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THE IMPOVERISHED RICH OF THE FLORENTINE SOCIETY OF THE 14TH AND 15TH CENTURIES

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In the Florentine society of the 14th and 15th centuries there were families and individuals who rose from the lower classes, such as the Medici, the most famous example, and in return there were those who experienced a decline. Diseases and epidemics, failure in commercial activity or political persecution could lead to a man being torn out of a comfortable economic situation and falling into poverty together with his whole family. There are also well-known examples of this, such as the fate of the Alberti and Lamberteschi.

Even in ancient times, there are authors who taught that people who have experienced a descent into poverty deserve special support. Thus, for example, Saint Ambrose of Milan (†397), in his writing *De Officiis*, worries about these people in several places because they are ashamed when they have to beg for money or goods for their livelihood (*qui publice egere verecundantur*).¹ He called upon the heads of the Church to take care of these people in need: *You should look for him who does not appear before your eyes; you should inquire about him who, being poor and ashamed, does not show himself*.² It was thought that impoverished people were ashamed of their need and therefore suffered more from begging than those who were born into a family of beggars and begged *by nature*.³ This teaching is found among many other Church Fathers and became a recognized doctrine of the Church of the Middle Ages, as Giovanni Ricci has shown in a profound study.⁴

- 1 Maurice Testard (Ed.): Sancti Ambrosii Mediolanensis de officiis (Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina 15). Turnhout 2000 II, 15, 69.
- 2 Ambrosius of Milan: Of the Duties of the Servants of the Church (De Officiis), in: Johannes Niederhuber (eds./transl.): The Doctrine of Duties of St. Ambrose, the teacher of the Church of Milan, and selected smaller writings (Library of the Church Fathers 1.32). Kempten/Munich 1917, II, 16, 77 (in the digital version: <http://www.unifr.ch/bkv/kapitel2722-15.htm>); Ambrosius Mediolanensis: De officiis (as Note 1), II, 16, 77: *Videndus est ille, qui te non videt: requirendus ille, qui erubescit videri*.
- 3 Cf. the comprehensive study by Giovanni Ricci: Poor, shame, pride. The downgraded between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age (Sages 452). Bologna 1996.
- 4 Giovanni Ricci: Birth of the shameful poor man. Between the history of the ideas and the social history, in: Annals. Economies, Societies, Civilizations 38 (1983), S. 158-177.

In the 13th century, institutions were founded in several cities of Europe to put into practice the call to charity for the shamefaced poor; the first is documented in Modena in 1248, and a few years later similar institutions were established in Flanders.⁵ In Florence, too, the *poveri vergognosi* were in the consciousness of society by the 14th century at the latest, as Paolo da Certaldo (t 1370) shows in his *Libro dei buoni costumi*, when he describes alms to these recipients as particularly pleasing before God,⁶ and a hundred years later distinguishes Vespasiano da Bisticci (t 1498) into the *poveri vergognosi* and the *poveri pubblici*.⁷ Help was deserved by the impoverished rich who, through no fault of their own and criminal machinations, had fallen into an existentially difficult situation. This included not only the impoverished rich living freely in the city, but also the debtors locked up in prison, who could not afford shame at all when they were fighting for survival and for their release in this miserable place. However, in the following we will show that the Florentines were not only concerned with assistance in a current emergency situation, but with the realization of a much broader concept of prevention and assistance in an emergency.⁸

The surest way to prevent the impoverishment of an upper and middle class family would have been to intervene as soon as commercial difficulties became apparent. In fact there is a great deal of evidence that the Medici, for example, helped distressed merchants and craftsmen with low-interest loans. The generous granting of private and commercial loans is even considered one of the central elements of the clientele system that Giovanni di Bicci (t 1429) and his son Cosimo (t1464) so successfully established.⁹ If bankruptcy nevertheless occurred, the further fate of the unsuccessful purchase

5 Emily Albu/Carter Lindberg: *Through the Eye of a Needle. Judeo-Christian Roots of Social Welfare*. Kirksville (MO) 1994, p. 201.

6 Paolo da Certaldo: *Book of good customs*, in: Vittore Branca (Hg.): *Merchants writers. Memories in Florence between the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. Milan 1986, S. 1-99, hier 68f. (in der digitalen Version: <http://www.bibliotecaitaliana.it/xtf/view?docId=bibit001248/bibit001248.xml>): (325.) *When you make limosine, use to make it for the sick and the shameful poor: and those are the good limosine and acceptable to God, to help those people who do not have the power to act for themselves.*

7 Vespasiano da Bisticci: *Lives of Illustrious Men of the XV Century*. Florence 1859, S. 175.

8 Research on this issue has so far been largely limited to individual studies on the *Buonomini di San Martino* and the *Monti*. Cf. therefore the literature mentioned in these sections. The most comprehensive work on charity in Florence by John Henderson: *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence*. Oxford 1994 - The support of the *poveri vergognosi* had to be provided through institutions, otherwise the anonymity of the recipients would not have been guaranteed. It is therefore in its nature that it left hardly any traces. It is therefore only possible to examine wills and the activities of brotherhoods and other corporations that were active in this field.

