



and you too **do** likewise

Sr. Carmela Paloschi

Beggars' hospices

You always have the poor with you (Mt 26:11)

Jesus, having become poor out of love for us, in his earthly life had compassion for the poor, he was interested in them and used to fulfil their needs. In the Gospels, from the singing of Mary's *Magnificat* to the episode of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus, we witness an itinerary of solidarity with the poor and can grasp the invitation to sharing addressed to every person, sensitive and open to others. Bartolomea in 1824 wrote to her friend Marianna Vertova:

Let us have a preferential love for the poor. They are the living image of Jesus Christ. Let us help them as much as we can, even if it may cost us at times.

And in the «Method of life» of 1830, she notes:

I will dearly love the poor. I will gladly talk with them; I will help them as much as I can afford, and three times a week I will put part of my food aside and give it to them.

In a prayer attributed to Vincenza Gerosa we read:

...for your love this is what I resolve: I will be compassionate from my heart towards the afflictions and miseries of the troubled poor, I will often say to myself: I could be in their place. The most ragged and derelict will be in a special way the object of my care and attention. Above all, my adorable Saviour, I will recognize yourself in each of the troubled and the poor (Scandella, VG, 65).



All our sisters always lived and worked with these same sentiments, in the footsteps of Jesus the Redeemer and the Saints, loving and helping the poor both with the help given to individuals and with the assistance and service in the beggars' hospices.

SHELTER FOR THE POOR AT «LE GRAZIE», BERGAMO (1840-1915)

The phenomenon of begging and the need to regulate or even prohibit begging in public is recurrent throughout history, with periods of greater evidence and gravity due to wars, natural disasters, famines, or – later – insufficient wages and unemployment, especially in rural areas. However, lay people, religious and clergy have always shown themselves to be sensitive to the various manifestations of indigence because each person must be respected in his dignity and, therefore, helped as far as possible¹.

With the «Ban on begging» the so-called *hospices for beggars*, are opened, that is, «Shelter Houses» for the destitute, powerless to do any kind of work, «Work Houses» for those who could still carry out some activity, «Forced labour houses» for those who were beggars by profession due to «only idleness and vice»².

The Congregation of Charity made up of esteemed people was the management body of public goods; it had to administer with care and treat the poor with courtesy and respect.

In Bergamo, in the 'lower city' in the nineteenth century, the city reorganization project provided for a connection between the railway station and «porta S. Agostino»³, the busiest route. Therefore the convent of the Franciscan friars, founded in 1422 by San Bernardino da Siena was suppressed. Adjacent to the church of

¹ There were two sources of help for the poor: the generosity of private sources and, among religious, Benedictine monasteries, in particular, charity and hospitality, a task entrusted by the abbot's delegation to the father doorkeeper and service defined as the «liturgy of the door».

² cf. Ban on begging, Sovereign Decree, 20 August 1808.

³ One of the four access gates to the 'upper city' of Bergamo along the walls: S. Agostino, S. Lorenzo, S. Alessandro, S. Giacomo.

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«S. Maria delle Grazie» in Porta Nuova district, and in the ancient environments in October 1811, with the decree of the viceroy Eugenio Napoleone on the abolition of begging in the municipality of Bergamo, the *Casa di mendicITÀ* (Beggars' hospices), was established, which collected poor, destitute, beggars and infirm, with «house of recovery» and «house of industry».

In 1840 the director of the hospice, count G. B. Maffeis, as a representative of the Congregation of charity that administered the work, insistently asked and obtained from Sr. Vincenza Gerosa the collaboration of her sisters, already present in other works in the city of Bergamo⁴, although the Institute is still at the beginning of its mission of charity.

On **10 December** of **1840**, two sisters, *Rosa Sr. Serafina* (Francesca), already superior at the Institute «s. Chiara» (1837-1840), but not yet a professed sister⁵, enters the «Le Grazie» shelter – or also *Local di sàcoi* because everyone wore clogs⁶ – with *Mandelli Sr. Marcellina* (Anna Maria) who was only 22 years old, who had just worn the religious habit in November and will later be superior of the community, made up of five sisters⁷, from 1843 to 1851.

⁴ «Istituto s. Chiara» (21.5.1837), «Shelter of converts» (1.6.1838), «Ospedale Maggiore» (5.5.1840).

⁵ She will make her vows in the church of «S. Giorgio», Lovere on 14 September 1841 next to Sr. Vincenza. Cf. A. PREVEDELLO, *L'Istituto delle suore di carità*, Venice 1933, I, 167.

