

Confraternities and Brotherhoods in Spain, 1500–1800¹

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European scholars concerned with the history of confraternities and brotherhoods have noted the “universality of the confraternal phenomenon” that assumed “massive proportions in the West between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.”² Although confraternities (*cofradías*) and brotherhoods (*hermandades*) were founded in the Hispanic kingdoms during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, their greatest expansion occurred during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In Seville, for example, devotional confraternities focusing on the Passion of Christ were rare until the fifteenth century when they were founded in increasing numbers.³ In the Old Castilian city of Zamora, only ten confraternities and brotherhoods had been established by 1400. By the second half of the sixteenth century, 150 were in existence.⁴

How many confraternities and brotherhoods existed within the Hispanic kingdoms during the early modern period is a difficult question to answer because of the absence of reliable statistics until the later eighteenth century. In a pioneering study published in 1944, Antonio Rumeu de Armas estimated their number at 20,000 toward the close of the seventeenth century.⁵ In 1771, the alleged abuses of confraternities and brotherhoods, especially in financial matters, led the Council of Castile, the official body responsible for the kingdom’s internal government, to order a general enquiry into their number and condition. This reasonably accurate survey reported the existence of 25,038: 19,024 were in territory of the old kingdom of Castile; 6,557 in the former realms of the Crown of Aragón.⁶ If the estimate of Rumeu de Armas is accepted, the 1771 statistics suggest a

1 This is a revised version of a paper, “Las cofradías y hermandades de España y su papel social y religioso dentro de una sociedad de estamentos,” published in *Cofradías, capellanías y obras pías en la América colonial*, eds. P. Martínez López-Cano, et al. (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; Mexico City, 1998), pp. 35–48.

2 José Sánchez Herrero, “Las cofradías de Semana Santa de Sevilla durante la modernidad, siglos XV a XVII,” in Rafael Sánchez Mantero, et al., *Las cofradías de Sevilla en la modernidad* (Seville, 1988), pp. 46, 52.

3 Maureen Flynn, *Sacred Charity: Confraternities and Social Welfare in Spain, 1400–1700* (Ithaca, 1989), pp. 15–16.

4 Antonio Rumeu de Armas, *Historia de la previsión social en España: cofradías, gremios, hermandades, montepíos* (Madrid, 1944), p. 200.

5 Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, pp. 138–39.

6 A study of the southern city of Cádiz concluded that after the decade of the 1690s, when five new confraternities were established, “the movement to found confraternities declined nearly completely during the eighteenth century.” Arturo Morado García, *Iglesia y sociedad en el Cádiz del siglo XVIII* (Cádiz, 1989), p. 207.

remarkable increase in the number of confraternities and brotherhoods between the end of the seventeenth century and the later eighteenth century. But there is little reliable evidence to confirm that such an expansion occurred. Scholars have generally taken the contrary view that the number and vitality of these institutions were declining during the eighteenth century.⁷ In Zamora, their number fell from 150 during the sixteenth century to 113 by 1771. Nonetheless, there is some evidence that in certain regions, particularly Granada, the number of confraternities and brotherhoods, especially those connected to parishes, increased significantly during the eighteenth century.⁸

More research will be necessary to establish with precision the rise and decline of these institutions over time. Studies carried out for a number of cities suggest that the number of confraternities and brotherhoods in the Hispanic kingdoms was larger than elsewhere in Catholic Europe. The city of Toledo, with a population of approximately 40,000 during the sixteenth century, possessed 147, while the city of Zamora had 150 in a population of 8,600.⁹ By comparison, sixteenth-century Florence possessed seventy-five confraternities in a population of 59,000, a pattern observed elsewhere in cities such as Lyons and, before the Reformation, in Lübeck and Hamburg.¹⁰ The reasons behind the extraordinary popularity of confraternities and brotherhoods in the Hispanic kingdoms cannot yet be established, however, in view of the current state of research on the topic.

