MEMÓRIAS DA
MISERICÓRDIA
DE BRAGA

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OVER 500 YEARS OF THE MISERICÓRDIA OF BRAGA

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Established by Diogo de Sousa (1505–1532), the Misericórdia of Braga was very probably founded in 1513. We know that it was active in 1514, when it was granted the status and privileges of its counterpart in Lisbon by King Manuel I. At this initial stage, it received further support from various Archbishops, the Town Council, other institutions and many private individuals.

Archbishop Diogo de Sousa’s personal investment in the Misericórdia is particularly meaningful, as he founded and supported it throughout his prelature. Even in death he did not forget it, leaving a considerable legacy.

The Misericórdia found a home in the Jesus do Misericórdia chapel, which Diogo de Sousa ordered to be built within the cloisters of Braga Cathedral in 1513, and there it remained until 1562. In 1558 the decision was made to build its own house and church. The following year, Fray Bartolomeu dos Martires (1559–1582) ordered that the S. Marcos Hospital, run by the Town Council since 1508, should be transferred to the Misericórdia. This too had been founded by Diogo de Sousa.

The transfer of this service to the Santa Casa (Holy House), should be analysed from two different, but complimentary, angles. Firstly, the prelate gave the confraternities powers to manage an institution which was increasingly important in terms of public health and, secondly, he assigned it new roles, increasing its responsibilities and the services offered. We must also give thought to the period during which this change took place. The ecclesiastical authorities only made this decision once the confraternity had its own home, and church, had received various legacies, and expected to receive several more as a result of the burial plots inside the church. They were given authority to manage an institution which had its own income, but also incurred considerable running costs. We must also view this as part of a wider movement to incorporate hospitals into Misericórdios, which gained momentum following the Council of Trent.
The Misericórdia always maintained a close and direct relationship with the authorities. Until the end of the 18th century, this had two very significant dimensions: on one hand, links with the local authorities, controlled by the Archbishops and, on the other, ties with central government. The relationship with the Archbishops continues to this day, but was completely transformed by the loss of temporal power in the late 18th century, whilst the relationship with the Crown lasted until the Republic. The Misericórdia adapted to the regime change, forging close ties with the Republic and maintaining its proximity with central government, from whom it received several subsidies. Until the end of the Monarchy, the confraternity would contact the Crown whenever certain problems arose. These included elections, expulsion of brothers, increase of the *numerus clausus*, debt collection and disputes with other institutions in the city, or even with individuals. It did so in order to find solutions to problems which it could not resolve alone, using its royal protection status granted, as we know, during the Council of Trent. But while the Misericórdia sought assistance from the Royals, it also served them, treating soldiers in its hospital, and remembered them in their times of need. When a King or Queen was ill, they prayed for their recovery, and after death they called for suffrages to be offered, a display of condolences which kept the relationship between the two institutions alive, and meant that the presence of the power of the royals was felt in the Santa Casa and in the city. The relationship with the Archbishops operated on a closer level. The proximity of the institution and the fact that many Archbishops had, themselves, been brothers and acted as providers, as was the case of Rodrigo de Moura Teles, led to
increased interest and greater involvement. Furthermore, the relationship that Diogo de Sousa maintained with the confraternity during its beginnings acted as a model for his successors, who cited and followed his example. The impact and force of this Archbishop on the confraternity was extremely strong, lasting for centuries and providing inspiration to other Archbishops in terms of their relationship with the Santa Casa.

The history of the Misericórdia of Braga is intrinsically linked to the Archbishops of the city, though this connection was much stronger during the Modern Era. During this period, various Prelates acted as benefactors. As well as Diogo de Sousa, other figures such as Fray Baltazar Límpo (1550–1558), Rodrigo de Moura Teles (1704–1728), and Fray Caetano Brandão (1790–1805), are also notable for their close relationship with this confraternity and its hospital.

