

VISITATION

Johann Busch (1399–c. 1480), Sub-Prior of Wittenberg

1450s

A certain lector of the Dominicans had publicly preached in the town of Zutphen that lay-folk should have no books in the German tongue, and that no sermons should be preached to the people save only in the church or churchyard. When therefore I heard this (for I was then a simple brother at Windesheim, and had been sent with Brother Dietrich Willemzoon to conclude certain business of our monastery in Zutphen) then, knowing that there were more than a hundred congregations of sisters and Beguines in the Diocese of Utrecht which possessed several books in the mother tongue, which the sisters read daily either by themselves or publicly in refectory, I stoutly gainsaid this friar, seeing that they read and hear German books of this sort in Zutphen, Deventer, Zwolle, Kampen, and everywhere in the cities and country districts.

Wherefore I went to the Dominican convent and asked for the Prior, to whom I said, “My lord Prior, I have heard that your lector has publicly preached that lay-folk ought not to have books in the German tongue. In this he has preached ill, and he must publicly revoke it, for the princes of the land, the common people, men and women throughout the whole world have many books written in the vulgar German tongue which they read and study. Moreover you and your brethren preach oftentimes to the people in the vulgar tongue; would you wish also that they might remember your sermons by heart?”

“Yes,” said he.

Then I answered, “If they had them in writing, then they would certainly keep them better in their memory; why then should they not have books in German?”

He answered, “The lay-folk have many books in German, namely books of sentences and suchlike, which a certain doctor of our Order has translated into German; and others have a missal, with the canon of the Mass, in the vulgar tongue; therefore it is not good that they should have and read books in German.”

To which I answered, “I do not, indeed approve that plain lay-men and lay-women should have in German such lofty and divine books as that. Nay, I myself burned a canon of the Mass in German which was found in the possession of some nuns. Yet is it most profitable for all men, learned or un-learned, to possess and daily to read moral books, treating of the vices and the virtues, of the Lord’s incarnation, life, and passion, of the life and holy conversation and martyrdom of apostles, martyrs, confessors, and virgins, together with homilies and sermons of holy men provoking to amendment of life, moral discipline, fear of hell-fire, and love of the celestial country. If you will not allow such books, then I will I show you in writing the sayings of such doctors of the Holy Church as Augustine, Gregory, Ambrose, and Jerome, and other orthodox writers, to the effect that it is lawful and most profitable to have such books.”

Then said he, “If you produce the written words of doctors, we too will produce the contrary sayings of other doctors.”

Then said I more I plainly, “My Lord Prior, your lector must revoke publicly that which he has publicly preached to the people against possessing books in the German tongue. Otherwise I will so order things with the Lord David, Bishop of Utrecht,¹ with his High Chapter, that neither you nor your lector shall preach again in this diocese.”

Then said the Prior, “You seem to have a commission to this effect from the Bishop of Utrecht. Be at peace; I will see to it that Our lector shall revoke this.”

¹ David (c. 1427–1496), Bishop of Utrecht (1456–1496)

And when I would have gone of mine own authority to the lector, who was lying on his bed, then said the Prior, "He is a most learned man."

To whom I made answer, "I am all the more willing to speak with him since he is learned, for then he will the better understand his own error." Notwithstanding I desisted at the petition of the Prior and the brother who was with me and went not to the sick man; more especially because his Prior had promised me that he should revoke those words.

Another day as I journeyed by boat on the Yssel from Deventer to Zutphen, I questioned the men and women that voyaged with me, asking what the preachers are wont to preach at Zutphen. Whereupon they answered, "Our lector formerly preached that lay-folk should have no German books. This he has revoked in brief, saying, Good folk, when I preach the gospel to you here, you repeat it all awry to other men. I spoke to you the other day in my sermon concerning German books that the laity should not possess them, whereby I meant this: certain women, or even men, sometimes lay certain writings in the German tongue under the altar-cloths, that a mass may be read over them; after which they take these same writings away and work with them many incantations and divinations or auguries. Those were the writings that I forbade you to have and read; but you may well possess good and moral books in the German tongue, and read them."

And they who were in the boat added and said how they had marveled greatly that he should so revoke his own words, not knowing who had compelled him to do so. I for my part was well-pleased to hear of this his revocation, for in that same town were two houses of sisters that always read when they sat at meals by the table in the refectory.