

Natúúrlijk is de vrouw gelijk aan de man.....

Rie Vendrik en de pauselijke commissie over de vrouw



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Chapter I

Rie Vendrik, a short biography

I.1. Years at Home: 'Work hard and do your utmost.'¹

Rie Vendrik was born on 4 January 1908 in Maarsen (Netherlands). She was the fourth child in the Vendrik family where between 1901 and 1918 eight children came into the world. It was a simple family in which Rie grew up. Her father was a house-painter, working first as an employee and later as a tram-painter for the city of Utrecht. From 1920 on he had his own painting business in the centre of Utrecht in the 'Oude Gracht' where the family also lived. In the first years of marriage it was not easy for an employee-painter to earn a living and there were hardly any social securities in those times.

Sometimes Rie's father was unemployed. When he found a job as an employee-painter in Vleuten, he went there every day on foot because he could not afford a bicycle. That meant setting out at 6.00a.m. on the 7 km. Journey and a late home-coming in the evening

Rie's father was a gentle, attentive and very intelligent man. He, as well as his wife, went only to primary school, but he read much and studied for several diplomas. He also had a great social sense and participated in the Catholic Workers Association. Alphons Ariëns, the famous social pioneer, was in that time the parish priest in Maarsen and was much respected in the Vendrik's household. I believe Rie inherited from her father his intelligence, his precision and a lively social sense.

Rie's mother was a farmer's daughter who had to take great responsibility at home from an early age. This sense of responsibility was characteristic of hers during her whole lifetime. She was a hardworking, domineering woman with a great talent for organization. In her marriage she helped to make ends meet, first by doing fine needlework for well-to-do families along the river Vecht; later, when the family had the use of a larger house, she let out rooms and took care of the administration of her husband's business. From her mother Rie inherited the organizational talent, a strong sense of responsibility and great perseverance.

¹ Data were obtained from Collection 414 over Rie. Vendrik in: K.D.C. (Katholiek Documentatie Centrum) Nijmegen, from interviews with some of Rie's brothers; from a number of people who worked with Rie, members of the Monialen Beraad (Consultative body of Contemplative Orders), interviews with René van Eyden and with a member of the Pontifical Study Commission on Women in Society and Church.

The Vendriks were a good catholic family, and although the slogan at home was: 'Work hard and do your utmost', it was also a convivial place. Rie was a good pianist who often played 'quatre-mains' with a friend. Other members of the family sang in the church choir. Friends visited their home frequently and the Scout Movement played a great role in the family. Rie and Cor Valk, her friend and colleague, were leaders for the 'cubs' and her brothers were scouts. Chaplain A.C.Ramselaar, assistant priest of St. Catharine Church, was a welcome guest at the Vendriks. No wonder that scouting and social issues were part of the regular conversation in the family. Rie's parents had one great wish which was that their children should have a better future; they were willing to make any sacrifice for the education of their children. Since all the youngsters were quite intelligent, they went to secondary school and college, and the two youngest boys went to graduate schools. Rie attended the teachers training college in Utrecht and studied for degrees in English and French. She first taught at a primary school and later at a catholic secondary school in Utrecht. While teaching she was also active in the Catholic Action movement and involved in the catholic young women's movement, first in her parish, later as the diocesan president. During World War II Rie was, for some time, director of the secondary school because the nuns were not allowed by the German occupiers to be Head of a school. Rie hesitated before she accepted the position 'Can I do this? Is it disloyal to the nuns to do this?' She resigned as soon as the war ended. During the 'Famine Winter' of 1944-45 Rie helped with the relocation of children from Utrecht to the east of the country where there was no shortage of food. The children were taken into families there and Rie accompanied some of these groups. On the return journey she could bring food back for her family and friends.

Looking back on Rie's youth, one of her brothers describes her as friendly and attentive, especially to her younger brothers. She took over what her mother could not do, because of the latter's busy work life. Rie had a great social sense, was ambitious to use and develop her talents. She was physically and spiritually strong, rather flexible in spirit, with a great sense of responsibility, athletic – she loved playing tennis and cycling – but she was in those years a very serious young woman.

