

Corporate Charity in Spain: The Hermandad del Refugio of Madrid 1618-1814*

by William J. CALLAHAN**

1. — POVERTY IN SPAIN.

The existence of a vast population living precariously at best and desperately at worst afflicted European society between 1500 and 1800 with an insoluble problem. Traditional pre-industrial economies based on rudimentary agriculture and isolated pockets of commerce and manufacturing provided limited employment opportunities and left the majority of the urban and rural populace exposed to the misery and suffering resulting from periodic food shortages and economic depressions. The problem of poverty, though common to every European state, may well have been more acute in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Spain. The Spanish economy of the sixteenth century, stimulated by massive imports of bullion from the New World and by the profits of colonial trade, brought prosperity to commerce and industry. But the sixteenth-century boom proved ephemeral, and its collapse was already evident during the closing years of the reign of Philip II (1556-1598). A catastrophic decline in agriculture accompanied the ruin of trade and manufacturing. An unjust and inequitable system of land tenure, whether in the form of the inefficient estates of the aristocracy in the south or the tiny uneconomic plots leased to the rural populace of Galicia, created an oppressed peasantry reduced to still greater desperation by royal taxation. The Castilian peasant of the seventeenth century paid approximately fifty per cent of his income in taxes, rents and dues.¹ To this grim picture must be added the effects of climatic disasters and several waves of disease which may have carried off over a million persons during the seventeenth century.² There were some periods of relief and some regions where the crisis was less serious than in others, but in general, economic conditions abandoned the majority of the population to a brutal struggle for survival.

Philip V's accession to the Spanish throne in 1700 did not bring significant improvement to the kingdom's economy. The cost of the war of Succession (1700-1715) and the destruction caused by military operations as well as poor crops in 1706 and 1709 seemed to augur a future as gloomy as the recent past. But once the war had ended, there began an

* Research for this article was made possible by a Humanities and Social Science grant from the Canada Council

** Department of History, University of Toronto

¹ John LYNCH, *Spain under the Hapsburgs* (2 vols.; Oxford, 1964-1969), II, p. 146.

² Antonio Domínguez ORTIZ, *La sociedad española en el siglo XVII* (2 vols.; Madrid, 1963-1970), I, p. 81.

economic and demographic recuperation, though episodic and imbalanced, which would last until the first of a new series of crises beginning in 1789.³ But the structure of Spanish industry, based on innumerable small enterprises of an artisan character, left the urban working class exposed to chronic unemployment and general distress produced by sudden economic changes.⁴ Agriculture continued to occupy the majority of the population during the eighteenth century, and the state of the economy at any given moment depended on the prosperity of the agrarian sector. Spain had been unlucky during the seventeenth century; it was more fortunate in the eighteenth. Poor harvests and rising grain prices in the late 1730s, the late 1740s, the mid-1760s and the early 1770s created the usual crises, but none equalled destructive earlier depressions.⁵ There was, however, no fundamental reform of the weaknesses of the agricultural economy. The fragility of an agriculture subject to the vagaries of climate and endowed with a structure that militated against efficient production continued to leave the population vulnerable to hunger and unemployment.

In Spain as elsewhere in early modern Europe, poverty in both city and countryside arose from the weaknesses of the pre-industrial economy; the poor were present everywhere. Mendicants filled city streets; their importunations were a normal aspects of urban social life. An English visitor to Spain in 1786 and 1787, a time of relative prosperity and of stringent government measures against mendicity, observed that in León beggars "abounded in every street;" in Granada, from three to five thousand gathered daily outside the archbishop's palace awaiting the daily distribution of alms; in Alicante, the streets "swarmed all day with beggars."⁶ In Burgos during the 1770s, mendicants wandering through the cathedral constantly upset the decorum of the services with their loud pleadings for alms, and in Zamora, the residents occasionally had to rise after they had retired for the night as groups of mendicants moved through the streets pounding on doors and appealing for help.⁷ In the cities, economic conditions or ill-health could deprive the artisan of his livelihood for periods of time. For the workman with a well-paying trade, the sudden plunge into poverty was a temporary setback from which he might soon recover. He was among the fortunate. The majority of the urban population lived far more precariously. The unskilled construction worker might go unemployed for several months of the year; the sudden death of an earning husband could push a widow with small children into misery overnight. Many of the urban poor worked at menial occupations as servants, streetcleaners, washerwomen, water carriers, peddlers, etc., with little job security and

³ J. Vicens VIVES, *Historia económica de España* (Barcelona, 1959), pp. 539-44.

⁴ Pierre Vilar has stressed the artisan character of Spanish industry during the eighteenth century. "Structures de la société espagnole vers 1750," *Mélanges à la mémoire de Jean Sarrailh* (2 vols.; Paris, 1966), II, p. 439.

⁵ Gonzalo Anes, however, notes a return to the earlier pattern especially after 1790. *Las crisis agrarias en la España moderna* (Madrid, 1970), p. 432.

⁶ Joseph TOWNSEND, *A Journey through Spain in the Years 1786 and 1787* (2nd ed.; 3 vols.; London, 1792), I, p. 378; II, p. 278; III, pp. 57, 183.

⁷ W. J. CALLAHAN, "The Problem of Confinement: An Aspect of Poor Relief in Eighteenth-century Spain," *Hispanic American Historical Review*, LI (1971), no. 1, p. 1.

miserable wages. Theirs was the daily struggle to earn enough to eat and to rent some form of accommodation. The marginals of Spanish urban society were numerous and always poised on the brink of total indigence. Below them stood the dregs of urban society, the semi-criminal elements so frequently noted by observers, the swindlers and con men, the petty thieves, pickpockets and prostitutes.

That the problem of poverty was massive in early modern Spain is clear. How many were poor at any given moment will perhaps never be established. Bennassar in his brilliant study of Valladolid society in the sixteenth century cautiously estimates that ten per cent of the town's population fell into this category; Pike in her study of Seville during the same period found no reliable figures.⁸ The seventeenth-century observers, Fernandez Narvarrete and Sancho de Moncada, saw the problem of the poor as one of the kingdom's gravest social ills but furnished little specific information.⁹ An experienced government official of the eighteenth century, Bernardo Ward, believed that 2,000,000 of the nation's population of approximately ten million lived in poverty.¹⁰ Of all the major social groups in early modern Europe, the poor lend themselves least to accurate enumeration. The civil and ecclesiastical authorities never agreed on a specific financial or social definition of poverty. Bennassar found that in Valladolid the authorities counted as indigent only those with fixed residences and not the itinerant poor who moved constantly through the city in the perpetual search for work or alms. The poor did not form a coherent social group like the nobility sharing a common legal status within the society as a whole. Nor did they possess enough in the way of material possessions to figure prominently in the notarial records which historians have begun to use in their reconstruction of early modern Spanish Society.¹¹ We know less about the poor than any other major social group.¹² They are difficult to count; they left few wills, records of business or real estate transactions; they did not write of their desperate condition. What we know of them comes almost entirely from government officials, ecclesiastics and other observers.

II. — POVERTY IN MADRID.

For over two centuries observers of life in Madrid, government officials, churchmen, public spirited writers and visitors, lamented and ag-

⁸ Bartolomé BENASSAR, *Valladolid au siècle d'or* (Paris, The Hague, 1967), p. 436; Ruth PIKE, *Aristocrats and Traders: Sevillian Society in the Sixteenth Century* (Ithaca, 1972), p. 194.

⁹ Pedro Fernández DE NAVARRETE, *Conservación de monarquías* (Madrid, 1626), p. 68; Sancho DE MONCADA, *Restauración política de España* (Madrid, 1619), p. 4.

¹⁰ Bernardo WARD, *Obra pía: memoria de remediar la miseria de la gente pobre de España* (Madrid, 1782), p. iv.

¹¹ The poor figure only occasionally in Bennassar and in another fine study of urban society. A. BERTRAND, «Ségovie au XVIII^e siècle: Étude par sondages des patrimoines dans les archives notariales,» *Caravelle* (1965), no. 4, pp. 49-81.

¹² The best general treatment of the complexities of the world of poverty in early modern Europe is Olwen HUFTON, "Life and Death among the Very Poor," in *The Eighteenth Century: Europe in the Age of Enlightenment*, ed. A. Cobban (London, 1969), pp. 293-310.

onized over the pervasive and seemingly insoluble problem of poverty in the very capital of the Spanish empire. The circumstances and economic structure of Madrid made it the preindustrial city writ large. Philip II's decision in 1561 to establish his court and government in the then modest town of 25,000 inhabitants set off a demographic and building boom that saw the population reach perhaps 170,000 by 1630.¹³ The city expanded from its center around the Alcázar, a palace-fortress on a promontory over the Mazaneres River, and spilled over the odd walls to the north, south and east in total disorder. By the mid-seventeenth century Madrid contained thirteen parishes, thirty monasteries and twenty-six convents.¹⁴ But the impressive building record proudly related by the chroniclers of Hapsburg Madrid hid the reality of a crowded city filled with ramshackle dwellings and traversed by streets regarded by visitors as the dirtiest in Europe.

The expansion of Madrid gave it the reputation of a "court of miracles" holding out the lure of fame and riches to some and a decent living to others. But for most it was a court of poverty and despair. As a city set in an arid plain with few natural advantages, Madrid never developed a productive commercial and industrial economy. It depended on crown, nobility and church for survival. Noblemen outnumbered merchants by four to one.¹⁵ There was some manufacturing activity, but it was artisan in character and devoted to servicing the needs of consumers. As late as 1797, shoemakers made up the largest single trade, followed by carpenters and tailors.¹⁶ Without a solid economic base, the city offered the vast majority of its residents only menial occupations. Water-carriers, street sweepers, rag collectors, porters, servants, refuse movers, washer-women, peddlers and countless others obtained a precarious living. For those lacking even this possibility, petty crime, con games, prostitution and other dubious enterprises offered at least the hope of survival. That Madrid offered at best only marginal employment opportunities to those who came to live there was not surprising. The town's narrow economic base meant relatively few jobs in proportion to the size of population, a common pattern in Europe during the early modern period.¹⁷ But the problem in Madrid was on a grander scale. The near collapse of Castilian agriculture and industry during the seventeenth century made the city especially attractive to the impoverished of surrounding areas. Contemporary observers assumed that desperate conditions in the countryside

¹³ David RINGROSE, "Madrid and Spain: Patterns of Social and Economic Change," paper presented at the Eighteenth-Century Studies Conference, McMaster University, 1973 p. 6.

