

Catholic Charity in Perspective: The Social Life of Devotion in Portugal and its Empire (1450-1700)

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Abstract

This article tries to outline the major differences between practices of charity within Europe, either comparing Catholics to Protestants, or different Catholic areas. The point of departure is constituted by the study of the *Misericórdias*, lay confraternities under royal protection who would develop as one of the main (if not the greatest) dispensers of charity either in Portugal or its Empire. Its evolution since the formation of the first *misericórdia* in Lisbon to the end of the seventeenth century is analysed, relating these confraternities to political, social and religious changes that occurred in the period under analysis. Issues related to their functioning, membership, rules, and economic activities, as well as the types of needy they cared for, are also dealt with, mainly through the comparison of different colonial and metropolitan *misericórdias*.

Keywords

Charity; Catholic and Protestant Europe; Poverty; Devotion; State Building

In the past, charity was a form of devotion, being one of the ways in which Christians could honor God. As one of the theological virtues, together with faith and hope, it enjoyed a high position in the hierarchy of religious behavior. The concern with charity was common to Catholics and Protestants, but with one major difference. Whilst the former could obtain salvation through good works and might be relatively sure that forgiveness of sins could be obtained through charity, the latter could not rely on such a possibility, since God alone could save believers, without the agency of the individual or intermediaries.

Recently, historiography on the subject of charity and poor relief has rediscovered the centrality of religious beliefs in the framing of charitable action. This new tendency is supposedly a reaction against the "socio-economic" approach of famous works by Natalie Zemon Davies (1968) and Brian Pullan (1971). Both authors maintained that differences between Catholics and Protestants did not alter the fact that in both religious frameworks the poor that were to be helped through charity were subject to selective devices that involved choosing between a large number of candidates for relief. Social pressure created by the outbreak of famine, plague or the overpopulation of cities crowded with immigrants led to a sometimes uncontrollable increase in the numbers of poor people in need of help. As such, these historians emphasized the fact that both Catholics and Protestants felt the need for a reform in poor relief.

On the other hand, since the beginning of the 1990s, the "religious approach" authors have stressed the relationship between religious ideology and charitable practices. Carter Lindberg studied the changes in attitudes towards work and poverty brought about by the ideas of Martin Luther and his followers (1993). Ole Peter Grell and Andrew Cunningham edited a collective volume on poor relief in Protestant Europe, while stressing the need to study the subject from the

religious standpoint¹. Critchlow and Parker (1999) explored the importance of the pervading notions of community in the shaping of charitable action.

Ideas about who belonged to a community no doubt exerted a decisive influence upon who was helped and who was denied relief. Charity was one of the performative devices that created the boundaries of community (Cavallo, 1995). The different Protestant churches and sects certainly took care of their own members, and the same can be said for Catholics. Catholic empires, which, at least until the eighteenth century, were more concerned with proselytization than the Protestant ones, integrated converts inside the boundaries of community. Although charity was universal within the Catholic Church, help could be refused to those who had not received the baptismal water, or to those who were not willing to confess and receive communion.

As we shall see, religious culture does not explain much about the organizational devices that are set in motion when we analyze the institutional practices of charity by a given political unit, or even at a single-city level. If the religious or "community" approach helps to explain most attitudes towards the poor and their relief, it does not fully take into account the organizational specificities of each local society. Nor does it acknowledge the centrality of the study of religious forms and beliefs in the works of either Natalie Davis or Brian Pullan, whose attention to doctrine is more profound than their critics suggest. The key feature of those extremely variable "systems" of poor relief is, of course, locality, but, as we shall see in the Portuguese case, it also involves the integration of such areas into broader organizations that we commonly designate the "Early Modern State". Institutional diversity was restrained by the existence of "umbrella" institutions and common procedures that were implemented by the incipient central institutions. As we shall see, the Portuguese case illustrates this point beyond any doubt, as the modern Portuguese state developed through the pressure caused by the need to draw profits from maritime commerce and by the development of a colonial administration that could relate to the metropolitan institutions.

We cannot ignore the various Protestant churches and sects and their different ways of dealing with poverty, but it is also risky to think about Catholic charity as being the same within the Italian states or in the kingdoms that formed Spain or Portugal, to name only a few examples. In spite of the fact that Portugal was Catholic, its forms of charity differed significantly from those found in other Catholic areas. Catholic culture or the Catholic sense of community cannot account for all the differences in institutional charity between the various areas. What is the explanation for these organizational differences? This article will try to explore the idea that, in the Portuguese case, the evolution of the kingdom along an imperial path, which enabled the country to evolve through homogenous sets of institutions, is responsible for relatively unified practices in terms of charity. Portugal as a sovereign state owes largely to the fact that the reign expanded overseas. In the first place, the crown was able to rely on funding from overseas trade; secondly, the "center" had to evolve in order to structure institutions that would work not only at home but also overseas. I will thus use an approach that does not ignore the centrality of religious doctrine and Catholic notions of community, but that is also aware of the political, economic and social configurations that modeled charity in Portugal and its empire.

Early Modern Catholic charity

Certainly, Catholic charity enjoys common features throughout the countries that remained faithful to Roman authority, or, to use John O'Malley's recent suggestion, "Early Modern Catholic Europe" (2000). At a schematic level, Catholic charity can be contrasted with all the practices that the Protestants tended to abolish. Let us name only a few.

In spite of ubiquitous attempts to control begging and vagrancy, the Catholic world tended toward a relative tolerance for beggars, unthinkable in Protestant areas. Luther's ideas, for instance, were directed toward the total elimination of beggars, and not to control of begging (Lindberg, 1993: 106). Begging in public was strictly forbidden in Zwingli's Zurich (Wandel,

¹ Cf., in particular, the essay by Ole Peter Grell, 'The Protestant imperative of Christian care and neighborly love', in Ole Peter Grell and Andrew Cunningham, *Health Care and Poor Relief in Protestant Europe 1500-1700*, London, 1997, pp. 43-65.

1990). The attempts to suppress beggars in Protestant areas, except for cases such as Lyon or Ypres where reforms were led by Catholics (Davis, 1968), were not systematic in the Counter-Reformation world, where there were merely occasional outbursts calling for the repression of mendicants.

Whereas Protestant devotion is characterized by logocentrism (Todd, 2002), Catholic charity is part of an iconic religion. The images conveyed through ritual not only kept center stage, but were also emphasized during the baroque era. Catholic charity made itself visible through ritual, ensuring the participation of the larger community in the act of giving (Sá, 2001). As one of the possible displays of devotion available to a Catholic individual, the practice of charity was sacralized through a broad spectrum of different rituals. Among them, one could mention the public almsgiving by important civic and religious personalities; the Washing of the Feet on Maundy Thursday or the participation of large groups of poor people in burial processions, and the celebration of thousands of masses for the dead souls in Purgatory. Not that the Protestant world completely erased rituals from religious life, but its emphasis on direct contact with the Scriptures caused ritual to be seen as less important than particular forms of interiorized devotion (Muir, 1997). Natalie Davis (1980) emphasized the Protestant "human communication network", as opposed to the Catholic ceremonial moments in space and time. On the other hand, Early Modern Catholicism retained its belief in the intercession of the Virgin and the Saints. The Mother of Christ as the mother of Mercy and some of the saints famous for their acts of charity (St. Martin of Tours, the bishop St. Nicholas, etc.) continued to be venerated and depicted in iconography². Some of them had been the inspirers of specific practices of charity since the Middle Ages and continued to be so throughout the Early Modern Period. The confraternity of *San Martino* in Florence helped *poveri vergognosi*, *San Giovanni Decollato* prepared the condemned for public execution, the Virgin of the *Annunziata* (Annunciation) was the patron of poor girls who were given dowries, etc.