I.2. National Activity in the Lay Apostolate

I.2.1. Full-time in the Catholic Young Womens' Movement

When in 1945 the priest G.A.H. Groothuis was assigned by Archbishop de Jong to set up a Young Womens's Movement in the diocese of Utrecht, he asked Rie Vendrik and Bep Twaalfhoven to collaborate with him as full-time workers in the movement. For Rie this was a difficult and important decision. It meant leaving the school and the security – including financial security – of her tenure and taking a leap into an unknown future. She herself said about this decision: "Everyone was astonished that I dropped this security and ventured into a task where everything was still uncertain."

This seems to have been a first step towards ever greater responsibility. In 1945 she was the co-founder of Catholic Action for Young Women and in the same year she became its national president. This Catholic Action for Young Women was rebaptised as the Catholic Young Women's Movement. It was not a simple change of name but clearly a choice for autonomy, a breaking away from the larger Catholic Action movement to which the youth group had belonged and in which it was subordinate to the hierarchical system.

Within the Catholic Action movement itself, there was in the Netherlands at this time a growing criticism of Catholic Action being part of the hierarchical apostolate. Lay people considered themselves more and more as autonomous believers. Many wanted to abolish the ecclesiastical paradigm in which two sorts of faithful were distinguished: hierarchy and laity. They felt that even the word 'lay', which suggests something less than the best should be avoided. They wanted ecclesiological dualism² to make room for an integral ecclesiology: the church as people of God, in which all who have been baptized take part in the mission of the church.

For Rie and other leaders in the Catholic Young Women's Movement there was the further consideration that the whole Catholic Action movement was in the hands of men, either clergy or laymen. The female youth leaders wanted to diminish the great influence in their organization of the clergy in particular. Bep Twaalfhoven said about this:

"We, the laity, didn't accept that they (the clergy) have such an enormous authority. We thought that we ourselves could take the responsibility. Especially the women on the board thought that the men continually took the floor and we wanted to change that. We also wanted to be heard."³

Making a stand for the autonomy of the laity is a thread running through the whole life of Rie Vendrik. From the beginning she fought for the recognition of the specific mission of the laity. Lay people were more than objects of pastoral care. Neither were they assistants of the clergy and still less the obedient servants of the hierarchy. Rie wrote in 1944 in the margin of a text for a youth organisation seminar:

"...Insist that in the Catholic Action movement responsibility is taken by adult laity...Lay people are not community of listeners...but a community of co-workers."

She argued for this particular responsibility of the laity in 1951, as a member of the Dutch delegation in the World Congress for the Lay Apostolate. She reacted to a speech by Cardinal Caggiano of Argentina, who stipulated:

"To appreciate correctly the idea of the nature of the apostolate, one has to consider the nature of the Church. The Church is the People of God, the Kingdom of God and the Mystical Body, but the constitution of the Church is hierarchical, not according to the will of people but according to divine institution. She is, according to the will of the founder, a community of unequals, integrated in two classes of members who mutually differ in essence: the hierarchy and the simple believers, those who sanctify and those who are

² Jan Grootaerts defines 'ecclesiological dualism' as the tendency to base the image of the Church on the polarity: laity – clergy i.e. a tendency to try to attribute to each of these two categories a specific statute, specific tasks and, if need be, a specific theological interpretation. The image of the Church itself should be constructed from that basic assumption....The consequence of this tendency is a 'lay theology' as it was especially designed between 1950 and 1960. Jan Grootaerts, *De Bouwwerf blijft open. Bestek over de leek in kerk en wereld* (The construction site remains open. A blue print for the Laity in the Church and in Society) Tiel, 1988, 177-178. It was only after Vatican II that a theology was developed of the Church as people of God, as *communio*, an integral ecclesiology in which all baptised in one community participate in the mission of Christ. o.c. 68.

