

Two Confraternity Statutes from Venice: The Scuola Grande di Santa Maria della Carità (c. 1300) and the Scuola Piccola del Santissimo Sacramento in San Felice (1541)

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In Perugia, in the spring of the year 1260, the hermit Raniero Fasani began to preach sermons advocating public displays of penance through self-flagellation. The people of the city increasingly took up the call and by October not only a large portion of the city's population was participating in these processions, but the movement had also begun to spread rapidly through Italy. The movement's northward progression passed through Imola and reached Bologna on 10 October, and Modena nine days later. On 10 November, the *disciplinati* or *battuti*, as they were known, arrived in the Veneto at Padua. After Padua, the movement is recorded in Treviso (only twenty miles north of Venice), before spreading into German-speaking lands. There is no documentation of the usual sort of processions in Venice itself, which perhaps in its zealous protection of public order barred the disseminators of the practice from entering the city (as they would do a century and a half later with the movement of the Bianchi¹). Nonetheless, just at the time that the forefront of the movement would have been closest to Venice, in December of 1260, a group of devout Venetians founded the earliest of their flagellant confraternities, the Scuola di Santa Maria della Carità. Within a few months (that is, no later than the end of February, when the Venetian year 1260 ended), a second flagellant confraternity, the Scuola di San Marco, came into existence, followed in early March by one dedicated to San Giovanni Evangelista.² These three *scuole dei battuti*, or flagellant confraternities, were the first of the great institutions that came to be known as the *scuole grandi*. Despite the lack of documentary evidence for flagellant processions in Venice before their founding, and the absence of any reference to Raniero in their statutes (which sometimes occurred in those from other cities), it must be assumed that the passage of the flagellants only a few miles from the city inspired their formation.

In most Italian cities, the clergy, usually of the mendicant orders, were the prime movers in the foundation of confraternities, and the newly formed institutions found their homes in or beside the churches of their sponsors. The situation in Venice was very different. Laymen, not the clergy, were the founders of all of the *scuole grandi*, and of many, if not most, of the *scuole piccole*. Since religion was, nonetheless, at the core of the scuola's activities, each

¹ See Bornstein, *The Bianchi of 1399*.

² For a recent discussion of the origin of the scuole see Gasparini, "La pietà laicale" (especially pp. 944–953).

scuola, at its founding, established a contractual relationship with a church in which it could perform its religious services with the aid of the clergy and, at least at first, hold its meetings. Santa Maria della Carità (after initial ties with the parish church of San Leonardo and the oratorio of San Giacomo on the Giudecca) was linked with the church of the same name, a house of Augustinian Canons Regular, of the Lateran branch, on the Grand Canal in the *sestiere* (district) of Dorsoduro. The scuola built its hall (also known as the *scuola*), alongside the church. The building (now part of the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice's principal art museum), contained both administrative offices and great halls for ceremonies and meetings of the brothers.

The earliest membership rules of the *scuole grandi* would seem to allow all Venetians to join, but, in practice, this was not the case. The original membership lists are made up almost entirely of *cittadini* (civil servants, notaries, and professionals) and the upper stratum of the *popolani*, the guild members. There were also a few nobles, but the lower classes are almost entirely absent, probably because the admission fee was beyond their reach; moreover, they undoubtedly would not have met with the approval of the existing brothers. Unlike many of the *scuole piccole*, the *scuole grandi* did not have close ties with particular professions. The thirteenth-century statutes of the Carità (translated here), for example, identifies over one hundred and fifty occupations among 975 brothers (with another five hundred named without profession; the 1,444 names represent the initial membership and their replacements over the first several decades of the scuola's history). The membership of the *scuole grandi*, unlike many other confraternities, was also geographically diverse. While the lists reveal some bias towards those who lived nearest the scuola, brothers of each of the *scuole* came from nearly every parish of the city.

The activities of a *scuola grande* were governed by several basic principles, all expressed in its statute, known in Venetian dialect as a *mariegola* (apparently from the phrase *madre regola*, or mother rule). Underlying almost everything the brothers did was, of course, prayer and devotion, including the discipline of flagellation, to benefit the souls of brothers both living and dead. They performed regular religious services, penitential processions, and funerals for deceased members.³ Some of their processional activities were also governed by another principle: patriotism. Many Venetian processions, although ostensibly religious, celebrated important events in Venetian history, and the *scuole grandi* participated, alongside the patricians who actually governed the city, as representatives of the ordinary citizens of the city. They thus helped to embody the myth of Venice, that it was a Republic, governed by the nobility but with the welfare of all its people at heart. From the beginning, the *scuole grandi* also performed acts of charity, initially towards their own poor brothers (and their families), but increasingly to the broader Venetian

³ On the devotional activities of the *scuole grandi*, see Glixon, *Honoring God and the City*.

population, building hospices, offering alms, and constructing housing for the poor.⁴

