Revolution in Charity

Chapter One

Charity in Retrospect

Charity for the poor and disabled has always been one of the principal obligations imposed by the Catholic Church; as such, it was never entirely neglected. To this extent, there is nothing original about the charitable movement of the seventeenth century. It was a deep resurgence, exceptionally well and widely organized. But was it no more than that?

In comparison with the preceding century, the mid-seventeenth century organizations of charity seem to have been animated by a new spirit. Reading the works even of contemporaries of Francis de Sales, one is struck by the impression that the poor were considered a useful instrument for the personal salvation of their benefactors. The Scriptures had enjoined the practice of fraternal charity on all who hoped to gain the kingdom of heaven. Any person with pretensions to piety therefore gave alms to the poor, especially on feast days and other notable occasions.

It would be difficult to prove with absolute certainty that charity was extended more from a sense of duty than for the actual benefit of the recipients. Concrete expressions, from which this sentiment may be inferred, appear to be exceedingly rare. The task would be much easier were there any studies of sixteenth century French charities. Until the present, however, historians have ignored that field, and have isolated Vincent de Paul, as though he has worked in a vacuum. Scattered examples will have to suffice to point out the way.

Since care for the poor was a religious virtue, mention of it sometimes occurred in obituaries or literary portraits. Richelieu’s Mémoires, written in the very time of De Sales, contain a number of these. In the year of the death of Marguerite de Valois, the divorced wife of Henry IV, he devoted several pages to a portrait of her. After lightly passing over her faults, he signalized her charity, the crown of her virtues, for she gave abundantly to any who came to her in need. By all accounts, she was indeed charitable, giving alms and dowries to the poor, visiting hospitals and supplying them with blankets. When Vincent de Paul first came to Paris, in 1609, she employed him as one of her almoners. But what conclusion did Richelieu derive from all this? He said that God rewarded her richly for her compassion towards his creatures by granting her such a Christian death that she was the envy of all whom she in life might herself have envied. The moral is clear: go and do likewise, if you would die a peaceful death.

2 Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 371.
4 Cardinal de Richelieu, op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 371
Richelieu’s comments on the charity of Marie de Medicis are even more revealing. Not only did she strengthen the French Church by the establishment of new or reformed orders, such as the Capuchins and the Discalced Carmelites, but also “as true reverence for God is followed by reverence for the poor, she cares for them, and, in order to draw down the blessing of God upon this kingdom, she founds… three hospital for the sick and poor.”

One of these hospitals was that of Saint-Jean-Baptiste de la Charité; to found it, Marie de Medicis had merely called four friars of the Order of Saint-Jean-de Dieu from Florence in 1611, and rented a house for them. The hospital stood in need of practically everything; the friars had to appeal to the charity of the well disposed. Vincent de Paul, then almoner to Marguerite de Valois, not only visited the hospital, but contributed materially to its support as much as he was able. The same year, 1611, he made the friars a formal donation of 15,000 livres, a sum which had been assigned to him by the city of Paris.

Marie de Medicis’ hospitals, therefore, do not seem to have been very well endowed. Paris, more over, judging by the later extent of De Paul’s activities, must have been swarming with paupers and outcasts of all sorts. Three small hospitals can scarcely have represented an earnest attempt to remedy the situation. Yet Richelieu already wrote of the glorious age of St. Louis, and the blessings from Heaven! On the very next page, however, he hastened to reassure the reader that these lofty occupations did not prevent the Queen from planning municipal adornments, such as the Luxembourg.

Of the many volumes devoted to the Court intrigues in which Marie de Medicis was involved, only two pages are concerned with her public charities. The major part of her energies was obviously concentrated elsewhere, and Cardinal de Richelieu had no fault to find with that.

One can expect was worldly and shrewd a man as the Cardinal to have written about charity in the prevailing tone. Precisely that tone revealed an almost complete indifference to the personal welfare of the poor. They apparently were an unavoidable evil, like the mud in the streets of Paris – with this difference, that they had immortal souls, and that it would profit one’s soul to care for them occasionally.

It might be pointed out that Richelieu expressed the views of Court politicians, a species naturally living in a world apart. There is, however, the strikingly similar testimony of Madame de Motteville, regarding the piety of Anne of Austria. Any author who describes Anne at all, mentions that she was a very devout woman, fond of retreating to her favorite convents and assiduous in attendance at the Sacraments. Madame de Motteville herself seems to have been anything but a courier. She was a favorite of the Queen by reason of her simplicity, and her piety

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5 Ibid., p. 254. Quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are translated by the author.
6 Pierre Coste, op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 68.
8 Cardinal de Richelieu, op. cit., p. 255.
was of a piece with her sophistication. Religious innovations shocked her; she was delighted that she had to now only the Creed, the Our Father, and the Commandments, in order to be saved. Her account may therefore be considered that of a disinterested traditionally devout person.

