
Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Wisch, Barbara and Nerida Newbiggin. Acting on Faith: The Confraternity of the Gonfalone in Renaissance Rome

Nicholas Terpstra

Volume 37, Number 2, Spring 2014

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090739ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v37i2.21835>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Terpstra, N. (2014). Review of [Wisch, Barbara and Nerida Newbiggin. Acting on Faith: The Confraternity of the Gonfalone in Renaissance Rome]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 37(2), 195–198.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v37i2.21835>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2014

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Wisch, Barbara and Nerida Newbiggin.

Acting on Faith: The Confraternity of the Gonfalone in Renaissance Rome.

Early Modern Catholicism and the Visual Arts Series 7. Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2012. Pp. xxii, 512 + 269 colour ill. ISBN 978-0-916101-74-9 (hardcover) \$100.

Gregory Martin thought it was the oldest confraternity in Rome. Writing in *Roma Sancta* (1581), the refugee English priest set out the impressive range of activities that made the Confraternity of the Gonfalone the epitome of confraternal piety and a testament to the new spiritual currents that animated the old

Catholic faith. Scholars have long turned to Martin's volume for a status report on the religious landscape of Rome at the point when it was being turned decisively into the Catholic *Caput Mundi*. With this spectacular volume by Barbara Wisch and Nerida Newbigin they now have a status report that describes, with more rigour, breadth, and objectivity than Martin was capable of, a world of Catholic practice that had just reached the peak of its strength in the immediate post-Trent decades. Wisch and Newbigin offer a portrait that is all the more vital for fully understanding early modern Catholicism because it describes a world on the verge of disappearing. What no one quite knew, and what the *confratelli* of the Gonfalone could hardly have anticipated, was that in the new world emerging after Trent, the forms of lay piety which had become ever more rich and variegated through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had passed their peak and begun sliding towards insignificance.

The Gonfalone was certainly among the oldest of Rome's confraternities, or rather, it incorporated the oldest among the seven separate sodalities which had come together from across the city into one group in the 1480s and 1490s. This was a period for confraternal mergers across Italy, and inevitably the larger consolidated brotherhoods were wealthy and powerful bodies that could boast many of the local political, economic, and ecclesiastical elites among their greatly expanded memberships. They controlled extensive property portfolios made up of both urban and rural investment properties left by testators over the previous centuries, and of numerous institutional buildings: one or more churches or chapels, some administrative quarters, and one or more charitable hospitals. Wisch and Newbigin set out in far greater detail than any previous study just how one of these new consolidated confraternities of the later fifteenth century emerged, and how its wealth of human, artistic, and spiritual resources drew on each of its constituent parts.

Yet far more importantly, they analyze how the larger confraternity that emerged was not simply a larger corporation or spiritual conglomerate pursuing growth as an end in itself. As presented here, the Gonfalone is the prototypical expression of powerful currents for the reform of the Catholic religion that emerged in the century before Trent and that saw reform as a project of laity and clergy working collaboratively. Wisch and Newbigin devote separate chapters or groups of chapters to a wide range of separate initiatives that combined art, theatre, charity, and ritual life. The cult of St. Lucy at the confraternity's chief church of S. Lucia Nuova included rituals in which young women were

given dowries by the Gonfalone's *consorelle* and were paraded through a red light district to show prostitutes the hope of an alternate life; the Gonfalone also redecorated the public church itself with new works by leading artists (ch. 5–6). The Gonfalone's control of major miracle-working images brought popular influence and increasing clerical challenges (ch. 6–7), while its custodianship of the key church of S. Maria Annunziata outside Rome's walls brought it control of a significant collection of relics and the indulgences associated with them (ch. 8). It also operated a collection of hospitals (*ospedali*) and mobile charitable services established through previous centuries by its constituent brotherhoods (ch. 9).

The activity that demonstrated most clearly the Gonfalone's commitment to *public* expressions of faith that would convert, teach, and build up the *corpus christianum* was the set of processions and plays it developed from the later fifteenth century in order to mark Holy Week. Nothing demonstrates more clearly how much the brothers saw themselves as playing a major part in civic-religious life. They staged the Passion Week play in the Coliseum itself, and used it and other rituals to denounce what they took to be the serious menace that Jews posed to the spiritual integrity of the city of Rome and the Catholic faith (ch. 10–13). The play triggered such violent attacks on Rome's Jews that it was banned by papal authorities in 1539.

The Gonfalone's Passion play was on one level simply another example of the accelerating anti-Semitism that from the later fifteenth century was spurring the demonization, expulsion, or ghettoization of Jewish communities across Europe. Another was the Gonfalone's promotion of Rome's Monte di Pietà. Yet it was also an example of confraternal over-reach, and the play's suppression in 1539 marked the first serious curbing of the Gonfalone's civic-religious agenda by ecclesiastical authorities. From the late 1560s it lost its control over a major icon, and in the course of the following century its charitable work of offering dowries, running hospitals, redeeming prisoners, and ransoming slaves was greatly outdone by the new religious orders. Elevation to archconfraternal status (1579), a spectacular private oratory (1584), and new statutes (1585) marked both a peak and a shift in influence. Over the coming decades, the Gonfalone would become a more private and inward directed confraternity whose public mission was largely defined by its archconfraternal status and connections to the upper curia. Although it survived until the post-Risorgimento state suppressions, it was no longer the creative driving force for

public artistic, dramatic, and ritual innovations that Wisch and Newbiggin so skilfully describe, but an elite and privileged religious club.

With a wealth of illustrations and primary source texts, and a wide-ranging and heavily documented text, Wisch and Newbiggin portray the Gonfalone's steady rise and point to its relative decline. Their rigorous scholarship contextualizes the confraternity's urban presence, architectural profile, artistic innovations, and political and social roles in a critical period when Rome began setting the Church Local more firmly within the Church Universal. Their thorough collaboration offers an unparalleled example of seamless interdisciplinary work. This is an indispensable text for anyone wishing to understand the emergence of early modern Catholicism as an artistic and social phenomenon.

NICHOLAS TERPSTRA

University of Toronto