

MARCIN POLKOWSKI

A YOUNG CARMELITE ON ICE SKATES.  
THE EARLY OCCASIONAL POETRY OF ST. TITUS BRANDSMA  
AS A LITERARY TESTIMONY OF HIS LOVE OF GOD,  
LIFE, AND THE FAMILY

**Abstract.** The recently canonised Dutch Carmelite Titus Brandsma (1881–1942), World War II martyr, mystic, Catholic journalist and historian of spirituality, was also – what is less known – a talented poet. The article recalls his early occasional poetry, written in Dutch and Frisian between 1898 and 1906 for members of his immediate family. Its literary characteristics are presented, demonstrating that this poetry is a valuable testimony to the saint’s views on human life from an eschatological perspective, including topics on the family, marriage, and the relationship between children and parents. This justifies recognising St. Titus Brandsma’s occasional poetry as an expression of his unique poetic theology of the family. The article also includes an English translation of a hitherto untranslated poem by St. Titus Brandsma.

**Keywords:** St. Titus Brandsma; Dutch poetry; marriage; children; poetic theology of the family.

INTRODUCTION

On the feast of St. Nicholas, 21-year-old Titus Brandsma jokingly referred to a gift of a pair of ice skates he had received at the Carmelite house in Zenderen in a holiday parcel from his parents and sister. “Don’t worry,” he wrote, “that goes on here so neatly, // We don’t fall down at all.” He then promised them he’d be careful “like... a cow,” adding to explain: “[...] you’re laughing at such a comparison, // But tell me, father, isn’t it true? // If I’m careful like a cow // Will I catch a cold then?”<sup>1</sup>

---

Dr habil. MARCIN POLKOWSKI – the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, the Institute of Literature, Department of Dutch Literature; e-mail: [polkowski@kul.pl](mailto:polkowski@kul.pl); ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5854-2027>.

<sup>1</sup> Titus Brandsma, *Sint Nicolaas 1902* (hereafter abbreviated as [3], see bibliographic list below), Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 22-1, ln. 25-28 and 29-32.

We read this light-hearted, conversational passage in one of the earliest poems that Titus Brandsma wrote to his family. Brandsma, as a native of Frisia, certainly enjoyed ice skating, although we do not learn much about it in any of his published biographies. What we do know is that he was frequently ill, which was a source of anxiety for his parents.<sup>2</sup> Yet, like many children or young adults with an illness or a disability, he no doubt wanted to be free of that anxiety and participate alongside his peers in the activities that he liked. We find an echo of this dilemma in the passage quoted (in translation) above.

Titus Brandsma's occasional poetry, written for special events such as feasts, anniversaries and birthdays, is a unique but understudied part of his wide correspondence. It has a distinct literary quality, revealing a side of Titus previously unknown (such as a fondness for ice skating). Also, it shows his very human self-awareness, love of life, as well as good-natured and always very Christian response to interpersonal relationships in the family.

#### 1. THE POETRY OF ST. TITUS BRANDSMA – A NEGLECTED PART OF HIS OEUVRE?

St. Titus Brandsma's (1881–1942) reputation rests primarily on his life's testimony as a martyr of the Nazi regime in Dachau. He is known as a staunch defender of the freedom of the press against the encroachment of totalitarianism, and esteemed worldwide for his life's work as a philosopher and scholar. He is also recognized as a modern Catholic mystic, whose writings are imbued with insights expressing his awareness of God's presence in

---

Unless noted otherwise, the English translations are by the author of this article. This passage in Dutch:

En de schaatsen – o, geen zorgen,  
Dat gaat hier zoo netjes toe  
Vallen doen wij hier volstrekt niet  
En voorzichtig? Als een... koe.  
Ja, gij lacht om zo'n ver'glijking  
Maar zeg, vader, gaat 't niet op,  
Ben 'k voorzichtig als de koeien  
Loop ik dan verkoudheid op?

<sup>2</sup> See the testimony of Titus' brother Henricus Brandsma about the protectiveness of father and mother Brandsma and Titus' health problems in: Ton Crijnen, *Titus Brandsma. De man achter de mythe* (Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers), 23, 27. On p. 31 is a brief allusion to Titus's fondness for skating, not in Zenderen though but at home in Oegeklooster. In 1901 Titus suffered a serious stomach bleeding, his joking about (not) catching cold could have been an attempt to reassure his parents.

everyday life and the human soul.<sup>3</sup> He was beatified by Pope John Paul II on November 3, 1985, and canonized by Pope Francis on May 15, 2022.

