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 standpoint. 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, 1997, pp. 43-65).

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.