

# WESSEL GANSFORT (1419–1489) AND NORTHERN HUMANISM

EDITED BY

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## CONTENTS

Plates .....	vii
Preface .....	ix
Contributors .....	xiii

### PART ONE

#### WESSEL GANSFORT AND HIS FAME

1. Wessel Gansfort's rise to celebrity C. AUGUSTIJN .....	3
2. A commemorative mass for Wessel Gansfort F. BAKKER .....	23
3. Gansfort between Albertism and Nominalism H.A.G. BRAAKHUIS .....	30
4. Wessel Gansforts Stellungnahme zum <i>vita activa</i> — <i>vita contemplativa</i> -Problem: <i>De stabilitate meditationum et modo figendi meditationes</i> , Buch 1 (mit kritischer Textausgabe von <i>Scala meditationis</i> , Buch 1, capp. 1–7) K.A.E. ENENKEL .....	44
5. <i>Albertistae, thomistae</i> und <i>nominales</i> : die philosophisch-historischen Hintergründe der Intellektlehre des Wessel Gansfort (†1489) M.J.F.M. HOENEN .....	71
6. Wessel Gansfort: <i>Magister contradictionis</i> H.A. OBERMAN .....	97
7. Wessel Gansfort and Cornelis Hoen's <i>Epistola christiana</i> : 'The ring as a pledge of my love' B.J. SPRUYT .....	122
8. Among the good teachers: Melanchthon on Wessel Gansfort D. VISSER .....	142

