



# The Penitential Language of the Congregation of Artisans in the Neapolitan Pastoral Care of Francesco De Geronimo

Pasquale Rubini

Volume 31, Number 1, Spring 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1100132ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/confrat.v31i1.36864>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

1180-0682 (print)

2293-7579 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Rubini, P. (2020). The Penitential Language of the Congregation of Artisans in the Neapolitan Pastoral Care of Francesco De Geronimo. *Confraternitas*, 31(1), 35–51. <https://doi.org/10.33137/confrat.v31i1.36864>

Article abstract

Between the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, the Congregation of Artisans in Naples, spiritually led by the Jesuit Fr. Francesco De Geronimo, expressed its participation in the sufferings of Christ with a public procession that included elements of corporal penance. The ritual, meant to atone for one's own sins and those of others, also served to generate community involvement. This article examines the penitential practices of the Congregation of Artisans by contextualizing them in the missionary work of the Society of Jesus and its mission in "the internal Indies."

# The Penitential Language of the Congregation of Artisans in the Neapolitan Pastoral Care of Francesco De Geronimo

Pasquale Rubini

---

*Summary:* Between the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, the Congregation of Artisans in Naples, spiritually led by the Jesuit Fr. Francesco De Geronimo, expressed its participation in the sufferings of Christ with a public procession that included elements of corporal penance. The ritual, meant to atone for one's own sins and those of others, also served to generate community involvement. This article examines the penitential practices of the Congregation of Artisans by contextualizing them in the missionary work of the Society of Jesus and its mission in "the internal Indies."

## Introduction

The founding of new religious orders in the sixteenth century, and in particular of the Society of Jesus, brought a dramatic change to Catholic apostolic missions among the people by closely aligning the drive to spread Christian doctrine and discipline with the new "Tridentine paradigm", as Paolo Prodi called it,<sup>1</sup> that was emerging in the wake of the Council of Trent. A new and well defined missionary method was soon established, especially thanks to the Jesuits, that aligned missionary work in foreign lands with similar work within Catholic Europe; its aim was not only to convert unbelievers, but also to consolidate the faith and morals of those who had been baptized and were deemed to be believers, though perhaps not believers enough.

The Jesuit order, as the Society of Jesus is more commonly known, soon became the standard-bearer of a new approach to apostolic work that contributed greatly to the religious turning point of the Catholic Reformation. Through the 'internal missions' they carried out on the Italian peninsula, Sicily, and Sardinia they were able to foster the beginning of a social transformation in a context characterized by profound ignorance and by the presence of a secular clergy that was both poorly educated and culturally inadequate to the challenge. In addition to the establishment of colleges to educate the young, or active preaching in

---

<sup>1</sup> Prodi, *Il paradigma tridentino*, 7 and *passim*. Here and henceforth all translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

cathedrals and important churches to reach the general population, the Jesuits also developed a widespread missionary effort directed at the urban poor and rural dwellers.

### The Image of the 'Indies'

The arrival in town of a Jesuit returning from distant lands or the news of a new mission beyond the borders of Europe revived the hopes of the young who had entered the Order with the intention of dedicating their lives to the spread of the Gospel in foreign lands. They would formally petition the General of the order to be sent to the 'Indies' where they could put the philosophical, theological, rhetorical, and linguistic knowledge they had acquired in the order's colleges to work for the conversion of local populations. To an early modern Jesuit, the 'Indies' were those lands outside Europe that were in need of conversion— in the east, they included India, China, and Japan, and in the west the Americas. It was particularly disappointing for a young Jesuit to have his petition rejected and to be sent, instead, on a mission to nearby towns, especially if he had friends and family in the area. To overcome this disappointment the Order subdivided the image of the 'Indies' into the 'foreign Indies' and the 'internal Indies.' In the words of Adriano Prosperi, the image of the 'internal Indies' was part of "a process of abstraction and distancing that led to viewing as different and as not-Christian those peasants and Italian mountain folk whose adherence to the official [Catholic] religion no-one had previously placed in doubt."<sup>2</sup>

For aspiring Jesuit missionaries, being assigned to apostolic work among the poor people of a depressed urban neighborhood or in the countryside of Italy was a humiliation that obliged them to profoundly revise their aspirations: their compliance with the General's order required them to be able to change their desire for assignment to a foreign missions into a willingness to forego their dream and obey their superior, which they did in line with the Jesuit motto of "to the greater glory of God" (*ad maiorem Dei gloriam*), for the triumph of the Catholic Church, and the good of the Society of Jesus. Their only consolation lay in the certainty that the knowledge and skills they had acquired over the years of formal learning in the Society's colleges were the right tools to impart correct Christian doctrine and discipline to the *rudes*, that is, to the people of the countryside or of the urban slums who were considered to be rough, unrefined, and illiterate. The missionary saw himself as the 'soldier of Christ' (*miles Christi*) who served God by preaching and administering the sacraments. The mystique

<sup>2</sup> "[un] processo di astrazione e di allontanamento che portava a considerare come diversi e non cristiani quei contadini e quei montanari italiani di cui nessuno aveva contestato fino ad allora l'appartenenza alla religione ufficiale"; Prosperi, *Tribunali della coscienza*, 588.

