

The *Compagnia di San Paolo* and the Turinese Poor

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From time to time, unintended consequences can outlive the best laid plans. A confraternity established in the sixteenth century to combat the Lutheran heresy may appear in the first half of the twentieth century in the disparate forms of a major banking establishment and a hospital for the indigent. Such is the case with the *Compagnia di San Paolo di Torino*. The bank (*Istituto Bancario di San Paolo di Torino*) continues to exist, but it is the now-closed hospital/poorhouse which traces its origin more directly to the founding works and aims of the *Compagnia di San Paolo di Torino*. The *Ospedale di Carità* served continuously in its primary role as a poorhouse on the Via Po in Turin from 1697 to well into the twentieth century.¹ It was an outgrowth of previous less successful attempts at establishing an institution designed to help the poorest of the Turinese poor.

Tracing back through these precursor institutions leads directly to its sixteenth century foundations: the *Monte di Pietà* (a Franciscan-operated moneylender established in 1519) and the *Compagnia di San Paolo* (the well-known Turinese confraternity established in 1563), which adopted the *Monte di Pietà* structure to carry out one of its aims.

The Monte di Pietà, Precursor to the Compagnia di San Paolo

A Franciscan brother proposed the founding of a *Monte di Pietà* in April 1519. As sufficient donations arrived, it was established on April 27, 1519. At first the Franciscans oversaw the institution, but, shortly thereafter, the city of Turin brought it under its patronage.² As a result, the city and the archbishop donated money, and Duke Charles II immediately approved the creation of the institution. However, this first *Monte di Pietà* in Turin was not long-lived; war broke out between the French and the Spanish over Lombardy in 1521, and in the following four years the war gravely damaged Turin's economy. In 1525 the Spanish were victorious; they occupied Piedmont until 1529. The *Monte di Pietà* collapsed, as the Dukes could not supply the institution with funds.³

1 Archivio dell Comune, Turin (hereafter ACT), "Categoria in *Inventario dell'Ospedale di Carità* (Torino)", 7.

2 Mario Abrate, *Istituto Bancario San Paolo di Torino, 1563–1963 IV Centenario* (Torino: Istituto Bancario San Paolo di Torino, 1963), 39–40.

3 *Ibid.*

The Compagnia di San Paolo, Precursor to the Ospedale di Carità

Three decades elapsed before the next precursor to the *Ospedale* appeared. These years were not placid; they saw the continuation of the same conditions which had already led to the collapse of the *Monte di Pietà*, notably the war and the subsequent occupation by foreigners. On April 1, 1536, Francis I, King of France, occupied Turin. The *Monte di Pietà* having collapsed, and with it the campaign against the Lutheran heresy, Francis I assumed the anti-heretical task.⁴ The calamities of war and foreign occupation were compounded by an outbreak of the plague in 1558–1559. By 1559 bread was scarce, and misery was widespread.

Although a peace treaty had been signed in 1559,⁵ the French did not leave Turin until 1562, and the Duke only entered the city on February 7, 1563.⁶ Despite Francis I's re-organized campaign against "the Lutheran heresy", it remained a major concern after he had departed.⁷ Duke Emanuele Filiberto had not yet arrived in Turin when, on January 25, 1563, the confraternity entitled the *Compagnia di San Paolo* was founded. This confraternity was established by a group of prominent men organized to meet perceived societal problems, preeminently spiritual matters. The primary spiritual matter was the strengthening of faith necessary to combat the Lutheran heresy.⁸ Poor-relief did not appear until later. Indeed, for the first century and a half after its foundation, the *Compagnia* was involved in a variety of spiritual initiatives, to which the poor-relief activities which led to the establishment of the *Ospedale* were only incidental.

Poor-relief and the Compagnia

In all, the *Compagnia*'s programs involved seven "works", part spiritual (countering the heresy of Luther), part social. The first work (*Opera*) was to sustain the faithful by encouraging them to partake of the Holy Sacraments, and thus participate in the Reform of the Church (*Riforma della Chiesa*). In order to maintain the holy Catholic faith, the confraternity encouraged the cult of the Eucharist (*culto della Divina Eucaristia*).⁹

The second major work, being educational, did have an incidental bearing on the poor. In March, 1567, the *Compagnia di San Paolo* participated in the establishment of the *Collegio di Torino*, and thus became partly responsible for the education of the Piedmontese youth. To the extent that this included the poor, this work had an incidental element of poor-relief.¹⁰

4 Conte D. Emanuele Tesauo, *Istoria della Venerabile Compagnia della Fede Cattolica sotto L'Invocazione nell'Augusta Città di Torino* (Torino: Battista Zappata Libraro di S.A.R., seconda edizione, 1701), 7.

