

Pivotal moments:
the Foundation of
the Misericórdia de Lisboa
and its First *Compromisso*
Printed in 1516

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The Seven Acts of Mercy by Caravaggio

In 1607, Caravaggio painted the seven corporal works of mercy, for a confraternity of Neapolitan nobles, the *Pio Monte della Carità*. He brought these seven acts together for the first time in just one single image, instead of painting separate panels, and made the good actions of men dependent upon divine grace, personified by the sacred figures in the upper part of the canvas.

INTRODUCTION: A CONFRATERNITY FOR CHRISTIANS¹

He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction. (William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act III, Scene 1)

This text is well known: it is a monologue spoken by Shylock, in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, first performed in the late sixteenth century. Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, demands the fulfilment of a promise: a pound of Antonio's flesh for the money that he lent him to invest in maritime trade.



The seven works of mercy
Master of Alkmaar, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Antonio is left ruined by the loss of his ships in a storm, and, against all the rules of Christian piety, Shylock insists on the payment of the bloody debt. The words that he then utters reveal his resentment over the discrimination he receives; if we pay close attention to them, we can see that they are a kind of negative expression of the Christian works of mercy, which he knows are refused to him because he is a Jew. Shylock claims respect for his humanity, which is given to him, above all else, by his possession of a body, with eyes

¹ The author, who acknowledges full responsibility for any eventual errors or omissions, wishes to thank Francisco d'Orey Manoel and Tiago Reis C. P. Miranda for their careful reading and comments of an earlier version of this text.

and hands, subject to pains and diseases, and also vulnerable to feelings and emotions. Nothing separated him from the Christian, not even the right that he claimed to seek revenge in the face of insults and humiliations.

Let us go back in time another hundred years. In Lisbon, in 1498, a confraternity was created that was dedicated to the fulfilment of the fourteen works of mercy and was open to all those who were baptised. The text could not be more explicit, as is shown by this excerpt taken from the first paragraph of the *Compromisso* of the confraternity published in 1516: “[so that] all the works of mercy, both spiritual and corporal, may be fulfilled, insofar as possible, to succour the tribulations and miseries that are suffered by our brothers in Christ who have received the water of the Holy Baptism.”²

Christians, therefore. In a city that just under two years earlier had embarked on a process of eradicating its Muslim and Hebrew minorities, and then extended this procedure to the whole kingdom.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE MISERICÓRDIA DE LISBOA: THE CONTEXT

On 4 or 5 December, 1496, King Manuel I (1495-1521), under pressure from the king and queen of Castile (this was how the Portuguese referred to Fernando and Isabel, both before and after the Pope granted them the title of the Catholic Monarchs in 1496), applied through their eldest daughter, Isabel, determined that the Jews of the kingdom should be given a period of time during which to convert to Christianity or else abandon the kingdom by the following October³. Traumatized by the tragic death of her first husband, Prince Afonso, and already living in retreat at a convent, the princess refused a second marriage and demanded as a condition for marrying the Portuguese king that he should expel the Jews from the kingdom⁴. This was a measure of spiritual purification, and it closely followed what had been happening in Spain since at least 1478, when the Inquisition of Castile had been founded. The main blow against the religious minorities, however, was delivered with the order to expel the Jews from the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon in 1492, shortly after the successful completion of the conquest of

² *Compromisso da confraria de Misericórdia*. Lisbon, Valentim Fernandes and Hernão de Campos, 1516. We shall quote from the first printed version of the *Compromisso* published in Isabel dos Guimarães Sá and José Pedro Paiva (eds.), *A fundação das Misericórdias: o Reinado de D. Manuel I, Portugaliae Monumenta Misericordiarum*, vol. 3, Lisbon, União das Misericórdias Portuguesas, 2004 (henceforth referred to as *PMM*, vol. 3), pp. 410-423. All updates of spelling that have been made in the transcription of this text, as well as the underlinings made for the purposes of emphasis, are the author's responsibility.

³ Through a charter sent to the municipal councils ordering the expulsion of Jews and Moors by October of the following year. This same charter was then incorporated into the ordinances of the kingdom (*Ordenações Manuelinas*, Lisbon, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1984, livro II, tit. 41, pp. 212-214).

⁴ Isabel of Castile and Aragon was a princess of Portugal through her marriage to the Infante Dom Afonso, the heir to the Portuguese throne, who died in 1491.

the kingdom of Granada by the Catholic Monarchs. The princess demanded that the same procedure should take place in Portugal in order for her marriage to be realised, all the more so because it was clear that many of the Jews expelled from Spain had fled to Portugal. King Manuel gave in to the princess's pressures (and perhaps, above all, to those exerted by her parents), paying a high price for this, as he would have to dispense with a community that had proved useful to the Iberian monarchs. We now know that he later preferred to forcibly baptise them rather than to see them leaving the kingdom.

If we look at the political moment in itself, perhaps King Manuel's option to forcibly oblige the Jews to convert was the better of the two choices open to him. The second option would be to yield to the international pressures brought by Spain and Venice and to ally with them against France by joining the Holy League. Charles VIII of France had entered Italy, marching against Naples, the kingdom over which he claimed dynastic rights, during the year of 1496. In this way, he began the Italian Wars, which would continue to be waged throughout the sixteenth century. François Soyer states that the king of Portugal, who wished to invest in the Portuguese expansion into the Indian Ocean region, did not want his resources to be dispersed and committed to fighting wars in Europe. Also, according to the same author, King Manuel had just one single purpose, to avoid participating in the inter-state wars of Europe: to protect his resources and to leave himself room for manoeuvre in order to pursue the project of reaching India by sea. Despite the contrary opinions expressed by his council, which met as soon as he became king in 1495, King Manuel insisted on trying to reach India by sea⁵. This aim was realised after the marriage of King Manuel I to Isabel, for which the contract was signed on 30 November 1496; Vasco da Gama set sail for Calicut on 2 July 1497, and returned to Lisbon on 28 August 1499.

The 'lesser evil' soon showed itself to be far more problematic than the king had predicted, all the more so because his wish was to keep the Jews in the kingdom, as was clearly highlighted at the end of December 1496, only a few weeks after the order of expulsion had been decreed. The subsequent measures promulgated by King Manuel, however, were to place the Portuguese Sephardic community at risk, and meant that shortly afterwards there would be a repression brought against the Jewish people, motivated by their resistance to these same measures. It would seem that the king had not expected to meet with any great opposition on the part of the Jews, which proved to be wrong. At Easter time in 1497, King Manuel ordered the children of the Jews to be taken away from them, in order to be brought up and educated by Christians, which, as was to be expected, caused a tremendous shock among the Jewish community. Meanwhile, he had limited their possibilities of leaving the kingdom, progressively restricting the number of ports where they could embark, until they were permitted to leave exclusively from the port of Lisbon.

⁵ François Soyer, *The Persecutions of the Jews and Muslims of Portugal. King Manuel I and the End of Religious Tolerance (1496-97)*, Leiden, Brill, 2007, pp. 169-181.

April of that same year was, very probably, the month of the (enforced) mass baptism of Jews. These were gathered together on the land behind the Estaus Palace, in Lisbon, where they were piled on top of one another under inhuman conditions. Some preferred to commit suicide rather than to renounce their faith. Historiography has remained silent regarding the most violent aspects of the events of 1497, but those studies that have made use of Hebrew sources have drawn attention to this difficult period in the life of the Jews in Portugal, which was particularly acute in the city of Lisbon⁶. Immediately afterwards, on 13 May 1497, perhaps in order to relieve the tension, King Manuel ordered that the newly-converted Jews should not be prosecuted for errors of faith for a period of twenty years.

The repression of the Jews posed problems for the monarchy. In the Middle Ages, they had enjoyed immediate royal protection, and monarchs and members of the royal family lived happily together with Jews, whose services they constantly solicited. In Portugal, there is evidence that, without ever having converted to the Christian faith, Jews were to be found actively employed in various fields, such as medicine, tax collection, and the manufacture of weapons; some were indispensable as lenders of capital to the crown and the high nobility⁷. The situation was similar in Spain, although most of the individuals to be found working under these circumstances were converts to the Christian faith. Many of them performed highly important roles in the upper echelons of royal officialdom, as well as holding leading positions at ecclesiastical institutions, as can be seen in the long lists drawn up by Spanish historians⁸. While, in the neighbouring kingdoms, there had been countless conversions following the persecutions that had begun in 1391, in Portugal such cases were relatively low in number before 1497⁹. Moreover, the Spanish Inquisition, which was founded in the kingdom of Castile in 1478, and then shortly afterwards in Aragon, justified its existence through the fact that it was generally believed that the Jews that had converted to Christianity were exposed to bad influences by those who had remained loyal to the Jewish faith.

Legally, the Jews were under the king's protection, and the same situation also applied in Castile and Aragon before 1492. The monarchs levied high taxes on the Jewish communities, but they were also capable of protecting them in situations where it was predicted that their houses could be attacked as a result of the people's anger. Besides these moments, Lent and Easter were other chronic occasions when attacks on the cities' Jewish quarters were a recurrent event, as well as during those periods when there were small power vacuums caused by the death of the monarchs. In 1449, at the time of the Battle of Alfarrobeira, which marked

⁶ Elias Lipiner, *Os baptizados em pé. Estudos acerca da origem e da luta dos Cristãos-Novos em Portugal*, Lisbon, Vega, 1998, in particular pp. 35-36. Soyer, *The Persecution of the Jews*, cit., pp. 182-240.

⁷ On the question of the Jewish merchant bankers of Lisbon, linked to the court, cf. Maria José Pimenta Ferro Tavares, *Os Judeus em Portugal no século XV*, vol. I, Lisbon, Universidade Nova, 1982, p. 131 and following.

⁸ Miguel Ángel Ladero Quesada, *La España de los Reyes Católicos*, Madrid, Alianza Editorial, 1999, pp. 315-316.