In the Protestant world, both the denial of transubstantiation and the refusal of Purgatory suppressed the centrality of the mass. Among Catholics, masses for the dead continued to be the main vehicle for the funding of institutions, which received large sums of money as well as landed property through death bequests. The maintenance of a larger group of clergymen is central to the Catholic areas, and new religious orders devoted specifically to charitable services were created in the Catholic world after the division of Europe according to religious creed. By eliminating Purgatory, the masses for the dead, and religious orders, especially the mendicant ones, the Protestants suppressed significant pieces of the chain that normally started with a bequest made to an institution, prescribing both masses and charity to the poor. Generally, these funds could be invested in the money market. The association between charity and money loans was not unusual in the Middle Ages, nor was the controversy it caused. Whenever the reproduction of money by itself, without the intervention of nature, was at stake, it was the task of the Church to confirm or deny its legitimacy. Some new practices met with public suspicion, such as the *Monte delle doti*, a public dowry fund created in 1425 in Florence, whereby investors secured honor for their daughters while aiding municipal finance (Taylor, 1982: 329).

In Italy, the *Monti di Pietà* constituted a form of helping the poor in distress by lending them money at an advantageous interest rate, in contrast to the sinful usury practiced by the Jews (Menning, 1993). Although moneylending could easily merge with usury, certain forms of profitable finance came to be sanctioned by the Church. Annuity rents were one of these, being low interest loans secured by property that were not considered usurious by the Church in the fifteenth century and were one of the sustainers of parochial charity in the Low Countries (Galvin, 2002: 139-140). Early Modern Catholicism acted according to the principle that interest on loans was not illicit so long as the money gained was used for the well-being of persons who needed help. The bequeathed money generally circulated in the money market and profits were used in celebrating masses for the souls in Purgatory, as well as for supporting charitable practices. Protestant charity did not contribute to the economic survival of the members of religious orders or secular priests, thus

² On the importance of the cult of the Virgin Mary and the saints in Spanish confraternities cf. Maureen Flynn, *Sacred Charity. Confraternities and Social Welfare in Spain, 1400-1700*, London, Macmillan, 1989.

breaking an economic chain that was responsible for a large concentration of wealth in the hands of the Church.

Early Modern Catholic Europe tended to reinforce the role of religious orders in the practices of charity. Some of them were especially dedicated to service inside hospitals, such as the Hospitaller brothers of St. John of God, but Franciscans and Dominicans were also invested in the care of sick patients. A new religious order specifically devoted to charity was created in 1586, the Camillians, who were very active in Italian hospitals, such as, for example, the hospital of the *Annunziata* in Naples (Gentilcore, 1999). In Imperial Spain, Mexico and Peru also experienced the creation of two new Hospitaller religious orders, the Betlmitas and the Saint Hippolytus Order of Charity, both of them based upon the Augustinian rule. The Jesuits, even if they did not have the practice of charity as their main goal, followed a program of strict observance to the practice of the fourteen works of mercy in their years of formation (O'Malley, 1993: 165-199). In Portuguese India, for instance, Saint Francis Xavier and his fellow missionaries were especially careful to help the local charitable institutions by tending to the sick, both spiritually and physically, and performing other works of mercy. As Brian Pullan remarked, hospitals became battlefields for conversion and the salvation of souls (1999: 30-31).

Catholic Europe reinforced the presence of confraternities in urban and rural communities, many of them being dedicated to charity. Most charitable confraternities recruited at the level of the whole community, and charity was organized on a supra-parochial basis (Pullan, 1996) in spite of the centrality of parishes in the organization of community life implemented after the Council of Trent (Black, 2001: 167). The Protestant world tended to reaffirm the importance of the parish in matters of poor relief. In England, the Poor Laws transformed the parish into the taxing unit for the funding of charity to its residents; in many cities across Calvinist Europe, the deacons in the consistory were responsible for the care of the poor of the community (Benedict, 2002: 455). In Lutheran communities, the common chest brought together alms that were to be distributed to the needy (Lindberg, 1996). Catholic areas tended to create urban systems of poor relief, where old and new institutions co-existed, whilst the parish tended to restrict itself to the organization of religious life.

In the Catholic world, charity continued to be a form of penance - together with prayer, fasting and self-flagellation - and it never separated itself from other religious forms of devotion that were not concerned with giving to the poor. Before resources got to the charitable institutions, a large proportion of them were spent on the celebration of masses, and charity was only one of the ways in which to obtain forgiveness for one's sins and negotiate the afterlife.

In very general terms, these could be said to be the main differences between charity as practiced by Protestants and Catholics. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that both of them shared a religious approach to the question of social and economic inequality.

Most historians of charity tend to avoid the issues behind the very existence of charity itself by not questioning its fictional character. Despite being inspired by sincere devotion, charity did not distribute wealth on any rational basis, because the donor was free to give what he wanted, however much he wanted, when he wanted and to whom he wanted. Charity was a system whereby a fiction of the distribution of wealth was enacted. It was only possible through the creation of a hegemonic domination that erased social conflict except in times of extreme dearth. Outbreaks of popular revolt were sporadic and could be violent, but they did not seriously question the social, political or economic order *per se* (Thompson, 1971).

Both in the Protestant and the Catholic world, charity could be used to legitimize upward social mobility, illegal profits or questionable ethics. Corruption did not apply to royal office or administration: officers tended to be underpaid, and making profits from their offices was seen as inevitable and legitimate. But social and religious ethics viewed personal gain with suspicion (Cardim, 2000). Even if all kinds of fraud were possible, a moral economy placed very strict limits on the legitimacy of profit. It was a sin to cheat the dead or to deprive the poor of their alms by diverting the funds assigned to them in wills. These rules were relatively easy to apply; others, concerning usury or other forms of illicit profit, were not. It is because people sinned (and not only in what concerns "economic" behaviour), that they needed to operate a fictive image of benevolence and compensate for their faults.

In spite of all the differences between Catholic and Protestant attitudes towards poor relief, they used charity in common for the normalization of social behavior. It is generally admitted that charity did not limit itself to easing the suffering of the needy, but that it was also a powerful means of ensuring social order. By repressing vagrancy, forcing the poor to work inside workhouses, and promoting good sexual behavior, charity was used, especially after the Council of Trent, to discipline and punish, to use Michel Foucault's expression (1995). Charity became part of an aggressive Catholicism, whose main purpose was to save souls from Hell (Pullan, 1982). Nevertheless, it could hardly be affirmed that Protestant charity was not similarly repressive in its concern for good moral behavior.

