

**Brotherhood and Charity in Renaissance Florence: The Role of Confraternities in  
Maintaining Social Cohesion During Urbanization**

by

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## **Abstract**

This research project examines religious lay organizations in Renaissance Florence and the efforts they made to curb emerging problems for Florence's poor. It explores how their work contributed to maintaining the cultural identity and prosperity of the newly-urbanized city through a number of rituals, forms of charity or almsgiving, and acts of mercy, and how notions of brotherhood were able to facilitate the creation of a community in an area where community seemed to be fracturing. With the emergence of commercialism, the prevalence of wage labor, and rise of aristocratic class loyalties, along with external problems such as the Black Death, the city needed new ways of approaching its new issues. The paper argues that, even though confraternities wound up dying out, they played a vital role in creating social bonds and tying together failing ends of Florentine social life during its urbanization.

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# Introduction

The city of Florence during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries had been undergoing a number of drastic changes that affected the lives of every one of its citizens, both positively for some and negatively for others. The city had become an independent commune during the twelfth century, and an important commercial center by the thirteenth. With urbanization, and subsequent housing and food insecurity (as citizens were now required to provide these things for themselves), the city was rife with issues of disease and poverty. Without access to guild membership or well-paying professions, many citizens would find themselves with no means of support. Plagues had taken the lives of over half of the population of the city, and secular authorities were not yet equipped to handle the sheer number of sick and dying citizens. The weight of aiding the poor and sick was picked up by a number of different lay religious organizations that resided in the city, typically known as confraternities. Public life in the city would have had an exuberant and lively character, with Feast Day processions and ceremonies being performed through the streets, large gatherings of citizens meeting up to celebrate Mary and the saints, and massive colorful festivals being organized for any day on the liturgical calendar that called for them. Women and children would be fed and clothed on street corners, and devotional prayers and hymns would be said publicly, with citizens being encouraged to join and take part in public worship. By the thirteenth century, hospitals, schools, and shelter facilities would begin popping up throughout the city to serve all of its citizens. Much of this

organizing was done by lay citizens who had joined confraternities under the premise of fellowship under God.

Confraternities were religious orders made up of laypeople that typically worked under mendicant orders or local parishes. Premised on seeking salvation for their own members and those in their communities, much of their work was rooted in almsgiving and the healing of souls for those in dire conditions, as well as giving community members avenues to access spirituality and to glorify God with methods that simultaneously enriched the community and its culture. They engaged in a variety of community-oriented works, including the funding, construction, and management of hospitals, shrines, schools, orphanages, and shelters, the organizing of Feast Day celebrations, processions, and burials, and the funding and directing of performances and visual arts to be enjoyed by the city. They distributed dowries to poor women, housed, fed, and clothed the needy, tended to the sick, educated children and adults, provided financial assistance to prisoners, and helped prostitutes, battered wives, and other marginalized people find shelter away from dangerous situations.<sup>1</sup> Membership was also used as a way for men to gain social influence in their communities and, in select cases, as a means to flaunt social standing and wealth.

During confraternities' peak in prevalence, around the sixteenth century, Florence alone consisted of seventy three confraternal groups (not including smaller, parish-based confraternities which weren't directly run under any mendicant order) that engaged in work ranging from private self-flagellation to organizing large Feast Day devotional festivals.<sup>2</sup> These groups transcended class lines, with some primarily consisting of nobility, others 'plebians,' and

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<sup>1</sup> Weissman, Ronald F.E. "Brothers and Strangers: Confraternal Charity in Renaissance Florence." *Historical Reflections* 15, no. 1 (1988). <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/41298890>. pp. 28-30

<sup>2</sup> Henderson, John. *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2016. p. 2

many having a mixture of both. Fellowship was a central tenant to joining an order, and many saw it as a means of guaranteed salvation. Less wealthy members were able to receive financial assistance, such as healthcare, that was needed to provide for themselves and their families in order to lead more pious lives, and wealthier members receiving the prayer and devotion meant to spiritually enrich them.<sup>3</sup>

The notion of fellowship was central to confraternal organizing. Not only did it give members access to social networking among Florentine citizens, but it gave the groups an amount of power in social and political life that was inaccessible to ordinary citizens beforehand. The institution of ritual brotherhood had a hand in transforming social relationships during the growth and development of the city, as achieving a higher social standing was no longer limited to taking the avenue of clerical work or becoming nobility. Social power, prior to the transition away from feudalism, had been understood to be granted solely by God, either directly through becoming a member of the clergy, or through nobility forming relationships with the Church and the members of its clergy. This was no longer the case in Florence as the emergence of guilds and the transformation of banking as a profession allowed for individuals to access social power through secular professions and monetary wealth. The symbiosis between secular and religious authorities that had existed for centuries had begun to wane due to the emergence of newer groups who were able to access power through utilitarian monetary work, and the relationship between the two groups had become somewhat abrasive. The establishment of lay orders had eased this tension, offering members a role in a family-like structure from which they were able to receive social power through acts of faith. Influence could be accessed both horizontally, through inter-member relationships and strength that came through fellowship, and vertically,

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<sup>3</sup> Elsenbichler, Konrad. "Italian Scholarship on Pre-Modern Confraternities in Italy." *Renaissance Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1997): 567–80. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3039190>. p. 571

through members' relationship with the Church and mendicant orders, as well as socially influential guild members. Religion came to be understood as a lived experience, where social relations were central to religious practices. Popular religion in this form wasn't as prevalent in smaller medieval towns and villages, where local parishes and clergy would typically ensure spirituality was conducted according to set doctrine. Through the ritual celebration of community, with unifying symbols, prayers, devotions, and performances, members were encouraged to lead pious lives through the mutual support of their brothers. Humility could be practiced through almsgiving and devotion to the order, as well as the outer community, and imitating Christ could be accomplished by devoting oneself to spiritually or materially aiding others belonging to the order. Similarly, political power could be found in ritual practices and honor.<sup>4</sup> This also aided in easing the transition from a more familial-based mode of production (which confraternities were able to mirror in their upholding of the virtue in fellowship) into a much more individualized society, wherein the individual had become a core factor in economic and social organizing. Stress on personal, more accessible, avenues of practicing faith (i.e. prayers in the vernacular, laypeople fully participating in ceremonies, organized almsgiving on an individual basis) gave the individual a central role in practice, while emphasis on fellowship, community, and an 'earning' of salvation through one another's neighbors reflected the familial nature of organizing that had been present in Florence's feudal period.

Florentine culture during the 15th and 16th centuries was moving quickly away from being entirely rooted in the spiritual due to urbanization and newfound emphasis on commercial growth and socialization. Its competitive nature allowed for confraternities to gradually reinvent themselves and gain access to an amount of social power previously withheld from them.

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<sup>4</sup> Terpstra, Nicholas. *The Politics of Ritual Kinship: Confraternities and Social Order in Early Modern Italy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007. p. 3

Although by this time lay religious organizations had existed for a few hundred years, they were able to cement themselves as important players in the zeitgeist of 14th century Florence, becoming vehicles for political and social organization and institutions that were central to nearly all aspects of city life. They began to look very similar to guilds (in that they became sites of inter and intra-industry socialization), while still (more or less) maintaining their mission of practicing piety and seeking salvation. At the same time, with the changing face of poverty in Florence, confraternities were able to fill gaps that were left unmanageable with the same charitable provisions (though on a larger scale) that they had been performing for centuries beforehand.<sup>5</sup> They became both parallels of the Church and of secular societies, existing in a cultural space that was otherwise barriered.