9 From the extensive literature on this subject, only two methodologically innovative approaches should be mentioned here: John F. Padgett/Paul D. McLean: *Economic Credit in Renaissance Florence*, in: *Journal of Modern History* 83 (2011), pp. 1-47; John F. Padgett/Paul D. McLean: *Organizational Invention and Elite Transformation. The Birth of Partnership Systems in Renaissance Florence*, in: *American Journal of Sociology* 111 (2006), pp. 1463-1568.

The success of a man or craftsman depends above all on his private and political network of relationships. This is the conclusion reached by the study of 30 bankruptcy cases heard before the economic court, the Mercanzia, in the 15th century.¹⁰

Antonio di Ricciardo degli Alberti was one of the richest men in Florence around 1430.¹¹ He had large estates in Florence and Bologna and was involved as a banker and merchant in companies operating in London, Bruges, Cologne, Rome and Basel. In 1436 this commercial network collapsed in a short time, so that on 30 June 1437 the priors of the guilds of Florence informed King Henry VI of England that all these undertakings were *in manifes- tam ruinam prolapsi sunt*.¹² Antonio degli Alberti lost all his private property and the property of his wife. In his declaration of assets to the attention of Catastro in 1442, he wrote that his wife had died of grief over this loss and that he only had seven children and huge debts of more than 30,000 fiorini:

*The sustanties of mine have been stolen from me, and taken away from me, and to me nothing remains nothing, and I am left with nothing, I am a man of seven sons, and debit between Chol Chomune and other twenty-four thousand florins, and what I had, where I will tell you, what a short fairy tale.*¹³

His name disappears from the political annals of Florence. He died in 1452 and none of his children appear anywhere as members of the city's elite.

Francesco d'Altobianco degli Alberti, who had invested a lot of money, especially in the banks in Rome and Basel, was also affected by this great bankruptcy. He succeeded in saving his wife's considerable dowry from the creditors, so that he did not have to buy money. He no longer worked as a banker, but gained some fame as a poet. His many humorous poems are especially well known. He was thus able to maintain a large part of his social status through achievements in other areas that were associated with great prestige in Florentine society. His famous relative Leon Battista degli Alberti (t 1472) dedicated the third volume of his *Libri della famiglia* to him.¹⁴

As the third merchant we see Baldassare di Bernardo Bonsi della Ruota, who was in prison around 1450 because he could no longer pay his debts.¹⁵ Already eight years after this prison stay he was active as a merchant again. Although he no longer founded his own companies, he still managed

10 In this respect, I leave out the astonishingly many cases where the failed person died within a year of bankruptcy, such as Benedetto di Bernardo degli Alberti, Alessandro Ferrantini and Bernardo da Uzzano. See Archivio di Stato di Firenze (- hereinafter ASF), Catasto 32 (1433), c. 422r-432v; Luigi Passerini: Gli Alberti di Firenze. Genealo- gia, storia e documenti, vol.1 Firenze 1869, p. 151.

11 ASF , Catasto 32, cc. 39r-45v (1433) and Passerini: Gli Alberti (as Note 10), p. 127.

12 George Williams (Hg.): Official Correspondence of Thomas Bekynton. London 1872, S. 249.

13 ASF, Catasto 617, c. 33r.

14 ASF, Catasto 32, cc. 226r-233v, and Passerini: Gli Alberti (as Note 10), p. 151.

15 ASF, Mercanzia 1377, c. 110v.

important ventures of other merchants in Pisa and Tunis. In 1458 he was prior for the quarter of Santo Spirito. His son Domenico held the highest public offices and was sent to foreign rulers several times as an envoy from Florence. He also played a prominent role during Savonarola's reign in Florence.¹⁶

The comparison of the three fates shows that the return to the old commercial significance after a bankruptcy remained closed in any case, because the creditworthiness was lost by such a collapse. The Alberti could no longer engage in commercial activities; Baldassare Bonsi had to be content with working as an employee for other merchants. Bankruptcy did not necessarily lead to social decline, however, if the bankrupt could be - compensated economically by the family. Even if he himself now had no more assets at his disposal, his status remained intact, as he did not become a *povero vergognoso*. Even his stay in the debtors' tower obviously did not in itself represent the end of a good social standing, as the fate of Bonsi shows. The fact that he managed to survive the economic collapse was not only due to his own family network, but above all to his family's longstanding membership of the innermost circle of Cosimo de' Medici's clientele. In contrast to the Alberti, the Bonsi were party members of the Casa Medici and had to accept the banishment from Florence for a time. They could therefore count on the support of the *Pater Patriae* in difficult times, although he was probably more concerned with the functionality of his clientele system than with following Christian doctrine.