State building, local power and charitable practices: the formation of the Portuguese *Misericórdias*

If we are to look at the specificities of each Catholic area or cultural unit, the answer to explaining their peculiarities must lie in political evolution and in the role played by the formation of the Early Modern State in the creation and development of homogenous sets of institutions. If we study charity in Spain or Italy, we are forced to focus on specific political units that developed their own sets of institutions. Naples was different from Venice, and Catalonia differed from Castile, for instance. Nevertheless, if we analyze the Portuguese case, there was no regional diversity and the forms of charitable organization were homogenous in all its territories. We also have to take into account the fact that Portugal was an empire that exported its institutions to several overseas areas, from Brazil and Africa to the Far East.

The way these different colonies related to metropolitan Portugal can vary. In Asia, there was a viceroy who represented the king's authority over a territory that extended from fortresses in East Africa to Macao in the Far East—the *Estado da Índia*. In contrast, Portuguese America was administered by a governor whose powers were never as extensive as those of the viceroys. Nevertheless, the basic local colonial institutions were the same as the ones that existed in metropolitan Portugal: the *câmaras* and the *misericórdias* (Boxer, 1965; Bethencourt, 1998). Whilst the former organized economic and political life at the local level, enabling colonists to exercise local power, the latter were confraternities which tended to admit the same local elites as the ones that belonged to the *câmaras*. Their sphere of action was nevertheless concerned with charity. Like the municipalities, they tended to be formed in the *concelhos*, i.e. the same administrative space as the *câmaras*, which corresponded to a group of parishes. By the mid-seventeenth century, there were hundreds of *misericórdias* in Portugal itself and over fifty in the colonial territories.

There is no doubt that the *Misericórdias* were the most important confraternities in Portugal and its Empire, far outweighing all the other existing brotherhoods in almost any locality. The first confraternity was founded in Lisbon in 1498 during the reign of Dom Manuel I (1495-1521), in times of prosperity. The spice trade was flourishing and the Crown was one of the main merchant bodies. Vitorino Magalhães Godinho (1978) demonstrated the increase in royal revenue that occurred during the reign of Dom Manuel I due to the development of transoceanic maritime trade. The crown enjoyed political stability and economic prosperity, enabling the king to introduce significant changes in the legal, institutional and ritual order. Major and minor reorganizations took place in court, in religious and political rituals, and in the organization of administrative and legal structures (Curto, 1998). In this context, the king took advantage of the possibility of benefiting the new confraternity, both financially and juridically. As a result, the new confraternity expanded at a fast pace, both in metropolitan Portugal and its colonies. This expansion allowed for a maximum amount of local autonomy with a minimum amount of interference from the central institutions. The Lisbon *Misericórdia* was never entitled to any authority over local *misericórdias*, apart from giving its advice when needed. *Misericórdias* collaborated with one another, and always regarded Lisbon as the "mother" house, but never with any sense of dependency. Although its statutes tended to be adopted, frequently with local adaptations, the Lisbon *Misericórdia* did not rule over the others. Moreover, the *misericórdias* were never archconfraternities, in the sense of ecclesiastic confraternities linked to a main branch, located in Rome or in other Italian cities, having

jurisdiction over regional confraternities and recognizing the pope or the local bishop as their supreme authority³. Right from their beginning and until the end of the Council of Trent, the evolution of these confraternities followed a logic under which the king was to be the ultimate authority to which they answered. At the last session of the Council of Trent, this prerogative was sanctioned when they obtained the status of lay confraternities under royal protection. This meant a great deal in terms of state building: the kings of Portugal got to be the main patrons of charitable action, and the *misericórdias* were never to become ecclesiastic confraternities under the authority of the Catholic Church. In spite of the influence that ecclesiastic dignitaries or Church institutions might exert over the local *misericórdias*, these confraternities always remained within the juridical sphere of the king⁴.

At the end of the Council of Trent, and especially in the twenty years after 1563, the *misericórdias* transformed themselves into the main administrators of local hospitals through the annexation of municipal hospitals. The merging of several medieval hospitals into larger institutions had been taking place since the end of the fifteenth century. Dom Manuel I had tried to hand several hospitals to the newly-founded *misericórdias*, but only after Trent were hospitals systematically incorporated into them. At the last session of the Council of Trent, it was agreed that the *misericórdias* were not to be supervised by episcopal authorities, except in relation to altars and liturgical equipment. This meant a great degree of autonomy for every institution run by the *misericórdias*, including hospitals, together with the freedom to manage their own financial resources. Even if bishops and other ecclesiastics could be members, and were often highly influential in the internal life of the *misericórdias*, the Church as an institution was not to rule over them, as they were answerable only to the king (Sá, 1997b).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the ideology that pervaded the action of the *misericórdias* was entirely religious and, moreover, was already fully formed before Trent. If we read the devotional books printed during the reign of Dom Manuel, we can find the basic principles of the practice of charity by the *misericórdias*. Charity was seen as a "working prayer" in contrast to "oral or "vocal" prayer, i.e. as the "social life" of devotion.

From the beginning, the *misericórdias* were associated with the Marian cult and would never cease to be dedicated to the Virgin, who was understood to act as a mediator between sinners and her Holy Son. Her benevolent protection was extended to all those who practiced the fourteen works of mercy, and she was to be their patron throughout the history of the *misericórdias*. The version of Mary that encapsulated the confraternity's action was the pregnant woman who visited her cousin Isabel, who was about to bear a child in old age. This act epitomized the spirit of the confraternity, as it stood for devotion and compassion towards the needy. The day that commemorated this episode (2 July) became the main feast of the confraternity, and it also assumed a symbolic value, since it was mimicked by its members when they visited the needy in houses, hospitals and prisons.

The cult of the Virgin Mary was also associated with another episode in her life, the death of her Holy Son. The *misericórdias* were never to lose their penitent character, which was especially visible in processions during Lent (Maundy Thursday), where self-flagellation would be practiced by all those who joined the *cortège*. Confraternal banners would testify to both Mary as the defender of

³ On archconfraternities, see Black, 1989: 72-74. Although there were archconfraternities where the main branch was located outside Rome, the term always referred to ecclesiastical brotherhoods under episcopal authority, which was never the case of the *Misericórdias*.

⁴ For a different view on this subject, see Abreu, 2003. This author suggests that negotiations at Trent were optimized by the fact that the regency of the kingdom was held by a high dignitary of the church, Cardeal Dom Henrique. Nevertheless, it is not likely that Rome expected Portugal to be ruled forever by ecclesiastics. It has to be remembered that the last session of the council actually confirmed that *misericórdias* were lay confraternities under royal protection. Abreu also mentions the increasing proximity of the *misericórdias* and the Catholic Church after Trent, based on the granting of indulgences. However, the latter were not specific to the *misericórdias*, as they were also given abundantly to many other local confraternities. Furthermore, the "Catholicization" of the kingdom after 1563 is a general issue, shared with other Catholic areas, and cannot be singled out as being specific to the *misericórdias*.

sinner and Mary as the suffering mother: one side depicted her unfolding her cloak over humanity and the other represented her holding her dead son after the Descent from the Cross.

