

Women in Confraternities between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age.

Research in Umbria

The presence of women in confraternities both in Umbria and in Western Europe is a field still very much open to research. The female component in the tremendous variety of confraternal organizations is a constant which, at the same time, is also discontinuous and variable. Because the phenomenon is so complex, every categorical and absolutist affirmation risks being inexact. Christopher Black pointed out that "The confraternities were primarily male societies, but not wholly so."¹ A study on women in confraternities could therefore be seen as something fairly marginal; but even apparently marginal phenomena can assume great importance. Furthermore, the phenomenon is worth our attention in light of the difficult and indeed complex condition in which women in general lived in the period of transition between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age.

Women were limited and constrained by what I call the circle of exclusions, that is, exclusion from military life, management of power, access to public, civic, political and administrative appointments, from the priesthood and any other priestly functions, from official culture and from the universities. Women may, on the other hand, have enjoyed equal recognition in the fields of trade and commerce where openings were available (female corporations, female shop keepers, etc.) despite there never having been any full recognition of female professionalism. The bourgeoisie, in fact, was oriented in its development towards a model of clear separation between male and female roles: men in business and in the public or political life, women in home management. With its multiple variants and forms, religious life, whether forced or spontaneously and freely chosen, remained, or rather, was imposed as the only alternative to married and family life.

¹Christopher F. Black, *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 34.

When speaking of women in confraternities we are referring to all possible specifically lay female areas.

It is by now an accepted historiographical fact that women did actually find their own spaces in religious, lay-religious or semi-religious life. It is perhaps no coincidence that in the European congress on "Le mouvement confraternel au Moyen Age. France, Italie, Suisse" Anna Benvenuti Papi, referring to the Florentine area, should not have spoken of women in confraternities but rather of religious women connected not only to the traditional orders, but also to new ones (*pinzochere*, *vestite*, etc.).² She also mentioned communities of penitents and recluses, not to mention oblate sisters and conversae. If, then, during the Middle Ages women found their own spaces in religious, lay-religious or semi-religious spheres, it would be interesting to study what and how many opportunities they were able to find in the strictly lay universe.

Meersseman, for example, in his *Ordo fraternitatis* does not speak specifically about women in confraternities, but only briefly about "Women and the confraternities of the Disciplined," noting their absence in the area of the *magna devotio* and their participation in same cases in the spiritual goods of the company.³

However, taking a closer look at his work one realises that female participation in Italian and European confraternities was not insignificant. Between the 10th and 11th centuries women appeared in the rural confraternity of Sant'Appiano in Valdelsa (Meersseman, 1:55-65) and in the urban confraternities of Ivrea, Modena and Tours (Meersseman, 1:95-108). Between the 12th and 13th centuries women were admitted into clerical confraternities in Paris and London (Meersseman, 1:169-178). Between the 13th and the 15th centuries there was a diffusion of Marian confraternities in the Dominican area. The statute of the confraternity of the Virgin in Arezzo (1262) provided for the admission of women "Quia vero ad salutis opera perficienda apud Deum viri sive mulieris non est distinctio seu differentia constituta" (Meersseman, 2:1022). However, in this last case women were allowed to carry out only certain tasks of a religious-devotional character, such as prayers, monthly meetings and participation in the various feasts in honour of

²Anna Benvenuti Papi, "Donne religiose nella Firenze del Due-Trecento. Appunti per una ricerca in corso" in *Le mouvement confraternel au Moyen Age. France, Italie, Suisse* (Rome: Ecole Française de Rome, 1987), 41-82.

³Gilles Gérard Meersseman, *Ordo fraternitatis. Confraternite e pietà dei laici nel Medioevo* (Rome: Herder, 1977), 1:498-504.

the Virgin, and were excluded from the official management of the confraternity. Within the realm of Marian confraternities it is not necessary to emphasize the opening of the confraternities of the Rosary to women. James Sprenger (1475) had already proclaimed the unconditional admission of women into this type of confraternity (Meersseman, 3:1215). Between the 15th and the 17th centuries a series of confraternities, generally dedicated to St. Peter Martyr, appear in the Dominican area. Their purpose is the defence of the faith. In these confraternal aggregations a female cooptation was also provided for.

