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Confraternities

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Broadly, confraternity is an English-language term derived from the Latin *frater* (brother) and referring to any Roman Catholic membership association operating under authority of a bishop and canon law. Although the usual references are to male-membership and lay associations of a non-occupational type, the term may extend into any of these domains. Catholic membership associations whose members are predominantly or exclusively women may be designated as sodalities.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines confraternity as “a brotherhood; an association of men united for some purpose or in some common profession; esp, a brotherhood devoted to some particular religious or charitable service. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* uses confraternity and sodality interchangeably as “voluntary associations of the faithful.” In general, it is possible to think of confraternities as philanthropic organizations devoted to practical tasks or instrumental missions, so long as one gives rather wide latitude to what may be deemed practical at different times in church history. Confraternities are distinguishable from such other forms of Catholic social organization such as dioceses, parishes, and orders in part by this shared purpose or mission.

Confraternities were especially prominent in the social order of medieval Europe, where they are often distinguished primarily from guilds (or gilds). Confraternities are comparable in many respects to the American concept of voluntary associations, although participation in any association sanctioned by Episcopal authority, ecclesiastical obligation and divine sanction may hardly be designated “voluntary” in the ordinary sense. The importance of explicit grants of authority, obligation and sanction are evident when one contemplates the line between confraternal actions and heretical movements (including the Protestant reformation) in this history of Catholicism.

Philanthropy organized through confraternities reaches deep into the history of Christianity and other world religions. Christianity produced a wealth of philanthropic institutions associated with monastic establishments, cathedrals, parishes, chantries, and the local diocese. As early as the fourth century, bishops such as John Chrysostom, Bishop of Antioch, laid down rules for the foundation and operation of local associations within the broader penumbra of the organized church (Wilkin, 1983). Lay confraternities such as the well-known American example of the Knights of Columbus represent interesting and understudied modern survivals of medieval Christendom within the organizational network of the contemporary Roman Catholic

church. As of this writing, the Library of Congress catalog lists 12 entries on the KoC, none of which appears to be a critical or scholarly work.

One of the most distinctive periods in the history of confraternities is the late 19th century rise of fraternalism in the U.S. Equally remarkable is the European upsurge that occurred in the wake of St. Francis of Assisi within the indigenous local political dynamics of the Italian city states and spread to other localities including Spain (Henderson, 1994; Trexler, 1991).

One rather dramatic example is the confraternity in 13-15th century Florence that specialized in creation and use of “images of shame” (*tavolettas*), paintings on religious subjects held in front of the eyes of condemned prisoners on their way to the gallows by a confrater walking backwards and praying with the condemned (Edgerton, 1985).

There is little doubt that life in medieval urban social worlds struggling with plague, warfare, famine and the many other ills was well characterized by the English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes as “mean, nasty, brutish and short”. In such contexts, preoccupation with death was a suitably practical task of much interest to various confraternities. Banker (1988) examines the evolving commemoration of death over two centuries from 1250 to the coming of Florentine rule in 1440 in the small Tuscan town of San Sepolcro in the Upper Tiber Valley.

The tie between confraternities and the arts – notably painting, music, architecture and sculpture – is an important one and has been a strong recent interest of humanist scholars. Sohm (1982) looks at the architecture produced by a Venetian confraternity between 1437-1550. Glixon (2003) addresses music in Venetian confraternities. Wisch (2000) addresses the role of confraternities in patronizing the visual arts. Webster (1998) discusses the role of confraternities in Seville, where patrons sponsoring the creation of wooden sculptures used in processions during Holy Week.

Piety was an important dimension of medieval confraternities, with important ties to art, charity, and politics (Barnes, 1994; Crouch, 2000; Eisenbickler, 1991; Henderson, 1997). An important sub-class of medieval and modern confraternities are known as confraternities of penitents. In the 13th century, their numbers increased to such an extent that there were eventually more than 100 in Rome alone. Each was distinguishable by the colors of its processional robes – white, black, blue, gray, red, violet, and green. Typically, members would combine penitential acts such as fasting, discipline, or wearing of hair shirts with activities somewhat similar to contemporary social care services. Care of the sick, burying the dead, medical aid to the indigent, providing dowries for poor girls are among the penitential acts mentioned for white penitents. Black penitents consoled criminals and accompanied them to the gallows, buried them along with the poor and unidentified bodies found within the Roman Campagna.

