CHAPTER 2

The Ethics of Confraternities

Gervase Rosser

The Ethical Purpose of Confraternities

The *raison d'être* of the medieval confraternities was ethical.[1] As other articles in this volume extensively indicate, confraternities were diverse in their declared purposes and in their practical undertakings. Yet, infusing them all was a language of moral reform that was simultaneously addressed to the singular participant, to the body of the members, and to society at large. To say that confraternities shared a common rhetoric of human and spiritual values is not to say that either the institutions themselves or their individual members were universally virtuous in their intentions or beneficial in their actions. Clearly, this was not the case. On the other hand, even the politically driven organisation or the selfishly motivated brother or sister would have lacked standing and power without the rhetoric of virtue that gave status and meaning to the confraternity's very existence. Such a moral rhetoric has tended to be underestimated by historians, in part because its repetitive character makes it seem platitudinous and in part because of a modern tendency to assume that every ideal is merely a material motive in disguise. Yet, the insistence of tens of thousands of medieval and early modern confraternity documents on the moral purpose of these organisations demands, at least, that this discourse be taken seriously.

The language of moral distinction was reinforced in all confraternities by the ethical and material requirements of membership. As was stipulated *ad infinitum* by their statutes, new recruits were to be "of good reputation," were obliged to swear their commitment to a life of virtue, and could be expelled for moral failings. The ability to pay an entrance fee or regular subscription, modest though this was in most cases, was itself perceived as a guarantee of social stability and worth. The social credit that accrued to the member of a confraternity was similar to that "certificate of moral qualification" that Max Weber associated with the Protestant sects after the Reformation.[2] The badge of confraternity membership was a potent resource. By the same token, however, the wearer was committed to an ethical role in the world.

Human Frailty as Human Potential

The ethical obligations of confraternities called for action on the part of the individual brother and sister, not merely to fulfil the public duties of a formulaic charity, but to behave in such a way that they might, themselves, grow as moral human agents. Not every confraternity was seen in such a virtuous light by outside observers, who at times had good grounds for the conviction that a particular association had been formed under the cover of a seeming piety in order to serve quite different ends. Rebels in the French town of Châteauneuf-lès-Tours were said in 1305 to have plotted together in confraternities in which the rhetoric of community

---

1 The ideas summarised in this chapter are discussed at greater length in Gervase Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages. Guilds in England 1250-1550* (Oxford: 2015).

2 Max Weber, "The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London: 1948), 305-306.

had been usurped "under the false veil of a confraternity, as if to make a monopoly and to usurp the name of commune" ("sub ficto velamine confratriae quasi monopola facientes nomenque communiae usurpantes").[3] Nonetheless, the distortion of the confraternity model for corrupt purposes was possible only because of a prevailing perception that the purpose of these organisations was to foster the active piety of their members. Virtuous interaction with others was intended not to be a mere social façade, nor the hollow execution of a cold principle, but rather a necessary and creative exchange between people, both within and beyond the confraternity, who were in need of one another.

The ethics of the confraternities rested in an ancient understanding of the fragility of human nature. The recognition that "none of us is individually self-sufficient" was, in classical Greek thought, the basis both of society and of morality.[4] One person's need was the opportunity for another to engage his or her potential for virtuous action. As Cicero would say of friendship, "I am inclined to think that friends ought at times to be in want of something. For instance, what scope would my affections have had if Scipio had never wanted my advice or co-operation?"[5] The foundational Christian injunction to "love thy neighbour as thyself" (Matt. 22.39, Douai) was predicated on the same premise. The frailty of others gave to individuals a crucial opportunity to exercise a capacity for charity that, in turn, enabled them to grow as moral actors and human beings.

Starting in the thirteenth century, the translation into Latin, completed in the 1240s, of Aristotle's *Ethics* was of enormous importance as a catalyst for the multiplication of confraternity foundations. Whereas the philosophy of the Stoics, which had prevailed in the writings of the Christian Fathers, viewed ethics from the perspective of the individual, a right decision being judged as such when it was good for the particular person, Aristotelian philosophy placed emphasis on the quality of reciprocal human relationships. According to the *Ethics*, in order to enable oneself to act virtuously, and so to fulfil one's potential for development as a human being, each person needs others upon whom to practise charity, justice, or gentleness. In this perspective, ethics are social virtues. Among Aristotle's readers at this time was Thomas Aquinas, who similarly understood morality to be not a static quality possessed by an individual in isolation, but a form of social action.[6] Virtue was brought into being in the world by the active human communication of charity, or love. From the theological arguments of Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, and others, these ideas found their way into sermons for the laity and so into the everyday environment of the founders of confraternities.[7] At the same time as Aristotle was being newly received in the West, the great pastoral reform movement of the Western Church promoted the idea that a full Christian life could be lived not only by specialists with monastic callings, but by lay men and women in the world.[8] For a group of lay people to form a confraternity was to emulate

---

3 *Les établissements de Rouen*, ed. A. Giry (Paris: 1855), p. 107.

