if its end is good, the whole thing is good. But many things happen that on the face of it appear to be true.

In 1349 in the village called Houtaing near Tournai there was a girl about fourteen years old. She said that while she was watching her parent's cows she often saw certain people — women — dressed in white clothing, who spoke to her. She told her father, mother, and brothers and sisters what these people said to her and about the writings they showed her, teaching her lessons about [the magic power of] words and herbs. The girl began to work wonders, so much so that great numbers of people feeble, blind, or paralyzed poured around her, putting-unthinking faith in her. She came to the notice of the bishop, the reverend father Lord Jan [de Pratis], at that time bishop of Tournai, who sent his official to her (accompanied by the dean of the cathedral of Notre Dame at Tournai and by lawyers and other skilled and learned clerics) to examine her and the works she had done. They reported that the girl was a half-wit who knew nothing, not even the Our Father and the Hail Mary, though she was impetuous in her words and in her answers to them. But since crowds of men and women alike were putting faith in the girl's deeds and calling what she said and did miraculous, the lord bishop, after careful and serious deliberation, silenced the girl and her parents, and ordered them to stop their undertaking. Obeying him, they ceased, and immediately

there were no more rumors about her.

That same year in the village of Bedlers near Tournai in the diocese of Cambrai there was a married woman who was being paid to nurse another woman's infant. This woman said that one night while her husband was away she got up before dawn to tend to some necessities. Going back to her room, she saw, so it seemed, a great light over the sleeping infant, and, thoroughly terrified, she heard, or so it seemed to her, a voice saying to her, "I am the Blessed Mary, and I give notice to you and to all people that my Son is angry and there is a great disturbance upon his people." When morning came, this woman sought the advice of her curate, who took her to Tournai where she spoke to the dean of the cathedral, to Brother Gerard de Mur, and to Brother Robert de Paris, who examined her and found no validity to her story, though there had been great rumor and various opinions among the people about this. She effectively dropped the whole matter.

Also that year in the parish church of Blessed Mary Magdalene at Tournai there was great excitement among the men and women because an image of the crucified Lord Jesus Christ in the church, which many saw, was said to have sweated, and a large number of drops had fallen from it. This was reputed to be a miracle, and a great part of the town poured into the church to see it. This opinion held sway for a few days, but in a brief time it was completely disregarded and forgotten.

In that year too, after these other events, in the leper-house of Vaulx outside the town walls there happened to be a certain image of the glorious Virgin. Many men and women maintained that they had seen it sweating and crying. This rumor instantly swept through the town, and without interruption a huge crowd of people came there. Egging each other on in turn, they professed that the glorious Virgin had worked a miracle there. Such things happened at Tournai and in many other places. The people for the most part believed in them, reputing them to be miracles. It would take too long to describe such matters to those disinclined to believe quickly; therefore let this suffice for future [readers], and let them reflect on such things, since perhaps other people have made mention of them in their writings.

A narrative about those people who — through the cities, towns, hamlets, castles and other places, in companies now numbering a hundred, now two or three hundred, now more numerous still — banded together and went about doing public penance in 1349.

God knows how to change his verdicts if you know how to correct your mistakes. I would have been oppressed had I not known your mercy, Lord; for you said, "I desire not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn

from his way, and live" [Ezek. 33.11]. And you, O good Jesus, said with your own holy and blessed mouth, "Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart" [Matt. 11.29]. And "Come to me all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest" [Matt. 11.28]. Therefore let sinners look into their heart, and may he who has stumbled look inward so that he may rise up, and let he who has sinned cease, because this is true contrition, and its definition is to weep for the past, and, by weeping, to sin no more. For the time to repent is nigh, and when it comes to time, we have only the present. So let sinners hurry to penance while they have time.

[Underlined in red:] Penance, however, should be prudent, reasonable, within proper limits, and undertaken at the will of a superior having the power to enjoin penance; because what is done without the authority and will of a superior should be regarded as presumptuous and vainglorious, not compensatory.