⁶ cf. U. ZANETTI, *Da 150 anni le suore di carità alla casa di ricovero di Bergamo* (For 150 years the sisters of charity in the shelter home of Bergamo) - Extract from «Proceedings of the University of Sciences, Letters and Arts», Bergamo, vol LI, academic year 1889-1890, pp. 131-132.

⁷ Bonotti Sr. Felice (aged 22), Locatelli Sr. Rosa (aged 35), Perimbelli Sr. Zaveria (aged 25), Ferrari Sr. Domenica (aged 28), Giudici Sr. Fedele (aged 29). Cf. Actual Status of the year and the statistical records in the archive.

Only Vincenza Gerosa's courage and faith could proceed to the foundation of new works in this way!... Bergamo's bishop, Mgr Carlo Gritti Morlacchi (1831-1852), since the convent in Lovere (BG) was under the jurisdiction of the diocese in Brescia, gives his approval.

The guests were about 300, more women than men, and were assisted by a doctor, a steward, a door keeper, a governor, a person in charge of the linen room and several attendants (also chosen from among the youngest and most reliable patients), who had to guarantee the presence for twenty-two hours a day, as prescribed by the *Discipline* of 1840:

They will have to reside all day in the infirmaries and dormitories intended for them, except for two hours a day, once their own duties have been completed. In these hours of absence, they will replace each other or will be represented by people designated by the inspector; when they leave the house they will have to tell the door keeper where they can be found in case of need (chap XVI)⁸.

A Document in 1840, drawn up by mutual agreement between the noble count cavaliere Giovan Battista Maffeis, director of the «Pia Casa», and the superior of the Lovere Institute, Sr. Vincenza Gerosa – very similar to the subsequent *Conventions* –, specifies the duties and services of the individual sisters.

1. *The general surveillance of the rooms inhabited by the females is the responsibility of the superior. All of them: responsible, overseers, attendants, patients depend on her, therefore she will have to be vigilant so that her duties are carried out, not only with regard to order but also concerning morality; in case of non-compliance, she will admonish the guilty ones and, if they do not repent, she will inform the inspector or the director... She will not use preferences or regards, she will ensure that all have a modest, respectful, obedient demeanour towards their superiors, as well as mutual charity and respect between them.*

⁸ U. ZANETTI, *Da 150 anni le suore di carità alla casa di ricovero di Bergamo* - Extract from «Proceedings of the University of Sciences, Letters and Arts», Bergamo, vol LI, academic year 1889-1890, 132.

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2. *The supervision of the infirmaries and dormitories inhabited by the attendants and the inmates is entrusted to the **warden nurse**. She will ensure that not only the sick but also the other patients are assisted and served with due patience and charity, not using partiality. She will take care that there is always cleanliness, calm, good order. She will follow the doctors in the ordinary and extraordinary visits and will ensure that the prescriptions are scrupulously followed.*

3. *The **person in charge** of the linen room is responsible for the effects and furniture of the linen room, she will coordinate some able inmates to make the necessary deliveries and linen changes. She will collect the dirty linen and clothing from the head nurse or the attendants assigned to the men's rooms and return them clean and tidy; the worn out ones collected from the laundry will be passed on to the foreman.*

4. *The **laundry chief** will take care of the laundry. She will collect the soap, ash and wood needed for the laundry from the warehouse, noting that they are not used more than necessary. Only in winter and on rainy days, when the linen does not dry in the open air, that is, on the lawn and the antana (covered terrace on the roof of the house), she will turn on the appropriate stove that will be assisted by the washerwomen assigned to it.*

5. *The surveillance and the running of the women's workshop are entrusted to the **foreman**⁹, with the help of an attendant or a woman or a patient capable of changing the bed-sheets and shirts... She will fill in the daily note of all the inmates who work in the workshop and of those who for some sickness work in the dormitories. Each month she will pass the note to the inspector for the payment of the fees due to the inmates who have worked.*

⁹ Tuscan-style adaptation of the Bergamo dialect *laurére*, an environment in which some of the patients were engaged in sewing and mending work.