Some confraternities, while in their inception focused solely on charitable work, became absorbed into the nature of the new mode of production in Florence. By the 16th century some groups had grown enormously in numbers, largely consisting of affluent guild members or aristocrats with ties to patrician families. These groups had become predominantly involved in organizing guild festivals or maintaining elite social status, moving entirely away from the charity work they had premised themselves on. Others laid the groundwork for government-provided social assistance, and by the time these institutions were in place, the necessity of the confraternities themselves had vanished and the groups either fizzled out or were forcefully disbanded.<sup>6</sup>

Confraternities fused together two areas of life in late medieval and early modern Florence that were typically viewed as mutually exclusive from each other – the sacred and the secular. They were not purely aimed at devotion, nor were they entirely grounded in political

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<sup>5</sup> Terpstra. *The Politics of Ritual Kinship*. pp. 6-7

<sup>6</sup> Terpstra. *The Politics of Ritual Kinship*. p. 276



relations. They existed in a transitory space in time wherein Florence, as well as many other newly-emerging city-states that would much later make up the whole of Italy, were moving away from being politically dependent on the Church to becoming structured around secular authority. Guilds and patron families presented opposition to the Church, and the social landscape of the city followed suit. Fellowships brought devotional life to secular social spaces. They existed to serve God, to serve communities, and to maintain a semblance of social order that was familiar to the old mode of production while still being applications of aristocratic socialization. Without this, the transition from feudalism to an early form of pre-industrial capitalism was liable to be messy and less successful. Homelessness was by and large a fairly new phenomenon, there were shortages of hospitals (especially with Florence only recently recovering from the Black Plague and experiencing waves of subsequent plagues), and women and children were found without any means of support in unprecedented numbers. Secular authorities were only able to address much of this well into the 16th century, so confraternities acted as the sole providers of this assistance. Furthermore, spiritual values and religious ritual were still something vital to a culture that had been accustomed to existing under the authority of the Church for centuries. Lay orders had become a means of adapting to something culturally opposite to the norm by legitimizing secularization through the use of Catholic tradition.

Eventually lay religious groups inevitably fell to the wayside, with the largest groups becoming corrupted by a disproportionate amount of members (mostly made up of aristocratic socialites) more concerned with social contract than with devotional work. Others were rendered obsolete after charity work became a secular civil pursuit. Regardless as to what method of dissolution each order had undergone, the apparatus of lay orders as a whole had become absorbed into the new mode of production. They were no longer necessary as a means of easing

the transition from social life grounded in sacrality to secularized political society, and thus vanished. The absence was later filled by a variety of secular fraternities whose methods of organization were grounded in the blueprint laid out by religious organizations before them.<sup>7</sup>

For many years lay orders weren't understood by historians to be central to the social and political life of Florence, but rather fringe groups dedicated to the welfare of their own members. More recently, studies have revealed the importance of these groups in merging religious values and practices with newfound secular political and social practices. Traditionally, scholarship on Florentine confraternities has tended to revolve around examining Church history. Work, such as social organizing, done outside of what was deemed pious practice was generally dismissed. Much of this research was provided by friars who belonged to orders that had historically had authority over their respective confraternities, so available information was typically very narrow and biased.<sup>8</sup>

Confraternities only largely began to be examined under a sociological light in the later 20th century. This was something explored by Ronald F.E. Weissman across several works, most notably his 1981 book *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence*. Weissman was the first historian to significantly explore the relationship between sacred ritual practices and social organization that was born from the practices and organizing of these groups. He looks at how lay religious orders organized among themselves, their rituals, and the implication of hierarchies within the orders. He lays out a perspective of what the experience of being a confraternal brother may be like during this time. He also discusses the changing face of confraternities over a 200-year period, and how confraternities had developed along with cultural changes the city was undergoing in and around the same period. Weissman offers the argument that

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<sup>7</sup> Terpstra. *The Politics of Ritual Kinship*. p. 8

<sup>8</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. pp. 4-5  
Elsenbichler. "Italian Scholarship." pp. 568-569

confraternities were not only a way for members to engaged in socialization, but also used as a means to escape it and take a break from the ‘agnostic’ competition that had become so commonplace under Florentine society.

John Henderson’s *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence* explores the development of confraternities over time, from Medieval private brotherhoods focused solely on secluded devotional practices and charity in their inception, to the exclusive clubs they wound up becoming in the 16th century. Henderson focuses heavily on the charitable aspects of confraternities, extensively outlining what membership could do for members themselves, accompanied by lots of data tables giving insight into the numerical side of membership, to what members would accomplish in terms of charity for the outside world. The research done into the methods of charity performed by larger orders, such as the Orsanmichele Church company, and analysis of the financial data collected by them offers perspective on the scale of the orders and the importance of the work done by them. It becomes evident in Henderson’s book just how vital the role of confraternities became in upkeep Florentine social life and preventing poverty-induced disaster.

This project relies solely on secondary texts, as translations of first hand accounts from lay organizations during the period are lacking. With the total absence of any sort of memoir and lack of first-hand collected data from the time period, secondary texts written by historians who have done work in the Florentine Archives translating early modern documents has been very useful. Luckily, through some of these books, bits of first-hand account texts have been translated, and some numerical data has been collected on confraternal membership and expenditures, as well as salaries of Florentine workers and other data that may give some insight on the significance of the necessity of charity during the time.

With so little to work off of in terms of primary sources for this project, many of the issues being examined can only be examined through the lens of different historian's work and their own insights. A synthesis of these works allows for understandings of confraternities' roles in the social-political landscape of Late Medieval Florence, and their influence over social and economic organizing, to arise. While each historian generally agrees that confraternities were able to remain prevalent through their use of familiar ways of organizing and traditional rituals while also exploring secular social order, each historian disagrees to the extent to which these groups could be rendered successful, and each provides different insight into the ways religiosity was expressed by these groups. With significant variance between ideological approaches taken by each historian, a story is able to be woven together about how confraternities might have worked within and outside of their own spaces in melding together piety and secularism.

Two major themes of this projects are charity and ritual, each of which have their own sections and take up the bulk of the discussion. The project begins with an examination of the charity work done by confraternities during the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, once they had found strong footing within the city. It examines some larger companies and how they would go about allocating resources to the impoverished citizens of Florence during periods of crisis. The second chapter is on the rituals that would be prevalent amongst many confraternities prior to their decline, and how ritual contributed to social maintenance. The third chapter is a look at the eventual decline of confraternities during the sixteenth century and some discussion on the social factors that wound up leading to this.

# Charity

Though it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when confraternities began to organize, historians generally agree that the earliest orders emerged during the ninth and tenth centuries in smaller towns and villages. Organizations during this time were more informal and typically consisted of both men and women who were tasked with small works such as providing supplies for local parishes and praying for the souls of parishioners in need. Members were still tightly tied to clerical influence, and had yet to become organizations with their own agency.<sup>9</sup> Laity was still, at the time, barred from participating in ceremonial rituals, confraternal meetings were very infrequent, and much of the work of the laity was still done in a less public manner. The notion that lay fraternities could become something separate from their local parishes was not yet established. The twelfth century saw the rise of a number of larger companies whose work revolved around the running of hospitals for the sick. This was one of the first types of charity work done by informal orders that would later lay the groundwork for much of the larger-scale charitable endeavors picked up by confraternities.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, many city-states across Northern Italy were undergoing a changing of political and economic structure. Historically, kings would have jurisdiction over several different areas owned by landowners and overseen by bishops. This structure began to crumble throughout Northern Italy due to a series of political conflicts between different leaders claiming

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<sup>9</sup> Black, Christopher. *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century*. Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 2003. p. 26

<sup>10</sup> Black. *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century*. pp. 26-27

kingship, and civil war causing the political landscape of the area to change accordingly.<sup>11</sup> Many Italian cities, Florence included, had been developing over the course of hundreds of years at this point to ensure the protection of their citizens and landowning counts and countesses, and had come to take on their own cultures and sense of identity for citizens. With the political instability that had come to be commonplace in the region it was only natural for the Florentine people to strive for higher amounts of agency, which was granted to them. Though still overseen by Church bishops (who were far less threatening, invasive, or demanding of communes), kings had generally begun leaving larger cities to their own devices. The land itself was no longer under their direct jurisdiction.<sup>12</sup> Property ownership and political professions became more localized due to the splintering of authority, and secular individuals who had no professional relationships with the Church or its clergy were able to access land and political power. Aristocracy was no longer strictly bound by age-old familial relationships, and a new class of citizens began to exercise political power through land ownership that would have been entirely inaccessible to them for hundreds of years beforehand.