¹⁴ Alonso Núñez DE CASTRO, *Libro-histórico-político: Solo Madrid es Corte* (Madrid, 1669), p. 6.

¹⁵ The accurate census of 1797 listed just over 5,000 noblemen and nearly 3,000 clergy compared to 1,500 merchants, the vast majority in retail trade. *Censo de la población de España de el año de 1797* (Madrid, 1801), "Estado general... 1797."

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ The same pattern prevailed in France. Olwen HUFTON, "Begging, Vagrancy, Vagabondage and the Law: An Aspect of the Problem of Poverty in Eighteenth-Century France," *European Studies Review*, II (1972), no. 2, p. 106.

and in the older Castilian cities like Segovia, Cuenca, Toledo, Guadalajara, drove many into the capital in the desperate search for survival. In normal times a city with numerous religious and government institutions enticed immigrants from less favoured areas. Poor soil conditions, inadequate transport, climate disasters and oppressive taxation, all prevalent in seventeenth-century Castile, made the attraction of Madrid irresistible. The capital's population declined after 1630, falling by as much as a third by 1680, but the fundamental relationship of the city to its region remained unchanged. Madrid recovered demographically during the eighteenth century as its population reached nearly 170,000 by 1797, but its hinterland, the depopulated towns and *pueblos* of New and Old Castile did not. Fragmentary information for the late eighteenth century indicates that Madrid still attracted immigrants from Toledo, Guadalajara, Cuenca, Segovia, Avila and the countless small villages surrounding them.¹⁸ Madrid remained a bureaucratic, clerical and residential city in a region with limited agricultural and industrial possibilities. Poverty followed inevitably.

How many were poor in Madrid: ten per cent of the population as in sixteenth-century Valladolid, the twenty per cent suggested by Ward for the mid-eighteenth-century?¹⁹ The absence of a generally accepted definition of poverty and of any meaningful figures as well as the infinite complexities of the world of urban poverty make accurate enumeration impossible. We can know something, however, of the structure of poverty, the "moral economy" of the poor. Could most of the city's inhabitants earn enough to eat, clothe themselves and obtain shelter even at a minimal level? Conditions varied from period to period, of course, but study of the economic situation in a time of noticeable urban prosperity, 1750-1800, provides an answer. In normal times even the most favoured of the working class, artisans with some form of employment, spent a disproportionate share of their incomes on bare necessities, and none was more important than food. The popular diet consisted of bread, dry vegetables, especially chickpeas, olive oil and small quantities of bacon for soups and broths. Meat and fish rarely appeared on domestic menus except among the wealthy.²⁰ For every family, bread was the indispensable item with each individual consuming approximately a pound a day. In a year of cheap food (1783), a highly skilled worker employed in a luxury trade and with a wife and two children, managed well, spending less than ten per cent of his daily wage on bread; a moderately skilled artisan, a journeyman carpenter, spent nearly twice this and an unskilled labourer paid out a devastating forty per cent. When food prices shot upwards (1789), all three saw the cost of bread consume respectively nearly a fifth, a third and two-

¹⁸ Lists of inmates of the Madrid poorhouse in 1782-1783 indicate that Madrid continued to attract immigrants especially from the Castiles. Archivo Histórico Nacional, Consejos, Sala de Alcaldes, 1782, 1783. The information, however, is fragmentary.

¹⁹ See notes 8, 10.

²⁰ Vicente Palacio ATARD, "Algo mas sobre el abastecimiento de Madrid en el siglo XVIII," *Anales de Madrid* (1970), pp. 255-56. The lack of meat and protein was common to popular diets throughout Europe. HUFTON, "Life and Death among the Very Poor," p. 295.

thirds of daily wages.²¹ Changes in the price of bread, almost always upward during the late eighteenth century, arose from the fragility of an agriculture limited in its productive capabilities and beset by periodic climate disasters, inadequate means of transport for the grain producing areas to the capital, and not least by hoarding and speculation. The chronic fluctuations of food prices exposed artisans to a sudden worsening of their economic situation. The highly skilled and the best paid might survive rising prices, but they were a small minority of the working class. A middle level artisan saw his position worsen appreciably; the unskilled workman went from desperation to despair.

The relation of daily wages to food prices tells only part of the story. An artisan working regularly at a reasonably well-paying trade could manage, perhaps with difficulty, to spend nearly a third of his income on bread in a bad year. But how long did an artisan work even in good times? E. J. Hamilton in his fine study of wages and prices expresses puzzlement at Madrid's failure to attain full employment in the midst of its late eighteenth-century boom.²² But full employment in the pre-industrial city was unusual. After deducting days given over to religious holidays, ninety-three in the Toledo diocese to which Madrid belonged, a working year of approximately 275 days remained.²³ A fortunate artisan may have worked on them all; more likely he did not. A 1750 survey of Castilian wealth, the *Catastro* of Ensenada, calculated the income of the non-agrarian sector of the economy on the basis of a work year of 180 days.²⁴ The journeyman carpenter of 1783 paid a ten *reales* a day for a full work year of 250 or 275 days could survive better than one employed for 200 days. A family needed bread, religious holidays and unemployment notwithstanding. These admittedly artificial calculations suggest that eighteenth-century observers of life in Madrid were correct in their view that "laborers were utterly unable to live on their money incomes."²⁵ Between 1750 and 1800 the artisans of Madrid saw their economic situation deteriorate as real wages dropped significantly. Although specific conditions contributed to the urban worker's declining standard of living during these fifty years, they did not represent a significant change from the traditional "poverty of employment" of the old regime city. The urban artisan faced always the prospect of unemployment for long or short periods; he could not escape the remorseless cycle of good and bad harvest which could drastically alter an already strained family economy. Personal circumstances, a long illness, a crippling injury, perhaps a new child, could push him over the brink from survival to misery. The poor of Madrid were not simply those lacking the skills to get a decent job, or the handicapped who could not

²¹ I have based this calculation on Palacio Atard's estimate of a pound of bread per day for each individual and on Hamilton's figures for bread prices. Hamilton use the loaf as the basic unit but estimates a loaf at two pounds. E. J. HAMILTON, *War and Prices in Spain, 1751-1800* (Cambridge, 1947), p. 107, note 32 and Appendix I.

²² HAMILTON, *War and Prices*, pp. 215-16.

²³ TOWNSEND, *Journey through Spain*, II, p. 226. This figure does not include local or parish feast days which would increase the total of non-working days still more.

²⁴ VILAR, « Structures de la société espagnole vers 1750, » p. 440.

²⁵ HAMILTON, *War and Prices*, p. 216.

work, or mendicants who would not. In every period the working artisan lived the possibility that he could not make ends meet. It was but a short step to indigence. Residents of the city without a regular trade faced an even more desperate situation. With marginal jobs and insecure sources of income, they struggled to survive at a subsistence level. Knife grinders, newspaper sellers, vendors of olive oil, chestnuts, asparagus and cheese, the blind willing to sing ballads for a tiny gift, the small shop-keepers, the *covachuelas*, selling tinder, rattles, cheap toys, caps and stockings underneath the church of San Felipe and others like them scrambled to eke out a bare living. Add to their ranks those who could not work, poor widows, the aged, the blind and crippled, young widows with children. Here were the real victims of Madrid's inadequate economic structure. How many there were and how they survived one may never know. If the unskilled labourer put forty per cent of his wages towards the purchase of bread, the marginals surely spent every *real* on food and cheap lodgings, the squalid single rooms, often without windows, rented out for sixty or seventy *reales* a year in the late eighteenth century in the crowded tenements of the *calles de Toledo, Ruda and Preciados*.

The poor without a dependable income lived as best they could. The clever among them used their wits in minor con games with the unwary; others took to petty crime. Experienced local residents always warned visitors to beware of pickpockets especially in church where devout attention to the services easily meant the loss of a purse.²⁶ Not everyone resorted to dubious activities to survive. When there was no bread on the table, there was always the street. Government authorities and some commentators on poverty in the capital liked to think that the beggars filling the streets were idlers and no-goods who would not work. The reality was different. Undoubtedly, ne'er-do-wells and professional mendicants wandered through the town seeking alms, but the majority were local residents forced into begging out of desperation. Unskilled labourers (*peones de albañil*); those with menial occupations, the aged and crippled predominate in the lists of persons seized by the authorities during the early 1780s for mendicity: Luis Rodríguez Guerra, 70, a master tailor fell ill and could not work and took to the streets because he had nothing to eat; Joaquín de Araujo, 30, an unskilled labourer and married, "being without work" started to beg; Melchor Fernandez, 66, who obtained a bare living carrying laundry from the Mazaneres River, Francisco López, 60, an unemployed *peon de albañil* who supported an aged mother for twelve years "on his poor wages," but then took sick and could not work.²⁷ These examples illustrate another characteristic of urban poverty, the fragile economic condition of the marginally employed. Without a sure and steady income because of a lack of a decent job or personal circumstances, they were the most likely to go onto the streets and beg when family economics disintegrated with unemployment, declining wages or sickness. The marginally employed and those unable to work faced a lifetime of misery. They were nearly destitute in good times, in bad, they became desperate. For the

²⁶ C. E. KANY, *Life and Manners in Madrid, 1750-1800* (Berkeley, 1932), p. 59.