5 Francesco Cognasso, *Storia di Torino* (Firenze: Giunti Martello, 1978), 197.

6 *Ibid.*, 198–201.

7 Tesauo, *Istoria della Venerabile...*, 7.

8 *Ibid.*, 20. Abrate, *Istituto Bancario San Paolo...*, 26.

9 Tesauo, *Istoria della Venerabile...*, 23.

10 *Ibid.*, 40–1.

The third work undertaken by the *Compagnia di San Paolo* was purely spiritual. It established the *Congregazione della Beata Vergine* to combat the Lutheran heresy by increasing religious devotions and practices.¹¹

In contrast, the fourth work did have relevance as a precursor of the *Ospedale*. It furthered the establishment of the *Monte di Pietà* to help the poor in general, but especially to help the *poveri vergognosi*—the “shame-faced poor”—persons of rank who were specially worthy of help, privately provided, because of their position in society.¹²

The fifth work of the *Compagnia di San Paolo* was designed to have a direct effect on a narrow element of the poor: impecunious unmarried virgin women. It established the House of Help for Virgins (*Casa del Soccorso delle Vergini*).¹³ It had a broader effect on the poor when the limitation “*delle Vergini*” was dropped and the charge was expanded to include fallen women, invoking the name of Mary Magdalene.¹⁴

A further expansion extended the services of the *Casa del Soccorso* to additional poor. Widows with insufficient funds to raise their girl children became a concern, as did the upbringing of girls whose mothers’ reputations were considered improper. The *Casa del Soccorso* usually had more than twenty young women, who had to follow the rules of *L’Ufficio Pio*.

The decision regarding admission to the *Casa* usually rested with the parish priest, based on an interview with the mother and child. The technique later found a use at the *Ospedale* itself.¹⁵

Thus, recovering women to the faith involved a measure of poor-relief. The *Compagnia di San Paolo* provided dowries for virgin women; it provided clothes for poor women; and it accomplished the *Pie Disposizioni de’ Testatori*.¹⁶

The sixth and seventh works had no direct effect on the poor; they related to the establishment of an Oratory of prayers, especially for their rulers (*i propi Principi*),¹⁷ and the building of “*Tempi, e Edifici*” in honor of God.¹⁸

The Compagnia di Carità in Turin

Beside the internal pressures to serve the poor that grew out of the *Compagnia*’s original purposes, a major expansion of services to the poor resulted when the *Compagnia* sought and achieved inclusion within an existing category of papal approval and support. This papal favor was to lead directly to the organization of the earlier versions of the *Ospedale*.

11 *Ibid.*, 55–56.

12 *Ibid.*, 66–69.

13 *Ibid.*, 77.

14 *Ibid.*, 80.

15 *Ibid.*, 82.

16 *Ibid.*, 80–85.

17 *Ibid.*, 86.

18 *Ibid.*, 100–106.

In 1520, before the creation of the *Compagnia di San Paolo* in Turin, Cardinal Giulio de' Medici established a confraternity in Rome entitled the *Compagnia di Carità*, dedicated to the needs of the *poveri vergognosi*, the assistance of the incarcerated, and the burial of the dead. Pope Leo X approved of this confraternity, and lent his authority as head to all such *compagnie* using the title of *Carità*, wherever these institutions would be founded.¹⁹

In order to participate in the privileges conferred by Rome, the *Confratelli di San Paolo* were required not only to operate under the style of *Carità*, but also to expand their concern from housing the "shameful poor" to housing beggars.

Thus, almost twenty years after the founding of the *Compagnia di San Paolo*, the Turinese city government gave grants to its *Compagnia di Carità* in 1582. The purpose of these grants was to gather all the poor beggars in the city in one location, an establishment which was named the *Albergo della Carità*. This institution would provide shelter, clothing, and food. The sick would be taken care of, and the healthy would work in the wool manufactory (*lanificio*) and at other trades. Contributions were given by each of the confraternities to build this *Albergo della Carità* in the suburb along the Po River.²⁰

There were two attempts to establish a permanent *Ospedale di Carità*: 1627, and 1650. The actual construction, at the Via Po site which was to be its permanent location, began at the beginning of 1682 and was finished at the end of 1697. Like many such institutions before and since, the *Ospedale* in its final form was an outgrowth of earlier efforts to solve the problem of poverty. It was, however, both significant and unusual in its ability to survive for over two centuries.

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19 *Ibid.* (Torino: Gio. Sinibaldo Stampator Regio, e Camerale, 1657, first edition), 189.

20 *Ibid.*, 190.