Florence had become an autonomous commune by the early twelfth century, and had subsequently become a sanctuary for people looking to be protected from the political turbulence of the outside world. The city grew exponentially in population, became a center of commerce and trade, and soon took on the position of the most powerful and prosperous city in the region. By the mid-thirteenth century, they minted their own gold currency, the florin, and political power gradually shifted away from the landowning class into the hands of merchants and guild members. This was the first time the city saw political power accessed by secular aristocracy; rules, regulations, and social structuring were no longer handed down (either directly or

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<sup>11</sup> Wickham, Chris. *Early Medieval Italy: Central Power and Local Society, 400-1000*. Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2009. pp. 82, 175-176

<sup>12</sup> Wickham. *Early Medieval Italy*. pp. 168-171

indirectly) from the Church, and social values became tied to more utilitarian ways of thinking and organizing rather than traditionalist Church doctrine. Markets (that is, businesses and firms engaging in competition and setting prices accordingly) had begun developing by and large during the eleventh century, and the twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw a complete transformation of commerce, finance, and pricing.<sup>13</sup> Florence would not cement its place as the center of finance and banking until after the Black Death had come and gone. That said, its political and economic structuring around guilds and merchants, the weight given to currency rather than land (and subsequently wage labor), as well as a stark emphasis on the individual as an economic player, placed the groundwork that would allow for Florence to grow into a commercial center and take on a form of pre-industrial capitalism in later years.

Though confraternities did exist in Florence throughout this period, their presence was likely marginal (though steadily growing). There is no evidence to suggest that they played a majorly important role in Florentine culture and society until larger fellowships were formed in order to assist the mendicant orders present in the city at the time. The change in economic structure came with an abundance of new issues that citizens at all social levels and professions would have to face, which gave already-existing confraternities opportunities to expand and develop. Fellowships would have to continuously adapt to emerging issues, which allowed for them to take on a more present role in the city's social life.

Mendicant orders (namely the Franciscans and Dominicans) began their involvement with lay companies during the thirteenth century, which led to the companies gaining an amount of prevalence in Florence. The involvement of these orders led to an explosion of confraternal membership and the creation of a variety of societies tasked with performing different types of

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<sup>13</sup> Tawney, R. H. *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism: A Historical Study*, London: Routledge, 1998. pp. 14-16

charity and devotion. This had begun when Saint Peter Martyr, a Dominican friar and direct disciple of Saint Dominic, organized the Congregation of the Virgin. This was likely the first very large lay order established in Florence, reaching the city in 1245. Saint Francis and the Franciscan Order played an equally important role in the creation of confraternal organizations. Franciscan friars were heavily engaged in voluntary poverty and almsgiving, and created institutions of lay people to help with this: The Order of the Penitence, Societies of Faith, and Marian companies. All aimed to strengthen their relationship with God through assisting the poor and creating an atmosphere and collective experience of fellowship, and gave members the opportunity to experience religious life without moving away from their families or giving up secular professions.<sup>14</sup> The Florentine Penitents became an organization solely meant to allocate Franciscan funds to the poor as a form of almsgiving, and eventually began to fund and staff hospitals, which would later come to play a central role in confraternal organizing.<sup>15</sup> Members themselves, particularly widowed women, were able to join in order to receive shelter and food for free while also seemingly securing their salvation through merciful acts. This in and of itself was seen as a form of charity provided by organizations due to newfound rates of homelessness and a general decline in the standards of living.

Marian lay groups and the Penitents are generally considered the direct predecessors of the lay brotherhoods that dominated the social life of Florence throughout the following centuries.<sup>16</sup> All of these groups worked mostly on maintaining and providing for churches themselves. They assisted the laity in becoming more connected with faith and the Church through different means, such as publicly singing hymns in both Latin and the vernacular, and offering Marian devotions, such as the Ave Maria, outside of mass. They, like their successors,

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<sup>14</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. pp. 23-24

<sup>15</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. p. 24

<sup>16</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. p. 28



granted members avenues for social networking outside of immediate professions, guaranteed members financial safety, and allowed for faith to be experienced through fellowship.

Nonetheless there were still a number of differences between these early orders and what would come to be known as confraternities throughout the following centuries. Female membership was still commonplace, members weren't allowed to participate in secular politics in any way, and the orders had not yet reached a level of organization that would allow for them to carry out much of their larger works that they would become responsible for in later centuries. This would gradually change as views of piety developed along with Florentine culture and confraternal tasks and obligations began carrying more weight.

During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Florentine secular leadership had no means, and generally no interest, in providing relief to poor citizens. They instead opted to allocate a relatively small amount of funds to local churches and orders who would tend to use it for construction projects. Funds received by the vocationally poor, the friars and sisters belonging to mendicant orders, would be distributed to confraternities so that it could find its way to those in need of it. Larger parish confraternities would also receive direct funds from the commune, the largest recipient being the confraternity of the Orsanmichele Church, which was an exceptionally large order that worked closely with the commune throughout its existence (and also kept the most well-documented records of their income and expenditures). They would be granted approximately \$4900 from the commune to distribute to the city's poor.<sup>17</sup> Companies would also raise their own money through the sale of items and services, collection of donations, property rentals, and (in the case of Orsanmichele in particular) estate sales from acquired

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<sup>17</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Consumer Price Index Historical Tables for U.S. City Average. [https://www.bls.gov/regions/mid-atlantic/data/consumerpriceindexhistorical\\_us\\_table.htm](https://www.bls.gov/regions/mid-atlantic/data/consumerpriceindexhistorical_us_table.htm)  
Historical CPI-U  
<https://www.bls.gov/cpi/tables/historical-cpi-u-201712.pdf>

Church property.<sup>18</sup> Some of this money would be earmarked directly to individuals in need, and a portion of it would go towards larger projects meant to assist the community. At this time the Florentine government welcomed and encouraged the institution of independent charities to assist with the needs of the poor, though this would change in coming years.

General views on poverty had a great influence on the choosing of fund recipients. While the commune treated the voluntary professional poor with respect, they also used harsh methods to rid the city of the involuntary poor. Violent punishments were put into place in attempt to eliminate the city of beggars and the homeless, and laws were instituted to banish disabled citizens who weren't able to work or financially support themselves in order to protect the sanitary and aesthetic value of the city (though it isn't clear the extent to which these laws were actually put into practice). Certain groups of poor citizens, such as prostitutes and panhandlers, were not only neglected by the commune, but actively put in danger in order to maintain the city's public image. Policies were implemented to either punish them or institutionalize them in hospitals so they couldn't be seen in the streets.<sup>19</sup> These policies and practices were symptomatic of the shift that came with Florence entering its new economic age, as new social and economic realities had to be weighed against the diminishing presence of religion in the political sphere. The working poor suffered from the negligence of the city as well. Being a relatively new class of citizen due to the fact that working in any given profession was no longer a sustainable way for poor citizens to have all of their most basic needs met, they were generally disregarded as truly poor. The Church, too, concentrated their efforts on more traditionally poor classes, such as orphans, widows, pilgrims, and imprisoned debtors.

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<sup>18</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. pp. 192-193, 201, 233

<sup>19</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. pp. 243-244

Those belonging to the lowest echelons of society made up the majority of the city's population, as most Florentine citizens were earning wages below the bar of subsistence. The price of wheat over the course of the 1300s had been gradually increasing all while real wage rates for laboring professions were on the decline (not only due to a stagnation of wages measured in the price of wheat, but a fairly considerable decline in nominal wages themselves). By the mid 1350s, individual unskilled day laborers would typically make an estimate of \$12 per month, while upwards of \$9.50-\$22<sup>20</sup> were required to support each individual in households of four.<sup>21</sup> The heads of households were not making the wages they would need to support themselves, let alone entire families, and oftentimes women would find employment in textile industries to add to their household income (though this was obviously not much).