of the apostolate animated the missionary drive and pushed “participants to generously face any sacrifice, even at the risk of their own lives.”<sup>3</sup>

The image of the ‘Indies’ served also as an indicator of the religious ignorance of the peasants by equating the European populations in need of catechesis with the indigenous populations of the Americas and the Far East. As such, the ‘Indies’ took the form of a literary topos that sought to transfer the crusade impulse of earlier times into missionary activity within Europe. As a result, the distant ‘Indies’ and the domestic ones were made equivalent. In the eyes of the Jesuits, the people of Europe, like the those of the Americas and the Far East, did not really know the teachings of Christianity, even though they had been baptized and supposedly raised in the Christian religion, since much of their behaviour was the result of an endemic ignorance that marked not only individuals but entire villages and hamlets. The missionary thus had to provide them with elementary catechesis, initiate practices of devotion and prayer, and reform their customs. By instructing them in Catholic doctrine and encouraging them to partake regularly in the sacraments of confession and communion, the Jesuit missionary helped to distance them from the risks of heresy, superstition, and immorality.

In Naples the cultural and religious illiteracy of the local population was particularly marked among families of shop keepers, artisans, fishermen, manufacturers, and labourers, while in the countryside it was prevalent among agricultural workers and livestock breeders.<sup>4</sup> Jesuits thus turned their missionary efforts towards these near-by existential frontiers aware that in order to change society it was necessary to start with the grassroots and their spiritual/moral life.

### The Jesuit Mission in Naples

Jesuit missions among the working class of Naples reached their peak in the seventeenth century and first half of the eighteenth, a time when “missionary activity carried on without respite since the end of the previous century, which in the 1720s (aided by the Enlightenment) took the form of systematic covering of entire regions, where towns and villages, without exception, were visited one after another.”<sup>5</sup> This practice was widely diffused and characterized by spectacular preaching, a sign of the Baroque aesthetics of the time.

<sup>3</sup> “i protagonisti ad affrontare generosamente qualsiasi sacrificio, anche a rischio della propria vita”; Orlandi, *I missionari redentoristi italiani*, 103.

<sup>4</sup> Poli, *Città contadine*, 120–121.

<sup>5</sup> Châtellier, *The Religion of the Poor*, 60.

In cities such as Naples, the preaching programs that were part of Jesuit missions among the poor unfolded over one or more days, usually Sundays and holidays. Each month the missionaries set their pulpits in public squares or underprivileged neighbourhoods and preached, did penances, organized processions, and invited people to go into the local churches, possibly those belonging to the Jesuits, to receive the sacraments of confession and communion. A lay confraternity was often present on site to help promote the mission and enrich the local religious milieu.

From the 1590s on, confraternities for the laity or for the clergy and conservatories for girls and young women increased in number to the point of becoming a characteristic of the passage of Jesuits missions in the Italian peninsula, both in important urban centres and in smaller rural communities.<sup>6</sup> Initially established in Jesuit colleges and residences, Jesuit-sponsored confraternities spread to other areas touched by the work of the Society and assisted the clergy by cooperating in the missions and continuing the apostolate under the guidance of spiritual directors. As Francesco Di Palo has noted, “the *solidales* [confraternity brothers], under the patronage of the Virgin, whose particular devotion they carried out and disseminated, established homogeneous congregations characterized by group exclusivity (nobles, clergy, artisans, farmers, students, etc.) or age, or marital status (single or married), perfectly in tune with their society and its members.”<sup>7</sup> He also points out that “they constituted a form and place of sociability, both controlled and controllable, that could counteract other forms of group membership”<sup>8</sup> especially those deemed to be too worldly or possibly sinful.

Between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries, a great missionary movement began to develop in Naples characterized by preaching in the squares and in the underprivileged quarters of the city, and by the practice of general Communion on the third Sunday of the month. From 1580 on, Jesuit theology students would leave their college every Sunday and preach in the most crowded parts of the city. Young nobles in the Jesuit colleges established a confraternity dedicated to the Virgin Immaculate; their special task was to go out ahead of the preachers and invite people to

---

<sup>6</sup> Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal*, 258–261.

<sup>7</sup> “I *solidales*, posti sotto il patronato della Vergine della quale praticano e diffondono la devozione particolare, formano congregazioni omogenee, caratterizzate cioè dall'esclusività di gruppi (nobili, clero, artigiani, contadini, scolari, ecc.), o di età o non ancora di condizione giuridica particolare (scapoli, coniugati), adattandosi perfettamente alla società ed alle sue componenti.” Di Palo, “Missioni, Missionari,” 326.

<sup>8</sup> “costituivano oltretutto una forma ed un luogo di socialità, peraltro controllata e controllabile, capaci di contrapporsi ad altri momenti di aggregazione”; Di Palo, “Missioni, Missionari,” 325.

gather to listen to them. After the sermons, the men who had come to hear the preaching followed the Jesuits to the church of *Gesù Nuovo* to confess.