There are also several general considerations that should be taken into account in the study of Spanish confraternities and brotherhoods. The 1771 survey shows that there were significant regional differences in their distribution. In terms of the relation of the number of these institutions to population, they were dense in the provinces of Old Castile and León, especially in Zamora, Toro, Valladolid and Palencia. They were less numerous in southern Spain with the provinces of Seville, Valencia and Extremadura standing at the bottom of the list, although some northern regions, particularly Asturias, Vizcaya and Catalonia, approximated the southern pattern.¹¹ As yet there has been no satisfactory explanation for this distribution. Although confraternities and brotherhoods were

7 Miguel Luis López Muñoz, *Las cofradías de la parroquia de Santa María de Granada en los siglos XVII y XVIII* (Granada, 1992), p. 22.

8 William Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, 1981), p. 149; Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, p. 16.

9 Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, p. 17.

10 Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, p. 139.

11 According to the census of 1787, the proportion of priests with pastoral responsibilities was lowest in the south: Andalucía, 1:1,297; Córdoba, 1:1,343; Valencia, 1:1,069 in contrast to Burgos, 1:238; León, 1:171; Valladolid, 1:315. Juan Sáez Marín, "Estado del clero secular con cura de almas según datos del censo de 1787," *Datos sobre la Iglesia española contemporánea, 1768-1868* (Madrid, 1975), p. 293. Similar differences in distribution have been noted in the Normandy region of France. Confraternities were numerous in Rouen and Fécamp, less so in other parts of Normandy. According to Vauchez, these differences remain "largely unexplained" given the present state of research. André Vauchez, *Le Mouvement confraternel au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1987) p. 398.

numerous in the cities of the south, especially Seville, they were weakly represented in the large rural towns characteristic of the region. This may have reflected settlement patterns where landless day laborers living in desperate economic conditions formed the bulk of local populations in contrast to the small peasant villages of Old Castile and elsewhere in the north where stronger community links had developed. It also may also reflect the weak institutional organization of the Church in the south where parishes were substantially larger and less well-staffed than in northern regions.¹² This explanation does not explain, however, why the density of confraternities and brotherhoods was low in the peasant districts of Asturias and Vizcaya where parish populations were small and the parochial clergy numerous.

There has been a tendency for scholars to emphasize the confraternity as a primarily urban phenomenon, a reflection, perhaps, of their early development in Italy where they formed an essential part of civic and urban life. In the Hispanic kingdoms, however, these institutions were equally important in the religious and social life of the small village. Pastoral visitations carried out by the bishops of Cuenca during the sixteenth century found that “nearly every community had at least one brotherhood,” even small villages of 500 inhabitants. A similar pattern prevailed in villages around Toledo during the late sixteenth century. Indeed, in one small town membership was made obligatory for all the inhabitants.¹³

Interpretations of confraternities throughout Catholic Europe have stressed their collective character as organizations linked to community life. The confraternity, declared Bartolomé Bennassar in his magisterial study of sixteenth-century Valladolid, “was one of the most valuable organizations” in the social life of the local population.¹⁴ Although the collective manifestations of piety and charity associated with confraternities were often impressive, the question of individual motivations is less easily answered. In cities where they were numerous, it was common in Catholic Europe for individuals to belong to more than one.¹⁵ This pattern also prevailed in Spain. In Zamora, for example, some individuals belonged to six or seven confraternities/brotherhoods at the same time.¹⁶ André Vauchez has argued that multiple memberships had the effect of diluting the commitment of many members. He maintains that it is important to distinguish between those who spread their pious activities over several confraternities and the “permanent cadre” who devoted their time and energy to the work of a single institution. At a broader level, a scholar who has studied the confraternities of

12 Sara T. Nalle, *God in La Mancha: Religious Reform and the People of Cuenca, 1500–1650* (Baltimore, London, 1992), p. 161; Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, p. 52.