Charity could apparently be one of the means for resolving conflicting desires between body and soul, through the compensation for sin. Doctrine described penance as having three forms: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, and the latter was seen, long before Protestant charity questioned its legitimacy, as a working prayer (“oração de obra”). It is also a fact that most of the devotional texts that circulated either in print or in manuscript had been written a long time before this, precisely during the years of the spread of lay piety and *devotio moderna*. Christine de Pisan's writings, the works of Saint John Chrysostom, Ludolf of Saxony's *Vita Christi*, the *Sacramental* by Sanchez de Vercial or the *Flos Sanctorum*, were available in printed form, and some of them in vernacular language, in the first quarter of the sixteenth century⁵. Books such as the *Ritual de Coimbra*, the *Manual dos Pecados* by Garcia de Resende, or the *Catecismo Pequeno* by Diogo Ortiz, among other works written by Portuguese courtiers and ecclesiastics, were also published⁶. All these works exhorted the believer to the virtue of charity and to the practice of the fourteen works of mercy. Without exception, they viewed wealth as a sin that only contempt for material possessions could make forgivable in the eyes of God. Material goods, the ones that served the equally sinful body, were to be transformed into spiritual goods through the generous giving of alms to the poor and through the practice of the fourteen works of mercy. This charitable ideology can be observed in the first *compromisso* of the *Misericórdia* of Lisbon, and in some of the rhetoric of the laws issued by Dom Manuel I. Many of these texts insisted on the vanity of possession and the spiritual benefits of being poor and helping the poor. There was thus nothing “modern” about the practices of charity that the crown was trying to introduce. The visions of poverty and charity that served as meta-narratives to the practice of the fourteen works of mercy were traditional and medieval in substance. Only the fact that the crown and the local elites thought it fit to create confraternities that obeyed a homogenous pattern in an area that crossed various continents constituted a “modern” novelty.

The *misericórdias* would evolve clearly along Post-Tridentine lines and adapt themselves to the circumstances of royal government, but it can be said that the charitable practices of the *misericórdias* were Catholic before Catholicism. The devotional climate of spirituality and self-abnegation dating from these early years would have been lost by the time the Council of Trent started. But there can be no doubt that the Portuguese population had fully assimilated the doctrine of salvation through good works, because it had in fact been practicing it at least since the end of the fifteenth century. Charity projected the individual into the afterlife and at the same time sought to attenuate extreme social and economic inequality by projecting the fiction of generosity into the social fabric. By transforming the rich into the lesser children of God, poverty became acceptable. It is also tempting to start studying the emergence of the tendency to project the individual and not the collective into the afterlife. In the last years of the fifteenth century, it was still common to found chantries to honor one's lineage or to establish the celebration of masses for one's family as well as for the donor (Rosa, 2000). But, by the end of the sixteenth century, the dying individual was more and more concerned with his own salvation than with that of his relatives. During the

⁵ Pisan, Christine de, *O Espelho de Cristina*, Lisbon, Herman de Campos, 1518 (facsimile edition, edited by Maria Manuela Cruzeiro, Lisbon, Biblioteca Nacional, 1987); [Beja, Frei António de], *Tradução da Epistola de S. João Chrysostomo*, Lisbon, Germão Galharde, 1522; Saxónia, Ludolfo de, *Vita Christi*, Lisbon, Nicolau de Saxónia and Valentim Fernandes, 1495 (modern edition: Magne, S.J., Augusto, *O Livro de Vita Christi em Lingoagem Português. Edição Fac-similar e crítica do Incunábulo de 1495 cotejado com os apógrafos*, vol. II, Rio de Janeiro, Ministério da Educação e Cultura, 1950); *Flos Sanctorum*, Lisbon, Hernan de Campos, 1513; Sanchez de Vercial, Clemente, *Sacramental*, Lisbon, João Pedro de Cremona, 1502.

⁶ Ortiz, D. Diogo, *Catecismo pequeno da doutrina e instrução que os xpãos ham de creer e obrar pera conseguir a benaventurança eterna*, Lisbon, Valentim Fernandes and João Pedro de Cremona, 1504 (modern edition: Silva, Elsa Maria Branco da, *O Catecismo Pequeno de D. Diogo Ortiz Bispo de Viseu*, Lisbon, Colibri, 2001); Almeida, D. Jorge de, *Manuale secundu[m] consuetudinem alme Colymbrieñ [sic]. Ecclesie*, Lisbon, Nicolao Gazzini, 1518; Bragança, Joaquim de Oliveira (ed.), *Breve Memorial dos pecados e cousas que pertencem ha confissam hordenado por Garcia de Resende fidalgo da casa delRei nosso senhor*, Lisbon, Gráfica de Coimbra, 1980 (1st edition 1521).

seventeenth century, the individual concern with one's own salvation that had been exclusive to the elites during the times of *devotio moderna* had spread to the larger strata of the population. All those who could afford it bequeathed property and money on behalf of the eternal wellbeing of their own souls. Charity thus operated at a level that mediated between the guilt of the individual and the needs of the community. The latter was understood as an organic collectivity that needed sanctification, but, at the individual level, it was up to each person to negotiate his or her afterlife.

The key to the success of the *misericórdias* lies in their mutual advantages for the king and for the local elites. In fact, the need to promote the creation of *misericórdias* from the center can be circumscribed to the first twenty years. During the reign of Dom Manuel, most *misericórdias* were created by direct or indirect intervention of the king. Nevertheless, even in this initial period, local seigniorial domains, both ecclesiastic and lay, created *misericórdias*. At the time of the king's death, in December 1521, spontaneous local initiative was sufficient to guarantee the spread of these confraternities.

In the empire, in some cases, *misericórdias* preceded the creation of municipalities. They had become the "Portuguese" language for the practice of charity and the power that this inevitably brings with it. Across the empire, whether in Africa, Asia or Brazil, the formation of *misericórdias* was as inevitable as the existence of local municipal councils, as historian Charles Boxer was the first to point out in the 1960s (Boxer, 1965).

The *misericórdias*: how they worked

Like all confraternities, the *misericórdias* ruled themselves by statutes, which took the name of *compromissos*. In Portuguese, this word means commitment or undertaking, as every new member had to swear upon the gospels that he would abide by the rules included in this text. There were three main regulations approved initially for the Lisbon *Misericórdia*. The first one, in printed form since 1516, was sent to local *misericórdias* from the royal chancery. This text was generally not adapted to local circumstances, but this was not the case with the other Lisbon regulations of 1577 (printed 1600) and 1618 (first edition in 1619). These were to inspire local *compromissos*, often revised versions of the former. The 1577 statutes did not last long, and the cities that adopted them had to elaborate new *compromissos* with the reform of 1618. This was the case with the cities of Porto, Goa and Guimarães. The *compromisso* of the Manila *Misericórdia* is an exception to this rule. This confraternity, whose creation was inspired by Portuguese men living in Manila during the Iberian Union (1580-1640), elaborated its rules by adapting an older version of the *compromisso* of the Goa *Misericórdia* (1595), and the Lisbon edition of 1600 (Mesquida, 2003). The Lisbon *compromisso* of 1618 was to have a longer life and a larger number of adaptations than the earlier versions. At least 19 *misericórdias* later drew up their own regulations based on its text (Sá, 2001: 42).

