

A Confraternity of Florentine Noble Women

The place and role of women in Florentine lay religious organizations was generally limited and tangential. They could share in the spiritual benefices earned by a men's confraternity, they could possibly be buried in a confraternity plot (or, more likely, in a separate plot reserved for women), or they could receive a candle from the confraternity on the feast of the Purification of the Virgin (2 February)—all this, of course, on payment of an annual fee, usually smaller than the one paid by the male members of the confraternity. They certainly could not participate fully in the spiritual life of the confraternity, nor in its administration. Often, they were not even permitted to enter into the confraternity's oratory.¹

A very different example from this "model" is offered by the Compagnia di Santa Caterina da Siena, which met in the Dominican church of Santa Maria Novella, in Florence. The founding date for the confraternity is unknown, but it certainly predates the 23rd of March 1553 (1552 Florentine style), when the group began keeping a register of deceased sisters. At that time, Ermellina Rosata Davanzati was the *carmalinga* (treasurer or bursar). The only males mentioned in the document are the servant, who looked after the funeral arrangements and saw to it that eight men would be dressed "with our flagellant robes" ("colle nostre veste da battuti"), a friar *camarlingo*, and a paid doctor for the sisters.²

¹ See Ronald F.E. Weissman, *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence* (New York: Academic Press, 1982), pp. 212-213.

² Archivio di Stato di Firenze (henceforth, ASF), Congregazioni Religiose Soppresses (henceforth CRS) dal Governo Francese 102, Appendix 73, unnumbered folio.

Two inventories, one from May 1557 and another from March 1560 (1559 Florentine style), reveal that the confraternity owned a light blue taffeta pall or quilt with an image of Saint Catherine embroidered on it ("coltre imbottita di taffetà azzurro con ricamatavi Santa Caterina") used to cover the bier ("tavola della onoranza") or whatever else was used for the funeral.³ The second inventory mentions a small chapel located under the rood screen ("Ponte"), past a lateral door in the oratory,⁴ that in 1565 was moved to the left wall, under the organ. On the altar, which the convent of Santa Maria Novella had already consecrated to St Thomas Aquinas and which was later given to the Alfani family,⁵ the confraternity had placed a statue of St Catherine designed by Michelangiolo Bandinelli but executed by Domenico Atticciati probably around 1596. It was later replaced by a papier-maché copy. Bernardino Barbatelli, called il Pocchetti, painted a number of pictures ("tavolette") depicting various saints: Dominic and Thomas, Francis, Benedict, Mary Magdalene, an unidentified female saint, and four archangels.⁶

The confraternity's rich wood panelling and choir, renovated in the 18th century, incorporated two small paintings (c. 30x40 cm.) depicting "Catherine frees a possessed woman" and "Catherine's stigmata".⁷ The painter Francesco di Giacinto Botti was paid for the two paintings on 10 May 1688.⁸ It is worth noting that the artist was paid by the confraternity's *camarlinga*,

³ *Ibid.*, at dates.

⁴ Stefano Orlandi, *Necrologio di Santa Maria Novella* (Florence: Olschki, 1955), vol. 2, p. 401.

⁵ See Modesto Biliotti, *Chronica pulcherrimae aedis S. Mariae Novellae de Florentia* (Florence, 1636), pp. 45-46; J. Wood Brown, *The Dominican Church of S. Maria Novella at Florence* (Edinburgh, 1902), p. 124; Marcia B. Hall, *Renovation and Counter-Reformation, Vasari and Duke Cosimo in S.ta Maria Novella and S.ta Croce, 1565-1577* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1979), pp. 110-111.

⁶ See S. Vusetti, *Bernardino Barbatelli detto il Pocchetti*, Tesi di laurea, Università degli Studi di Firenze, Anno Accademico 1988-1989, IV, p. 594; see also the bibliography included in the thesis.

⁷ ASF, CRS dal Governo Francese 320, D, at date 11 Oct. 1725.

