

Florentine confraternities, society, and lay-religious life in the sixteenth century — A Work in Progress

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The present article is a brief resumé of the context for my current research towards a major study of Florentine confraternities and society after 1500. In what follows there is not space for detailed description of all aspects of the project. I have instead opted in the available space to discuss briefly some of the factors that led me to undertake this study in the hope that the identification of a number of themes and historiographical issues will be of interest to other scholars in the field.

Readers of *Confraternitas* hardly need telling that the burgeoning interest in European confraternities has, over the last generation, spawned a minor industry. Some, like myself, may also find themselves wondering from time to time whether indeed this enterprise is in need of some kind of “future-directions policy”—given its scale, there is an occasional lack of rigour and a certain tendency for scholars working in different places to reproduce each other’s results. The situation is perhaps somewhat different from the one that Gene Brucker identified in relation to the state of Florentine studies in the late 1970s. Professor Brucker opened his *The Civic World of Early Renaissance Florence* by observing that the prevailing tendency for historians to utilize Florence as a laboratory within which to test epistemological tools taken from other disciplines had produced nearly as many differing interpretations as there were monographs on the subject.¹ The result then, in Professor Brucker’s opinion, was that the consequent plethora of competing or mutually exclusive visions of Florentine society had produced more dissent than agreement and, indeed, occasionally led one to ask whether certain authors were writing about the same city.

Interest in confraternities has, similarly, produced a huge number of new studies both big and small, and it must be said that this recent scholarship has militated strongly against an earlier portrait of Renaissance Italian society as a secularizing prototype of our own age. Thematically speaking, however, the published literature is unevenly spread, as Konrad Eisenbichler recently observed.² The problem is not so much one of competing and conflicting voices, but of a lack of clarity and consistency. Institutional histories and isolated case-studies abound, and certain aspects of confraternal experience have received

1 Gene Brucker, *The Civic World of Early Renaissance Florence*, introduction; also the same author’s “A Tale of Two Cities: Florence and Venice in the Renaissance” *American Historical Review* 88 (1983), pp. 599–616.

2 Konrad Eisenbichler, “Italian Scholarship on Pre-Modern Confraternities in Italy,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 50:2 (1997), pp. 567–580.

a great deal of attention, but the general picture remains sketchy. It is still not possible to do more than venture tentative hypotheses about the way that this form of popular religious experience responded to the changing social and religious environment in northern Italy after 1500. If this situation holds for confraternity studies in the institutional sense, it is perhaps even more serious with regard to the relationship of confraternities to the society of which (it seems sometimes to be forgotten) they formed a part.

These problems are more serious in the Anglophone than the European world. If one turns to Florence between 1500 and the Council of Trent, one finds that until now historians writing in English have left the field largely untouched.³ Much useful work in Italian has for the most part an institutional or art-historical focus,⁴ and much of the latter category is primarily concerned with individual artistic commissions in the confraternal setting.⁵ When it was published a decade ago, Christopher Black intended that his admirable survey of Italian confraternities in the sixteenth century be an "interim report" on the field, and he alerted the