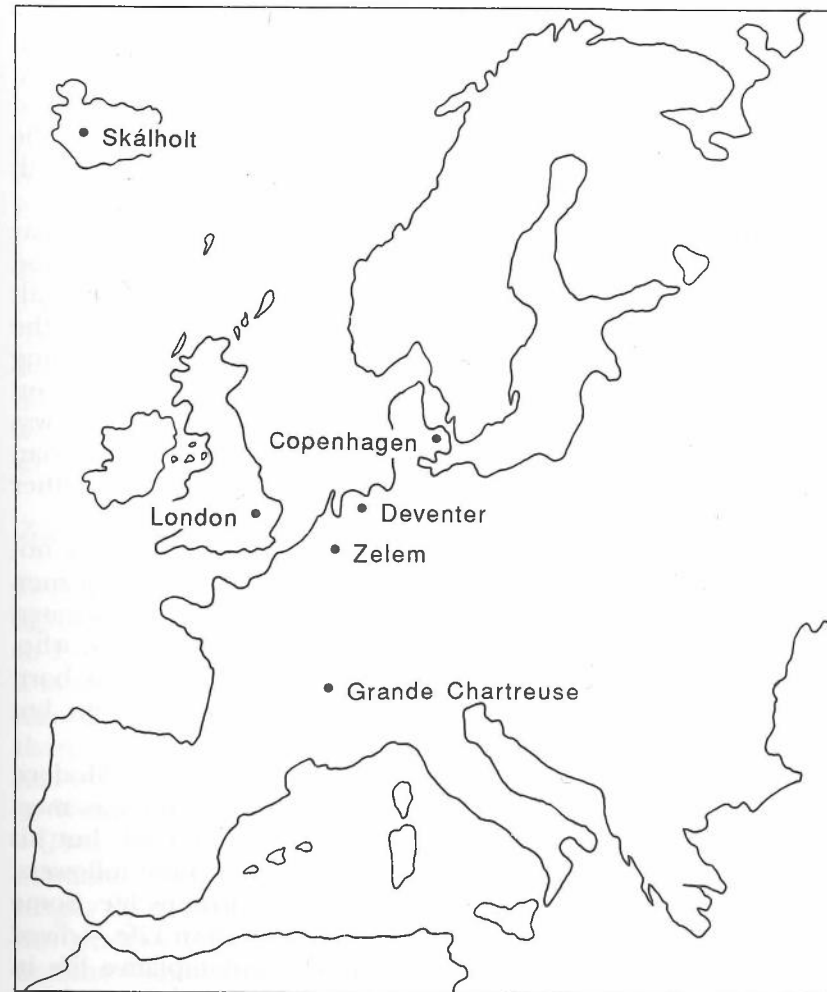
G.A. PIEBENGA

GOZEWIJN COMHAER — CARTHUSIAN AND  
MODERN DEVOUT<sup>1</sup>

Some years ago the writer of this article was astonished to read in a book on the history of Iceland in the late Middle Ages, that one of the bishops on this remote island in the fifteenth century, Gozewijn Comhaer, was of Dutch origin. That the two sees of Iceland — Skálholt in the south and Hólar in the north — were not always occupied by Icelanders but often by Danes or Norwegians and occasionally by a Swede or an Englishman was well-known. New, however, was the fact that a Dutchman had filled the post of bishop. It was unexpected moreover, because in Gozewijn Comhaer's time — the first half of the fifteenth century — there was surely no contact between Iceland and the Low Countries worth mentioning.

Amazement generally breeds curiosity, and in turn curiosity provides a motive to set up an investigation. The investigation uncovered the fact that there was no question of a discovery. It appeared that others had been surprised before that the Carthusian monk Gozewijn Comhaer from Deventer had been bishop of Skálholt for about nine years. Some, to wit W. Moll, a well-known church historian, and H.J.J. Scholtens, an expert on the Carthusian order, had even made a study of him.<sup>2</sup>

This did not necessarily mean that things could be left as they were and that Gozewijn need not be brought into the limelight once more. After all, articles are like so many other things: as time passes they age and require a face-lift. Certain errors can be corrected and newly acquired knowledge can be added. Moreover, there can be a shift of emphasis and subjects of secondary importance in previous studies can be highlighted. This article will give special consideration to the question of how it happened that Gozewijn — judging by a letter of indulgence that he granted in the later years of his life — felt such a strong sympathy for the ideas of the Modern Devotion.



II. Gozewijn Comhaer's Europe.

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Mieke van der Leij for the English translation of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Moll, 'Gozewijn Comhaer' (1880); Scholtens, 'Gozewijn Comhair' (1926).

*Deventer, ca. 1375–1400*

Gozewijn Comhaer was born in about 1375 in Deventer.<sup>3</sup> His father, Gerrit Comhaer, was a goldsmith and banker by profession, and he ranked as one of the leading citizens of Deventer. This Gerrit Comhaer also had municipal duties for a while. At the end of the fourteenth century he had been commissioned by the bishop of Utrecht, Frederik van Blankenheim, to handle the financial administration of Salland, the region to the north of the river IJssel.

We do not know how Gozewijn spent his boyhood, but we may assume that as a child of wealthy parents he was given a good education. In his spare time he certainly must have played with friends in the inner city of Deventer and wandered about on the banks of the IJssel river. He will have watched the ships sailing by with interest. Deventer was in his youth a major junction on both the east-west and the south-north trade routes. There was a brisk trade especially with Germany and the Scandinavian countries, so the boy Gozewijn will have heard several other languages spoken besides his native tongue.

Deventer in the fourteenth century was a flourishing city not only in the material sense but also in the cultural. Young men came from far and wide to the city on the IJssel to be educated at the Latin school. One of them was Thomas a Kempis, who, we assume, was the author of *De imitatione Christi*. He was born in 1379 or 1380 and so was about the same age as Gozewijn, but there is no record that the two were acquainted.

Gozewijn was growing up as the movement of the Modern Devotion appeared on the scene. Geert Grote, who was most effective in getting the movement going, died in 1384, but his ideas were further propagated by his followers. These followers, the so-called Devouts, pursued a devout and virtuous life. Some of them — the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life — lived in communal houses. Others led a more contemplative life in the monastery at Windesheim which was intended for men or in the one at Diepenveen for women.

Gozewijn must have often seen the Brothers and Sisters walking about in their simple and rather sober clothing, and at his parents' house he certainly met Johan ter Poerten, one of their leaders. This man, a prominent figure in Deventer society, was a friend

<sup>3</sup> The Comhaer family came from Zaltbommel originally, but they were probably already living in Deventer around 1375.

of Gozewijn's father, Gerrit Comhaer. Gerrit himself, however, was not a member of the movement, but he was sympathetic to it and several times gave it financial assistance.