4 Plato, *Republic*, trans. and ed. C.D.C. Reeve (Indianapolis: 2004), 47 (II.369b).

5 Cicero, *De amicitia*, c.14, in *Cicero De senectute, De amicitia, De divinatione*, ed. W.A. Falconer (London: 1959), 162-163.

6 Bonnie Dorrick Kent, *Virtues of the Will: The Transformation of Ethics in the Later Thirteenth Century* (Washington: 1995), 206-212, 246 and *passim*; Mary M. Keys, *Aquinas, Aristotle and the Promise of the Common Good* (Cambridge: 2006), 85 and *passim*. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. and ed. T. Irwin, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: 1999).

7 M. W. F. Stone, "The Care of Souls and 'Practical Ethics'," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Robert Pasnan, 2 vols (Cambridge: 2010), vol. 1, 517-535.

8 Marie-Dominique Chenu, "Monks, Canons and Laymen in Search of the Apostolic Life," in his *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*, trans. and ed. J. Taylor and L.K.

aspects of the regular life of monks and nuns, while extending the transformative potential of that model to parts of society from which it had previously remained distant and unattainable. The greatly increased proliferation of confraternities in the historical record from the mid-thirteenth century onwards can be attributed in considerable measure to this dual contemporary impetus of moral philosophy and pastoral engagement. The sponsorship of many confraternity foundations by the new mendicant orders is a symptom of this conjuncture of ethical thought and social practice.

The Dominican theologian and preacher Remigio de' Girolami, impressing upon his Florentine congregation around 1300 the need for a collective response to civic violence, cited the words of Christ "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18.20, Douai) and Aristotle's observation that men have a greater capacity to think and to act when they are in the company of friends.[9] The ethical impetus motivating the founders of the later medieval confraternities was a response to this perception of human interdependence and social morality. Whatever public projects or works of charity were undertaken by confraternities in particular cases –inviting the poor to dine together with confraternity members, building a bridge, running a school or a hospital – the moral purpose ran deeper. This was to create an environment in which individual members might, through interaction with one another and with others outside the society, foster the fulfilment of their own potential as moral human beings.

Artificial Families, Unnatural Communities

The charitable network of the confraternity was not naturally a given, but had to be worked for. Demographic upheaval and population movement which, although by no means new in the last three centuries of the Middle Ages, were intensified by the overpopulation of the thirteenth century followed by the famine and plague of the fourteenth and fifteenth, led to a greatly increased number of deracinated migrants and consequently to a growing challenge to mitigate the difficulties of survival, especially in the diverse and unstable world of the towns. The thousands of confraternities recorded among the urban populations of late-medieval Europe point to the perceived value of these societies as responses to the practical and moral hazards of a world in flux. It is sometimes observed that confraternities, with their language of "brotherhood" and "sisterhood', offered to the displaced new arrival in a town the support of a surrogate family.[10] Notwithstanding its partial truth, this idea oversimplifies the thinking behind the familial discourse of the confraternities. In fact, to the initiate in a confraternity, one's new "brothers" and "sisters" were, precisely, *not* one's kin: they were strangers, with whom one had just vowed to develop a new relationship of trust and mutual support. The members agreed to behave, as the statutes of a confraternity at Lincoln put it, "*as if* they were

---

Little (Chicago: 1968), 202-238; Alfred Haverkamp, "Leben in Gemeinschaften: alte und neue Formen im 12. Jahrhundert," [1995], repr. In *Gemeinden, Gemeinschaften und Kommunikationsformen im hohen und späten Mittelalter*, ed. F. Burgard, L. Clemens and M. Matheus (Trier: 2002), 207-236.

9 Charles T. Davis, "An Early Florentine Political Theorist: Fra Remigio de' Girolami," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 104 (1960), 662-676; Matthew Kempshall, *The Common Good in Late Medieval Political Thought* (Oxford: 1999), 327.

10 This was the thesis of the author of the first scholarly monograph on the medieval guilds and confraternities and it has been often restated; see Wilhelm Eduard Wilda, *Das Gildenwesen im Mittelalter* (Berlin: 1831).

children of the same parents."[11] The point was to treat unrelated human beings with the care expected of family members. Christ had made the point explicitly, when told that his mother and brothers were waiting for him. His answer had been:

> "Who is my mother? and who are my brethren? And he stretched forth his hand towards his disciples, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whoseoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother." (Matt. 12.49-50, Douai)

The decision of a man or woman to join others in a confraternity was a conscious choice to create a family-like relationship of solidarity with others. It required a putting aside of self-interest; and it did not come naturally.