The confraternity movement was not limited to medieval Italy, however. In addition to the Knights of Columbus, an interesting and controversial modern form of penitential confraternity in the contemporary United States are the *penitentes* of New Mexico (Ahlborn, 1986; Carroll, 2002; De Aragon, 1997; Steele & Rivera, 1984; Varjabedian & Wallis, 1994). Likewise, throughout the former territories of New Spain, New France and predominantly catholic cities and neighborhoods of U.S. cities today, confraternities continue to be important forms of religious association for Catholics.

In addition to the authority of the bishops, most confraternities had (and have) one or more patron saints, as well as patrons in a more earthly political and economic philanthropic sense. Thus, for example, St. Bonaventure, who was at that time Inquisitor-general of the Holy Office, prescribed the rules, as well as the white habit of the most important of the white penitents, the Archconfraternity of the Gonfalone, established in 1264 at Rome.

Confraternities can be distinguished from other forms of catholic voluntary association by at least three important variables: gender, occupation, and status.

The Latin stem *frater* in the term means brother and most medieval and modern references to confraternities refer to male associations that might be termed symbolic rather than genetic brotherhoods. Weissman captures precisely this connotation in the book title, *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence* (1981).

The role of confraternities in preserving and maintaining the fundamentally patrimonial authority structure of Catholicism is evident but under-studied in the women's literature. Women's sodalities were not unknown in late medieval Florence, according to Trexler (1991, p. 14). One might question his conclusion however that "they played no perceptible civic or neighborhood role." At any rate, Florentine women, as well as adolescents, youths and adult salaried workers were generally excluded from occupational associations (guilds) and from religious groups until the late 15th century (Trexler, 1991, p. 14).

Generally, the term confraternity refers to non-occupationally-based Catholic lay associations, with two notable exceptions. Occupational confraternities were very rare in renaissance Florence (Traxler, p. 14) and the same appears to have been true elsewhere. In some cases, however, foreign artisans (who may not have been Catholic, but whom the Florentines nevertheless wished to keep in the city) were allowed to organize into confraternities.

Trexler (1991) notes also that Florentine guilds and confraternities both maintained constitutional distinctions between major and minor members, along status lines. Confraternities were organized primarily by and for

taxpaying nongildsmen, although the leadership often came from important guilds (p. 15).

The political and status dynamics of confraternities in Renaissance Florence were intimately tied up in some of the traditional connotations of the idea of philanthropy going back to the Greeks. No less an authority than Niccolò Machiavelli noted in his *History of Florence* that the nobility had brought the city both necessary military virtue, but also a certain “generosity of feeling” obliterated it was said by the subsequent rise of the *popolo* (Machiavelli, 1970, pp. 107-109).

Catholicism poses a host of special problems for contemporary philanthropic and religious studies: Is the Roman Catholic church an organization or a collaborative network of hundreds of distinct organizations or even an international subculture? Or is it even an entire hierarchical social order (“Christendom”, “the church universal”) as rhetoric perfected in the high Middle Ages still proclaims today? Is the “communion of saints” an association of currently living persons, or as is claimed theologically an association of the presently living and dead and all those unborn? In what sense are associations formed as an expression of religious obligation “voluntary” associations? These are questions much easier to pose than to answer.

There is a rich literature on confraternities only a small portion of which is available to the English reading audience. The Library of Congress catalog, for example, lists almost 200 books on the subject in English, French, Spanish, German, Latin and other languages dating from 1500 CE.

Easy entry points into the literature of confraternities include a review essay by Barnes (1991) that reviews several books on Italian and Spanish confraternities in the 15th-18th centuries, and entries on the subject in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. The rich literature, some of which is cited here, on confraternities in Florence, Venice and the other Italian city states has many strong ties to contemporary civil society/ social capital discussions (Putnam, 1995). For those with a more intense interest in the subject, The Society for Confraternity Studies, based in Toronto, produces a regular online newsletter.

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