³ Marjet Derks, Bep Twaalfhoven (1918) en het Katholiek Vrouwelijk Jeugdwerk, in: Marjet Derks, Catharina Halkes, Annelies van Heijst (ed), *Roomse Dochters, Katholieke Vrouwen en hun beweging* (Roman Catholic Daughters, Catholic Women and their Movement), Baarn 1992, 293.

sanctified, those who govern and those who are governed...The conclusion one has to draw is that the members of the Catholic Action movement cannot, by the fact of their membership, cease to be simple lay people in the strict juridical and theological sense.”⁴

In response to this speech Rie asked in the name of the Dutch delegation and with the approval of several other delegates, whether such a strong accent on the ‘*subordinatio*’ of the lay apostolate to the church-hierarchy does not include the danger of passivity in the catholic laity. Would it not promote a lack of initiative?

“We think therefore that the subordination of the laity to the hierarchy is perhaps sufficiently guaranteed by the love of the laity for the church, by their ‘*sentire cum Ecclesia*’, which will make their apostolate more fruitful than when their subordination is only accepted on juridical grounds.”⁵

Granted, this was still a very cautious remark, but in ecclesiastical Rome at that time it was courageous for a lay person to react even so far to the speech of a cardinal.

Although the Catholic Young Women’s Movement in those years did not specially aim at the emancipation of women, there were some steps in that direction. They pleaded for the training of girls and young women based on the same rights that applied to boys and young men. In their formation program attention was given not only to preparation for marriage but also to proper job-training for girls. A great deal of Rie’s work consisted of setting up programs and leading seminars for women youth leaders. In view of the developments in society, an increasing need was felt for professionally trained youth leaders, both female and male. Therefore a training centre called the ‘Kopse Hof’ was founded in Ubbergen. Rie Vendrik and Bep Twaalfhoven were members of the board of directors.

In 1960 Rie terminated her presidency of the Catholic Young Women’s Movement. She was succeeded by Bep Twaalfhoven.

1.2.2. De Horstink

In 1959 Rie was invited to become a staff-member at De Horstink, the national centre of the Catholic Action movement. Her main activities were:

- ? Study of the position of women in church and society. In this role she became in 1967 a member of the ‘Workgroup Co-operation of Men and Women in the Church’. She also participated in a research study and publication about the life of widows.
- ? Interest in international affairs. In 1960 she became, on behalf of De Horstink, vice-president of the Catholic Association for International Relations (KAGIB) and gave courses on orientation to international work. She was also directly involved in the introduction of the KAGIB into the Catholic Council for Church and Society in the Netherlands in 1978. During the Third World Council for the Lay Apostolate in Rome, 11th –18th October 1967, Rie played an important role. As a member of the board of the Permanent Committee for International Congresses of the Lay Apostolate, she worked intensely on the preparation for this congress, in part by organizing an international inquiry. She also played a substantial role in preparation

⁴ Summary of Cardinal Caggiano’s address in the official *Congres Bulletin*.

⁵ Ibid.

of the Dutch delegation. At the congress itself, she was active in the organization committee.

For Rie and the other participants the congress was a high point: it focused on the clarification for the laity of this new identity of the church as people of God, which was proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council. Consequently the influence on the congress (both open and hidden) by Vatican authorities was for many of them a disappointing experience.⁶

