CHAPTER 20

People, Groups, and Institutions: Charity and Assistance in the Duchy of Milan from the 15th to the 17th Century

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The period spanning the late Middle Ages and the start of the Early Modern Era saw the presence of an interconnected system of assistance for the poor, in which individual initiatives and organizations created by institutions (State and Church) interacted and intersected.

It is clear that every society has to confront internal problems linked to the presence of weak elements, unable, primarily (but not only) due to their economic situation, to live in dignity. Historically speaking, however, it is rather difficult to define a state of necessity, be it material, physical, or indeed moral: the criteria and boundaries are rather ephemeral, the limits of what are considered acceptable standards of living vary greatly, and consequently, the point at which conditions fall below these limits and charitable assistance is necessitated, be it by institutions, groups, or individuals, also varies. It goes without saying that no measure exists to evaluate the state of poverty and need, not even economic need, as these concepts are infinitely variable on the system of values of different societies: a person living in what we would today define as an unacceptable state of poverty, would be perfectly acceptable in a society at a different stage of economic development or with values pertaining to different civilizations.

This brief preamble serves as a necessary premise to deal with the subject here discussed: although the Duchy of Milan (and its capital in particular) have been proposed as a model (and in some ways ahead of its time) of a system of assistance that developed and became widespread over the course of the following centuries in a wider context, in this essay this system will not be presented as a clearly defined entity, but an extremely fragmented one (and at times not without internal contradictions). In the given context and the given period, the notion of charity cannot be understood using a snapshot approach that would help to clarify the difficulty society at that time faced in coping with

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1 For a summary on charity in Italian society see the recent volume by Marina Garbellotti, Per carità. Poveri e politiche assistenziali nell’Italia moderna (Rome 2012).
the presence of need and of poverty. In order to gain a deeper understanding of poverty in context, consider that contemporary societies view poverty and illness as woes that must be overcome (albeit with profoundly different approaches in perception and in the search for a solution), the commitment of public authorities in this battle is not called into discussion, despite needing to deal with manifest inadequacies in terms of intentions and actions. This cannot be said of the time period in question, indeed, at that time, poverty and illness need to be understood within a Christian framework, that, in certain contexts, allows them even to be considered as ‘privileged’ conditions (the image of Christ is archetypal for both the pauper and of suffering) or as sought after states as a symbol of absolute devotion to the Christian message. At the same time, however, the battle against poverty is a duty of all Christians who are obligated to fight suffering with acts of personal charity; even though the help given to lift the needy out of their current state was always perceived as a moral and religious obligation, not as the right of the weak and an act of social justice.

It would, therefore, be difficult to give an overview on this topic for which, as Alessandro Pastore rightly notes, it is still necessary to clarify the meaning of terminology (and of categories of interpretation) that scholars² have far too frequently used forgetting the historical dimension and searching at all costs for continuity (or the Idol of Origins in Bloch’s notion of memory).

**The Intervention of Lay and Ecclesiastical Institutions in the Government of Charitable Organisations: Some Examples**

Let us begin with the institutional organization and the largest urban distributors of aid: the large hospitals, accommodation facilities of extraordinary importance (particularly when administrative reorganisation combined with the construction of a new hospital) and, at the same time, centres from which many urban and rural hospitals were managed. A hospital, in that age, was not a place of medical care: or rather, it was only in the sense that disease accompanied poverty. The aim of hospitals, as defined in various deeds, norms, regulations, statutes, was to distribute all forms of aid (alms, care, comfort, food) to whoever needed it (women, men, children, the elderly). Clearly not all of those who were needy had the right to make use of the hospitals’ services, especially