13 Bartolomé Bennassar, *Valladolid en el siglo de oro: una ciudad de Castilla y su entorno agrario en el siglo XVI* (Valladolid, 1983), p. 390.

14 Vauchez has noted that in Normandy and Germany, the “plurality of memberships was frequent everywhere. *Le mouvement confraternel*, p. 400.

15 Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, p. 23.

16 John Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence* (Oxford, 1994), p. 412.

medieval Florence has cautioned against seeing participation as inspired by a single cause. Members "shared a wide range of motivations from genuine devotion to the desire to make professional contacts and to guarantee a basic form of social insurance."¹⁷

A problem faced by historians of confraternities and brotherhoods is how to classify them. Rumeu de Armas suggested that there were three distinct types: (1) the devotional confraternity that was purely religious in purpose without any involvement in either charitable activities or the provision of social assistance to its members; (2) the professional confraternity that served the religious needs and occupational interests of specific professions and artisan trades; (3) the confraternity devoted to providing social assistance to both its members and the poor (*hermandad de socorro*).¹⁸ This is too simple a classification. The line separating purely religious and charitable activities was never rigid. Maureen Flynn's study of the confraternities and brotherhoods of Zamora establishes, for example that in one form or another, most, whatever their social composition and primary purpose, provided help both to their own members and the poor, a pattern that also prevailed in Seville.¹⁹

The classification of Rumeu de Armas also pays insufficient attention to the development in urban areas of highly specialized confraternities and brotherhoods which, although inspired by religious motives, focused their energies neither on devotional activities nor on the provision of assistance to their members but on helping the poor. The most important charitable brotherhood in Madrid during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Santa y Real Hermandad del Refugio y Piedad, was in many respect a primitive version of a modern social agency rather than a traditional confraternity engaged primarily in devotion while offering financial assistance to its members.²⁰ Similarly, the Real Hermandad de Nuestra Señora de la Esperanza, founded in Madrid in 1734, was established less to serve the religious and social needs of its members than "to do good and say Masses for the conversion of those in mortal sin" primarily through an ambitious program of dowries for poor women and the maintenance of a shelter for those who wished "to withdraw from their evil life and the world."²¹

In his study of parish confraternities and brotherhoods in Granada, Miguel Luis López Muñoz maintains that no single model of classification can be applied to these institutions. He believes that historians must establish classifications in

17 Rumeu de Armas, *Historia de la previsión social*, pp. 199–212.

18 Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, pp. 44–69; Sánchez Herrero, "Las cofradías de Semana Santa de Sevilla," pp. 74–75.

19 Through a variety of charitable exercises, for which careful records were kept, the Hermandad assisted 610,208 persons during the eighteenth century. William J. Callahan, *La Santa y Real Hermandad del Refugio y Piedad de Madrid, 1618–1832* (Madrid, 1979), p. 106.

20 *Constituciones de la Real Hermandad de Nuestra Señora de la Esperanza y Santo Zelo de la Salvación de Almas* (Madrid, 1752), introduction.

21 López Muñoz, *Las cofradías de Santa María Magdalena*, pp. 136–38.

the light of the specific questions for which they are seeking answers. He suggests one model based on the sociology of membership that divides confraternities into three types: (1) whether or not they limited the number of members, the “open” versus the “closed” confraternity; (2) to what extent did an individual confraternity form a cohesive group in relation to the social condition or occupation of its members; (3) to what extent did the members identify their activities with their own group, their neighborhood, the entire city or the kingdom as a whole. López Muñoz also suggests alternative models. For example, confraternities could also be classified: (1) by location, whether in cathedral, parish church, hospital or convent; (2) by their activities. Were they purely devotional in purpose or did they have the broader objective of assisting their members and providing aid to the poor? He believes that these and other models are useful for the historian, although he cautions against using any of them rigidly in view of the enormous variety and complexity of confraternities and brotherhoods.²²