- ? Formative work with female contemplative religious. In the sixties these religious felt the need for reflection on the contemplative life in modern times, and the reception and training of young women who wanted to enter. In 1964 the convent 'Werkhoven' invited superiors and novice-mistresses for an exchange of ideas. They were looking for a discussion leader outside their own circles and, via De Horstink, Rie Vendrik was invited. She accepted this task with great joy. Rie led the yearly discussion days for the following ten years, first in Werkhoven, and later at the convent of the Sisters of St. Augustine in Heemstede. Her introductory speech 'How do lay people see the contemplative religious?' made a great impression and laid the foundation for a process of searching discussions. Rie was much appreciated by the sisters. She facilitated skillfully the sometimes fierce discussions that flared up, she listened attentively, gave everyone the possibility to speak freely even when that brought about tension, and she showed respect for everyone's opinion. Her profound questioning was very much valued as were her sensitivity, her sense of humor and her clear summaries. She trusted others and stimulated each one to be herself. At her farewell on 7 June 1974, the President Sister Joanne said: "Rie, you have been a real Guru for us and we will never forget that. Thank you."
- ? The organization of reunions for young contemplative religious. Novices and postulants from several convents were brought together so that these young women could find support from each other and reflect on their way of life at that time.
- ? At the same time Rie was working with others on a report about religious congregations for the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the Dutch Pastoral Council in Noordwijkerhout, 4th – 7th January 1970.⁷ She participated in the council, was a member of the study committee on religious congregations and helped write the draft of the committee's report for this assembly. Rie was also present at the Sixth Plenary Session of the Dutch Pastoral Council. She was appointed to the Council's ad hoc Workgroup on Religious Life. The task of this workgroup was to draw up a report about the restructuring of the co-operation among the different religious congregations in the Netherlands.

I.2.3. Ecumenism

Rie had regular ecumenical contacts in the Netherlands: Church and World (Dutch Reformed), the St. Willibrord Association and De Horstink (both Roman Catholic). As a delegate for De Horstink, Rie was a member of the policy Council of the Ecumenical

⁶ See: Daniel de Lange, Wereldcongres voor lekenapostolaat. Van binnenkerkelijke navelkijkerij naar wereldomvattend verantwoordelijkheidsbesef (Worldcongress for Lay Apostolate. From Internal Church Introspection to Worldwide Sense of Responsibility), in: *Kosmos en Oecumene*, jrg. 1, 1967, Nr. 10, 362-364., and J. Vaillantcourt, *Papal Power. A Study of Vatican Control over Lay Catholic Elites*, Berkely 1980, chapter 4 and 5.

⁷ Pastoral Council of the Dutch Church, Nr. 6, *Fifth Plenary Meeting 'The Religious Orders and Priestly Ministry'*, Amersfoort 1970

Action Centre. This work for ecumenical initiatives and actual forms of co-operation of churches was well-suited to Rie's open and realistic mind. She also became a member of the editorial board of 'Kosmos en Oecumene', the monthly publication of the St. Willibrord Association. During her time with the youth movement Rie had developed good contact with Albert van den Heuvel, a staff member at the Geneva centre of the World Council of Churches, and via him, the doors of this Council were open for her. As the World Council was regularly invited for international conferences with catholic youth movements, Rie was often involved in deliberations over a common strategy. She came thus to be greatly valued in Geneva. Likewise on the international level Rie was asked to take up an ecumenical task. She became a member of the Women's Ecumenical Liaison Group (WELG). This contact group was founded in 1968 by the World Council of Churches and the Secretariat for the Unity of Christians in Rome.⁸

I.3. International Activity

I.3.1. International Young Women's Movement

During international meetings of female youth leaders Rie attracted attention because of her great organizational talent and sharp insight into matters. It is no wonder that she was asked, in 1948, to participate in the Board of the Fédération Mondiale de Jeunesse Féminine Catholique (FMJFC). In 1962 she became vice-president of the FMJFC and a member of the executive committee of the World Assembly of Youth (WAY). At the same time she participated in the executive committee of the Institute de la Jeunesse of the UNESCO. In 1956 Rie succeeded the Honorable C. de Hemptinne as international president of the FMJFC and worked with an old family friend, Mgr. A.C.Ramselaar, who was advisory chaplain to the movement. The Federation was a world-wide organization, comprised of 84 organizations, with ten million members and sections in 110 countries, spread over all continents. The goals of the FMJFC was the study of social and cultural questions of young women all over the world and the bringing together of these young people so that they could get to know each other's social and cultural situations and exchange experiences. For Rie and the staff this meant concretely a multitude of meetings as well as the organization of seminars, congresses, international camps and days of encounter.