Networks of Friendship

Just as, by their adoption of the language of familial relationships, confraternities challenged their members to reconsider the basis of true fraternity, so also did they renew the concept and the meaning of friendship. The motif of friendship and mutual love recurs as a universal goal of medieval confraternities. Because neither the bonds of personal friendship nor the emotional ties of love are given the same social values today as they held in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance, it takes an effort to recognise the significance which contemporaries attached to these feelings. But we would be wrong to dismiss as superficial the declaration, many times reiterated by confraternities, that their purpose was to foster friendship and love. One such statement may stand for thousands: "Each brother and sister of the confraternity should love one another with all the zeal of which they are capable."[12]

Aristotle, once again, provided a basis for late-medieval and Renaissance thought on this subject: as the *Ethics* underlined, friendship for another person was the starting point of personal growth.[13] Christianity added to this philosophy and ultimately higher purpose: as Augustine had influentially described in the *Confessions*, human friendship was the means given to the individual to open outwards and, by suppressing selfishness, to realise a divine potential for love.[14] This lent momentous importance to the value of friendship in the confraternities. For, in the words of a confraternity at Leicester, "God is charity, and he who remains in charity, remains in God"[15] (clearly echoing 1 John 4.16). Therefore, as the brothers and sisters of a religious guild of St Francis in King's Lynn put it in their statutes of 1454:

> Everybody shall keep peace, love, and charity with [each] other in as much as he can or may; harm nor heaviness wilfully he shall not do, but with weighty words, strength,

---

11 The National Archives, London, PRO C 47/40/143: "stabunt cum illo [sc. a fellow confraternity member] in conciliis et auxiliis sicut frater eorum ex patre eorum et matre" (1389).

12 London, The National Archives, PRO C 47/38/6 ; printed in *Cambridge Guild Records*, ed. M. Bateson (Cambridge: 1903), 79: the confraternity of St Catherine in the church of St Andrew, Cambridge (fourteenth century).

13 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII.

14 Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. and ed. H. Chadwick (Oxford: 1991), 56-61 (IV. 4-9).

15 Jonathan Wilshere, *The Religious Gilds of Medieval Leicester* (Leicester: 1979), 24-5.

> and might, as well without the town as within, he shall succour and keep him in his need.[16]

Moral Horizons and the Goals of Confraternity Charity

For the great majority of confraternities, the horizon of moral responsibility was limited to the geographical and social environment with which the brothers and sisters themselves were more-or-less familiar. Confraternal charity tended to be focused upon the members – who typically did not exceed more than a few dozen in any given society – together with a limited range of external beneficiaries. Confraternity memberships, where registers of members allow these to be analysed, tend to show that these were drawn from the middling ranks of late medieval and early modern society, extending from relatively comfortable rural labourers and peasant landowners and urban artisans to minor gentry and merchants. Many confraternities in the south of Europe admitted men only, while some, and in the north the majority, comprised both men and women. Individuals could and (as testaments very frequently record) did belong to more than one confraternity, thereby widening their field of contacts. Every confraternity was varied in its membership to at least some degree and, in a minority of instances, the social range was very marked. The "poor confraternity" of Notre Dame de Thuyn at Ypres, recorded in 1426, included poor, blind, deaf, and lame members, the majority by implication of very modest means, together with a number of rich bourgeois.[17] The diversity of the memberships had limitations. The inclusion of aristocrats was relatively uncommon and likely to be honorific. The absolutely poor could only participate by invitation. Nevertheless, and to varying degrees, each confraternity presented the new member with the challenge of establishing relationships with unfamiliar others.

At times the localism and social restriction of confraternity perspectives seemed, to contemporary critics, solipsistic and selfish. An English preacher of the late fourteenth century, deploying an inclusive language that was influenced by John Wycliffe, denounced all confraternities as the ironic creators not of unity, but of division:

> Christian men should be lovers of brotherhood, not of brotherhood of friars nor of brotherhood of guilds, but of brotherhood in Christ and of Holy Church our mother. The men that make these sects work against Christ's brotherhood. Christ worked in many ways for the unity of this brotherhood, but these sects work hard to diversify it.[18]

It is understandable that a form of association that was bound by the members' oath to keep the society's secrets, and in which material assistance was confined to the group itself and to selected outsiders, should at times have attracted suspicion and even hostility. Yet, to this invocation of an idealised universal community of all Christians, confraternities returned the answer given by Jesus himself, when he was asked, "Who is my neighbour?" The response had been the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.29-37): a story that epitomised the way in which moral behaviour is necessarily situated in the world of human beings. Given the

---

16 Norwich, Norfolk Record Office, MS King's Lynn Gd. 80. In the English context, confraternities were usually called either "fraternities" or "guilds".

