

Confraternities & Sodalities in Modern Ireland

Colm Lennon & Nicholas Terpstra

Honouring God and Community: Confraternities and Sodalities in Modern Ireland was the title of a conference held at the National University of Ireland (NUI) at Maynooth just outside Dublin on 7–8 September 2007. The conference grew out of a major grant from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) to a team of researchers at NUI Maynooth for a project entitled *Religion and social identity in Ireland: the role of parish confraternities and associations, 1775–1965*

The *empirical* objectives of the IRCHSS-funded Irish confraternity project are:

- Primary data-gathering of information on all traceable confraternities and associations in parishes throughout Ireland between approximately 1775 and 1965 in diocesan, religious and other archives, including:
- Compilation of a data-base to record all the information gathered;
- Bibliography of sources, including main primary records, commemorative publications, devotional works, printed rules for the conduct of confraternities, periodical literature containing relevant material, photographs; secondary sources; and literary sources including memoirs and fictional accounts of parish associational life;
- Collection of records of oral recollections of confraternal and associational life in the parishes;
- Catalogue of sacral objects, art-work and shrines associated with confraternal practice.

The *interpretative* objectives of the project are:

- Discerning of patterns in the chronological and geographical spread of confraternal foundations;
- Investigation of the role of the associations in the religious life of the parishes and of the dynamic between clergy and laity;
- Examination of the educational function of confraternities and parish associations over the study period;
- Assessment of the contribution of the parish associations to charitable and welfare provision, and the development of Catholic social policy;
- Assessment of the part played by confraternities in social and political mobilisation since the early nineteenth century.

The research project has now run for two of its three years and the conference offered many of the researchers involved in the project an opportunity to share and discuss their findings. History Department Chair, R.V. Comerford, himself a scholar of associational life in Ireland and the Netherlands, welcomed the participants and launched the proceedings.

Nicholas Terpstra (University of Toronto) offered an opening paper *Confraternities, Social Capital, and Civil Society: Comparisons, Contexts, and Questions* that explored some comparative work being done in recent studies of Italian confraternities, and in the broader phenomenon of social kinship generally.

Colm Lennon (NUI Maynooth), the project's Principal Investigator and organizer of the conference then offered a paper on *Confraternities in Ireland: a long view* tracing the history of confraternities in Ireland over a long duration, examining both continuities and discontinuities. It stressed the range of functions that these associations had apart from the devotional, mentioning sociability, civic ritual, charity and education, and drew contrasts between the religious associations as run by laypeople down to the Counter-Reformation, and the clerically-controlled organisations that persisted into the modern period.

Robin Kavanagh (NUI Maynooth) the Project Research Fellow then offered *An introduction to the Project*, discussing some of the findings of the research project to date and reviewing the multiplicity of confraternities and sodalities, the focus of their different devotions and their regional distribution. She offered a case study of a particular confraternity of the Holy Family to give an example of its membership, constitution, rituals, contribution to parish identity and wider activities. She also noted the work of the project in finding and inventorying the literature and material culture that confraternities generated, including manuals, devotional items, and Catholic periodicals.

Máire Ní Cearbhaill then offered a paper on *Dublin Confraternities and sodalities: a quantitative perspective* that was based on the quantitative data produced thus by the project for confraternities in Dublin over first half of the twentieth century. Trends in the affiliation of men and women to certain associations were examined, against the backdrop of cultural and social developments such as the formation of the Irish Free State, the holding of the Eucharistic Congress, the apogee of the influence of the Catholic church and the reforms ushered in by the Second Vatican Council. She also offered a case study of the fortunes of the Society of St Vincent de Paul to highlight the salient trends.

Cormac Begadon (NUI Maynooth) drew on his research on Roman Catholic culture of the late eighteenth century as he spoke on *Religious confraternities and the pastoral revival of Catholic Dublin 1740–1830*. This was the period when the penal laws that had limited Catholic worship and associative life were drawing to a close, and his paper presented evidence of the role of confraternities at the turn of the eighteenth century in forging a Catholic identity which contributed to the formation of a confident Catholic community in an era of Catholic emancipation.

Jennifer Kelly (NUI Maynooth) spoke on *Irish associational culture in the nineteenth century*, an aspect of her work on movements of popular protest such as the ribbon men. She framed the confraternities within the milieu of broader associationalism, examining patterns of membership of both religious confraternities and popular societies.

Dáire Keogh (St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra) spoke on *Christian Brothers' evangelization of youth in nineteenth century Ireland*, drawing on his ongoing major study of the Irish Christian Brothers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Brothers were extremely influential in education and catechesis in Ireland and elsewhere. Here, in the context of confraternal studies, he examined the methods and effects of the Brothers' evangelisation of Irish youth in the nineteenth century.

Martin Maguire (Dundalk Institute of Technology) addressed *Church of Ireland parochial associations: a social and cultural analysis* in the later nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Less a devotional presence than a form of sociability and charity, these Protestant associations performed a wide range of functions. Of particular note is their contribution to the bolstering of Anglican morale in a time of threatened hegemony after the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869.

Jacinta Prunty (NUI Maynooth) has researched the subject of urban philanthropy and the contribution of Catholic sisters. In *Continental religious devotions and practical applications in the Dublin slums 1860s–1870s* she discussed the adaptation of continental confraternal practices and rituals to the Dublin slums in the mid-Victorian period. The contrast between the exotic devotions imported by the sisters and the squalor of the slum-dwellers could not be more pronounced.

Carole Holohan (University College, Dublin) spoke on *John Charles McQuaid and the failure of youth sodalities 1956–1961* describing the efforts of Archbishop John Charles McQuaid in the 1950s to popularise youth sodalities as a means of coping with the problems of the emergent category of teenagers. The paper analysed the early approaches to youth issues through the agency of youth sodalities. It demonstrated how class difference was used as a policy-directing tool, but noted that the failure of the sodalities to take root was indicative of wider problems in the confraternal system.

Louise Fuller (NUI Maynooth), Associate Investigator on the project spoke on *The decline of the confraternities and the problem of sources* reflected on the dramatic decline of the associations after the Second Vatican Council, and discussed the problem of sources for confraternal activity. With the abandonment of confraternal devotions, there was widespread loss of documents, including minute-books, membership rolls and accounts. Fuller discussed her visits to the archives and analysed attitudes to the confraternities from the perspective of the early twenty-first century.

Banners, booklets, badges and other materials gathered by Fuller and other project members were on display at the NUI Russell Library as an exhibition entitled *Memorabilia and iconographic images of Confraternity*.

For further information on the project, please contact Prof. Colm Lennon: <colm.lennon@nuim.ie>