Many smaller independent companies during this time would only provide for their own members, of whom women, as well as different types of day laborers (including those who worked in textile industries), were oftentimes excluded. Hospitals that were run by larger companies were able to provide for excluded people, but not in any substantial amounts. The Orsanmichele Church company organized a system in which they would rank those in most need of alms based on worthiness. Orsanmichele allocated about 98% of their total funds to charity, but most of this was given to the professional religious, and non-religious lay people would directly receive only about 4% of the church's funds in total. Those belonging to nuclear families who were struggling due to factors outside of their control (such as sudden illness) were second in line to receiving assistance, and the "biblically" poor (i.e. orphans, widows, the chronically sick and disabled, and those imprisoned for debt) were included next. Larger families were given priority over smaller families, and single mothers who had become

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<sup>20</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Consumer Price Index Historical Tables for U.S. City Average. Historical CPI-U

<sup>21</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. pp. 249

widowed, pregnant mothers, and mothers who had recently given birth were eligible to receive larger amounts of alms. Working men were not entirely excluded from eligibility either. Some records point to a select number of cases where men coming from a wide range of professional backgrounds, from clerical and transportation work to the production and sale of food, metal, and textiles, were able to receive alms.<sup>22</sup> Anyone who did not fall into one of these categories would be able to receive small amounts of money, but it would often amount to close to nothing. Beggars would show up outside the fraternity's office in the church's piazza weekly in masses and receive whatever money they were able to (usually between \$0.06-\$0.12),<sup>23</sup> which would not even cover a single meal for the day. Bread was also publicly distributed (typically on Feast Days), but oftentimes each individual would not receive more than a slice.<sup>24</sup>

The fact that men working in supposedly livable professions were still in need of alms on a weekly basis is reflective of the sheer amount of citizens living near or below subsistence levels during the years leading up to the Black Death, and exemplifies the general decline of the standard of living for average citizens over this period. Orsanmichele made sure to keep meticulous records of everyone who receive substantial assistance from them. Favoring those belonging to nuclear families and more stable fiscal situations over homeless beggars (who received little to nothing) was not only seen as more respectable and productive, but it was also much easier. These recipients had identities that could be defined and recorded with ease, making them more liable to receive the adequate funds necessary to tend to their specific needs. The remainder would be handed out to the weekly droves of essentially anonymous homeless beggars who had no way of being recorded in the company's books.

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<sup>22</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. pp. 267, 272-273

<sup>23</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Consumer Price Index Historical Tables for U.S. City Average. Historical CPI-U.

<sup>24</sup> Hednerson. *Piety and Charity*. pp. 256-258

In 1328, the city experienced one of their largest economic crises leading up to the Black Death. Inflation led to a sharp decline in real wages earned by laborers, as monthly salaries measured in grain more than halved.<sup>25</sup> This gradually began causing issues vertically, and affected not only day laborers, but even wealthier artisans and business owners. Skilled laborers would soon find themselves joining the droves of people gathered outside the piazza of Orsanmichele hoping for alms. The company was at capacity for being able to provide for the poor as the number of citizens in need of assistance drastically increased. Although the commune had recognized their contributions to the city and increased their funding, they were losing money from private sources that they would typically collect from due to citizens needing to be tighter with personal funds. The order soon found themselves completely unequipped to contend with the sheer amount of new clientele, and in the following year the financial crisis only worsened. Social order in the city seemed on the verge of collapse as citizens got increasingly anxious about income and hunger, and the commune itself could only alleviate so much of their unrest through rations. Orsanmichele was working off little income as well, only bringing in about \$24,423<sup>26</sup> total, when in previous years they had an income of double or triple this amount.<sup>27</sup> Poverty and borderline famine were becoming an epidemic, and although the crisis was relatively short-lived and the city would be able to partially recover, the following years wouldn't prove to be significantly more stable.

Depression broke out during the period of 1338-48, deemed the “decade of disaster.” The state had become abrasive with its citizens, imposing inordinate taxes on them during a period where there wasn't even enough grain to feed the population. Orsanmichele remained the largest

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<sup>25</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. p. 273

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Consumer Price Index Historical Tables for U.S. City Average. Historical CPI-U.

<sup>27</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. p. 279

agency of poor relief, using an estimated \$24,423 out of their yearly income of \$27,154<sup>28</sup> solely on poor relief. Other confraternities, such as that of the Santa Maria Nuova and San Paolo Hospitals, the Bigallo, and the Misericordia became large players in poor relief during these years as well, though Orsanmichele remained the most well-documented. The government had appointed these companies in providing bread, of which the state claimed a monopoly on, to all citizens as well. Funds were allocated away from the professional poor and used instead to distribute to the nearing 10,000 beggars who would gather in the piazza, and some ~15,000 others through sealed alms, bread, or services such as hospital and hospice care.<sup>29</sup>

Orsanmichele's expenditures over the course of the decade would be completely reorganized to prioritize those who were most in need of alms. The large-scale charity work they conducted was facilitated by the government and done seemingly purely out of devotion to the poor. Without confraternal services the commune would have likely not been able to contend with the period of unequivocal poverty, and social unrest would have been liable to turn violent. It was fortunate that some confraternities already had the structure and resources to aid in this, and that they could (more or less) easily adapt already-existing methods of poverty relief to stay ahead of the worsening conditions of the city. The presence of confraternities provided the commune with a vital resource needed during a period of precarious political and social order that could not yet be addressed by a relatively new state with relatively new modes of economic, social, and political organizing. Confraternities were able to develop along with the constantly-changing culture and newly emerging needs of the city and quickly became an apparatus of the state. They served not only as institutions geared towards devotions and salvation, but also as a proxy-agency of the commune that would come to lay groundwork for

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<sup>28</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Consumer Price Index Historical Tables for U.S. City Average. Historical CPI-U.

<sup>29</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. pp. 284, 294-295

secular welfare agencies provided directly through the city's government; they became both an extension of the Church and of secular authority. Charity and faith were recreated and redefined through them, and relief that would be necessitated under a newer utilitarian system was able to be realized and perfected. Of course, much of this relief work acted only as a bandage over the issues of poverty and famine. Orders could only alleviate existing financial problems, not solve them. The next year would prove to be even more challenging due to the emergence of the Black Death. The plague would devastate the city, leaving companies to unravel newer solutions to deal with unprecedented amounts of mass sickness and loss of population on top of continuing to provide almsgiving services in increasingly large numbers.

# Ritual

Religious ritual was a vital part of public and political life in Florence during the time that confraternities would begin to emerge. Not only did it help define the nature of citizens' spirituality, but it also contributed to defining the character of the city and the relationships citizens would build with one another. It was present in every facet of social life, so much so that citizens would find their identities (at least partially) defined by their participation in local communal religious practices. Communities were built on devotions to patron saints, celebrations, symbols, and other displays of camaraderie centered around public worship. While this was very common to local life in smaller communities, the decline of local sovereignty and onset of urbanization came with levels of commercial competition and local divisions that would cause community-binding ritual to wane.<sup>30</sup> Many of the confraternities sponsored by mendicant orders were founded on the rejection of the neighborhood sectarianism that had become prevalent in Florence once the city had sprung up as a commercial center due to guild loyalties and competition. Public rituals were used as a means to promote peace and humility, remind individuals of their fellowship under God, and encourage socialization and community-preservation through celebration.<sup>31</sup> Confraternities allowed for a partaking in ritual that would have previously been left solely to the professional religious. Making certain

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<sup>30</sup> Trexler, Richard C. *Public Life in Renaissance Florence*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019. p. xxi.

<sup>31</sup> Weissman, Ronald F. *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence*. New York, NY: Academic Press, 1982. pp. 44-45



practices more accessible to those who had secular professions and families, and facilitating social bonds through common devotion kept ritual at the forefront of Florentine culture. Like charity, ritual would find a place in the commune where it helped strengthen social ties and bandaged failing areas brought about by the city's changing social structure.