A less well-known aspect of the wide-ranging and extensive diverse oeuvre of St. Titus Brandsma is that he was a proficient poet in the Dutch and Frisian languages. His poetic output, which has not been so far collectively investigated, is small in contrast to his remaining works. Numbering perhaps little more than twenty poems (the exact number is not known), it could be collected in a slim volume.<sup>4</sup>

St. Titus Brandsma wrote poetry throughout his life, from his days as a student in the Franciscan College in Megen (1892–1898) to the very last months of his life as a prisoner at Scheveningen and Amersfoort. His final poems, evocative of suffering and the redeeming power of the Cross, are the ones modern readers are the most familiar with, and have been frequently translated or anthologized. By contrast, most of his earliest poems, written for his nearest circle of family, friends, other students, teachers, and acquaintances remain largely unknown. St. Titus Brandsma's poetry was distinctly private. He seldom published poems during his lifetime (isolated texts were published, for instance, in the journal *Carmelrozen*), and he did not reveal any ambition to be recognized as a poet.

Among researchers, the critical response to St. Titus Brandsma's poetry has been muted.<sup>5</sup> While some of it has been deservedly recognized for its mystical insights,<sup>6</sup> the significance of his poetic oeuvre as literature has never been exhaustively investigated. Ongoing research has been impeded by the fact that a number of his poems, especially early ones, have not yet appeared in critical editions.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Anne-Marie Bos, "Titus Brandsma: Getuige van God," *Acta Theologica Supp* 33 (2022): 174–189.

<sup>4</sup> No collected poems of St. Titus Brandsma have yet been published. Some poems have been translated into English and other languages. The exact number of his poems is difficult to estimate, because previously unknown poems keep surfacing. In 2022, for example, a poem addressed to a child, Marie, was found. See Peter van Erp, "Aan vooravond heiligverklaring duikt gedicht van Titus Brandsma op: 'Dan landt gij kind ten paradijze'". *Brabants Dagblad*, May 12, 2022, accessed 6 December 2022, [www.bd.nl/oss-e-o/aan-vooravond-heiligverklaring-duikt-gedicht-van-titus-brandsma-op-dan-landt-gij-kind-ten-paradijze](http://www.bd.nl/oss-e-o/aan-vooravond-heiligverklaring-duikt-gedicht-van-titus-brandsma-op-dan-landt-gij-kind-ten-paradijze).

<sup>5</sup> Indicative of this is a reaction by historian Ton Crijnen, who commented that Brandsma was no great poet but one who produced doggerel. Crijnen acknowledged the significance of Brandsma's poetry as a vehicle for mystical insights though. Crijnen, *Titus Brandsma*, 33.

<sup>6</sup> Bos, "Titus Brandsma," 175, discusses Titus Brandsma's probably best-known poem *O Jesus*, written in 1942 in the police prison of Scheveningen. For an English translation of this poem see: Titus Brandsma, *O Jesus*, accessed December 6, 2022, [titusbrandsmateksten.nl/o-jesus/](http://titusbrandsmateksten.nl/o-jesus/).

<sup>7</sup> The most extensive critical edition of Brandsma's poems is a digital project: "*Writings of Titus Brandsma. Critical edition – Titus Brandsma Institute Nijmegen*," accessed December 6, 2022, [titusbrandsmateksten.nl/writings/poems/](http://titusbrandsmateksten.nl/writings/poems/).

This article seeks to offer an appraisal of St. Titus Brandsma's earliest occasional poems written for his nearest family circle as providing a unique, literary insight into his growing personality, his love of God, his respect for the dignity of human life, and his spontaneous, natural appreciation of the beauty of the family. I will consider those writings, dating from 1898 to 1906, as projecting a slightly different image of their author from the one we are acquainted with. I credit Brandsma with creating in this loose collection of verses a poetic theology of the family. Combining the method of *poiesis* (the Aristotelian term for making, by which we may refer to the process of imaginative, artistic writing) with elements of the language of theology, Brandsma crafted poetry that uniquely expressed his profound awareness of the presence of God (and of the need for God's presence) in family relationships. Owing to this, I will argue for a re-assessment of the value of Brandsma's early occasional poetry as expressing the future saint's view on the principle that holiness can be attainable "among the pots and pans" of everyday life in the family,<sup>8</sup> and offering that view in an accomplished literary form.