Although women were generally excluded from the official management of these confraternities (eg. Vicenza, Verona, Vigevano), the statute of the confraternity of St. Peter Martyr in Introbio, Como (1580) provided for two priors and two prioresses (Meersseman, 2:909-912), a clear sign of the move to make the female components more responsible within the group.

Reading the volume *Le mouvement confraternel au Moyen Age (France, Italie, Suisse)*, one obtains an overview of women in confraternities. Whereas Benvenuti Papi spoke only of religious women, Noël Coulet has underlined the mixed character of some Provençal confraternities,⁴ Catherine Vincent has mentioned the presence of married couples in confraternities in Normandy,⁵ and Kathrin Tremp-Utz has spoken of women in the confraternity of St. James in Bern.⁶ In speaking about the diocese of Geneva, Louis Binz has noted the generalized *mixité* of the confraternities,⁷ and André Schnyder has pointed out the presence of women in the confraternities dedicated to St. Ursula in the cities of Southern Germany such as Strasburg.⁸ Furthermore, the confraternity of the Holy Spirit in Friburg had been founded as early as 1264 as a mixed religious entity.⁹ For Florence, Charles De La Ron-

⁴Noël Coulet, "Le mouvement confraternel en Provence et dans le Comtat Venaissin au Moyen Age," in *Le mouvement confraternel*, 105-6.

⁵Catherine Vincent, "La confrérie comme structure d'intégration: l'exemple de la Normandie," in *Le mouvement confraternel*, 120-21.

⁶Kathrin Tremp-Utz, "Une confrérie de saint Jacques à Berne la fin du Moyen Age," in *Le mouvement confraternel*, 228-29.

⁷Louis Binz, "Les confréries dans la diocèse de Genève à la fin du Moyen Age," in *Le mouvement confraternel*, 250-51.

⁸André Schnyder, "Unions de prière patronnées par sainte Ursule en Allemagne du Sud à la fin du XVe siècle," in *Le mouvement confraternel*, 266.

⁹Nicolas Morard, "Une charité bien ordonnée: la confrérie du Saint Esprit à Fribourg à la fin du Moyen Age (XIVe-XVe siècles)," in *Le mouvement confraternel*, 277-78.

cière has noted a rather reduced female presence. In the Florentine countryside women appeared either in separate confraternities or in mixed ones.¹⁰ In the city of Florence, however, mainly in the company of San Frediano women participated in spiritual *beneficia* and in specific confraternal activities such as the procession on the first Sunday of every month, but were excluded from official management hierarchy.¹¹ For the Veneto, De Sandre Gasparini has noted an increase in female presence between the 14th and 15th centuries, when confraternities expanded and included family groups.¹² Such an example is the confraternity of St. Rocco in Villa del Bosco (Padua),¹³ whose statute of 1478 reveals: a) the centrality of the confraternal organization in a minor rural centre; b) the presence of both men and women with the same rights and religious-devotional duties such as prayers, processions and the rite of *focaccia* (flat bread); c) exclusion, however, of women from positions of management within the confraternity; d) greater involvement of family groups within the confraternity. As far as the congregations of urban clergy were concerned, women were admitted into the one in Padua and into the one dedicated to Sts. Peter and Paul in the diocese of Treviso.¹⁴

The place of women in confraternities is a complex subject predicated on openings, preclusions and limits. There were confraternities where no female presence occurred at all, and others which were exclusively female, some seem to have been female ramifications of male confraternities, and some were a heterogenous multiplicity of

¹⁰Charles M. De La Roncière, "Les confréries à Florence et dans son contado aux XIVe-XVe siècles," in *Le mouvement confraternel*, 303-4.

¹¹ Massimo Papi, "Le confraternite fiorentine tra Medioevo e Rinascimento. Stato della questione e prospettiva d'indagine," *Ricerche di storia sociale e religiosa* 17-18 (1980), 126-27, 129.

¹²Giuseppina De Sandre Gasparini, "Il movimento delle confraternite in area veneta," in *Le mouvement confraternel*, 385-86.