One of the most notable changes that came about with the development of urban areas was the fragmentation of larger family structures that would have been present in smaller feudal villages in previous centuries. By the thirteenth century, while rural family groupings in the Florentine countryside would generally consist of five to six members across multiple generations, urban family groups averaged closer to four members, and would typically be nuclear. This pattern seemed to stay consistent across most cities in the region at the time, but the difference was particularly notable in Florence, with a staggering 43% of households, regardless of class, either only consisting of single members or being headed by women or minors.<sup>32</sup> Around 27% of households only contained a single generation.<sup>33</sup> This was likely due to the nature of urban economic structure, where income could be made through wage labor, business ownership, or political involvement, in addition to the devastating effects of the Black Death (which obviously affected the city's population at much higher proportions than its spread-out surrounding rural villages).<sup>34</sup> Young people also began leaving rural households (either as couples directly after marriage or as singles) to move into the city in search of work, meaning many households would be headed by young financially unstable individuals, rather than the oldest working member of the family.

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<sup>32</sup> Hughes, Diane Owen. "Urban Growth and Family Structure in Medieval Genoa." *Past and Present* 66, no. 1 (1975): 3–28. <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/66.1.3>. pp. 4-5.

<sup>33</sup> Herlihy, David. "Mapping Households in Medieval Italy." *The Catholic Historical Review*, April 1972. [https://doi.org/ https://www.jstor.org/stable/25019007](https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/25019007). p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Herlihy. "Mapping Households." pp. 4-5.

The small, one to two generation, generally younger, households that had emerged in Florence deviated starkly from the multi-generational households that preceded them. Families suffered from the loss of financial structure that larger households with multiple incomes and stronger support systems for financially and physically dependent members of the household would be able to provide, and families headed by widows, minors, or bachelors, would deal with even greater struggles. Orphanhood became increasingly more prevalent in the city, with homelessness and the plague causing children to be torn from their parents. Marriage rates were lower as young men found it more difficult to become financially independent enough to support families, and widowed women found it much more difficult to remarry after the loss of their husbands without the strength of tighter-knit communities that would be found in rural areas.<sup>35</sup> Families were suffering greatly from the financial burdens that came along with the loss of centuries-old familial structures. Confraternities were able to provide something that mimicked this structure through ritual brotherhood. Not only would members be able to find the same familial structural and fiscal support they would be lacking otherwise, but spiritual enrichment through ritual (for both members and non-members) also provided them with a sense of relational warmth that would have been missing from their daily lives. Brotherhoods promoted ideas of ritual solidarity, universality of human experience, and the creation of interpersonal bonds through spirituality that would have brought comfort and spiritual healing to those suffering from the burdens of unstable or fragmented family structures.

Of the twenty confraternities founded in the thirteenth century, over half were founded by mendicant orders. Mendicants only allowed themselves to exist on the peripheries of Florentine social society, as they would typically dedicate their lives wholly to voluntary poverty and subsequently refused to engage in property exchange or income through employment. This left

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<sup>35</sup> Herlihy. "Mapping Households." p. 14.

them with the inability to access lay communities to some extent. Lay orders were meant to reflect the values taught by the mendicants while still being able to participate fully in local social spaces in order to introduce devotional and charitable practices to the city's lay population. Two types of companies were created to address the orders' teachings: the *laudesi* companies, devoted to the saints and the cult of the dead, and the *disciplinati* companies, devoted to penitential practices. These companies would engage in the public worship of saints, commemoration of the dead, and practices of penance, all of which were traditionally clerical practices that had been extended to the laity for the sake of accessibility to the public.<sup>36</sup>

Many of these companies in their earlier stages would play a hand in public education on strengthening and correcting faith and forms of worship. The *laudesi* companies took on the role of stamping out of local cultural heresies, such as unitarian understandings of Christ that were widely present across the city.<sup>37</sup> They also worked to introduce new forms of Marian devotion to the laity, such as the newly-synthesized *Ave Maria*, from the Dominican and Carmelite brothers who founded it.<sup>38</sup> Marian veneration was a particularly important notion to extend to the laity because Mary served the role of providing compassion to sinners and a means in which to approach Christ for forgiveness in a way that felt more accessible and less abstract; to many, she felt more approachable and human. Even in language, Mary was addressed with the familiar and informal "tu" form in prayer, which were encouraged to be made personalized rather than traditional recited prayers. This type of personal prayer was pushed for companies' other patron saints as well.<sup>39</sup> Like doing public penances, worshipping publicly, or partaking in communal hymns and processions with fellow parishioners and brothers, receiving compassion from

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<sup>36</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. pp. 44-45.

<sup>37</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. pp. 46-47.

<sup>38</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. p. 75.

<sup>39</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. pp. 81-82

another human (like Mary or the Saints) before God could strengthen the soul and provide courage for combatting sin and receiving salvation. This was an idea that began to be pushed more and more by mendicants and clerics; personal relationships (with God and with one another) began to take precedence over adhering to the Church's catechisms and practicing more abstract, removed, forms of worship.

The building of meaningful social relationships between neighbors was understood to be congruent to the search for salvation, as reciprocity was just as important in the relationship between an individual and God as it was in a relationship between an individual and their neighbor. Around this time, clerics and mendicant brothers began putting an emphasis on building a personal relationship with God, in that seeing Him as a friend while also revering and fearing Him became the ideal way to worship, rather than focusing solely on following Church doctrine. Interpreting this relationship through the lens of less abstract personal relationships would encourage laity to have a model to work with in their relationship with God. Divinity could not be found or remotely understood solely within oneself. Rather, individuals had to look outside of themselves and attempt to build understandings of divinity present in social relationships in order to find footing in a relationship with Christ. They could not create or influence holiness by themselves, but it could be found in communities premised on love and solidarity.<sup>40</sup> This seemed to have been a relatively new idea that only began being taught around the thirteenth century in Florence, likely due to the splintering of community bonds present in the city (which wouldn't have existed in smaller townships with small populations and lack of industry diversity). This was a notion encouraged heavily in the structuring of confraternal communities. Fellowships were meant to promote strong ties between individuals, where mutual

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<sup>40</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. p. 47.

commitment under God was made apparent through mutual obligations such as ceremony, meetings, and ways of organizing.

One of the largest reasons men decided to join lay orders was for protection after death. Members were promised burials conducted by their brothers, requiem masses sponsored by the order, and posthumous prayers and devotions required from every member of the fraternity. Fellowship was a way in which members could not have to worry about long purgatory sentences after death. Each member could feel secure in the fact that they had an entire community supporting them spiritually and guiding them towards salvation, and that in participating in these rituals to help other members, they were also strengthening their own chances of salvation.<sup>41</sup> With many Florentines being expected to provide for themselves and the members of their household on subsistence wages, burials were probably oftentimes viewed as a luxury. Citizens likely found the provision of posthumous ceremonies and devotions especially necessary due to the apparent lack of familial structure. This service reflected something that would have been provided with relative ease prior to the urbanization of the city that could no longer be fulfilled by single households or somewhat splintered communities. It became a large draw for joining orders, as the sense of security brought with the promise of the ritual was extremely valuable for more financially vulnerable citizens.