This complexity was marked in the Hispanic kingdoms, both in the Old World and the New, because there was never a universal institution such as the Santa Casa de Misericordia established throughout Portugal and its overseas empire, whether in Lisbon, Brazil or Goa. The Hermandad del Refugio, given its location in Madrid, its aristocratic membership and its connection to the royal court, pretended to this status. In 1655, it invited the delegates present in the city for the parliament of Castile to attend its meetings in the hope that “they would dedicate themselves to its holy exercises and establish brotherhoods in their respective cities.” In the same year, the Hermandad wrote to King Philip IV asking him to urge bishops and provincial governors to promote the foundation of brotherhoods in their jurisdictions. These efforts produced few results. Only twelve Hermandades del Refugio were established outside of Madrid. Most did not survive for long.²³ Efforts to found the institution in the New World proved even less successful. During the early 1650s, the Madrid brotherhood sent a copy of its statutes to the authorities of the silver mining town of Potosí in the viceroyalty of Peru, but nothing came of this initiative. Over a century later, the brotherhood wrote to the viceroy of New Spain (Mexico) urging him to promote the institution within his jurisdiction, but again with no result.²⁴

That an institution located in the centre of the empire with connections to the royal court and the aristocracy failed in its efforts to become imperial in extension suggest that it was impossible to overcome one of the essential characteristics of Hispanic confraternities and brotherhoods, their intensely local character. They were important examples of what William Christian has called “local religion” based on town and village communities, each with its own patron saints and religious associations.²⁵

22 Callahan, *La Santa y Real Hermandad del Refugio*, pp. 61–62.

23 Archivo de la Santa y Real Hermandad del Refugio, legajo 132, expediente 6.

24 William Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, p. 149.

25 Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, p. 34.

In most cases, the foundation of confraternities and brotherhoods arose from the initiative of the laity rather than the clergy, prime examples of the lay piety that began to flourish in late medieval Europe. This piety developed largely on its own uncontrolled by either local bishops or the pope, both of whom regarded its manifestations with some suspicion. In Zamora, for example, confraternities and brotherhoods limited the participation of priests, thereby creating what Maureen Flynn has described as "a system of lay piety" relatively free of ecclesiastical intervention.²⁶ As early as 1536, the archbishop of Toledo declared that no new confraternity or brotherhood could be established without the permission of the ecclesiastical authorities on the grounds that the excessive number of such associations was causing harm to the Church. In a report submitted to the Council of Trent, Juan de Ávila called either for their suppression or a thorough reform to place them completely under ecclesiastical jurisdiction.²⁷ The Council did not go this far, but in its last session of 1562-1563, it approved new regulations attempting to reduce the autonomy of confraternities in favour of episcopal authority. In 1604, Pope Clement VIII issued the bull *Quaecumque* which gave the bishops even greater jurisdiction over these institutions.

To what extent these attempts to control exuberant lay piety affected the confraternities and brotherhoods of the Hispanic kingdoms is unclear in spite of the efforts of Philip II to implement the decrees of Trent. The Church promoted the foundation of a new kind of confraternity in accord with theology reaffirming the sacrament of the Eucharist against Protestant criticism. As a result, confraternities and brotherhoods committed to devotion to the Holy Sacrament, the Holy Name of Jesus and the teaching of Christian doctrine multiplied. After 1575 in Cuenca, for example, there were determined efforts to promote the establishment of confraternities committed to realizing the goal of Trent by deepening personal piety in a way fundamentally different from that of the traditional confraternity.²⁸ This attempt to redefine the confraternity according to the objectives of the Council of Trent enjoyed only limited success. Episcopal attempts to limit or eliminate flagellation during Holy Week processions by the so-called "confraternities of blood" during the sixteenth century proved a failure. In fact, in Seville the number of such penitential confraternities increased significantly during and following the Council of Trent.²⁹

The resiliency of traditional confraternities and brotherhoods developed from their connection to local religious cultures. It also reflected a fact noted by scholars who have studied specific cities and regions, the strongly popular

26 Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, pp. 167-68.