Soon other confraternities dedicated to the Virgin Mary were established. In 1582 the most senior and respected artisans in Naples established the Confraternity of the Purification of the Virgin. In 1588, a confraternity of working class people was established out of the Purification; like so many other such groups, its purpose was to work for the salvation of its members and of others. As the Jesuit Francesco Maria D'Aria (1889–1976) noted:

This first confraternity of workers who made themselves apostles to their fellow men lacked only the name in order to be a *mission confraternity*. It officially received that title in 1626 when, after a few downturns, it was reorganized with a much wider scope as an integral part of the street missions that were, themselves, also developing further; it now acquired by antonomasia the name of the *Naples mission*.<sup>9</sup>

Between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the spiritual guide of this confraternity, known as the *Congregazione degli Artieri* (Confraternity of Artisans) was Fr. Francesco De Geronimo, S.J., (1641–1716) who had redirected his crusading drive from foreign missions to internal ones. For forty years he carried out his apostolic work among the working-class population in the streets and neighbourhoods of Naples so much so that he became known as the “Missionary of Naples.”<sup>10</sup> While civic and ecclesiastical institutions, including the Spanish and Roman Inquisitions, sought to control the public and political life of the city by dealing with sin as if it were a crime, De Geronimo sought instead to improve the social and cultural life of Naples by working on the conscience of individuals by way of persuasion and constant missionary work.

De Geronimo's *actio* turned words into visible events. He engaged his audience not only with his effective preaching, but also by visible physical means such as the blood and tears that were shed in public penitential acts, by the celebration of the sacraments, with the songs, lights, and flowers that were used in processions, with the *novevas* and in various devotions

<sup>9</sup> “A questa prima congregazione di lavoratori che si facevano apostoli dei propri compagni, non mancava che il nome per essere la *congregazione della missione*. Le fu dato ufficialmente nel 1626, allorchè, dopo alcuni anni di eclissi, fu organizzata con più vasto programma come parte integrante dell'apostolato della strada, il quale s'era anch'esso venuto sviluppando e aveva assunto per antonomasia il nome di *missione di Napoli*.” D'Aria, *Un restauratore sociale*, 203. On 23 March 1631 the confraternity was aggregated to the *Prima Primaria* (the first and foremost) in Rome.

<sup>10</sup> Stradiotti, *Della vita del P. Francesco di Geronimo*, 20.

to the Eucharist and the Virgin Mary. In this communicative process, the strong and persuasive modulation of his voice, vestments, body language, especially that of his face and hands, and the closeness of human interaction that included gestures of kindness and welcome, made the meaning and message of his words physically perceptible. This intimate conjunction of words and gestures served not only to entertain (*delectare*) his audience but also to encourage it to work for the salvation of their soul by partaking the sacraments, joining in prayers, doing penance, and giving alms. While this religious work was aimed at individuals, it also had an impact on families and the entire community, thereby affecting the social fabric of early modern Southern Italy.

### **The Spectacular Penance of the Confraternity of Artisans**

De Geronimo carried out his ministry in Naples by using a missionary praxis that had been in place for over a century and whose aim was to control society by imbuing it with militant Catholicism. This enterprise concerned very precise areas mentioned with accuracy by De Geronimo's first biographer, the Jesuit Carlo Stradiotti (1644–1724):

The Offices assigned to Father Francesco included only three very serious occupations, each of which is more than enough to fully occupy someone with a lot of spirit and strength. First, every Sunday and holiday he was to preach in the squares of Naples where the most idle people of this vast city normally gather. He was also in charge of regulating a very large and busy Congregation of Artisans whose goal is not only their own perfection, but also even more the well-being of their fellow men. Finally, he had to extend the invitation for General Communion every third Sunday of the month; not a light duty. Father Francesco personally carried out all three of these offices for many years until his death, without any interruption except when, in order to obey his Superiors and tend to the direction of other populations, he sometimes left Naples, either for some Lenten sermon cycle or for some other mission.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "L'Uffizio, a cui fu destinato il Padre Francesco, abbraccia in sè solo tre gravissime occupazioni, ciascuna delle quali è più che bastevole per impiegare interamente un Soggetto di molto spirito, e robustezza. Primieramente in ogni giorno festivo ha da predicare nelle Piazze di Napoli, dove appunto è solita radunarsi la gente più scioperata di questa vasta Città. In oltre hà l'incarico di regolare una di pari numerosa, e frequente Congregazione di Artieri, che attende di proposito non solo alla propria perfezione, ma di più alla salute del Prossimo. Finalmente deve far l'invito alla Comunione Generale per ogni terza Domenica del Mese; faccenda di peso non leggiero. Tutti e trè questi uffizj se gli addossò il Padre Francesco, e continuolli per molti anni fino alla morte, e senza che mai ne interrompesse le funzioni, se

In listing De Geronimo's tasks, Stradiotti placed preaching in the squares first and foremost, then his pastoral guidance to the Confraternity of Artisans (*Congregazione degli Artieri*), and finally his efforts to encourage the population to partake in the practice of General Communion on the third Sunday of the month.