17 Jacques Toussaert, *Le sentiment religieux en Flandre à la fin du Moyen Âge* (Paris : 1963), 482.

18 *English Wycliffite Sermons*, ed. A. Hudson, 5 vols (Oxford: 1983-96), vol. 1, 626-627; syntax slightly adapted and spelling modernised (*c.* 1380s – *c*. 1410). See n. 16 for a note on terminology.

embodied nature of human existence on earth, men and women are inevitably closer to some people than to others. As Augustine, in turn, had expressed it, one cannot love all human beings equally, so one should concentrate one's moral energy on those with whom, "as if by chance', one finds oneself in close proximity.[19] If the exercise of charity in the medieval confraternities tended to be confined to the immediate context, within which members developed particular relationships over time, this was by moral design. The bond created between the confraternity member and the familiar recipient of charity was of a different order from the relatively superficial relationship between the alms-giver and the altogether unknown poor.

That personal engagement was facilitated and fostered in part by the changing demography of late medieval and early modern Europe. In the preceding period, towards 1300, the experience of population explosion contributed to the image of the anonymous pauper. The recipient of alms at this time was frequently faceless. After the mid-fourteenth century, declining population and modestly rising living standards, albeit in an environment characterised by continuing uncertainty and the precariousness of personal fortunes, created a different context for the exercise of charity, one that tended increasingly to be focused upon the known victim of misfortune and the familiar neighbour who fell into difficulty.[20] Relationships were built over time with beneficiaries whose worldly circumstances were typically not very different from those of the confraternity members who befriended and helped them. The Lübeck brotherhood of St Antony from the mid-fifteenth century maintained a list of vulnerable non-members of the confraternity who were issued weekly rations of food: a pound of butter, two rye loaves and two *Pfennige*, allowances that increased with the growing resources of this and other similar guilds. In 1503 the confraternity of St Leonard, again in Lübeck, was issuing a pound of butter (replaced in Lent by herrings) together with four rye loaves and four *Pfennige* each week; at Easter the handouts were supplemented by eggs.[21] In Florence, the Buonomini di San Martino discreetly identified and assisted neighbours who were not confraternity members but who were seen to be at risk of falling into debt, thereby jeopardising their public reputation and consequently their ability to find work.[22] This concern with the "shamefaced poor" is found in many European towns at this period. A similar society founded in Siena in 1492, the "Congregazione dei poveri vergognosi', issued alms on a daily basis to families and individuals in need, their targets being for the most part humble workers: all were perceived to be vulnerable to the catastrophe of finding themselves unable to work because of illness or accident.[23] As with all

---

19 Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, ed. and trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: 1996), 38-39 (i.28).

20 Michel Mollat, *Les pauvres au Moyen Âge* (Paris: 1978) ; Luciano Orioli, *Le confraternite medievali e il problema della povertà. Lo statuto della Compagnia di Santa Maria Vergine e di San Zenobio di Firenze nel secolo XIV* (Rome: 1984).

21 Monika Zmylslony, *Die Bruderschaften in Lübeck bis zur Reformation* (Kiel: 1977), 129-134.

22 Amleto Spicciani, "The 'poveri vergognosi' in Fifteenth-Century Florence: The First 30 Years' Activity of the Buonomini di S. Martino," in *Aspects of Poverty in Early Modern Europe*, ed. T. Riis (Florence: 1981), 119-182. See also *Confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino. Historical Archive* (Florence: 2001) and Samantha Hughes-Johnston "Early Medici Patronage and the Confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino," *Confraternitas* 22.2 (2011), 3-25.

23 Duccio Balestracci, "I lavoratori poveri e i 'disciplinati' senesi. Una forma di assistenza alla fine del Quattrocento," in *Artigiani e salariati. Il mondo del lavoro nell'Italia dei secoli XII – XV* (Pistoia: 1984), 345-368.

the charitable activities of confraternities, the issue had a practical dimension in the material support that, on varying scales, was distributed in order that individuals should not lose their livings and so fall into a cycle of ruin. But if this was its pragmatic purpose, the underlying ethical principle was that both confraternity members and those whom they helped, although currently less fortunate, were equal and united in their common humanity. To help in the distribution of charity was to receive a lesson in humility. The extent to which that experience was morally transformative would have depended upon the individual confraternity member.