¹³Giuseppina De Sandre Gasparini, *Contadini, chiesa, confraternita in un paese veneto di bonifica. Villa del Bosco nel Quattrocento* (Padova, 1979; Verona: Libreria Universitaria Editrice, 1987).

¹⁴André Rigon, "Le congregazioni del clero urbano in area veneta (XII-XV secolo)," in *Le mouvement confraternel*, 350; see also his *Clero e città. 'Fratalea cappellanorum', parroci, cura d'anime in Padova dal XII al XV secolo* (Padova, 1988), 170-71; B. Betto, "Congregazioni di clero nella diocesi di Treviso. La congregazione degli apostoli Pietro e Paolo attraverso lo statuto dell'anno 1482 e altra documentazione inedita," *Ricerche di storia sociale e religiosa*, 17-18 (1980), 229.

mixed confraternities within which, however, women were excluded from the echelons of management.

A case between openings and limits can be seen, for example, in the confraternity of San Bartolomeo in Sansepolcro (Tuscany).¹⁵ Its statute of 1269 provides for the presence of men and women who must be separately registered. Only men, however, could be rectores. Between the 13th and the 14th centuries, in carrying out its mission of charity towards the needy and piety towards the dead, the confraternity accepted hundreds of women of varying social extraction, including servants, married women and widows. The men, in turn, founded new confraternities, exclusively male. Thus, while San Bartolomeo became feminized and remained the only viable lay religious organization for women (and here only in a passive role), new opportunities opened up for men.

Another example may be seen in the Company of the Gonfalone in Rome,¹⁶ whose statutes of 1490 suggest that women constituted a ramification of the male association which controlled, among other things, the enrolment of new female members. The women had their own structure and even a prioress. They also had the same processional and religious-devotional obligations as the men, but were probably excluded from the organizational apparatus of the mystery plays.

During the 16th century the confraternities of the Rosary and of the Holy Sacrament seem to promote female presence despite a persistent dimorphism of men/women in organizational and administrative management.¹⁷ These types of confraternities, together with others with the same emphasis on their devotional character, were found to be more suitable for women, whose sphere of action was more private in nature and tendentially excluded from the possibility of a broad participation in public and collective life. Seeing that, for example, in Rome and in Florence, however, women were admitted into confraternities even different from those of the Rosary and of the Holy Sacrament, it really does seem that the general picture is indeed a complex varying

¹⁵For this confraternity see James R. Banker, *Death in the Community. Memorialization and Confraternities in an Italian Commune in the Late Middle Ages* (Athens, GA. and London: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1988), 38-74, 188-90.

¹⁶Anna Esposito, "La confraternita del Gonfalone (secoli XIV-XV)," in *Ricerche per la storia religiosa di Roma* 5 (1984), 129-30.

¹⁷See, for example, Danilo Zardin, *Confraternite e vita di pietà nelle campagne lombarde tra '500 e '600. La pieve di Paragiago-Legnano* (Milano: NED 1981), 230.

between opening and constraint to be evaluated from place to place and from period to period without emphasizing generalizations.

On a general level one might be tempted to compare the presence of women in confraternities to their presence in corporations and guilds. Here women could be either thoroughly excluded (as was quite often the case), or present with men, or active in entirely female corporations. Whereas the world of organized work tended to limit the place of women, confraternal religiosity was perhaps more willing to accept women both for obvious reasons of control and for placing and arranging the faithful adherents within the fabric of correct catholic religiosity.

Amidst such openings, closures and limits, what possibilities were there in Umbrian confraternities for female participation? Due to the lack of any organic work on this topic, I shall limit myself to giving only a few indications.

Between the 13th and the 14th centuries Marian-centred mixed confraternities of Dominican descent appeared in Orvieto and in Perugia.¹⁸ The 1312 statutes from a Perugian laudese confraternity provided for the admission of women but also for their exclusion from management. Other documents dating back to the first half of the 14th century refer to confraternities dedicated to St. Mary in centres around Lake Trasimeno (Perugia).¹⁹ Testamentary bequests suggest that they were male and female branches of the same confraternity.