⁹ François Soyer, *The Persecution of the Jews*, cit., pp. 84-88.

the transition from the regency of the Infante Dom Pedro to the reign of King Afonso V, through the death of the former, the Jewish quarter of Lisbon was attacked and robbed and some Jews were killed while the king was in Évora. The situation was such that only the king could resolve it: after a “request of the greatest urgency”, King Afonso V ended up coming to Lisbon in person and ordering the customary executions of those believed guilty, a measure that many considered to have been implemented with far too much haste, believing that several innocent people had been executed. The courts arrested those who were found in possession of property that had been stolen from the Jews, without there being any proof that they were the ones who had stolen it¹⁰. There is evidence that both King João II and his wife, or even King Manuel, before the years 1496-1497, wrote letters to various municipal councils ordering them to protect the Jews in situations when attacks were expected on the Jewish quarters. For example, when King João II lay dying in the Algarve, and the people were apparently preparing to attack the Jews of Évora, Queen Leonor and her brother wrote to the municipal councils of Évora and Lisbon, asking that measures be taken to prevent this from happening¹¹. The fact is that the expulsion of the Jews decreed by the Catholic Monarchs in 1492 led to many of them fleeing to Portugal, causing situations of tension and conflict in various towns and villages.

One must, however, guard against exaggerating the royal protection that was afforded to the Jews, dictated, above all else, by pragmatic reasons, related both with the functions that they performed and with the taxes that they paid. The social relationships that were conducted in private with Jews did not mean that there was any real tolerance for Judaism: in their sermons, Franciscans and Dominicans, for example, exhorted the urban populations to engage in violence against the Jews, whom they associated with the sin of usury. It may be said that anti-Semitism, with all of its ambiguities and contradictions, was a major structural component of late medieval culture¹².

While King Manuel hesitated between imposing the public and abstract violence of the law and allowing for tolerance in private towards the presence of people of Jewish origin in his kingdoms, the inhabitants of the cities were clearly and manifestly anti-Hebrew¹³. It was often evident to the monarchs that the Jews needed protection against the violence of the urban populations, especially during critical periods of the liturgical calendar, such as Holy Week (the Jews were held

¹⁰ Rui de Pina, “Chronica do Senhor Rey D. Afonso V”, in *Crónicas de Rui de Pina*, M. Lopes de Almeida (ed.), Porto, Lello, 1977, pp. 758-759.

¹¹ Arquivo Distrital de Évora, *Livro 3.º de Originaís (73)*. Letter from the queen to Dom Fernando de Castro, seeking to protect the Jews of Évora, fl. 129 (1495.10.24, Alcácer do Sal); *Idem*, *Livro 3.º de Originaís (73)*, Letter from Dom Manuel I to the city of Lisbon, asking for measures to be taken to prevent riots from being perpetrated against Jews as a result of the king's death, fl. 136 (1495.10.27, Alcácer do Sal).

¹² On these aspects, cf. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, “A Ferida na Parede” in *Idem*, *A Prática do Novo Historicismo*, São Paulo, Edusc, 2005, pp. 89-127, in particular pp. 93-94, and the respective note no. 7, with various bibliographical references relating to works about anti-Semitic writings by the mendicant preachers.

¹³ Benzion Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, 3rd ed., Philadelphia, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1972, p. 41.

responsible for the death of Christ), or during periods of crisis, such as famine and plague, when the anger of the people was directed towards the religious minorities, whom they blamed for their misfortunes. Francisco Bethencourt attributes these anti-Jewish revolts not only to the practice of money lending and/or the collection of taxes and rents, but also to the urban competition for economic resources, which caused resentment among the poor population in particular¹⁴.

As we have seen, a particularly acute moment was experienced in Lisbon when the Jews were confined within a walled and empty plot of land behind the Estaus Palace, where the headquarters of the Inquisition (founded in 1536) and the Dona Maria theatre (1836) would later be built¹⁵.

The violence and intolerance that could be felt in the streets of Lisbon were logically compensated by the formation of a confraternity that sought to personify love for one's neighbour. However, in its very first *Compromisso*, the Misericórdia de Lisboa declared that the confraternity was intended for all Christians, reflecting the generalised anti-Jewish climate. It was only open to Christians, among whose number the New Christians were now included, in other words, the Jews who had received the water of baptism. The expression therefore takes on a new meaning when examined in the light of what was happening in Lisbon during those two crucial years.

The role that the Misericórdia de Lisboa played in pacifying the city's social relations was not confined to the moment of its foundation. Years later, it entered into action once more, albeit on an *ad hoc* basis. After the violence that had marked the massacre of 1506, when crowds already made desperate by the plague that was devastating the city (those who stayed there were the common people and the city council, because the court had already fled), and further incited by some Dominican friars, massacred thousands of Jews, with Christians also in the midst of them, the Misericórdia once again performed its special role, which was always associated with pacifying actions. When the massacre was over, the brotherhood came out of the cathedral in a procession, publicly whipping themselves in an act of self-flagellation and seeking to bring an end to the situation. According to the chronicle: “/and the very next day, which was Thursday, a very devout procession of the brotherhood of the Misericórdia came out of the cathedral, with many disciplinants, all shouting /peace / peace / with which the said killing was completely extinguished”¹⁶.

Let us now return to the summer of 1498. King Manuel had departed on 29 March, with his wife pregnant, leaving Queen Leonor as his regent. He had been

¹⁴ Which, according to the author, was later made much worse with the conversion to the Christian faith and the consequent transformation of the Jews into New Christians. Francisco Bethencourt, *Racisms. From the Crusades to the Twentieth Century*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 145.

¹⁵ See the representation of that space on a sixteenth-century map, reproduced in Soyer, *The Persecution of the Jews*, *cit.*, p. 221.

¹⁶ Gaspar Correia, *Crónicas de D. Manuel e de D. João III (até 1533)*, José Pereira da Costa (ed.), Lisbon, Academia das Ciências, 1992, p. 31. On the massacre, cf. François Soyer, which is based on Correia's account, although it does not refer to the passage now quoted. “The Massacre of the New Christians of Lisbon in 1506: A New Eyewitness Account”, *Cadernos de Estudos Sefarditas*, no. 7, 2007, pp. 221-244.

solemnly sworn as the heir to the throne of Castile at Toledo Cathedral and had set out en route to Saragossa, where the kingdom of Aragon was supposed to perform a similar act. However, things did not go so well here: the Aragonese showed themselves to be reluctant to accept an heir to the throne who came to them through a female line, since they followed the Salic law, which eliminated women from the order of succession. Their rejection of the king was being negotiated and the court was waiting in Saragossa, because Queen Isabel was nearing the end of her pregnancy. But the worst part was that the queen died just a few hours after giving birth to a son, who survived. Because of the death of his wife, King Manuel lost the right that he had to the thrones of Castile and Aragon, which passed to his son, Dom Miguel da Paz, who was to be raised and educated in Castile under the guardianship of his maternal grandparents and died two years later¹⁷.

Tradition has created the idea that the Misericórdia de Lisboa was founded on 15 August 1498, although, in truth, it is impossible to determine whether it actually happened on that day¹⁸. All known versions of the first *Compromisso*, as well as the second one, dating from 1577, refer only to the month of August, without mentioning the exact day; all mention of the circumstances of its foundation was to completely disappear in 1619. But, *se non è vero è ben trovato*: the Virgin Mary was the patron of the confraternity, and because 15 August was the day of her assumption to heaven, and therefore a holy day, there may well have been a procession to celebrate the event. However, despite everything that has been said, there is one incontrovertible fact: it was Queen Leonor who founded the confraternity, since her brother the king was absent from Lisbon from the end of March until October in that year of 1498. King Manuel sent his sister instructions for the government of the country during his absence, but none of those that have survived makes any mention of the Misericórdia, and so it is possible that Queen Leonor did in fact take the initiative to found this institution. We now know that this foundation was inspired by, but not copied from, the homonymous confraternities of Tuscany. It is likely that the queen's devotional culture, as well as her frequent social contact with members of the clergy, contributed to this initiative, which may have been completely unknown to King Manuel. We know that Queen Leonor, just like the whole of the court in fact, had dealings with the influential community of Florentine merchants who lived and conducted their business in Lisbon. It is perfectly plausible, therefore, that these people spoke to her about the Tuscan *misericórdias* and that Queen Leonor took her inspiration from them¹⁹.

¹⁷ Queen Isabel died on 23 August 1498, and the prince died on 19 August, 1500, in Granada.

¹⁸ As noted by Gonçalo de Carvalho Amaro, *Uma Igreja, Duas Histórias. Um percurso pela história e pelo património da antiga igreja manuelina da Misericórdia de Lisboa (actual Conceição Velha)*, Lisbon, Santa Casa da Misericórdia, 2015, p. 14, note 5.

¹⁹ Marco Spallanzani, *Mercanti Fiorentini nell'Asia Portoghese*, Firenze, Studio per Edizioni Scelte, 1997, pp. 13-22; Kate Lowe, "Rainha D. Leonor of Portugal's Patronage in Renaissance Florence and Cultural Exchange", *Cultural Links between Portugal and Italy in the Renaissance*, K. J. P. Lowe (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, pp. 225-248; Nunziatella Allestrandini, *Na comunidade italiana os florentinos em Lisboa e a Igreja do Loreto: subsídios para o seu estudo no século XVI*, 2 vols., Master's Degree thesis, Lisbon, Universidade Aberta, 2002, in particular vol. I, pp. 122-144.

The new confraternity was founded in one of the chapels of the cloister of Lisbon Cathedral, the chapel of Our Lady of Piety, or of Nossa Senhora da Terra Solta, as it was also known, which still exists there today. This is a relatively tiny space, a simple place of meeting and worship, from where the brothers would set forth to undertake their works of mercy in the city of Lisbon. Or, in other words, at this initial moment of its foundation, the confraternity relied on the support of the Cathedral chapter, although, as the text of the 1516 *Compromisso* makes clear, the initiative was the responsibility of the queen regent: "Being in this way [involved] in the institution of the Confraternity and Brotherhood, with the permission and help being granted by the reverend college of the said cathedral²⁰. Several Portuguese *misericórdias* were to be installed in chapels in the cloisters of cathedrals and collegiate churches where they remained for the first years of their existence, as was the case in Porto and Guimarães. Only later was the Misericórdia de Lisboa to be given its own church, built roughly between 1517 and 1534, and situated between the present-day streets of Rua da Alfândega and Rua dos Bacalhoeiros²¹.