In this article, I will draw on the following poems by Titus Brandsma, written in the Dutch language and addressed to his nearest family: his parents Titus and Tjitsje (or Tjitje, Tjitske, Theresia), his sisters Siebregje and Gatsche (sometimes spelled Gatske), together with her husband Michiel de Boer. A chronological list of poems is given below:

- [1] *Aan Moeder op haar patroon- en geboortefeest* (To Mother on her saint's day and birthday), written on October 15, 1898;<sup>9</sup>
- [2] *Het plechtig 'Ja' weerklonk...* (The solemn 'Yes' resounded...), on the marriage of Gatsche and Michiel de Boer, May 21, 1901.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> This phrase of St. Therese of Àvila, "Know that if it is in the kitchen, the Lord walks among the pots and pans helping you both interiorly and exteriorly," was echoed by Pope Francis during his homily at the canonization mass on May 15, 2022. Kathleen N. Hattrup, "Photos and full text from canonization: 'Since He loved me...'," accessed December 6, 2022, [aleteia.org/2022/05/15/photos-and-full-text-from-canonization-since-he-loved-me/](https://aleteia.org/2022/05/15/photos-and-full-text-from-canonization-since-he-loved-me/).

<sup>9</sup> Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 18-1. For the English translation, see Elisabeth Hense, and Joseph Chalmers, eds., *Titus Brandsma. Letters to the family* (Roma: Edizioni Carmelitane, 2021), 23–24.

<sup>10</sup> Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 21-1. A Dutch transcription of this poem is in: Crijnen, *Titus Brandsma*, 53. It is referred to (but not cited) in: Hense and Chalmers, *Titus Brandsma. Letters*, 27, n. 31.

- [3] *Sint Nicolaas 1902. Aan mijn dierbare Ouders en aan Siebregje* (St. Nicholas 1902, to my dear Parents and to Siebregje), written around December 6, 1902;<sup>11</sup>
- [4] *Sint Nicolaas* (St. Nicholas), written in Frisian for Gatsche and Michiel de Boer around December 6, 1902;<sup>12</sup>
- [5] *Neijier* (New Year) for Gatsche and Michiel de Boer, written in Frisian ca. 1902.<sup>13</sup>
- [6] *Aan de blijde ouders bij de geboorte van hun eersteling* (To the happy parents on the birth of their first child), to Gatsche and Michiel de Boer, written on August 12, 1903, on the birth of their son Jan.<sup>14</sup>
- [7] *Aan mijn dierbare Ouders op den feestdag van hun vijf- en dertigjarige huwelijksvereniging* (To my dear parents on the feast of their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary), May 1, 1905.<sup>15</sup>
- [8] *Beste Michiel en Gatsche* (Dear Michiel and Gatsche), on the birth of Michiel and Gatsche's daughter Theresia (Trees), written on May 29, 1906.<sup>16</sup>

(In the sections below, individual poems will be referred to by these numbers).

There was nothing strange in the fact that a young Carmelite novice in the Netherlands around 1900 (Brandsma was between 17 and 25 years of age at that time) should write occasional poetry for his closest family. His sister Siebrigje (later Sister Willibrorda) also wrote some poems.<sup>17</sup> This kind of literature was not unusual in the Low Countries, where since the late 16<sup>th</sup> century a strong tradition existed of writing poems in connection with im-

<sup>11</sup> Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 22-1. A scan is available from Europeana: [www.europeana.eu/pl/item/603/\\_providedCHO\\_NL\\_BwdADRKF\\_2\\_22\\_1](http://www.europeana.eu/pl/item/603/_providedCHO_NL_BwdADRKF_2_22_1).

<sup>12</sup> Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 22-2a. For the English translation see Hense and Chalmers, *Titus Brandsma. Letters*, 32. A scan is available from Europeana: [www.europeana.eu/pl/item/603/\\_providedCHO\\_NL\\_BwdADRKF\\_2\\_22\\_2a](http://www.europeana.eu/pl/item/603/_providedCHO_NL_BwdADRKF_2_22_2a).

<sup>13</sup> Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 22-2b. For the English translation, see Hense and Chalmers, *Titus Brandsma. Letters*, 33-34. A scan is available from Europeana: [www.europeana.eu/pl/item/603/\\_providedCHO\\_NL\\_BwdADRKF\\_2\\_22\\_2b](http://www.europeana.eu/pl/item/603/_providedCHO_NL_BwdADRKF_2_22_2b).

<sup>14</sup> Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 23-1. A scan is available from Europeana [www.europeana.eu/pl/item/603/\\_providedCHO\\_NL\\_BwdADRKF\\_2\\_23\\_1](http://www.europeana.eu/pl/item/603/_providedCHO_NL_BwdADRKF_2_23_1).