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- 3 Konrad Eisenbichler's exhaustive treatment of the Florentine youth company of the Archangel Raphael makes use of a wealth of unpublished documentary material, but the author was unable to describe the society's activities during much of the early sixteenth century because of a large gap in the records: no documents survive for the period between 1494 and 1530. Konrad Eisenbichler, *The Boys of the Archangel Raphael. A Youth Confraternity in Florence, 1411–1785* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), pp. 39–40. Hospitals in the early-modern era have for some time attracted the attention of scholars such as Philip Gavitt (see, for example, his *Charity and Children in Renaissance Florence. The Ospedale degli Innocenti, 1410–1536* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990)). The recent historiography relating to the confraternities is, as I hope to make clear in what follows, a particular case, and I do not intend to discuss the growing literature on hospitals here.
 - 4 See, for example, Ludovica Sebgondi, *La compagnia e l'oratorio di San Niccolò del Ceppo* (Florence: Salimbeni, 1985); *eadem*, *Tre confraternite fiorentine. Santa Maria della Pietà, detta 'Buca' di San Girolamo. San Filippo Benizi, San Francesco Poverino* (Florence: Salimbeni, 1991).
 - 5 To this category belong short articles such as the following by Anna Padoa Rizzo: "Cosimo Rosselli e la tavola per la Compagnia dei SS. Innocenti," *Antichità viva* 30:6 (1991), pp. 12–16; *eadem*, "L'altare della Compagnia dei Tessitori in San Marco a Firenze: dalla cerchia di Cosimo Rosselli al Cigoli," *Antichità viva* 4 (1989), pp. 17–24. The position of women in the lay-religious culture of the period is a subject increasingly well-served in the Italian literature, though the work of historians like Daniela Lombardi often draws its conclusions from institutions other than confraternities. See, for example, her articles and books including: "Poveri a Firenze: programmi e realizzazioni della politica assistenziale dei Medici tra Cinque e Seicento", pp. 165–85, in Giorgio Politi, *et al* (eds.), *Timore e carità: i poveri nell'Italia moderna* (Cremona: Biblioteca statale e libreria civica di Cremona, 1982); *Povertà maschile, povertà femminile: L'Ospedale degli Innocenti nella Firenze dei Medici* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1988); "Le altre famiglie: assiste e serve nella Firenze dei Medici," *Memoria: Rivista di storia delle donne* 18 (1986), pp. 25–36; "Intervention by Church and State in Marriage Disputes in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Florence," in T. Dean and K. Lowe (eds.) *Crime, Society and the Law in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 142–57.

reader very early that his approach was descriptive rather than analytical.⁶ Throughout his survey, Black's account revealed large gaps in current knowledge of sixteenth-century popular religion. A decade later there is still no detailed analysis of the theme for sixteenth-century Florence, a lack which hinders interpretation of the society as a whole.

It is against this general background that I have undertaken work towards a major study of confraternities in the Cinquecento. My current research aims not simply to fill a gap by confirming or denying hypotheses advanced in the recent secondary literature, though Florence has serious need of the kind of stock-taking that Christopher Black performed for the Italian peninsula, and this is certainly one primary objective. The project, however, is at least equally concerned to achieve a change of emphasis, given that a number of other secondary studies have considered confraternities from an overly ecclesiastical perspective⁷ or have erred by treating them primarily as sociological phenomena—running the risk, in this second case, of draining them of their religious significance. The most important work in the latter group is Ronald Weissman's *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence*. Valuable and, indeed, pathbreaking a book as this was, its insistence that Florentine confraternities functioned as an alternative to normal Florentine social relations and the interpretation of their rituals as "liminal" social action led the author to underplay the extent to which piety infused much of everyday urban life during the period between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁸ The implicitly secularizing approach in Weissman's work is most problematic in the last two chapters where the author casts forward into the Cinquecento, proposing that the recurrent social, political and religious crises of the century's first decades caused a further crisis in lay-religious observance and devotion. After the confraternities had passed through a period of upheaval and repeated suppression in the first half of the century, Weissman argues, they once again became active, but had by now been transformed on one level into agents of social control enforcing religious orthodoxy and civic conformity, and on another into aristocratic clubs.

It would be foolish to deny the enormous impact of combined social, military, political, and epidemiological crises and theological reform on sixteenth-century confraternities, and this indeed is not the objective of my current work. Weissman's relatively simple explanation of the situation after 1500 does not, however, convincingly portray the exact nature of the changes wrought and needs

6 Christopher F. Black, *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 279 and 4 respectively.

7 Gilles G. Meersseman, *Ordo fraternitatis. Confraternite e pietà dei laici nel medioevo*, 3 vols. (Rome: Herder, 1977).