Whatever loans could be granted through the networks was far from sufficient to cover the needs of the Florentine economy, to be able to borrow money for a limited period of time to purchase goods and materials and to bridge liquidity shortages. Although Florence was home to many great international bankers of the late Middle Ages, in the city itself it was often difficult for a simple craftsman to obtain a small loan. Since horrendous interest demands were usually made for this, many quickly fell into a debt trap and then into impoverishment. In¹⁷ 1415 laws were therefore passed to protect debtors, which stipulated that a creditor could only enforce his claims in court if he himself deposited the amount claimed with the court. If he lost his case, he not only had to pay a high

16 Giovanni Cambi: *Istorie* (Delizie degli eruditi toscani). Florence 1785-1786, S. 6, 21, 48, 75, 84, 124; Abel Desjardins: *Negociations diplomatiques de la France avec la Toscane*, Bd. 1 (Collection de Documents Inédits sur l'histoire de France. Series 1: Histoire politique). Paris 1859, S. 594-595, 601, 615, 620; Lauro Martines: *Lawyers and Statecraft in Renaissance Florence*. Princeton 1968, S. 260. Siehe ferner den Art. Bonsi, Domenico, in: *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* 12 (1971), S. 376-379 (in der digitalen Version: http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/domenico-bonsi_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/).

17 On banks and *popolo minuto* cfr. Frank R. Salter: *The Jews in Fifteenth-Century Florence and Savonarola's Establishment of a Mons Pietatis*, in: *Cambridge Historical Journal* 5 (1936), S. 193-211.

He not only had to pay the fine for the false accusations, but also lost this deposit.¹⁸

Cheap loans could only be found if they were secured by a pledge; but in the Middle Ages this business was largely reserved for Jews, who were forbidden to do so in Florence. For years, therefore, it was not possible to obtain a loan against interest in Florence.¹⁹ Sometimes credit seekers had to go as far as the Jews in Prato if they needed money urgently.²⁰ On several occasions the councils therefore discussed the possibility of bringing Jews into the city as money lenders in order to protect the urban middle class. This was finally put into practice shortly after 1435, based on a privilege granted by Pope Eugene IV.²¹ The Jewish banking partnerships were given a monopoly on the pawnbroking business in the city, whereby they were prohibited from charging excessive interest and charging for partial months as a whole. Obviously, therefore, it was assumed that the interest rates were more favourable with Jews than with Christian banks.²²

As Salter showed in a treatise on the importance of Jewish credit, one of the pillars of Medici rule in the 15th century was the policy of helping *popolo minuto* to obtain cheap credit. The Medici had no interest in depriving the Jews of this business activity and replacing it in the granting of small loans with a *Mons Pietatis* (Italian: *Monte di Pieta*), i.e. a pawnbroker's shop organised on a non-profit basis. Two attempts by Franciscans to set up a Mons in Florence failed in 1473 and 1488, but it was only after the expulsion of the Medici and the direct influence on the affairs of government by the Dominican Girolamo Savonarola († 1498) and his followers that the pawn shop was taken away from the Jews in 1496 and taken over by Monte della Pieta.²³ As a result, the interest rates were lowered,

18 Salter: Jews (see note 17), p. 194.

19 Marino Ciardini: I banchieri ebrei in Firenze nel secolo XV e il monte di pieta fondato da Girolamo Savonarola. Appunti di storia economica con appendice di documenti. Florence 1907, no. 2009, p. ij. From the *Capitoli* between the city of Florence and the Jew Abraham Dattili and his partners of 17 October 1437: *Considerantes quod a compluribus annis citra non fuit qui publice in civitate florentie mutuaret ad fenus (...); and quod ob id oportuit commorantes in illa et in locis circumstantibus egentes pecuniia, aut ire vel mittere a longe per decem miliaria ad minus pro suis rebus impignandis si subveniri voluerunt aut sine subventionem peristere.*

20 Ciardini: I banchieri (see note 19), p. 30.

21 Salter: Jews (see note 17), p. 195.

22 Ciardini: Banchieri (as Note 19), S. ij: *Dummodo non permetteretur eis nimis excessivum fenus nec pro huiusmodi feneratoris acceptione mensis non completus reputaretur pro integro.* See also Andrew Gow/Gordon Griffiths: Pope Eugenius IV and Jewish Money-Lending in Florence. The Case of Salomone di Bonaventura during the Chancellorship of Leonardo Bruni, in: *Renaissance Quarterly* 47 (1994), pp. 282-329.

23 Salter: Jews (as Note 17), S. 207. Cf. Carol Bresnahan Menning: The Monte's 'monte'. The Early Supporters of Florence's Monte di Pieta, in: *Sixteenth Century Journal* 23 (1992), S. 661-676; dies.: *Charity and State in Late Renaissance Italy. The Monte di Pieta of Florence.* Ithaca (NY) 1993; Ariel Toaff: *Jews, Franciscans, and the First monti di Pieta in Italy (1462-1500)*, in: Steven J. McMichael/Susan E. Myers (Hg.): *Friars and Jews in the Middle Ages and Renaissance (The Medieval Franciscans 2)*. Leiden 2004, S. 239-254.

At the same time, however, the group of credit beneficiaries was also reduced, as the new institution had to prove that it was in need of emergency assistance. It was probably for this reason that Savonarola also advocated that the Jews should not be expelled from the city but should continue to be allowed to do credit business.