<sup>15</sup> Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 25-1. A scan is available from Europeana [www.europeana.eu/pl/item/603/\\_providedCHO\\_NL\\_BwdADRKF\\_2\\_25\\_1](http://www.europeana.eu/pl/item/603/_providedCHO_NL_BwdADRKF_2_25_1). An English translation of this poem is provided in the appendix.

<sup>16</sup> Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 26-3. A scan is available from Europeana: [www.europeana.eu/pl/item/603/\\_providedCHO\\_NL\\_BwdADRKF\\_2\\_26\\_3](http://www.europeana.eu/pl/item/603/_providedCHO_NL_BwdADRKF_2_26_3).

<sup>17</sup> For example Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 130-4, a poem for Tjitsje's birthday (1906).

portant events related to the family, such as births, marriages, etc., and such literary activities were not limited to the upper classes of society.<sup>18</sup> Composing poetry was encouraged as a staple part of the school curriculum, also in schools run by Catholic religious institutions.<sup>19</sup> An acclaimed poet from the Low Countries who used creative writing as a pedagogical tool was Flemish priest Guido Gezelle (1830–1899).<sup>20</sup>

The poems discussed here do not form a deliberate arrangement, but they can be seen as a sequence sharing the same overarching theme (family events) and the same group of addressees. Poems [1], [6], and [8] all belong to the tradition of the *genethliacon* (birthday poem), while [2] and [7] may be seen as connected to the tradition of the nuptial ode.<sup>21</sup> Because the texts are part of Brandsma's correspondence, one may recognize in them specimens of epistolary poetry. This is clearer when we look at [8], which opens with a salutation like a letter. That the poems use an epistolary convention can be seen in how Brandsma ends the texts with a closing phrase, placing his name at the very end, for example in [7].

Brandsma's early occasional poetry to his family shows him embracing verse forms which at that time belonged to a living literary tradition. The most common is a stanzaic poem consisting of a varying number of quatrains. The exceptions are a sonnet [2] and poems written without blank lines ([5] and [7]). Brandsma had a distinct preference, somewhat unusual in Dutch poetry, for alternating rhyme (abab), a feature of all of his stanzaic poems, as well as of poems [5] and [7]. He clearly preferred lines in iambic tetrameter with alternating masculine and feminine rhyme, the rhythm of which went well with the conversational tone of the poems. We do not see him using the alexandrine (iambic hexameter) which was so hugely popular in 17<sup>th</sup> through 19<sup>th</sup> century Dutch poetry.

Autographs by St. Titus Brandsma exist of all the poems discussed here. They were written in ink on sheets of paper and sent along with letters to family members. The manuscripts at the Archive and Documentation Centre

<sup>18</sup> J.A. Gruys and Adele Nieuweboer, *Dutch occasional poetry, 16th through 18th centuries: a genre rediscovered* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> For the significance of poetry in the students' life at the Franciscan college in Megen, see Crijnen, *Titus Brandsma*, 34–35; Hense and Chalmers, *Titus Brandsma. Letters*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Guido Gezelle, Paul Vincent, ed., *Poems of Guido Gezelle: A Bilingual Anthology* (London: UCL Press, 2016), accessed December 6, 2022, doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1hd189w.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Beata Gaj, "Genethliacon for Barbara Bogolebska, or on the Need to Celebrate Birthdays and Anniversaries," *Acta Universitatis Lodzianis, Folia Litteraria Polonica* 54 (2019): 37–50.

for Roman Catholic Frisia (Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland) are well preserved and easily legible.

### 1. GOD

As Elisabeth Hense and Joseph Chalmers wrote, “the most striking characteristic of Titus Brandsma’s personality seems to be that he looked at everything in life from a considered Christian perspective.”<sup>22</sup> We see this trait reflected in his occasional poetry. One of its recurrent themes is St. Titus’ ability to present the life events of his nearest family members from an eschatological perspective. An illustration of this is poem [1] addressed to his mother on her birthday. In it, St. Titus offered some conventional thoughts, greeting her and other family members, sharing in their joy, and wishing her many happy years to come ([1], 5-16).<sup>23</sup> However, he combined these considerations with some less conventional ones, which illustrates his unique attitude. Using the noun “stonde” (hour), he juxtaposed two key moments of his mother’s existence: the hour of baptism, when “God was imprinted in [her] soul // through the holy water”<sup>24</sup> ([1], 1-4), and the “more beautiful” hour when she would be united with her children before God’s throne, rejoicing together with her patron saint, St. Therese ([1], 17-24). St. Titus immersed his mother’s life-span in the perspective of human salvation, already anticipating the participation, after physical death, of her soul in the *communio sanctorum*.