From 1959 till 1961 she also acted as president of the International Catholic Organization (ICO), an umbrella organization that included the FMJFC. In December 1960 Rie became the head of a special international composed workgroup of the ICO, called the Council Committee of the ICO, with responsibility to bring as much material as possible to the preparation-committee for the Vatican Council in Rome.

Actually much of Rie's work consisted of the leadership of congresses. Chairing such large meetings seems to have been one of her specialties and the way she fulfilled this function compelled great respect. Her organizational talents and her great command of languages were fully employed. She could switch effortlessly from one language to another and always prepared extensively for such meetings and congresses. Her intelligence helped her to penetrate to the core of questions, so that she grasped the roots of oppositions and conflicts. She did not avoid these conflicts but always tried to bring about reconciliation.

⁸ On the formation of WELG see: Women appeal to the Pastors of the Church, in: *Pro Mundi Vita*, Bulletin 108, 1987, Nr.1, 28.

Moreover Rie had a talent for getting along with all sorts of people, be it the young women of the youth movement or clerical dignitaries both within and outside Rome. She actually found easy acceptance in Rome, where the staff of the Federation met twice a year. Mgr. Damen, the rector of the 'Holland College' provided hospitality in the house 'Domus Mariae'. Thanks to him many doors in Rome were opened to Rie. Although she was almost 'one of the family' there, she was aware of the ambivalent attitude of the Roman prelates towards women. She realized that in Rome women were not taken seriously, that while she might be spoken of with appreciation there was also a certain *dédain*.

Among Rie's tasks was that of participation in international congresses in various countries. In this capacity she traveled in 1958 with chaplain H.Vaessen, the successor of Mgr.A.C.Ramselaar, and some staff members to ten countries in South America, where she was greeted with great enthusiasm. Besides attending the congresses there she visited the local branches of the Federation of Catholic Young Women in order to stipulate these women and, where possible, she gave lectures and courses. She also was always diplomatic: upon arrival in any country she and chaplain Vaessen would visit the papal nuncio and the archbishop, and she would then 'incidentally' mention the names of her influential contacts in Rome. Thereafter all doors were open to her.

Notwithstanding all her work, Rie found time for study with her staff. The changing times required reflection on new developments in society and church. The team read and discussed together works by, among others, Edward Schillebeeckx, Frans Haarsma and Karl Rahner. During all those years Rie had not had much time for relaxation, hobbies and keeping up with friends, but she maintained an open and warm informal contact with her co-workers. During the time that the secretariat of the Federation was in Utrecht, Rie often shared a drink in her apartment with the secretary Annemarie Roeloffzen while they discussed, brainstormed or just amicably exchanged thoughts.

After 8 years as president of the FMJFC, Rie decided to retire. At the General Assembly, 6th–8th April 1964, an unpleasant farewell gift awaited her. There were two candidates to succeed her: a Dutch person, Bep Twaalfhoven, and an Argentine, Mrss. M.Moyano. The nominated candidates needed the approval of the Holy See but, although a letter had been sent to Rome in February asking for this approval, there was no answer from the Holy See, even after the request had been repeated. Finally on the 3rd of April, four days before the election, the managing committee received a letter in which approval was granted, but only for the Argentine candidate; the wish was also expressed that the new president should come from a non-European country. The next day in the Vatican Mgr. Luoni told Rie and the chaplain that it was the wish of the Holy Father that Ms. Twaalfhoven withdraw and that if Ms. Twaalfhoven maintained her candidacy "She runs directly counter the wish of the Holy Father...At the General Assembly it should be announced that Ms. Twaalfhoven does not accept the candidacy. However on no account may it be announced that this is happening because of the wish of the Holy See. You have to think up another motive..."⁹ During this interview Rie burst into tears. At the Assembly Bep Twaalfhoven announced that she was withdrawing her candidacy for reasons coming from 'outside the Federation'. When it became known anyway that Bep Twaalfhoven had withdrawn by order of the Holy See, many members strongly criticized such a dictatorial intervention of the Vatican. A delegate from the United States declared: "We are always ready to obey the Holy See.