Members were expected to attend every meeting held by the order, and every liturgical service sponsored by the order. In-unison chanting of sung masses would be performed by the body of members along with vernacular hymns. This encouraged more intimate, personal approaches to be taken to the mass where members could feel as though they played a vital role in the ritual. Frequent feasts would allow for socialization outside of the context of stricter forms of worship (such as the mass) where members would be able to get to talk about their lives

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<sup>41</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. pp. 49-50.

outside of the Church and build deeper personal relationships with one another. The order would organize visitations for ill brothers, which other members were expected to participate in in order to retain their membership. Everything down to the orders' patrons saints, meeting locations, emblems, owned relics, uniforms, and commissioned arts were meant to foster a sense of community bound in religious ritual. They promoted feelings of shared intimacy and solidarity through identity with objects, symbols, motifs, and actions. Visual symbols and communal actions transcended class, literacy levels, and education, allowing for community building beyond traditional barriers. Uniforms worn during ritual ceremonies and processions, for example, would all be designed in very similar styles across all confraternities, and distinctive insignias for different orders allowed for feelings of shared identity to be strengthened between brothers.<sup>42</sup>

The structuring and organizing of orders, including shared practices and rules for membership, also played a hand in facilitating ritual fellowship between their members. Statute books were written up and used to establish rules, procedures, and standards that would be enforced in certain confraternities. Some companies, including the previously-discussed Orsanmichele Church company, would familiarize members of all literacy levels with these books through mandatory monthly readings. They would typically be made to reflect scripture readings or clerical teachings, and were meant to instill common values of piety and morality as a discipline for all members to partake in.<sup>43</sup> It also provided familiarization with Gospel and Epistle readings for members lacking formal education. Many passages would have dealt with salvation through acts of self-sacrifice, charity, and prayer, in attempt to encourage members to imitate Christ and live closely by the Word of God. To “do good and avoid evil” was a popular

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<sup>42</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. p. 82

<sup>43</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. p. 85

motif in fourteenth and fifteenth century Florentine spirituality, and the books were meant to promote this as a core idea to live by.<sup>44</sup> Most of the time, these obligations outlined in the statutes would consist of specific daily prayers, fasting, mourning deceased brothers and visiting ill brothers, attending mass weekly (and on Holy Days of Obligation and certain Feast Days), attending confession at least three times per year, receiving communion whenever possible, attending confraternal meetings, and paying dues to the order (so long as you had the financial means to do so).<sup>45</sup> Some obligations would vary between order, depending on specific forms of charity work or specific devotional practices. The recurrent communal experience of listening to recitations of statute books would not only aid in strengthening individual spiritual values, but also strengthening core community values on a larger scale and facilitating communal bonds through shared motives and standards of behaviors. The statute books also required very specific, manageable, and reasonable tasks for the laity to live by, rather than demanding endless, guilt-driven, devotions that the professional religious would have been partaking in. The leniency granted in these demands allowed members to take avenues of ordered, formal, and reverent styles of living without the burden of unending obligation that was not feasible for laypeople with secular professions and families. Imitating Christ was still manageable through living by the Commandments and being charitable to one's neighbor without having to abandon secular identity and non-devotional personhood.

With many confraternities being founded on notions of peacekeeping, peace was something that was reflected in internal rituals as well. Members would practice offering each other signs of peace while entering or exiting spaces belonging to their orders, the changing from street clothing into confraternal robes was used to symbolically eliminate outward social statuses

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<sup>44</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. p. 86

<sup>45</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. p. 87.

and promote congruency in brotherhood, and even seating was made to be non-hierarchical, with frequent seat-switching being enforced in order to ensure higher-standing members didn't get too comfortable with physical positions of power. Confessions were often said publicly in front of other members to promote ideas of mutual understanding, comfort in unity, and general solidarity, and members who were caught speaking illy of other confessors or needlessly gossiping about others' confessions would risk being immediately expelled from their order.<sup>46</sup> This, too, strengthened the family-like bonds that orders would strive to create, in that members were urged to create personal and trusting bonds with one another free from judgement or feelings of strong social hierarchy. Each member was treated as an equal, deserving of unconditional compassion and support from his brothers. Constant reminders of peace and solidarity through the use of ritual would alleviate the struggles of economic, spiritual, or physical isolation that may have been present outside of their membership in the brotherhood.

On Holy Thursdays, many confraternities had the tradition of officers washing the feet of lower members while they feasted. The officers would willfully experience a form of ritual humiliation in servicing those beneath them while they dined, and in turn, the lower members would receive a form of symbolic humiliation for taking on the role of the poor disciples whom had had their feet washed by Christ. The poorest members of the confraternity would be brought an experience of equality that was not typical for them in being offered this service.<sup>47</sup> This practice of ritual equality and humility was meant to remind members that their economic positionings and social standings had very little meaning in the eyes of God, and encouraged practices of peace through self-sacrifice, humility, and genuine love for one's neighbor.

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<sup>46</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. pp. 93-95.

<sup>47</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. pp. 101-102.



Though it was obviously important to instill values of brotherhood within the walls of confraternal spaces, it was even more vital that these ideas be brought to public spaces and introduced to those who weren't a part of any religious organization. The community was urged to join in on different symbolic practices of peace and community reparation, especially during periods of political and social strife in the city.<sup>48</sup> This typically took the form of public masses and celebrations. Flagellation was perhaps the most common and widespread form of public ritual. Consequently, it was also extremely effective in promoting the values of the universality of brotherhood as part of devotional experience and encouraging practices of charity and solidarity in every day lay life. It was meant to promote peace and forgiveness, and diminish the prevalence of social and political faction present throughout Florence (as well as neighboring areas). Flagellant processions would typically follow a three-part form, in which participants would "detach" themselves from their own ego, becoming a piece of a larger body made up of brothers. The self would be severed from its own previous position in the social order, and be reincorporated into the new, indistinguishably equal, social structure made up of the body of processional participants. The transformation that would take place was meant to mirror that of the Death and Resurrection, as symbols of economic status, family, and social status would be replaced with symbols of "allegiance" and "harmonious behavior." Public processions were very frequent, and citizens would likely see flagellants processing on their streets all the time, especially during the seasons of Lent and Easter. The ideas being conveyed would not be at all foreign to the laity, and seeing open displays of these ideas was meant to have influence over how non-members would conduct themselves in their own daily lives.

Flagellant uniforms, which completely masked the wearer's identity, were used as a way to emphasize the equality of brotherhood, as all social distinctions were lost in the uniformity of

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<sup>48</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. pp. 91-92.

participants' appearance. This also encouraged confidence in mutual obligation and conveyed complete equality in penitential practice. Unlike mendicants, who were robed at all times, uniforms were only worn for confraternal brothers while fulfilling flagellation procession and ceremonial obligations. Social status was typically able to be ascertained through members' clothing and appearance, so these rituals carried a lot of weight in terms of exercising brotherhood and solidarity with the complete riddance of these identity markers.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, citizens who were not members of confraternities were encouraged to participate in these processions while they made their way through the streets. This gave laypeople the opportunity to further their spiritual development through temporarily rejecting worldly affairs in favor of engaging in Christlike love and passion.

Display of ritual life only became commonplace in the city due to confraternities' ability to amass funds. Unlike mendicant orders, confraternities were not barred in any way from accumulating wealth. While this helped with funding masses, celebrations, and funeral services for members and the general public, it also allowed for companies to become more bureaucratic or administrative in their organizing. Large, city-wide, productions oftentimes demanded access to specialized laborers (such as professional skilled musicians) and large sums of money. While the ability to gather funds opened the door for more extraordinary performances that would entice the public and encourage participation in spiritual celebration and worship, it also led to members becoming distanced from their personal role in ritual that the confraternities were premised on.<sup>50</sup> By the sixteenth century, much of the spiritual and sacrificial rootings of confraternities seemed to be lost in favor of commercial and economic aristocratic forms of fellowship and social organizing. With the Medici family and powerful guilds taking precedence

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<sup>49</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. p. 154

<sup>50</sup> Henderson. *Piety and Charity*. p. 109

over the running of civil authority, confraternities adapted to new forms of socialization, and fellowship took on a new meaning to their members. Subsequently, ritual transformed into something completely foreign to what it looked like in many orders' inception. Rather than strengthening notions of universality in fellowship, formal rituals began to be used to strengthen class and commercial loyalties between members.<sup>51</sup> That said, ritual came to be central to meaning instilled in Florentine political processes due to the prevalence of ritual facilitated by confraternities during the three hundred year period. New practices in social politics found their rootings in the tradition of ritual and religious community experience. Doctrines and institutions directly from the Catholic Church were something only peripheral to these new forms of urban ritualistic organizing, and they came to play a relatively small role in both the public religious experience and the city's experience of social politics.<sup>52</sup> Confraternities were able to simultaneously influence the culture of Florence through ritual while also adapting ritual to changes in culture that came from other areas of economic change. Even after the changes that confraternities would undergo in following years, their influence would remain present.