²⁷ Archivo Histórico Nacional, Consejos, leg 49-67-49671.

urban masses of all kinds, poverty or its imminent prospect was a simple fact of existence.

III. — IDEAS AND RESPONSES.

The problem of massive poverty bedeviled governments throughout the early modern period. Few regions were without populations of beggars, vagabonds and unemployed, and everywhere public officials, churchmen and intellectuals searched for solutions.²⁸ In Catholic lands, poor relief policy had to be elaborated with special care because of the importance attached to the spiritual character of almsgiving for both the recipient poor and charitable donors. Ideally, every Christian laboured under the obligation to dispense charity in proportion to his means, first as a tribute to the spiritual significance of the poor and second, as a necessary instrument for the attainment of eternal salvation. The impoverished were "the poor men of Christ... who represent the Lord and who were made poor in this world for our benefit."²⁹ This view of charity rested upon a doctrine of riches which maintained that men fortunate enough to enjoy material goods possessed them not to satisfy their selfish interests and pleasures but to assist the poor as providentially appointed "administrators, dispensers and majordomos" of worldly things.³⁰ Although clerics stressed that the obligation of charity applied only after an individual had met the cost of his own necessities compatible "with the decency of his state," they emphasized that once this had been done, the duty to render charitable assistance bound under pain of a sin "against the providence, mercy and justice of God."³¹ Ecclesiastics extolled the spiritual advantages of almsgiving for "the man who is pious and charitable with the poor of Christ, although he be guilty of many offences, appears as a saint because according to St. Peter, charity covers a multitude of sins."³²

Ecclesiastics stressed the immediate and personal benefits arising from the exercise of charity, and the most common method of dispensing alms took the form of direct distribution of money, food, clothing and shelter to the poor by the clergy, religious foundations and laymen. But the social reality of a large population of impoverished ranging from the respectable who had fallen on hard times to common criminals led to a concerted campaign in several European countries for more organized and discriminating poor relief. The reformed systems of assistance like those established at Ypres in the 1520s from a proposal of the Spanish humanist, Juan Luis Vives, and at Lyon in the form of the *Aumône Générale*, found-

²⁸ C. R. STEINBICKER, *Poor Relief in the Sixteenth Century* (Washington, 1937) provides a general survey of the early stages of the search for a solution to the problem of poverty.

²⁹ Antonio ARBIOL, *La familia regulada con doctrina de la sagrada escritura* (7th ed.; Zaragoza, 1729), p. 315.

³⁰ Pedro DE CALATAYUD, *Doctrinas practicas que suele explicar en sus misiones* (2 vols.; Valencia, 1737-1739), II, p. 122.

³¹ Gregorio Baca DE HARO, *Empresas morales para explicación de los mandamientos de la ley de Dios* (2 vols.; Valladolid, 1703), I, p. 145.

³² ARBIOL, *La familia regulada*, p. 311.

ed during the 1530s created central organs of charitable administration under municipal administration to distribute alms on the basis of need.³³ During the seventeenth century, the economic and social effects of poverty increasingly concerned central governments as in France where the government of Louis XIV placed thousands of poor swept from the streets by police action into quasi-penal workhouses.³⁴

Intense discussion preceded the adoption of poor relief measures establishing distinctions among the poor. In sixteenth-century Spain the debate reached impressive intellectual proportions. A Benedictine monk, Juan de Medina, fired the opening around in a tract of 1545 calling for strict regulations against mendicity and the confinement of the poor in institutions on the grounds that the widespread practice of indiscriminate charity by individuals, ecclesiastical institutions and pious foundations served to intensify the problem by encouraging paupers to think that they could survive by alms and not by work. Medina established a distinction between the "true" poor, those deserving assistance legitimately because of age, illness and other personal circumstances and the "false" poor, those who could work but who did not because they knew they could live off the charitable inclinations of a Christian society.³⁵ Medina's suggestions for a more rational scheme of poor relief, however, aroused the opposition of defenders of the traditional system who argued that charity had one purpose, the spiritual improvement of its practitioners and beneficiaries. According to this view, best expressed by the Dominican Friar, Domingo de Soto, what mattered was the act of charity not its social effects. There might be undeserving persons using fraud and deceit to obtain alms. This was unfortunate but insignificant compared to the immense spiritual benefits derived from the donation of alms.³⁶ Both schools of thought agreed that a Catholic society laboured under the obligation to assist the poor; beyond this there was a fundamental difference about how society should fulfill this responsibility. Upholders of the doctrine of "pure" charity saw nothing wrong with indiscriminate charity and believed that distinguishing among the poor threatened the spiritual advantages that could be derived from almsgiving, hence Soto's complaint that the removal of the poor from the streets would cause grave harm by denying the faithful the opportunity of practicing charity.

Neither side carried the day as the debate on indiscriminate charity simmered on. In 1598, Dr. Pérez de Herrera's extravagant descriptions of paupers resorting to ingenious stratagems to obtain alms revived the hopes

³³ J. NOLF, *Ta réforme de la bienfaisance publique à Ypres au XVI^e siècle* (Ghent, 1915); N. Z. DAVIS, "Poor Relief, Humanism and Heresy: the case of Lyon," *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, V (1968), pp. 217-275.

³⁴ Emanuel CHILL, "Religion and Mendicity in Seventeenth-Century France," *International Review of Social History*, VII (1962), pp. 400-25.

³⁵ JUAN DE MEDINA, *De la orden que en algunos pueblos de Espana se ha puesto en la limosna para remediar de los verdaderos pobres* (Salamanca, 1545).

³⁶ DOMINGO DE SOTO, *Deliberación en la cause de los verdaderos pobres* (Salamanca, 1545), chapter XI.

of those favoring a more organized system of poor relief.³⁷ Philip II became personally interested in one of Herrera's pet schemes, the establishment of a house of confinement for mendicants in Madrid. The state constructed an edifice, the Albergue de San Lorenzo, for this purpose but it did not survive.³⁸ Although proposals for change continued to appear, major reform awaited the reign of Charles III (1759-1788). Only then did the state promote the creation of municipal *juntas de caridad* similar to the charitable boards established elsewhere in Europe during the sixteenth century; only after 1750 did poorhouses appear in significant numbers similar to those in use in France for a century.³⁹ Until the second half of the eighteenth century, state policy on poor relief consisted first, of an extensive body of ineffective repressive legislation directed against the most troublesome of the poor, vagabonds, petty criminals and itinerants of various kinds;⁴⁰ second, of support for a limited number of hospitals, foundling homes and orphanages and finally, of the general supervision of private foundations engaged in poor relief through the office of *Protector de Obras Pías* in the kingdom's most important administrative organ, the Council of Castile. The burden of helping the poor fell largely upon private individuals, the church and charitable foundations. The persistence in Spain of a religiously oriented structure of assistance had several causes. In spite of the enthusiasm displayed by government authorities, some laymen and clerics, for a reform of charity along the lines of change carried out elsewhere, the classic mode of charity never lacked its defenders. For every Medina or Pérez de Herrera, there were several Sotos expressing their support for "pure" charity not as openly as the sixteenth-century Dominican but no less effectively in a vast literature of sermons, spiritual guides and pious biographies. As late as the mid-eighteenth century a celebrated missionary preacher warned his congregation against inquiring too closely into the necessity of paupers asking for alms "because even if you are deceived, it is a fortuitous deception since it provides you with an opportunity to win merit in heaven."⁴¹ Moreover, the limited fiscal resources of the state and the structural weaknesses of the economy prevented the establishment of any system proposing to put the jobless to work and mendicants from the streets into institutions of confinement.

The indigent of Madrid had few choices when they needed help. Charity hospitals, the Hospital General (for men), the Hospital de la Sa-

³⁷ Cristobal PÉREZ DE HERRERA, *Discursos del amparo de los legítimos pobres y reducción de los fingidos* (Madrid, 1598), recounted a litany of abuses and frauds committed by beggars: the practice of blinding and crippling, of renting out small children to several beggars, of using cosmetics and other tricks, all designed to evoke pity and thus secure a gift of alms.

³⁸ Jerónimo DE QUINTANA, *A la muy antigua, noble y coronada villa de Madrid: Historia de su antigüedad, nobleza y grandeza* (Madrid, 1629), p. 453.

³⁹ CALLAHAN, "The Problem of Confinement," pp. 11-12.

⁴⁰ In 1552, for example, the penalty for vagabondage was four years in the galleys for the first offence, eight for the second and life for the third. I.A.A. THOMPSON, "A Map of Crime in Sixteenth-Century Spain," *Economic History Review*, XXI (1969), 2nd ser., p. 245.

⁴¹ CALATAYUD, *Doctrinas*, II, p. 129.

grada Pasion (for women), located at the end of the calle de Atocha, and the Hospital de San Juan de Dios (Antón Martín) accommodated the sick poor.⁴² The General and the Pasión treated 10,000 persons a year, but they could not assist everyone appearing at their gates.⁴³ Crowded and understaffed, the hospitals developed elaborate admission procedures to determine who among the sick deserved treatment. Moreover, popular fear of hospitals led many to avoid them like the plague. For the healthy poor the prospects were little better. Friends and relatives might offer temporary help, but often they could do little. If worse came to worse, begging on the streets offered some hope. Only the charity of the church, private individuals and voluntary charitable groups provided regular if undependable assistance.

The study of the charitable role of the church in Spain during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has scarcely begun, but it is clear that the charity dispensed by the church was massive. Far more than the state, the church raised one of the few barriers, however fragile, against the spread of starvation and death among the lower classes. Monasteries, convents, bishops and cathedral regularly set aside a portion of their incomes for charitable purposes. An eighteenth century bishop of Málaga spent half his revenues on the poor;⁴⁴ the archbishop and canons of Santiago de Compostela saved thousands from certain death during the winter of 1768-1769 when emaciated peasants filled the town in a desperate quest for assistance.⁴⁵ In periods of distress, the populace turned to monasteries and convents as a matter of course, and in normal times monks, friars, bishops and priests distributed bread, soup and clothing to the poor gathered outside their doors. No scene was more familiar to Madrid than the crowd of indigent clustered around monastery gates awaiting the hour appointed for the dispensation of alms.