In 1349, therefore, those living heard and saw marvelous things, and it seems appropriate to me to make it known to all future generations, since at the time all sane-minded people were absolutely dumbfounded by the various things that happened and by the changes in the times and in the people. It is a fact that at the beginning of the year, just after Lent and immediately before Easter Sunday, everyone — men and women, cleric and lay — fell into such a disordered state of every excess that it was a horrible thing to see, especially for those who remembered bygone times. This happened the world over, and it would be hard to put it into words; for what can I say about the way people dressed and adorned themselves? Men wore clothes so close-fitting and short that their crotches were visible underneath, which was shameful. Lewd and lascivious women gladly looked at them nonetheless, since all human acts tend toward lust.

And what should I say about the lewd women? They copied the image and likeness of men in their dress and adornments, wearing dresses so tight that their close fit revealed the shapes of their naked bodies. They decorated their heads with wigs and with hair shaped into beast-like horns, and then they walked through the streets and lanes to their churches. Whenever the occasion arose they went to funerals, divine services, sermons, and any other place dressed as if they were attending a wedding feast. Through such fashions they seemed to be goading men on to look at them, not only by the way they dressed but by everything they did. They had no regard for the scripture that says "She is chaste whom no one has sought after," since through a nod, a laugh, a cast of the eye, they provoked men. It would take too long to describe their lewdness, their lustful songs, their fashion-bound dancing, music-making, and fads. Sad to say, I cannot totally exclude the clergy from these abuses, woe to the church! It seems that the time has arrived

about which it is said: as are the people, so are the priests [Isa. 24.2]. The change in things is everywhere apparent, and everyone should reflect on this in his or her heart and make a decision about it. For the holy virgin Hildegard of Bingen [1098-1179] says in one of her letters to a clergyman, "They too have a voice, but they do not shout; they are given work but they do not do it: they want glory without merit and merit without work." But let him who wants glory, cut himself off from his property. Let him who craves merit with God produce the work fit for it. For an overseer looks down from on high; hidden yet watchful, he is a strong yet merciful judge.

How utterly incredible! And I dare say that although the noble classes — men and their wives, and their sons and daughters — and some of the lower nobility and their offspring acted in the manner just mentioned, people of inferior station and poor people not only wanted but tried to act this way too. It happened that children, young people, and women, seeing these novelties, wanted to imitate them, so much so that the clothes on their backs and the jewels that many men and women wore in public were worth more than the houses they lived in. And so the vices mushroomed: pride, greed, anger, envy, gluttony, and lust and things of their ilk. But preachers — prelates and genuinely holy men, religious mendicants and learned men — seeing the world so universally snared in the vices, preached in churches and other fitting places, constantly proclaiming the Divine Word, praising virtue and damning vice. Yet they had little success, for as it is written: "the people sat down to eat, and drink, and they rose up to play" [Exod. 32.6]; and examples do more good than words. The people's heart was not right with God; but he is merciful and will be kind toward sins. And that year he showed this, because the Most High changed his hand. As the vices boiled hot and swelled, the Lord summoned a fitting remedy. For after the aforementioned news about the destruction of the Jews, news grew about the penitents, which I will mention. In Tournai there was no rumble of news except about the condemnation of the Jews and about the ritual of penitence that had already begun in Flanders. Yet people were not paying any attention to it the way they later did, so that they would not have to correct their vices. But at the beginning of August or thereabout, people in some of the parishes started falling sick and dying.

The first appearance in Tournai of people doing penance.