Unlike the *misericórdias*, most Portuguese confraternities were not universal in their concerns about charity, and provided a unique range of charitable actions to those that they helped. Apart from some medieval confraternities that administered hospitals and managed to survive until modern times, most confraternities were either devotional or belonged to guilds. At the parochial level, confraternities such as the *SS. Sacramento*, *Almas* or even *Nome de Deus* were created after the Council of Trent and were aimed at the Christianization of the population (Zardin, 2000). They helped to intensify devotion among the population and the participation of believers in the community, but did not have significant resources to devote to poor relief. Guild confraternities restricted charity to the support of members and their families. The *misericórdias* can be singled out by the fact that they did not practice inward-looking charity, i.e. they did not restrict help to their own members, in contrast to devotional and occupational confraternities. Despite using selective devices in order to choose beneficiaries, due to the high demand for their resources, the *misericórdias* helped a broad spectrum of social groups, from the middle strata or the shamefaced to the poorest individuals. The *misericórdias* were some of the most wide-ranging charitable institutions in Early Modern Catholic Europe, although the members of such confraternities also tended to use resources for their own gain.

As has been well demonstrated for other European areas, charitable institutions were crucial as self-help support systems for their members. In the case of the *misericórdias*, we know that, by admitting only the elites of noblemen or craftsmen, these confraternities helped to establish social frontiers, confirmed the upward social mobility of some, and, above all, helped many to reproduce their social status. Members and their families were entitled to high-quality free burials, duly accompanied by the celebration of masses on behalf of their souls. Other unstated and sometimes illegal benefits were available to members. They could make (and many of them did make) financial loans to brothers, give a marriage dowry to a less fortunate family whose men had traditionally been members, and rent out property under advantageous conditions. Except for marriage dowries (where the preference of members' daughters could be stated in the form of written rules), all the practices which favored members directly or indirectly always bordered on the edge of legitimacy, and were frequently strictly forbidden by royal and local regulations. The truth is that, with the accumulation of property, whether in the form of land or money, the *misericórdias* became rich institutions whose control could not be left to chance. On the other hand, the continuing social and economic prominence of these confraternities depended on their prestige in the community. Bequests would not be forthcoming if the community could not rely on the institution to fulfill the obligations included in their wills (mainly the celebration of a large number of masses) or if rumors of mismanagement cast a shadow over the institution's reputation. Loss of prestige could have a high price if it meant a loss of confidence on the part of the population.

The *misericórdias* had a limited number of members, related to the size of the population and local elites. Broadly speaking, towns had 100 members, medium-sized cities 250-300, whilst in large cities such as Lisbon and Goa membership could amount to as many as 600. Generally, there was a divide between noble and non-noble members. Non-noble members consisted of the middle strata of the population, in other words the local master craftsmen or even landowning farmers. The main requirement was that they did not work with their own hands, in order to have enough free time to fulfill the confraternities' duties and obligations. This also revealed distinct attitudes towards manual labour, which was considered to be a feature of the lower strata, precisely those who might fall into poor relief and need charitable help. One of the exceptions to this binary composition of the *misericórdias* was the one in Macao, where the regulations recognized the absence of Portuguese craftsmen in the city, thus implicitly promoting all the confraternity's members to the condition of nobility.

Applying for membership in a *misericórdia* was an elaborate procedure. Candidates were informed by the ruling boards that a period of new admissions was coming up and they had to write petitions stating their age, the name of their parents and grandparents, place of residence, etc. The confraternity then undertook a private inquiry in order to confirm the information included in these applications. If correct, admission had to be sanctioned by the votes of all the members of the brotherhood. Only white, literate and Old Christian adult males could stand for election, although research has shown that the admission of brothers was often more flexible than the rules prescribed in the *compromissos*, adapting itself to the morphology of local elites. It was impossible, for instance, in many colonial cities to restrict membership to whites, as miscegenation was the rule, so that selection was restricted to Portuguese blood in the patrilineal line. In other places, the local elite was rural, with few nobles available to be admitted as first-class members; landowning farmers could then be admitted under that status. All that was required was that the people in the hegemonic groups of local society were not left out of the brotherhood (Sá, 1997: 142); the presence of the local nobility in these confraternities was the guarantee that self-perpetuating oligarchies would rule over the *misericórdia*. Some local families actually dominated the confraternity for several centuries (Sobral, 1990).

The ruling board of the *misericórdias* was composed of thirteen members. They formed the *mesa*, which met at least twice a week and whose chairman was the *provedor*. Amongst this group were the secretary and treasurer: the former was responsible for keeping minutes, whilst the latter ruled over financial matters. Other members of the *mesa* could be entrusted on a monthly basis with other tasks such as visiting prisoners or taking care of domestic relief, but the *mesários* could also delegate such tasks to brothers from outside the *mesa*. Of course, the tendency in many *misericórdias* was to have a restricted group of active members, whilst most brothers took advantage of

membership without affording any reciprocal dedication to the confraternity. On the other hand, for the few that took confraternity matters seriously, this meant their enjoying significant control over the economic, social and political resources of their own *misericórdia*. The elitist nature of the confraternity was reinforced by the fact that it became very important to control its ruling board. The *mesa* was chosen by indirect elections, which soon fell prey to every sort of electoral manipulation, causing conflicts that often required the intervention of central institutions.

The *misericórdias* were also controlled by groups of elders, who could be part of a board of twenty members, the *definitório*. Such a board was composed of men, often with university degrees in theology or law, who had gained experience in handling the delicate internal affairs of the confraternity through previous membership or office in the *misericórdia*. In practice, this board made all significant decisions of the confraternity. It remained in operation from the last decades of the sixteenth century until the 1630s and coincided with an overall tendency toward a bureaucratization of the *misericórdias*. In the last years of the sixteenth century, it was still common to summon all members to collective gatherings that made important decisions. In 1618, the *compromisso* did away with the election of the *definitório*, and the collectivity of brothers became less and less visible and lost ground to institutional mediation.

In the same way, the beginnings of the confraternity had relied on the fictional belonging to the confraternity of all those who contributed alms. Such donors were the *confrades* as distinct from the brothers, i.e. the full and active members of the brotherhood, who were actually scrutinized before being elected and admitted to the confraternity.

This bureaucratization of the confraternity was also accompanied by the hiring of a larger number of employees who performed all the lesser tasks associated with charity. They served in infirmaries, controlled doors as porters, served as *factotums* and carried funeral biers. Women cleaned premises, cooked or cared for hospital patients. Of course, each *misericórdia* had to rely on a significant number of priests to celebrate the masses each confraternity had the obligation to perform as a consequence of death bequests, which by the beginning of the eighteenth century numbered thousands each year.

The increasing tendency toward bureaucratization of the *misericórdias* from their initial years in the sixteenth century to the eighteenth century is also confirmed by the increasing amount of paperwork. Although informal acts of charity were still important, especially if the *misericórdia* had a regular almsgiving day when alms were handed directly to the poor at its headquarters, most poor people had to write petitions if they wanted to apply for regular or "expensive" charity. The members of the confraternity became increasingly status-conscious, often forgetting the self-effacement that was inherent in late medieval piety, from which the confraternity drew its principles in the first years of its existence.

In spite of some occasional pressures from the Crown, which could raise money from the funds of the *misericórdias* or intervene in elections in which conflict arose, it might be said that their internal matters were left entirely to the discretion of their members. Until the time of the Marquês do Pombal, there were no systematic orders from the king putting an end to rigged elections or inspecting the accounts of the *misericórdias* (Lopes, 2002).