Meanwhile, in October, the king arrived in the city at night, incognito, but taking care to immediately go and speak to his sister. The fact that the city was in mourning prevented him from being received by the municipal council with organised festivities, as was the norm²². The proof that the idea pleased him can be found in the way in which he used his authority as king to encourage the creation of *misericórdias* throughout the whole kingdom of Portugal and its conquests. This latter aspect of the origins of the *misericórdias* is better known, but this façade that the king demonstrated may have given the impression that Queen Leonor's important actions amounted to little more than working behind the scenes.

We know today that the dowager queen had a remarkable influence on her brother the king, who was eleven years younger than she was. We are given to understand this from certain passages of the chronicle of Damião de Góis, some of which were later censured by the Count of Tentúgal, and from the report of a Venetian spy who expressly mentioned that King Manuel never did anything without first asking his sister. For Damião de Góis, Queen Leonor had been no more and no less than the person who had made her brother the king of Portugal: the 'sole cause' to use his inescapable words²³. We also have other indirect indicators of the queen's influence on the king, such as the fact that the latter continued to be generous towards his sister insofar as the concession of property was concerned. For the historian Anselmo Braamcamp Freire (1849-1921), who idolised King João II and disparaged King Manuel, this latter figure was a weak man, at the mercy of the

²⁰ In the original: "Sendo isso mesmo na instituição da Confraria e Irmandade e dando a elo outorga autoridade e ajuda o reverendo colégio da dita sé". Prologue to the *Primeiro Compromisso*, *cit.*, in *PPM*, vol. 3, p. 411.

²¹ Gonçalo Amaro, *Uma Igreja, Duas Histórias*, *cit.*, p. 13.

²² Biblioteca Nacional da Ajuda, *cód.* 51-V-69, fl. 209.

²³ "... which Lady was the sole cause of his being appointed in the succession of these Kingdoms...". Damião de Góis, *Crónica do Felicíssimo Rei D. Manuel*, new edition in accordance with the first edition of 1566, Coimbra, by order of the University, 1949, part I, p. 9.

pressures exerted upon him by the three women in his family, his mother Beatriz and his two sisters, Queen Leonor and the dowager Duchess of Bragança, Dona Isabel²⁴. We should therefore consider the hypothesis (which unfortunately it is impossible to prove) that Leonor was the *éminence grise* behind her brother, and that he always treated her with a consideration that King João III did not show her in the last four years of the queen's life, between 13 December 1521 and 17 November 1525, which were the dates of the deaths of King Manuel and Queen Leonor respectively.

In one of the few letters in which she allowed herself to make a more personal remark, Queen Leonor was to say that she "was the cause" of the foundation of the Confraternity of the Misericórdia. This was much later on, in 1524, in her reply to the provost and brothers of the Misericórdia do Porto who had asked her to intercede with King João III on behalf of the confraternity, since they had not been paid the alms in money, sugar and incense that they had previously received in the time when his father was king²⁵. Probably the queen wished to say that the idea had been hers, and that her brother had taken credit for it, and she was not referring in the letter just to the Misericórdia do Porto, but in fact to all the *miseri-córdias* in the kingdom, created after the one set up in Lisbon²⁶.

In Autumn 1498, when King Manuel returned to Lisbon, he found the Misericórdia de Lisboa already founded. We do not know whose idea this was, whether the two siblings had planned its foundation before the king left, or even whether the latter had been taken by surprise and then gone along with it. What is certain is that, from then on, *miseri-córdias* were founded almost everywhere where there were Portuguese to be found. Queen Leonor abandoned the regency and it fell to her brother to protect the new confraternities since he was now the king; we will always know very little about the role that the queen played after the founding moment in the evolution of the *miseri-córdias*.

The movement that led to the foundation of the *miseri-córdias* must be seen within the context of a Manueline tendency for the standardisation of institutions, which took place in specific areas such as the publication of the Ordinances (1512-4) and of the new charters (1497-1520), and it should not be seen as part of a supposed centralisation of the royal power²⁷. In short, the *miseri-córdias* brought together nobles and the most highly skilled artisans of each urban centre, marking a dividing line between the elites and the rest of the population. They established social boundaries between different groups, dividing their own members into

²⁴ Anselmo Braamcamp Freire, *Crítica e História. Estudos*, Lisbon, Gulbenkian, 1996, pp. 97-132, in particular pp. 115-116.

²⁵ In Artur de Magalhães Basto, *História da Santa Casa da Misericórdia do Porto*, vol. I, Porto, Edição da Santa Casa da Misericórdia do Porto, 1934, pp. 356-358. The letter was written in Xabregas on 18 May 1524.

²⁶ This is also the interpretation of Artur de Magalhães Basto, *História da Santa Casa, cit.*, vol. I, p. 357.

²⁷ Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro, "O Reino Quinhentista", in Rui Ramos (coord.), Bernardo Vasconcelos e Sousa and Nuno Gonçalo Monteiro, *História de Portugal*, Lisbon, Esfera dos Livros, 2009, p. 228. We may add to these actions the taking of the inventories of the chapels and hospitals, which was carried out from 1505 onwards (Góis, *Crónica do Felicíssimo cit.*, pp. 227-228. Silva Dias also talks about the intention to undertake a general reform of the monastic orders of the kingdom in around 1501. J. S. da Silva Dias, *Correntes do sentimento religioso em Portugal (séculos XVI a XVIII)*, Coimbra, Universidade de Coimbra, 1960, vol. I, Tomo I, p. 98.

noble brothers and officers, and excluding those who might come to need alms. Only in theory, since they constituted powerful elements of self-help and helped to guarantee the social reproduction of the elites themselves, who enjoyed privileged access to the confraternity's financial resources.

In 1498, therefore, a confraternity was founded in Lisbon destined for the practice of the fourteen works of mercy, "insofar as possible". While charitable practice was an extension of one's love for one's neighbour, a basic principle that had been present in the Christian religion right from its very beginning, the enumeration of the works of mercy has a history that needs to be told, albeit if only in a very general fashion. It is a difficult narrative to elaborate, since the historians of charity have not paid any real attention to the subject²⁸. A recent work, which deals with the evolution of the philosophical and political concept of mercy, does not even mention them²⁹. The historians of art, on the other hand, have dealt with the theme in some depth, since the iconographical representations of the works are mostly based on earlier texts³⁰. In very general terms, and mentioning only the most influential of these texts, let us briefly review the main moments of this evolution, merely to underline the fact that the medieval formulation of the works of mercy is the result of an evolutionary doctrinal process, and that their presence in the *Compromisso* of the Misericórdia de Lisboa is of great importance, because of the didactic value that it explicitly recognised, as well as the role that it played in structuring the activities of the confraternity.

THE ENUNCIATION OF THE FOURTEEN WORKS OF MERCY: THEIR GENESIS AND DEVELOPMENT

In the Christian religion, charity and mercy are close to one another, but they are not equivalent. Charity, one of the three theological virtues, is related to one's love for God and for one's neighbour, whereas mercy, although it arises from charity, is not the same as this, since it presupposes compassion for the suffering of others. As the 1516 *Compromisso* of the Misericórdia de Lisboa made clear in its prologue: "succouring the tribulations and miseries that our brothers in Christ suffer from"³¹.

There are many passages in the Bible that refer to acts of mercy, but among them the most important is the passage from the Gospel according to St. Matthew, which inspired the seven corporal works of mercy³². Addressing the righteous,

²⁸ With the exception of Maureen Flynn, *Sacred Charity. Confraternities and Social Welfare in Spain, 1400-1700*, London, Macmillan, 1989, pp. 44-47.

²⁹ Alex Tuckness and John M. Parrish, *The Decline of Mercy in Public Life*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015.

³⁰ Maria do Rosário Salema Cordeiro Correia de Carvalho, ... *Por amor de Deus. Representação das obras de misericórdia, em painéis de azulejo, nos espaços das confrarias da Misericórdia, no Portugal Setecentista*, Master's degree thesis, Lisbon, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa, 2007, pp. 14-82. The literature survey that is made in this thesis refers to art historians who have examined this theme at an international level. See also Federico Botana, *The Works of Mercy in Italian Medieval Art (c. 1050-c. 1400)*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2012.

³¹ *Compromisso* of 1516, in *PMM*, vol. 3, p. 410.

³² For a survey of these episodes, see Maria do Rosário Carvalho, ... *Por amor de Deus, cit.*, pp. 17-21.

Jesus promised them the kingdom of heaven, saying “for I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.” (Matthew, 25: 35-36).

Not in the person of Christ, but in that of the poor, who thus began to be identified with him: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew, 25: 40). The eternal life was therefore within reach of those who practised these precepts, and eternal punishment, through *antonomasia*, awaited those who failed to fulfil them. The passage could not be placed within the context of a more relevant whole – the Last Judgement – nor could it be more explicit about the fact that the poor (the “least of these my brethren”) are situated on the Christians’ path to eternal salvation.

The formulation of the works of mercy such as it appears in the Gospel according to St. Matthew also highlights an historic moment. Not included in this list is the seventh work of mercy – burying the dead – since cremation was still part of the funerary practices of the Roman Empire. It was precisely the idea of the Last Judgement, and of the resurrection of the flesh, that this practice should be replaced with burial. In the Bible, this work of charity is mentioned in the Book of Tobias, whom God praised for having buried the dead (Tobias, 8-14). As we shall see later on, one of the medieval Portuguese confraternities, the confraternity of *Santa Maria da Anunciada* in Setúbal, was to incorporate this precept in its version of Chapter 25 of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.

As is known, the Bible adopted by the Catholic world dates back to the fourth century, corresponding to the Vulgate of St. Jerome (347-420), who in 382 was entrusted by the Pope with the task of compiling a group of texts in different languages and translating them into Latin, although he was not always the author of these translations³³.

