

ARAÚJO, Maria Marta Lobo de - "Charity practices in the Portuguese brotherhoods of Misericórdias (16th-18th centuries)", in Laurinda Abreu (ed.) *European Health and Social Welfare Policies*, Blansko, Compostela Group of Universities, 2004, pp. 277-296.

Charity practices in the Portuguese brotherhoods of Misericórdias (16th-18th centuries)

Maria Marta Lobo de Araújo*

The Misericórdia of Lisbon (founded in 1498) sought to accomplish the fourteen works of mercy. These include the seven spiritual ones ("teach the humble, give good advice to those who seek it, punish with charity those who make mistakes, comfort the sad and unsatisfied, forgive those who trespass against you, suffer injuries with patience, and implore God for the living and the deceased") and the seven corporal ones ("redeem the captives and visit the prisoners, cure the sick, cover the naked, feed the hungry, give a drink to those who are thirsty, give a home to the pilgrims, and bury the dead")¹. The Misericórdia opened the way to a rapid dissemination of these brotherhoods. When Queen D. Leonor died in 1525, there were already dozens of brotherhoods spread all over the country and overseas².

The Misericórdias rapidly demarcated their field of action in their help to the poor, to orphans (through the administration of the institutions of aid and of the distribution of wedding dowries), to the sick (through owning and administrating hospitals), to widows, to pilgrims, and to captives. They provided assistance to the deceased, promoting funerals of the poor, spiritually preparing those who had been sentenced to death, and integrating and organizing religious manifestations³, among which we should point out the processions of the Maundy and those which took place on All Souls' Day.

Despite their autonomy, The Misericórdias acted similarly, due to having the Misericórdia of Lisbon as the Mother-Home and following the same commitments. Although some of these brotherhoods had reformed the commitments of the Misericórdia of Lisbon, adapting them according to their needs and to the local context, this did not

*Department of History of the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of Minho

¹ From the *Compromisso da Confraria da Santa Caza da Misericórdia de Lisboa fundada pele Rainha D. Leonor de Lencastre*, Caldas da Rainha, Tipografia Caldense, 1992, p. 11.

² On this subject, read Correia, Fernando da Silva, *Estudos sobre a História da Assistência. Origens e Formação das Misericórdias Portuguesas*, Lisboa, Henrique Torres Editor, 1994, p. 582; Sá, Isabel dos Guimarães, "A reorganização da caridade em Portugal em contexto europeu (1498-1600)", in *Cadernos do Noroeste*, vol.11 (2), 1998, p. 34.

³ The reader is referred to Sousa, Ivo Carneiro de, "Da Esmola Medieval às Misericórdias da Rainha D. Leonor" in *500 Anos das Misericórdias Portuguesas, Solidariedade de Geração em Geração*, Lisboa, Comissão para as Comemorações dos 500 Anos das Misericórdias, 2000, p. 28.

mean that they had their essence altered. They kept the same spirit and only changed some parts which were considered inadequate to the institution; also, they introduced some aspects which were considered more important to the activity of the brotherhood.

Formed and managed by secular people, these brotherhoods assumed from their foundation a profound spirituality⁴, which made them promote religious manifestations associated to intense moments of charity, or simply take part in those collective manifestations of devotion⁵.

The present work only focuses on some charitable works carried out by the Misericórdias: the alms distributed at certain times of the year (possibly associated with the liturgical calendar) and the partition of clothes. The distribution of clothes, like more general alms, might follow a fixed calendar or take place at any time of the year. We have especially noted the care given to the patients by means of the alms they distributed; the brotherhoods made sure that these alms contributed to improving their health.

The distribution of alms or material aid was a responsibility of the Misericórdias, not of other brotherhoods, who focused more on helping their own brothers. However, we should recognize that there were brotherhoods that gave alms to the poor who were not part of their ranks. Practicing charity was a Christian mandate which everybody ought to exercise, not only the rich (Mark 12, 13)⁶. Private people also distributed alms to those who knocked on their doors, normally on particular days of the week. There were others who ritualized charity and distributed alms at some religious festivities, as could be noted in the great mansions or in the residence of the archbishops. These massive deliveries of alms did not hinder other daily or weekly activities, which completed the previously planned alms. We should not think, however, that these alms were indiscriminate. On the contrary, the poor were carefully selected, and only those who were considered deserving were given the alms. The Misericórdias did not automatically guarantee the right to alms. They were subject to networks of influence and acted with networks of business connections.

The calendars of distribution depended not only on the wishes of the institutors who determined in their will the time of delivery. They also depended on the practice of the institutions, which associated distribution to moments of great significance and the liturgical calendar. So, the giving of alms might take place on Christmas, Easter, The Holy Souls in Purgatory's Day or at any other moments of religious festivity⁷.