During Passion Week, 1647, Anne of Austria made a stay at the convent of the Val-de-Grace. On Good Friday, she went to the infirmary to visit a nun dying of a malignant tumor. She insisted on watching while the wound was being dressed, a particularly painful procedure, because, according to Madame de Motteville, not only was the odor of corruption overpowering, but the cancer had apparently eaten through the rib cage. The worthy lady concludes: “After this action of charity, we left her (the Queen) to the repose one enjoys at the foot of the altar.” There is no further mention of the nun. She was probably too far gone to appreciate the honor done to her. She had served her purpose, however, in preparing Anne for the devotions of Easter Sunday.

Whether the middles classes felt the same way about the exercise of charity, would be difficult to determine exactly. Small trades people, for example, were not in the habit of recording their daily actions, and if they did, the records are neither printed nor readily available. There is indeed a clue to what was expected of them – namely, the Catechism of the Council of Trent.

The Decrees of the Council of Trent were, for a variety of reasons, never officially accepted in France. After fifty years of vain negotiations, the French clergy at the Estates General of 1614 petitioned Louis XIII for the promulgation of the Decrees, a step which they considered both good and necessary for the French Church. No action being taken by the Court, the 1615 Assembly of the Clergy unanimously declared in the moral obligation and pastoral duty of every prelate and clergymen in France to receive the Decrees of the Council of Trent, and to observe them as fully as possible. This resolution was not formally ratified by Louis XIII or his successors, but it was apparently accepted de facto, and carried into effect on the local level. Since the Tridentine Catechism was an essential part of the reform decrees, it seems safe to assume that it was expounded in at least a number or French pulpits. In any case, it represents the official, mid-sixteenth century views of the Catholic Church on the duties of every Christian.

The Catechism includes an exposition of the Creed, the Sacraments, the Decalogue, and the Lord’s Prayer. According to the prefatory decree, all bishops and priests were required to explain to the faithful, in the vernacular, the nature and use of the Sacraments, for which purpose

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the *Catechism* was prepared.\(^{13}\) Since it was intended, therefore to aid in the instructions of the laity, its injunctions regarding charity are of special interest.

Charity and fraternal love are seen to be the positive aspects of the fifth Commandment: “Thou shalt not kill.” “And inculcating charity and love it must also enjoin all those duties and good offices which follow in their train.”\(^{14}\) These duties consist of patience and benevolence. The latter includes the pardon of enemies, but “its principal offices are to relieve the wants of the poor, to fee the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked.”\(^{15}\)

Nothing in the sentences just cited is at variance with the later teaching of Francis de Sales or Vincent de Paul. It might be remembered that the principle of good works prompted by love was not a new one of the Church. It was the amount of emphasis placed on it that varied, and the *Catechism* of the Council of Trent stressed other motives for works of charity.

The clergy is specifically instructed to inspire the faithful with the desire to succor those in distress; in order to impress them with the seriousness of their obligation in this regard, “the pastor will urge the overwhelming argument that, on the day of final retribution, the Judge of the living and the dead will hurl against the uncharitable man the indignant sentence of irrevocable condemnation; and will invite the language of eulogy, and introduce into his heavenly country, those who have exercised mercy towards the poor.”\(^{16}\)

Not only in order to enter Paradise, but also for prayers to be acceptable, is it necessary to show some feeling for the wants of the poor.\(^{17}\) Liberality in almsgiving is, moreover, considered an excellent remedy against the vice of covetousness.\(^{18}\) To combat carnal desire, the *Catechism* recommends recourse to confession and the Holy Eucharist, but “Unceasing and devout prayer to God, accompanied by fasting and alms-deeds, has the same salutary effect.”\(^{19}\) Charity is thus considered a most useful means for the mortification of the body. The mercenary motive, the view to ends other than relief of the destitute for the love of God, could hardly be more clearly expressed.

A further argument for the assertions that the recipients of charity were not regarded in themselves, is provided by the words of Vincent de Paul himself. To say nothing of the numbers of beggars, paupers, and diseased which he found in Paris, he encountered the problem of abandoned children – the innocents, and therefore logically the ones nearest to Christ. In a conference with the Ladies of Charity in Paris, sometime between 1640 and 1650, he described the plight of these children, abandoned to the public mercy as soon as they were born.\(^{20}\)

\(^{13}\) *Catechism*, op. cit., p. 3.
\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 383.
\(^{15}\) Ibid.
\(^{16}\) Ibid., pp. 297-298.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 328.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 314.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 291.
The babies brought to the *Couche*, or foundling home, supposedly under the supervision of the Cathedral Chapter of Paris, were exposed to all sorts of abuses. Some were sold to beggars who broke their limbs in order to excite the passers-by; some were otherwise distributed in dishonest ways. Of the children thus dispersed during the first fifty years of the century, none seemed to have survived at the time De Paul wrote, while, among those remaining in the *Couche*, many had died unbaptized.\(^{21}\) It would be difficult to find an example of greater indifference to the need of others, or a more callous perversion of a charitable institution.