The Dominicans contributed to the diffusion of such Marian confraternities, but so too did the Franciscans. In the first year of St. Bonaventure's generalship (1257) a whole series of confraternities dedicated both to the Holy Mary and to St. Francis were founded and received papal letters. One of them was a confraternity in Montefalco (diocese of Spoleto), composed of both men and women whose principal aims were devotional (illuminations, recitation of the *Salutatio Virginis*, etc.).²⁰

Along the same line as these Marian laud-singing confraternities, there was a certain diffusion throughout Umbria of confraternities of Recommended of the Virgin. Many of these appeared in Assisi, Gual-

¹⁸Meersseman, *Ordo fraternitatis*, 2:1012-13, 1041-42, 1063-66.

¹⁹Pian del Carpine, Isola Maggiore, Isola Polvese, S. Feliciano, Monte del Lago; Perugia, Archivio di Stato, Ospedale della Misericordia, *Bastardelli*, 5, ff. 2r-3r, 56r-47r; 8, ff. 7v, 12v-13v, 21r; 10, f. 161r.

²⁰S. Nessi, "Storia e arte delle chiese francescane di Montefalco," *Miscellanea Franciscana* 62 (1962), 310-11.

do Tadino, Todi, Trevi, Spello and Bettona, but some were in time taken over by the spreading matrix of *disciplinati* confraternities.²¹ From their *forma vitae* and the letters of brotherhood, we can see that the Recommended must have originally accepted women.²² The *statuta* and *matricula* of the confraternity of the Recommended in Assisi certainly provided for the presence of women.²³ However, from these same documents it is difficult to tell whether the women could participate in every facet of the confraternity's religious life. It is clear, though, that the confraternity itself was governed by a male hierarchy. The *matricula* contains a list of 85 women, some of whom were the wives, mothers or sisters of the 284 male members of the confraternity.

Thus far, our brief survey pinpoints female participation in confraternities based on Marian devotion. This fact does not, however, alter the male preeminence in the hierarchical and institutional structure of the confraternities. It merely states that such associations did not exclude women.

The male nature of the confraternities of *disciplinati* is an undeniable reality. Nonetheless in Umbria the following instances of female participation have been noted: in Cascia (diocese of Spoleto) there were the "homines et mulieres ... congregationis dissiplinatorum monasterii Sancte Lucie ordinis Sancti Augustini" (1329);²⁴ in Terni there appeared a confraternity of Disciplined sisters (1412);²⁵ in Gubbio, within the confraternity of S. Maria del Mercato, in the 15th century the names of 56 women appear.²⁶ Here, however, these names might be due to a heritage of female participation deriving from an original Marian confraternity which united the singing of lauds with the practice of flagellation. The statutes of confederation for the three Perugian

²¹Giovanna Casagrande, "La fraternita dei Raccomandati di Maria," in *Le fraternite medievali di Assisi. Linee storiche e testi statutari* (Assisi: Centro di ricerca e di studio sul movimento dei Disciplinati, 1989), 15-16.

²²Giovanna Casagrande, "Lettere d'indulgenza e di concessione di benefici spirituali. Forma vitae dei Raccomandati della Vergine," in *Le fraternite medievali di Assisi*, 191-98.

²³Giovanna Casagrande, "Statuto e matricola della fraternita dei Raccomandati della Vergine," in *Le fraternite medievali di Assisi*, 203-32.

²⁴P.L. Meloni, *Per la storia delle confraternite disciplinate in Umbria nel secolo XIV*, in *Storia e arte in Umbria nell'età comunale*, Atti del VI Convegno di Studi Umbri (Perugia: 1971), 2:562-63.

²⁵Ibid., 564.

²⁶Ibid., 543-44.

confraternities of St. Augustine, St. Domenic and St. Francis (1472) state that "it is an old official tradition that women should not enter our dwellings."²⁷

In the 14th century there was a confraternity of women attached to the church of Sant'Antonio in Perugia, but we do not know whether it was linked, and if so how much, to the male confraternity of *disciplinati* attached to the same church.²⁸ The female confraternity dedicated to the Virgin appears at the beginning of the 16th century, for example, and has at its head two "abbatisse seu ministre" who act on behalf of the entire confraternity.²⁹ The same confraternity seems to be thoroughly autonomous in the *Capitoli e Costituzioni* datable after 1618.³⁰ By this date it is decidedly Marian-devotional in nature, in charge of a chapel and governed by an abbess and a prioress.