At this time, the confraternity was going from strength to strength, having already received some legacies, sought funding in the city and large parts of the diocese, and received donations from individuals. However, against the increasingly competitive backdrop of Braga, home to several confraternities, it was not until the 17th century that it truly took root and flourished. This growth was also evidenced by the production of a own compromisso, or “commitment”, published in 1630. This set of regulations was periodically replaced, especially during the 19th and 20th centuries, providing the institution and its services with up to date rules, consistent with its role and needs.

As we have already mentioned, the history of the Santa Casa of Braga was, for its first three centuries, marked by the presence of the Archbishops.
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As well as offering patronage, donations and services, their influence was always felt at crucial moments in the confraternity’s history: its foundation, the construction of its own house, the increase in the number of brothers, the approval and confirmation of new regulations. They also assisted in the resolution of internal problems, whether with brothers or employees, in charitable works, in raising funds, and in major building projects, most importantly the churches and hospital. As well as the great support it received from the prelates, the Misericórdia also took advantage from the symbolic capital their work gave it. Whenever necessary, the brothers summoned these memories in order to ensure that the rules established by the Archbishops were respected, thus asserting its authority.

The fact that the seat of the Archbishops was just metres from that of the institution facilitated contact, circulation of books and resolution of problems.

Over the course of these three centuries, the confraternity’s philanthropic work continued to expand. Although they initially prioritised prisoners and the poor, the incorporation of the S. Marcos Hospital and an increase in the institution’s funds saw them start to treat the sick. They helped women, whether by means of the Santo António Refuge, by providing them with the means to marry, or by giving aims, mainly to spinsters and widows. They assisted pilgrims, gave alms to prisoners and buried the dead, offering prayers for their salvation. In other words, the Modern Era saw a consolidation of the confraternity’s work in society, in line with the needs of the city and surrounding area, legacies received and the capacity of the confraternity and its management.

Many of these legacies, originating from Brazil, were used...
to extend the confraternity's religious activity, particularly masses held for the dead, but from the 18th century, they were also put to use in the care of the infirm. Some of these legacies were used to enhance religious celebrations, although many of these had no direct connection to the institutions. However, it is still worth mentioning the involvement of the confraternity in these events, especially at certain times of the year—Lent and Holy Week are particularly important. Its two churches bore witness to increasingly lavish celebrations and pilgrimages, inspired by ceremonies held in the Cathedral. The confraternity acquired valuable goods and religious artefacts, and made improvements to the buildings. The religious activity of the brotherhood became part of a rich tapestry of religious ceremonies in the city, organised by private institutions and public institutions, as well as by the Cathedral and the Archbishop. They competed directly with the Santa Cruz, São Vicente and Santíssimo Sacramento de
Sé confraternities, the most powerful in the city.
The Santa Casa became the most important confraternity in the city. It was the stomping ground of its most illustrious men, but their wives, mothers, daughters, sisters and other relations were also present.

With the approach of the 19th century and the end of the Archbishops' temporal power in the city, many things changed for the Santa Casa. While these changes embraced the innovations of the period, they also built on the esteem and tradition resulting from centuries of history. There was no great divide, although we believe that the atmosphere was, at times, tense. Political changes occurring in Portugal had profound, and sometimes undesired, repercussions on the institution, as was the case with the appointment of Administrative Committees. Despite this, tradition and innovation coexisted harmoniously. This has been a recurring theme throughout history, and continues to this day, though they are increasingly hard to distinguish.

Liberalism brought with it greater powers for central government, forcing the institution to follow new procedures, but often also led to instability. It brought about factional divides in the confraternity, based on the political allegiances of its men. From the 19th century, in the Misericórdia, as in the country at large, there were rumblings of political unrest and instability, particularly at certain key moments.