8 Ronald F.E. Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980), pp. 26–35. See especially pp. 27 and 30, and my earlier comments on Weissman's work in Nicholas A. Eckstein, *The District of the Green Dragon: Neighbourhood Life and Social Change in Renaissance Florence* (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 1995), pp. xx–xxi.

substantial modification. The author assumes too readily that crisis and an increasingly authoritarian political climate were the causes of widespread apathy amongst the membership of confraternities and that ordinary people ceased to have any voice in confraternal affairs. One source of this misunderstanding is an overemphasis on the many complaints in the records about failure to observe confraternal statutes and an alleged difficulty in finding office-bearers, particularly after the century's second decade. There are strong reasons (which I discuss in a forthcoming article) for believing that these complaints are more formulaic than they appear at first glance and that they need to be seen in a much broader context. More seriously, Weissman assumes a necessary connection between social crisis and the impulse to corporate lay devotion. In this analysis, piety and group worship are delicate flowers indeed, wilting suddenly in the Cinquecento's changing social and religious climate. The interpretation, indeed, strikes one as strange in a book which in the first place casts confraternities as organizations that functioned as an antidote to social crisis. At the very least, the conclusions about patterns of corporate devotion after 1500 are too easily made and need testing.⁹

My current research on Florentine confraternities in the sixteenth century does not aim to add one more institutional history to the pile of similar studies already published. Rather, the methodological approach has been similar to that of my earlier study of neighbourhood and religious community in fifteenth-century Florence.¹⁰ Here confraternal piety was related to the religious context of late-medieval urban life as a whole, and conclusions were based on a wide range of evidence, confraternal and non-confraternal. While different in focus, the present research shares the objective of weaving sixteenth-century confraternal experience into its social fabric, thereby avoiding the danger of a too-narrowly-focused or simply institutional study. The records of twenty-five Florentine confraternities have to this point been systematically sampled, while half a dozen others—including the companies of Saint John the Baptist, called the *Scalzo*, Saint Sebastian, and the company of the Purification of Mary, also dedicated to Saint Zanobi—have been singled out for detailed analysis.

At every point my current analysis of the sources seeks to investigate the devotional impulses of the confraternities' members, the companies' internal existence and the symbiotic relationship between the companies and society in its

9 While more delicate use of Weissman's conclusions has now been made—see, for instance, Nicholas Terpstra, *Lay Confraternities and Civic Religion in Renaissance Bologna* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 93 and 116—there are signs that they have achieved the status of a received wisdom in the Anglophone world. When discussing Florence in the sixteenth century, for instance, Black, through no fault of his own, was constrained largely to rely on Weissman's last two chapters. We read, therefore, that “[In the second half of the sixteenth century] Confraternities became reinforcements of parochial religious-social life; those representing wider neighbourhood or occupational groups were largely superseded.” Black, *Italian Confraternities*, p. 29.

10 See my *The District of the Green Dragon*, *passim*.

broadest sense. As already acknowledged, the atmosphere of social, political and religious crisis that pervaded the first four decades of the sixteenth century cannot be ignored, but the kind of impact that such crises had on the quality of urban life should constitute a conclusion, not a point of departure for research.

In this project it is assumed that the crisis of the early sixteenth century had a transforming effect on confraternal life; judgements as to the quality of that transformation, however, destructive or otherwise, await more detailed consideration of the sources. This is a deliberate methodological choice based on the fact that it is simply too easy to subscribe to that nostalgia common to all periods and places, which afflicted sixteenth-century Florentines no less than their forebears, and which modern Italians invoke with the trope that “le cose non sono più come una volta.” Listening to contemporaries, one is encouraged, furthermore, to look only for violent and massive change, ignoring areas where change was absent, gradual, uneven or smooth. Contemporaries’ sense that things were gloriously better at some indeterminate period in the past can also combine with historians’ own natural propensity to read the late-twentieth-century present into the past. The risk in the context of the Reformation is particularly serious because the period saw the birth of many attitudes that have survived, albeit in modified form, into our own day. It needs to be borne in mind, to take just one example, that the transformation by which corporate (usually seen as “late-medieval”) charity turned into a statist programme of philanthropy is in fact a gradual, not a specifically sixteenth-century phenomenon, as Henderson and Terpstra have most recently demonstrated.¹¹ The historian’s problem is that it stands out in sharper relief after 1500 and in some ways looks newer than it really was, inviting facile conclusions about the populace’s continued involvement in, or exclusion from poor relief. Much of sixteenth-century Florentine has a very modern appearance, and this will often be an indicator of genuine change, but the change can also be more apparent than real. Exaggeration of the sixteenth century’s modernity gives rise to arguments that stress the culture’s “proto-modern” or “early-modern” characteristics, that reinforce the tendency to divide urban experience into distinct “religious” and “secular” realms,¹² and encourages analyses with a diachronic rather than synchronic unity.