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<sup>51</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. pp. 167, 170, 180.

<sup>52</sup> Terpstra. *The Politics of Ritual Kinship*. p. 3.

## Decline

As time progressed, confraternities underwent drastic changes as they were absorbed into new forms of aristocratic socialization that had developed over the course of a few centuries. Class loyalties between Florentine aristocracy had been established after wool workers' revolts that occurred in the late 1300s, and strengthened throughout the following centuries. Industrial secretarianism had gradually fallen to the wayside as Florentine aristocracy began prioritizing horizontal class and familial loyalties over more vertical industry alliances, with the Medici family being at the center of every facet of political socialization. Strong unity and tight ties between those belonging to the ruling class of the city created a strong counterweight against the monarchy so that Florence could retain its autonomy, but the homogeneity between elites would also cause a mirroring of aristocratic values and purpose in confraternal organizing. This, coupled with pressures of the Counter Reformation, would ultimately cause every confraternity in Florence to decline in popularity and influence, and eventually be extinguished in one way or another.<sup>53</sup>

By the mid 16th century, all political positions in the commune were held by members of the Medici family or aristocrats with direct ties to them. The family had become incredibly influential in Florence as their level of financial influence grew internationally. The aristocracy became very closed off and inaccessible even to the wealthiest guild members who were not

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<sup>53</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. pp. 195, 197.

directly involved with the family, and political action became much less about enacting popular legislation than being a game of exclusivity. Those who were not directly involved with the family, even wealthy entrepreneurs and investors, found themselves on the outside of the city's politics.<sup>54</sup> Confraternities began to reflect these values, with many orders beginning to practice exclusivity in membership, and some of the larger city-wide confraternities working directly under the Medicis. Wealthier members were given access to long-term positions in many orders that came with different privileges, and newer companies barred citizens without certain social status requirements (most often direct familial relation to patrician families) from membership<sup>55</sup> Artisans and trade workers were barred from joining many orders entirely, regardless of wealth, and poorer membership became virtually unheard of. Inter-class social relations between members disappeared in favor of enforced divisions between members of different classes and social statuses. This would cause the rituals and acts of mercy that were at the forefront of confraternal values and actions to fall to the wayside. Flagellation was no longer practiced, as most city-wide *laudesi* orders became elitist clubs, and any confraternity that still practiced any sort of traditional ritual usually belonged to a small local parish. They were no longer able to bring cross-neighborhood unity to the city, even though this had initially been a primary goal for many orders. Additionally, parish companies were usually under the authority of the parishes they were tied to (which were in the midst undergoing reform instituted by the Church), and were subsequently much more limited in the rituals and processions they were allowed to conduct.<sup>56</sup> City-wide processions and festivals for feast days and saint patronage ceased to exist in favor of tiny localized celebrations honoring specific parishes' patron saints. Additionally, rituals like the

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<sup>54</sup> Goldthwaite, Richard A. "The Medici Bank and the World of Florentine Capitalism." *Past & Present*, no. 114 (1987): 3–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650959>. p. 22.

<sup>55</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. pp. 197-198.

<sup>56</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. pp. 206, 208.

washing of the feet on Holy Thursday fell out of practice for the larger orders due to its ‘impurity,’ and was replaced with Eucharistic adoration. Those of higher social standing no longer wished to put themselves in the position of partaking in an act seen as humiliating. Notions of symbolic equality were disregarded entirely as orders moved away from leading with ideals of cross-class brotherhood and neighborly love.<sup>57</sup>

Consequently, new confraternities made up solely of artisans and tradesmen began to form in order to to give some amount of social access to those who were now excluded from participating in the well established, larger, and more influential orders. This was reflective of the trend it seemed the economic landscape in the city was following due to the Medici family’s rise to international influence, where many guilds had declined drastically in size and strength. Guilds no longer had the amount of influence over the politics of the city that they had claimed in previous centuries; they had become relatively insignificant.<sup>58</sup> Newly-formed confraternities were beginning to look congruent to these small and relatively unimportant guilds. These orders were typically much smaller and didn’t have access to the amount of funds or financial stability that older confraternities had accumulated over previous centuries, so they weren’t able to accomplish nearly as much in terms of providing for their own members, let alone outside citizens. Still, they were generally able to provide some assistance to ill members, partial burial benefits, and dowries to members’ daughters.<sup>59</sup>

These orders were under strict surveillance of the Medici family, and membership was made compulsory for members of certain trades in order to ensure that they were not receiving benefits or financial assistance from both the order and the commune. The Medici family was also able to use this as a form of social control, as workers would be under the threat of

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<sup>57</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. p. 228.

<sup>58</sup> Goldthwaite, Richard A. “The Medici Bank.” pp. 13, 19-20.

<sup>59</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. p. 202.

expulsion from their order if they were partaking in unsavory activities, such as frequenting taverns. For the first time, the working class of Florence was seemingly formally excluded from having any sort of agency in socialization while also experiencing strict control in their daily activities from the governing body of the city.<sup>60</sup>

The Counter Reformation was one of the largest factors in ritual change that confraternities had undergone during the sixteenth century. The Church began to make a concerted effort to weed out heretics in Florence, and with the begrudging support of Duke Cosimo I de' Medici, the inquisition entered the city in order to rid the area of Protestant thought and ensure any type of subversion would be unsuccessful. This came along with certain types of education on and reinforcement of catechistical teachings to ensure the population was not being misguided by Protestant beliefs that would have transgressed Catholic doctrine.<sup>61</sup> Among these teachings were putting an emphasis on the importance of the sacraments (particularly baptism), the veneration of spiritually significant objects and spaces, understanding the catechisms, and the importance of consuming the Eucharist. Most importantly though, the Church sought to reestablish its own power in popular religious life, and this would wind up coming at the cost of lay orders' agency. Confraternities were seen by the Church at this time as an alternative (less formalized) way of engaging with faith. Focus on informal communal celebration, especially with the added element of secular social benefits, was seen as a means for subversion of the hierarchy of the Church and the importance of the sacraments. They became a main target of Church authority, as it needed to be ensured that citizens were parishioners of the Church before all else, and informal celebration should only be an afterthought in their methods of worship.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. p. 205.

<sup>61</sup> Murry, Gregory. "Cardinals, Inquisitors, and Jesuits: Curial Patronage and Counter-Reformation in Cosimo I's Florence." *Renaissance and Reformation* 32, no. 1 (2009): 5–26. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v32i1.9588>. p. 15.

<sup>62</sup> Bossy, John. "The Counter-Reformation and the People of Catholic Europe." *Past & Present*, no. 47 (1970): 51–70. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650448>. pp. 58-60.