Charitable practices

The agenda of the *misericórdias* always had the fourteen works of mercy as its creed, even if their specific enunciation had been suppressed from the *compromissos* by the second half of the sixteenth century. All these works were to be performed, although the importance of single works varied according to time and place. Contemporaries valued both the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, because all of them without exception allowed for the exercise of the virtue of charity. In the *compromisso* of 1516, the spiritual works were listed first. In fact, praying for the dead and making peace between enemies through forgiveness were among the most important acts of charity, and their social importance cannot be underestimated. Any charitable deed could fall under the scope of the fourteen works of mercy, except for the obligation to enable single orphaned girls to get married by giving them a dowry. This practice developed during the fourteenth century, but was never formally included in the formulation of the works of mercy (Pullan, 1996). In Portugal, from the

beginning of the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, dowering poor girls became one of the favorite pious legacies included in wills. Some rich donors enabled the foundation of a conservatory for women by bequeathing a single large fortune, as was the case in Bahia (Russell-Wood, 1968).

Almsgiving: old and new

Indiscriminate almsgiving did not vanish completely from Portuguese daily life, and it was expected of a new *provedor* to give generously the day he took office after the election. Some *misericórdias* still kept the habit of handing out money, clothing and food from their headquarters on a weekly basis. Nevertheless, the tendency was to draw up lists of poor people who were to receive regular support, even if publicly (Araújo, 2000). The members of the *mesa*, or other brothers appointed to the task, were entrusted with the task of checking whether the applicant was eligible for help. For the shamefaced poor, the selective procedure through certification was the same, but help tended to be given in secret. Brothers working in pairs visited such paupers in their homes. Often being responsible for specific areas into which the city had been divided, such visitors were required to be respectable elders and were never to enter the houses of the poor alone, in order to allay suspicions of lascivious behavior.

Many *misericórdias* did not convert all their rents into money. Some tended to supply themselves with their own products—cereals or other foods—using them to supply their own hospitals or distributing them through domestic or outdoor relief. No *misericórdia* was ever self-sufficient in terms of food supplies, but few had to buy all the essential products to feed their poor. Although the *compromissos* recommended the conversion of landed property into money by public auction, some of the land and houses inherited were non-partible and could not be sold (*propriedade vinculada*). Macao was once again an exception, because there was no land to cultivate and thus no food production in the small peninsula that formed its urban territory. Clothes were also given to the poor, sometimes through the recycling of deceased patients' outfits, as a result of pious donations, or were even newly made.

Although the Portuguese Crown very often legislated against the proliferation of beggars and on several occasions entrusted the *misericórdias* with the operations needed in order to license the "true" ones, the realm and its Empire never witnessed any significant attempts to confine these "idle" individuals. In fact, the Empire was in constant need of men and the policy adopted was to channel as many as possible to the colonies (Coates, 2002). The death penalty was relatively rare (Paz Alonso and Hespanha) and criminals were easily converted into exiles (*degredados*). Before the mid-eighteenth century, there was no demand for begging to be entirely abolished, either in legislation or in theological literature. It is also important to point out that none of the Portuguese *misericórdias* ever had the task of incarcerating the idle yet able poor and forcing them to work, as was the case with Barcelona's *Misericórdia*, founded in 1584 (Carbonell i Esteller, 1997). The present state of research allows us to assert that there was no confinement of beggars or vagrants in hospitals in Portugal, in contrast to what happened in most European areas, Protestant and Catholic alike (Gutton, 1991; Jutte, 1994: 169-177). Portuguese hospitals were never involved in the repression of beggary or the introduction of forced labor (Sá, 1997 and 2001). The creation of institutions specially designed for beggars, such as the *Ospedale dei Mendicanti* of Florence (Lombardi, 1988), never took place. Tolerance for begging was well incorporated into Portuguese culture. The word "esmola" (alms) was often used in letters that individuals and institutions addressed to the king whenever they were asking for a royal favor.

By 1618, when a mature version of the *compromisso* was reached, the selection procedures for most petitions issued by the poor were virtually uniform. The candidates stated their identity, place of origin, the name of their parents and grandparents, and their situation of poverty. The confraternity then checked such data, often asking their parish priest to confirm their situation and asking their neighbors about their mores. This was a secretive procedure, as the identity of the informers was not to be known, and also because there should be no intention of destroying the reputation of the petitioner. This system relied on the cooperation of parish priests and sometimes

required correspondence with other *misericórdias*. We must also bear in mind that the poor were often transferred from local prisons to the main courts (*Relação*) where they awaited trial.

The care taken in the selection of recipients of relief varied in accordance with the value of the service required. The high cost of dowries, prolonged domestic relief or stays in conservatories for women restricted the number of recipients, whilst sick patients in huge hospitals, foundlings and prisoners reached a high number and were less expensive *per capita*. Not only were the costs of dowries, domestic relief and institutionalization in conservatories high, but these resources also enabled the recipients to preserve some of the social esteem required by their status. A study of charitable action in Portuguese colonial contexts also confirms that preferential treatment was given to individuals who belonged to the colonial elite, and that institutions that catered to the local converted poor were segregated from those dedicated to the Portuguese-born "white" poor. This happened, for example, in Portuguese India, but in Bahia the main local hospital of São Cristóvão admitted black and mulatto slaves, Amerindians and also some rare Protestant members of ship crews (Russell-Wood, 1968). Nevertheless, this was a service designed for persons of a low social status and, as such, it absorbed the Portuguese emigrants to Brazil who had not been successful in their quest for social and economic prosperity. Charitable actions that required high-standard charity altered the criteria of selectivity by restricting admission to individuals of white blood, as was the case with marriage dowries and the local conservatory for women. Local plantation economies, where slaves were essential assets, also account for the absence of discrimination in the Bahia hospital, but this situation contrasts with the one to be found in Goa. There, native converts were admitted to a separate hospital, whilst whites had their own (Sá, 1997).

Richard Sennet, drawing on the anthropologist Mary Douglas and reflecting on the feelings that gifts aroused in their recipients, remarked that charity wounds, as gratitude often implies submission. He quotes Hannah Arendt (1963: 74-75) "Compassion may itself be a substitute for justice", since "pity always signifies inequality" (2003: 149). One might argue, with some reason, that most paupers could not afford the luxury of losing their self-esteem by begging publicly for help. Nevertheless, the existence all over Europe, and indeed well into the nineteenth century, of a special category of privileged poor testifies to the fact that public recognition of poverty implied a loss of social status and shame to those who were used to higher levels of respect from society. The vocabulary for these poor was the same throughout Europe: *poveri vergognosi* in Italian, *pauvres honteux* in French, *pobres vergonzantes* in Castilian, "shamefaced poor" in English (Ricci, 1996). The institutions that catered to them were the first to be secretive about the help provided: they were visited with discretion at their homes and forbidden to beg in the streets. Efforts were made to avoid social disqualification that might occur as a consequence of visible poverty.