That year [1349] on the feast day of the Assumption of the glorious Virgin [Aug. 15], it happened that around dinnertime about two hundred people arrived from the town of Bruges. They gathered in the town square. Immedi-

ately the news was all over town so that everyone went there. They came in large gangs to the square because they had heard the news and now aimed to see what was happening. In the meantime, the people from Bruges had prepared themselves and started performing their ritual, which they called penitence. Everyone, men and women alike, who had never seen such a sight, began to suffer with these people and feel the pain of their penitence; they gave thanks to God for such penitence, which they considered most severe. The people from Bruges stayed in the town that whole day and night. The next day, which was a Sunday, they gathered at the monastery of St. Martin where they performed their penitential exercise, and then after dinner they went back out into the square. During those two days, the whole community felt compassion for these penitents, though there were differences of opinion. Some sane-minded people did not commend them; others could not approve their deed more highly.

On the following Tuesday, a common procession of the cathedral's dean and chapter, the clergy, and all the people went to our monastery of St. Martin, where the Franciscan brother Gerard de Mur preached the word of God about the coming plague. Preaching splendidly, rebuking the vices, and condemning the habits of men and women, he reprimanded them most sharply. But at the end of his sermon, he neglected to pray for penitents like those from Bruges; consequently, the greater part of the audience was indignant, and for that whole week people griped variously about him. That same week a great company of around 450 came from Gent, and another company of about 300 from the town of Sluis on the sea, plus another company of 400 from around Dordrecht, who did the same kind of public penance twice a day, sometimes in the town square, sometimes in the courtyard of the monastery of St. Martin.

That Saturday, the feast of the beheading of John the Baptist [Aug. 29], a band of about 180 people came from Liège, accompanied by a Dominican friar. On that day and the next — a Sunday — they remained doing their penance like the others. The friar obtained a license from the dean and chapter to preach the word of God in the same place where Brother Gerard had preached, at the monastery of St. Martin of Tournai. News about this spread throughout the city. Such a multitude of men and women gathered there as Tournai had never seen — there was scarcely a place in the monastery to put them all. The Dominican friar began to preach on the text "Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, etc." [John 12.24]. Speaking about many things, he came to about the middle of his sermon. Then he got down to the matter of those with whom he had come, who were doing penance. He called their company Red Knights; he accused the mendicant friars of

preaching against the piety of those undertaking penance, and said that for as many as they persuaded to stop, they persuaded an equal number to take up penance. He called such friars scourges and Antichrists, even comparing the blood of those they called the Red Knights to the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ — or so many understood him to say. He also said that, since the shedding of our Savior's blood, there had not been such a noble outpouring of blood as there was from those who now shed it while scourging themselves. He said many other things that bordered on error, which some who were there wrote down. When he finished his sermon the community was pleased beyond measure, and nearly all of them began to gripe against the mendicant orders and even against all the clergy.

But the dean and chapter who, since the see was vacant [*Bishop Jan de Pratis had died of plague early that summer*], were acting in the capacity of the bishop, convoked a gathering of religious mendicants and learned men, together with those who had transcribed the words of the friar's sermon, and many other judicious and respected men. They consulted with them about the propositions and statements in the friar's sermon, and they deliberated over it. Then they issued a proclamation that all the clergy and other religious and all the people should assemble on that coming Tuesday in order to make a procession barefoot and shirtless; the procession should go as far as the parish church of St. Catherine and then return to the monastery of St. Martin where the word of God would be preached. In the procession the lord dean and another canon priest would carry the most holy sacrament of the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ. And so they all assembled at the monastery, but it was not like it had been the preceding Sunday, for Brother Robert, an Austin friar, preached the word of God. Taking for his subject the deaf-mute healed by our Lord Jesus Christ [Mark 7.32-36], he expounded it most eloquently and ingeniously, praising the virtues and reproaching the vices. At the end of his sermon, when he was making the customary commendations and prayers, he neglected to pray for those doing public penance. Afterwards he said, "O good folk, I was charged to speak to you about the brother who preached here last Sunday, for he spoke words that touched on the faith, expressing various opinions, and, among other things, making a comparison between the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and those people who are scourging themselves in public." But before he could make his point, against all reason and custom some people rose up shouting "Sir, you are badly informed. The friar did not say this in his sermon." And instantly all the men and women started protesting and shouting, all at once saying that the friar had not said this in his sermon. Imposing silence with great difficulty, however, Brother Robert spoke, wishing to calm the people: "I told you what my