27 Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, pp. 122-24. Nalle has argued persuasively that confraternities dedicated to the Holy Name of Jesus were connected to the Church's objective of standardizing and reinforcing the faith. "New devotions compatible with the post-Tridentine Church had come to the fore." *God in La Mancha*, p. 161.

28 Nalle, *God in La Mancha*, p. 132; Sánchez Herrero, "Las cofradías de Semana Santa de Sevilla," pp. 71-72.

29 Sánchez Herrero, "Las cofradías de Semana Santa de Sevilla," p. 73.

character of membership. There were, of course, some associations that limited membership to the nobility or clergy, but in most cases members were recruited from the popular classes. This was obviously true in the case of peasant villages where only one or two confraternities existed, but it also prevailed in the cities, at least during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In Seville, “all the confraternities were nourished in their origins by the popular classes.”³⁰ In Zamora, more than 100 of the city’s 150 confraternities and brotherhoods recruited from among artisans, the middle class and even the poor. Membership fees were extremely low, thereby allowing individuals of limited means to join. The vast majority of the city’s confraternities did not enquire too closely into the social background of candidates other than to demand that they should be of good moral conduct. They readily admitted candidates who, although Christian, were descended from Jews or Muslims. This stood in stark contrast to the practice common to numerous civil and ecclesiastical institutions in early modern Spain of excluding such *conversos* by requiring proof of “purity of blood” (*limpieza de sangre*) as a condition of membership.³¹ It is also striking that in Zamora, Cuenca, Seville and Valladolid membership in most cases was open to women. In Cuenca, for example, 62% of men and 40% of women belonged to at least one confraternity or brotherhood.³²

The popular character of confraternities in general did not mean that social differences were absent from their organizational framework, but studies of Zamora, Toledo and Cuenca show that differences in their social composition primarily reflected urban settlement patterns rather than a conscious attempt to organize along class lines. In Cuenca, membership was largely determined by where an individual lived. In parishes where artisans were numerous, they predominated in confraternity membership, as did nobles in parishes with a high proportion of the nobility. Even here, however, there was no rigid class separation. Membership in the city’s most exclusive confraternity, Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, was dominated by the nobility but, even so, 16% of its members came from the popular classes. A similar pattern prevailed in Toledo. In Zamora, the density of confraternities was highest in neighbourhoods where nobles and artisans lived, a situation reversed in Cuenca where the parish of San Salvador, “a solid bourgeois section of the city, was perhaps the stronghold of confraternal participation.”³³ These examples suggest that analysis of local settlement patterns is indispensable for the study of the development of confraternities and brotherhoods.

30 Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, p. 23.

31 Nalle, *God in La Mancha*, p. 165; Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, p. 23; Sánchez Herrero, “Las cofradías de Semana Santa de Sevilla,” p. 73; Bennassar, *Valladolid en el siglo de oro*, p. 390.

32 Nalle, *God in La Mancha*, pp. 163–64; Christian, *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, pp. 149–50; Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, p. 23.

33 Nalle, *God in La Mancha*, p. 163.

Studies of Hispanic confraternities and brotherhoods also show that they were constantly evolving and changing. In Cuenca, those concerned with the administration of hospitals were in full decline by the end of the sixteenth century as a result of a crisis in the city's economy, a development that affected other traditional confraternities during the following century. Other confraternities and brotherhoods, however, and especially those of the Holy Sacrament inspired by the Council of Trent, were on the rise.³⁴ In Seville, the austere penitential confraternities of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries gave way after 1570 to the "baroque confraternity" in which simplicity yielded to splendor manifested in the construction of costly statues for Holy Week processions and a variety of social activities "not in accord with the contemplation and imitation of the Passion of Christ."³⁵