If bankruptcy occurred despite all the possibilities of temporarily raising money, the Florentines considered the daughters of the bankrupt as particularly vulnerable, since they could only find a husband appropriate to their social status if they had the appropriate dowry. If the father could not raise the appropriate amount, it was very difficult to arrange a suitable marriage. In the legend of St. Nicholas, this is what happened to the three daughters of an impoverished rich man. Gentile da Fabriano (t 1427) painted in 1425 for the church of San Niccolò Oltrarno how the saint throws three gold balls through a window of the house of this family at night.²⁴ The girls were supposed to be able to marry with the anonymous gift and be saved from prostitution. It is certainly no coincidence that in the same year the Signoria of Florence set up *Monte delle doti*. In this state-controlled and guaranteed bank, wealthy Florentines were able to invest money firmly and securely against interest; the credit balance was contractually linked to a daughter of the depositor and was to be paid out as a dowry only to the groom. In this way, several objectives were pursued at the same time: The wealthy were able to invest money against interest without having to fear a church penalty, the strapped state treasury was provided with money invested for the long term, the men willing to marry knew exactly how much money could be obtained from which bride, and the girls did not have to suffer if a father lost his fortune. If the father paid into the *Monte delle doti* for his little daughter soon after her birth, this prevented her from sinking below her birth status when she was married.²⁵

Jewish money lenders and *Monte di Pieta* offered the possibility of helping themselves through cheap loans, before only begging remained, which was very widespread in Florence in the 14th and 15th centuries. Giovanni Villani (t 1348) tells in his *Nuova Cronica* of a Florentine who, around 1330, left six denari to every poor person in the city in his will. In order for this money to be distributed, all the beneficiaries had to participate in a certain

24 See Julius Kirshner/Anthony Molho: The Dowry Fund and the Marriage Market in Early Quattrocento Florence, in: *The Journal of Modern History* 50 (1978), S. 403-438. Das Bild befindet sich heute in der Hnacoteca Vaticana.

25 In their first studies on *Monte delle doti*, Kirshner and Molho saw only the rehabilitation of the state coffers and the interests of the prospective fathers of the family. Cf. Kirshner/Molho: Dowry Fund (as Note 24), p. 406. In later works they recognized the importance for girls and emphasized it accordingly. Cf. Anthony Molho: Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence (*Harvard Historical Studies* 114). Cambridge (Mass.) 1994, pp. 233-297. On *Monte delle doti* cf. Julius Kirshner: Pursuing Honor while Avoiding Sin. The Monte delle Doti of Florence (*Quaderni di "Studi senesi"* 41). Milan 1978; Anthony Molho: Deception and Marriage Strategy in Renaissance Florence. The Case of Women's Ages, in: *Renaissance Quarterly* 41 (1988), pp. 193-217; Anthony Molho: Figlie da maritare. Il problema della dote nella Firenze del '400, in: *Storia e Dossier* 29 (1989), pp. 19-25.

Sunday at the same time in their neighbourhood church. There they were locked up and only on leaving were they handed over the money to everyone. This was to prevent that someone could collect his inheritance more than once. As a result of this procedure, more than 17,000 people were able to benefit from the small amount. This figure did not even include the *poveri vergognosi*, the sick and the prison inmates, which are estimated to be another 4,000 people.²⁶ Since this chronicler is not always considered very reliable in his figures, this figure only leads to a rough estimate of the extent of poverty in Florence.²⁷ Together with figures from other sources, such as the Catasto of 1427, it must be noted that probably between a quarter and a half of the city population of about 90,000 people did not have an income that ensured their livelihood.²⁸ It is in the nature of this social phenomenon that much less concrete information can be given about the number of shamefaced poor people. But respect for their anonymity has always been a principle of dealing with them. For example, the city officials who distributed grain in the famine year 1335 wrote that the names of the shamed poor were not listed in the registers so as not to hurt their pride.²⁹

- 26 Giovanni Porta (ed.): Giovanni Villani: Nuova Cronica, vol. 3, Parma 1991, 11.163 (in the digital version: http://www.classicitaliani.it/villani/cronica_11.htm). Cf. Robert Davidsohn: Research on the History of Florence, vol. 4: The Early Period of Florentine Culture. Berlin 1922, p. 176.
- 27 Thus he pointed out that people from the Contado had come to the city on the occasion of this donation. It is also unknown how many children have to be added to these adults. See Walter B. Scaife: Florentine Life during the Renaissance (John Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science 14). Baltimore 1893, p. 178.
- 28 On the development of poverty in the city of Florence and its contado see Charles-M. de la Ronciere: *Pauvres et pauvreté à Florence au XIVe siècle*, in: Michel Mollat du Jourdin (eds.): *Études sur l'histoire de la pauvreté. Moyen âge - XVIe siècle* (Publications de la Sorbonne. Series "Études"). Paris 1974, pp. 661-744, here 662-665; Richard A. Goldthwaite: *The Economy of Renaissance Florence*. Baltimore 2008, pp. 560-582; David Herlihy/Christiane Klapisch-Zuber: *Tuscans and their Families. A Study of the Florentine Catasto of 1427* (Yale Series in Economic History). 2nd ed., New Haven (CT) 1985, p. 58. The study of the tax returns in the famous Catasto of 1427 by Herlihy and Klapisch-Zuber shows a comparable value, because about 30 % of all families are exempt from any tax because of insufficient assets. However, this source is also extremely doubtful, as not even 40,000 inhabitants were recorded. So it is very likely that at least half of the population is missing in these figures. Even more mysterious is, of course, the number of poor people in hiding. The only quantitative source is the records of institutions that made donations. But these contain little information about the size of the circle of potential beneficiaries.
- 29 Vera Zamagni: *Poverta e innovazioni istituzionali in Italia Dal Medioevo ad oggi*. Bologna 2000, p. 179: *A certi poveri vergognosi i cui nomi non si dice per non par loro vergogna*. - The consequence of this rule of conduct is that alms from individual members of the wealthy upper class to shamefaced poor people in the springs cannot be grasped. That these direct alms existed can be concluded from Bisticci: *Vite* (as Note 7), p. 556, which tells about Alessandra de' Bardi: *E molti poveri vergognosi soccorreva nelle loro nicissita*.