The Confraternity of Artisans, which included both artists and artisans in the city, served as the link between the mission in the squares and the drive for the General Communion of the people. As such, it was the long arm of the Society of Jesus in Naples during the second half of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, a fundamental source of support for missionary work in the city. Once De Geronimo's apostolate started, the confraternity played a fundamental role in his religious and social work. It was the lay force that, together with De Geronimo's moral authority, tended to break down previously established attitudes and customs by supporting Jesuit preaching in the squares and encouraging General Communion, two practices that helped to form new attitudes and establish practices drawn from Tridentine doctrine and Jesuit spirituality. The confraternity had a hierarchical structure that echoed that of the Society of Jesus, complete with offices, tasks, devotional practices, and penitential rituals. During De Geronimo's time it consisted of a group of aspirants and two hundred members, seventy-two of whom formed a small group of penitents and collaborators called 'the secret':

The duty of these confraternity members is to walk ahead of the Father with a raised Crucifix in an orderly and modest procession through the city streets where on public holidays one goes to preach in the squares, also to break up, without violence, but frankly any groups of players and lead them to hear the sermon, and often even appear on theatre stages to order the comedians to be quiet and cede the stage to the preacher. Not all Brothers who are part of the general confraternity are admitted as a group to such fervent work; but from those who are considered to be more suited for it seventy-two are selected, and no more. These make up the secret Congregation, where together they carry out pious exercises and mortification that are most suited to fire anyone up with zeal and Divine Love even if one lives as a layman and is busy with the care of his family.<sup>12</sup>

---

non quando per ubbidire a' suoi Superiori, e soddisfare alla divozione di altri Popoli, uscì talora da Napoli, ò per qualche Quaresimale, ò per altre Missioni." Stradiotti, *Della vita del P. Francesco di Geronimo*, 21–22.

<sup>12</sup> "Questi Congregati hanno per regola di precedere al Padre con il Crocifisso inalberato, componendo un'ordinata, e modesta Processione per le strade della Città, qual'ora ne' giorni festivi si vada a predicare nelle Piazze; di più rompere senza violenza, ma con franchezza i circoli de' Giuocatori, menandogli ad ascoltare la predica, e spesso anche presentarsi a' palchi



In his *Brevi notizie delle cose di gloria di Dio accadute nell'esercizio delle sante Missioni di Napoli da 15 anni in qua* (1690)<sup>13</sup> De Geronimo described, in an apologetic spirit and propagandistic tone, the administrative structure and religious rituals of the Congregation of Artisans. Even though he was the confraternity's spiritual guide, he describes his work within the group in the third person, possibly to suggest that the pastoral care of the brotherhood was the prerogative of the entire Neapolitan Society of Jesus, not of himself alone. What emerges from his description are the confraternity's penitential aspect, its members' passionate involvement in the association, and their strong community cohesion, all of which may well be the result of De Geronimo's preaching and guidance. A modern reader will be struck by the group's spectacular and sensational practices, an expression of Neapolitan baroque culture in which the taste for the ephemeral was an expression of human existence marked, according to the sensitivity of the time, by dissimulation, ambiguity, and hypocrisy.

Among the various Congregations that exist in this Professed House for the help of the citizens who are nurtured in it for the profit of their souls, there is one called the Congregation, or Oratory of the Missions. In all the feast days of the year, as well as in their spiritual exercises which they do in the morning when they sing the Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Father who does the mission celebrates Mass, and there are always many who take Communion (aside from their two General Communions on the first and third Sunday of the month). And the same Father also delivers a fervent exhortation: and penances are given for faults committed or willingly sought. Aside from this, after lunch, their members return to the Congregation in order to accompany the Fathers who go into the city to preach in popular places, walking processionally and occasionally singing some devout little song; and they do this with so much pleasure that if sometime the Father needs to be away on a feast day and take a break from his missions, so as to go somewhere to rest, these brothers do not know how to leave the church and they say that when they

---

de' Comedianti, ed intimar loro che tacciano, e si ritirino per dar luogo al Predicatore. Ad uffizio di tanto zelo non si ammettono alla rinfusa tutti que' Fratelli, che frequentano la Congregazione pubblica; ma de' riputati più a proposito se ne fa una scelta di settantadue, e non più. Questi compongono una Congregazione segreta, dove s'impiegano in esercizi di pietà insieme, e di mortificazione, adattissimi per infiammare di zelo, e di Amor Divino chichesia, quantunque per altro viva in abito da Secolare, e tra le faccende dimestiche della sua Famiglia." Stradiotti, *Della vita del P. Francesco di Geronimo*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> The original autograph of the *Brevi notizie* is in the Roman Archive of the Society of Jesus (Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Opera Nostrorum, 47); it was edited and published by Giuseppe Boero in 1882 and then reprinted in 1883.

do not have a mission to go on they are as good as dead and they do not know where to go. Such is the benefit of a good practice that has become a virtue. They also do it with so much zeal that it is a marvelous thing to see with what affection they draw people to hear the Word of God and with what love, once the sermon is finished, they persuade them to accompany the Holy Crucifix and encourage them to go to Confession.