Besides meeting Johan ter Poerten, Gozewijn certainly came into contact with other followers of the Modern Devotion. He may have attended the Brothers' meetings on Sundays or on weekday evenings. These edifying meetings were especially intended for the students who stayed at the boarding schools run by the Brothers, but others were welcome. It was of course the Brothers' concern to spread the message.<sup>4</sup>

The movement must have influenced Gozewijn considerably. This we can conclude from the fact that he chose to apply for a place in the monastery at Windesheim instead of continuing his studies or taking over his father's business. So it must have been a disappointment for him to have had his application turned down. The reason why Gozewijn was refused admittance was his wealthy background. There was nothing left for him to do but to return home!

*Zelem, 1400–1415*

Gozewijn did not stay long in Deventer, for in 1400 we meet him again in a monastery of the Carthusian order in Zelem near Diest in Belgian Limburg. He may have tried to apply for a place in a monastery closer to home first, but it is possible that he went directly to Zelem. It was common knowledge that the monastery there accommodated monks from well-to-do families. So Gozewijn had no reason to fear a rejection of the kind he had undergone at Windesheim.

There is another reason why Gozewijn turned to a Carthusian monastery, when the possibility of entering Windesheim was no longer open. This was the close affinity the Carthusians had to the Modern Devouts. Geert Grote had developed the ideas that became characteristic of the Modern Devotion during a stay in a Carthusian monastery. When his followers founded the monastery at Windesheim, they based their code of order on the Carthusian one.

In the years following his profession, Gozewijn led a secluded life. He spent most of the day in his cell or apartment. Generally he only went out to sing matins or to attend mass with the other monks. The rest of the day he spent in prayer or work. That work

<sup>4</sup> Persoons, 'Verspreiding der moderne devotie', 77–78.

consisted mainly in copying manuscripts or occasionally writing something himself. Although nothing has been preserved from this period, we know from the chronicler of the monastery that Gozewijn's work included a treatise on the Lord's prayer.<sup>5</sup>

The year 1407 brought a change to Gozewijn's life. He was elected prior and that position entailed a number of tasks not only within the monastery but also outside it. For example, he had to visit and inspect some convents in the area. Also he had to attend the meetings of the order, which were referred to as the General Chapter. These meetings were usually held in the Carthusian mother convent at La Grande Chartreuse, in the east of France, just to the north of Grenoble. However, in the first years of his priorship, Gozewijn went to Seiz in Stiermarken to attend these meetings. The order had been split as a result of the Western Schism and therefore the meetings of the General Chapter were also held in two places. After 1410, La Grande Chartreuse again became the general meeting place.

Despite his full agenda as prior, Gozewijn did find time to visit his father, who meanwhile had moved to Denmark, due to a conflict with Frederik van Blankenheim, the bishop of Utrecht, at the beginning of the fifteenth century. He had lent money to Frederik and had fallen into disfavour after his request for repayment some years later. He fled to Denmark, a country with which Deventer, as a member of the Hanseatic League, had close connections; there he resumed his old profession of goldsmith. Without doubt he must have been a skilled craftsman, for here too his business flourished. Soon he was appointed master of the mint by Erik of Pomerania, king of Denmark, Norway and Sweden from 1412 to 1439.