On the other hand, in the diocese of Assisi the medieval statutes belonging to the confraternities of *disciplinati* leave no space whatsoever for women. The confraternity of San Lorenzo in Castelnuovo is specifically not allowed to accept women (1363),³¹ and the statutes of the confraternity of San Rufino in Assisi (pre-1347) read as follows: "Item quilibet fugiat ut pestem mortiferam longa colloquia et consortia mulierum que prestant et inferunt causam libidinis et hosticulum inhonestatis."³²

However, recent studies have shown that from the 16th century on certain confraternities of *disciplinati* in Assisi began accepting women (Santa Chiara, S. Maria del Vescovato, Sant'Antonino, San Vitale, San Francesco).³³ It is, in fact, well within the 16th century that the disciplined sisters appear in Montefalco (diocese of Spoleto) with their own oratory called *la secreta*.³⁴ At the same time there appears in Oro

²⁷"antiquamente proveduto che femine non possano entrare nelle nostre case." Perugia, Archivio Braccio Fortebracci, A VI 513, f. 10v.

²⁸G. M. Bico, "La fraternita di S. Antonio Abate in Perugia," *Annali della facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell'Università di Perugia* 9 (1971-72), 315-57.

²⁹Perugia, Archivio di Stato, Notarile, *Bastardelli*, 1015, ff. 270v-71v, 301v-2v.

³⁰Perugia, Biblioteca Comunale Augusta, ms. 1471.

³¹Meloni, "Per la storia delle confraternite disciplinate," 605.

³²Ugolino Nicolini, "Statuto della fraternita dei Disciplinati di S. Rufino," in *Le fraternite medievali di Assisi*, 313.

³³Luisa Proietti Pedetta, *Le confraternite di Assisi tra Riforma e declino (secc. XVI-XVIII)* (Assisi: Accademia Properziana del Subasio, 1990), 76.

³⁴Giovanna Casagrande, "Ricerche sulle confraternite delle diocesi di Spoleto e Perugia da *visitationes* cinquecentesche," *Bollettino della Deputazione di Storia*

(diocese of Perugia) a disciplined confraternity with forty-four members of both sexes.³⁵

The absence or weak presence of women in confraternities of *disciplinati* may be explained by considering a whole range of factors such as: shame and decency; the penitential spirit; the greater public role played by men; the appropriation of penitential and liturgical practices of a specific male and religious-ecclesiastical domain (monastic discipline, liturgy of Maundy Thursday); the identifying of oneself in and/or appropriation of the Passion of Christ as a specifically masculine possibility.

In fact, well into the 16th century, in the diocese of Spoleto, some exclusively female confraternities revert back to purer forms of Marian worship, eg. in Castel di Lago, Natività della Vergine; in Cascia, Concezione della Beata Maria; in Onelli, Beata Maria; in Spoleto: Madonna della Misericordia.³⁶ Also, within the diocese of Perugia there were at least six exclusively female confraternities which were dedicated to Our Lady. Another two, for example, were mixed. In the area around Lake Trasimeno the very early Marian confraternities were still surviving (Isola Maggiore, Monte del Lago).³⁷ In Castel Rigone (Perugia), instead, the statutes of 1634 indicate the confraternity of Madonna dei Miracoli as exclusively male;³⁸ in the late 16th century in the same church there was a company of women who were in charge of a particular altar.³⁹

The confraternities of the Rosary were either mixed, as in the case of Terni,⁴⁰ Perugia, Casalina and Sant'Enea (Perugia) and Cannaiola (Spoleto),⁴¹ or composed exclusively of women, as in the case of Castelvivo (Spoleto), Passignano and Badiola (Perugia).⁴² The confraternities of the Holy Sacrament might very well have been mixed. However, both in the case of the confraternities of the Rosary and in

Patria per l'Umbria 75 (1978), 37.

