

## **Sodalities of the Blessed Virgin Mary: Forging Ties That Bind Here and Hereafter**

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One of the foundational principles of the Catholic social teaching tradition is that of “solidarity”. This is generally understood as the establishment of a sense of mutual care among citizens at the social level. Solidarity is primarily considered as a horizontal dynamic, if you will. However, it is perhaps beneficial to conceive of solidarity in another dimension, namely in its transcendent, or vertical, aspect. The cultivation of a genuinely religious imagination is rightly construed as the establishment, in a sense, of solidarity between members of the heavenly community with those of the earthly one. A true “culture of life”, while expressed in the earthly arena, must be informed by and take its cues from strong bonds with God and those who have gained special union with him, the saints. Only in so far as the social bonds are informed by the religious bonds and vice versa, does a reality emerge in which the fullness of the dignity of the human person (both individually and communally) is truly recognized and promoted.

Robert Orsi has contributed in understanding this dynamic from an historical and sociological perspective. He describes how these bonds are established and nurtured both within the earthly community, and also how they are negotiated with the heavenly community by means of popular devotion to the saints. Both in *The Madonna of 115<sup>th</sup> St* and in *Thank You, St. Jude*, Orsi gives highly detailed descriptions of how it is that devotion to these heavenly figures so powerfully serve to shape the imaginations and world-views of ordinary people with the most human of needs. Whether the case is one of immigrants trying to forge a life in a new world for their families in the company of their fellow countrymen or the universally human trials of difficulties with romantic

relationships or loved ones suffering poor health, devotion to these figures in the heavenly community, predicated on a well-cultivated religious imagination, makes possible a sense of clear identity and solidarity- key aspects of a “culture of life”.

Colleen McDannell provides a kind of complement to Orsi’s work on the dynamics of popular devotion. In *Material Christianity*, McDannell offers a close study of the potency of material religious objects in shaping the imagination. Describing the use of religious “kitsch” in the Christian home and everyday aspects of the lives of Christians, she provides a compelling argument for the power of seemingly trivial devotional objects to work as signs of identity and meaning-makers for those who possess them. These objects go a long way in mediating the relationships between those here and now and those in the hereafter.

There is much evidence which suggests today that the bonds in both these realms- the vertical as well as the horizontal- have weakened significantly. Stephen Carter’s *Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*, for instance, traces in the legal and political realms, the degree to which our society is increasingly secularized as a matter of policy while religious commitment and expression are largely limited to the realm of private opinion. Robert Putnam’s study of contemporary civic participation, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* describes the widespread diminishment of belonging to and acting within intermediary institutions, from gardening clubs and fraternal organizations to political and social action groups over the last 40 years which has devastating effects on the social fabric of this country.

The decline in communal and public expressions of religious devotion has imitated, says Putnam, the weakening of social institutions which historically have provided so much to strengthen the bonds which make a flourishing culture possible. Indeed, we now run the risk of a kind of widespread amnesia with respect to this social and religious heritage which has preceded us. Already it is difficult to even imagine how such a culture in which these bonds, both horizontal and vertical, ever even existed. As a way of renewing the possibility of an authentic solidarity today, it is beneficial to examine expressions of it from our past. One such expression from our own culture's not-so-distant past was aimed, simultaneously, at the development of both vertical and horizontal solidarity. The following is a brief sketch of the nature and dynamic of the Freshman Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary, founded in 1916 for newly arrived students at Boston College.

From the very first meeting on February 22<sup>nd</sup> until the last of the year on May 10<sup>th</sup> gathering nearly every week at 9:00 am and concluding at 9:30 sharp, this group of 50-100 young men, were methodically given both a set of ethical ideals to strive for and an imaginative framework within which to understand themselves in the world, both individually and communally. Central to the continuing formation of this identity was deepening the sense of their relationship to the heavenly community by means of the Sodality of Our Lady.

The secretary of the sodality, already shaped by the romantic Catholicism of the day describes the conditions under which the first meeting took place. Detailing the frozen reservoir at the base of the campus and the icy wind which was "striving to chill as it were the fervour of the new society", he is already aware of the importance of this

organization in waging a kind of spiritual warfare. Elements of this struggle of good against evil, at both the social and cosmic levels, are evident throughout this formation. The secretary would later note the “*sacrifice* ever present in the Boston College man, a characteristic which marks him in every walk of life as a man of high ideals, a staunch defender of the church and a faithful and devoted servant of the Mother of God.”

As an heir to the romantic privileging of the medieval spirit, the young secretary conceives of this important membership as something akin to a modern day knighthood. The “Boston College man”, already an ideal type for this newcomer to the campus, is one who sacrifices of himself and is who defends the integrity of the church, the institution on earth which somehow embodies the divine life for which he strives, along with his companions, as his ultimate end. But it is not just a faceless institution which he defends. The inclusion of “the Mother of God” as the most proximate figure for whom he will show devotion and demonstrate service, is a powerful imaginative tool in personifying for the sodalists all that is good and pure and honorable. In this all-male environment, by the way, it is no mistake that particular devotion would be aimed at the feminine, appealing to the masculine and gentlemanly desires of the young men gathered together on that cold February morning.

