

Catherine Vincent, *Les confréries médiévales dans le royaume de France: XIIIe–XIVe siècle*. Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1994. 259 pp.

In this volume, Vincent surveys French confraternities during the last two centuries of the Middle Ages. Since studies of confraternities tend to be limited in both time and space, this work, scanning a wide area, should attract a large readership. The book is intended for the general reader as well as the specialist. It presents the first with a fascinating look at the inner workings of these quintessentially medieval organizations; the specialist historian looking for specific references, on the other hand, will be satisfied with the volume's abundant endnotes and detailed bibliography. Further, an extremely handy reference section, at the end of the volume, lists confraternities by city and adds the relevant bibliographical resources for each organization.

Vincent opens her work by exploring the reasons for the popularity of confraternities during the late Middle Ages. In her view, their success sprang from two areas: their ties to what she labels "traditional forms of Christian piety", and their own specific qualities. The latter comprises their membership enrolment, and the role confraternities played in teaching their members the appropriate social and religious practices. In order to lead her reader through her arguments, Vincent creates a generic confraternal model (*un schéma-type*) which allows her to develop her premises.

She turns first to what she perceives to be the high point of the confraternal calendar, the annual meeting. Her description of this event covers the many signs of recognition used by members to identify each other inside and outside the group (costumes, for example); the religious activities of the group (confraternal communion and banquet); and the ceremonies which gave cohesion to the group (the general assembly, public lecture of the statutes, sermons, and literary games or theatrical productions if applicable).

She then dwells on the origins of confraternities. Vincent finds the birth of confraternities in the prevalent medieval need to form social groups. For the author, the solitary man had no place in medieval society. In France, associations formed around devotion to a particular cult, saint or Christian mystery, around the construction of a church or chapel, in defense of communal interests, or around political, professional or national motivations. The author rightly sounds a note of caution regarding the largely accepted view that medieval confraternities existed mainly in urban areas throughout the West. It may be that limited documentation for rural areas has given rise to this view. The conclusion of the chapter deals with the longevity of these associations, and thus their usefulness, and leads on to the focus of her next chapter: identification of the social need or void filled by the confraternities.

The author notes that confraternities evolved at a time when families were in difficulties. Did the population decline and dislocation that resulted from the calamities (plague, war and famine) of the "waning Middle Ages" create a void which was then filled by confraternal associations? Not in the opinion of this author. Vincent systematically deconstructs this hypothesis by showing that the foundation of most confraternities had little to do with the plague. Furthermore, the confraternal rejection

of the most isolated individuals—single women and the poor, the ones most affected by receding economic conditions and the breaking of familial ties—enhances her point. The confraternities were composed of members already well established within familial structures. This point leads the author to conclude that confraternities did not replace lineage and alliances but, on the contrary, extended them. Confraternities enlarged the circle of solidarities available to their members.

In her search for patterns possibly duplicated by confraternities, Vincent looks at the other medieval model of family, that of the church, and its impact on confraternities. The author first assesses the role that the evangelical model played for the lay population as a whole. Then, she concentrates on the specific effect on confraternities: mainly the development of confraternal charitable works (the six works of mercy and the care of the dead), aimed mostly at their own members and the deserving poor. However, many confraternities also delved into the care of the soul. Many associations centred most of their activities around the development of a rich liturgical life. The dignity and glamour of their cult enhanced the prestige of a brotherhood. Vincent surveys the many forms of intercession used by confraternities and the emergence of the concept of Purgatory.

Vincent then moves to the private motivations of confraternal members. For the author, the decision to enter a confraternity reveals a conscious effort by each individual to handle his or her own salvation. This individualization of religious practice matched the growing internalization of religious life of the late medieval period. Joining a confraternity offered to the many the permanency of personal memory, in this world and beyond, which had been previously reserved only for the few.