A contemporary of St. Jerome’s, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), was to insist that faith in itself was insufficient for obtaining salvation and that it needed to be complemented through charitable works. The formulation of the corporal works is similar to the one that we already know, but some of those that would later become the spiritual works of mercy were already being sketched out. For St. Augustine, forgiving those who sin against us was already a work of charity: “provided what they say is what they do, for to forgive a person who asks for pardon is itself an almsdeed”³⁴. He went on to say:

“And so the Lord’s words, *Give alms, and everything is clean for you* (Luke, 11: 41), apply to any work of mercy that benefits somebody. Not only somebody who offers food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, hospitality to

³³ The Vulgate was to be rejected by the Protestant reforms, whereas the Catholic Church reasserted its official character by ratifying it in the Council of Trent (1545-1563).

³⁴ 71, the Lord’s Prayer. Saint Augustine, *The Augustine Catechism: the Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Charity*, Hyde Park, NY, New City Press, p. 99.





Works of mercy
Giving drink to the thirsty
and clothing the naked

the traveller, asylum to the refugee, a visit to the sick or the prisoner, redemption to the captive³⁵, support to the weak, guidance to the blind, comfort to the sorrowful, medicine to the unwell, a path to the wanderer, advice to the uncertain, or whatever is necessary to a person in need, but also one who offers pardon to the sinner, is giving alms. And one who uses the whip to correct someone over whom he has power, or disciplines him in some way, and yet puts away from his heart that person's sin by which he has been hurt or offended, or prays that it may be forgiven him, is giving alms not only through forgiveness and prayer but also in reproof and correction by some punishment, for thus he is showing mercy"³⁶.

In this way, St. Augustine proposed an expansion of the contents of the Gospel according to St. Matthew relating to the Last Judgement, as referred to above (Matthew 25: 31-46), extending it to include all acts that might benefit someone. He already refers to what would later be some of the spiritual works of mercy, albeit without their definitive formulation: the second, to counsel the doubtful, the third, to admonish the sinners with charity, the fourth, to comfort the afflicted; the fifth, to forgive offences willingly; and the sixth, to bear wrongs patiently. Only the first, to instruct the ignorant, and the seventh, to pray for the living and the dead, are missing.

In turn, the Benedictine rule represented a powerful instrument for the dissemination of the works of charity, because of the structural role that this religious order played in the Christian west after its foundation with St. Benedict of Nursia (480-543). In its Chapter IV, this rule enumerated the "instruments of good works", a set of 78 principles drawn from the most diverse biblical sources. Some corporal works of mercy are clearly enunciated therein: to succour the poor, to clothe the naked, to visit the sick and to bury the dead. And other precepts were found that were in keeping with the spiritual works of mercy, although they were referred to without any apparent logical sequence: to comfort the afflicted; not to seek vengeance, not to commit injustices in relation to anyone but to bear the injustices that they do unto us patiently; not to repay evil with evil, and to love our enemies³⁷. These recommendations, which were made for the use of monks, did not apply to everyone and were not restricted to the works of mercy, which became lost in the profusion of precepts. They did not yet contain the systematisation that the works of mercy were to have later on, when they were reduced to fourteen, seven spiritual and seven corporal.

In the life of the monks, the works of mercy were above all reflected in the duty of hospitality to the poor and to travellers, who should be received as if they were Christ himself, always in keeping with the idea that is so dear to the chapter referring to the Last Judgement in the Gospel according to St. Matthew. After

³⁵ In the *Enchiridion*, there is no mention of burying the dead, but Maureen Flynn states that St. Augustine included this work of mercy in other writings (Flynn, *Sacred Charity...cit.*, p. 45).

³⁶ Saint Augustine, *The Augustine Catechism, cit.*, pp. 99-100.

³⁷ In *Règle des moines. Pacôme. Augustin. Benoît. François d'Assise. Carmel*, Paris, Seuil, 1982, pp. 65-68.

they had been welcomed, the guests would pray together with the monks, give the kiss of peace and have their feet washed; they would eat and sleep separately, in the abbey's lodgings, which also included its own cooking facilities³⁸. As we can see, this system was quite different from the urban practices that we will find in the last centuries of the Middle Ages.

Some centuries later, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) was to definitively establish in his *Summa Theologica* the programmatic value of the works of mercy for the devotional practice of the Christian, by promoting the idea that charity came above the other two theological virtues, faith and hope, because it signified union with God, stating that no true value was possible without charity³⁹.

St. Thomas also provides a point of arrival in the enumeration of the works of mercy, expressed with clarity in his *Summa Theologica*:

For we reckon seven corporal almsdeeds, namely, to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to harbour the harbourless, to visit the sick, to ransom the captive, to bury the dead; all of which are expressed in the following verse. "to visit, to quench, to feed, to ransom, clothe, harbour or bury". Again we reckon seven spiritual alms, namely, to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to reprove the sinner, to forgive injuries, to bear with those who trouble and annoy us, and to pray for all, which are all contained in the following verse: "To counsel, reprove, console, to pardon, forbear, and to pray," yet so that counsel includes both advice and instruction"⁴⁰

While this was the formulation proposed by St. Augustine, which was very close to the one that would figure in the first printed *Compromisso* of the Misericórdia de Lisboa, its definitive doctrinal format was not yet universal⁴¹. For example, in the Iberian Peninsula, the *Siete Partidas*, a body of rules drawn up in Castile under the auspices of Afonso X (1252-1284), which sought to impose some standardisation on the laws of the kingdom, already listed the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, albeit in an incomplete form and under the heading of "alms". The dates of the elaboration of this code are uncertain, but it was published in the second half of the thirteenth century; if these works of mercy were not exactly contemporary to those of St. Thomas Aquinas, they did at least date from close to the same time.

"Law IX: how many kinds of alms there are

There are spiritual and corporal alms: as is shown by the law of the holy church which divides them in this way, showing that the spiritual alms are of three kinds. The first is to forgive as if someone has suffered harm and without

³⁸ *Règles des moines, cit.*, pp. 116-118.

³⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Kindle edition, Coyote Canyon Press, Claremont, Ca., Part II-II, question 24, answer to objection no. 5, position 47745 to 48183.

⁴⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Suma Teológica*, São Paulo, Edições Loyola, 2004, *Summa Theologica*, Part II-II (Secunda Secundae), Question 32, art. 2, Kindle Edition, position 49643 and following.

⁴¹ The spiritual works of mercy are listed in practically the same order, with only the third one (admonishing the sinners) changing places with the fourth one (comforting the afflicted). As far as the corporal works are concerned, the order is far from being the same, with only the seventh one being the same in the two documents (burying the dead).

reason from another to forgive him through the love of God. The second is to admonish others through the love of God when it is seen that they are wrong. The third is to teach the things that are good for the health of their soul to those who do not know these things and to guide them to the path of truth. And the corporal alms are in the works of mercy, which are these: to give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, and to clothe the naked, and to visit the sick and those who are in prison.”⁴²

These were the things that God demanded on the day of judgement; also, as the soul was superior to the body, the spiritual alms had precedence over the works of mercy. As can be seen, this formulation is not yet the one that we will have later, with only three types of spiritual alms (not even referred to as spiritual works of mercy), and only five corporal works. The sixth one is missing (to give lodging to the pilgrims and the poor), although this may be included in those that mention giving food and drink to the poor; the most glaring omission is that of the seventh corporal work, to bury the dead. This list is therefore more complete with regard to the corporal works of mercy and less complete in the case of the spiritual ones.

When did the enumeration of the works of mercy begin to be disseminated in Portugal?

While the medieval texts indicating the chapter referring to the Last Judgement in the Gospel according to St. Matthew were relatively numerous and preceded the explicit formulation of the works of mercy in Portugal, these latter works did not appear before the fourteenth century. Perhaps the oldest formulation of these works was included in the erudite *Compromisso* of the confraternity of Santa Maria da Anunciada in Setúbal, which is dated 1330⁴³. Clearly enunciated here are the seven corporal works of mercy, completed with the inclusion of the seventh – to bury the dead – inserted in a version of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, which now included them (*Fuy morto e soterrastes-me* – I was dead and ye buried me)⁴⁴.

Until the first half of the fourteenth century, the *Compromissos* of the confraternities talked about ‘good works’, ‘works of piety’ or ‘pious works’, but never about ‘works of mercy’⁴⁵.

⁴² Alfonso el Sabio, *Las siete partidas* (*Texto antiguo*), Barcelona, Linkgua Digital, 2013, partida I, t. XXIII, lei IX, pp. 272-273. Original Spanish version: “Ley IX: quantas maneras son de limosna – Espirituales y corporales ay limosnas: segund muestra el derecho de santa yglesia que faze departimiento entre ellos desta guisa mostrando que limosna espiritual es en tres maneras. La .i. en perdonar como si alguno ouiesse sofrido daño y sin razon de otro y lo perdona por amor de dios. La .ij. es en castigar otrosi por amor de dios al que viesse que erraua. La .iij. es enseñar las cosas che fuesen a salud de su alma al que no sopiese & tornarlo a carrera de verdad. E la limosna corporal es en las obras de misericordia: que son estas: dar de comer al fanbriento & a beuer al sediento: y vestir el desnudo: y [fol. 72 v.] visitar el enfermo & lo que yace preso.”

⁴³ Ana Filipa Avellar, *Compromisso da Confraria de Setúbal* (1330), Master’s degree dissertation, Lisbon, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa, 1996, pp. 64-94.

⁴⁴ José Pedro Paiva, Maria de Lurdes Rosa, Saul António Gomes, *Antes da Fundação das Misericórdias*, in José Pedro Paiva (coord.), *Portugaliae Monumenta Misericordiarum*, vol. 2, p. 334 (henceforth referred to as *PPM*, vol. 2).

⁴⁵ See the numerous documents published in *PPM*, vol. 2. To focus on just a few, cf. the *Compromissos* of confraternities from the thirteenth century between p. 265 and p. 329.