charge was, but you hold to the opposite view. Still, don't let keeping the faith displease you, for it's time for you to observe peace and tranquility among everyone." But his soothing words had little effect, because the people stood up grumbling and egging each other on, saying that these things were typical of the mendicant orders. And that whole day there was huge unrest throughout the town over the mendicant orders and the clergy in general. But on the following Sunday there was another common procession at the monastery. There, with the mayors and town leaders present, Brother Robert delivered a sermon which calmed the people down a bit.

It should not be overlooked that this same rascal Dominican preached things similar to what he said at Tournai and more at the town of Valenciennes, so that afterwards some scholarly clerics opposed him; but because of the company with which he traveled, they abandoned their effort to change his ways.

How those at Tournai, like others, prepared themselves to perform public penance.

Our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, when he washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper, said to them, "I have given you an example, that as I have done to you, so you also should do" [John 13.15]. This is the path of humility. And if we should follow the example of good people, we should especially follow our Creator's example, for actions speak louder than words, and the words and examples of our Savior Jesus Christ are all any of us need as a remedy. Thus, many of the people of Tournai who saw the method of penance of the visiting penitents began to grow so devout that about 565 men or so gradually gathered together and made a mutual pact with the permission of the town's leaders. They proposed to leave the town and follow the example of the other penitents for thirty-three days once they had made all their necessary arrangements. They departed the town on a Monday [Sept. 7], the eve of the feast of the birth of the glorious Virgin; but before they left they performed their first act of penance in the town square, where a huge crowd of people had gathered. Leaving the city, they traveled toward Lille. On the day they returned — a Saturday [Oct. 10], the day after the feast of the martyr St. Denis — they did their penance in the town square. The next day on Sunday the whole company went to Mont-Saint-Aubert, performing their usual ritual both coming and going. It is true that it was rumored that, when they left, they went through France all the way to Soissons; but how they traveled, through what places or towns they passed, and how they behaved themselves it is not my concern to know or to describe — let them render their own account to God and the world. Their leaders and captains

were prudent men elected by the consent of the whole company: the knight Jan de Liancourt, Jan Mackes, Jan Wauckiers, and Jakob de Maulde representing Willem Pestel at the behest of the mayors and town leaders. The prior of the house of Austin friars, accompanied by a fellow friar, went with them with two other secular priests to hear confessions and administer the sacraments if needed. And one of the canons of St. Nicholas-de-Prés, called Gilles the monk, kept company with them by his own choice.

In a marvelous and indescribable way, lay men and women reached such levels of piety during that time that it is scarcely believable. For many men and women by divine instinct — may God give it — changed their manner of dress and their adornments, and many women changed their hairstyles, casting off their horns and knots; dropping their accustomed swear words that deform Jesus Christ and his Passion, the Virgin Mary, and all the saints; abandoning dice-playing and their other games where the dice roll; completely forsaking dancing, lewd songs, and many trivial and dishonorable things that were their wont. Even rumors about men and women fornicating and committing adultery stopped circulating. And may the God of Israel preserve this goodwill and give us the grace of perseverance. For it is commendable that, due to those doing penance and to their example, many people forgave or excused ongoing quarrels between them; this happened at Tournai and in many other places.

It is also noteworthy that, although there was a great movement of people doing penance during that time, this did not occur anywhere in France nor in other more northern kingdoms and territories except in Flanders, Hainaut, Brabant, and other places lying westward.