The unorganized charity of ecclesiastical bodies and the formal assistance of hospitals and other charitable institutions partially met the needs of the indigent. Equally important in the structure of urban poor relief were the numerous charitable corporations formed by laymen and clerics. The collective expression of the charitable impulse through voluntary associations dominated private charity in Madrid. These groups, known as brotherhoods (*hermandades*), or confraternities (*cofradías*), occasionally as *congregaciones*, represented the application to poor relief of a long Spanish tradition of the corporate organization of religious and social life. It has been estimated that by the end of the seventeenth cen-

⁴² There are few studies of Madrid's hospitals except *Madrid caritativo: Noticia de las obras de caridad y beneficencia existentes en Madrid y sus cercanías* (Madrid, 1875), and J. Álvarez SIERRA, *Los hospitales de Madrid* (Madrid, 1952).

⁴³ Leonardo GALDIANO Y CROY, *Breve tratado de los hospitales y casas de recogimiento desta Corte* (Madrid, 1677), pp. 6-7; Álvarez SIERRA, *Los hospitales de Madrid*, p. 52.

⁴⁴ TOWNSEND, *Journey through Spain*, II, p. 278.

⁴⁵ A. Meijide PARDI, "El hambre en Galicia y la obra asistencial del estamento eclesiástico compostelano," *Compestallanum*, X (1965), no. 2, pp. 222-38.

tury more than 20,000 religious, charitable and mutual aid associations were in existence.⁴⁶

After the church, the brotherhoods engaged in poor relief were the most important source of charity for the indigent. The charitable associations, however, do not fit into a simple pattern. Some of Madrid's *hermandades* dated back to the fourteenth century; others formed during the 1790s; some worked among the sick, others among prisoners, pilgrims, orphans and even prostitutes. All the brotherhoods originated in the same way; small groups of individuals decided to engage in good works for religious motives. Although the *hermandades* shared a common spiritual purpose, their work took different forms as each determined the character and extent of its charities. In Madrid, there were parish associations such as the brotherhood of the Misericordia operation in the parish of San Martín at the end of the sixteenth century. Members of the association, twelve priests and seventy-two prominent laymen, visited the parish indigent in their homes and distributed gifts of food.⁴⁷ Other brotherhoods served the needs of charitable institutions. The brotherhood of San Fernando (1673) gathered beggars from the streets "to be fed, clothed and served."⁴⁸ The Congregación de San Felipe Neri (1694) worked in the Hospital General on Sundays and feast days throughout the year, a task performed by the Congregación de N. Señora de la Caridad (1707) for women in the Hospital de la Sagrada Pasión.⁴⁹ Several brotherhoods served specific groups of poor. The Congregación de Santísimo Cristo de Consuelo (1681) provided burial to paupers who had died in the city's hospitals; the oldest charitable corporation of Madrid, the Real Archi-cofradía de la Caridad (1421) buried executed criminals, and a later group, the Real Asociación de Caridad (1799) worked among prisoners in the jails.⁵⁰ The most picturesque association of Madrid, the brotherhood of N. Señora de la Esperanza y Santo Zelo de la Salvación de las Almas (1734) tried to reform prostitutes, hence its popular name as the brotherhood of "mortal sin" since its members declared loudly that they were seeking alms on the streets "to do good and to have Masses said for the conversion of those in mortal sin."⁵¹ The most important charitable corporation of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Madrid, the Real y Santa Hermandad del Refugio y Piedad assisted nearly a million persons through its charities between 1618 and 1800.

⁴⁶ Antonio Rumeu DE ARMAS, *Historia de la previsión Social en España* (Madrid, 1944), p. 200.

⁴⁷ PÉREZ DE HERRERA, *Discursos del amparo*, pp. 33-35. A similar association was formed in the parish of Santa Cruz in 1615. Lorenzo Niño ACONA, *Biografía de la parroquia de Santa Cruz* (Madrid, 1955), pp. 47-8.

⁴⁸ *Constituciones y instrucciones de la Hermandad del Real Hospicio de Pobres Mendigos de Ave Maria y San Fernando* (Madrid, 1675), p. 81.

⁴⁹ Joaquín Tello GIMÉNEZ, *Hermandades y cofradías establecidas en Madrid* (Madrid, 1942), pp. 140-41, 255.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-36; Miguel DE CERVERA, *Compendio histórico de la fundación, instituto y piadosos ejercicios de la Real Archi-cofradía de N. Señora de Carida* (Madrid, 1768), pp. 110-15; M. LAMA Y NORIEGA, *Memoria histórica del piadoso instituto de la Real Archi-cofradía de Caridad y Paz* (Madrid, 1868), p. 10.

⁵¹ *Constituciones de la Real Hermandad de N. Señora de la Esperanza y Santo Zelo de la Salvación de las Almas* (Madrid, 1752), "noticia previa."

In spite of the critical place occupied by the charitable brotherhoods in the structure of urban poor relief, we know little of their operations. The world of organized charity in Spain was, for example, more institutionally fragmented than the efficient charitable system of Venice recently described by Pullan. Nor was there in the Spanish empire as generalized a charitable corporation such as the *Misericordia* found in all the major towns of the Portugal and Brazil.⁵² The localistic character of urban charity in Spain has made a general picture difficult to construct. Yet the work of the kingdom's most distinguished, wealthiest and active charitable association, the Brotherhood of Refuge and Piety founded in Madrid in 1618 and active through the early nineteenth century, provides an example of the corporate charity of the old regime and how a traditional society struggled with its most serious social problem, the poor.

IV. — CORPORATE CHARITY.

The Brotherhood of Refuge and Piety emerged as Madrid's most important charitable corporation during the 1620s. Founded by a small group of minor nobles in 1618, the brotherhood grew rapidly. By 1630 membership had become a social necessity for the capital's nobility. Members of the royal family, papal nuncios, bishops, *grandees* and noblemen of secondary rank regularly sought admission. Notable seventeenth century brothers included the conde-duque de Olivares, Don Juan de Austria, Charles II (1665-1700) and the celebrated dramatist, Pedro Calderón de la Barca. All the Bourbon monarchs of the eighteenth century were brothers as well as other prominent figures, José Carvajal y Lancaster and Bernardo Ward, both ministers of Ferdinand VI (1746-1759), Antonio de Ulloa, the explorer and scientist and Ramón de la Cruz, author of a series of popular satirical plays.⁵³ The quality of the Refugio's membership endowed it with the prestige necessary for the charitable institution wishing to prosper in a setting in which competition for alms was intense. Institutions seeking to win the generosity of the public for their charities needed to maintain an impressive corporate presence. The great charitable associations of Madrid did not carry on their work quietly or anonymously, for to do so was to risk losing financial support in a city where religious and charitable foundations constantly besieged the public for alms. Although cash gifts collected on the streets and in the capital's churches furnished the brotherhood with most of its operating funds until 1630, thereafter the institution relied heavily on bequests of urban property, state and municipal credit issues (*juros, efectos de villa*) and interest receipts on loans (*censos*) left by pious benefactors. Testamentary donations came largely from the middle levels of the city's nobility, the noblemen with comfortable church and government appointments or possessed of

⁵² Brian PULLAN, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice* (Cambridge, 1971); A.J.R. RUSSELL-WOOD, *Fidalgos and Philanthropists: the Santa Casa de Misericordia of Bahia, 1550-1775* (London, 1968).

⁵³ *Libros de Juramento*, I-III, Archivo de la Santa y Real Hermandad del Refugio y Piedad. Unless otherwise noted, all archival references are to the archives of the brotherhood.

substantial private means. It is interesting however, that the great nobility, resident at court, provided few significant bequests. The scale of the legacies received by the brotherhood throughout its history was modest; a bequest of a single house or *juro* was more frequent than larger donations. Although most individual bequests were small, the brotherhood succeeded building up an impressive array of investment holdings. By the end of the eighteenth century, rentals from houses acquired by bequest (191,648 *reales*) and interest receipts on inherited *juros*, *efectos de villa* and *censos* (132,012 *reales*) provided 74% of the institution's total income.⁵⁴

Nearly a million persons benefited from the brotherhood's charities between 1618 and 1800 in an impressive display of a traditional system of poor relief in operation. The charitable work of the Refugio, moreover, filled an important gap between the formal assistance of hospitals, orphanages, etc. and whatever help the indigent could secure from relatives and friends. Widespread poverty and the limited capacity of many institutions meant that the poor struggled to survive as best they could when serious illness or unemployment struck. In this context, the role of charitable associations such as the Refugio is significant, for in primitive fashion they approximated the social agencies of the modern city. They could never adequately meet the enormous demand for assistance, but they provided a buffer, however fragile, between total misery and bare survival for the urban poor.

The brotherhood's charities fell into two categories, first, the distribution of alms to the sick poor through an exercise known as the *visita* and second, the provision of services to the indigent through an ambulance service (*sillas*) and a nightly circuit of the streets (*ronda*) designed to gather the most desperate and abandoned poor and provide them with food and lodging for a short period. In the first, the Refugio furnished temporary help when sickness undermined weak family economies. Every family dreaded illness in a society lacking mechanisms to deal with unemployment.⁵⁵ In the second, the brotherhood provided needed public services in areas which the state traditionally had left to private initiative.

Several principles moved the charities of the brotherhood. First, charity served a spiritual purpose; relieving the physical needs of the poor took second place to providing the members and the paupers receiving help with the opportunity of advancing the cause of their own salvation. Paupers gathered from the streets by the *ronda* were always exhorted to confess before being given assistance.⁵⁶ The cases of charity most vigorously publicized by the brotherhood invariably involved religious con-

⁵⁴ Income levels varied from period to period, but in the second half of the eighteenth century, annual revenues stood at approximately 500,000 *reales*. Estado... de todas las rentas, 1782, leg. 148.