The flexibility of poetic discourse in [1] and [7] allows their author to smoothly proceed from a conversational discourse, expressed from the perspective of a child to its parents, to a prayerful utterance addressed to God. Poetry, crossing into the territory of prayer, becomes at a certain stage a medium of devout Christian reflection. This eschatological perspective is evident in poem [7] written on the anniversary of his parents’ marriage, where the poetic discourse becomes in the end a prayer ascending to heaven to petition for the eternal happiness of Tjitsje and Titus sr. ([7], 24-27).

---

<sup>22</sup> Elisabeth Hense and Joseph Chalmers, eds. *Mysticism in Action. The Collected Works of Titus Brandsma*, vol. 1 (Roma: Edizione Carmelitane), 27.

<sup>23</sup> Line numbers are provided between parentheses.

<sup>24</sup> Hense and Chalmers, *Titus Brandsma. Letters*, 23.

Innovatively for his time, the Carmelite also saw Catholic spouses as intrinsically called to sanctity.<sup>25</sup> Broadening this eschatological perspective to include a man and woman united through the sacrament of marriage, in poem [2] he compared marital life to a vessel sailing toward the harbour “that is God, only God” ([2], 4).

## 2. HUMAN LIFE

We may find in the occasional poems of St. Titus Brandsma an impassioned plea for the sanctity of human life, and an awareness that a child is not the property of its parents, but is endowed with rights that stem from its dignity as a child of God. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly, in this selection, than in poems [6] and [8].

The first lines of poem [6] resound with the announcement of the birth of a baby: “A child is born! // A child so tender!” This expression of delight, echoing almost word-for-word the phrasing of traditional Dutch Christmas carols,<sup>26</sup> welcomes the newborn infant as someone special. The young Carmelite recognized that the “soul [had] prayed in silence” ([6], 12), referring to the parents’ prayerful longing for progeny. The joy that they feel now not only allows the mother to forget the pain of childbirth ([6], 7–8) (cf. John 16:21), but it should also instil the parents with thankfulness to God, as the One who has heard these prayers ([6], 16). Similarly, in [8], 9–12, the speaker refers to the anxious awaiting for the birth of the child, who during pregnancy is already addressed by its name.

A child is a gift from God (“gift” – [6], 21–22, 25). Yet, a baby is even more than that: as the speaker of the poem states, God’s image is deposited in its physical appearance, its face, but especially its soul ([6], 23–24) (cf. Gen 5:1). Being a gift, a child is also a pledge (“een pand”), a “pledge of love and peace” ([6], 26).<sup>27</sup> This is an important thought that St. Titus will

<sup>25</sup> See John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, par. 56, accessed December 6, 2022, [www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html).

<sup>26</sup> One may compare this phrase, “Een kindeke geboren! / Een kindeke zoo teer!” [7], lines 1–2, with the *incipit* of a traditional Christmas carol from the Low Countries such as *Een kindeken is ons geboren in Betlehem* (A child has been born for us in Betlehem) or the apostrophe “kindeke teer” (tender child) in the carol *Hoe leit dit kindeken* (How this child lies...).

<sup>27</sup> The word “pand” in this sense is commonly translated into English as “pledge”, “guarantee”. “Pand” in Michael Hannay, M.H.M. Schrama, eds., *Van Dale handwoordenboek Nederlands-Engels* (Utrecht-Antwerpen: Van Dale Lexicografie, 1996). *Cambridge Dutch-English Dictionary* defines “pand” as “something given by a person who is borrowing money etc to the person he has borrowed



return to in poem [8]. In [6], 31-32, he explained: “It is a pledge; you are the guarantors // God will demand it back from you.” What St. Titus meant here and explained in the final stanzas of [6] was that a child was not its parents’ property but belonged first and foremost to God, who deposited it, as it were, with its father and mother. This opened a new perspective on parental obligations and their relationship to God in the family. The parents, St. Titus wrote, should praise God *in* their child, since it is His gift to them ([6], 27–28). A particular method, which he singled out, by which parents ought to praise God was to ensure that their child lived for the glory of God ([6], 25–26).

In [8], St. Titus Brandsma worked out this idea of a pledge more precisely, focusing on the child’s origins in the conjugal act of its parents ([8], 7–8). The baby takes its body from its parents – or as we would say today, it shares its parents’ DNA – and that “virgin” body God has united in the child to an equally “virgin” soul ([8], 15–18). Entrusting it to the parents, God expects them to be the guarantors (“borgen”)<sup>28</sup> of its soul in earthly life ([8], 19-20). St. Titus encouraged Gatsche and Michiel to offer up their child to God, because irrespectively of “what joy it gives them,” it still lives for “someone else” ([8], 25–28). Yet, this also holds a promise: if it lives well for God (cf. [6], 25–26, above) it will also do so for its parents. If the parents respect this order of importance, their child will be a “pledge” (“pand”), or in other words, a promise and guarantee of earthly and heavenly joy for them ([8], 29–32).