The concern with the salvation of the soul was present among all the givers, accomplishing thus spiritual (Matthew 25, 26)⁸ and temporal aims. Charity conferred power and prestige, because it created dependence and eternal gratitude on the part of the poor, who humbly recognized the gesture from which they were profiting. For the rich, an alm meant they were nearing Heaven and simultaneously reaching glory and power on

⁴ The reader is referred to Oliveira, António de, "A Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Coimbra no contexto das instituições congéneres", in *Memórias da Misericórdia de Coimbra - Documentação & Arte*, Catálogo, Coimbra, 2000, p. 13.

⁵ About the activity developed by the Misericórdia of Braga in the strictly religious field, read Castro, Maria de Fátima, *A Irmandade e Santa Casa de Braga, Devoções, procissões e outras festividades* (from the XVI to the beginning of the XX century), Braga, ed. of the author, 1998, pp. 5-72.

⁶ *Bíblia Sagrada em português corrente*, Lisboa, Difusora Bíblica, 1999, p. 1310.

⁷ See Geremek, Bronislaw, *A piedade e a força. História da Miséria e da Caridade na Europa*, Lisboa, Terramar, 1995, p. 49; Muir, Edward, *Ritual Modern Europe*, Cambridge, University Press, 1997, pp. 6-7.

⁸ *Bíblia Sagrada...*, p. 1285.

Earth; for the poor, it meant survival, and it materialized a relationship of subjugation and humility before the benefactors.

Though charity should be practiced only in the hope of a spiritual reward, the rich used it to reinforce their social and political status⁹ by obtaining earthly dividends.

The Misericórdias regularly gave the poor a single alm, in particular to pilgrims, the sick (who were cured at home or were on their way to other countries), prisoners, and captives. The Misericórdias referred to a “list of poor”¹⁰ who regularly benefited (twice a week). However, they chose certain times of the year to give alms to the poor in a gesture of great magnanimity and surrender. They also distributed some alms all year round, which included the offering of clothes.

“The list of those who received the alms at the door”

By means of the alms they distributed, the Misericórdias provided for a large number of people in need, although we know that many remained off the lists and that only a fraction of those who begged for an alm were given it. The institutions of charity could not help all those who asked for an alm. Their resources were limited, so they had to select the poor on established criteria. We are aware of the impossibility of knowing the universe of poverty¹¹, although it is clear that the number of poor people was a varying one, depending on the economic climate.

The “list of those who received the alms at the door” included the “poor of the House”, that is, those elected to receive a regular alm. This condition permitted them to receive some of the remaining alms of the brotherhood, since their poverty had been tested, and they had been shown to be deserving, as is shown in the work we are doing on the poor people and the alms of the Misericórdia of Ponte de Lima.

It was the uncertainty of their lives that dictated the admission to the list, confirmed by a decent life, according to the moral rules of that time.

The alms that were distributed varied among the Misericórdias. On the list of recipients of the Misericórdia of Vila Viçosa there were some who received a daily alm, which consisted of bread and meat. Others received an alm twice a week, as was the case with prisoners and other poor people, who also received bread and meat or bread and money. Still others received a monthly alm which consisted of money and wheat. The Misericórdia distinguished recipients, adjusting the alm to each one. It should be mentioned that the majority of those who benefited were women and included a large number of ashamed poor people and patients¹².

⁹ See Van Leewen, Marco H. D., “Logic of charity: poor relief in Preindustrial Europe”, in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, n° 24, 4, 1994, pp. 589-613.

¹⁰ The expression is used to refer to the poor people who were regularly provided with alms normally on Sunday and Wednesday. The expression “list on the door” or “the poor of the House” could also be used.

¹¹ About the impossibility of knowing the total number of the poor, see Sá, Isabel dos Guimarães, “Pobreza”, in Azevedo, Carlos Moreira (dir.), *História Religiosa de Portugal*, vol. 2, Lisboa, Círculo de Leitores, 2001, p. 456; Woolf, Stuart, *Los pobres en la Europa Moderna*. Barcelona, Editorial Crítica, 1989, pp. 15-16.

¹² For the study of the “list of the poor” of Vila Viçosa see Araújo, Maria Marta Lobo de, *Dar aos pobres e emprestar a Deus: as Misericórdias de Vila Viçosa e Ponte de Lima (XVI- XVIII centuries)*, Barcelos,

Most of the daily alms were directed to patients who were being treated in their homes. The Misericórdia always took care of a larger number of patients in their own homes. This was due to the fact that women refused to go to a public space, which the hospital was. They preferred to be treated at home and recover there. The Santa Casa sent them the doctor, the surgeon or those who bleed and also offered them the products from the chemist's so that they might be cured. In addition to this help, some patients also received a daily alm which consisted of meat and bread, thus making it possible for them to recover faster.

Though the hospital helped the local poor, it treated mainly people from the outskirts: men who were working in Alentejo for long terms and were unrooted and without a family. From 1660 onwards the hospital began curing soldiers by means of an agreement signed with the crown for that purpose.