⁹ See Rie Vendrik's Archive, Nr. 337.

Here, however, was an obedience which no one should have asked of us in this time of the Council and the coming of age of the laity.”¹⁰

Mrs. Moyano was elected as president by 69 of the 130 voters. It was probably not wise to put forward another Dutch candidate as the successor of Rie Vendrik, however capable a person she might have been. Nevertheless the manner in which the procedure was handled by Rome was extremely authoritarian and undemocratic. Mgr. Dell’Acqua of the Curia later offered apologies for this behavior.

I.3.2. Observer at the Second Vatican Council

During the first session of the Second Vatican Council only one (male) lay person, Jean Guitton, was personally invited by Pope John to be an observer.¹¹ During the second session more male lay persons were admitted. That provoked criticism from many women who were concerned about the church. This resulted in the attendance of some few laywomen at the second session and even more were invited to the third one in 1964. The Dutch woman Annemarie Roeloffzen was invited as a delegate of the FMJFC, whereas Rie Vendrik was invited by the nuncio in the Netherlands as a private person. She was already regularly present in Rome as a member of the staff of the Documentation Centre for the Council together with the journalist and priest L.ter Steeg. The director of the DOC-C was at first Dr.L.G.M. Alting von Geusau and later F.Haarsma. For both Dutch women to be present at the session on Theme 13, ‘The Church in the World’, was an impressive and important experience. Each morning they set out, adorned with their black mantillas, for St. Peter’s, which was filled with bishops and cardinals in solemn purple and red. From the observer’s corner they followed the many addresses. In the afternoon they themselves were also active because they sat in various committees where they could talk freely and discuss the issue, bringing to the fore the interests of the laity and especially of women. They also enjoyed the many informal contacts outside the meetings with bishops from all over the world, especially from Africa and Asia. Indeed, one evening a certain bishop invited them for a drink at the Episcopal bar in the St. Peter, a place strictly forbidden to women. Of course it did not take long before two Vatican ‘bouncers’ summoned them to leave this Episcopal area, but *not* before they had finished their cups of coffee.

I.3.3. International Council of the Laity

In 1967 the World Congress of the Lay Apostolate was taken over by a new permanent organization within the Roman Curia, instituted by the pope: the International Council of the Laity. This council would regularly meet in Rome in order to promote matters concerning the laity in the Catholic Church. The first meeting took place on 5th - 14th February 1968. From the Netherlands the only person invited to join was Rie Vendrik, as a delegate from De Horstink. She started cheerfully to work in this promising new organization and from the beginning she took up an independent and forthright position. Together with other members she refused to sign an oath of loyalty that obliged members to secrecy about the contents of the meetings. She often had differences of opinion with priests about their view on women. In 1972 she was reappointed to the Council of the Laity. Shortly thereafter she was deeply shocked by

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See: Carmen Elizabeth McEnroy, *Guests in their own House. The Women of Vatican II*, New York 1996, 33.

the Vatican's veto regarding the establishment of a National Pastoral Council in the Netherlands. She reacted with this straightforward statement:

"I am conscious of the ever growing distance between the local church in the Netherlands and the leadership in Rome. I am often perplexed by Vatican decisions and directives, so much so that I sometimes feel uneasy about my position in the Council of the Laity."¹²

However, she did not allow herself to be upset and remained a member of the council.

The Council of the Laity was created in January 1967 by Paul VI, but it only acquired permanent status in December 1976. With its permanent status came tighter controls, through the inclusion of more cardinals, bishops, and priests in the leadership positions of the organization¹³, and through the addition of the word "Pontifical" to its name, the Pontifical Council for the Laity is now nothing more than a traditional Vatican congregation, a disciplinary body which has the task of "seeing that the church's laws regarding the laity are strictly observed, and examining by administrative means disputes involving lay people", according to the papal degree of December 15, 1976.¹⁴