While the smaller confraternities may have been relatively more concerned to address the recurrent poverty of their own members, the general impression given by the evidence of late-medieval and early modern confraternity charity is that it was largely focused upon familiar recipients; that it was predicated on the recognition that there was in general little difference between givers and receivers, all being at risk of the vagaries of fortune; and that, while it made a significant if inadequate contribution to the overall needs of the indigent, its main purpose was perceived to be not the creation of an efficient and all-encompassing welfare system, but the development of habits of care for others on the part of the confraternity members.

Material and Spiritual Values of Trust

The material significance of the ethical values of confraternities was most evident in economic relationships. Not only in those craft associations which declared specific concerns with particular trades, but equally in the larger number of confraternities that brought together workers in various professions, members found in this context a means to create the basis of trust upon which all crafts and relationships were dependent. Given the scale of movement in the late-medieval and early modern labour force, and given also the diversity of economic production which necessitated the continual renegotiation of working relationships between practitioners of separate specialist skills, guilds and confraternities offered a vital resource for the establishment of mutual trust.

The need to consolidate trust through the oaths of mutual support required by confraternity membership was at times more narrowly, and at times more inclusively felt. At all periods of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, associations of wealthy traders are recorded whose exclusive concern appears to have been with the protection of their own elite interests. These associations, frequently designated in modern historiography as "merchant guilds", tended in their statutes and policies to manifest no more ethical concern for others than would secure the profits of big business.[24] At particular moments, also, groups of hired workers would foreground their common class interest in resistance to the oppressions of the merchants who supplied raw materials and controlled production.[25] At the same time, however, various considerations persuaded even rich merchants and dependent workers to cultivate relations with significant others, and indeed with one another. After all, craft masters and dependent journeymen did not inhabit altogether separate worlds. In fact, over the course of a career an artisan typically experienced a changing and unpredictable status. That shared experience was underlined by the mid-fifteenth-century statutes of the

---

[24] Sheilagh Ogilvie, *Institutions and European Trade: Merchant Guilds, 1000-1800* (Cambridge: 2011).

[25] For example, in the Ciompi revolt of 1378 in Florence: Samuel K. Cohn, *The Laboring Classes in Renaissance Florence* (New York: 1980); Franco Franceschi, *Oltre il 'Tumulto': lavoratori fiorentini dell'Arte della Lana fra Tre e Quattrocento* (Florence: 1993).

confraternity of the Pisan goldsmiths, which reminded its members to attend the funeral service for a fellow craftsman or a member of his family, whatever their social rank:

> If by chance some master or journeyman or mother or wife or sister of a goldsmith should happen to die [...] the captains or consuls are required to call together all the goldsmiths and to go to honour the deceased and accompany him to his burial themselves, and this must be done for the small and the great, whatever family they belong to.[26]

Historical studies that have focused only upon the self-declared interest groups of wealthy traders and upon officially registered guilds of craft masters have overlooked the extent to which other, more variegated forms of association fostered both material and ethical relationships across socio-economic divides.

Spiritual Exercise and Self-Formation

The language used by guilds and confraternities in their statutes, services, meetings, and celebrations, impelled individual members to reflect repeatedly on what it meant to relate virtuously to one's fellow human beings. This confraternal discourse tended to be conservative and had the potential to be oppressive; yet, at the same time, it engaged tens of thousands of guild and confraternity members in moral reflection, ethical judgement, and civic responsibility. It goes almost without saying that this discourse was itself derived from the encompassing Christian culture of medieval and early modern Europe. The individual confraternity member, historically bound, was not a completely free subject to reflect on ethical issues. The challenge confraternities presented to their members, however, was to reconsider how the values of that dominant Christian culture should be internalised and lived. The multiplication of confraternities that the sources record from the thirteenth century onward flowed from a large-scale critique of the perceived limitations of the Church's pastoral mission up to that date: a critique that had begun with clerical promoters of reform, but which had spread to elements in the lay community anxious to realise for themselves a more engaged and purposeful life on the Christian model. The process of conscientious self-examination and the practice of moral judgement in the exercise of charity, which were regularly required of confraternity members, were techniques of self-formation.[27] In these practices, the brothers and sisters of a confraternity, whatever the limitations of their social status and circumstances, were endowed with a degree of agency and such autonomy as enabled them to make genuinely ethical decisions.