If one may be allowed a truism, it is at least certain that Florence’s lay-religious life, especially as it may be observed and reconstructed through the city’s confraternities, was complex rather than simple. An academic year of full-time research in Florence’s archives and libraries has revealed that despite the thousand natural and unnatural shocks—and this includes repeated and sustained suppression—to which the men and women of Florence’s confraternities were subjected in the sixteenth century, the companies’ relationship with the city’s

11 Terpstra, *Lay Confraternities*, *passim*; John Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 367–72 and *passim*.

12 Carol Bresnahan Menning, for example, investigates the history of the Florentine Monte di Pietà from a rather secular viewpoint. See her *Charity and the State in Late Renaissance Italy. The Monte di Pietà of Florence* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993).

history in its broadest sense remained dynamic. It is already clear that as long as evidence is sensitively used and contextualized, the surviving records of confraternities have far from yielded up all they have to offer to the historian. In this sense, the last generation of published research in this field may well, as its protagonists in the 1960s would have hoped, serve as the foundation and spring-board for further investigation of society as a whole between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, and not simply as a limited foray into one discrete aspect of the people's religious experience.

The continued usefulness of confraternities as a point of access to the wider society, indeed, depends upon the area and the detail of the canvas on which they are located. In this sense, I hope that my current investigation of Florence's confraternities is broadly conceived without being overly ambitious. Research has already yielded insights into ways in which geographical neighbourhood and community relations were linked, activated and perpetuated after 1500. Changes in the way both were envisioned in the confraternal sources have much to say about the fault lines along which Florence was divided and within which its people drew together. The identification of these changes also affords new retrospective insights into the way neighbourhood and community, conceived of in lay-religious terms, functioned in the Quattrocento. A great deal has been written about Florence's festive and public life,¹³ but the defining and transforming effects of lay-religious consciousness on this behaviour, and the extent to which piety and confraternal liturgy were reified in the urban life of the period have not been investigated in detail; nor, I would suggest, will they emerge with any clarity before painstaking reconstruction of much of the *minutiae* that form the overwhelming bulk of the sources related to people's lay-religious observance in the religious companies.

The history of Florence's confraternities before and after Trent reveals uses and perceptions of the city that are as fundamentally different from each other as they are from the preceding century. A changing social geography and the objectification of groups within the membership—women, *fanciulli*, priests, artisans and nobles—are accompanied by a reassessment and re-elaboration of local liturgies similar to events in Rome and in other northern Italian cities. This, of course, is to be expected, but as Simon Ditchfield has argued, the impact of universalizing tendencies within the Tridentine church played itself out variously according to local traditions, an observation that holds down to the level of individual parish and city-block.¹⁴ Notwithstanding the Counter-Reformation Church's desire for conformity and uniformity, we are at this stage in no danger of repeating the results of research, like Ditchfield's, performed by other histori-

13 For the most important, comparatively recent, example, and for a bibliography of other earlier material, see Richard C. Trexler, *Public Life in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1980).

14 Simon Ditchfield, *Liturgy, Sanctity and History in Tridentine Italy: Pietro Maria Campi and the Preservation of the Particular* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), *passim*.

ans in different cities. Rather, we stand to learn much about the city's history in the widest sense. The presence of the increasingly powerful dominant theological culture created by the Tridentine church, indeed, has a positive impact for the historian in the sense that while its effects could vary from place to place, the broad similarity and cognate relationship of new local religious render them susceptible to comparative analysis.

My current work encompasses a twofold hope; in the first place, that a relatively large-scale study of Florence's confraternities might enhance our knowledge of the lay-religious context of sixteenth-century urban life in addition to teaching us more about the confraternities themselves. Second, I hope that, on the basis of any methodological strengths or weaknesses the study might have, it will be useful to scholars working on similar and related themes in other Italian and, indeed, European cities of this and other periods.

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