As explained above, the *scuole grandi* never came under the jurisdiction of either secular or monastic clergy. Not long after the *scuole* began, however, the government, in the form of the Council of Ten, started to concern itself with their activities. The government originally created the Council of Ten in 1310 to deal with internal rebellion, but it had expanded its powers (as it would continue to do for the remainder of the life of the Republic), and now considered all possible threats to the good order and well-being of Venice to be within its purview.⁵ The *scuole grandi* came to its notice quite early for the disruption they caused in the early fourteenth century when rushing to arrive first at the Piazza San Marco for processions. Over the next two centuries, the Council addressed various issues of membership, finances, and behaviour. Early in the sixteenth century, governmental bodies other than the Council of Ten had tried to extend their influence over the *scuole*, in part to raise money for military affairs, so in 1508, the council decreed that it had sole authority over the *scuole*, and that all decisions regarding them had to pass through its office before being executed. By the early seventeenth century, the council decided that it had more important matters to deal with, and assigned the responsibility of dealing with the *scuole*, at first in 1623 for a two-year trial period, renewed once, and then in 1627 permanently, to a newly created body elected by the council (and later by the Senate): the *Inquisitori e Revisori sopra le Scuole Grandi*. In 1644 the council clarified its authority, requiring that all decisions voted on by the *scuole* had to be approved by the *Inquisitori* before they could take effect.

The term *scuola piccola* was applied to most Venetian confraternities other than the six flagellant *scuole grandi*, signifying only in part their size, but more importantly their individual significance in the cultural and political fabric of the city. In the period between the founding of the earliest confraternities in the thirteenth century and the fall of Venice at the end of the eighteenth, approximately 900 *scuole piccole* (both legal and illegal) came into being, with more than 300 active at times in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.⁶ These confraternities were not all identical in purpose, organization, or function, but fell into several fairly distinct types, including devotional confraternities, those limited to members of a specific nationality or trade, mutual assistance organizations (the *sovvegni*), and those dedicated to praying for the dead (*suffraggi dei morti*).

⁴ The classic work on the poor-relief activities of the *scuole* is Pullan, *Rich and Poor*.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the interaction between the *scuole* and the Council of Ten up through the end of the fifteenth century, see Wurthmann, "The Council of Ten." See also Sbrizolo, "Per la storia delle confraternite veneziane."

⁶ All of these are documented in Vio, *Le scuole piccole*. On the problem of counting *scuole piccole*, see Mackenney, "The Scuole Piccole of Venice."

One of the most important categories of *scuola piccola* first arose in the early sixteenth century, founded in response to a movement to increase devotion to the Holy Sacrament. Known as *Scuole del Santissimo Sacramento* or *Scuole del Venerabile*, these were strictly parish-based.⁷ They held their services at (and maintained) an altar dedicated to the Sacrament in the parish church,⁸ and were open to all residents, men and women, rich and poor, of the parish. They not only provided the functions of a devotional confraternity, but also assisted with poor relief in the community (although this was increasingly the responsibility of the parish-based *fraterne dei poveri*, run for the poor of the parish by those more fortunate, also founded in the sixteenth century; such a *fraterna* is referred to in the statute translated here). In addition, each *scuola* worked closely with its parish priest (and chapter in collegiate churches) and gradually took on responsibilities within the church. These responsibilities often included running catechism classes, maintaining the church structure and its furnishings, including the organ, and sometimes employing the church organist.⁹ By the late sixteenth century, every parish in the city had its own *Scuola del Santissimo Sacramento*. The one in the church of San Felice, in the *sestiere* (district) of Cannaregio (whose statute is translated here), was founded in 1538. Government supervision of the *scuole piccole*, after initially being claimed by the Council of Ten, as with the *scuole grandi*, was subsequently turned over to the *Provveditori di Comun*.

After the fall of the Republic to Napoleon in 1797, the new Democracy took direct control of the *scuole*. The government, especially after the French turned over Venice to Austria in late 1797, limited their freedoms, and often froze their officers in place: new laws prohibited the *guardiani grandi*, once proud leaders of ancient confraternities, from resigning their positions, and forced them to dismantle their institutions, delivering the silver and other possessions to the revolutionary government, and even turning over their halls to the army for use as barracks. The government, now back in the hands of the French, in the form of Napoleon's Kingdom of Italy, seized their remaining assets on 25 April 1806.¹⁰ Mercifully, perhaps, a decree of 26 May 1807 put the *scuole* out of their misery, and suppressed them definitively.¹¹ Spared this fate were the Holy Sacrament confraternities. Because of their

⁷ On the origins and characteristics of confraternities devoted to the Holy Sacrament, see Barbiero, *Le confraternite del Santissimo Sacramento*. The earliest in Venice were founded in 1502 or 1503, more in 1506 and 1507, and in almost all parishes by 1550. On a possible origin for the movement in Venice see Mackenney, "Continuity and Change," 395ff.

⁸ On the altars of these *scuole* see Cope, *The Venetian Chapel of the Sacrament and Hills*, "Piety and Patronage."

⁹ On the developing relationship between *scuole* such as these and the parish ecclesiastical authorities, see Black, "Confraternities and the Parish."

¹⁰ See D'Angiolini and Pavone, *Guida generale*, p. 1080.

¹¹ D'Angiolini and Pavone, *Guida generale*, p. 1080.

close connection to the parishes, and their role in poor relief, those in the now consolidated parishes were exempted from the suppression, and many, including that at San Felice, continued to operate well into the nineteenth century, and sometimes later.

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