While I was writing the above, the prediction of Master Jan de Murs came to mind: how he said that, where there was a conjunction of stars and planets among other things, there would be destruction of religious sects, an uprising of the people, new kinds of rituals, and an epidemic. It seems to me that in 1349 these things happened for the most part, just as we have heard and seen at Tournai; for the Jews, wherever they were found among Christians, were destroyed through various tortures. Furthermore, the advent of penitence and those doing penance stirred people everywhere to a great uprising, since some people maintained that their deeds should not be condoned because they had not received approval from the Roman Curia. The king of France even had his *baillis* publicly proclaim everywhere that no one should admit these penitents. I also heard from a trustworthy person that he had seen at Avignon two thousand such penitents from Germany, who wished to have their practices and those of others endorsed by the pope and curia. At the end of the day they were told that they should leave, otherwise

they would face ecclesiastical censure; and so the next day and the day following all of them disappeared.

Due to these things and others that reason dictated, churchmen and other sane-minded and learned men held that, according to the Catholic faith, since the church had not consented and canon law prohibited it, their practices should not be approved. But the people, both men and women alike, those ignorant of Scripture, high-born and low, approved the practice beyond measure, especially in the regions mentioned above. And so there was remarkable and pointless dissension, and people everywhere blamed the mendicant orders in particular for setting up obstacles against them. But who could doubt that this was a new kind of ritual since they did their penance in churches, monasteries, and other holy places, where by law no violent shedding of blood whatsoever is allowed? And even when divine services or private masses were being said in churches, they paid no attention and did not interrupt their ritual. The greater part of the common people approved more of their penitential rites than they did of the divine services, calling them praiseworthy. Since there was such a transmutation of bad into good with their advent, as described above, churchmen who held to their conviction were quite often laughed at. Such was the common people's opinion that they claimed that miracles happened in many places by virtue of their penitence.

Since a man does not know whether he is more worthy of love than hate, therefore God is our judge, for the Lord's judgments are a great deep [Ps. 35-7]. I hesitate, for this ritual now grew (and grows) so much in many places through companies or people banding together who perform such novelties and practices contrary to approved custom, that it is horrible to contemplate or speak of. For — omitting other towns, villages, and places — I refer only to Tournai, since, when these penitents first arrived, they performed penance for thirty-three days. But now, banding together through the parishes, they perform their ritual both on the sabbath and on feast days in the cathedral church of Notre Dame and in other churches, often interrupting divine services, though the clergy do not dare criticize them due to pressure from the community. And what is more, it has spread and is a remarkable novelty because these penitents had a remarkable beginning. It is no longer proper to approach the cathedral canons and parish curates to collect the bodies of the dead, carry them to cemeteries, and bury them (as is reasonable and customary) since now the companies of penitents with cross and candle collect them, carry them, and bury them — and often induce those dying to make donations to them — customarily given to curates, chaplains, hospitals, or the poor. And I dare say that from their arrival before Christmas of 1349, these and many other things have happened in Tournai.

And since man sees the surface but God sees into the heart, since the things I have mentioned are unusual novelties, and since our Savior said, "Pass no judgment before the time" [1 Cor. 4:5], I therefore commit to Divine Wisdom and Majesty the advantage and honor of Holy Mother Church, the practices of faith and Christianity, and the progress of souls. For I do not know how to describe or entrust to the future such innovations and the things that happened in these days.

The numbers of people, the names of their towns, and when they arrived as mentioned above, as it was reported to me.

On September 12, 120 people came from Tienen in Brabant; that same day, 80 came from the town of Sluis.

On the eve [Sept. 7] of the feast of the birth of the Blessed Mary, about 50 came from Damme.

On the feast of the birth of the Blessed Mary [Sept. 8] about 200 came from Enghien.

The day after the feast, about 160 came from the town of Namur, and about 150 from Bruges.

On the eve of the procession at Tournai [Sept. 7] about 80 came from Nieuwpoort. That same day, about 52 came from the town of Eeklo; about 300, in two companies, from Bruges; and about 100 from Damme.

On the day of the procession, about 50 came from Cassel.

The day after the procession about 250 came from Sluis; about 100 from the town of Deynze; and about 60 from Diksmuide.

On the eve of the feast of St. Matthew [Sept. 20], about 240 came from the town of Mons-en-Hainaut.