During this visit Gozewijn must have met his step-mother, Aleid ter Poerten. She was the daughter of the Johan ter Poerten mentioned above and it is possible that Gozewijn had already made her acquaintance in Deventer. We do not know this for certain, because Aleid was much younger than Gozewijn. Gerrit Comhaer had married Aleid soon after the death of his first wife, Gozewijn's mother. The married couple first made a home for themselves in a town south of Copenhagen and later in Lund in southern Sweden, and it was here that Gerrit Comhaer in 1415 was overtaken by death. Aleid, hardly seventeen years old, was fetched back to Deventer by her father and rejoined the family circle. In 1432 she entered the convent at Diepenveen where she

<sup>5</sup> *De kartuizers en hun klooster te Zelem*, 100.

died in 1452. One of her fellow sisters wrote about her life in a work titled *Vanden doechden der vuriger ende stichtiger susteren van diepen veen*, which was printed with footnotes by D.A. Brinkerink (1904).<sup>6</sup>

The author devotes some six pages to Aleid ter Poerten in which information is also given about Gerrit Comhaer and his son. Gozewijn is described as a devout and sensible man who tried to imitate Christ in his life and work. Wherever he travelled, so the writer tells us, and however superior his function, he remained humble and modest. Even more so than his father, he was dedicated to the movement of the Modern Devotion. To prove this, the writer reproduces the conversation Gozewijn had with his father during his visit to Denmark. The conversation arose when Gozewijn saw his father staring in front of him, pen in hand. He then asked what his father was doing. 'I am making a note of my loan of a hundred nobles (coins) to the convent at Diepenveen', Gerrit Comhaer answered. 'Why don't you record it as a gift?' Gozewijn said. His father insisted that it had been a loan but finally gave in to Gozewijn's persuasive powers and wrote down 'gift'.<sup>7</sup>

Besides the visit to his father, Gozewijn probably had another objective in travelling to the north and this was to attend the opening of a new monastery of the Carthusian order in Pomerania. Possibly he met king Erik at this ceremony. After all, the monastery had been founded mainly at the insistence of this monarch. But it is also possible that Gozewijn met king Erik through his father. We know that the king was on friendly terms with the master of the mint and his wife. In any case, Gozewijn certainly met him on this visit to Denmark.<sup>8</sup>

After his return from Denmark, Gozewijn was involved in a dispute between Anthony of Burgundy, the duke of Brabant and Limburg, and the Roman German king, Sigismund. The duke and his wife asked Gozewijn to act as an intermediary, and so early in 1414 he set off for northern Italy to the king. Negotiations proceeded slowly, but were finally successful, and consequently Gozewijn was showered with tokens of appreciation by the ducal pair on his return to Zelem in the autumn of 1414. According to the chronicler of the order, it was to escape these honours that Gozewijn applied for a transfer from Zelem to La

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Van der Toorn-Piebenga, 'Over een vrouwenleven uit de 15de eeuw'.

<sup>7</sup> Brinkerink, *Van den doechden*, 268.

<sup>8</sup> Scholtens, 'Gozewijn Comhair', 138-139.

Grande Chartreuse.<sup>9</sup> We may assume, however, that Gozewijn also made this choice of going to La Grande Chartreuse because he wanted to catch up with his original intention of leading a secluded and contemplative life.

*La Grande Chartreuse, 1415–1436*

Gozewijn left for La Grande Chartreuse in 1415. Again a mere monk, he lived like he had in Zelem. But in La Grande Chartreuse, too, he was soon called from his cell and given an administrative task. First he was elected 'procurator', and as such one of his duties was to prepare the meetings of the General Chapter. Later he became 'definitior', whose main task was to advise the prior-general of the order.

Occasionally absent, Gozewijn stayed at the mother convent for about twenty years. For one thing, he had to sort out his father's inheritance. Gerrit Comhaer had outlined what should be done with his estate, but he had left the details to Gozewijn who was his sole offspring. In connection with this business, Gozewijn travelled to Deventer in 1417 to see to his stepmother's financial affairs. Some years later he was in Zelem where he announced how much of the income from the estate was to be conferred on this monastery. Before that he had granted a sum to La Grande Chartreuse and had arranged for new woollen shirts to be bought for the monks each year from the interest; the old shirts were to be divided among the poor, who were to pray for Gozewijn's father's soul.<sup>10</sup>