This Congregation gathers the most admired and esteemed artisans in town from various crafts and numbers 200 members. They participate diligently because the Father does not allow them to have their names listed in the register of names and not appear in the Congregation, for when he sees that someone has been missing for some time in a row, he immediately erases him from the list of brothers; as a result, one always sees the Congregation to be full, especially on the first Sunday of the month when the Most Holy [Sacrament] is exposed and the General Communion is taken in the Congregation; the same on the third Sunday [of the month]. At the end of the holy missions they return processionally to the Church to take Communion, together with the people, and to do the discipline, and after the intensity of this Penance the Father invites the people to enrol in the Congregation in order to truly work for the salvation of their Souls and on such occasion many young people are wont to enrol in the Congregation; and although not all of them return punctually, forgetting their good intentions once their little enthusiasm runs out, there is always someone, however, who remains faithful and, more sorrowful than others, does not have the courage to be unfaithful to God. Now, quite a lot of these who have come into the Congregation were full of vices, but little by little they have become so good that they are a great example, whereas before they were a great scandal, so much so that some fathers and wives have thanked God and the Father who have been the cause of such a beautiful change. And many of them admit to the same Father and in public Congregations the obligations they have for this place where, they say, they came to know God and to be known as Christians.

These good Congregants are encouraged to take General Communion on the aforementioned third Sunday [of the month], and they do it with so much zeal and passion that, aside from going around the city on the second Sunday, they do the same before the third Sunday when they take Holy Communion. On the Saturday before the third Sunday, at the first hour of night until the second hour,<sup>14</sup> about 36 members of the Congregation go through all the

---

<sup>14</sup> That is, one hour after sundown until the second hour after sundown.

major streets of the city and the suburbs first ringing their bells and then calling out, with their voice, the indulgence that one can earn at our Church; and they issue this invitation no matter what, even if a deluge is raining down or if it's snowing. As a result, in one hour the entire city is informed of the Most Holy General Communion.

Seventy-two of the most assiduous and diligent members of this Congregation are selected to be part of another Congregation that is called *Secret*. It meets twice a month, that is, on the first and third Sunday of each month, at one hour after lunch and one hour before we go through the city in our holy mission. Its meetings are held with door and windows closed, by candlelight, with very devout and fervent exercises, with a good half-hour of meditation either on the Passion of Christ or on death or on some other topic that might stimulate repentance; and then the discipline is carried out with all the lights off, with so much tearful crying that sometimes it was not possible to sing the penitential Psalm *Miserere*. Also, various punishments and penances are used during meditations such as kneeling all the time, or someone will wear a crown of thorns on his head, someone a rope around his neck, someone a cross on his shoulders, someone a skull in his hand, and some more than one of these penances. Other members carry out and seek other public penances from the Father; and so they ask others to slap them in the face, spit on their face; and so that these members may reap a benefit from these humiliations, they think it necessary to do this to them. They practice various acts of humility, throwing themselves face down to the ground with tears in their eyes and begging forgiveness from each other for their bad upbringing.

The brothers of this Congregation are divided into two turns, some [meet] on the Friday and some on the Saturday before the General Communion. They process through the city along different streets from those travelled on the previous Sunday, and they announce the said Holy Communion, and even though these are working days and they are craftsmen, nonetheless, they leave their shops that day in order to help out, in procession, with the announcing of the Communion. The members of this *Secreta* have, however, some privileges more than the public Congregation; one is that they have established and grown a fund among them with their own money, into which they pay every month, from which, if they are sick, they are paid 4 carlini per day, and upon their death a sum of 18 is spent on the obsequies. The other privilege they have is that they are buried in our Church with the donation of a very small sum to the sacristy for the candlewax that is consumed and the ringing of the small bells.

Because it is such a great honour for them, there are a lot of brothers who seek to be admitted into this secret Congregation.

On Sundays in Lent this secret Congregation meets with greater solemnity and more members because all brothers in the public Congregation are allowed to participate and, meditating normally on matters to do with the Passion they are wont to come to such an understanding that they give way to excesses of fervour, drawing near to adore the Crucifix in various forms of penance, some beating themselves on their naked shoulders, some dragging their tongue along the floor, some slapping themselves in the face, some dragging themselves along the ground, some in bare shoulders and chest, which produces not only great contrition, but also bears fruits that bring out new zeal. [...]

Many good fruits come from so many good spiritual exercises such as some who, having been offended by others who are not from the Congregation, either with biting words that are harmful to their Reputation or interests, or, as has happened, they have been threatened and also insulted [...], not caring about such worldly smoke, have thrown themselves, in the public street, at the feet of their offenders as if they themselves were the guilty party, much to the edification of the public, and when they were asked why they did this, they replied that Christ taught them so by mouth of the Spiritual Father.

With all this spiritual nurturing it also happens that many leave the world, their relatives, everything, and enter the Church. And so our Congregation can count on many of its children in our Society [of Jesus], others among the Capuchins, others with the Theresian [Carmelites], others with the Reformed Carmelites, others with the Reformed Franciscans, others, finally, with the Reformed Augustinians of St. Nicholas of Tolentino. Among the laity, then, many pray mentally every day, others carry little chains on certain days, and others, though young, live celibately in their marriage with the mutual agreement of their wife.<sup>15</sup>

Penance and participation in Eucharistic Communion were meant to make the brothers resemble Christ Crucified, to relive in their own body his painful passion and 'fix' the spirit in the search for good. Penance was not the goal, but an instrument to teach the will to choose good and to conform, in spirit and body, to the suffering Christ.