³⁵Ibid., 41.

³⁶Ibid., 38.

³⁷Ibid., 56-58, 60-61.

³⁸*Costituzioni e capitoli della confraternita della Madonna de' Miracoli e Confalone di Castel Rigone diocesi di Perugia* (Perugia, 1634).

³⁹Perugia, Archivio Diocesano, Documenti della Visita Bossi, VII, 14 nov. 1577.

⁴⁰R. Gradassi-Luzi, *Le XX confraternite laiche del comune di Terni* (Terni, 1927), 96-97.

⁴¹Casagrande, "Ricerche sulle confraternite," 38, 41.

⁴²Ibid., 38, 43.

that of the Holy Sacrament further study must still be carried out. The statutes of the confraternity of the Sacramento in the church of Sant' Angelo (Perugia), sanctioned by the Bishop Vincenzo Ercolani (1579-1586), instructed both brothers and sisters to participate in the procession of the Sacrament with honest behaviour whilst avoiding every lascivious glance, gesture, laugh and unbecoming word.⁴³

Within the city of Perugia, there were three other confraternities between the 16th and the 17th centuries open to female participation. In the 17th century the company of the Nome di Gesù had long lists of members of both genders. Women had their own two prioresses and all types of women seems to be present, that is, married women, sisters, nuns, not to mention women of every possible social background from high to low.⁴⁴ On the other hand, in the company of the SS. Sacramento e San Giuseppe, which was under the direct control of the Cathedral and connected to the cult of the Holy Ring,⁴⁵ there is a separate *matricula* especially for the female members (for the years between 1542 and 1627 it contains more than 1,800 names). Here again the social background of the female members is varied and complex including women from the families of the oligarchy, wives and daughters of craftsmen, servants and various religious women. The recruitment of new members generally took place within the city of Perugia without, however, excluding aspiring members from the entire diocese. Women carried out the same devotional duties as the men regarding the Holy Sacrament (such as prayers, masses and processions) and selected the female members who visited infirm women.⁴⁶ The management of the company, however, was completely in the hands of the males. The *Costituzioni* of the confraternity of the Suffragio in S. Maria di Colle (1628) created a female branch of the same confraternity with its own hierarchy including custodians, superintendents and nurses. It, too, was also under the control of the males in the

⁴³*Raccolta di orazioni le quali ordinatamente recitansi secondo le diverse funzioni solite a farsi tra l'anno in questa chiesa parrocchiale di S. Angelo* (Perugia, 1793), 12-22 [17].

⁴⁴Perugia, Archivio di Stato, Corporazioni religiose soppresse, S. Domenico, *Miscellanea*, 77; see also Black, *Italian Confraternities*, 37.

⁴⁵Giovanna Casagrande, "Devozione e municipalità. La Compagnia del S. Anello/S. Giuseppe di Perugia (1487-1542)," in *Le mouvement confraternel*, 155-83.

⁴⁶Perugia, Archivio della Cattedrale, Compagnia del SS. Sacramento/S. Giuseppe (S. Anello), *Matricola* n. 3.

confraternity.⁴⁷ Openings for women, therefore, were possible, provided that they were checked.

In conclusion, although for the moment it is not possible to generalize, the following tendencies can be used as a viable guideline for further research on women in Umbrian confraternities:

- 1) both in the Middle Ages and in the Modern Age women were most present in Marian and/or devotional confraternities;
- 2) at the same time some confraternities of disciplinati timidly opened themselves up to women;
- 3) after the appearance of new kinds of confraternities in the same period of transition, female participation widened.

The sources for data on the composition of confraternities are really quite disparate. They are direct and indirect, printed and in manuscript form. If, on the one hand, *statuta* and *matricula* are prime quality direct sources, one must not neglect the infinite, less direct sources such as privileges and indulgences, letters of brotherhood, convent and monastic records, pastoral and apostolic visits, various episcopal dispositions, notarial deeds of the most varying nature, such as wills, contracts, and so on. Women in confraternities, then, is still very much a open field for research.

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⁴⁷Perugia, Biblioteca Comunale Augusta, ms. 1386, ff. 419-20.