Besides arranging his father's inheritance, Gozewijn assisted the Carthusian mother convent in the foundation of a new establishment in Denmark. The Danish king had asked the Carthusian order to consider establishing a monastery in his country. The answer was affirmative and around 1427 the order sent a delegation commissioned to make the necessary preparations. Gozewijn was chosen as one of the delegates, probably because he had been to Denmark before and knew the circumstances. Also he may have had a working knowledge of the Danish language.<sup>11</sup>

During this visit to Denmark, Gozewijn renewed his acquaintance with King Erik. As remarked, they had met on his first visit

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 128–133.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 134–135; 163–169.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 136; Le Vasseur, *Ephemerides Ordinis Carthus.* II, 508.

in 1412. During this second visit there was close contact between the two. Gozewijn is mentioned in an official document as *confessor regis Daniae*, that is, confessor of the king of Denmark,<sup>12</sup> and he can hardly have acquired the title without talking to the king on a regular basis. In any case Gozewijn must have impressed King Erik, because around 1435 — eight years later — the king requested him to become head of the bishopric of Skálholt in Iceland.

It is surprising that Gozewijn agreed to king Erik's request. In 1435 he was about sixty years old and generally speaking that is no age to rush into perilous adventures. Indeed, this may be called a perilous undertaking. It was common knowledge also in Gozewijn's days that Iceland was a desolate place, where travel was difficult, where no grain would grow, let alone vegetables!

That Gozewijn took on the post may be seen as a sign of courage. Perhaps Gozewijn himself simply regarded it as his duty. He will have known that bishops' seats in Iceland were often vacant for years on end, and that more often than not the appointed bishop remained abroad, while a representative dealt with the affairs. This naturally gave rise to abuse. Gozewijn knew that his character and experience made him suitable for restoring order, and that is perhaps the reason why he accepted this appointment.

*Iceland, 1436–1445*

So Gozewijn set course for Iceland, a long way from La Grande Chartreuse, certainly in Gozewijn's time. More or less by accident we know the date of his journey and the route he took. As it happens there is a surviving document, dated 22 November 1436, drawn up in Westminster (London), stating that Henry VI, king of England, grants Gozewijn Comhaer, bishop of Skálholt, permission to travel to Iceland on a ship with a cargo of provisions and other goods.<sup>13</sup> This information makes it likely that Gozewijn left La Grande Chartreuse in the course of 1436 and sailed to London via the Rhine and the North Sea.

In a sense it is surprising that Gozewijn travelled by way of England. He had been asked by King Erik of Denmark to become bishop, so the most obvious course of action would have been to travel via Copenhagen and to have asked the Danish, not the

<sup>12</sup> *Foedera, conventiones, literae, . . .*, V 1, 75.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

English king for permission to travel with a supply ship. Clearly he could have travelled from Copenhagen to Trondheim in Norway. Iceland's two bishoprics came under the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Trondheim, from whom Gozewijn should have received the official insignia of his office — the staff and mitre. That this did not take place is connected to the fact that it was King Erik and not the pope who conferred this office on Gozewijn. As far as we can gather, the pope seems to have been left out of the appointment altogether.

Evidently Gozewijn himself did not make an issue of the fact that the appointment took place irregularly. His life coincides roughly with the time of the Western Schism (1378–1449) and he must have been accustomed to unconventional methods of decision-making. He had enough to worry about anyway. Even before he began his real task, there was the problem of what to take with him. Not so much what he needed himself — as a monk Gozewijn was used to austerity — but rather the requirements for the church service.

For example, Gozewijn took into account beforehand that there was a shortage of wheat — necessary for the preparation of the communion wafers — and of altar wine. So while in England he stocked up on these products. Besides he took along with him silver chalices and cloth for mass vestments. It was after all Gozewijn's concern to see that holy communion in the churches of his bishopric took place properly.

