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Author

Schrambach, Bendi Benson

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REVIEWS

John Patrick Donnelly and Michael W. Maher, eds., *Confraternities and Catholic Reform in Italy, France and Spain*. Sixteenth-Century Essays and Studies, vol. 44. (Kirksville, MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press 1999) x, 254 pp., 4 tables and 1 map.

The Middle Ages and early-modern period witnessed the dramatic development of lay religious societies who regularly gathered for devotional and charitable activities. These confraternal organizations (dating back to the tenth century in Italy²¹) flourished around the beginning of the thirteenth century in pre-Reformation Catholic Europe. Indeed, “confraternal ritual was one of the most common forms of religious experience for southern Europeans in the early modern period.”²² Uniting such groups as women or youth of like mind, worshippers of a specific patron saint, or members of an artisan guild, lay confraternities possessed a valuable and respected place in the community at large. They managed religious ceremonies, attended to the poor and encouraged generally amiable relations among and beyond their ranks.

This upsurge of religious activity outside of the local parish has commonly been attributed to the tumultuous conditions of the times.²³ A secure corporate haven providing a social and political remedy to some of the problems of the day, confraternities propagated peace. Their generally good reputations and generous service to the community permitted medieval religious confraternities a significant amount of liberty from ecclesiastical control. Nevertheless, the growing religious questioning and heterodoxy accompanying the spread of Lutheran and Calvinistic teachings undoubtedly pressured Catholic leaders to recover their wandering flocks.

This scenario provides the premise for the recent compilation of articles entitled *Confraternities and Catholic Reform in Italy, France and Spain*. Its twelve contributors consider the impact of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) on confraternal life in three countries greatly influencing and heavily influenced by the Catholic Reformation. Specifically, these scholars were asked to consider the confraternity’s role in the community, the objects of their charity, their devotional activities, the role of women within the confraternities, and ultimately, the confraternity’s overall compliance with and promotion of Tridentine reforms. The period of 1500–1650 is highlighted.

For the specialist, individual pieces prove interesting and well-argued. Historical articles supported at times by tables and maps narrate the mosaic pattern of confraternal experience in Italy, France and Spain. While some essays contribute to a general dearth of scholarship on a given topic (the confraternity-

²¹In her “House Divided” (55–74) Michelle M. Fontaine cites the Company of San Geminiano as one of the first Italian lay confraternities on record.

²²See Ronald F. E. Weissman (ix), whose important work *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence* (New York 1982) largely introduced the topic of religious life into the mainstream of Renaissance scholarship.

²³Weissman provides this explanation for confraternal outgrowth in Italy in the early thirteenth century. Likewise, explaining the quantitative rise in the number of confraternities in the fifteenth century, Konrad Eisenbichler cites war, pestilence and continued political insecurity; see his “Italian Youth Confraternities in an Age of Reform.”

parish relationship throughout Italy, to name just one example [Christopher F. Black]), others suggest novel methodological approaches to previously examined subjects (“move via ontology from political and religious culture to individual religious experience” [Ann W. Ramsey 151]). Among the topics treated in these essays are: the often precarious partnership between lay confraternities and ecclesiastical or local governmental power (Black, Paul V. Murphy, Nicholas Terpstra), youth and women’s confraternities (Konrad Eisenbichler, Susan Eileen Dinan), the historical evolution—origins, transformations and even demise—of particular confraternities (Michelle M. Fontaine, Andrew E. Barnes, Eisenbichler), Catholic promotion of outward piety and ritual in the pursuit of salvation (Michael W. Maher, S.J., Ramsey, Maureen Flynn), the confraternity and state politics in France (Ramsey, Christopher W. Stocker), and the general reorganization of confraternities after Trent (Allyson M. Poska, Flynn).

Undeniably well-documented (although sorely lacking a comprehensive bibliography and possessing a far too limited general index), this diverse array of (often poorly typeset) articles nevertheless fails to satisfy a desire for unity and coherence. For ironically, and as acknowledged by the editors in the preface, Trent appears to have had “little direct effect on confraternities (vii),” and thus, the initial basis of reasoning for the book falls flat. Weighted heavily (one half) on Italy, this volume appears at times deficient (with regard to Spain in particular), while at other times being unnecessarily repetitive (due to overlapping subject matter of the pieces). It is not surprising, therefore, that a sense of contiguity in this eclectic compilation of articles unequally scanning 150 years and three countries appears at times tenuous. Indeed, some essays, although closely related to the political era in question, neglect discussion of the (direct, indirect, or nonexistent?) link between Tridentine reform and the events therein considered (Maher, Ramsey, Stocker).

Gradually, the overarching anti-theme of the collection emerges; Eisenbichler states it thus: the reaffirmation of church authorities over lay confraternities beginning around the second half of the sixteenth century “can be seen more as a reflection of the reforming spirit of the . . . religious society of the times than as an immediate response to the directives emanating from Trent” (38). Thus, this diverse volume of essays dedicated to examining the relationship between confraternities and Tridentine reform convincingly demonstrates their very lack of *brotherhood*. Neither Trent nor the *Quaecumque*, ultimately signed by Pope Clement VIII in 1604 and conclusively terminating the independence previously enjoyed by confraternities, denotes the end of confraternal life in southern Europe; rather, such pivotal moments mark merely the mutations and new incarnations of a seemingly *blessed* existence.

BENDI BENSON SCHRAMBACH, French, UCLA