In the last few minutes of the initial meeting, Fr. Richard O’Brien, moderator of the Freshman Sodality, addressed his new charges, beginning by articulating the tradition these young men were inheriting. After a brief explanation of the purpose of the sodality, he referred to the foundation of the “Prima Primaria” in Rome. Since 1563, when Jean Leunis, a Belgian Jesuit scholastic teaching at the Roman College took the initiative to gather his students outside of classes to offer further encouragement in the life of piety

and Christian service, the Sodality of Our Lady had been an essential aspect of the project of Jesuit education. Within a few years, there were sodalities present in every Jesuit school in the world, imitating the program of the “Prima Primaria” at the Roman College. All throughout Europe, extending to India, Brazil and beyond, young men were being drawn into key aspects of the spirituality which shaped their own Jesuit teachers and which led them to make an offering of their lives for the greater glory of God and for the salvation of souls. Through these pious organizations, students were given a share in the imaginative framework of the members of the Society of Jesus which allowed them to dream dreams as St. Ignatius did of doing great things for God. The Jesuit school would be the place where these dreams would be cultivated. Boston College in 1916 was no exception.

The minutes of the next meeting includes an account of a “ferverino” given by Fr. O’Brien which more directly aimed at the building up of the religious imagination through the use of narrative. The Jesuit moderator’s story was of how St. Ignatius of Loyola established friendships with those who would become his fellow founders of the Society of Jesus. They had met as students at the University of Paris and, under the inspiration of the recently converted Ignatius, this band of friends gradually became convinced of their call to serve the Lord and His Church with their whole minds, hearts and souls. O’Brien gave special attention to the familiar story of Ignatius prodding Francis Xavier to give up his tendency of “aspiring for fame and honor” as a career cleric and probable bishop. Ignatius recalled the admonition of Christ in the gospel, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose in soul?” As a consequence of this friendship of school companions, Xavier chose a life of mortification, poverty and

imitation of Christ poor and humiliated. The student secretary noted the relevance of this story to his own time and to his own friends at Boston College: “The Rev. Moderator pointed out the foolishness of seeking only worldly goods and allowing ourselves to become proud and vain...forgetting the end for which we are created.”

Other sodality meetings that year were devoted to topics including the merits of frequent confession and communion as well as Marian devotion. The sacraments, Fr. O’Brien told the students are the food which nourishes in order to continue exercising “our spiritual sinew and muscle.” So too, proper attention to Mary by participating in the sodality named for her is a way of sacrificing and exercising one’s own mind, heart and will. A reference made at the beginning of the minutes for the second week indicates a pattern already being established in this effort to promote Marian devotion, noting “the usual office and prayers was read.” The office refers to the “Little Office of Our Lady”, apparently widely enough known even outside sodality circles, that its recitation was understood to be “usual” at only the second meeting of the group.

O’Brien concludes this session explaining the link between their participation in the sodality as a means to strengthening the bonds of heavenly friendship as well as earthly ones, concluding: “By making this little sacrifice now of devotion to Mary, when we lie down to die, it will be our happiest thought that we have been faithful to the sodalists of Our Lady.” Note the consolation comes here not just in the fidelity to our Lady, but to the other sodalists who shared the same practice of honoring Our Lady. Members were also urged to pray similar dedicatory prayers to the Virgin Mary on a daily basis as well as a whole array of pious phrases throughout the day, continually nourishing the religious imagination, referring to their guardian angels, Mary, Mother and Queen, Her

Immaculate Heart, various favorite saints, etc. In short, keeping the lines of communication open with the heavenly friends continued to establish that vertical solidarity which, in turn, led to continuous reminders of the importance one's daily actions on the horizontal level. Each of these two dimensions of a sodalist's life was, ideally, continually shaping the other.

In a similar vein, devotion to The Sacred Heart of Jesus and specifically, the prayer of the Morning Offering played a central role in the life of the sodality. This explicitly Christo-centric devotion placed special emphasis on the cultivation of an intimate relationship with the person of Jesus aiming to unite one's heart to the heart of the Lord. For example, the 1885 Instruction pamphlet for the Sodality of Blessed Virgin Mary spells out clearly how the sodalist was to grow in this intimacy, directing him or her:

“To be said once a day  
Before a Picture of the Sacred Heart,  
“My loving Jesus! I \_\_\_\_\_ give Thee my heart, and out of the grateful love I bear  
for Thee, and as a reparation for all my unfaithfulness I consecrate myself entirely to  
Thee, and with the help of Thy grace I purpose never to sin again.”

It is striking here the directive to be looking at the image of Christ while reciting this prayer daily, thereby establishing the religious imagination as a powerful means to building up friendship with the Lord while allowing that friendship to lead one in the effort to live a virtuous life.

Having taken a closer look at one particular sodality, brief reference must be made as to how widespread sodalities were in the earlier in the last century. In 1934, for example, there were 1,143 school-based sodalities in existence and another 8,210 parish-based sodalities functioning throughout the country. In 1957, 205 of these sodalities were of that elite type which was directly associated with the “Prima Primaria” in Rome. Tens of thousands of sodalists were active in every part of the country for much of the last

century. To give shape and coherence to this massive movement, the Queen's Work, a publishing house in St Louis, supplied countless thousands of instruction manuals for prayer and examination of conscience, pamphlets elaborating Catholic teaching on every imaginable social problem of the day, inspirational materials aiding meditation on major liturgical feasts, lives of the saints, etc. Fr. Dan Lord, director of the Queen's Work for much of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, personally authored over 220 of these pamphlets for a total of some 20,000,000 copies distributed to sodalists throughout the country. He also established what were known as summer schools of Catholic action in various parts of the country in the summer months to provide a more intensive religious formation for sodalists while cultivating strong bonds of friendship of youth who would otherwise never have met one another. For these occasions, Fr Lord wrote 26 morality plays, 12 liturgical pageants and 3 full-blown musicals as further means to cultivating the religious imagination through drama, song and dance. The efforts in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the likes of Fr. Lord as well as countless moderators like Fr. O'Brien at Boston College in 1916, helped to inspire thousands of young Catholics to take their place in American culture as agents for social improvement, i.e. to build up a "culture of life".