Obviously the supplies he brought did not last indefinitely and just over a year after his arrival Gozewijn was obliged to sail back to England and to charter a cargo boat. Some time later again — it is 1440 by then — Gozewijn himself does not go, but he asks that two ships loaded with grain, wine, salt and other products be sent to Iceland. The letter of request has not been preserved, but from King Henry's answer it is clear that Gozewijn had complained of his dire straits. On Iceland there is a shortage of food and woollen cloth so that he cannot properly feed and clothe himself and his monks and priests. Besides, mass cannot be celebrated because there is no wine. The king realises the severity of the situation and grants his permission. As on previous occasions, he does this on the condition that the ship sail back with a cargo of Icelandic products including stockfish and wool.<sup>14</sup>

Gozewijn's worry about spiritual things was even greater. It can be deduced from chronicles of Gozewijn's time as a bishop, that

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 45, 75.

he took his task seriously. During his stay on Iceland he visited many of the churches and monasteries of the bishoprics of Skálholt and Hólar. For about five of the nine years of Gozewijn's tenure in Iceland the see of Hólar was vacant, and so Gozewijn was responsible for it too. This meant that he was in fact bishop of the whole of Iceland, an area about three times the size of the Netherlands.

During his travels on Iceland, Gozewijn sometimes had to solve difficult problems. One of these was settling a dispute between an abbot and a priest who both laid claim to a stranded whale. He also had to take steps against priests who lived with women and who did not observe the rule of celibacy. This was not the only canonical law that was being broken, so Gozewijn was obliged to arrange a synod for all the priests in the country. Several decisions came down from this synod, for example, that consecrated wafers and altar wine had to be bought in Skálholt unless exemption was granted. This regulation is not surprising. From the foregoing it is clear that Gozewijn was apprehensive about using substitute products for the celebration of mass.<sup>15</sup>

Only isolated facts are known about Gozewijn's years as bishop. There is no description that provides us with a coherent picture. The eighteenth-century Icelandic church historian Finnur Jónsson, the first to take notice of Gozewijn, collected details from chronicles and annals and then concluded that the bishop 'was neither a bad man nor did he neglect his duties'.<sup>16</sup> He obviously regarded the facts too scarce to warrant a more positive conclusion. Jónsson does not mention the fact that Gozewijn's name as bishop was remembered on Iceland, which goes to prove that Gozewijn was popular during his period of office: The name Gozewijn itself was unknown on Iceland before his own time, but afterwards it appears as 'Gottsvein' and in the shortened form of 'Gosi'.<sup>17</sup>

In 1445 Gozewijn returned from Iceland to the continent. The date is known thanks to another document issued by King Henry VI; it is dated 4 December 1445, and like the others mentioned above, it was written at Westminster.<sup>18</sup> It records the king's

<sup>15</sup> See for further information about Gozewijn's activities on Iceland: Moll, 'Gozewijn Comhaer', 169–177.

<sup>16</sup> Finni Johannaei *Historia Ecclesiae Islandiae* II, 476. The original text reads as follows: 'Gotsvinnus, Skalholti episcopus, vir fuit nec malus nec officii omnino negligens'.

<sup>17</sup> Moll, 'Gozewijn Comhaer', 178.

<sup>18</sup> *Foedera, conventiones, literae, . . .*, V 1, 151.

permission for Gozewijn to leave England with his retainers and goods and to return within the year.

*Deventer and La Grande Chartreuse, 1445–1447*

After crossing the North Sea, Gozewijn first visited the monastery at Zelem. Here he made the final arrangements for his father's estate. He then went northwards to Deventer; although he had not been in his native city for a long time, he felt at home at once. This impression is given by what contemporaries write about him. One of these is a woman, who describes in a book, called *Leven der eerwaardige Moeder Andries Yserens*, the life of a nun in one of the convents in Deventer. She relates how the convent was visited a few times by the bishop of Iceland. Evidently she does not think it necessary to mention the name of this bishop; after all, everyone knew she meant Gozewijn. She does say, however, that the bishop's visits were greatly appreciated.<sup>19</sup>

Gozewijn is also mentioned in *Van den doechden der vuriger ende stichtiger susteren van diepen veen*, the book which describes the life of a number of nuns in the convent at Diepenveen. One of these is Aleid ter Poerten, whom Gerrit Comhaer had married after the death of his first wife; she had returned from Denmark after her husband's death there and entered the convent at Diepenveen. Gozewijn visited her there several times. The writer of *Van den doechden* describes him favourably. Despite his high office, she notices, he has not lost his simplicity. Neither does he let his travels come in the way of his devotion to prayer.<sup>20</sup>