That same day, about 300 came from Oudenaarde; about 120 from Genappe; and about 200 from Lille.

On the feast of St. Matthew [Sept. 21], about twenty women came from Flanders, whipping themselves in same way as the men, but uncovering only their backs.

The Sunday after the feast of St. Matthew [Sept. 27], about 200 came from the town of Maubeuge; that same day, about 300 came from Bailleul in Flanders.

On October 3, the eve of the feast of St. Francis, about 450 came from Valenciennes.

Note that I learned from some of the leaders chosen by the penitents that those joining the penitent companies promised to do and observe to the best of their ability the following things (which were first read to them) for as

long as they lived, otherwise they were not admitted. First, those joining made this promise, saying, "We swear to avoid every occasion of sin to the best of our ability, and to make general confession and contrition for all the sins we remember. We swear to make a last testament or some provision for our possessions, to pay or appoint someone to pay our debts, and to make restitution for borrowed goods. We will be peaceful, make amends, and show kindness. We will lay down our bodies and possessions to defend, maintain, and guard the rights of the holy church in its honor, liberty, faith, doctrine, and law. Recognizing that we are all created from the same kind of matter, redeemed by one ransom, endowed with one gift, we should address each other as 'brother' and no one shall call his comrade by his given name." Those joining should seek permission from their curate and receive their cross from him; they should seek permission from their lawful wives; and they should make themselves obedient to another's [authority]. They should discipline themselves for thirty-three and a half days, sitting on an uncushioned chair, sleeping without bed-clothes or pillows, keeping silent unless given permission to speak, receiving charity but seeking it from no one, entering houses only with the permission of their hosts, and upon entering or leaving saying five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys. Every morning they should say fifteen Our Fathers and fifteen Hail Marys, and fifteen more later on: five while kneeling before dinner, five after dinner, and five at night. They should wash their hands while kneeling on the ground before dinner, and they should not speak at the table unless given permission. "You shall not swear oaths on the Lord's Passion, nor blaspheme for the rest of your life insofar as you can. Every Friday you shall keep a Lenten fast if you can, and you shall have life; and on Good Friday only you shall scourge yourself three times during the day and night for the length of time it takes you to say five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys. If any of our brothers disagrees with another brother, calling him a liar or quarrelsome, he will make amends at the discretion of our confessors. You shall not bear arms, nor fight in battle for anyone other than your true Lord. No one will be entrusted with [carrying] the cross while walking, sitting, or lying down who does not have a tunic or a hood. No one, healthy or ill, may depart the company without permission, nor sit at table without permission. No one shall scourge himself so much that he becomes sick or dies. You should give alms to the poor to the extent you can. No one should refuse alms given to him out of love of God, unless he is rich or a nobleman. You should persistently fix your heart and mouth in praise and penance, and pray for all holy Christianity that God will put an end to this plague and be lenient to us for our sins. If anyone violates these measures or complains about them, he should amend himself at the discretion of a higher confessor;

and he who is found persevering to the end is privileged by God's grace to reign in glory. If any of the brothers quits during a session of public scourging, each of them shall be obliged to scourge himself for the length of time it takes to say fifteen Our Fathers and fifteen Hail Marys. We wish each one to be required to put his penitential habit and his scourge on his bed, in order to keep in mind the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. You should especially require yourself to abstain from all meat for the rest of your life, to keep your marriage vows sacred, and not to swear in vain. Also, everyone should be careful not to eat meat on Wednesday."