Poetry allowed St. Titus Brandsma to make full use of the wealth of meanings conveyed by the Dutch terms “pand” (pledge) and “borg” (guarantor) to express his thoughts on how the child is a gift from God. In the space of two poems, he developed a for that time unique theological vision, acknowledging that children should not be considered their parents’ property, but instead had the right to be seen in the light of the relationship of their personhood to God. This vision can be called very modern, since it anticipates the understanding that now forms the cornerstone of the Catholic theology of the family.<sup>29</sup>

---

it from, to be kept until the money etc is returned.” *Cambridge Dutch-English Dictionary*, accessed December 6, 2022, [dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/dutch-english/pand](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/dutch-english/pand).

<sup>28</sup> The Dutch noun “borg” can be translated as “surety”, “bail”, “guarantee”, etc. referring to a sum of money or item which acts as a security (see “borg” in Hannay and Schrama, *Van Dale*); Here, “borg” specifically refers to the person offering the guarantee, i.e. the guarantor.

<sup>29</sup> See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church. Second edition* (Cità del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), 572 (par. 2378), and Francis, *Postsynodal apostolic exhortation Amoris*

## 3. FAMILY

There can be no question that St. Titus Brandsma was devoted to his family and communicated with his closest family members on everyday issues.<sup>30</sup> He took great delight in celebrating and commemorating family events, which is illustrated by his occasional verse. Apart from showing a purely human side, St. Titus' poems illustrate how he practically worked out the Catholic understanding of marriage, children, upbringing, and interpersonal relationships in the family. The medium of poetry permitted him to share his thoughts with his family in an informal way.

We find St. Titus' love of the family expressed in poem [7], where he traces back his parents' marriage to the day they made their sacramental vows ([7], 7–8). Recollecting this, he described with humour the ups-and-downs of family life, including the “six of us,” meaning himself and his siblings, who “plagued” their parents with their crying ([7], 11–12). Instead of perpetuating a negative image of marriage as filled inevitably with toil or grievances, St. Titus Brandsma infused this picture with joy, and while acknowledging the existence of sorrows, he preferred to call it a “cheerful strife” ([7], 15). This image anticipates the modern understanding found, for example, in Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* that “marital joy can be experienced even amid sorrow; it involves accepting that marriage is an inevitable mixture of enjoyment and struggles, tensions and repose, pain and relief, satisfactions and longings, annoyances and pleasures.”<sup>31</sup> As St. Titus wrote elsewhere, God will “sweeten” the worries of a married couple through their “togetherness” (“[...] die zorgen // Die God verzoet door ‘t samenzijn” [8], 21–22). When children grow up, their parents come to feel this joy in yet another way, as St. Titus wrote. Now, many years later, the mother and father witness with satisfaction how their parental care has produced good results in the life of their children ([7], 20–24).

The relationship of parents toward their children expresses itself by offering the offspring a safe, caring environment ([7], 16–19). Marriage entails responsibility for a youngster who has, in a certain way, a right to “everything” ([6], 18). This responsibility, however, as we have seen above, is not limited to material things or physical well-being, but in St. Titus' view, as

---

*laetitia*, accessed December 6, 2022, [www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia\\_en.pdf](http://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf), 14–15 (par. 18).

<sup>30</sup> Hense and Chalmers, *Titus Brandsma. Letters*, 9–10.

<sup>31</sup> Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, 95 (par. 126).

articulated in poems [6] and [8], it should encompass care for the spiritual growth of that child as a gift of God made in His image and likeness.

The strong bond between parents and their children, and also between siblings, is based on mutual respect, understanding and acceptance. This is a theme of the St. Nicholas and New Year poems in Dutch and Frisian [3], [4], [5]. Parents and siblings form a tightly-knit community and express their affections by exchanging small holiday gifts – ice skates or a piece of traditional Frisian cake – *taaitaai* – baked by mother [3, 17-20]. Their friendship extends to knowing what the other likes ([3], [4], 5–6). They sing Frisian songs on New Year’s Day when they are together, and St. Titus even quoted one of them ([5], 1–4).<sup>32</sup> The site of this family’s life is their physical home: “that cozy Ugoklooster // Will shelter your joy under its roof” ([5], 30–31).<sup>33</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