After looking at confraternities from the point of view of the individuals who joined them, the author uses the last third of her volume to review the role of confraternities as a whole. First, confraternities educated their members. Confraternities enforced peaceful relations within the group and controlled the religious, moral and social behaviour of their members. It was understood that the prestige of any association and the effectiveness of its intercessory function depended on the good morality of its adherents. It logically follows that many associations screened their membership and excluded any members liable to stain the group's reputation. Thus, those leading a "bad" life, usurers, excommunicated individuals, and, as we progress into the modern period, women, either never gained access to or lost their places within these associations. Secondly, many confraternities held public functions.

The confraternities' forms of government trained their members in the intricacies of associative life. They also furnished training grounds for future leaders. But, most of all, confraternities offered an easily accessible financial resource in case of communal needs. Vincent uses this chapter to identify the social topology of these groups. In medieval France *gens de metiers*, primarily the middle class, joined confraternities. This topology allows Vincent to show the role that these associations played in the social cohesiveness of any commune or city.

Finally, the author examines more closely the relationship between confraternities and the public authorities, in particular the wariness of the latter toward these

associations. However, even if authorities sometimes feared confraternities, they could never suppress them. Thus the authorities chose control. Vincent admits that, during the Middle Ages in France, public authorities could only loosely constrain them. Civil authorities generally delegated their power over the societies to the church. This leads Vincent to her final point: the primacy of the parish in French towns. Noting the mendicant orders' lesser influence on the foundation of French confraternities, she places confraternities firmly in the shade of the parochial structure.

The author concludes with what she perceives as the duality and paradox of the confraternity. First, the associations exhibited a collective structure which presented signs of affirmed individuality. Secondly, confraternities attested to the internalization and privatization of religious life within a collective structure. Refuting, in passing, the work of Jacques Chiffolleau,¹ she states "Il n'est pas jusqu'à la place que les confréries ne cessent d'accorder de plus en plus massivement à la vie liturgique—un comportement trop rapidement fustigé comme purement comptable—qui ne fasse écho aux entreprises des évêques les plus soucieux de pastorales" (p. 188).² She leaves us with the impression that over the centuries confraternities had been the creation of a few conscientious bishops.

By considering confraternities as a complement to and reinforcement of the existing ecclesiastical structures she contradicts her previous conclusions (chapters Two and Six). In short, she does not believe that confraternities were created because their founders perceived a void in religious leadership.

The author's generalizations on the sociology of the associations (pp. 160–161, the primacy of the middle class for example; or p. 179, the invisibility of the mendicant orders in the association's foundations) may surprise a few readers, especially because the author does not include in her text the various statistical data required to make such assertions.

Still Vincent draws on a wide range of authorities. She offers many contextual references which are most useful to her "specialized" readers. Besides Italian and Spanish references, her bibliography includes many Anglo-Saxon authors. However, one must point out a shortcoming: the work is primarily narrative and descriptive, and avoids historiographical debate (e.g., the question of ritual behaviour in religious brotherhood). This may explain why some important authors, for example Weissman or Trexler,³ are missing from her bibliography. Her book will be of interest both to

1 In this case, I assume that she is referring to Jacques Chiffolleau, *La comptabilité de l'au-delà. Les hommes, la mort et la religion dans la région d'Avignon à la fin du Moyen Age* (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 1980).

2 "The growing role that confraternities grant, more and more massively, to liturgical life—a behaviour too quickly denounced as purely numerical—echoes the undertakings of the bishops the most concerned with pastoral life" (reviewer's translation).

3 Ronald F.E. Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1982); Richard C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

the general public and to students of history as an introduction to confraternities studies.⁴ Interested specialists will also find many points of reference for comparison and/or argument.

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Frontispiece to P. M. Campi, *Vita di S. Corrado eremita* from Simon Ditchfield, *Liturgy, Sanctity and History of Tridentine Italy*, p. 149.

4 To complete a quick survey of French confraternities see Noël Coulet, "Le mouvement confraternel en Provence et dans le Comptat Venaissin au Moyen Age", in *Le mouvement confraternel au Moyen Age. France, Italie, Suisse* (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 1987), 83–110.