Only in the fifteenth century did the formulation of the works of mercy become widespread in Portugal. The best known version was that of the king himself, King Duarte, who included them in his *Leal Conselheiro*, written in around 1438. On this occasion, we find a complete enumeration, including the seven spiritual and corporal works, duly explained. Among the first were, “to give sound counsel, to teach well and virtuously those who do not know and to put on the right path those who are lost, to console the afflicted of sight, word and work, to bear the pain of the evil and the loss of your neighbour, providing him at all times with the best you can, to pray to God for pilgrims and wayfarers upon the sea, to pray for the dead in general and especially for those to whom we are obliged. And the seven corporal works that belong to the body, namely to clothe those in need, to give food to the hungry and drink to the thirsty, to visit the sick, to visit the imprisoned, to give lodging to pilgrims, to bury the dead.”⁴⁶

Clemente Sanchez de Vercial (c. 1370-1426), an archdeacon of Valderas, in Leon, was the author of the *Sacramental*, written between 1421 and 1423, at the end of his life, a work that was, above all, intended for the instruction of priests in the Christian doctrine, whose ignorance the author recognised in the respective prologue. This work enjoyed enormous success until it was banned in the Index of Valdes, in 1559, promulgated in Valladolid, and then later accepted by the Cardinal King Henrique of Portugal: thirteen editions were published in Castilian, and four in Portuguese⁴⁷. This was the first book to be printed in Portuguese, in Chaves (1488)⁴⁸. It was followed by the editions published in Braga, between 1494 and 1500, Lisbon (1502), and once again Braga in 1539⁴⁹.

This brief review of the appearance and dissemination of the formulation of the works of mercy allows us to see that, in Portugal, before the fourteenth century, there was no textual evidence that these works were known in their definitive version, such as it appears in the catechisms, and in the prologue to the 1516 *Compromisso da Misericórdia de Lisboa*. It cannot be said that they were an absolute novelty, but their repetition arose from a process of affirmation (and consolidation) that took place throughout the fifteenth century. Hence the need for their inclusion *ipsis verbis* in the *Compromisso* of the new confraternity, while, at the same

⁴⁶ Duarte, king of Portugal, 1391-1438, *Leal Conselheiro*. In *Obras dos Príncipes de Avis*, M. Lopes de Almeida (ed.), Porto, Lello & Irmão, 1981, pp. 325-327. *PMM*, vol. 2, p. 469. Original Portuguese text: “dar são conselho, ensinar bem e virtuosamente o que não sabe e encaminhar o que vai ou anda desencaminhado, consolar o desconsolado por vista, palavra e obra, doer-se do mal e perda de seu próximo, provendo-lhe em todo o tempo o que bem puder, rogar a Deus pelos caminhanes e andantes sobre o mar, fazer oração pelos finados em geral e especialmente por aqueles a que somos obrigados. E as sete corporais que pertencem ao corpo, silicet vestir os que hão mister, dar de comer aos famintos e de beber aos sedorentos, visitar os enfermos, visitar os encarcerados, dar pousada aos caminheiros, enterrar os finados.”

⁴⁷ Cf. José Barbosa Machado, “Introdução”, in Clemente Sánchez de Vercial, *Sacramental* [Chaves, 1488], José Barbosa Machado (ed.), 3rd edition, revised, Braga, Edições Vercial, 2014, pp. 7-9.

⁴⁸ José Marques, “O arcebispo D. Jorge da Costa e as impressões flavienses do *Sacramental* e do *Tratado de confissão*”, *Revista Aquae Flaviae*, 1 (Jan.-Jun.), 1989, pp. 23-45. For a recent edition of this version, see Sánchez de Vercial, *Sacramental* [Chaves, 1488], *cit.*

⁴⁹ Clemente Sánchez de Vercial, *Sacramental*, sl., s.n., entre 1494 e 1500; Sacrame[n]tals / [por] Crimente Sanchez daverçhial bacharel en leys.. Lysboa: per Ioha[m] pedro de Cremona, 28 Sete[m]bro 1502; [Sacramental / por Crime[n] te sanchez de vercial]; Braga: Pedro dela Rocha: per Iohã Beltrã: Pero Gõc[aluares], 15 feueyroy 1539].



Works of mercy
Burying the dead

time, contemporary (or slightly later) catechisms also referred to them. The most paradigmatic example is the *Manual dos Costumes* from the diocese of Coimbra, in which the works of mercy appeared in connection with the summary of Christian doctrine. It contained the twelve articles of the Catholic faith, divided into fourteen (!), seven belonging to the divinity and another seven to the humanity of Christ; the ten commandments, the first three belonging to the honour of God and the others to one's neighbour, the five commandments of the Church, the seven sacraments, the seven deadly sins, the seven virtues, the five senses, the seven gifts of the holy spirit, and the fourteen works of mercy, seven spiritual and seven corporal. The catechism called for the commitment of these items to one's memory at a time when it was necessary to learn things by heart, because of the lack of possible forms for duplicating texts that would make them available to all. The number of items given in the case of each doctrinal group had the function of helping the Christian to learn the basic notions by heart, making use of the fingers of his hands: seven deadly sins, ten commandments (three against God and seven against men); eight beatitudes, etc.⁵⁰

CONFRATERNITIES AND THE WORKS OF MERCY

Albeit in a very general way, it is relatively feasible to trace the genesis of the works from a textual point of view, but it is undoubtedly even more difficult to track their implantation in the devotional practices of Western Europe. The enunciation of the works of mercy corresponds to the fixed establishment of what was understood by the idea of charitable practices at a precise time in history, during the period of economic growth in the medieval western world, between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries.

The works of mercy were addressed in particular to lay persons; these were the ones who should improve their knowledge of the doctrine and duties that this concept implied. Among the religious organisations that had a special vocation for congregating lay persons around common eschatological concerns were the confraternities, founded all over Europe, especially from the eleventh century onwards. These were associations of faithful believers who met to practise religious worship in all its forms: prayers of suffrage, processions, the upkeep of sacred places and things, aid to those who were weaker. Death and its rituals were, however, the pivotal moment around which the actions of the confreres most tended to come together. The practices of worship were intended to prepare the eternal life, and the giving of alms played a fundamental role in this. Many of these confraternities sought to promote the spread of devotional practices to the poorer and less educated segments of the population. Many of these men barely knew

⁵⁰ *Manuale secundum consuetudinem colibriens ecclesie*. Lixbonen: Nicolaum Gazini de Pedemontio, 1518, fls. LXXXIIIv-LXXXVIv. In *PMM*, vol. 3, pp. 530-534.

the Bible, but they learned the doctrinal precepts through their participation in the confraternities, albeit in a rather general fashion. It was in such a context that the works of mercy were to be understood: as Clemente Sanchez de Vercial said, in his already-mentioned *Sacramental*, they were a “prayer of work”, or, in other words, a way of worshipping and praying to God.

“Mercy is feeling the pain of the misery and affliction of your neighbour and Christian. And the work of mercy is a prayer of work. Here it must be known that there are two forms of prayer. One is vocal and comes from the mouth, just as the prayer that we make in beseeching God and asking him for something. Another is real, which is the prayer of work. And this is the giving of alms. And this prayer of work is the works of mercy or some of them.”⁵¹

This precise nature of medieval charity needs to be underlined: in the eyes of its mentors, it was just one of various forms of worship that competed with one another, amongst which were prayer and penitence. It was not by chance that many of these confraternities engaged in self-flagellation in processions, and, in the Holy Week, found the high spot of their devotional activity.

The confraternities exuded an attitude whereby the active life had primacy over the contemplative tradition of the cloister. Without the cities they would not have existed; confraternities and urban growth went hand in hand with one another. The works of mercy corresponded to the fixed establishment of what were understood to be charitable practices at a precise time in history, the already-mentioned period of economic growth enjoyed by the medieval western world from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries. The population of the cities grew, above all, through the emigration from the countryside into the city, bringing together highly heterogeneous people. These were communities divided by frontiers of gender, levels of wealth, age group, social status and legal condition. The confraternities were formed above all because of their organisational and normative power over the life of the different communities, which were scattered into fragmented entities and where religion, which from a certain time onwards was turned into a single whole (through the exclusion of religious minorities), represented the cohesion that was possible in territories divided by the fact that people belonged to different jurisdictions, by social stratification and different levels of status and wealth.

These associations had highly diverse contexts and purposes: they promoted liturgical singing in churches, organised festivals and banquets (religious ones undoubtedly) and provided funerals for their members. And they also practised the virtue of charity, helping the poor who most of the time were divided into specific categories (poor maidens, prisoners, those who were condemned to death,

⁵¹ “Título lxxij, que cousa he mia” in Clemente Sánchez de Vercial, *Sacramental* [Chaves 1488], cit., p. 121. Original Portuguese text: “Misericórdia é doer-se homem da miséria e coita de seu próximo e cristão. E obra de misericórdia é oração de obra. Cá é saber que duas maneiras são de oração. Uma vocal que é da boca, assim como a oração que fazemos rogando a Deus pedindo-lhe alguma coisa. Outra é real que é de obra. E esta é esmola. E esta oração de obra são as obras de misericórdia ou alguma delas.”

etc.). The communities were also divided into specific groups, such as the confraternities based on different professions (seafarers, craftsmen, magistrates, confraternities of beggars, of the blind, etc.); the *confrarias de nação* (“national confraternities” set up in order to provide shelter for travellers who came from a given political unit); and, from the sixteenth century onwards, there were also the ethnic confraternities (for black people or mulattos)⁵².

The medieval western world probably did not invent the confraternities, which already existed in the Roman world, but, during this period, they became considerably more numerous and were afforded greater diversity. According to Michel Mollat, the confraternities that were dedicated to the practice of the works of mercy appeared in the twelfth century, many of them being societies of mutual aid that functioned within a closed circuit, in other words benefitting their own members, and also sometimes, albeit far more rarely, the poor people of the local area⁵³.