We associate St. Titus Brandsma, understandably, with the martyrdom of Dachau, his strong resistance to Nazi doctrine, his defence of the freedom of the Catholic press, his work as a scholar of medieval and early modern mysticism, in particular within the Carmelite tradition, and we see him as a mystic in his own right. Yet, we seldom imagine him as a young man, a new member of the Carmelite community, enjoying ice-skating, eating traditional Frisian cookies on St. Nicholas’ day, taking part in family events such as the birth of a new child, birthdays or wedding anniversaries, or celebrating the New Year with a boisterous Frisian song. We tend to forget that St. Titus Brandsma, whom we see through the prism of the very end of his earthly life – through his “way of the cross” to and in Dachau – was a gentle and gregarious person, who at times loved having fun and possessed a good sense of humour.

Nowhere, perhaps apart from his letters, do we see this intimate, private side of St. Titus Brandsma’s personality revealed better than in the poems that he wrote as a young man during his novitiate and afterward in the Car-

<sup>32</sup> Hense and Chalmers, *Titus Brandsma. Letters*, 33, n. 45, state that the author of this Frisian song is unknown. We can now identify the New Year’s song, a passage from which Brandsma quoted in poem [5], as being identical with the first stanza of the song *Aldjiersjoun* by Frisian poet and language activist Jilles Klaasesz. (Jilles Klazes, 1822–1897). Johannes A. Leopold and Lubbertus Leopold, *Van de Schelde tot de Weichsel. Deel 3: Friesland* (Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1882), 163.

<sup>33</sup> Hense and Chalmers, *Titus Brandsma. Letters*, 33–34.

melite houses at Boxmeer, Zenderen and Oss. Like elsewhere, here too we witness St. Titus Brandsma looking at the events of his life, and the people around him, from a distinctly Christian perspective. His poems, addressed to family members, can be seen as embodying an informal, poetic “theology of the family.” It encompasses such matters as an eschatological perspective on human life, marriage, and the relationship between parents and their children. The medium of poetry became for St. Titus Brandsma an instrument for looking at reality differently, through the lens of faith, and for conveying his unique perspective, informally and artistically, to other family members.

**Appendix. An English translation of a poem by St. Titus Brandsma**

MR.<sup>34</sup>

Oss, May 1, 1905

**To my dear Parents  
On the thirty-fifth anniversary  
of their marriage**

My happy wishes swirl toward you,  
full of child-like affection.  
Today we celebrate a feast  
– in a truly child-like mood –  
5 bringing back the memories  
of thirty-five years ago,  
when at the altar, solemnly,  
you exchanged your marital vows.  
A great deal has passed  
10 Through your caring minds,  
There were the six of us,  
Who plagued you – with our cries.  
But though suffering was in plenty,  
Throughout those marriage years,  
15 That struggle was fought bravely,  
Nay, cheerful was that strife.  
If ever any danger loomed  
Over one of your offspring,  
Or if a storm approached,

---

<sup>34</sup> Mary. St. Titus Brandsma placed the name “Maria” or the letters “MR” in his writings as a reference to the Virgin Mary.

- 20 The comfort was parentally sweet.  
 And now – on this morning,  
 Rejoice while you look around you,  
 For the object of your cares,  
 Has finally borne its fruit.
- 25 And so today to God  
 My little verse ascends,  
 Praying that He, in Eden,  
 Will let you feel this joy.<sup>35</sup>

Your grateful Titus

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

##### Primary sources. Manuscripts of poems by St. Titus Brandsma

- Brandsma, Titus. “*Het plechtig ‘Ja’ weerklonk... .*” Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 21-1.
- Brandsma, Titus. *Aan de blijde ouders bij de geboorte van hun eersteling*. Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 23-1.
- Brandsma, Titus. *Aan mijn dierbare Ouders op den feestdag van hun vijf- en dertigjarige huwelijksvereniging*. Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 25-1.
- Brandsma, Titus. *Aan Moeder op haar patroon- en geboortefeest*. Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 18-1.
- Brandsma, Titus. *Beste Michiel en Gatsche*. Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 26-3.
- Brandsma, Titus. *Neijjer*. Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 22-2b.
- Brandsma, Titus. *Sint Nicolaas 1902. Aan mijn dierbare Ouders en aan Siebregje*. Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 22-1.
- Brandsma, Titus. *Sint Nicolaas*. Archief- en Documentatiecentrum voor R.K. Friesland, Bolsward, 22-2a.