6. *The supervision and regular operation of the kitchen are entrusted to the **head cook**, assisted by two attendants and two inmates. One day she will collect from the warehouse keeper all food items necessary for the Family, in the quantity that will appear on the daily schedule. She will not allow anyone to enter the kitchen and the distributions will be made from the special flaps. She will ensure that there is always due cleaning and that all utensils are kept clean, in particular, that the copper ones are always well tinned so as not to harm health¹⁰.*

From the text it can be deduced that the female sector of the hospice was directly entrusted to the sisters; It is interesting to note the attitude with which they must relate to people and the atmosphere that must characterize the environment: *no preferences or concerns, mutual charity and respect, due patience and charity, well-tinned tools so as not to harm health* and, at the same time, no. 6 of the *Document*, the community – guests and service personnel – is defined *Family*: connotations that say that good must always be done well, that every person must be welcomed and loved as a gift because they are God's children and an expression of Jesus' redemptive love, and that a family environment alleviates suffering and difficulties.

The *Document* also reports that every year, in addition to food and lodging: 20 weights of coal, 400 weights of 'big strong woods', 300 weights of 'strong woods in bundles', 4 weights of oil to burn, 1 weight and a half of tallow candles, 10 brents of wine were allotted to the sisters. A note specifies that the «rest home» for sisters who have become incapable, after at least 10 years of service, would be paid «every year until the end of their days, a pension of Austrian lire 150 each».

These are the written indications; we know nothing of the relationships with the director or with the team of the Congregation of charity because, unfortunately, the political events that have affected Italy and the transfer of the hospice¹¹ have affected the historical archive of the work, depriving it of important and inter-

¹⁰ *ib.* 133-135.

¹¹ In 1915 in via Borgo Palazzo; nel 1980 in via Monte Gleno. Cf. Community file.

esting documents. Our sources are therefore not primary and are rather limited. From the community file kept in the provincial secretariat and from the data archives of sisters-superiors-communities of the general secretariat it is possible to have the chronotaxis of the sisters, the superiors, the number of members of the religious community who worked in the hospice and the guests assisted.

Here is an example table from 1851 to 1915¹² and a brief critical reading of it.

date	superior	n. sisters	n. guests
1851-1878	Lachmann Sr. Clementina	6	300
1878-1879	Fassi Sr. Onesta	7	250
1879-1880	Baruffini Sr. Agostina	7	280
1880-1882	Vismara Sr. Maria Paola	7	278
1882-1884	Sangalli Sr. Angelina	7	300
1884-1889	Uetz Sr. Cecilia	9	443
1889-1892	Massinelli Sr. Egidia	9	417
1892-1895	Cappellini Sr. Emilia	10	388
1895-1896	Algisi Sr. Cornelia	9	385
1896-1915	Ferrario Sr. Giulia	9	340

Their limited service to coordination-surveillance is confirmed by the small number of sisters compared to the high number of beggars; the variable duration of the governance of the superiors shows that their mandate was not yet defined by Canon Law. The long term (a good 27 years) managed by Sr. Clementina Lachmann emerges in particular; later, from 1882 to 1893, she will be superior general of the Institute. The *historical eulogy*, celebrated after her death by Fr Carlo Castelletti¹³, allows us to visit the hos-

¹² From 1840 to 1851 the reference file records the presence of the sisters: 1840-1842: 2 sisters; 1843-1851: 6 sisters, while it does not provide the number of guests.

¹³ C. CASTELLETTI, *Historical eulogy of Sr. Clementina Lachmann, superior general of the Sisters of Charity of Loreve*, recited on 24 July 1893. Milan, Typography Ed Artigianelli in AGSdC 85/V. Carlo Castelletti, a native of the parish of «S. Alessandro in Colonna» in Bergamo, was ordained a priest in August 1872; imme-

pice «Le Grazie», to see the type of guests (beggars and attendants) and to know, following the example of the superior, how the sisters related with them.

*About three hundred were **hospitalized** in that grandiose establishment of charity; people of all sex, of all ages and belonging to the most disparate conditions. On the one hand, honest and labour-loving workers who, persecuted by misfortunes and rendered unable to work, gratefully enter that house to receive the bread that they can no longer earn with their toil and quietly finish their days there; on the other hand, incorrigible idlers who, having spent their life in begging and vices, enter there as in a life sentence, regretting the freedom of their wandering life. Once well-off people who still retain their feelings, education and, to a large extent, their memories and needs from their civilized condition; and next to them people rough and uneducated, of poor feeling, of trivial and rude ways. Young people due to infirmities of mind and body are rendered unable to bear life; old are often querulous and annoying. The God-fearing ones, who cherish the calm of that place, to attend more freely to the practices of Christian life; others, instead, who in the various vicissitudes of life have completely abandoned all religious practice and have almost lost their faith. Some lovers of peace and quiet, others noisy and rowdy. And in so much diversity of disposition, in one point they are all the same, in the great need that everyone has for compassion, assistance, comfort.*