Caring for prisoners and ransoming captives

Italy had its first confraternity exclusively devoted to the care of incarcerated men founded in Bologna in 1336 and similar ones were soon imitated in other Italian cities (Terpstra, 1994). To my knowledge, there is no evidence of confraternal charity in Portugal towards prisoners before the foundation of the Lisbon *Misericórdia*, although the care of prisoners was one of the first purposes of the confraternity right from its very first years of existence. Assistance to prisoners had deep spiritual significance: prisoners were compared to the souls awaiting release from Purgatory. We have to bear in mind that prisons were places where prisoners spent time *before* trial, as they awaited the execution of a sentence, in Portuguese designated by "livramento", a word that literally means "setting free". Helping the prisoners brought together several works of mercy, because they had to be fed, dressed, treated in illness, and buried if necessary. The *misericórdias* also encouraged public harmony by engaging in out-of-court settlements between the contenders and acting as mediators in private negotiations. They also brought their cases to court, ensuring that prisoners were tried and sentenced quickly (also in order to preserve the expenditure of the confraternity over long-term stays in prison). Furthermore, they also saw that they were quickly delivered to boats if they were sentenced to overseas exile. In the event of the prisoner being sentenced to death, it was up to the *misericórdia* to prepare his or her soul and lead the *cortège* to the place of execution. It was also the responsibility of the *misericórdia* to bury corpses. Another procession was staged on All

Saints' Day, when the prisoners' mortal remains would be solemnly collected and brought to the church of the *misericórdia*, in order to be buried the next day.

The *misericórdias* were not responsible for all those who were incarcerated. Prisoners had to apply for help and would be assisted only if it was confirmed that they had insufficient means to support themselves in prison. Only poor prisoners were entitled to the help given by the *misericórdias*, but evidence points to very significant numbers in big cities where the high courts were located (Oliveira, 2000).

Ever since the Middle Ages, Portugal had been a crusading kingdom, and war against the Muslim infidels had been a constant feature of its history. Firstly in the Iberian Peninsula and then, from 1415 onwards, in North Africa, military campaigns against the Moors, as well as coastal piracy, gave rise to a thriving commerce in captives. Religious war prisoners were no common prisoners, because their souls were infected with the danger of being drawn into the enemy's faith. Even religious images had to be ransomed. In metropolitan Portugal, the *misericórdias* only helped to collect money on behalf of the Crown whenever a general ransom was organized, and the Trinitarians had had to deal with the logistics of buying prisoners since the time of Dom Sebastião. In Asia, in the *Estado da Índia*, the Goa *Misericórdia* was officially in charge of providing for their release. Nevertheless, it can be said that religious war prisoners were always a secondary concern in the activities of the *misericórdias*. In contrast, the *misericórdias* were never to lose their obligation to enter prisons and provide for the corporal and spiritual welfare of prisoners, as they were also in charge of ensuring that prisoners attended mass on a regular basis. In the *misericórdias*, caring for the bodies of the poor was never dissociated from tending to their souls.

Women in Portuguese charity

In Portugal, the participation of high-ranking women in high-profile charity work waned after the end of the sixteenth century, a time which coincided with the Post-Tridentine Reformation. In the heart of the Middle Ages, female members of royal dynasties had become famous through their charitable deeds. Queen Isabel de Aragão, the wife of Dom Dinis (1261-1325) devoted her life to charity and was canonized in 1626, after Leo X had authorized the celebration of her feast locally in 1516. Dona Leonor (1458-1525), Dom João II's widow and sister to Dom Manuel I, founded the Lisbon *Misericórdia* during her period of regency in her brother's absence and can be held responsible for having influenced the king's initiatives in charitable matters (Sousa, 2002). After Dona Maria (1521-1577), the daughter of Dom Manuel I and his third wife Leonor, died, leaving her enormous spinster fortune to charities, women's foundations became less and less numerous and donors were increasingly male, although some conservatories owed their existence to the initiative of local aristocratic women.

Female charitable action was reduced to private almsgiving, though this of course is less well documented in serial sources. In Portugal, there were no female charitable religious orders such as the *Dames de Charité* during Early Modern times, and the presence of volunteer aristocratic women was not observed at welfare institutions such as hospital infirmaries. After an initial period during which they accepted women as well as men, the *misericórdias* forbade female membership, especially when the distinction between *confrades* and brothers disappeared. In some localities, however, women were still able to be members of the brotherhood and, in some rare cases, were able to serve as *provedoras*. Nevertheless, in important colonial, as well as metropolitan, cities, active participation in charitable institutions was exclusive to men. At best, women could succeed their husbands as members, in order to retain the rights to dignified burial ceremonies, to which they were entitled by the *compromissos* as the wives of brothers.

Whilst women could not actively participate in institutional charity, they were, on the other hand, the main recipients of poor relief. Everywhere sources document an obsessive concern with women, who formed the majority of those assisted. Poor wives and widows, unmarried mothers or maiden girls - women are omnipresent in the sources of the various *misericórdias* that have been studied in detail. They could be helped in their homes, forming the majority of the shamefaced poor, be given alms publicly if they had the status of poor women or apply for marriage dowries if they were successful in the tough contest between applicants.

There is no reason to think that the evolution of the dowering of poor girls in Portugal did not follow a similar pattern to the one in Rome. There, enabling poor girls to get married through the giving of a dowry was initially an act of individual charity; only in the last decades of the fifteenth century did it become one of the accepted confraternal practices of charity, further expanding in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Esposito, 1994). In Portugal, poor marriageable girls were already one of the concerns of testators in the fourteenth century (Pereira, 1972), but we have not been able to trace the beginning of this practice among Portuguese confraternities to that period.

As in other Catholic areas, women could be institutionalized in conservatories. The preoccupation with confining girls in order to preserve or regenerate their virtue can be considered as one of the consequences of the Council of Trent, which, according to some authors, is responsible for a greater emphasis on female purity and the stigmatization of bastardy (Kertzer, 1993: 17-19). All over Catholic Europe, two types of conservatories were founded, as institutions for honorable women were distinguished from those designed for former prostitutes or other "repentant" women (Chojnacka, 1998: 71). Whilst conservatories for "pure" women were specially designed to preserve female virtue until marriage or the convent, institutions for "stained" women concentrated on regenerating them through work. With a few exceptions, the *misericórdias* tended to manage institutions that safeguarded the sexual mores of maidens until they were given a dowry, often given by the *misericórdia* itself. The interconnectivity of assistance to women was a fact: they could be withdrawn from their homes to the conservatory and there receive a marriage dowry. Nevertheless, cases in which the *misericórdias* managed reformatories for "impure" women were exceptional. In Portugal and its empire, the bishops were the main promoters of reformatories for sinful women, founding them in several cities well into the eighteenth century and generally naming them after Saint Mary Magdalene, the repentant prostitute. Such institutions also tended to admit women of a lower social status than those admitted to the conservatories of the first type.

Children

The *compromissos* of the *misericórdias* committed these confraternities to the help of "meninos desamparados", literally children deprived of support. They made it clear that this notion did not apply to foundlings, as the law was clear in designating the local municipalities as the entities responsible for their upbringing. By "unsupported children" the *compromissos* meant the children of families of the deserving poor, often deprived of parental care, and, most especially, in their first years of life, of breast milk. The care of orphaned boys, who could be educated and transformed into priests or missionaries, was often the task of colleges under the authority of bishops (Guedes, 2000). Orphaned girls, as they fell into the category of marriageable women whose virtue was to be protected, were often taken care of by the local *misericórdias*, as we have seen.