Yet by the middle of the seventeenth century, the picture had changed. The nature and extent of the alteration can best be seen in an account of the two principal organizations of charity founded by Vincent de Paul.

On December 8, 1617, four months after he had become the parish priest of Chatillon-les-Dombes, Monsieur Vincent organized the first “Company of Servants and the Poor,” or Ladies of Charity, because “charity towards one’s neighbor is an infallible mark of the true children of God, and one of the principal actions of charity is the visit care of the poor and sick.”\(^{22}\) Charitable confraternities were not novelty in the Church. In Italy, efforts at ecclesiastical reform had brought into being the Confraternity of Charity and the Oratory of Divine Love, both of which were dedicated to the personal sanctification of their members through stricter religious practice-including the care of paupers, visit to prisoners, and the shrouding of the dead. Membership was, however, restricted to ecclesiastics.\(^{23}\) Lay confraternities were numerous in France, but they were primarily established in order to increase devotion to the Sacraments and morality of life. There is no evidence that Vincent de Paul had any rivals.

Chatillon-les-Dombes was a little town of some two thousand inhabitants; the Charity corresponded in size. At its founding it consisted of twelve ladies, wives of the leading citizens.\(^{24}\) The rules De Paul drew up for them remained essential the same for all the later foundations. The Company’s patron was to be Christ, and its aim the accomplishment of his ardent desire that Christians engage in works of charity and mercy towards each other.\(^{25}\) Financial resources were to be provided by endowments, as well as by the solicitation of contributions on Sundays and holy days. Poor people who had fallen ill were to be cared for in their homes, if possible; it was the task of the Ladies of Charity to provide them with clean linen and three meals a day. The procedure was minutely regulated. Each Lady in turn served the food—bread, meat wine, or broth, and eggs, as the occasion required-serve it and even feed it to the

patient if necessary. All this was to be done lovingly, “as though she were dealing with her own
child, or rather with God, who considers the good she does the poor as done unto himself.” 26

The spiritual welfare of the patients was not neglected. They were to be prepared for
Communions, and the Ladies were to exhort them to faith and patience. If they died, the Ladies
were enjoined to attend in death those whom they had served in life, “taking in this the place of
mothers who accompany their children to the grave.” 27 They were above all never to forget that
all their actions should be motivated by charitable intent towards the poor, rather than by any
personal consideration. 28

Who, before De Paul, could have expected wellborn women to follow an injunction to be
as mothers to the most miserable, revolting creatures? The principle of charity involved was old
indeed, but the eloquent emphasis on a disinterested service of love by the laity certainly had no
precedent in the immediate past. Vincent de Paul did not ignore the fact that the exercise of
charity contributes to the sanctification of the soul, and thus leads to rewards in Heaven. He saw
it in a fresh perspective—the glory of God comes first, though it entails loving obedience to all the
Commandments, including that to care for the good of one’s own soul. 29 The shift in emphasis is
subtle, but nevertheless perceptible. On the whole, however, De Paul mentioned spiritual rewards
less often than the value of good works as such. Toward the end of his life, he exclaimed: “And
what sort of love, I ask you. Do we bear him, if we do not love that which he has loved!” 30

There is a corollary to this apparent shift in the motivation. No evidence suggest that
numbers of sixteenth century French ladies tended the poor and sick with their own hands, or
even visited them regularly for any length of time. If they did so at all, they had the patients less
in mind than themselves. Yet Vincent de Paul considered it highly important that the Ladies of
Charity visit their charges in person—not merely because it would be an act of mortification for
them, but because it tended towards the glory of God and was good for the poor, insomuch as
human kindness would encourage them to recognize and love the divine. 31 Who, in the sixteenth
century, had ever worried about the effects of kindness on beggars? Clearly, the recipients of
charity were taking on new importance.

Monsieur Vincent was not preaching in vain. Though he was called away from Chatillon-
les-Dombes, the foundation there continued to flourish. Meanwhile he established a series of
Charities in the domains of his patrons, the Gondis. The Charity of Joigny came first, in 1618,
with thirty-nine members; a Charity for men was added to it in 1621, so that children of poor
parents might be apprenticed in some trade, and material and spiritual care be taken of the able-

26 Ibid., p. 428.
27 Ibid., p. 430.
28 Ibid., p. 435.
29 Ibid., p. 794.
30 Ibid., p. 811.
31 Ibid., p. 761.
bodied destitute. De Paul considered poorhouses to be impractical; in fact, his system was found to be more efficient was well as more economical.\textsuperscript{32} Other foundations followed in short order—at Montmirail Macon, Folleville, Paillart, Serevillers, Courboin, Montreuil and Argenteuil. After the Priests of the Mission became active, the Charities multiplied even more rapidly, since the Missionaries had full powers of foundation. Paris, of course, had its Charity—the Company of the Hotel-Dieu. At one time, Monsieur Vincent had also entertained a plan for a Charity of the Court with the Queen as Superior, although nothing come of that idea.