Already practiced in confraternities since the Middle Ages, penance was an expression of the theology of vicarious satisfaction advanced by

<sup>15</sup> Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Opera Nostrorum, 47, fols. 14<sup>r</sup>-16<sup>r</sup>. See the Appendix for a working transcription of the Italian original.

St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033/34–1109) in his *Cur Deus Homo?* (1098; *Why God was Man*). Anselm affirmed that the reason why the Son of God became man was to save humanity. This was accomplished through the willing sacrifice of Christ. Sin entails a penalty to be suffered, one that Christ paid with his sufferings, thus offering salvation to human beings. By taking sin upon himself, Jesus represented all humanity: his atonement is representative, inclusive, and supportive. Through their own penances, the missionaries and the faithful sought to join in the sufferings of Christ and to be associated with him, expiating their own faults and those of others, forging their own will in the search for good. Suffering was conceived not only as a punishment for sin, but also as a way to sanctify oneself and others. If on the one hand penance caused pain, on the other hand it actualized, over time, the beneficial effects of Christ's redemption by uniting the penitent's sufferings with those of Christ and offering them to expiate one's own sins and those of others.

The *secreta* congregation not only valued penance as an instrument of expiation, but also facilitated the development of relationships within the community of the members who, finding the emotional rather than rational motivations in the words of their spiritual Father and the example and assistance he provided, felt how important it was to belong to the confraternity community that guaranteed them assistance in times of illness and a proper burial in the church of the Gesù Nuovo in Naples. Confraternal relationships were not, however, the sole prerogative of the *secreta*, but of the entire association. This internal cohesion was visible during the confraternity's missions in the squares and in its meditations on the Passion, in its prayers and Quadragesima penances. A religious education, ecclesiastical and social bonds, and the penitential strategies of the Congregation of Artisans had a noticeable influence on the young members of the confraternity, some of whom embraced a religious life while others remained in the laity and devoted themselves more assiduously to devout practices.

In Fr. Francesco De Geronimo members found a model to imitate and follow. Through his own penitential practices De Geronimo showed himself to be close to the people whose life was characterized by misery and ignorance. He brought about an inner cathartic process that externalized in public penance the sufferings that were part of the precariousness of the life of the men and women who found comfort in their identification with the sufferings of Christ. This communicative strategy allowed the drama of human existence, expressed in the shedding of tears and blood, to be scripted with religious gestures and words. The religious spectacle of penance became a way to identify the cause of one's own dishonorable condition of being 'in sin' and then a way to expiate it and find peace. In the end, even though the 'evil' was believed to have been forgiven by

God because of Christ's sufferings and their own penances, the unjust structures of a society built on inequality remained in place and the poor remained slaves of their own misery. De Geronimo's charitable assistance and their faith in miracles helped them to survive. These subjective and interpersonal experiences became, in the preaching of Fr. De Geronimo in the squares and in the infamous neighborhoods of Naples, community experiences and part of the mentality of the people.

## Conclusion

In the early modern period the devotional practices carried out by confraternities assumed "increasingly popular characteristics with a pressing rhythm, projecting themselves, with profoundly suggestive effects, into continuous collective penitential appeals."<sup>16</sup> After the Council of Trent the confraternities that arose from the spirituality of the religious orders "modelled forms of piety and types of devotions destined to impress the fleeting urban realities and the prevailing rural structures of Southern Italy's civilization and culture for a very long time."<sup>17</sup> The Neapolitan mission that saw the participation of Congregation of Artisans is a testament to the strength of penitential action understood as the communicative energy of the popular missionary zeal that tended to form individuals, families, and society in Christian terms. This missionary project led Fr. Francesco De Geronimo and the members of the Congregation of Artisans into the city's public spaces of Naples where they practiced a spectacular form of devotion that sought to make the drama of human existence visible and theatrical.

FACOLTÀ TEOLOGICA PUGLIESE, BARI

---

<sup>16</sup> "caratteristiche sempre più popolari avendo un ritmo incalzante, proiettandosi, con effetti di profonda suggestione, in continui richiami penitenziali collettivi"; Rosa, *Religione e società nel Mezzogiorno*, 267.

<sup>17</sup> "modellarono forme di pietà e tipi di devozioni destinati ad improntare per lunghissimo tempo le labili realtà urbane e le prevalenti strutture rurali della civiltà e della cultura del Mezzogiorno"; Rosa, *Religione e società nel Mezzogiorno*, 267.

## Appendix

Francesco De Geronimo's description of the Congregation of Artisans in Naples  
(Rome, Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Opera Nostrorum, 47, fols. 14<sup>r</sup>-16<sup>r</sup>)