⁵⁵ Mutual benefit associations (*gremios-cofradías* and *hermandades de socorro*) were numerous among Madrid's artisans throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but with few exceptions these lacked the financial resources to provide extended assistance to their members. Rumeu DE ARMAS, *Historia de la previsión social*, p. 237.

⁵⁶ *Constituciones de la Santa y Real Hermandad de Nuestra Señora del Refugio y Piedad de esta Corte* (Madrid, 1724), p. 39.

siderations. In 1724, for example, the Refugio gave wide publicity to the religious conversion of a woman of dubious reputation who had been found by the *ronda*. The brotherhood made the case known to the public because "the example, tenacity and constancy of our brothers in the quest of saving a soul has brought so much glory to Our Lord."⁵⁷ Second, the Refugio's charities provided only short-term assistance to the indigent, primarily the so-called "decent" poor who had fallen on hard times. The artisan unemployed because of illness or injury, the impoverished widow with small children, were the objects of its charity. Even here the brotherhood had a limited purpose. It provided temporary help until an individual could sustain himself or until another charitable institution took up the burden in the case of prolonged inability to work. The brotherhood, then, furnished short-term aid to enable the respectable poor to survive a temporary crisis, and this principle would characterize its operation throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The *visita*, the most important and costly of the brotherhood's charities, served the sick poor who because of the nature of their illnesses or personal inclination chose to stay at home instead of seeking hospital treatment.⁵⁸ Each week, the brotherhood called upon three members, two laymen and a priest chosen by rotation, to distribute alms to the indigent who had petitioned for help. The sick poor assisted by the *visita* were among the worst victims of Madrid's unbalanced economic structure. The Refugio's records furnish only fragmentary information on occupations, but in every period, unemployed artisans, unskilled workmen, servants, widows, either aged or with small children, and others employed at menial jobs predominate.⁵⁹ Few of the pathetic requests for assistance have survived, but those that have, small scraps of paper covered with nearly illegible scrawls, testify to the depths of misery to which the urban poor could fall: María Martín, a widow, incurably ill and living in a small tenement room; María Fernández, an eighty-year old whose only possessions were the clothes on her back; Juan Francisco Vuelta, a jobless workman with a sick wife and daughter, the family so poor that it had no beds but slept on tables.⁶⁰ The recipients of the brotherhood's charity lived in conditions of unbelievable squalor in shoddy, multi-story dwellings along the narrow, badly paved and tortuous streets near Madrid's central square, the Plaza Mayor. Brothers engaged in the *visita* often found entire families living in single, ill-lit, badly ventilated rooms. Many had sold their beds to buy food.⁶¹ The assistance furnished by the *visita* took the form of cash donations paid on the scene by the visitors who occasionally distribut-

⁵⁷ Leg. 309, exp. 1.

⁵⁸ *Instrucción para las visitas de día* (Madrid, 1629).

⁵⁹ The records of the *visita*, the *Libros de visita regular*, only occasionally indicate the occupations of paupers. The Refugio was not in fact very interested in knowing the occupational status of the poor it was serving. It wished to know primarily whether an individual had a fixed residence, that is, that he was not a vagabond or itinerant and hence could be counted among the deserving poor.

⁶⁰ *Libro de visita regular*, 1670, XXIX.

⁶¹ In 1694, the brotherhood found this situation so common that it purchased a number of beds for distribution to paupers who had sold theirs to purchase food.

ed food, clothing and bed linen as well. The amount of a gift depended on the visitors' assessment of need in each case. Of the twenty-seven persons assisted in one week of 1627, fourteen received between two and six *reales* each; thirteen between eight and sixteen; only one received the maximum gift of sixteen *reales*.⁶² A similar list for a two-month period in 1670 included donations ranging from ten to forty *reales*.⁶³ The largest gift went to a woman dying of cancer; several donations of thirty *reales* were to women with large families. In general, the sick with terminal diseases, the completely incapacitated and the infirm with families received the largest donations. Paupers receiving help suffered from a variety of ailments: blindness, paralysis, tuberculosis, cancer, ulcerous sores and fevers were the most commonly listed. Of those assisted during the last two months of 1669, nine were badly crippled, five were blind; the others included a sick widower with five small children, seven sick women with infants and several persons suffering from fever.⁶⁴ For the urban poor without personal resources or friends to offer support, serious illness meant a sudden plunge into complete misery.

How generous the gifts of the Refugio were is difficult to determine. Much depended on the economic situation of the individual, the size of his family and other circumstances. The average size of donations in every period indicates, however, that the indigent received only enough for a few days sustenance. In the mid-seventeenth century, for example, when an unskilled workman earned four *reales* a day, when he worked, gifts ranged from eight to twenty-four *reales*. The poor undoubtedly squeezed as much as possible from the donations, but few could have survived for more than a week on what they received. The Refugio, moreover, faithfully adhered to the principle of temporary assistance. It prevented donations from being made to the same individuals in successive weeks. The brotherhood recognized that many of the indigent required long-term assistance. The visitors could make personal donations if they chose and often solicited additional aid from relatives, friends and other charitable groups.⁶⁵

The temporary nature of the Refugio's assistance, and this was generally true of other sources of religious charity as well, constituted the most serious weakness of a system of poor relief dependent on the church and voluntary charitable associations. The limited resources of most institutions engaged in charity partially account for this emphasis on short-term help. The number of poor needing assistance far exceeded the ability of institutions such as the Refugio to meet the demand. The brotherhood often found that it could not provide assistance to all the sick poor requesting gifts of alms. Ironically, pressure on the institution's finances was

⁶² Libro de visita regular, 1627, III.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1670, XXIX.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ In 1727, for example, the brotherhood's *ronda* which gathered paupers from the streets found a destitute nobleman living in a stable. It provided him with temporary lodging while it petitioned the authorities for a gift of alms to send him home to his native town of Valladolid. Libros de Ejercicios, XXIV, no fol. number.

greatest in times of general economic distress, and it was usually then that the brotherhood lacked resources to attend the indigent seeking help. Thus, large backlogs of petitions built up in 1679-1680, 1684-1685, 1709-1711, 1765-1766 and 1803-1805; all were years of severe economic crisis characterized by high food prices and widespread misery among the population.⁶⁶

No sight was more familiar in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Madrid than that of the brotherhood's servants clad in blue woolen capes bearing the sick to the city's hospitals in sedan chairs. By providing the capital with its first regular ambulance service, the Refugio assisted the seriously ill who were likely to languish without medical care until recovery or death. A typical family assisted by the *sillas* in 1723 was that of an unskilled labourer who had lost his job because of illness. The man lived with his wife and four small children in a single room in one of Madrid's crowded tenements, the family so poor, it had to sleep on the floor.⁶⁷ Paupers desiring transport to a hospital had to submit a request to the brotherhood which then sent two of its servants accompanied by a brother, the *veedor de sillas*. The *veedor* performed several important functions; he had to persuade paupers, suddenly repentant at the last moment when confronted with the prospect of going to a hospital, that such a course would be desirable whatever the reputation of the city's hospitals.⁶⁸ The *veedor* also accompanied the sedan chair on its route through the town and had the responsibility of seeing that it passed smoothly through narrow and frequently turbulent streets crowded with pedestrians, horsemen, carriages and wagons of every description.⁶⁹ Once the group arrived at hospital gates, it faced a final obstacle, securing the admission of a patient. The largest hospitals, the General, the Sagrada Pasión and the Antón Martín, operated as semi-autonomous corporations under royal patronage and functioned with elaborate administrative rules regulating everything down to breakfast menus.⁷⁰ Admission procedures were detailed; the pauper appearing at the door of a hospital was by no means assured of entrance, however grave his condition. The saga of a workman, Juan García, illustrates the problems created by the rigid corporate structure of Madrid's hospitals. García, injured while working on a well, first sought treatment in the small hospital of Montserrat which refused on the grounds that it only served residents of Aragón living in Madrid. García was then seen by a member of the Refugio who called for an ambulance chair. By the time the *silla* reached the Hospital General, García appeared near death,

⁶⁶ Libros de Ejercicios, I, no fol. number; Informe de los visitadores, December 13, 1766, leg. 329; Libros de Ejercicios, LXVI, fol. 64.

⁶⁷ Libros de Ejercicios, XV, fol. 153.

⁶⁸ Paupers expressing "horror" at the thought of going to a hospital were numerous enough for the brotherhood to provide the *veedores* with instructions in such cases. *Constituciones* (1724), p. 21.

⁶⁹ Disputes over the right of way on Madrid's narrow streets were common (see, KANY, *Life and Manners*, p. 45) and the brotherhood was involved in several. Leg. 273, exp. 6. 6; leg. 309, exp. 1.

⁷⁰ *Constituciones y ordenanzas para el gobierno de los Reales Hospitales General y de la Pasión* (Madrid, 1780), pp. 79-80.

but the gravity of his condition failed to move the admitting clerk who refused him entrance, alleging that he was suffering from syphilis, a disease the hospital could not treat according to its statutes. After considerable discussion, the *veedor de sillas* finally forced the hospital to admit the patient.⁷¹ Cases of this kind were common throughout the brotherhood's history. The presence of the *veedor* was always necessary to bring pressure to bear on hospital officials. The brotherhood's prestige allowed it to play the role of intermediary between the poor and the hospitals. The sick pauper struggling on his own to a charity hospital might or might not be received. The Refugio was perfectly aware of the rules and regulations governing the hospitals, but it paid little attention to them. It believed that its charitable purpose justified the admission of the poor to hospitals without petty discussion over the condition and eligibility of the paupers concerned.