Parallel to the Ladies of Charity had been established the Company of the Sisters of Charity, to lighten the labors of the former. Obviously, gentlewomen could not have been expected to possess either the skills nor the stamina necessary for actual nursing and menial work. Peasant girls were therefore recruited from 1634 on, to act as aides to the Charities. Their principal duty was to serve the poor and sick; they were to direct all their actions to the love of God and regard their patients as their lords in Christ.\textsuperscript{33} By 1647, the Sisters were already busy in Angers, Nantes, Poitiers, Sens, Rouen, Beauvais and Reims.\textsuperscript{34} Since they rarely acted apart from a Charity, it may be supposed that at least some of those cities were also provided with the Company of Ladies.

The achievements of the two groups were truly remarkable. The Paris foundations provide an outstanding example; there, the ladies of the Hotel Dieu, in conjunction with the Sisters, were concerned with the hospital itself, with the care and education of foundlings, the relief of prisoners and galley-slaves, the procurement of aid for war-devastated provinces, and support of the Missions abroad. At the beginning, the Company of Ladies consisted of between two and three hundred members; by 1657 death had whittled those figures down to one hundred and fifty.\textsuperscript{35} Yet the work was continued. The Hotel-Dieu alone was a considerable burden. Although the Ladies were not charged with the actual running of the hospital, they were responsible for the linen supply and the spiritual instruction of the patients. These must have numbered at least over three hundred, since, according to Vincent de Paul, 750 fresh sheets were required daily.\textsuperscript{36} The foundling home generally contained about four hundred children, though at one point De Paul noted a figure of eight hundred and twenty.\textsuperscript{37} During the year 1656-1657 alone, 17,221 livres were spent on the home.\textsuperscript{38}

The relief sent to the devastated provinces is undoubtedly the most spectacular of the works of the Company. As reports of the miseries in Lorraine drifted into Paris, the Ladies sponsored the publication of “relations,” written on the scene by Mission priests. These relations

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., pp. 497 ff.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., pp. 539-540.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., p. 567.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., p. 807.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., p. 773.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 802.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p. 807. For the value of the livre, see note 40 below.
were widely circulated, excited the pity of numerous well-to-do persons, and brought in a respectable amount of alms.\textsuperscript{39} The procedure was successfully repeated in the case of Champagne and Picardy some years later. In 1657, Vincent de Paul stated that since 1650, 367,500 livres had been distributed in the two provinces, for the relief and rehabilitation of the population.\textsuperscript{40} This sum included neither the contributions of clothing, implements, furniture, and church ornaments, nor the services of the Priests of the Mission and the Sisters of Charity. The King himself acknowledged the inestimable value of “a work so charitable and so important to the glory of God and the relief of his Majesty’s subjects.”\textsuperscript{41} As Vincent de Paul told the Ladies of Hotel Dieu, it was quite unprecedented in history that a handful of ladies should have been called to the aid of three ravaged provinces.\textsuperscript{42} Who should have known better than he?

A great change in the exercise of charity is implied by these developments; how had it come about? It cannot have been caused exclusively by material reasons, for the number of poor in France does not seem to have increased markedly until the mid-century. Nor could it have been due simply to the personality of St. Vincent de Paul, since the work was carried on after his death. He had, moreover, found the materials ready to his hand; the Ladies and Sisters of Charity could hardly have been organized had there not been large numbers of women predisposed to such activity. How they had become so, can only be explained in connection with the religious history of France in the early seventeenth century.

\textsuperscript{39} Pierre Coste, op. cit., pp. 581 ff., pp 624 ff.
\textsuperscript{40} St. Vincent de Paul, op. cit., Vol. 13, pp. 802 ff. It is impossible to give a modern equivalent figure for the French \textit{livre} of the seventeenth century in any meaningful terms of purchasing power. In the time of Vincent de Paul, however, 367,500 \textit{livres} represented a remarkable sum to have been raised by private contributions. It was only a little less than one percent of the total receipts from the \textit{taille} or basic land tax in 1661, and about 67,000 \textit{livre} more than the budget allocated for the whole French navy in the same year. In 1660, one \textit{livre} bought about three quarters of a bushel of wheat, or one cord or firewood, to mention only two commodities for which prices were recorded.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p. 325.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 866