

Paolo Benvenuti's *Confortorio*: A Movie about a Comforting Confraternity

A new Italian film, *Confortorio*, brings to the silver screen the last night spent by two Roman Jews awaiting execution in the Castel Sant'Angelo while members of the comforting confraternity of San Giovanni Decollato try their utmost to convert them and "save their souls". The story line is inspired by an actual historical event and drawn from archival documents examined by Simona Foà.

The story takes place in Rome during the night of 23/24 November 1736. Two Jews, found guilty of aggravated theft, are handed over by the Ghetto authorities to the Roman justice system for execution. The system, however, finds itself in a quandary: before it can execute the Jews it must first try to convert them to Christianity and thereby "save their souls". Enter, at this point, the confraternity of San Giovanni Decollato, also known as the Misericordia. The group, composed of Florentine men resident in Rome, is joined by a gamut of other "pious Christians", confessors, preachers, Capuchins, Jesuits, an archbishop and even a rabbi who has, himself, converted—all in an effort to convince the condemned to embrace Christ and die in a state of grace.

The film is directed by Paolo Benvenuti, who has already made a reputation for himself with *Il bacio di Giuda* as an innovative and controversial interpreter of religious "events". In an interview granted to Giovanni Bogani, Benvenuti comments that the confraternity does not show up well: "Certo, la Confraternita non ci fa una gran bella figura". This may very well be due to his own interpretation of the case, his avowed "atheist relationship with Christ" (from the same interview), and a modern judgmental lay bias against confraternities.

The film is produced by Andrea De Gioia for Arsenali Medicei in collaboration with Rai3 (Italy, 1992, colour, 85 min.).

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"Entry of New Members into the Charité de Sainte-Croix of Bernay", illustration from the confraternity's Register (1797); reproduced from *Le confraternite pugliesi ... 2*, p. 399.