Confraternity statutes and accounts give an indication of the range of circumstances in which members could find themselves compelled to exercise and refine their ethical judgement. The violence of urban factions, for which Remigio de' Girolami reproved the Florentines, was a widespread stimulus for the formation of confraternities, a number of which, like the Bolognese confraternity known as the *devoti*, proclaimed as their primary

---

[26] Franco Franceschi, "The Rituals of the Guilds: Examples from Tuscan Cities, Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries," in *Late Medieval and Early Modern Ritual: Studies in Italian Urban Culture*, ed. S. Cohn, M. Fantoni, F. Franceschi and F. Ricciardelli (Turnhout: 2013), 65-92, at p. 75.

[27] Such are what Foucault called "techniques of the self'. See Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. P. Rabinow and trans. R. Hurley and others (London: 2000), 277.

purpose the reconciliation of enemies and the promotion of peace.[28] Some of the earliest recorded medieval confraternities, which were active in England around the year 1000, laid particular emphasis in their regulations upon the need to restrain violence.[29] A significant context for the multiplication of confraternities may indeed have been the contemporary Peace of God movement, in which laymen swore oaths to limit vendettas and to maintain civic harmony.[30] Driving every confraternity foundation was a conviction of the transcendent value of human love: a principle reiterated so often in confraternity statutes that the modern reader may underestimate its seriousness. Typical of thousands is this declaration:

> If any of the brothers or sisters quarrels with any other (which God forbid), it is ordained that, in as much as the confraternity was founded to cherish kindness and love, the aldermen, stewards and two help-men shall deal with the matter.[31]

The particular ethical concerns of confraternities varied, but the fifteenth-century statutes of a rural confraternity near Bergamo in north Italy are broadly indicative. The members of this society distinguished themselves by singing a particular song in praise of the Virgin Mary. They maintained a hospice (*domus misericordie*) and a school, kept regular fasts, and made confession three times a year. One of the women in the confraternity was elected to the role of administering charity and of instructing the other sisters of the company in its values.[32] Once again we notice in this combination of activities the declared intention not simply to help others, but by doing so to foster the ethical development of the individual confraternity member.

Models of Ethical Living

In all areas of moral behaviour, the individual member was invited to make of himself or herself a model of probity, an inspiration to encourage the emulation of others outside the association. The collective concern with the internal health of the organisation was driven by the desire that it should catalyse moral change in the wider social arena. As this was expressed in the late-thirteenth-century statutes of a confraternity at Fanjeaux in southern

---

28 For example, Jennifer Fisk Rondeau, "Homosociality and Civic (Dis)order in Late Medieval Italian Confraternities," in *The Politics of Ritual Kinship: Confraternities and the Social Order in Early Modern Italy*, ed. N. Terpstra (Cambridge: 2000), 30-47, esp. pp. 36-7; Andreas Dehmer, *Italienische Bruderschaftsbanner des Mittelalters und der Renaissance* (Berlin: 2004), 86-87.

29 *English Historical Documents*, I, ed. D. Whitelock, 2nd ed. (London: 1996), 424-427, 657-660.

30 H. E. J. Cowdrey, "The Peace and the Truce of God in the Eleventh Century," *Past and Present*, 46 (1970), 42-67. A link between the peace movements and the confraternities was also suggested by Catherine Vincent, "L'apport des confréries à la pratique du droit dans la société urbaine, à partir d'exemples français et italiens des XIIIe – XVe siècles," in *Stadt und Recht im Mittelalter. La ville et le droit au Moyen Âge*, ed. P. Monnet and O.G. Oexle (Göttingen: 2003), 97-115, at p. 101.

31 *English Gilds*, ed. L. T. Smith and J. T. Smith. Early English Text Society, original series,, 40 (1870) , 158-9: statutes of the guild of St Mary at Hull, said to have been founded in 1357.

32 Maria Teresa Brolis, "Confraternite bergamasche bassomedievali. Nuove fonti e prospettive di ricerca," *Rivista di storia della chiesa in Italia*, 49 (1995), 337-354, at pp. 346-347.