The Refugio also provided its *sillas* for disaster relief. In a city of shoddily built wooden and brick structures, fires and building collapses occurred frequently. Primitive fire-fighting arrangements could do little to lessen the destructive potential of fire. The task fell to the carpenters' guild which followed the simple technique of using axes to demolish roofs, walls or anything else in a blaze's path.⁷² Rescue operations for the victims of fire were no less rudimentary. The injured were carried to hospitals by anyone the authorities could press into service. In 1723, the brotherhood decided to make the ambulance service available to move the injured to hospitals in cases of urban disasters.⁷³ The Refugio assisted at several of Madrid's eighteenth-century fires, of which none was more spectacular than the 1790 blaze that destroyed the eastern and southern sides of the Plaza Mayor. The deteriorating condition of the buildings surrounding the Plaza made it especially vulnerable to fire. After the bells of Madrid's churches announced the outbreak of fire there on the night of September 16, 1790, the ambulance service quickly moved to the scene but seeing that "the fire was moving rapidly and voraciously," it sent back a message to the Refugio's quarters asking for more help. For ten days the blaze went unchecked in spite of the efforts of hundreds of workmen. The *sillas* of the brotherhood remained on duty during the entire period. In the Plaza, mass confusion, flying embers and debris made rescue operations difficult, but the brotherhood moved the injured as quickly as possible to shops along the calle de Tinte where they were placed in chairs and litters for removal to the hospitals. The brothers themselves carried the *sillas* when the number of injured became too much for its exhausted servants.⁷⁴ The Refugio's participation in relief efforts of this kind shows the importance of the contribution of non-governmental groups to the provision of public services in a society in which these were imperfectly developed.

⁷¹ Leg. 309, exp. 1.

⁷² KANY, *Life and Manners*, p. 164.

⁷³ Incendios, Libro I, leg. 279.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

The third major charity of the brotherhood, the *ronda*, dealt with the most destitute of the urban poor, paupers so impoverished that they could not afford even cheap accommodations. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the presence in Madrid of a floating population of vagabonds, beggars, runaway children, prostitutes and the completely destitute was a much discussed problem of urban order.⁷⁵ Some observers viewed the existence of a large, unstable population on the streets as one of the principal causes of crime in the city. They may have been correct, although their severe moral disapproval ignored the economic causes of the problem. The civil authorities subjected this floating population to a variety of repressive measures. Royal decrees ordering the arrest, impressment and general harassment of mendicants and itinerants were numerous but ineffective.⁷⁶ Police services were inadequate even after the reforms of Charles III; a body of less than two hundred constables (*alguaciles*) in a city of more than 100,000 persons had all it could do to prevent violent crime.⁷⁷ Moreover, the state never resolved the problem of what to do with the poor seized on the streets in periodic raids. Madrid lacked a poorhouse until 1673 and when one was established, it held less than a thousand inmates.⁷⁸ The state simply lacked the money and the manpower to make a system of repression and confinement work as beggars continued to fill the streets.

The *ronda*, unlike the *visita* and the ambulance service, did not depend on petitions submitted by the poor. The three members of the *ronda* left the brotherhood's quarters each night at ten in summer, eight in winter, accompanied by a servant bearing a lantern to search for paupers living on the streets. The *ronda* worked for two hours and always went on foot. The typical *ronda* traversed a compact area within walking distance of the Refugio's building on the Postigo de San Martín until 1702, the Corredera Baja thereafter. The *rondas* did not cover the entire city but concentrated on an area running in an arc, north to south, from the royal palace (Alcázar, Oriente) to the Toledo gate. Here, much of the population lived in crowded conditions along a multitude of narrow streets, squares and alleyways. The Refugio chose routes known to be frequented by the poor.⁷⁹ Churches, monasteries and convents were passed on every *ronda*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ For a good example, see PÉREZ DE HERRERA, *Discursos del amparo de los legítimos pobres*.

⁷⁶ Hernández IGLESIAS, *La beneficencia en España*, I, pp. 255-57.

⁷⁷ Núñez de CASTRO, *Libro-histórico-político: Solo Madrid es Corte*, pp. 68-9; KANY, *Life and Manners*, pp. 45-51.

⁷⁸ This was the Real Hospicio General de Pobres de Ave Maria y San Fernando. A brotherhood similar to the Refugio administered the poorhouse. In 1673, a site on the calle de Fuencarral was purchased and construction begun on the handsome building which still stands. *Constituciones y instrucciones de la Hermandad del Real Hospicio... de Ave Maria y San Fernando*, p. 5.

⁷⁹ A typical *ronda* at the end of the seventeenth century began on the calle de Carretas, a busy street between the Puerta del Sol and the calle de Atocha. It continued on the latter as far as the calle San Blas before returning to the Refugio via the Plazuela de Matute and the calle de Principe. *Repartimiento de quarteles para las rondas en 9 noches*, leg. 273, exp. 6.

because the indigent often sought protection under their porches. Squares were also searched since paupers tended to gather there to beg alms from pedestrians. The brotherhood occasionally sent out extra *rondas* in severe winter weather often fatal to poorly clothed indigents. The special *rondas* began their work at a later hour, eleven at night, and concentrated their efforts on the major squares, the Plaza Mayor, the Puerta del Sol, the Plazuela de Santo Domingo, the Red de San Luis, the Plazuela Antón Martín and the Plaza de la Cebada.⁸⁰

The *ronda* served several groups of paupers of whom the indigent found under church portals or huddled in doorways were the most important. The brothers carried a basket filled with bread and fresh eggs to provide nourishment to those too weak to walk as well as two long poles (*correones*) which could be used to improvise a primitive litter to move the incapacitated.⁸¹ The *ronda's* objective was to furnish temporary shelter to the sick poor until they could be removed to hospitals in the regular ambulance chairs. The Refugio maintained a shelter (*albergue*) where the paupers gathered by the *ronda* were accommodated for a short period of time. Many of the indigent assisted by the *rondas* were convalescents released by the city's hospitals prematurely.⁸² Without the money to pay for lodgings and in a weakened condition, they often collapsed on the streets until found by the brotherhood. The sick brought to the shelter were given stews, fresh eggs and wine to build up their strength.⁸³ The *ronda* also dealt with runaway children who were found in considerable numbers. In 1635, for example, the *ronda* gathered ninety-seven children whom it returned to their homes and 223 whom it sent to the orphanage, the Desamparados located on the calle de Atocha.⁸⁴ After 1670, the number of children found by the *ronda* declined because of the work of another charitable institution, the Hermandad de San Fernando, which began to provide assistance to the healthy poor found on the streets by its members.

The Refugio never intended that the *ronda* and the *albergue* should serve as a general instrument of poor relief. In practice, the *rondas* gathered paupers indiscriminately. Its members, moving through darkened streets in a city without adequate policing, were anxious to go about their work as quickly as possible and were therefore less careful examining the poor than the institution's leadership expected. In 1679, the administration made what would become a chronic complaint when it declared that many of the youths brought in by the *ronda* were chronic vagabonds interested in a night's free lodging.⁸⁵ That the indigent of every description hoped to attract the attention of the *ronda* was natural. The brotherhood's shelter

⁸⁰ Libros de Gobierno, V, fol. 159.

⁸¹ *Instrucción...de lo que se debe hazer...en las rondas* (1629).

⁸² In one week of November 1623, for example, the *ronda* found "a poor convalescent appealing for help" in the calle de Atocha and "a pauper recently released from the hospital who had no place to spend the night." Leg. 296.

⁸³ The brotherhood, however, placed a limit of three days on the time paupers could spend in the shelter.

⁸⁴ *Compendio de Exercicios* (1635), leg. 278.

⁸⁵ Libros de Gobierno, XIX, fols. 12-13.

was uncomfortable and crowded, but there was at least basic medical care and food, a half-pound of meat stew and two fresh eggs a day for each inmate. The Refugio's irritation at the indiscriminate gathering of paupers was greatest in times of economic distress when the city was inundated with poor desperate for any form of assistance. The most vociferous complaints were made in 1679, 1684, 1710, 1741 and 1804, all years of general misery in the Castiles. In the *ronda*, the brotherhood adhered strictly to the principle of temporary assistance. Paupers taken to the shelter were either sent on to the hospitals or released on to the streets after a three day stay in the *albergue*. Yet the Refugio was the only institution in Madrid until the 1670s which attempted to do something for the most desperate of the indigent. During the eighteenth century, other charitable associations took up some of the burden and the state began to take a more active role in dealing with the poor.⁸⁶ But governmental action focused on improved police procedures and confinement. In any case, state action proved ineffective and the *ronda* of the brotherhood walked the streets of Madrid until the end of the old regime.

V. — LEVELS OF CHARITY.

How effectively the Refugio's charitable efforts contributed to the relief of Madrid's poor is a question difficult to answer. The brotherhood never intended that its alms should provide more than temporary help to the indigent. Charitable associations such as the Refugio assisted the poor to save them from hunger and death, and they looked upon this task in moral and religious terms. Institutions engaged in poor relief did not regard the search for a permanent solution to the problem of poverty as their responsibility. At best, religiously inspired charity helped the indigent survive from day to day, a socially useful if modest objective in a society where poverty was widespread. It is impossible at this stage of research into poor relief in Madrid to make an assessment of the brotherhood's contribution to the level of private and public charity in the city. The Refugio, however, published annual figures on the number of persons receiving help. These figures, fragmentary for the seventeenth century, nearly complete for the eighteenth, illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of corporate charity in the old regime. The pattern was similar throughout the brotherhood's history with the exception of certain crisis periods. In times of economic distress caused by grain shortages and high food prices, the number of indigent seeking help increased dramatically. During the 1660s, for example, the Refugio assisted approximately 3,000 persons a year in its three major charities, but in 1668, a year of crop failures in New Castile, it helped more than 6,000.⁸⁷ The brotherhood responded less well to the enormous pressure placed on its resources by the great

⁸⁶ CALLAHAN, "The Problem of Confinement," pp. 11-13.

