

Charity, Poor Relief, and Politics in Renaissance Florence, Bologna and Milan.

A Research Project

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The project is a preliminary step towards the analysis of more comprehensive, civic-minded systems of social welfare in Early Modern Italy. Particular attention is paid to why and how political elites prepared both themselves and their societies for a radical departure from previous methods of handling property. This preliminary study will eventually constitute the Florentine section of a larger project comparing Florence, Bologna, and Milan from the late fifteenth through the late sixteenth centuries. It will consider the role of charitable institutions operated by lay religious brotherhoods (confraternities) in providing the model and experience necessary for civic elites which sought to "reform" social welfare as a means both of controlling poverty and of consolidating their own authority.

The "long" sixteenth century of 1450-1650 was a critical period for changing perceptions of poverty and the poor, and of how society was to deal with both. These perceptions can be found in humanist works such as Juan Luis Vives' 1526 proposal for Bruges, *De subventionem pauperum*. Vives' widely circulated work typified a new approach to poor relief with its emphasis on distinguishing worthy from unworthy poor and its use of bureaucratically administered systems to help the former, and incarceration and forced labour to discipline the latter. The proposal inspired many of the civic assistance programs which emerged across Europe in the period. While recent studies have emphasized that such schemes were not created *ex nihilo* or adopted in a vacuum, the process leading to the development of more comprehensive civic systems of poor relief in Italy has not been thoroughly examined beyond Brian Pullan's *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice* (1971). A number of historians have pointed to the importance of charitable institutions, and confraternities in particular, as significant tools of both political consoli-

dation and of the movement towards civically-administered social systems. I would argue that confraternal charitable institutions such as infirmaries, foundling homes, orphanages, and pawn shops were the local, practical complement to abstract humanist works like that of Vives.

In Bologna through the period of the 1490s to 1530s, a small, inter-connected group of patrician families animated by charitable and political concerns took control of the city's confraternal charitable institutions. Their attempts to rationalize individual institutions included constitutional changes which shifted power from elected confraternal officials and vested it instead in self-perpetuating boards of *sindics*. These boards represented communal interests, with a strong component of senatorial families and with frequent cross-appointments creating a network of quasi-official institutions. The patrician's experience led them, by the mid-sixteenth century, to propose a comprehensive overhaul of social assistance on the municipal level. This took the form of the *Opera dei Mendicanti*, a scheme similar to the Vives plan which was first raised in 1548, revised in 1550, and fully implemented in 1563. The *Opera dei Mendicanti* was deliberately modelled on confraternal organization, with the critical addition of an emphasis on defining and disciplining the "unworthy poor." Their experience with confraternal charitable institutions gave patricians better understanding of social needs that were beyond the capacity of individual charitable agencies, and a better understanding of what was lacking in the informal network which they had devised. This experience allowed them to shape abstract humanist proposals into a workable, more comprehensive, and politically effective program. In short, the confraternities helped facilitate and legitimate the process of reforming social welfare.

On one hand the dynamic in Bologna appears thoroughly rooted in the turbulent politics of that city from the 1490s through the 1530s, but on the other, many cities in this period adopt similar schemes. Florence and Milan are natural subjects for comparative study because, together with Bologna, they are arguably the three major urban centres to undergo the greatest political upheaval during the "long sixteenth century." Each experiences a sequence of internally-generated or externally-imposed political forms, and by the middle of the century the three together exemplify the range of political options open to Italian city-states. Bologna moves from signorial to senatorial oligarchy and negotiates a degree of autonomy under the authority of the Papal State. Florence goes through varying forms of oligarchy and republicanism to emerge as a duchy moving towards absolutism under the control of a single family. Milan is governed by the Sforza dukes, and French and Spanish occupa-

tion before becoming a directly-ruled possession of the Habsburgs. More to the point, each experiences the rationalization of confraternal charitable institutions and the move to civic-directed relief programs at different times in the period under study. In Milan, the Ospedale Maggiore (Or Ca' Grande) originated as a union of confraternal hospices in 1456 and became a model for the co-operation of state, church, and confraternities through the sixteenth century. In Florence, Cosimo I brought the forty confraternal hospitals under the supervision of the Buonomini del Bigallo in 1542, part of a steadily increasing supervision of confraternal institutions, and a step towards confinement of beggars in the Ospedale dei Mendicanti in 1621.

The dynamic of a local oligarchy working in some way with an outside power creates a vigorously competitive political climate which effects all urban institutions, not least the charitable institutions and the government bureaucracy itself. My investigation into the relation of charity, politics, and religion in the three cities will focus on four specific points of comparison:

1. the ennobling of the confraternities (with particular attention to the influx of politically active individuals), and the networks of cross-appointed officers serving distinct institutions.
2. mergers between confraternities performing similar charitable functions, and the consequent rationalization of confraternal charitable functions.
3. the development of civic poor relief schemes and workhouses, through subsidization of existing confraternal institutions and the creation of new ones.
4. the relevant political debates within the three cities, with attention to how the different political systems and circumstances affect the debate.