The principle of anonymity was also followed by the Laudesi Brotherhood of Orsanmichele, founded in 1294, which held an outstanding religious and social position in Florence in the 14th century, which it owed above all to the rich merchants among its followers. At times it had several thousand registered members and had large sums of money that could be spent on charity. A decree of the silk merchants' guild of 1334 states that she paid 12 lbr. to Orsanmichele each year for church charity. If the whole amount was not used up, it went to *pauperes verecundi*.³⁰ The shamefaced poor were thus able to benefit from alms, but these never accounted for more than eight percent of the total expenditure budget.^{31 32} Almost eighty years later, when the brotherhood had already lost a large part of its prestige, the famous merchant Francesco di Marco Datini (t 1410) bequeathed to it in his will possessions, in order to be able to make donations to the *vergognosi*.³²

In the few surviving documents of the Orsanmichele Brotherhood, there is no evidence of a specific focus of their charity on the shamefaced poor.³³ Such an institution was founded in Florence in 1442 by the prior of the Dominican convent of San Marco, Antonino Pierozzi (t 1459),³⁴ who was appointed Archbishop of Florence four years later and canonized in 1523. The concept of care for the poor, on which this act was based, was developed by the painter Lorenzo Lotto (t 1557) in an altarpiece for a side chapel of the church SS. Giovanni e Paolo (Zanipolo) church in Venice.³⁵ The picture shows an enthroned Sant'Antonino, under which two clergymen can be seen, separated from the poor by a curtain; one receives selected petitions, the other distributes alms. These gifts, however, should be given with great care and consideration (*cum intellectu et ratione*) and the recipients should be carefully examined so that no false beggars could make a living from them. Thus it can be seen that the priest takes the money from a sack where he has probably counted it exactly, so that

30 Alfred Doren: *Studies from Florentine Economic History*, Vol. 2, Stuttgart/Berlin 1908, S. 381.

31 Cf. de laRonciere: *Pauvres* (see note 28), pp. 692-694.

32 Lapo Mazzei: *Letters from a notary to a merchant of the 14th century. With other letters and documents*, Vol. 2. Firenze 1880, p. 290.

33 On the charity of the Orsanmichele cf. Henderson: *Piety* (as Note 8), S. 196-237. Comprehensive about this fraternity: Saverio La Sorsa: *La Compagnia d'Or San Michele, a page of charity in Tuscany in the 14th century*. Trani 1902.

34 Although there is no founding document with the signature of Antonino Pierozzi, no one doubts that he is indeed the founder of this fraternity. A few years after the foundation, Bisticci also emphasizes this: *Vite* (as Note 7), p. 175: *E questa compagnia che e oggi in Firenze de'poveri vergognosi, ordino lui*.

35 Bernard J. Aikema: *Lorenzo Lotto. The altarpiece of Sant'Antonino and the Dominican Observance in Venice*, in: *Mitteilungen des kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 33 (1989), S. 127-140. At this point Aikema refers to these teachings as "the innovative ideas of St. Antoninus regarding the theme of charity".

every needy person receives the fair number of coins. The emphasis on the support of the *poveri vergognosi* is shown by the depiction of several women who do not stretch out their hands like the others, but look away to the side in shame.³⁶ Sant'Antonino wished to put these teachings into practice through a brotherhood of twelve men, the *procuratori dei poveri vergognosi*, later called the *Dodici Buonomini di San Martino* after their seat in the Cappella di San Martino.³⁷

Studies of the very well preserved files of the Buonomini,³⁸ which are still active today, show Cosimo de' Medici as by far the largest donor in the first years, because almost half of the available money came from his treasury. Of these, after a thorough examination of the plight, never single persons were given alms, but only families. At first, the beneficiaries were mainly members of the lower middle class; between 1487 and 1497, however, more than half of the donations went to the upper class. Mostly bread loaves, flour, cloth and wood were distributed. The sick received money to pay for their treatment, girls for their dowry and inmates of the debtors' prison.³⁹ Under the strong influence of Girolamo Savonarola, the brotherhood lost its limitation to supporting the *poveri vergognosi* and became an important instrument of its social policy.⁴⁰

36 A detailed description of this altarpiece and its relation to the teachings of Sant'Antonino *ibid.*

37 Margaret Wilson Oliphant: *The Makers of Florence. Dante, Giotto, Savonarola and their City.* London 1876, S. 228.

38 See you. Amleto Spicciani: *The Florentine archives of the Buonomini di San Martino. Sources for the study of poverty in the second part of the 15th century,* in: *Bollettino Storico Pisano* 44-45 (1975/1976), S. 427-436.