In Portugal, the first known confraternities date back to the twelfth century. There were confraternities that provided for burials, and for clothing or feeding the poor, among other acts, but they did not clearly announce in their *Compromissos* that they practised the respective works of mercy. Or, in other words, they did not reveal a clearly defined “doctrine” of “mercy”. There is a parallel that can be drawn between this lack of a clear textual definition in the formulation of the works of mercy until the first half of the fourteenth century and the appearance of confraternities explicitly dedicated to the practice of one or more works of mercy. As we shall see, the Misericórdia de Lisboa, and then its counterparts around the kingdom and in its overseas territories, proposed the practice of all the works of mercy, both spiritual and corporal. The first *Compromisso* of the Lisbon confraternity enumerated these works as follows:

Of the works of mercy, which and how many they are. Chapter one. Since this holy confraternity was founded in order to fulfil the works of mercy, it is necessary to know the said works.

The first is to instruct the ignorant.

The second is to give good counsel to those who seek it.

The third is to admonish with charity those who do wrong.

The fourth is to console the sad and disconsolate.

The fifth is to forgive those who have done us wrong.

The sixth is to bear wrongs with patience.

The seventh is to pray to God for the living and the dead.

And the seven corporal works of mercy are as follows, namely,

⁵² On the different types of confraternities, cf. John Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994, or also Christopher F. Black, *Italian Confraternities in the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

⁵³ Michel Mollat, *Les pauvres au Moyen Âge*, Brussels, Éditions Complexe, 2006, pp. 125-135.



Works of mercy

The emergence of the practice of the corporal works of mercy cannot be dissociated from the urban growth of the last centuries of the Middle Ages. In the figure, 'giving food to the hungry'.

The first is to ransom the captives and to visit the prisoners.
The second is to cure the sick.
The third is to clothe the naked.
The fourth is to give food to the hungry.
The fifth is to give drink to the thirsty.
The sixth is to give shelter to the pilgrims and the poor.
The seventh is to bury the dead.⁵⁴

The didactic purpose of this enunciation of the works is made clear by the underlined phrase “it is necessary to know the said works”, which points to the fact that they were not yet fully inculcated among everyone as doctrinal principles. While, as we have seen, the Crown and the religious elites were already familiar with their formulation, the same may not have been the case in regard to the confreres and brothers who practised good works at the confraternity of the Misericórdia de Lisboa.

CHARITABLE PRACTICES AND THE WORKS OF MERCY

Before moving on to the analysis of the way in which the works of mercy were practised in the first days of the Lisbon confraternity, it is important to draw attention to the role reserved for the Virgin Mary, recognised as the “title, name and invocation of Our Lady the Mother of God, the Virgin Mary of Mercy”, immediately on the very first lines of the prologue of its *Compromisso*. The *mater omnium* (mother of all) presided over the charitable works that were practised and it was she, more than Christ or God the Father, who was responsible for pardoning the sins of mankind. Unlike the other two figures, she did not judge, but sheltered everyone under her protective cloak. This matrilineal role (in the literal meaning of the word) that was assumed by the mother of Christ is not found in the Bible, and it is an example, among many others, that the evolution of the Christian religion (in this case, Catholic) was not always based on texts, but on the customary tendencies and ways of thinking of its believers. The Virgin dressed in her cloak was established as one of the most common representations of the spirit of charity, and of the need for protection felt by men and women, becoming one of the most recurrent images of the visual culture of that time. Together with the figuration of the Virgin and Child, this image represented the idea of the mother of sinful humanity. Always young and beautiful, impermeable to the less

⁵⁴ Original Portuguese text: Das obras de misericórdia quais e quantas são. Capítulo primeiro. Pois o fundamento desta santa confraria é de cumprir as obras de misericórdia é necessário de saber as ditas obras. A primeira é ensinar os simples. A segunda é dar boõ conselho a que o pede. A terceira é castigar com caridade os que erram. A quarta é consolar os tristes desconsolados. A quinta é perdoar a quem nos errou. A sexta é sofrer as injúrias com paciência. A sétima é rogar a Deus pelos vivos e pelos mortos. E as sete corporais são as seguintes, *scilicet*, A primeira é remir cativos e visitar os presos. A segunda é curar os enfermos. A terceira é cobrir os nus. A quarta é dar de comer aos famintos. A quinta é dar de beber aos que hão sede. A sexta é dar pousada aos peregrinos e pobres. A sétima é enterrar os finados.

noble human emotions, the figure of the Virgin did not, however, correspond to the condition of women, who were always subordinate to, and dependent upon, men⁵⁵. At the Portuguese *misericórdias*, the representation of the Virgin in her cloak was transformed into their visual *leitmotiv*, depicted in stone, in paintings on canvas and wood, on glazed decorative tiles, and also on paper. The *Compromissos* themselves reproduced the Virgin: in the *Compromisso* printed in 1516, the same engraving was reproduced twice: in the frontispiece, and after the table of contents, in an image that occupied the whole page⁵⁶. This representation was maintained in the frontispieces of the *Compromissos* printed after this, although it occupied less space⁵⁷.

As is known, the Misericórdia de Lisboa was replicated throughout the kingdom and its conquests, beginning in the very same year as its foundation. One of the ways in which the confraternity was disseminated was via the texts of the Lisbon *Compromissos*, which each new confraternity acquired, sometimes adapting them to the local reality⁵⁸. There are several such texts, but we must see in the *Compromisso* printed in 1516 a turning point, brought about by the establishment and fixing of the respective text, which was now in print and therefore could be reproduced more easily. Although it underwent a number of alterations over time, some of which were quite profound, it served as the basis for the *Compromisso* of the Misericórdia de Lisboa of 1577 and that of 1618. Besides its organisational and administrative aspects, and despite the fact that the explicit formulation of the works of mercy disappeared in the 1618 *Compromisso*, the charitable practices of the Portuguese *misericórdias*, which were eminently wide-reaching, owed a great deal to the initial formulation of the 1516 text.

Revisiting the way in which the Portuguese *misericórdias* practised the works of mercy helps us to understand the mental universe of these social actors and their attitudes towards the poor.

Above all, the corporal works of mercy meant the need to provide for poor people's needs for physical survival: not dying of hunger or thirst, but being provided with shelter and being cared for in sickness, as well as receiving lodging during their long journeys, which were generally undertaken on foot. The spiritual works of mercy were not, however, intended only for the poor, but were related with rules of social intercourse: to bear wrongs patiently, to give good counsel to those seeking it, to make peace between enemies. To use a more modern vocabulary, we should say nowadays that the aim of such works was to safeguard the dignity of each person

⁵⁵ Flynn, *Sacred Charity*, cit., p. 78.

⁵⁶ *O Compromisso da Confraria da Misericórdia*. Lixboa, per Valentym fernandez e Harmam de ca[m]pos, 1516, (Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal, purl.pt/27090).

⁵⁷ *Compromisso da Irmandade da Casa da Sancta Misericórdia da Cidade de Lisboa*. [Lisbon], by Antonio Aluarez, 1600 (Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal, purl.pt/15178). *Compromisso da Misericórdia de Lisboa*, Lisbon, Pedro Craasbeck, 1619 (Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal, purl.pt/13349).

⁵⁸ For the manuscript versions of the *Compromisso da Misericórdia de Lisboa* prior to its printing in 1516, cf. *PMM*, vol. 3, pp. 385-410 and Ivo Carneiro de Sousa, *Da Descoberta da Misericórdia*, cit., pp. 225-243.

when faced with adverse situations, in such a way as to contribute to the harmony of the community, or at least to avoid the exacerbation of already existing conflicts. They required self-control, in order to prevent the escalation of tensions, in societies that were marked by high levels of physical and verbal violence. The spiritual works of mercy thus consisted of precepts of good social interaction, based on the exercise of the virtue of charity. Or, in other words, the work of bearing wrongs patiently was an attempt to suggest the moral inferiority of those who were committing the wrong, calling for benevolence on the part of those who were wronged.

St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas had already insisted on the need for the good Christian to love his enemies. The spiritual aspect of the *misericórdias* was not therefore linked to the relationship between the poor and the non-poor, but had to do with the communities in general, and it could also take into consideration the relationship between equals. Consequently, it is quite understandable that the spiritual works should figure considerably less in the *Compromissos* than the corporal works, with the latter being directed more towards helping the poor. Some works of mercy were never taken seriously, although they were included in the *Compromissos*. The first spiritual work, for example – to instruct the ignorant – was related not to the teaching of literacy, but to the learning of the doctrine, and it does not seem to have been practised by the confraternities of the *misericórdias*, because it was not specifically stated that they should teach the catechism.

On the other hand, the fourteen works of mercy should not be understood in isolation, because most charitable practices tended to consist of a combination of these works. The most customary practice was to perform several works simultaneously, both corporal and spiritual. Let us take the hypothetical example of a pilgrim. If he were undernourished, he could be fed and clothed; he could receive the holy sacraments if he had been missing communion, or receive the last rites; if he were sick, he could be visited by a physician or be tended to by a brother, and so on. We should not therefore consider the works in isolation, but instead see them as a unified whole.

In its chapter 19, under the heading of “How to proceed in order to make friendships”, the 1516 *Compromisso* included the act of making peace between enemies, which we might wish to see as a combination between the fifth spiritual work (to forgive those who have wronged us) and the sixth (to bear wrongs patiently). There is evidence that the confraternity did its best to cause people who were in disagreement to make peace with one another in public, at ritualised ceremonies, generally undertaken during Holy Week. The difficulties in reconciling people who were in disagreement with one another were immediately evident in the text, which prescribed the taking of written records of the reconciliations that were made in the presence of four witnesses, so that the parties could not deny it at a later date. This chapter was later included in the *Compromissos* of 1577 and 1618, although in this latter case various exceptions were added to cover situations that might cause harm to the common good.