⁸⁷ These figures are derived from the *Compendios de Exercicios* and in some cases the *Libros de visita regular*. E. J. Hamilton refers briefly to the 1668 crisis in *War and Prices in Spain, 1651-1800*, p. 125.

depression affecting the Castiles between 1677 and 1686.⁸⁸ Periodic crop failures, a series of natural disasters and the state's destructive fiscal policy reduced the urban and rural population to misery and led to an increase in the number of poor seeking help from charitable institutions. These same conditions, however, brought the Refugio's finances to the point of near collapse and forced a reduction in the level of assistance in 1679-1680 and 1684-1685.⁸⁹ By the late 1690s, improving economic conditions allowed the brotherhood to aid more persons than ever before, especially in 1699 in the midst of widespread misery created by a disastrous spring harvest. Famine was general in the Castiles with food riots occurring in several cities, including Madrid. The brotherhood assisted more than 11,000 in 1699 alone.⁹⁰

Interpretation of the figures for the War of Succession (1700-1715) presents certain difficulties. The level of assistance declined substantially, especially in 1706 and 1710-1711 in spite of poor harvests and rising food prices. In both cases, external circumstances contributed to the decline. Extensive military campaigning around Madrid between the armies of Philip V and Archduke Charles disrupted the life of the capital and made the Refugio's normal operation impossible. A severe winter in 1708-1709 damaged crops and livestock and precipitated a new crisis while fighting in the environs of the city in 1710 created more difficulties. The brotherhood's charity began to slip badly in 1710 and reached its lowest point in thirty years in 1711.⁹¹ The decline reflected the impact of the war on the institution's finances. By late 1710, the brotherhood was forced to suspend the *visita* because of a lack of funds.⁹² The Refugio's charity recovered slowly after the war but reached previous levels by 1730. Between 1750 and 1780, the brotherhood expanded its charitable efforts significantly as it assisted more paupers on an annual basis than at any time in its history. The increased level of aid was due to the extraordinary stability of the institution's finances over the three decades.⁹³ For the brotherhood and similar groups, the expansion or contraction of charity depended on their financial condition. The Refugio financed its work on the income from urban real estate, government credit issues (*juros, efectos de villa*) and other investment holdings; all were highly vulnerable to changes in the economy. One of the gravest weaknesses in a system of poor relief relying on charitable associations was that in periods of severe economic crisis,

⁸⁸ Henry Kamen discusses this crisis in, "The Decline of Castile: the last crisis," *Economic History Review* (1964), 2nd ser., XVII, no. 1, pp. 63-76.

⁸⁹ Income fell from 175, 236 *reales* in 1679 to 96,393 in the following year. *Cuentas Generales, 1679-1680*, leg. 156.

⁹⁰ HAMILTON, *War and Prices*, p. 131.

⁹¹ Kamen discusses the economic impact of the difficulties of 1708-1709 in, *The War of Succession in Spain, 1700-1715* (Bloomington, London, 1969), pp. 361-62. The Refugio's income dropped sharply between 1707 and 1712. The following are the income figures for these years: (*in reales*)

1707	1708	1709	1710	1711	1712
157,240	92,01	88,944	58,994	59,788	85,563

⁹² In 1711, for example, the brotherhood was able to assist 2,143 persons, approximately half the number aided in the difficult year of 1709.

⁹³ The brotherhood's income approximately doubled between 1750 and 1780.

when pressure from the indigent was intense, declining revenues often forced a reduction in the level of assistance as in 1679-1680 and 1710-1711. The soundness of the brotherhood's finances after 1750 reflected the relative prosperity of the general economy. There were some periods of economic dislocation, during the mid-1760s and the early 1770s, but they were far less destructive than some earlier depressions.

The number of poor benefiting from the Refugio's charity, though not a precise guide to the incidence of agrarian crisis in eighteenth-century Spain does correspond, however, to the major periods of crisis recently elaborated by Gonzalo Anes in his exhaustive study of agricultural difficulties during the last century of the old regime.⁹⁴ Anes traces the development of several economic cycles, the first (1716-1735) was characterized by low prices for agricultural products, reasonable harvests and no serious subsistence problems. During this period, the level of the brotherhood's charity remained relatively low and stable. The second cycle (1735-1753) saw the beginnings of the price rise that would extend through the rest of the century as agrarian difficulties occurred with increasing frequency. The expanded level of the Refugio's charity in 1738-1739 and 1748-1753 conforms to the pattern of agricultural difficulties. The third cycle (1754-1774) witnessed several crises caused by accelerating food prices and poor harvests. The brotherhood had never been more active as it enlarged its assistance significantly in 1754, 1763-1765 and 1771-1772. A steady rise in agricultural prices with brief crises in the early 1780s and in 1788-1789 characterized the fourth cycle (1775-1789), and during these years the Refugio expanded its charitable efforts. The fifth cycle (1790-1808) saw an intensification of agrarian problems culminating between 1803 and 1805 in the most serious economic crisis that Spain had suffered since the seventeenth century,⁹⁵ and it was then that the brotherhood aided more poor than at any other time in its history. (Figure 1)

The crisis of 1803-1805, provoked by disastrous harvests and rising food prices, stimulated the Refugio into two years of intense charitable activity. Desperate conditions in the countryside drove thousands of peasants into the capital where the existence of religious and charitable institutions offered the hope of alms, although conditions within the city were equally grim. To meet the enormous pressure from the indigent, the brotherhood expanded the *ronda* and ambulance service significantly. The heaviest burden fell on the *ronda* whose members had to struggle each night through the large crowds of paupers gathered outside the Refugio's quarters. The brotherhood could not offer much, three days food and lodgings, but even that was welcomed by those who had nowhere else to turn. In one ten-month period, the *rondas* gathered 8,000 paupers from the streets.⁹⁶

The brotherhood's ability to respond to the needs of the poor depended on several considerations, but none was more important than its finan-

⁹⁴ ANES, *Las crisis agrarias*, pp. 427-434.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 410-411.

⁹⁶ Libros de Ejercicios, LXVI, no fol. number.

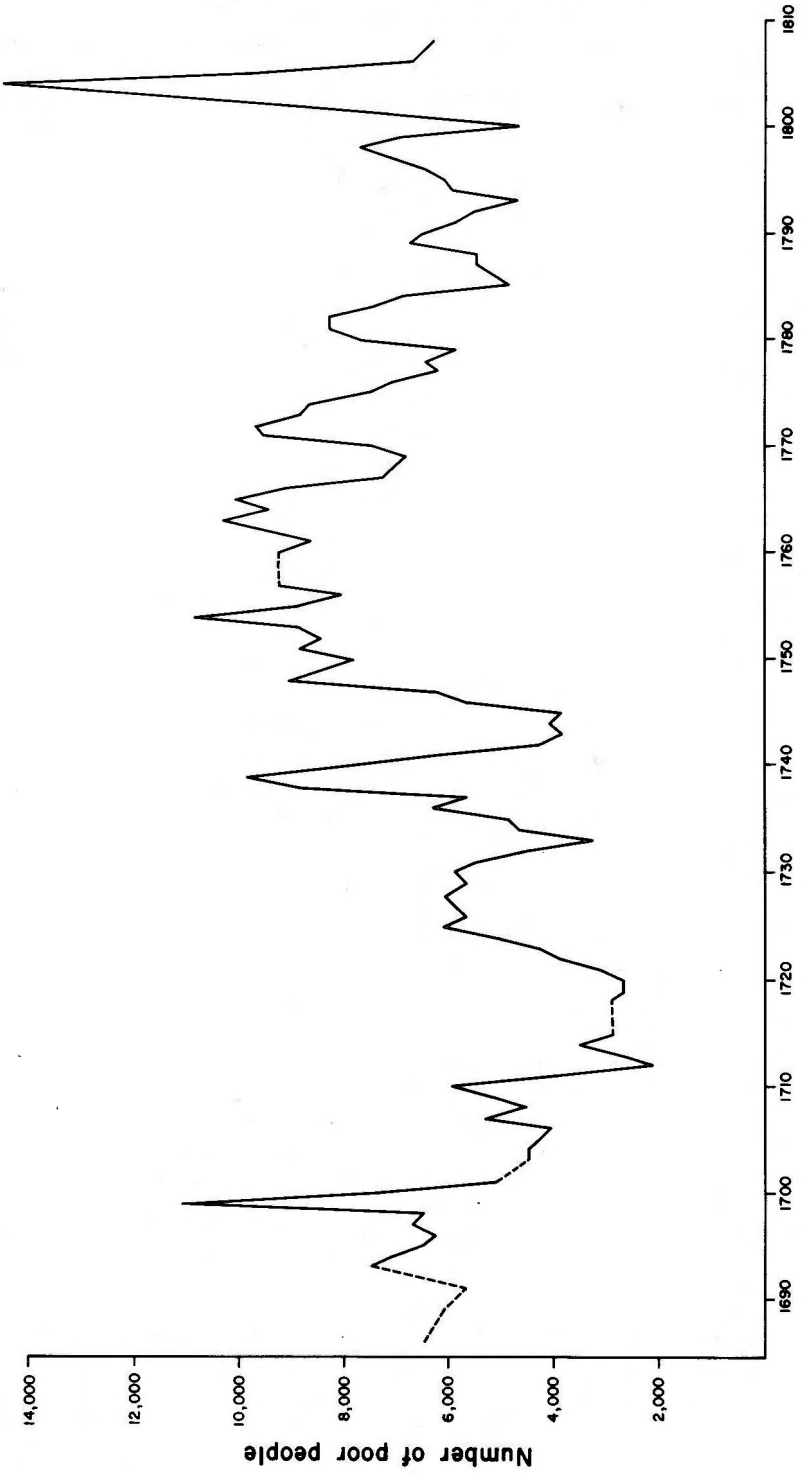


Figure 1.

cial condition. Since the *visita* absorbed approximately sixty per cent of the charitable budget in any given year, and this exercise furnished the poor with more than the very short-term assistance of the *sillas* and *rondas*, it was the only one of the Refugio's charities which contributed to the alleviation of misery in a significant way. The *visita*, however, could be expanded in times of widespread distress only if the brotherhood had the means to do so. In periods of deep economic crisis, 1706, 1709-1711, for example, the brotherhood enlarged the *sillas* and the *ronda* but lacked the resources to do the same for the *visita*. (Figure 2) In subsequent decades, especially between 1750 and 1785, the Refugio expanded the *visita* on a large scale while both the *sillas* and *ronda* remained stable or declined, a situation which reflected the prosperity of the brotherhood and of the city itself during the second half of the century. The sharp decline of the *visita* beginning in the late 1780s and continuing through the following two decades was another sign of a charitable system in crisis. The Refugio's ever more serious fiscal problems and the worsening state of the economy after 1789 curtailed the institution's ability to distribute help through the most useful of its charities for the poor. The brotherhood aided more paupers than ever before between 1803 and 1805, but expansion took place in the *sillas* and *rondas*, both relatively inexpensive to conduct. The shift away from the *visita* toward the close of the century reveals that the charity of the brotherhood was becoming far less effective than it had been between 1750 and 1785.