39 Cf. Piero Bargellini: *I Buonomini di San Martino.* Florenz 1972; Amleto Spicciani: *The „po- veri vergognosi“ in Fifteenth-Century Florence. The First 30 Years' Activity of the Buonomini di S. Martino,* in: Thomas Riis (Hg.): *Aspects of Poverty in Early Modern Europe.* Stuttgart 1981, S. 119-182; Olga Zorzi Pugliese: *The Good Works of the Florentine „Buonomini di San Martino“.* An Example of Renaissance Pragmatism, in: Konrad Eisenbichler (Hg.): *Crossing the Boundaries. Christian Piety and the Arts in Italian Medieval and Renaissance Confraternities.* Kalamazoo 1991, S. 108-120; Lucia Sandri: *I Buonomini di San Martino e la „nuova“ Misericordia nella seconda metà del XV secolo,* in: Maria Morelli Timpanaro/Rosalia Manno Tolu/Paolo Viti (Hg.): *Consorterie politiche e mutamenti istituzionali in età Laurenziana.* [mo- stra], Firenze, Archivio di Stato, 4 maggio - 30 luglio 1992. Florenz 1992, S. 245-249; Christopher F. Black: *The Development of Confraternity Studies over the Past Thirty Years,* in: Nicholas Terpstra (Hg.): *The Politics of Ritual Kinship. Confraternities and Social Order in Early Modern Italy.* Cambridge 2000, S. 9-29, hier 24; Ulrike Ritzerfeld: *Pietas - Caritas - Societas. Bildprogramme karitativer Einrichtungen des Spätmittelalters in Italien.* Dissertation, Bd. 2, Bonn 2007 (in der digitalen Version: <http://hss.ulb.uni-bonn.de/2007/1083/1083-2.pdf>), S. 289-291.

40 Amleto Spicciani: *Aspetti finanziari dell'assistenza e struttura attuale dei poveri vergognosi fiorentini al tempo del Savonarola (1487-1498),* in: *Studies of Tuscan economic history in the Middle Ages and Renaissance in memory of Federigo Melis* (Biblioteca del Bollettino storico pisano. Collana storica 33). Pisa 1987, S. 321-346; Lorenzo Polizzotto: *The Elect Nation.* The

The Capella di San Martino was decorated after 1482 by painters from the circle of Domenico Ghirlandaio (t 1494) with frescoes depicting various forms of charity.⁴¹ Among them is a lunetta depicting *Buonomini* releasing a debtor from prison. This building is certainly *Le Stinche*, where political prisoners, dishonourable women, difficult youths and the mentally ill were imprisoned, as well as the *debitores*.⁴² The *Buonomini di San Martino* or wealthy fellow citizens like the Medici were able to help here if they gave a merchant or craftsman in financial distress through no fault of his own so much money that his creditor was satisfied to such an extent that he agreed to his release.⁴³ In this gloomy building, which had no windows facing the city, the Franciscans of the nearby monastery of Santa Croce and lay fraternities associated with them had probably been working to help these impoverished people since its opening shortly after 1300. They had derived this task from the *Legenda maior* des Bonaventura (t 1274), written around 1260, where it is said that Francis of Assisi (t 1226) once met a noble knight who was poor and badly dressed. In fact, through the help the saint gave this man, he performed two acts of mercy at once, hiding the shame of a nobleman and helping a poor man.⁴⁴ From 1335 on, the Minorites were obliged by the city that two of their brothers were always present in the chapel of the Stinche. Since it was consecrated to Saint Leonhard, the brotherhood grouped around this institution called itself the *Compagnia di S. Leonardo*. In⁴⁵ 1582 it changed its name to *Buonomini delle carceri di*

Savonarolan Movement in Florence 1494-1545 (Oxford-Warburg studies). Oxford 1994, S. 32.

41 Ritzerfeld: Picture programs (as Note 39), pp. 288-294.

42 About the Stinche cf. Marvin E. Wolfgang: A Florentine Prison. The Prisons of the Shins, in: Studies in the Renaissance 7 (1960), S. 148-166; Piero Jacopo Fraticelli: Delle antiche carceri di Firenze denominate Le Stinche. Rome 1975; Halina Manikowska: The Florentine Communal Prison "le Stinche" in the Fourteenth Century, in: Acta Poloniae Historica 71 (1995), S. 133-160; Graziella Magherini/Vittorio Biotti: L'Isola delle Stinche e i percorsi della follia a Firenze nei secoli XIV-XVIII. Florence 1992; Guy Geltner: Not isolated island. The Shanks in the Middle Ages, in: Annals of History of Florence 3 (2008), S. 7-28.

43 The ASF, Archivio Mediceo avanti il Principato (hereinafter: MAP) keeps dozens of letters to members of the Medici family asking for money to buy them out of the Stinche. Cf. for example ASF, MAP XXXVIII, n. 68: Letter from Luigi di Domenico Bonsi from the Stinche to Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici dated 13 May 1472.