*Add to this the numerous **persons in service**, among which, if many are God-fearing, charitable and good, some aim only for gain, neglected moreover in their duties, sluggish and vicious, more of a hindrance than a help to the good running of the house. Add to this the need and the duty to depend on superiors and administrators, each of whom has her ideas in the way of thinking and often tries to make it prevail in housekeeping¹⁴.*

And Sr. Clementina, still young, assumes the commitment of **superior** in this «Casa delle Grazie»; with humility and wisdom

diately he was coadjutor in the same parish, then vicar, finally parish priest; died on 30 November 1908.

¹⁴ Historical eulogy, 11-12.

she earns the admiration and affection of her sisters; respectful and obsequious towards the superiors and administrators of the House, all esteem her and respect her proposals; with kindness and fine manners she attracts the sympathy of the persons in service whom she sometimes replaced when she saw them too tired and weary.

Her charity shone in particular in her loving care towards the inmates, continues the historian. She listened patiently to the often boring and repeated narration of their events and misfortunes, lavishing advice and comfort on them. He used to listen patiently also to the idiots and to their inconclusive speeches, always sending them back happy with a few caresses and some little gifts. She took special care of the sick, visiting them frequently and lovingly serving them, and making sure that they did not lack either the remedies of the body or the comforts of the spirit.

And the *sisters* willingly and spontaneously followed her examples, contributing to the climate of family and fraternity; we read about them¹⁵: Sr. Maddalena Maffioli (at the hospice from 1852 to 1870 and from 1871 to 1878), the *foreman*, «amid 500 unhappy people, in secret, in silence, without human satisfaction, she enriched her crown with great merits; her behaviour was always edifying in her assiduity to prayer and fatigue»; Sr. Elena Bertoletti (1855-1864), in charge of the linen room, «when she was changed, the sight of the poor who sadly lament the loss of a good mother was very moving»; Sr. Domenica Tonazzoli (1864-1874), in charge of the laundry, «At the school of the sweet superior, she gave precious fruits of the most beautiful virtues».

In 1859 the wounded people of the second war of independence were also welcomed in «Le Grazie» and in 1867 cholera spreads there. The sisters do not spare themselves, with generosity and courage they assist the sick and comfort the dying with total and silent dedication.

¹⁵ cf. Necrology in AGSdC.

In 1878, at the request of the administration of the Congregation of Charity, the sisters also assumed, with managerial and supervisory responsibilities, the assistance service in the dormitories and¹⁶ the male infirmaries and their number increased up to 10.

When the old structure is inadequate and the social context has changed to welcome the elderly, the city of Bergamo in April 1915 inaugurates the large complex «Pia Casa di Riposo» in Borgo Palazzo, also known as «Clementina» after the name of a pre-existing farmhouse¹⁷ and/or – according to a popular tradition – ‘by popular acclaim’ so named in memory of Sr. Clementina Lachmann, who did so much for the elderly to obtain the esteem even of the anti-clerical forces¹⁸. Later, in October 1980, the headquarters were moved to via Monte Gleno, on the outskirts of the city, to the «Residential and day-care centre for the elderly» which in 2004 was called *Carisma (Fondazione Casa di Riposo santa Maria Ausiliatrice)*. By now the physiognomy of the work has changed, the residence no longer has the characteristics of a hospice, of a welfare institution, but of a social-health complex, where the sisters first ensure direct assistance to the patients and, subsequently, carry out the spiritual ministry, according to the directives of the chaplain: two other chapters of the service of charity of the sister nurses that deserve to be read and deepened.

Our presence ceases on **30 November 2015**.

The sisters have written wonderful pages of history among the destitute and the elderly, who above all ask to be heard or consoled, especially those who feel abandoned even by family affections. They have always shown themselves to be mothers and sisters for everyone.

¹⁶ Deliberation of the Congregation of Charity on 13 April 1887 in U. ZANETTI, *For 150 years the Sisters of Charity at the hospital in Bergamo*, 136.

¹⁷ On the site of the hospice in the city in 1928 the building- operative office of the bank *Banca Credito Bergamasco* was built.

¹⁸ cf. *L'Eco di Bergamo*, November 2015 - C. EPIS, *Sisters of charity. Farewell to Gleno after 175 years*, in AGSdC.