1.3.4. Pontifical Commission on Women in Society and the Church

In May 1973 Rie received a letter from Cardinal Villot of the Vatican State Secretariat, in which it was announced that she had been appointed to the Pontifical Commission on Women. With her hopes high Rie went to Rome for the first meeting of the commission. She wanted to make a contribution to a better and more just position for women in society and church so that, after centuries of male domination, a real space for women could develop. It was an enormous disappointment! For Rie, accustomed to democratic meetings, the way matters went in this commission was unbearable. The conservative viewpoints of the Vatican theologians and the opposition that she and some other women met with both discouraged her and made her more militant. She and four other women distinguished themselves by adopting critical positions towards the outdated traditional Vatican views on women and she further strove for open and honest discussions. The final conclusions of the commission and the way in which they were achieved were difficult for Rie to accept. Her hope for a more just future for women in the Catholic Church was seriously damaged.

1.4. The last years of her life

Rie did not want to stop, even up to her seventieth year. She found it difficult to retire from her work, to which she gave her whole heart and energy. Her farewell to De Horstink was exuberantly celebrated in a festive gathering on 26 October 1976. Many who knew and respected Rie were present and from all sides and in many speeches she was praised and honored. Her nomination as Officer in the Order of Oranje Nassau gave a well-earned closure to her many activities. She had no hobbies, never having had time for them. What remained were her personal contacts and the bonds with her relatives.

¹² Interview published in the newspaper *De Tijd*, 9 September 1972.

¹³ One of the consultants of the Council for the Laity was Cardinal Woityla who's restrictive policy was considered by Rie as very negative.

¹⁴ Jean-Guy Vaillancourt, *Papal Power. A Study of Vatican Control over Lay Catholic Elites*, Berkeley 1980, 287.

At last she had time for herself, for reflection on her life and deepest self. Shortly before she died she said:

“I want to know who I am before I die.”

“I experience that I have a force in myself stronger than death.”

To help her in this quest she followed a course in Psychosynthesis, a method which helps people heal traumas and develop their deepest spirituality.

Rie returned from a vacation in Africa with a strange illness. She sometimes suddenly collapsed in the street. First the doctors thought that she had caught a tropical disease in Africa. However, in February 1982, when she was admitted to the Deaconess Hospital in Utrecht, they found a tumor in her brain. Alas, nothing could be done. Her suffering ended on 17 September 1982; she was 74 years old. The funeral liturgy took place on 22 September in the church of Our Lady's Ascension in Utrecht. Rie's brother Nico led the service which preceded the cremation.

1.5. 'A Woman, gentle but strong'

The influence of Rie Vendrik was not first of all to be found in publications. She did not record many of her thoughts and ideas. Her influence was especially felt in study days, congresses, organizations and personal contact with many people. Looking back on her life, one admires her energy and determination in standing up for her ideals and principles. In Rie one also sees a development through which other women in the church have also gone in this century. They first of all strove for the responsibility of the laity in the church. Gradually they discovered however, that even as the laity gained a more independent position, discrimination against women did not disappear. The church needed another sort of feeling for that to happen; a church in which the equality of women and men was put into practice.

Rie gave her best energy to this renewal, especially in the Pontifical Study Commission on Women, where she had to oppose outdated and discriminating views about women. Rie loved the Catholic Church and at the same time suffered from it. She experienced joy but also disappointment in her Church. Sometimes she was heavy-hearted but never embittered; in spite of everything she stayed hopeful for a truly human Church in which women and men would carry equal responsibilities.

Jacques Stalpers said at Rie's farewell from De Horstink:

“What you have set in motion...was the realization that during change one can be loyal, while at the same time letting go of a past that is no longer relevant...Rie, I spoke of you as a woman who was born at the turn of the tide and whose work was totally dedicated to assisting that turning, and in other moments to coping with and correcting this turbulent, bewildering and risky process.”

Jacques Stalpers ended with the poem of Henriëtte Roland Holst:

“The gentle forces will surely win in the end.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Jaques Stalpers, Farewell speech for Rie Vendrik, in *Archivef KDC*, 414, Nr. 618.