All of these things that the initiates promised obviously appear to be honest and devout things if their heart matched their words, if they persevered, and if Holy Mother Church consented and gave her authority. Since God — who says, "Without me, you can do nothing" [John 15:5] — alone knows the secrets of the heart [Ps. 43:22], it is not my concern to approve or reprove them. As Augustine says, "I neither praise nor condemn daily celebration." And wise Seneca says "Praise little, blame even less." Thus, I yield judgment to God most high and to Holy Mother Church, since if something is good in its end, everything coming from it will be good. It is, nevertheless, my intention to write an account for the future's notice, because no one in past times has ever seen the penitents' methods, the way they dressed, and how they acted while doing penance. Many people have written or spoken about where and why this movement began, but I have never been able to get sure proof from anyone about these questions. I can only record what happened in Tournai since I do not know the truth of what happened in distant places.

Here was the procedure when companies of two or three hundred, sometimes more, sometimes less, had gathered. It was their practice to wear over their clothes a sleeveless tunic called a *cloche* [i.e., bell-shaped cloak] in the vernacular. On the front of the tunic was a red cross on the breast and a similar cross on the back. It was cut on one side and hanging there were lashes [*scorpiones*] — what we call scourges [*scorgies*] in the vernacular — that had three tips on them, each iron tip spiked with four needle-like points. They wore hoods on their heads and on top of them a cap on which was sewn a red cross front and back; they carried penitentiary staves in their hands. Entering the town they carried a cross, banners, and wax torches as they were able, some more, some fewer, and they went in order, singing in their native language — Flemings in Flemish, Brabantines in German, French in French. When they arrived before the image of Blessed Mary in the cathedral church they stopped singing. Afterwards they assembled in the town square or in the courtyard of St. Martin's. They went into a private room or some other fitting place and stripped off their clothes and shoes, leaving someone

behind to look after them until they returned. Then they came to the place with their heads covered by their hoods and the caps over them, their feet bare, and their bodies naked except for a cloth covering, like the kind bakers wear when they work. They wrapped this garment, which reached to the ground, completely around them over their breeches and cinched it at their waist. In their hands they held their scourges. When they reached a suitable street, it was their custom to process carrying crosses and banners following each other in order according to their numbers and the size of the place. Then they started forming a circle and singing chants in their native language, which appointed singers began while the others responded in unison. Chanting and responding they made a circle and the chanters and responders whipped themselves. The hymn was such that they were required to prostrate themselves three times. When they reached the first verse, they all fell to the ground at the same time and, stretching their arms out at their sides, made the shape of a cross. Getting up on their knees, they variously tormented themselves with the scourges, so much so that those seeing them were astonished and wept and felt compassion for their suffering. They did this a second and a third time, the chanters (who were curates or religious mendicants of the various orders) singing in the middle of the circles that each led. After they had finished making these circles and punishing themselves with prostrations and beatings, after they had ended their chanting, they all knelt and one of the priests among them offered commendations and prayers, just as if he were in church at funeral rites or the end of a sermon. All of them stayed kneeling until he had finished his commendations and prayers. It was most pious and terrible for those present to see what prostrations and punishments they inflicted on themselves. When everything was over, they stood up and, singing about the Blessed Virgin in their own language, they went back and put on their clothes. Many finished their chants before the image of the Blessed Virgin in some other place prior to dressing. One should not overlook that some bands underwent various kinds of torments, some more than others. After all this was done, they all went, rich and poor alike, into the town's streets, hoping that someone would invite or ask them to his house. Those who received invitations or summons went with the permission of their superiors, who remained with those uninvited until they had been asked to someone's house. None of them could eat or stay at one place more than once; they could stay longer at their own expense, but they had to obey the above ordinances. When the weather was pleasant and dry, they performed this ceremony in the public streets; when it rained, they did it in churches, cloisters, or other covered places. What sane person, according to the predictions of Master Jan de Murs, would not say that these things were a

new kind of ritual and an advent of prophets?

Concerning the devotion of the people of Tournai — men, women, and outsiders — at the feast of the procession which is customarily celebrated on the day of the exaltation of the Holy Cross [Sept. 14]: in these days there was a terrible plague in the town that grew worse daily.