France, the annual procession of confraternity members through the town was staged in order "that others may see this, along with the other good things done by the confraternity," and with the intent "that those witnesses may themselves be inspired to pray to the Virgin'.[33] In a similarly choreographed example, recorded in the fifteenth century at Arles, on the day of the confraternity feast members visited each of the town's hospitals, distributing to their patients portions of bread, meat and wine, before partaking of the communal meal of the confraternity after which, again, left-overs were given to the poor.[34] At Châlons-sur-Marne in the fourteenth century, a confraternity calling itself "la charité" distributed white bread to the sick in local hospitals and to prisoners each Sunday, supported by weekly contributions of one *denier* from each confraternity member. In addition, the confraternity encouraged devotion on a larger scale by advertising sermons which all townspeople were invited to attend.[35] A confraternity of the Holy Ghost at Freiburg im Uechtland in the fifteenth century was responsible for an extensive charitable initiative, which it further advertised in the wings of the altarpiece it commissioned in 1506-07 showing the poor and sick receiving the care of the confraternity.[36] Such demonstrative piety, manifested in diverse ways by all medieval and early modern confraternities, redounded to the benefit of the members' own reputations; but materialist self-interest cannot fully account for the detail, the variety, and the extent of such enactments of charitable relationships with particular individuals and of wider social engagement. As Aristotle had said, and as Christ had demonstrated, virtue must be acquired through practice: nobody starts out virtuous, but one may become so by doing those things that a virtuous person does and by repeating them regularly so that, in due course, they become internalised and habitual. The pattern of confraternity charity was intended to foster just such moral growth on the part of individual members.

Together with the practice of charity, confraternities fostered a regular habit of self-examination, and monitored the mores of their members:

> It is ordained that if any brother of the guild should be convicted of adultery or any other notable crime, then he shall be publicly defamed by the master and wardens of the guild; and if on the third warning he will not desist, repentant, from such a crime, then he shall be removed from the guild, and on no account be readmitted, for it is written: "Let the name of such a malefactor be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous" [Psalms 69.28]. And if any of the brotherhood be inclined to some error or vice which is not notorious, as the master and wardens may establish, they are earnestly to warn them about this failing, in accordance with the scriptural truth: "If thy brother trespass against thee [go and tell him his fault

---

33 Arnaud Ramière de Fortanier, "La confrérie Notre Dame de Fanjeaux et son développement au Moyen Âge," *Cahiers de Fanjeaux* 11 (1976), 321-356.

34 Louis Stouff, "Une confrérie arlésienne de la première moitié du XVe siècle: La confrérie de Saint-Pierre de Luxembourg," *Provence historique*, 23 (1973), 339-360, at pp. 358-359.

35 *Institutions ecclésiastiques*, vol. 3, *Histoire des institutions françaises au Moyen Âge*, ed. F. Lot and R. Fawtier (Paris: 1962), 290-291, 395-397.

36 Katharina Simon-Muscheid, "Spätmittelalterliche Bruderschaften und Königreiche," in *Mittelalterliche Bruderschaften in europäischen Städten. Funktionen, Formen, Akteure*, ed. M. Escher-Apsner (Frankfurt am Main: 2009), 255-291, at p. 271.

> between thee and him alone': Matthew 18.15], so that they may desist from such crimes.[37]

Disciplinary meetings were a regular feature of life in confraternities. Three of the four annual sessions of an English confraternity at Wisbech in Cambridgeshire, apart from the general feast, were stated to be "for the correction and amending of members' behaviour."[38] Another confraternity in the same town specified in 1384 that gambling would be condemned and that persistent offence would lead to expulsion.[39] Keeping a brothel was specified as equally unacceptable in a London confraternity at the same period.[40] Members who allowed personal quarrels to surface at the general gathering of the confraternity were subjected to public reproof and material fines.[41]

From the ethical perspective, one should underline that in principle the judgement of members' behaviour was carried out by and in the presence of their peers. Clerics certainly played a part in the drawing up of confraternity statutes, but they did so under the direction of their lay employers, the masters and wardens of these secular associations. The point deserves to be stressed again that, while the language of moral probity that pervaded the guilds and confraternities was derived from the dominant clerical culture of the Christian Church, in the context of these associations it was appropriated, owned and deployed by the lay men and women who created and directed these bodies. Priests regularly belonged to confraternities in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance, yet they did not control them.[42] The member of the fifteenth-century Florentine Compagnia di Gesù Pellegrino who had infringed the rules of the society was obliged to kneel before the friar confessor to acknowledge his error and then submit to a scale of penitential flagellation. Yet, even in such a case as this, the corrector himself was subject to the rules of the confraternity, whose direction remained in the hands of the lay officials.[43] The process of collective moral judgement that was cultivated and regularly practised in confraternities imposed upon all members a burden of scrutiny that could be oppressive, yet functioned as a school of ethics.

Individual Virtue and Collective Good

Confraternities placed ethical value both on the collectivity and the individual member. This historical example problematizes the dualistic model, which in the modern Western world has prevailed for too long, whereby "the individual" is categorically and morally opposed to "the community." Medieval and early modern confraternities were rooted in an understanding that human nature, in order to survive, needs to face both inside and outside itself. The balance of

---

37 "The Guild of St Mary and St John the Baptist, Lichfield: Ordinances of the Late Fourteenth Century," ed. G. Rosser. *Collections for a History of Staffordshire*, 4th series, 13 (1988), 19-26.