At this time, with the exclusion of the older, larger confraternities, who rarely practiced any form of public ritual following their transformation into more secretive elitist clubs, the newer parish-based confraternities bore the weight of bringing ritual to the public. While over the previous two centuries, confraternities practiced ritual rooted in community, brotherhood, and equality, the Church had begun to urge orders to put more weight on private devotion and ritual practice. Social status obviously began to be enforced more heavily, and ritual subversions of social rank were no longer encouraged. Additionally, obedience to the clergy was urged to be practiced, as confraternities fell under strict authority of the Church due to their newfound reliance on parishes. The Church had begun doubling-down on some activities and traditions that had recently received criticism from Protestants, such as saint veneration, indulgences, transubstantiation and the act of receiving Christ in communion, and the veneration of relics. Some of the responsibilities of continuing to bring these concepts to the public were granted to parish confraternities, who were given funds, permissions, spaces, and relics directly from the Church to ensure that community members would continue receiving, venerating relics, and providing their parishes with plenary indulgences.<sup>63</sup>

While each act encouraged by confraternities during the Counter Reformation was important in keeping citizens' understandings of the reasons behind Catholic ritual alive, it was more important that these acts strengthened their obedience to the Church in the face of widespread dissent. Transubstantiation and the receiving of the true body of Christ was at the heart of this, and quickly became something that parish orders were made to push heavily. This not only reminded citizens of the level of privilege and enjoyment granted in the act of receiving Christ, but also solidified the authority of local clergymen who, at the time, were able to withhold receiving from suspected heretics. Eucharistic adoration, called *Quarantore* at the

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<sup>63</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. p. 220.



time, was also introduced to the public by confraternities at this time as a way to convey the idea of the presence of Christ in the eucharist to the public. Larger events for eucharistic processions and adoration were usually commissioned and funded by those belonging to patrician families, possibly as a way to retain popularity among citizens through enjoyment of the spectacle, and encourage obedience to the aristocracy in charge of the commune.<sup>64</sup> Eucharistic processions helped confraternities shift away from public ritual centered around brotherhood to that centered around revering the authority of Christ.

Additionally, while confraternities had historically been able to celebrate mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation (with the assistance of priests), they were now forbidden from conducting masses, as that responsibility was left solely to the parishes they worked under. This rule included even the larger elitist parishes which weren't under the direct authority of the city's parishes. This, again, was meant to allow the Church to retain its authority over ritual, and encourage citizens to practice obedience towards their local clergy. It also ensured that potentially incorrect practices would be hidden from laypeople. Certain processions and all banquets (with the exclusion of banquets meant to honor Corpus Christi) were forbidden from being conducted by lay orders as well, with the responsibility of those, too, being left to local clergy.<sup>65</sup> Practically the entire purpose of most confraternities began to become the urging of eucharistic worship, with any form of public celebration of community, brotherhood, or solidarity being dissuaded or outright abolished by clerical officials. Confraternities no longer served the purpose of bringing social cohesion to the city. Most of the work they had done in the previous centuries meant to salvage any form of cultural identity or financial safety the city had needed was no longer able to be done, and their social influence weakened. They served the sole

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<sup>64</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. p. 234.

<sup>65</sup> Weissman. *Ritual Brotherhood*. pp. 222-223.

purpose of aiding the Church in ensuring collective respect, and anything beyond that was forbidden.

While many of the changes confraternities had undergone over the course of the sixteenth century seemed to have been due to external factors, the nature of how confraternities organized themselves and functioned contributed to their decline. The amount of leniency they were granted in membership, along with the direction political socialization had been going over the course of the few centuries beforehand, made it inevitable that they would likely become spaces for aristocracy to socialize in relative secrecy. Members were not expected to devote their lives to pious practices in any substantial way (which was one of the draws for joining an order to begin with), but this also meant that the accumulation of wealth and enjoyment of higher social status wasn't prohibited (such as it was for the Mendicants whom their organizations were meant to reflect). At the time of some of the oldest confraternities' inceptions, these were necessary characteristics for orders to be able to establish themselves and work effectively within the newly-commercialized city. Later on, though, with the amount of political power the familial-based aristocracy had claimed in the centuries leading up to the orders' transformations, it was only possible for practices of equality and solidarity to be temporary. The very reason confraternities were unique in their functioning, and the reason that they were able to survive and gain so much influence in the city over the previous few centuries, would later be the cause of their decline. Similarly, some of the issues within the city, such as neighborhood and class divides, that orders had prioritized attempting to diminish would wind up being the reason for their fracturing. Confraternal socialization had become the opposite of what it was in many orders' inceptions, and their work would become no longer necessary. Gaps would be filled in by secular societies in the following centuries, some of which would focus on

philanthropy, and churches were able to pick up the weight of ritual organization. The public character of Florence would not be lost, but if it weren't for the work done by these lay orders over the course of a few centuries, the culture and prosperity of Florentine public spaces may have looked substantially different.

## Conclusion

Confraternities existed during a precarious period of Florentine history, where urbanization and commercialism were causing a number of issues for the city's population to crop up. Homelessness and general poverty were becoming commonplace throughout the city, plague was causing mass death, and citizens were isolated from their neighbors and traditional support systems. Many people were finding it difficult to survive, let alone live comfortably, under the new economic and social conditions of the city. Citizens were isolated, both materially and spiritually, and many lost the ability to take care of themselves or their families without any sort of social assistance. Religious lay orders were able to contend with some of these issues, alleviating some of the stresses that citizens were expected to endure during this time. Though they weren't able to maintain their scale or exist in any significant form past the sixteenth century, their work over the course of three centuries contributed substantially to the city and its population.

The emergence of wage labor and commercialism had begun in the thirteenth century, relatively early in the city's history. While it allowed for industrial growth and new forms of socialization to emerge, it also led to many laborers not being able to support themselves and their families. Day laborers, typically making wages at or below the bar of subsistence, were struggling to shelter and feed their families, and many people would eventually find themselves homeless. The relatively new commune had no way of contending with this, and problems only

worsened once the Black Death had struck the city. Not only would this lead to the loss of a large portion of the population, but it would also cause inflation that affected citizens across all social classes and professions. The city was in crisis, and with no systems of social security in place, confraternities were able to fulfill the roll of social assistance and (partially, but substantially) provide for citizens most in need.

Though most orders started out as devotional groups which would partake in almsgiving only when necessary, confraternities soon found themselves engaging in large-scale charitable endeavors, moving away from giving alms on an individual or very localized basis. Larger companies began devising systems to provide necessary funds and food to any citizen in need, including business owners, day laborers, widowed women, those unable to work, the disabled, children, and homeless beggars. Though the massive amounts of new clientele from the effects of the Black Death stunted these companies, the commune was able to begin providing larger companies with allowances earmarked for redistribution to poor citizens. Methods of record-keeping and distribution were perfected throughout this time to hand out wheat and alms to everyone according to their specific needs. Though this was only a temporary fix to a problem consuming the city, orders were able to provide some amount of alleviation to its citizens and keep the economic landscape of the city in somewhat functioning order.

Like charity, ritual would find a place in the city where it helped strengthen social ties and bandaged failing areas brought about by changing social structure. It became something just as important in maintaining the character, as well as the peace, of the city. The diminishing size of family units, as well as neighborhood guild loyalties, left many citizens financially and spiritually isolated. Ritual was meant to bring together the fractured community in celebration of symbolic brotherhood and solidarity. It took the form of many different public

community-bonding experiences, premised on fellowship under God and love for one's neighbor. Public prayer and devotion, flagellation processions and public penances, and a number of different Feast Day celebrations, would encourage members to practice humility and care for less fortunate brothers, promote equality in brotherhood and trust in one's neighbor, and encourage the seeking of divinity in human interpersonal relationships. Each of these rituals was meant to promote solidarity as part of devotional experience and mend any sort of community strain, rifts between citizens, or feelings of isolation that may have emerged due to the social structure of the city.

Confraternities were able to alleviate some of the newfound issues urbanization had caused, and promote peace, unity, neighborly love, and universality in fellowship through ritual and charity. They were able to bring together the spiritual and secular in spaces where they may have otherwise been exclusive from each other. Members engaged in secular socialization while also securing their salvation through acts of mercy and spiritual healing. Though this would later be to their detriment, they were able to lay the groundwork for government-provided social assistance and retain a level of spiritual sensibility throughout the city in the following centuries.

Although confraternities were only able to really bandage failing areas of Florentine urban life, they set the stage for what assistance under secular social order could look like. They provided community to an increasingly divided city, helped maintain the city's population in financially failing areas, and facilitated the creation of a cultural identity that residents could find solidarity in. The confraternity ultimately wound up being a relatively short-lived experiment, but their contributions to the social welfare of the city and creation of cohesion during a time where the city's social landscape was becoming unrecognizable cannot be overlooked.