⁸ See my entry for this item in volume 2 of the forthcoming *Iconografia di Santa Caterina da Siena*.

Sibilla Cini Malaspina. In fact, all the confraternity's administrative needs were carried out and supervised by the sisters, so much so that one of them even received a salary for being the record-keeper and orderly ("scrivana e infermiera").⁹ These were, for the most part, women who belonged to the more important families in Tuscan society, such as the Frescobaldi, Tempi, D'Elci, Guadagni, and others. Giuseppe Richa, in fact, calls it a confraternity of "gentlewomen who have devoted themselves to the Saint".¹⁰

The confraternity also owned and managed a house in the piazza Santa Maria Novella. It had acquired it in 1622 as a bequest from two sisters and was used to house five women (youths, widows, or needy women),¹¹ until at least 1785, when the Grand Duke Peter Leopold closed down all confraternities in the city.¹²

Information on the confraternity's other activities is, unfortunately, quite limited. We know that the feast of their patron saint was celebrated as early as the sixteenth century on the first Sunday of May and that on that occasion the sisters offered some food (a "pietanza") to the Dominican friars of Santa Maria Novella.¹³ We also know that Mass was celebrated in the confraternity's chapel every Monday, and that two Requiem Masses were celebrated in memory of each deceased sister.¹⁴

These short notes are certainly not intended to exhaust the topic. They are provided here merely as an indication of the presence of such a confraternity for women. Aside from the

⁹ ASF, CRS dal Governo Francese 323, 8, at date 7 May 1780.

¹⁰ "Compagnia di Gentildonne dedicatesi alla Santa", Giuseppe Richa, *Notizie storiche delle chiese fiorentine* (Florence: Pietro Gaetano Viviani, 1754-1762), vol. 3, p. 71.

¹¹ ASF, CRS 320, A.

¹² See Ludovica Sebrengondi, "Tracce per la ricostruzione del patrimonio artistico delle confraternite fiorentine soppresse da Pietro Leopoldo", *Rivista d'arte* 43 (1992), pp. 229-244, and especially p. 236.

¹³ ASF, CRS dal Governo Francese 103, Appendix 73 and ASF, CRS 323, 8, at date 15 May 1721.

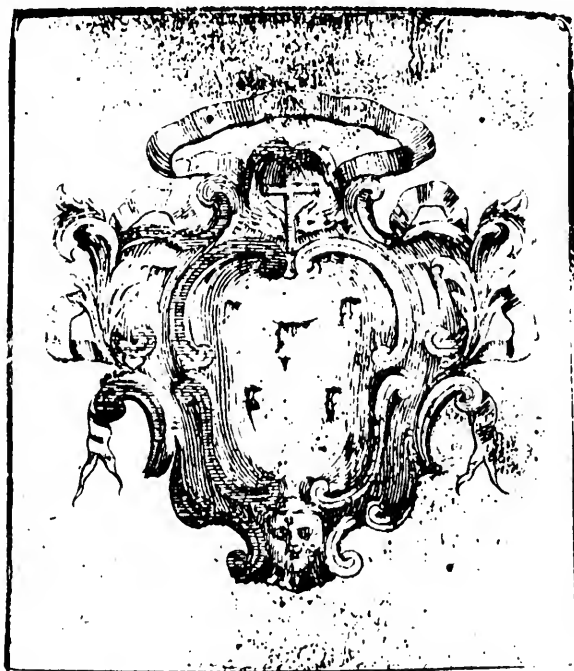
¹⁴ *Ibid.*, at dates 7 May 1725 and 6 May 1726.

above sample of information of interest to art historians, the women's confraternity of Santa Caterina da Siena in Florence could also offer scholars a fascinating historical and sociological entry into women's spirituality and history in Florence in the 16th to 18th century.

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Emblem of the Compagnia delle Sacre Stimate di San Francesco, Florence. From *San Lorenzo. I documenti e i tesori nascosti*, p. 226 (entry 5.15a)