As the largest and most deprived section of the population, children were a massive group who often required prolonged help. In Portugal, most significantly, the number of foundlings grew almost without interruption from the end of the sixteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century. The law committed the local municipal councils to their upbringing, enabling them to amass financial resources for them through extra taxation, but the municipalities often entrusted foundling homes to the care of the local *misericórdias*. This was to be a permanent source of trouble for the latter, because the payments owed by the municipalities were often insufficient and delayed. Furthermore, the logistics of feeding babies abandoned by the hundreds or even thousands in each "foundling" wheel proved to be very demanding (Sá, 1994). By the eighteenth century, *misericórdias* in cities such as Lisbon, Porto, Évora, Coimbra, Bahia and Macao, among others, had become overburdened with foundlings and had a separate budget for meeting their costs, which was funded by the municipalities. Either because there were delays in payments or the money became insufficient due to the increasing number of foundlings, the relationship between municipal councils and *misericórdias* often went through periods of crisis. Sometimes unwillingly and with many disputes, the *misericórdias* of such cities had indeed taken over a responsibility that was not theirs by Portuguese law.

The fact that child abandonment took place on such a massive scale was the consequence of the ease with which one could get rid of an unwanted child. There were foundling wheels available throughout the territory, granting total anonymity to abandoners. Once more, the contrast with Protestant countries is striking: no political units other than the Catholic ones maintained anonymous systems of child abandonment for so long (Sá, 2000).

***Misericórdias* and credit**

The Portuguese *misericórdias* developed their own credit systems early in the sixteenth century. Their members, especially the noble ones, enjoyed privileged access to the funds of the confraternity, at low interest rates, sometimes taking money out of the coffers without proper registration or regular payment of interest. In the empire, some *misericórdias* played a fundamental role in the economy, such as financing the sugar planters in Brazil or the maritime merchants of Macao. There is no evidence, however, that the *misericórdias* ever specialized in lending money to the poor as did the Italian *monti frumentari*, *monti di pietà* or similar institutions in Catalonia. On the contrary, this capability seems to have been used by the upper strata of Portuguese societies, both metropolitan and colonial. It must be said that the interest rates charged can be considered comparatively low, as they varied between 5% and 6.25%.

The State also came to rely on the *misericórdias* to withdraw money through the system of *padrões de juro*, a device used by the Crown in times of greater financial discomfort. The king withdrew large sums from the *misericórdias* in exchange for a regular payment of interest. This situation existed even during the affluent times of Dom Manuel I, but became especially common during the reign of his successor, Dom João III, and afterwards when the decline of royal finances became chronic.

The *misericórdias* can perfectly well be included in a history of pre-banking institutions in Portugal, a country where the first bank was created in the 1820s. Nevertheless, credit was used to lend money to the Crown, sometimes on an almost compulsive basis, and to the elites that could manipulate the decision-making processes of the confraternity. Its use by individuals from the middle strata of society or by the working groups as a form of cheap credit with charitable intentions—such as the Italian *monti*—seems not to have occurred, even if in some *misericórdias* loans could be secured against the pledge of valuables.

The study of the credit activities of the *misericórdias* has yet to be inserted in local contexts, as Portuguese historiography is still discovering the ubiquity of credit among individuals and institutions, especially religious ones such as Third Orders, convents and lay and ecclesiastical confraternities. We still do not know the position of the *misericórdias* in the local money markets, although we can easily assume that they were one of the main creditors, as well as the guardians of money placed on deposit by private individuals. By the eighteenth century, private investment had transformed the *misericórdias* into one of the main subscribers of annuity rents, whose interest had to be paid to lenders.

Conclusions

The organization of institutional charity in Portugal was relatively homogenous in its metropolitan territory and in its colonies, and relied on supra-parochial confraternities, the *misericórdias*, which recruited their members from the same elite as the local municipal administration. The advantage of these confraternities consisted not only in the wide range of services they performed and the resources they managed, but also in the privileged relationship they enjoyed with the king. After Trent, they were formally considered as lay confraternities under royal protection. After 1560, they became more and more concerned with the administration of local hospitals, thereby incorporating the most significant local charitable institutions.

The beginnings of the *misericórdias* confirm a devotional climate that was typical of the late Middle Ages, based on the practice of the fourteen works of mercy. In the early years of the sixteenth century, spiritual works of mercy were as important as corporal ones, because they were

all involved in the promotion of social peace and the elimination of conflicts through the virtue of charity, understood as the ability to forgive through brotherly love. The late sixteenth century and the seventeenth century witnessed the bureaucratization of these confraternities, which became drowned in paper work and in detailed classifications of the poor and their needs, leading to their transformation into institutional and political entities that became one of the pillars of the local political order. The confraternity refined the selection procedures of both its members and the poor that it assisted. As a result, it lost contact with the collectivity of the brotherhood through the creation of a board of counselors that made decisions that had previously been the privilege of the whole brotherhood.

The cult of the Virgin Mary as the mother of mercy led to a feminization of charity, although only men performed effective charitable work. Nevertheless, the various rituals enacted by the *misericórdias* afforded visibility to the practices of charity they performed, whilst also allowing the local population to join in the celebrations.

In the empire, *misericórdias* became omnipresent, being founded mostly by local initiative, and brought a Catholic sense of identity to those they assisted. With rare exceptions, being baptized and willing to confess and take communion was a prime requirement for anyone who needed to be institutionalized in a hospital. It would be false to say that converted gentiles were assisted on an equal footing with the colonial elites, since, in the colonies as well as in metropolitan charity, social discrimination on the basis of status was the norm. Expensive charity, such as marriage dowries, prolonged institutionalization in a female conservatory or domestic relief, was always the privilege of those who might lose their status if they were not helped. On the other hand, the help provided to those at the bottom of the social scale was inexpensive at the individual level. Prisoners, foundlings and poor patients entering general hospitals had no social image to lose, but total expenditure was high because of their large numbers. Women, for instance, were reluctant to enter hospitals, which always had fewer infirmaries for them than for men.

Although the *misericórdias* played a leading role in local politics through their elite membership, their control of charitable institutions and sometimes a share of the money market, they were always allies of the king, to whom they answered directly. Their autonomy from episcopal authority, together with their religious ideology in conformity with Catholic doctrine, made the *misericórdias* an institution that occupied an intermediate position between lay and ecclesiastical authorities, between central and local institutions, between the Early Modern State and local prerogatives. The key to their success was no doubt ambiguity, the capacity to serve multiple purposes in the name of devotion. Used as a moneylending resource by the elites and being a key to the maintenance of social status, as well as providing a benevolent image of power, the *misericórdias* no doubt provided stability to the social, political and economic equilibrium of the Portuguese areas.

Certainly, the devotional, political and social climate of Portuguese society underwent many changes between the beginning of the sixteenth century and the end of the seventeenth century. Social stratification increased, both in membership and in the selection of recipients of relief. Relationships between the center and the periphery became increasingly codified, and the choice of local interlocutors with the king became increasingly restricted to the local elites. The need for order sacrificed collective participation in favor of bodies of representatives. Access to charity was increasingly mediated by bureaucratic and certification procedures. However, in spite of these changes, charity still formed an important part of the social life of devotion.

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