I dare say in all honesty that in my whole life I have not known, heard of, or seen such peace and such piety among the whole people on the night and day of the procession as there were this year. Bear in mind that two hundred and fifty or more men had gathered at Tournai, mutually associating and coming together, so that on the day of the procession and on the following eight days they did penance in the manner of those who had departed Tournai. Everyone who arrived met with Brother Robert, a lector at the house of Austin friars, who was their leader for these nine days. But it was his order that each day they make a circuit of the town without a cross, banners, or tapers, all of them wearing (as was explained above) a hood on their heads, and over that a black cap without a cross, holding scourges in their hands, barefoot and naked except for a breechcloth over which they wore a cloth garment tied at the waist, as described above. On the day of the procession they gathered in the church of Blessed Mary where they heard mass in St. Louis's chapel; during the whole mass, two candles burned. When it was time for the procession to exit the church and go around the town, those who had prepared took off their clothes and put on the penitential garb. As was the custom, first came the mendicant clergy, then the companies of canons and monks, then a company of citizens — called squires — carrying the reliquary of the Blessed Mary in the usual way. They were barefoot and bore themselves devoutly. After these followed the band of penitents two by two without any ornaments led by Brother Robert, dressed in the aforementioned way, and whipping themselves with scourges as much as their appointed leaders permitted so that they would not inflict too much pain or shed blood unduly. Of the two candles in the church, one was left burning before the Blessed Virgin's image, the other at the entrance to the cloister until the whole procession had returned and then each one was put back in its proper place.

The course of the eight days following the procession was such that each morning they assembled in the chapel of St. Michael and heard mass with two candles burning. After mass they undressed in the refectory, put on their penitential garb as mentioned, and, going down the steps, went before the image of the Blessed Virgin where, kneeling, they said the Our Father and

the Hail Mary. And then walking two by two they circled the town whipping themselves as mentioned while the two candles were left in the aforesaid spots. Returning in the same order, everyone put their clothes back on and then went about their business.

When the nine days of processions ended, on the tenth day the greater part of the band heard morning mass dressed in their penitential habits and then went to Mont-Saint-Aubert and returned bearing themselves most devoutly and whipping themselves a little bit. I cannot find the words to describe the devotion of the people during those days, since many of them performed this penance going to Mont-Saint-Aubert over the space of thirty-three days.

Nor should one forget that in those days in the country of Hainaut and in the surrounding parishes there was a great movement of all the people, because they came in parish groups and bands carrying the cross, banners, and candles to Mont-Saint-Aubert, and the word of God was preached there. I have heard from those who were present that one day more than ten thousand people came together there.

Future readers should realize that if I wanted to record all the things going on around the penitents during that time and what was happening day to day, I would neither have the know-how nor the ability to do it. I believe and maintain that many people have been recording these deeds in both Latin and French; I have recorded what I have seen and heard.

Note that in that year Christmas was on a Friday, which was the beginning of the year according to style of the Roman curia. Thus it was a jubilee year and the indulgence ordained by the Lord Pope Clement VI began. Many evils ceased; and many things were reported that I do not think it right to pass on to the future until the truth about them is known. I thus put an end to my account.

That same year [in fact, 1350], in the first week of Lent, the town's governors proclaimed in the public square that everyone should cease performing public penance voluntarily undertaken; anyone doing otherwise would be banished for the rest of his days. The king also proclaimed that everyone should cease under pain of death and loss of goods, since the king called them a sect in his letters. This was also done with the common consent of the lord bishop of Tournai, the deans, the chapter, and the governors of the town. For in the second week of Lent on the eve of the feast of St. Peter's Chair [Feb. 22] in the cathedral church of Notre Dame, Tournai, the word of God was preached. With a huge number of people gathered there, the curate of St. Piat gave a sermon. He proclaimed the mandate of the lord pope about the penitents, but he did not show a copy of the bull itself, which caused

people to complain greatly. In his sermon the curate announced a general indulgence issued from Rome at the basilicas of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul by the lord pope and his college. From that day these penitents, with great grumbling, reluctantly stopped.