Fra l'altre Congregazioni che si fanno in questa Casa Professa per aiuto de Cittadini, che si fanno coltivare per il profitto dell'Anime loro, vi è una chiamata Congregazione, ovvero Oratorio delle Missioni. Questo in tutte le feste dell'Anno oltre del loro esercizio spirituale che se li fa la matina quando cantano l'Officio della B.ma Vergine, se li dice la messa dal Padre che fa la missione nella quale vi è continuamente numerosa Comunione (oltre delle due loro Communioni Generali prima e 3<sup>a</sup> Domenica di mese) se li fa dal medesimo Padre una fruttuosa esortazione, e si danno penitenze per mancanze commesse o volontariamente cercate. Oltre di questo li fratelli dopo il Pranzo ritornano a detta Congregazione per accompagnare li Padri che vanno per la Città predicando ne' luoghi popolati processionalmente cantando di quando in quando qualche divota canzoncina; lo che fanno con tanto gusto, che se occorre qualche festa d'haver dal Padre qualche vacanza dalle missioni, acciò si vadano a ricreare, non si sanno però partir dalla Chiesa dicendo che quando non hanno missione son come morti, e non sanno dove andare. Tanto giova il buon habito fatto nella virtù. Lo fanno parimente con tanto zelo, che è cosa mirabile il vedere con che affetto tirano la Gente à sentir la Parola di Dio, e con che amore persuadono, finita la Predica, di accompagnare il Santo Crocifisso; et esortarla alle Confessioni.

Questa Congregazione è d'Artisti li più honorati, e stimati per la Città; di diverse arti è numerosa di 200 Congregati, che sono assidui non permettendosi dal Padre che siano solo notati alla tabella li nomi, e non compariscano in Congregazione le persone, per lo che quando vede che qualcheduno manca per qualche tempo continuato, subito lo cancella dal numero dei fratelli; donde nasce che sempre si vede la Congregazione piena, particolarmente la prima domenica del mese quando si espone il SS.mo con musica e si fa in Congregazione la Comunione Generale; atteso nella 3<sup>a</sup> Domenica, vanno processionalmente a comunicarsi in Chiesa. Coll'occasione delle sante missioni nel ritorno che si fa colla Gente per farsi la disciplina suole il Padre dopo il fervore di quella penitenza invitarla a scriversi nella Congregazione per attendere davvero alla salute dell'Anima e con tale occasione sogliono scriversi molti giovani nella Congregazione delli quali benché non tutti sian puntuali; scordandosi poi finito quel poco di fervore de buoni proponimenti; sempre però osserva fedeltà tal'uno, che più ferito dell'altro non li basta l'animo di usare infedeltà con Dio. Hor di

questi molti e molti sono venuti alla Congregazione viziosissimi; ma poco a poco son divenuti così buoni, che son di grand'esempio per dove furono di gran scandalo; onde si son stati padri e mogli che han ringraziato Iddio et il Padre che sono stati causa di sì belle mutazioni. E molti confessano al Padre medesimo, et in pubblica Congregazione l'obbligo che hanno a tal luogo, dove dicono d'haver conosciuto Dio, et esser diventati christiani.

A questi buoni Congregati sta raccomandata la Comunione Generale della 3<sup>a</sup> Domenica sopradetta, e lo fanno con tanto zelo e fervore, che oltre dell'andar per la Città la 2<sup>a</sup> Domenica, cioè l'antecedente alla 3<sup>a</sup> in cui si fa detta Santa Comunione il sabbato precedente a la 3<sup>a</sup> Domenica ad un'ora di notte incirca fino alle due scrono circa 36 di detti Congregati per tutte le strade principali della Città e Borghi dando prima segno co' l suono de campanelli e poi a viva voce intonare l'indulgenza che nella nostra Chiesa si guadagna; e ciò inviolabilmente fanno ancorché piova il cielo a diluvio, l'acqua o neve; onde ne siegue, che in un'ora si notifica per tutta la Città la SS.ma Comunione Generale.

Da questa Congregazione si sono scelti 72 fratelli delli più frequenti et osservanti quali compongono un'altra Congregazione che si chiama *Secreta*. Questa si fa due volte il mese, cioè la prima e 3<sup>a</sup> Domenica di ciascheduno mese nell'ora del doppo Pranzo un'ora prima che si vada per la Città nella santa missione. Questa si fa parimente con porta e finestre serrate con luci di candele con esercizij molto divoti e fervorosi, con una buona mezz'ora di meditazione o della Passione di Christo o della morte o altra materia che cagioni compunzione; poi li si fa la disciplina con l'aria totalmente oscurata, in cui li pianti sono sì dirotti che tal'ora non li s'è potuto cantare il Salmo penitenziale: *Miserere*. Di più in detto tempo di meditazione s'usano varie mortificazioni e penitenze cioè: chi sta continuamente in ginocchio; chi tiene corona di spine in testa, chi una fune al collo, chi croce sulle spalle, chi teschio di morto in mano, e chi più d'una di tali penitenze; altri fanno, e cercano dal Padre pubbliche penitenze; onde si vanno pregando l'un l'altro di essersi schiaffeggiato, chi sputata la faccia; e perché fratelli a chi si cercano tali penitenze, pensano doversi loro tali mortificazioni; s'essercitano varij atti d'humità, buttandosi colle lagrime agli occhi l'un l'altro a piedi la faccia in terra cercandosi vicendevolmente perdono della mala edificazione.