##### Secondary sources

- Bos, Anne-Marie. “Titus Brandsma: Getuige van God.” *Acta Theologica Supp* 33 (2022): 174–189. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Second edition. Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019.
- Crijnen, Ton. *Titus Brandsma. De man achter de mythe*. Nijmegen: Valkhofpers, 2008.
- Francis. *Postsynodal apostolic exhortation Amoris laetitia*. Accessed December 6, 2022, [www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia\\_en.pdf](http://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> English translation by the author of this article.

- Gaj, Beata. "Genethliacon for Barbara Bogolebska, or on the Need to Celebrate Birthdays and Anniversaries." *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis, Folia Litteraria Polonica* 54 (2019): 37–50.
- Gruys, Jan Albert, and Adele Nieuweboer. *Dutch occasional poetry, 16th through 18th centuries: a genre rediscovered*. Leiden: Brill, 1999.
- Guido, Gezelle, and Paul Vincent, ed. *Poems of Guido Gezelle: A Bilingual Anthology*. London: UCL Press, 2016. doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1hd189w.
- Hannay, Michael, and M.H.M. Schrama, eds. *Van Dale handwoordenboek Nederlands-Engels*. Utrecht-Antwerpen: Van Dale Lexicografie, 1996.
- Hatrup, Kathleen N. "Photos and full text from canonization: 'Since He loved me...'" Accessed December 6, 2022, [aleteia.org/2022/05/15/photos-and-full-text-from-canonization-since-he-loved-me/](http://aleteia.org/2022/05/15/photos-and-full-text-from-canonization-since-he-loved-me/).
- Hense, Elisabeth, and Joseph Chalmers, eds. *Titus Brandsma. Letters to the family. The Collected Works of Titus Brandsma*, vol. 2. Roma: Edizioni Carmelitane, 2021.
- Hense, Elisabeth, and Joseph Chalmers, eds. *Titus Brandsma. Mysticism in Action. The Collected Works of Titus Brandsma*, vol. 1. Roma: Edizione Carmelitane, 2021.
- John Paul II. *Familiaris consortio*. Accessed December 6, 2022, [www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html).
- Leopold, Johannes A., and Lubbertus Leopold. *Van de Schelde tot de Weichsel. Deel 3: Friesland*. Groningen: J.B. Wolters, 1882.
- "Pand," *Cambridge Dutch-English Dictionary*. Accessed December 6, 2022, [dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/dutch-english/pand](http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/dutch-english/pand).
- van Erp, Peter. "Aan vooravond heiligverklaring duikt gedicht van Titus Brandsma op: 'Dan landt gij kind ten paradijze'." *Brabants Dagblad*, May 12, 2022. Accessed December 6, 2022, [www.bd.nl/oss-e-o/aan-vooravond-heiligverklaring-duikt-gedicht-van-titus-brandsma-op-dan-landt-gij-kind-ten-paradijze](http://www.bd.nl/oss-e-o/aan-vooravond-heiligverklaring-duikt-gedicht-van-titus-brandsma-op-dan-landt-gij-kind-ten-paradijze).
- "Writings of Titus Brandsma. Critical edition – Titus Brandsma Institute Nijmegen". Accessed December 6, 2022, [titusbrandsmatekst.nl/writings/poems/](http://titusbrandsmatekst.nl/writings/poems/).

#### MŁODY KARMELITA NA ŁYŻWACH.

#### WCZESNA POEZJA OKOLICZNOŚCIOWA ŚW. TYTUSA BRANDSMY JAKO LITERACKIE ŚWIADECTWO JEGO MIŁOŚCI DO BOGA, ŻYCIA I RODZINY

Niedawno kanonizowany niderlandzki karmelita Tytus Brandsma (1881–1942), męczennik drugiej wojny światowej, mistyk, dziennikarz katolicki i historyk duchowości, był także – co mniej znane – utalentowanym poetą. W artykule przywołano jego wczesną poezję okolicznościową, powstałą w latach 1898–1906, napisaną w języku niderlandzkim i fryzyjskim dla członków najbliższej rodziny. Ukazano jej cechy literackie, a także wykazano, że jest ona cennym świadectwem poglądów świętego na życie ludzkie w perspektywie eschatologicznej, a także na rodzinę, małżeństwo, oraz relację dzieci i rodziców. Uzasadnia to uznanie poezji okolicznościowej św. Tytusa Brandsmy jako wyrazu jego szczególnej, poetyckiej teologii rodziny. W artykule zamieszczono także przekład na język angielski dotychczas nie przełożonego wiersza św. Tytusa.

**Słowa kluczowe:** św. Tytus Brandsma; poezja niderlandzka; małżeństwo; dzieci; poetycka teologia rodziny.