The Refugio's charitable activity between 1803 and 1805 was at the same time an impressive example of traditional poor relief in action and one of the last occasions when such an effort would be possible. There is ample evidence that the entire structure of religious charity, of which the brotherhood of the Refugio was an important part, had begun to weaken after 1790 in a period when recurring economic crises increased the demand for assistance dramatically. During the reign of Charles IV (1788-1808), the first signs appear of the disintegration of the financial base which had allowed the old system of charity to function. The fiscal demands of the state, especially after 1793, forced the crown to turn to the resources of the church and charitable associations as a means of raising revenue. Between 1793 and 1808, ecclesiastical institutions, dioceses, cathedral chapters, monasteries and convents poured millions of *reales* into the royal treasury in the form of forced loans, special taxes and voluntary gifts. The impact of government fiscal policy on the wealth of the church has not been studied, but there is no doubt that it was serious and certainly compromised the ability of bishops, monasteries and convents to distribute alms with their customary largess. Charitable institutions and associations were subject to the same financial demands but faced a more dangerous threat to their survival, the royal *cédula* of September 25, 1798 commanding the sale of their property.⁹⁷ Since rents from urban housing provided a significant proportion of the income of hospitals, orphanages and groups such as the brotherhood, the state's legislation threatened their

⁹⁷ F. Tomás y VALIENTE, *El marco político de la desamortización en España* (Barcelona, 1971), p. 43.

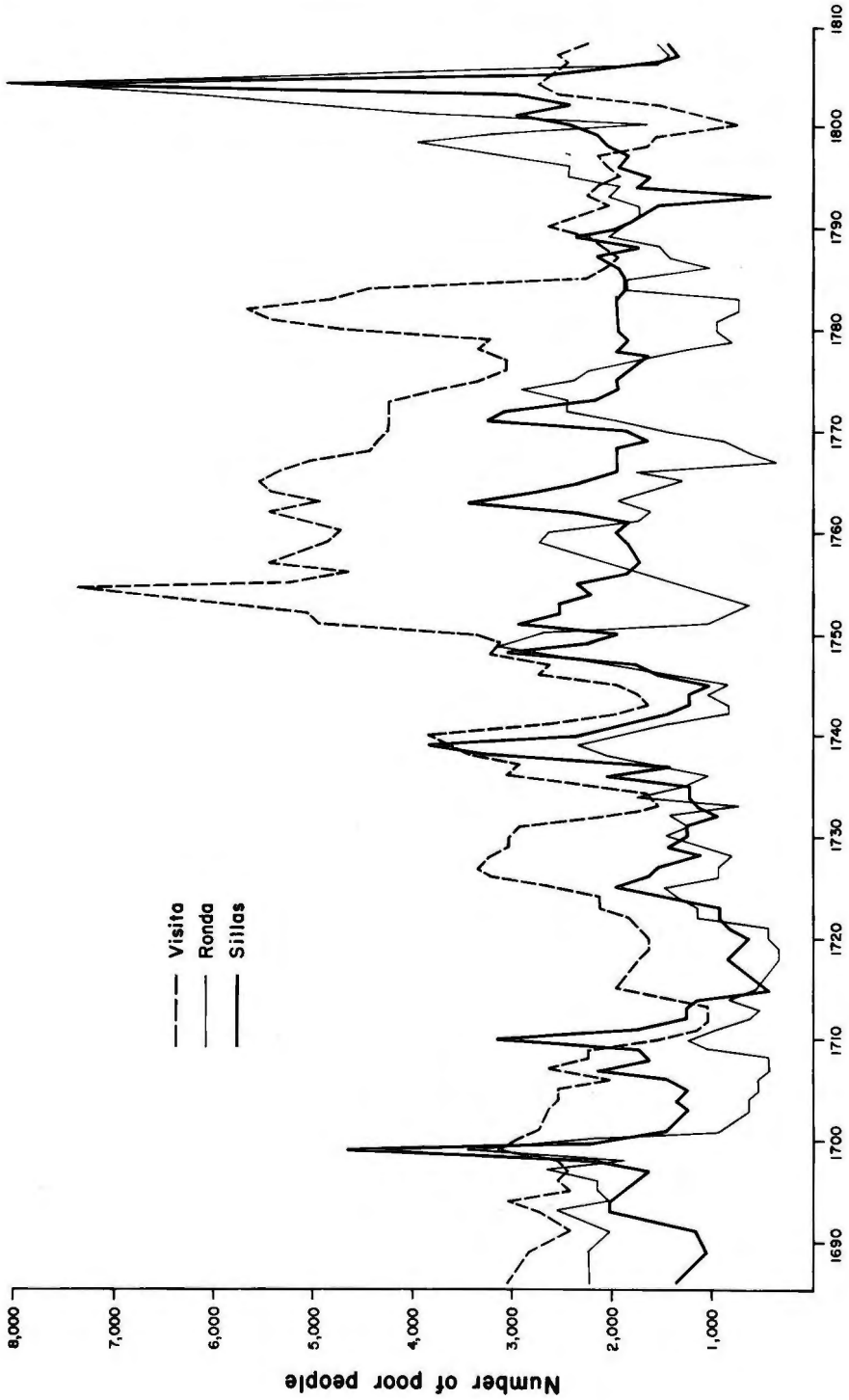


Figure 2.

very existence. The crown did not order an expropriation; theoretically, the funds realized from the sale of charitable property at public auction, deposited in a government financial agency (*Caja de Amortizaci6on*), were to produce 3% interest a year, approximately the annual return institutions were receiving from their real estate.⁹⁸ In fact, the weakness of royal finances between 1798 and 1808 meant that interest was paid sporadically and often not at all. The sale of charitable property moved slowly at first, but as Richard Herr has shown in a recent study, it progressed rapidly from 1805 on and had reached substantial proportions by 1808.⁹⁹ The brotherhood, depended for 40% of its revenues on house rentals, saw fourteen of its thirty-seven houses in Madrid sold at auction and preliminaries underway for the sale of the remainder.¹⁰⁰ The sale of charitable property was incomplete at the time of the Napoleonic intervention in Spain, but it meant the beginning of the end of a traditional structure of charity that had relied on the ability of charitable institutions to finance their own work. The erosion of church revenues and the sale of the property of institutions engaged in poor relief diminished their resources in a period when pressure from the poor was intense, a situation which grew more critical between 1809 and 1814. The traditional system virtually collapsed with the dissolution of the monasteries, the continued deterioration of church income and the effects of war and economic crisis. During the terrible winter of 1811-1812, when over 20,000 perished in Madrid, the Refugio's income had fallen to a third of what it had been 1808.¹⁰¹ (Table 1)

Table 1

1807	1808	1809	1810	1811
516,823	423,179	220,747	195,767	167,306

It is true that the traditional structure recovered to some extent with the restoration of absolute monarchy in 1814, but the recovery was incomplete. The Fernandine monarchy continued to make fiscal demands on the church; many religious and charitable institutions failed to attain pre-1808 levels of prosperity and the liberal revolution of 1820 endangered the entire system once again. The second restoration of absolute monarchy allowed the traditional forms of assistance to survive for another decade, although only in pale imitation of what they had once been. The disentailling legislation introduced by the liberal Mendizábal in 1836 began the final assault against the property of the church and charitable associations. The process took decades to complete, but when it was over, religious charity, at least in the way that it had been practiced in Spain for centuries, disappeared.

⁹⁸ Two of the brotherhood's most important sources of revenue, rents from real estate in Madrid and the interest on *censos* produced from 2% to 3% on capital during the late eighteenth century.

⁹⁹ Richard HERR, "Hacia el derrumbe del Antiguo Régimen: crisis fiscal y desamortización fiscal bajo Carlos IV," *Moneda y Crédito* (1971), no. 118, pp. 37-100.

¹⁰⁰ Leg. 271, exp. 2.

¹⁰¹ Manuel ESPADAS-BURGOS, "El hambre de 1812 en Madrid," *Hispania* (1968), XXVIII, no. 110, p. 610; Cuentas Generales, 1809-1811, legs. 200-01.

The decline of the old charitable order took place over several decades. The legislation of a triumphant liberalism simply put the finishing touches on a process that had begun as far back as the 1790s. The decline of the traditional poor relief undermined a foundation of Spain's hierarchical social structure by depriving two of its most important elements, the church and the nobility, of a key instrument of social control and political stability. Pedro Romero in his recent study of eighteenth and nineteenth-century society has correctly observed that the diminished ability of the traditional structure of assistance to respond to the needs of the poor deprived the urban masses of one of their few defences against economic hardship and as a result pushed them toward the popular and revolutionary agitation which characterized Spanish political history between 1808 and 1873.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Pedro Romero de SOLIS, *La población española en los siglos XVIII y XIX* (Madrid, 1973), p. 207.