44 Ricci: Naissance (as note 4), pp. 167 f. - Bonaventura (Giovanni di Fidanza): Legenda maior Sancti Francisci, in: <http://www.franciscanos.net/fuentes/legmaior.htm>: *Cumque, resumtis corporis viribus, sibi vestimenta decentia more solito praeprasset, obvium habuit militem quemdam generosum quidem, sed pauperem et male vestitum, cuius pauperiem pio miseratus affectu, illum protinus, se exuto, vestivit, ut simul in uno geminum impleter pietatis officium, quo et nobilis militis verecundiam tegetet et pauperis hominis penuriam relevaret.*

45 Luigi Passerini: History of charity and free elementary education establishments in the city of Florence. Florence 1853. Zur Armenpflege durch die Franziskaner in Florenz siehe Anna Benvenuti Papi: The friars of Penance in the Florentine society of the Two-three hundred, in: Mariano D'Alatri (Hg.): The Penitent Friars of St. Francis in Two and Fourteenth Century Society. Proceedings of the 2nd Conference of Franciscan Studies. Rome 1976. Rome 1977, S. 191-220.

San Bonaventura e Sant' Elisabetta.⁴⁶ However, since their older archives have been lost, it is not possible to establish anything specific about the exact direction and scope of their activities. In addition to the spiritual assistance she gave to the prisoners, she certainly helped them in all their efforts to leave this *miserable luogo*⁴⁷ and supported the families who had to get along without a father.⁴⁸ From the fact that she released up to 183 prison inmates every year in the 16th century, it can probably be concluded that she also had means for this purpose in the 15th century.

More is known about the *Compagnia di Santa Maria in Santa Croce al Tempio*, also affiliated with the Franciscans. It changed its name several times and finally became *Compagnia de' Neri* in 1424, because its members, including Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici (d. 1492), wore a black gown with a hood.⁴⁹ It had its origin in the middle of the 14th century and among its many tasks it had the accompaniment and burial of those condemned to death. From her circle, four were chosen each year by lot, who, together with four men chosen by the Signoria, were responsible as *Soprastanti* or *Buonomini delle Stinche* for the administration of the prison and the welfare of the inmates.⁵⁰ They could call a doctor if one of them was ill, or a clergyman if he wanted spiritual help. In the files of this body, from 1374 onwards, there is often the note *miserabilis* next to the names of released prisoners. Indeed, if it was concluded that a debtor in prison had neither the possibility of ever repaying his debt nor sufficient means of subsistence in prison, his release could be arranged.⁵¹

The fraternities, which were in contact with the impoverished rich, had thus shared the tasks in Florence. Those inspired by the Dominicans took care of the impoverished families of the upper and middle classes living in the city, while the Franciscans and their fraternities took care of those incarcerated in prison. But this help was always limited to preventing a further decline and at least to securing the minimum subsistence level. The return to the former social and economic situation was not their intention.

As has been shown, the efforts to help the impoverished rich in the city of Florence go back to the 14th century and after 1425

46 Massimo D. Papi: The lay associations of Franciscan inspiration in the Florence of the Two-three hundred, in: Mariano D'Alatri (Hg.): *Friars Penitent* (as Note 45), S. 221-243, hier 231.

47 ASF, MAP LXVI, No. 75: Letter from the Stinche of Francesco Soderini to Cardinal Niccolo d'Acciapaccio dated 7 December 1441.

48 In more detail about this brotherhood: Passerini: *Storia* (as Note 45), S. 497-501; Giuseppe Conti: *Firenze dai Medici ai Lorena. History, anecdotal chronicle, costumes, 1670-1737*. Florence 1899, S. 195, 232; John Edgumbe Staley: *The Guilds of Florence*. London 1906, S. 552-553.

49 Papi: *Le associazioni* (as Note. 46), S. 225-229.

50 Staley: *Guilds* (as Note 47), p. 552.

51 Cf. Passerini: *Storia* (as Note 45), S. 482-497; Martino Beltrani-Scalia: *Sul governo e sulla riforma delle carceri in Italia. Historical and theoretical essay*. Turin 1867, S. 344; Giuseppe Rondoni: *I "Giustiziati" a Firenze (dal secolo XV al secolo XVIII)*, in: *Archivio Storico Italiano* 59 (1901), S. 211-256.

strikingly closed. Where are the causes and motives for this development? Is it due to an increase in the problem or to a change in values in Florentine society? Did religious ideas change? Were there more people who had to accept a decline, or did the attention paid to them increase for whatever reason? Since none of the institutions mentioned here has produced documents that show a direct link between the expansion of charity and a current event or a particular economic, political or social change,⁵² historians have much room for speculation in answering this question.

A largely economic rationale is provided by Mollat, who stresses cyclical fluctuations as a cause of the increase in poverty and attention to the *poveri vergognosi*.⁵³ He thus follows in the tradition of Vespasiano da Bisticci, who wrote in the 15th century, who cites the *grande carestia* around 1440 as the reason for the founding of the *Buonomini di San Martino*.⁵⁴ Goldthwaite was certainly right, however, to point out the difficulty of linking the development of the dimensions of poverty directly to the increase in private or institutionalised charity.⁵⁵ There were also periods of crisis in the 14th century and in the ten years before 1350 there were probably more bankruptcies than in any decade of the quattrocento. Thus, no motive can be deduced from an increase in bankruptcies, and thus in the number of impoverished rich, which cannot be grasped at all in the sources, for society to turn its attention to supporting needy members of the upper and middle classes.