Criticism of these associations was common during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it was only in the age of enlightened absolutism during the eighteenth century that they were exposed to withering attack by the ministers of the Crown. The extensive documentation of the Council of Castile examined by Milagros Romero Samper shows that royal concerns were moved by several considerations. First, in an era of expanding royal authority, the government was determined to exercise absolute control over confraternities and brotherhoods. In 1763, the Council of Castile declared that "everything related to their . . . administration . . . is exclusive to Royal Authority."³⁶ Second, government officials believed that many confraternities and brotherhoods were spending their funds on litigation, costly ceremonies and social activities. In 1769, the Crown attorney of the Council of Castile, Pedro Rodríguez de Campomanes, complained that they were spending excessive amounts on "ruinous excesses" that "diminished the devotion of the faithful to the spirit of the gospels and the tradition of the Church."³⁷ Third, the royal administration, influenced to a limited extent by Jansenist currents, saw the devotional activities of the confraternities as opposed to its efforts to eradicate superstition in favor of a simple, austere Christianity. As early as 1763, Campomanes demanded an enquiry into their devotional practices to determine "if in their religious exercises, superstition or some other activity . . . contrary to Religion is to be found."³⁸ After receiving a complaint from the bishop of Ciudad Rodrigo about the abuses of confraternities, in 1768 the Council of Castile ordered royal officials throughout the realm to gather information about the number of confraternities and their activities. The information

34 Sánchez Herrero, "Las cofradías de Semana Santa de Sevilla," p. 79.

35 Milagros Romero Samper, *Las cofradías en el reformismo de Carlos III* (Madrid, 1991), p. 50.

36 Milagros Romero Samper, *Las cofradías en el reformismo de Carlos III*, p. 67.

37 Milagros Romero Samper, *Las cofradías en el reformismo de Carlos III*, p. 98.

38 The Hermandad del Refugio of Madrid, for example, lost half of its property between 1805 and 1807, while its income collapsed during the war against the French. Callahan, *La Santa y Real Hermandad del Refugio y Piedad*, pp. 155, 162.

received formed the basis of the survey, completed in 1771, which prepared the ground for a thorough reform of the confraternal system.

It required more than a decade, however, for the Council to produce a law of general reform through a Royal Resolution of 17 March 1784. It suppressed all confraternities that were not primarily religious or charitable in purpose. It ordered the elimination of those that had not received formal government approval at their foundation or that had been authorized only by ecclesiastical authorities. Surviving confraternities and brotherhoods were ordered to draft new statutes for submission to the Council. Bourbon regalism and centralism had little sympathy for popular forms of religious devotion expressed autonomously by confraternities. The vision promoted by enlightened absolutists and their episcopal allies left no room for an institution formed in different times and circumstances. Their commitment to what has been called “Enlightened Catholicism” offered a view of religious devotion fundamentally hostile to the exuberant baroque piety of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The 1784 reform was implemented only in an episodic way, but it marked the beginning of the end of the confraternal system. In 1798, many confraternities faced the loss of a significant proportion of their property as a result of the disentanglement ordered by Godoy. Their financial situation deteriorated further during the prolonged period of economic crisis that began in the 1790s and continued through the disruptive years of the Napoleonic intervention.³⁹ In 1841, the liberal government of General Espartero dealt the final blow by ordering the sale of the remaining property of confraternities and brotherhoods with the proceeds to be used to reduce the national debt. Some confraternities and brotherhoods survived, of course, as any visitor to Spain during Holy Week knows, but they were now voluntary associations of private citizens dependent on the contributions of their members. Finally, it is worth noting that the number of these institutions in Hapsburg and Bourbon Spain marked the high point of Spanish Catholicism’s associational activity. The number of Catholic associations of all kinds recorded by the Ministry of Justice during the 1990s was 10,000, less than half the number recorded in the 1771 survey in a population far smaller than in present day Spain.

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39 Rafael Díaz Salazar, “La institución eclesial en la sociedad civil española,” *Religión y sociedad en España* (Madrid, 1993), p. 292.