Besides the convents mentioned here, Gozewijn visited other communities as well. Sometimes he left them letters of indulgence. One of these is remarkably different from the customary letters of indulgence of the time, for besides the usual conditions such as attending mass, regular prayer and gifts of money, this letter in particular mentions quite other conditions for securing indulgences. It makes clear how a person should lead his life, according to Gozewijn's precepts. For not pursuing gossip Gozewijn grants a certain number of days of indulgence. He does the same for those who accept admonitions, for those who, either by admonition or example, keep a fellow human being from straying, for those who help the sick or cheer an angry or miserable person, for those who perform difficult tasks in a cheerful and

<sup>19</sup> Spitzen, 'Leven der eerwaardige Moeder Andries Yserens', 183–184, 193–194.

<sup>20</sup> Brinkerink, *Van den doechden*, 269.

patient manner, for those who suppress feelings of impatience and dissatisfaction, for those who act, or refrain from acting for the sake of another, and for those who are in general modest and obedient. These regulations are written entirely in the spirit of that which the Modern Devouts advocated: to be subservient and helpful to others.<sup>21</sup>

The letter also discloses that Gozewijn still stood by the principles of the Modern Devotion, even though he had been away for a long time. Obviously it had played an influential role in his younger years, and we must not forget that during his time as a Carthusian monk he had lived in a similar style. In any case, this congeniality meant that Gozewijn immediately felt at home again in Deventer. It must have been pleasant for him, anyway, to once more speak his native language, and to be surrounded by familiar faces. However, although he felt very much at home in the city on the IJssel, he did not stay there. His real home, La Grande Chartreuse, was waiting. We do not know when he went there but it must have been before the onset of winter. It was to be his last journey. On 20 June 1447 he died in the mother convent of the Carthusians.

*Conclusion*

The title of this article is 'Gozewijn Comhaer — Carthusian and Modern Devout'. Now that Gozewijn's life-story has been told, we can conclude that both epithets, 'Carthusian' and 'Modern Devout', are indeed applicable. Gozewijn was a dedicated Carthusian and was active in expanding the order. And he was a Modern Devout as well. Particular proof of this is the letter of indulgence which he wrote shortly before his death. This letter provides regulations that are characteristic for the movement of the Modern Devotion and thus proves that the influence the movement had on Gozewijn in his youth was strong — so strong, in fact, that he still felt the effects of it in his old age.

As far as his spiritual kinship with the Modern Devotion is concerned, Gozewijn can be compared to Wessel Gansfort, the man to whom this volume is dedicated, who was born almost half a century after Gozewijn. Wessel Gansfort was also influenced by the Modern Devotion in his youth, and he preserved for the rest of his life the spirit of the 'imitation of Christ', which was so characteristic of it. His letters and books, written after he

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Van der Toorn-Piebenga, 'Over de aflaatbrieven van Gozewijn Comhaer'.



returned from abroad while living in the abbey of Aduard and the monastery of Agnietenberg, bear witness to this. Further evidence is also found in what his contemporaries say about him.<sup>22</sup>

That the baker's son from Groningen remained loyal to the ideas of the Modern Devotion is less self-evident than that the jeweller's son from Deventer did so. The latter entered a monastic order that was closely related to the Modern Devotion and kept in touch with the order even in the years he spent outside the walls of the monastery. Wessel Gansfort, on the other hand, travelled abroad after his years in Zwolle, where he had been educated by the Brothers, and he studied at several universities. He therefore came into contact with all kinds of 'modern' schools of thought and could easily have given up his original principles. This was not the case, however. Wessel Gansfort knew how to combine his Biblical piety with his scientific work just as Gozewijn combined his devotion with practical work.

### PART THREE

## NORTHERN HUMANISM

<sup>22</sup> Van Rhijn, *Studiën over Wessel Gansfort*, 63.