Works of mercy
Healing the sick

The most influential spiritual work of mercy in the *praxis* of the Misericórdia consisted in praying to God for the living and the dead. Because of the importance that the living attributed to eternal salvation, and to the third place between Heaven and Hell – Purgatory – organising masses to pray for their souls was a priority among the benefactors of the *misericórdias*, which clearly relegated to a secondary place the donations made with a view to the exercise of corporal works of mercy by the brothers. Since these masses were set up in their thousands at each *misericórdia*, either as separate events or in combination with others, they turned the *misericórdias* into important agents for hiring clergy, so that they could fulfil the seventh spiritual work of mercy. On the other hand, the donations that were made with the aim of curing the “sick poor”, ransoming captives, helping prisoners, providing dowries for orphan maidens and alms in the form of clothes, money and food, were far less popular among the benefactors. The poor received far fewer resources than those given to the souls of the deceased, although sometimes there were surpluses from the funds donated to set up masses, which, if they were not used, especially from the second half of the sixteenth century onwards, the Portuguese *misericórdias* profitably invested in treasury bonds or deposited in banks and turned into capital loans.

In the early days of the *misericórdias*, the idea of the “visit” as a moment imbued with sacred significance was particularly important for charitable practices. Since these confraternities did not have hospitals or other charitable institutions of their own (such as the ones that they would later come to administer), special emphasis was placed on the visit as a privileged moment of compassion for one’s neighbour. Visiting not only prisoners, but also the sick and poor in their own homes became one of the most regular practices at the *misericórdias* in the first few decades of their existence.

The illustration of scenes from the Gospels once again became an important part of the cult of the Virgin Mary: it was Mary who, after receiving the annunciation of the birth of Christ, had visited her cousin Elizabeth, pregnant with St. John the Baptist and especially deserving of compassion due to her advanced age (Luke, 1: 39–56). This episode, known as the Visitation, which, in the liturgical calendar took place on 2 July, was transformed into the *leitmotiv* of the *misericórdias* and the date became that of the day of the brotherhood, when changes were supposed to take place in the leadership and the accounts from the previous year were presented.

To visit prisons and hospitals, royal letters patent were required, giving permission for the brothers to enter these places, as well as making it possible for them to go there out of hours, with it being necessary to ensure that they could carry weapons with them (which were prohibited after the bell had been sounded for the curfew). Prisoners also had a peculiar symbolic value according to the logic of salvation that existed at that time. The analogies established between prisoners and



Works of mercy
Ransoming captives and visiting prisoners

the souls of believers, imprisoned in their own corrupt bodies, made the captive a living metaphor for the situation of the Christians. It was also a society where the soul took precedence over all aspects of material life.

Beyond the eschatological meanings of prison, the prisoners found themselves living in situations that were highly restrictive from a physical point of view: they were often kept chained up in dark and filthy cells and were only given food if they could pay their jailors for it, or if their family and friends helped them. In this way, communication was ensured with the world outside the jail, so that the prisoners could receive food or money, frequently donated in the form of alms. In the case of poor prisoners, the situation was even worse, since they ran the risk of dying of starvation. Prison was only a place where one awaited one's sentence, which could be a release from jail, exile, death, or the cutting off of one's limbs, a punishment that was still practised in the reign of King Manuel. Sentencing prisoners to a term of imprisonment was not yet part of the normal practice, so that the prison was merely a waiting room (although, in actual practice, some prisoners were kept in jail for months and even years on end). In this way, shortening the time between the imprisonment and the judicial sentence – the “deliverance” – was a priority in terms of the charitable act that was provided. At the Appeal Courts of Porto and Lisbon, the members of the respective *misericórdias* frequently tried to encourage the litigants to reach amicable agreements in order to avoid subsequent legal procedures. Such procedures led the brothers to serve as mediators between the parties in dispute, obtaining pardons in the name of the king⁵⁹. These pardons were always granted in the case of minor crimes, related with personal disputes, or verbal insults, so that we can include these amicable agreements among the confraternity's practice of spiritual works of mercy.



Visitare i carcerati

Façade of the Ospedale Santa Maria del Ceppo (Pistoia)

⁵⁹ Marta Tavares Escocard de Oliveira, *Justiça e Caridade: a Produção Social dos Infratores Pobres em Portugal, séculos XIV ao XVIII*, PhD thesis, Niterói, Universidade Fluminense, 2000, pp. 250-257.

This state of affairs meant that the brothers of the Misericórdia could enter into prisons, clean them, give food to the prisoners, tend to them in sickness, providing the help of a physician if necessary, but also dealing with their lawsuits at the courts. This explains why the first corporal work of mercy (to ransom captives and to visit the imprisoned) is represented in the visual arts through the depiction of men visiting prisons, sometimes equipped with buckets, as in the case of the frieze of glazed ceramic tiles at the Hospital do Cepo in Pistoia.

The aid that was provided to the prisoners also included a spiritual dimension, by ensuring that they could attend mass on a regular basis, which was mostly celebrated in a chapel in front of a prison window, so that the prisoners could establish visual contact. In this context, special significance was also attached to the removal of the bodies of those who were sentenced to death from the place where they were executed, and to their subsequent burial. It was important to tend to the souls of everyone, mainly those who found themselves in a flagrant situation of sin, as, for example, in the case of penitents and convicts.

Other types of poverty also existed in medieval Portugal: helping to pay the ransoms of captives was always one of the most important works. These captives were prisoners of a religious war, and hanging over them was the spectre of Hell if they converted to the enemy's religion. With the conquests of North Africa, which prolonged the crusading ideals of the Medieval Reconquest, the figure of the captive was given even greater value and importance. On both sides, there was a thriving market in ransoms; the most complicated aspect was to purchase the freedom of poor captives, and it was here that the works of mercy entered into action. Public collections of money were made, and people bequeathed legacies in their wills to help pay for the prisoners' ransom. There were some religious orders that had a special vocation for dealing with such cases, such as, for example, the Trinitarians, who were installed in Portugal in 1207, and who claimed for themselves the exclusive right to exercise this work of mercy in the second half of the sixteenth century. However, there was no end to the involvement of the *misericórdias* in this matter; the Misericórdia do Porto, for example, continued to busy itself with the ransom of fishermen and seafarers kidnapped by pirates in the north of Africa.

Religious values took precedence over all other considerations, defining the sacraments as a priority for some charitable practices. For example, ensuring that foundlings received a solemn baptism (contrasting with the urgent need for care that they frequently exhibited at the moment of their abandonment) was more important than creating effective conditions for the survival of such children. In the same way, the last rites or the delivery of the soul of a deceased pauper were the real criteria underlying the charitable help and assistance that were provided to him.

The transition from the late Middle Ages to the modern period brought with it a worsening of the condition of women, to the point where some historians, such as Nicholas Terpstra, have understood that this was the driving force behind the charitable

reforms in the cities of the Italian Renaissance⁶⁰. Single mothers and bastards were condemned to an increasingly marginal social condition, compared with the Middle Ages when their presence was considered a normal affair and was much more readily tolerated, not only by their families, but also by the authorities⁶¹.

As far as Portugal is concerned, there are still no data enabling us to confirm the increase in the numbers of poor women and the consequent creation of institutions to help them, but there are some indicators that this was in fact the case. For example, regarding the forms of worship, there existed the figure of the *merceeiro* or *merceira*, men and women who received board and lodging from charitable donors in exchange for praying for their souls and for those of their deceased family. This was a way of providing charitable care and assistance for abandoned people who otherwise would not be able to enjoy decent living conditions⁶². In most cases, such people corresponded to the *pobres envergonhados*, people who had fallen on hard times and whose relatively high social status evidently contrasted with the penury that they now experienced, being too “ashamed” to acknowledge their poverty in public. There are indications that there was a tendency for *merceiros* to consist more and more of women in the late Middle Ages. The endowment of poor orphan girls was a practice that already existed in medieval times and became increasingly frequent in Portugal, especially from the first half of the sixteenth century onwards. Charitable donors were increasingly concerned with setting up dowries to help arrange marriages for girls who otherwise would not be able to find husbands, and whose souls might be lost by their succumbing to the temptations of the devil. The provision of dowries became one of the most successful charitable practices until the end of the modern period, but the emphasis that was placed on female sexual honour was transformed into an instrument of repression to be used against women. The endowment of poor women is an example illustrating the fact that the works of mercy were insufficient for dealing with every form of deprivation, since these situations were not covered by the list of fourteen works.

In any case, the works of mercy were never practised as an absolute gift; they were part of an exchange economy, based on the gift and counter-gift, as Marcel Mauss suggested⁶³. The poor provided the givers with one of the paths to their salvation, together with the intercession of the Virgin Mary and the Saints, with prayer and penitence. On the other hand, they also provided services, attending funerals in exchange for praying for the soul of the dead. They received clothes, food and drink, and other forms of aid, but they were not exempt from

⁶⁰ For the author, most of the poor people were women, and the new institutions were largely intended for their use. Nicholas Terpstra, *Cultures of Charity. Women, Politics and the Reform of Poor Relief in Renaissance Italy*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2013, p. 2.

⁶¹ David I. Kertzer, *Sacrificed for Honor. Italian Infant Abandonment and the Politics of Reproductive Control*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1993, pp. 17–19.

⁶² Maria José Pimenta Ferro Tavares, *Pobreza e Morte em Portugal na Idade Média*, Lisbon, Presença, 1989, pp. 91–96 and 131–133.

⁶³ Marcel Mauss, *Ensaio sobre a Dádiva*, Lisbon, Edições 70, s.d., pp. 76, 162 and 175.

obligations. It was a relationship of exchange, which today has been lost when one accepts a grant from a private or state institution, since this gift has become transformed into a right. Contrary to a fiscal system in which the state taxes the taxpayers according to supposedly objective criteria, charity belongs to a world of voluntary transfers of wealth, so that the amount of the donation, the time and the form under which it is made, are all left to the criterion of the donor⁶⁴. The benefactor's absolute freedom is a mark of his economic and social power, and an important factor in the continued reproduction of this same power. On the other side, in return for the act of giving, the receiver had the duty of gratitude and the obligation to repay the gift by praying.

