

Wisch, Barbara and Nerida Newbigin. *Acting on Faith. The Confraternity of the Gonfalone in Renaissance Rome. Early Modern Catholicism and the Visual Arts Series, 7. Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2012. Pp. xxii, 512 + 269 colour ill. ISBN 978-0-916101-74-9 (hardcover) \$ 100.*

This volume is a study of the history, art, and rituals of the Confraternity of the Gonfalone, one most important lay religious associations of Renaissance Rome and one that by the end of the sixteenth century had become a point of reference for many confraternities throughout Italy. In this beautifully and richly illustrated volume Professors Wisch and Newbigin present the confraternity in its various aspects — historical, devotional, charitable, legal, artistic, theatrical —, thus providing readers and scholars with a detailed, but very accessible insight into the organization and its contribution to Roman religious, charitable, artistic and performative culture.

Supposedly founded, as the confraternity's legend claimed, by St Bonaventure himself in the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in 1264, the sodality certainly did date from the 1260s and so could rightly claim to be the oldest in Rome. It also claimed to be the first to place an image of the Madonna of Mercy (Misericordia) on its confraternal banner (the *gonfalone*), something that was then imitated by countless other Marian confraternities throughout Italy and the world. The confraternity redacted its first set of statutes in 1495 and its second in 1584. It was eventually suppressed by an act of the Italian parliament in 1890.

During its six centuries of active life, the Gonfalone was not only the most important, but also the largest confraternity in Rome, partly because of the great number of members it attracted (both male and female) and partly because of the various other confraternities it absorbed (seven by the sixteenth century!). It was one of the first to be raised to the rank of an archconfraternity (1579). The Gonfalone was also one of the richest confraternities in the city, the proud proprietor of various churches, chapels, *ospedali* (hospices), an oratory, and nearly 200 rental properties. It was also rich in its people, drawing into its membership rolls not only a great number of wealthy artisans and shop keepers, but also a significant number of nobles and high prelates, including important cardinals and foreign dignitaries, all of whom bestowed their largesse upon the sodality. Not surprisingly, the Gonfalone prospered and grew throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to become a model for other such organizations in the entire peninsula.

In the Renaissance the Gonfalone was famous not only for its size, wealth, influence, and rank, but also for the monumental Passion plays it mounted at Easter time in the Colosseum. As Newbigin/Wisch point out, "these Passion plays were the most elaborate confraternal theatrical events in all of Renaissance Italy, ground-breaking in text, music, and stagecraft technology" (2). The plays, written and performed by the members of the Gonfalone, were one of the first collections of plays to be printed (1496), with subsequent editions and re-editions well into the nineteenth century.

Performances of these plays were so powerful that they sometimes led to violent crowd reactions. The strongly anti-Semitic elements in the scripts served, in particular, as an incentive to violence against the local Jewish community. In 1539, Pope Paul III finally put a stop to such repeated violence by prohibiting future performances of the Passion plays.

The Gonfalone was not all wealth, performance, or violence, but also a major contributor to philanthropy in Rome. It provided alms for the poor, dowries for poor girls, food for the hungry, hospitals for the sick, hospices for the indigent and abandoned. It freed two prisoners every year on the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin (15 August) and worked assiduously with the papacy to ransom Christians prisoners from Muslim captivity. And it hosted pilgrims visiting the Eternal City. As an important tessera of the city's social mosaic, the Gonfalone worked hard to maintain established social norms through elaborate ceremonies that reinforced order and obedience.

The book is divided into fifteen chapters, plus introduction, epilogue, and two appendices. The large number of chapters allows the authors to focus effectively on various aspects and moments in the confraternity's life, progressing naturally through its history, activities, and contribution to Roman spiritual, charitable, and festive life. Their descriptions and analyses are firmly based on extensive archival and manuscript research, as well as on the two authors' excellent knowledge of previous and current literature on the Gonfalone, on Roman confraternities, and on Italian confraternities in general. As they promise to do, they show "how the Gonfalone expressed its beliefs in confraternal structures and animated urban spaces with effective rituals, emotive sacred drama, and joyous charitable festivals." (p. 13) In so doing, they also bring to light the "tensions and failures" in Roman society from the late Middle Ages to the end of the Renaissance and present the reader with a society that was diverse, intricate, energetic, religious, and profoundly charitable.

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