Another event which marked the history of the Confraternity was the establishment of the Republic, which led to many changes. The Mesa, (brotherhood board), was dissolved in November 1910 and an Administrative Committee appointed. The positions of hospital chaplain, hospital church sexton and choir chaplain were abolished and controls were placed on worship in the hospital church. The governing Definitori (Decisio-making Council) disappeared in 1911, the year in which nuns working in the hospital were replaced with nurses and the Santo Antonio Refuge closed. The Santa Casa was renamed “Misericórdia and Hospital of S. Marcos”, a change to its original name. In 1911, the School of Nursing opened in the Santa Casa, and work began on plans to build a new hospital, a dream which was never realised.

It was also at this time that the Santa Casa began to receive regular support from the Government, in the form of subsidies, and became more politicised. Under the Estado Novo (New State Dictatorial Regime), the institution was managed by men close to the regime, and experienced many financial difficulties, mainly during the two world wars. Despite this, in 1945 it embarked upon a major project to build a neighbourhood of social housing, the “Bairro da Misericórdia”, answering the calls of decree-law 344 of 6 April the same year, which encouraged the Misericórdios to build housing for the neediest in society. This was inaugurated in 1950. In 1960, the School of Nursing’s Nevante Gulbenkian halls of residence opened, and the following year of the South wing of S. Marcos Hospital opened its doors.

In 1974, the revolution brought yet more upheaval. The Misericórdia lost S. Marcos Hospital, but it continued to manage several institutions. As a result of decree-law n.º 704/74 of 7 December, central and district hospitals, “belonging to legal persons with a public administrative interest maintain the administrative and financial autonomy granted to them by decree-law n.º 162/74, of 20 April, and shall from now on be
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administered by committees, appointed by the Secretary of State for Health, to whom they shall be responsible”. At this time, the Misericórdia still managed two churches, the School of Nursing, the nursing students’ halls of residence, the pharmacy, Misericórdia Church and the associated house, seat of the brotherhood, the Chapel of São Bento, the chapel, the tombs and vaults of Monte D’Arcos Cemetery, and the shelter for mothers. It also owned a residential neighbourhood, various urban and rural properties, credit policies, share capital and received rent and ground rent in various municipalities. Focusing mainly on the field of health, the history of the Santa Casa in the 19th and 20th centuries reflects not only the crucial issues of the era, but also the deep changes occurring at all levels of Portuguese society. During the 19th century, it still distributed alms to the poor, owned the Santo António Refuge and founded two primary schools, one in 1843 and another in 1879. However, its role in treating the sick was becoming increasingly important.

Throughout the 20th century, the Santa Casa of Braga took on new challenges. It lost its refuge, but opened a bath house in 1926, the Nursing School in 1911, and the nurses’ residence in 1960. It ran a shelter for mothers from 1962, and opened three creches and three homes for the elderly between 1978 and 1990. Today, the Misericórdia operates three homes for the elderly, named D. Diogo de Sousa, Nossa Senhora da Misericórdia and Novoate Guibardikian. It also offers home support and a Day Centre. It supports the young with its two creches and has set up two social kitchens. The institution has also implemented two CLDS (L.C.: Local Contracts for Social Development) and a RLIS (L.N.: Local Network for Social Intervention).

From the last decade of the 20th century, the Board of the Santa Casa began to pay particular attention to its movable and immovable heritage. The institution gained new momentum, demonstrated by the launch of several projects, its work to protect the helpless, its strengthened cultural dynamic, and the opening of its newest initiative – The Centro Interpretativo das Memórias da Misericórdia de Braga (Memories of the Misericórdia of Braga Interpretation Centre).

Summarising five centuries of history in so few pages inevitably leads to some significant episodes being considered only in passing. However, great efforts have been made to choose the most important points. Composed of the great and the good, the Santa Casa of Braga has, throughout its history, succeeded not only in attracting the most influential figures in the city, but also in expanding its sphere of influence, with brothers going on to become members of parliament or important figures at the national level. It used all of this energy and influence to protect those who needed it most, fulfilling a truly vital role.

A powerful force for good, providing support to the most vulnerable in society, the Misericórdia of Braga has prevailed through the hardest of times, turning its weaknesses into strengths in order to fight poverty and ease the suffering of those in need.

References
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