

Venzano, Luciano. *Confraternita di N.S. del Rosario, S. Biagio in Polcevera*. Genova: Erga Edizioni, 2002. 184 pp., 15 b/w illustrations. ISBN 88-8163-278-0

Luciano Venzano's study provides the reader with a vivid and rich history of the confraternity of Nostra Signora del Rosario (Our Lady of the Rosary) in San Biagio, a small community in the Polcevera valley in the Liguria region of Italy (north-west shore). His research covers several centuries and, though focused on this one confraternity, does also draw parallels to other sodalities (primarily from Liguria).

Venzano starts with a detailed description of the parish church that hosts the confraternity. He then proceeds with a very brief history of confraternities in general, tracing their origin back to 1230 when the first processions of "flagellants" (*flagellanti*) were taking place in Italy. Venzano then points out not only the religious, but also the social role of these confraternities within the community; they would, for example, assist the poor and educate the youth. It was because of their active role in the community that they would, from time to time, clash with the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In the next four chapters, Venzano reconstructs the history of the Confraternita di N.S. del Rosario; each chapter is devoted to a different century starting from 1600 and finishing with the present (2001). Most of his primary sources are drawn from the confraternity's accounts book, the *Libro dei conti*. The reader is thus provided with an extensive record of expenses incurred by the confraternity over the course of the four centuries under examination.

The Compagnia di N.S. del Rosario was founded in San Biagio in 1604 by Dominican friars and erected canonically into a confraternity in 1654. The seventeenth century proved to be rather peaceful for the confraternity, though the life of the people of valley of the Polcevera was marked by continuous epidemics, famines, natural disasters and brigandage. At the beginning of the eighteenth century the community strove to complete the construction of the oratory and the sacristy. The years between 1742 and 1748 were rather war-torn; on 4 September 1746 the Austrians reached the valley and devastated everything on their path. In June 1748 an agreement was reached and a peace treaty signed. The second half of the century, although more peaceful, was plagued by droughts and frosts that damaged cultivations and caused famines in the region. In April 1798 the government confiscated all the gold and valuable objects in churches, monasteries, and confraternities, thereby precipitating a dramatic dispersion of the historical, cultural, and artistic property of many Ligurian religious organizations. In the chapter devoted to the nineteenth century Venzano underlines the population's continuous efforts to deal with the revolutionary ideas coming from France. The humblest classes suffered the most from the social changes implemented by the French, so much so that their relatively stable economic situation was severely compromised by the French-inspired reforms. With the convention of Mombello, Napoleon guaranteed that no action would be taken against the Catholic faith and

allowed the Ligurian Republic to maintain its Catholic traditions and practices. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the century, the oratory in San Biagio was closed (1811–1814), confraternities were suspended, and their properties and wealth confiscated. In this chapter Venzano connects San Biagio with the great violinist and composer, Nicolò Paganini. Apparently, because of a misunderstanding at the artist's deathbed, Paganini was prosecuted posthumously and judged to have been impious and unworthy to be buried in consecrated ground. As a result, the musician's remains were interred in the grounds of Villa Paganini in San Biagio, once owned by the artist's father. His corpse laid there from 1844 till 1876 when, finally, his son Achille managed to have the verdict rescinded and his father's remains transferred to the cemetery in Parma. The second half of the nineteenth century was severely plagued by epidemics and famines. In 1854 the confraternity celebrated its 200th anniversary with festivities that went on for eight full days. The chapter on the twentieth century, which reaches as far as 2001, examines several regulations introduced in the confraternity, most seeking to regularize the rituals surrounding funerals, processions, and pilgrimages.

The last part of Venzano's research deals with the confraternity's devotions, its art, and the structure of the sodality's buildings. In the section on devotion the author stresses the importance of regulations that sought to standardize the actions and intentions of confraternities and their members. A large part of the chapter is dedicated to the rosary, its origin, and its diffusion. The last section of the book examines the structure and art of the confraternity's buildings and relates it to its function.

Venzano's work provides confraternity researchers with a fairly detailed description of a Ligurian confraternity from a poor rural area and seeks to connect it with the religious and political life of the region as a whole. By bringing to light a sodality from a small town in a region not usually studied by early modern scholars, Venzano helps to widen our horizons on, and our understanding of, early modern Italian confraternities.

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