Political motives were cited by Passerini, Morgay and Adorno as the main forces for change. The return of the Medici from exile in 1434 had led to many banishments and purges, as well as to a sharp increase in the tax burden. Sant'Antonino's main motivation was the attempt to help these victims of the Medici rule.⁵⁶ By contrast, Spicciani has shown, through a profound analysis of the *Buonomini's* expenditure books, that exactly the opposite was the case. Sant'Antonino was indeed about charity, but Cosimo had created an instrument for himself,

52 Dale V. Kent: The *Buonomini di San Martino*. Charity for „the Glory of God, the Honour of the City, and the Commemoration of Myself“, in: Francis Ames-Lewis (eds.): *Cosimo "il Vecchio" de' Medici, 1389-1464 Essays in Commemoration of the 600th Anniversary of Cosimo de' Medici's (Papers delivered at the Society for Renaissance Studies Sixcentenary Symposium at the Warburg Institute; London, 19 May 1989)*. Oxford 1992, pp. 49-67, here 52nd In the founding statutes of the *Buonomini di San Martino* the reason for the establishment of the brotherhood is the current famine and the large number of *poveri vergognosi*. However, there is no indication of the reason for this emergency.

53 Michel Mollat: *Les pauvres au Moyen Age*. Brussels 1984, p. 54.

54 Bisticci: *Vite* (as Note 7), p. 175.

55 Goldthwaite: *Economy* (as in note 28), p. 573.

56 Passerini: *History* (as Note 45), S. 502; Raoul Morgay: *Saint Antonin, archeveque de Florence, 1389-1459*. Paris 1914, S. 87f.; Francesco Adorno: *The World of Renaissance Florence*. Florence 1999, S. 160. Cf. auch Emanuele Repetti: *Notizie e guida di Firenze e de' contours*. Florence 1841, S. 223-225.

to secure his position of power in *popolo minuto*.⁵⁷ It was the combination of the *high-minded, other-worldly* archbishop Antoninus and a *crudely self-serving* Cosimo de' Medici that helped this new institution to achieve its significance.⁵⁸ Cosimo's commitment to the economically threatened classes was to be seen in deliberate contrast to the rather middle-class unfriendly policy of the Albizzi oligarchy. For the same reason, he had also personally appealed to the Pope for the privilege of allowing Jews to use the pawnshop in Florence,⁵⁹ and for this reason, even thirty years later, Lorenzo had shown little enthusiasm for the construction of a *Monte di Pieta*, since he had seen it as a deterioration of the situation of this class.

Trexler places this local power-political argumentation in a larger socio-political context, because he sees in it the efforts of the European elites to stabilize the existing social order by supporting the lower classes.⁶⁰ Van Leeuwen interprets this behaviour as a tacit mutual contract: the wealthy had to help the *poveri pubblici*, for which purpose they were supposed to put up with the social order as God intended, and submit to moral control of their behaviour by the benefactors.⁶¹ Consequently, if this charity was directed against all the efforts of the lowest classes to ascend, that directed at the impoverished rich against the questioning of the social order by descent.⁶² In a society in which the rich became increasingly rich and the gap between them and the poor widened, these attempts at stabilization were of great importance.⁶³

In addition to economic, political and social factors, a significant change in the values and attitudes of the Florentine elite from the 14th to the 15th century played an important role, which can be seen in the described Pala of Lorenzo Lotto. The beggars stretching out their hands are much coarser, darker people than the light-skinned, finely slender, bashful arms. This is a pictorial translation of the change in the assessment of the *poveri pubblici* by the urban elite in the course of the 15th century as described by Goldthwaite. They no longer appeared merely as a rebellious threat, but as people with a tendency towards crime, without taste or education; they were even associated with sin per se.⁶⁴ In the same

57 Spicciati: The 'poveri vergognosi' (as Note 39).

58 Kent: Buonomini (as Note 52), here 50.

59 Salter: Jews (as Note 17), p. 196.

60 Richard C. Trexler: Charity and the Defense of Urban Elites in the Italian Comunes, in: Frederic Cople Jaher (Hg.): The Rich, the Well Born, and the Powerful. Elites and Upper Classes in History. Urbana 1973, S. 64-109.

61 Cf. dazu Sergio Bertelli: The oligarchic power in the medieval city-state (Strumenti 88). Florence 1978, S. 140; Sandri: Buonomini (as Note 39), S. 262.

62 Marco H. D. van Leeuwen: Logic of Charity. Poor Relief in Preindustrial Europe, in: Journal of Interdisciplinary History 24 (1994), pp. 589-613. Cf. also the remarks on the Church's teaching in Ricci: Poverta (as Note 3).

63 Cf. Goldthwaite: Economy (as Note 28), pp. 568-570.

64 Cf. *ibid.* p. 573f.

To the extent that the elites turned away from these poor, they turned to the impoverished rich, who were much more highly regarded.