Li fratelli di questa Congregazione *secretata* si dividono in due tormi, quali li Venerdì e Sabbati antecedenti alla sopradetta Comunione Generale fanno Processione per la Città per altre strade diverse da quelle che si son scorse la Domenica antecedente, e s'avvisa la detta Santa Comunione, e benché siano giorni feriali e loro Artisti lasciano però per quella mezza giornata le loro botteghe per assistere processionalmente all'avviso della Comunione. Hanno però questi Congregati della *secretata* alcuni privilegij più della Congregazione pubblica, e sono che hanno tra



di loro un monte fondato e cresciuto con propij denari, che pagano in ciascheduno mese co' l quale nelle loro infermità se li dà 4 carlini il giorno, et in caso di morte se li spende nell'esequia la somma di 18 ducati. L'altro privilegio che hanno si è che si sepeliscono nella nostra Chiesa con darsi alla sacristia pochissima summa per la cera che vi si consuma, suono di campane. Lo che essendo di grande loro honore vi è gran concorso di fratelli, che cercano d'esser ammessi in detta Congregazione secreta.

Le Domeniche poi di Quaresima questa Congregazione secreta si fa con maggior solennità e concorso, dandosi licenza di venire a tutti li fratelli della Congregazione publica e meditandosi d'ordinario materie della Passione sogliono venire in tale comprensione, che danno in eccessi di fervore, accostandosi ad adorare il Crocifisso in varie forme di penitenza, chi battendosi a spalle nude, chi strascinando per terra la lingua, chi schiaffeggiandosi la faccia, chi strascinandosi tutto per terra et alcuni con spalle, e petti ignudi, lo che cagiona non solo gran compunzione, ma parimente frutto cavandosi nuovo fervore ne costumi.

Da tanti buoni esercizi spirituali ne sieguono molti buoni frutti, come sono, che alcuni essendo offesi da altri che non sono di Congregazione o con parole ingiuriose o piccanti nella Riputazione o l'interesse; et ancora è succeduto che minacciati, et anche oltraggiati con mazze; loro non curandosi di fumi mondani, si son buttati a piedi de' loro offensori in publiche strade, come se loro fossero li colpevoli con grand'edificazione del publico; e dimandati perche havevano fatto quell'atto, han risposto che così l'insegnava Christo per bocca del Padre loro Spirituale.

Per tanta coltura spirituale ne nasce ancora che molti se ne fanno Religiosi abandonando il secolo, parenti, e tutto; onde conta per suoi figli detta Congregazione molti della nostra Compagnia, altri Cappuccini, altri Teresiani, altri Carmelitani Riformati; altri Francescani della Riforma; altri finalmente Agostiniani della Riforma di S. Nicolò da Tolentino. Delli Secolari poi molti fanno orazione mentale ogni giorno, altri portano catenelle in alcuni giorni segnalati; et alcuni benché giovani vivono casti nel loro matrimonio con commune consenso colla loro moglie.

## CITED WORKS

*Manuscript Sources*

- Rome. Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu (ARSI)  
 Opera Nostrorum, 47. De Geronimo, Francesco. *Brevi notizie delle cose di gloria di Dio accadute nell'esercizio delle sante Missioni di Napoli da 15 anni in quà; quanto si è potuto richiamare in memoria*. [Edited and published by Giuseppe Boero in his *San Francesco Di Girolamo e le sue missioni dentro e fuori di Napoli*. Florence: Tipografia della SS. Concezione di R. Ricci, 1882, 67–181; republished, 1883).

*Printed Sources*

- Châtellier, Louis. *The Religion of the Poor: Rural Missions in Europe and the Formation of Modern Catholicism, c. 1500–c. 1800*, transl. Brian Pearce. Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press / [Paris]: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1997.
- D'Aria, Francesco Maria. *Un restauratore sociale. Storia critica della vita di San Francesco De Geronimo da documenti inediti*. Roma: Edizioni Italiane, 1943.
- Di Palo, Francesco. "Missioni, Missionari, Congregazioni mariane. L'attività del Gesuita Domenico Bruno (1665–1730) in Terra di Bari." In Luigi Michele de Palma (ed.), *Studi in onore di Mons. Antonio Bello*. Quaderni dell'Archivio Diocesano di Molfetta-Ruvo-Giovinazzo-Terlizzi, 14. Molfetta (BA): Mezzina, 1992, 321–363.
- Hsia, Ronni Po-chia. *The World of Catholic Renewal (1540–1770)*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Poli, Giuseppe. *Città contadine. La Puglia dell'olio e del grano in età moderna*. Bari: Progedit, 2004.
- Prodi, Paolo. *Il paradigma tridentino. Un'epoca della storia della Chiesa*. Brescia: Morcelliana, 2010.
- Prosperi, Adriano. *Tribunali della coscienza. Inquisitori, confessori, missionari*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Turin: Einaudi, 2009.
- Orlandi, Giuseppe. *I missionari redentoristi italiani nel Settecento: reclutamento, formazione e attività*. In Christian Sorrel and Frédéric Meyer, eds., *Les Missions intérieures en France et en Italie du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Actes du colloque de Chambéry (18–20 mars 1999)*. Chambéry: Institut d'études savoisiennes-Université de Savoie, 2001, pp. 103–116.
- Rosa, Mario. *Religione e società nel Mezzogiorno tra Cinque e Seicento*. Bari: De Donato, 1976.
- Stradiotti, Carlo. *Della vita del P. Francesco di Geronimo della Compagnia di Gesù*. Naples: Tipografia Luigi Muzio, 1719.