38 The National Archives, London, PRO C 47/38/39 (1389).

39 The National Archives, London, PRO C 47/38/41.

40 The National Archives, London, PRO C 47/41/193.

41 For example, two members of a guild at Lynn in Norfolk, England, who in 1516 were fined because they "violently usurped in words and deeds in the presence of the alderman sitting on the general day'. Norwich, Norfolk Record Office, MS King's Lynn Gd78, Statutes and accounts of the Guild of St Antony, 1467-1537, *sub anno*.

42 This changed from the later sixteenth century, when the Counter Reformation introduced a concerted attempt to bring confraternities under clerical direction.

43 John Henderson, "Confraternities and the Church in Late Medieval Florence," in *Voluntary Religion*, ed. W.. Sheils and D. Wood (Oxford: 1986), 69-83, at pp. 74-75.

this relationship was not easy to manage. It called for a deliberate suppression of selfish interest in order to open oneself to the needs of another. Confraternity members were required to do this in their diverse undertakings to befriend and to assist the aged, the poor, the sick, or those in prison. The persons who regularly performed these acts of charity exposed themselves to the discomfiting likelihood that they would be altered by the experience. At the same time, the individual brother or sister was not subsumed anonymously into the communal ethos, but was valued as a singular Christian soul to be befriended in life and prayed for after death, and as a particular contributor to the collective enterprise.

Confraternities expressed their sense of reality, too, in their conception of the ethical "community" not as a fixed or simple state, but as the challenge of a shared responsibility. As the political philosopher Roberto Esposito has reminded us, the word "community" derives from the Latin *cum*: "with" and *munus*: "burden'.[44] The recognition of such a common responsibility is widespread across diverse cultures: whether described in religious or secular terms, the shared concern is always with a perceived need to defend certain human values. The protection of the weak, assistance for the sick, the denunciation of violence, were identified by the confraternities of medieval and early modern Europe as ethical responsibilities that were laid upon Christian society at large, and to which these groups exemplified a mode of response. Confraternity membership was not exclusive: the brother or sister, who wore the confraternity's livery and badge while engaged on the public work of the association, was nonetheless by this token a parent, a worker, or a civic official. Confraternity members were thus able to develop multiple identities: loyalty to the association co-existed with personal concerns, family ties, neighbourhood identity, and participation in the kingdom or city-state. The ethical values of confraternities were not a private code: they proposed, rather, a way of living the Christian life that was held up as an example for anyone who might be moved to emulate it. Their example deserves our attention, both as historians of the Middle Ages and Renaissance and as contributors to the society of the twenty-first century.

Select Bibliography

Black, Christopher F., *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: 2003).

Black, Christopher and Pamela Gravestock, eds, *Early Modern Confraternities in Europe and the Americas. International and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Aldershot: 2006).

Chenu, Marie Dominique, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century* [1998], trans. and ed. J. Taylor and L. K. Little (Chicago: 1968), 202-238.Dompnier, Bernard and Paola Vismara, eds, *Confréries et devotions dans la catholicité moderne (mi-XVe – début XIXe siècle)* (Rome : 2008).

Eisenbichler, Konrad, *The Boys of the Archangel Raphael: A Youth Confraternity in Florence, 1411-1785* (Toronto: 1998).

Esposito, Roberto. *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. T. Campbell (Stanford: 2010).

Haverkamp, Alfred, "Leben in Gemeinschaften: alte und neue Formen im 12. Jahrhundert" [1995], reprinted in *Gemeinden, Gemeinschaften und Kommunikationsformen im hohen und späten Mittelalter*, ed. F. Burgard, L. Clemens and M. Matheus (Trier: 2002), 207-236.

[44] Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community* [1998], trans. T. Campbell (Stanford: 2010), 4-6.

Orioli, Luciano, *Le confraternite medievali e il problema della povertà. Lo statuto della Compagnia di Santa Maria Vergine e di San Zenobio di Firenze nel secolo XIV* (Rome: 1984).

Rosser, Gervase, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages. Guilds in England 1250-1550* (Oxford: 2015).

Stone, M.W.F., "The Care of Souls and 'Practical Ethics'," in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Robert Pasnan, 2 vols (Cambridge, UK: 2010), vol. 1, pp. 517-535.

Terpstra, Nicholas, ed., *The Politics of Ritual Kinship. Confraternities and Social Order in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge : 2000).

Vincent, Catherine, *Des charités bien ordonnées. Les confréries normandes de la fin du XIIIe siècle au début du XVIe siècle* (Paris : 1988).