The works of charity conferred order and significance upon the divisions created in society by economic and social inequalities. Charity played an important role in the stabilisation of the social order; its purpose was not to change reality, but to maintain it. It did not seek to change the social and economic structures, or to narrow the gap between rich and poor, but only to serve as a vehicle for salvation. The poor would not cease to be so; and, in the same way, the middle strata of society, namely artisans working in urban areas, because they were vital for the economy of cities, were the ones who most benefited from charitable resources. Did this aid actually make a difference? In political and social terms, charity was designed to maintain the established order; it called for submissiveness and discipline on the part of the poor, as well as others who were less poor but also in need of help.

The Portuguese *misericórdias* sought to perform all the works of mercy, whereas the confraternities in other regions of Europe with the same charitable invocation concentrated on just one or two of these works, but never on them all at the same time. The Tuscan *misericórdias*, for example, specialised in emergency services, because they had been founded in times of widespread plague, when the first need was to collect all the bodies from the streets and to bury them; in no case had they specifically been designed to offer a system of general care and assistance, since their stated purpose was not to fulfil all the works of mercy⁶⁵. There were numerous confraternities in the Spanish world that were designated *misericórdias*, but these did not have the same wide-reaching nature as the Portuguese ones. The one in Madrid, for example, had as its main objective to remove vagrants from the street and to oblige them to work. Not all the Spanish *misericórdias* with an invocation to Our Lady of Mercy had this degree of specialisation, however; some, such as the one in Zamora, buried the dead, visited the poor in hospital, and gave shelter to pilgrims⁶⁶.

What made the Portuguese *misericórdias* clearly original was their broader scope of action and their replication on a global scale – in Portugal and the various areas of Iberian expansion – something that, as far as is known, was unprecedented in

⁶⁴ Carlo M. Cipolla, *História Económica da Europa Pré-Industrial*, Lisbon, Edições 70, s.d. [1974], p. 30 and following.

⁶⁵ Cf. the *Compromissos* of the Italian *misericórdias* (respectively Florence-1490; Rome-1501 and Rome-1518), in Ivo Carneiro de Sousa, *Da descoberta da Misericórdia*, cit., pp. 269-309.

⁶⁶ Flynn, *Sacred Charity...cit.*, pp. 51 and 74.



Works of mercy
Giving shelter to pilgrims and the poor

any other confraternity⁶⁷. It is true that there were confraternities of the Rosary or of the Holy Sacrament to be found all over the Portuguese Empire to some extent. But these did not operate as part of a network, nor did they have the same political and social importance as the *misericórdias* at a local level⁶⁸. Formally placed under the control and supervision of the royal power, the *misericórdias* operated in accordance with a form of equilibrium established between the central and the local power: such a balance was frequently precarious or under threat from royal pressures, but, even so, it was an enduring one, since it was only called into question by the first threats brought by the Enlightenment, although these did not seriously affect it, nor even succeed in bringing about its replacement by another system⁶⁹. This combination of characteristics made the Portuguese *misericórdias* unique: they operated according to the same rules; they sought to fulfil all the works of mercy at the same time; and they all enjoyed royal protection.

The Portuguese *misericórdias* were original because they were widespread and all-inclusive, but they did, however, follow European patterns, namely in their obedience to Catholic rules. Or, in other words, charity led to the organisation of institutions throughout the Catholic world based on private bequests or donations made by living persons, submitting the poor people to prior selection. Their particularities generally had to do with local specificities, sometimes being linked to small political units, of which the extreme fragmentation of the Italian Peninsula is a paradigmatic example. Unlike Italy, Portugal managed to achieve a relatively homogeneous pattern throughout its European territory (relatively small in terms of size and without any regional differences from a political point of view), which it then exported to territories scattered all around the world. Charles Boxer described them, together with the municipal councils, as the twin pillars of Portuguese colonial society, in a description that has become quite famous, but which could also be extended to the metropolis⁷⁰. This pattern included something that was rare in Catholic Europe: a great autonomy in regard to the Church's control and supervision of charitable institutions, guaranteed by the existence of the *misericórdias*. We would, in fact, go much further and state that the foundation of a series of such institutions, sponsored by King Manuel I, corresponded to a very precise moment in the history of Portugal, a time when the

⁶⁷ There were *misericórdias* in the areas of Spanish overseas expansion, such as Buenos Aires and Manila. On the other hand, towns such as Ceuta and Olivença maintained their *misericórdias*, even after they had fallen under the jurisdiction of the Spanish monarchy.

⁶⁸ This is not the place for explaining this subject, but the Portuguese *misericórdias*, although they remained independent and autonomous from one another, not only shared rules (disseminated through the *Compromissos* of the *Misericórdia de Lisboa*), but also communicated with one another through a well-structured and regular correspondence.

⁶⁹ Maria Antónia Lopes, "Parte II – De 1750 a 2000", in Isabel dos Guimarães Sá and Maria Antónia Lopes, *História Breve das Misericórdias Portuguesas*, Coimbra, Imprensa da Universidade, 2008, p. 66 and following; Laurinda Abreu, "Limites e Fronteiras das Políticas Assistenciais entre os séculos XVI e XVIII. Continuidades e alteridades", *Vária História*, vol. 26, 2010, no. 44, p. 351.

⁷⁰ C. R. Boxer, *O Império Colonial Português*, Lisbon. Edições 70, s.d. [1969], p. 263. This statement is generically true, although such bipolarity is inexact for some places, as in the rare cases where the *misericórdia* was relegated to a secondary position by another confraternity or even in those cases where the municipal council was run by the bishop/chapter or by a monastic order that enjoyed hegemony at the local level.

new riches enjoyed by the Crown had enabled it to strengthen its power and assert its position in the world. When the Council of Trent took place, the Portuguese kings already had an interest in preserving the existing reality, freeing the *misericórdias* from the control of the Church. The *misericórdias* began to have the status of lay confraternities under royal protection, so that they could only be visited by bishops in the case of matters relating to the churches and the equipment and implements used in worship. However, aspects such as the foundation of a new confraternity of the *misericórdia*, or the approval of *Compromissos* depended solely upon the king⁷¹.

This new-found autonomy of the *misericórdias* in relation to the Church's institutions – and, above all, in relation to Rome – must also be seen in the context of other changes that were introduced during the reign of King Manuel I, which his successors would then continue or effectively implement: the consolidation of the Portuguese patronage in the Orient, the appropriation of the leadership of the military orders by the Crown, the reform of the religious orders, and the creation of the Inquisition.

However, the specific nature of the organisation of charity in Portugal must be viewed in terms of its actual scale: the Portuguese model always remained a local one, like so many others existing in the different political units of Europe, ranging from Protestant to Catholic cities. The most substantial difference, and the one that afforded it a scale that it would not have had otherwise, was the existence of territories where the Portuguese presence had become established as a result of the country's overseas expansion. In the early sixteenth century, even at the height of its economic development, Portugal was far from being a pioneer as far as the invention of models of charitable aid were concerned. As is known, that role fell to the Italians, who, in the fifteenth century, already had all the institutions that the rest of Europe, and above all the Catholic countries, would later adopt: the large hospital, as well as hospitals for foundlings, the granting of marriage dowries for poor girls, refuges, the *Monti di Pietà* (mutual loan institutions) and also the *misericórdias*.

EPILOGUE

This already long text has sought to demonstrate that both the foundation of the Misericórdia de Lisboa and its *Compromisso* were important structural elements in the formation of the Portuguese reality, representing substantial turning points in the country's history, in the transition from the medieval to the modern period, and they must be viewed in conjunction with other important changes that occurred between the late fifteenth century and the first half of the sixteenth century.

⁷¹ This subject was dealt with for the first time in recent Portuguese historiography about the *misericórdias* in Isabel dos Guimarães Sá, "Shaping Social Space in the Centre and Periphery of the Portuguese Empire: The Example of the Misericórdias from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century", *Portuguese Studies. Papers given at the Conference Strangers Within. Orthodoxy, Dissent and the Ambiguities of Faith in the Portuguese Renaissance, University of London 30 June–2 July 1994*, volumes 11 (1995) 12 (1996) 13 (1997), p. 211.

What would have happened if Queen Leonor and King Manuel had not founded the *misericórdias*? This is a difficult question to answer, and all the more so when the historian has no means of knowing the changes that would have occurred. We can only put forward a series of conjectures, which are the same as those that we might make for any system of social cohesion based on the idea of Christian charity. It would be impossible to continue to belong to a religion that allowed its members to die in the streets, including children (who were considered innocent) abandoned by their parents, that did not rescue its captives from the hands of the infidel, that did not protect the virginity of its women and delivered them – and its men too – to the temptations of the devil, that did not give food and drink or a roof to its pilgrims, or that left its prisoners to rot in jails. The total absence of any care and assistance for those in need would imply the destruction of a set of religious ideals that were based on love for one's neighbour, and which, in many doctrinal writings, identified the figure of the poor man with their own prophet, Jesus Christ. One can also guess the rupture that would take place in the existing economic and social order, since any form of government, when it is exempt from the use of explicit violence, justifies its existence through the protection that it offers to the weakest members of its society. In the cities, ceasing to give help to the artisans when they were incapacitated and unable to work, or to their widows, would imply the destruction of the productive fabric; ceasing to come to the aid of the starving country folk who came there in order to try their luck, or just to bring an end to the famine that, in bad years for agriculture, would give rise to social uprisings. This was a fear that was frequently felt when it came to implementing systems designed to provide aid in situations of emergency. On the other hand, the process of constructing the state would have taken place differently, since the *misericórdias* were everywhere to be found in the overwhelming majority of territories under Portuguese administration, contributing to the institutional uniformity of the Empire and to the balanced relationship between central and local power.

In recent years, we have once again been most keenly confronted with the importance and urgency of the works of mercy and charity when faced with the displacement en masse of populations that have been devastated by war and by natural catastrophes. They continue to remind us of the basic needs of human life: clothing, food, health, a roof over one's head. If today we still need to try and understand the ways in which the men and women of the late Middle Ages and the early Modern Age included their duties towards their neighbours in their obligations of worship, the harsh realities that the works of mercy referred to are still far from having disappeared. What has disappeared, however, is the idea that these works are to be applied only to those who have received the water of baptism. There is only one humanity.