It should be said that the Misericórdias were the main administrators of hospitals in Portugal, having become the primary institutions in charge of health care. This was the result of the incorporation of several local medieval hospitals, which were under the administration of the Council, and other recently built hospitals. This movement of incorporations (which began in Portugal mainly during the XVI and XVII centuries) put the leproseries under the administration of the Misericórdias, many of them disactivated or with a short number of patients, and now with different functions. They had been adapted to hospitals for syphilitics, and the hospitals for pilgrims were transformed into hospitals for old people.

The calendars of the distribution of alms might present some adjustments, but, as a rule, they had to assure the support of those who were on the list to receive help, allowing regular assistance during a more arduous period.

The distribution of alms on Wednesdays and on Sundays fell upon the same days as the *cabidos* of the *Mesa*¹³, a fact that ritualized the distribution and reinforced the importance of these meetings, associating them with the exercise of charity. Nothing could be more attractive to an institution of charity than the delivery of alms to an extended number of poor at the moment of the meetings of the *mesários*. This regular distribution of alms gave much prestige, exhibiting a large number of poor under their power.

In the Misericórdia of Ponte de Lima, the poor people on the "list of those who received the alms at the door" had access to the other alms of the brotherhood; for example, on the Holy Souls in Purgatory's Day. Also, they received clothes and cereals in May. The greatest difficulty was gaining inclusion on this list. Afterwards, their need having been confirmed, the doors to the other alms of the brotherhood were open. Belonging to this list was so important that it was used as a reason to justify the attribution of other alms and supported the presence of many of these poor in the other alms. The alm consisted of bread and money, or simply of bread or only money; many benefited.

Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Vila Viçosa / Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Ponte de Lima, 2000, pp. 231-233.

¹³ A meeting held by the *Mesa* (Members of the brotherhood) on Sundays and Wednesdays. The alm was distributed after the meeting.

Besides the elderly, widowers, paralytics, fools and the solitary, the list included many small children and patients. Many children were orphans, others illegitimate and exposed, and others were the daughters of poor parents who needed money to rear them.

The children normally received an alm of bread; sometimes a coin was added to it. The alm was never given directly to the children. Though it was intended for them, it was offered to the person who was responsible for their upbringing. From the end of the XVII century onwards, the Misericórdia of Ponte de Lima frequently had the list renewed, revealing the pressure of the poor on the institution. As a consequence, the poor received support for shorter periods, and simultaneously it made the alms available to a larger number of needy people.

The presence of patients on this list was not very significant, because the Santa Casa did not include those who continued to be helped by the brotherhood after having left the hospital. As the hospital of the Misericórdia was permanently overcrowded, the option was to send the patients home as soon as they showed any signs of recovery, giving them alms in cash when they left the institution.

Afterwards, at home, the patients received visits from the fellow members for three weeks, and they were given 50 *réis* (Portuguese currency at that time) every visit. The Santa Casa was concerned about the recovery of these poor people and continued to give them support for a month after leaving the hospital.

Despite being a regular procedure, some of the patients were included on the lists of those who had been provided for, showing that the patient continued to receive an alm while ill. When the poor were being helped by the brotherhood and became ill, they emphasized their illness in order to obtain a higher alm. The Santa Casa normally agreed with these petitions, declaring that the rise of the alm would be kept while the patient “lay in bed” because, as soon as he recovered, the alms would return to the previous amount.

The Misericórdia of Viana do Lima also worked with a list of poor people, giving them alms on Sundays and on Wednesdays. The gift consisted of loaves of bread and money. When there was not enough bread, the brotherhood paid the alm only in money. In 1670 “as there was no bread” the poor took an alm which consisted only of money.¹⁴

Normally the alm offered to each poor person was between 20 and 30 *réis* and a loaf of bread to each poor person. However, there were some beneficiaries who received a higher alm in money¹⁵. Like the Misericórdia of Ponte de Lima, the majority of beneficiaries in the Misericórdia of Viana were women. However, there was a considerable difference as far as the residence in these two Misericórdias is concerned. In Ponte de Lima, the brotherhood supplied people of the whole municipality, despite showing a clear preference to the poor from the small town and from the surrounding villages. In contrast, in Viana the beneficiaries of the “list of the House” were all from the small town, as was the case in the Misericórdia of Vila Viçosa. The Santa Casa of Viana do Lima registered the street they belonged to, making it possible to analyse the foci of poverty in the small town as well as the help given to them.

The Misericórdia of Arraiolos organized a weekly list of poor people that it supported, and included it in the journal of receipts and expenditure. It distributed bread,

¹⁴ During this year the Santa Casa – Holy House - spent 260 *réis* monthly just to cover the offer of bread. See Archives of Santa Casa da Misericórdia of Viana do Castelo (henceforth, ASCMVC), *Livro de receita e despesa 1670-71*, fl. 86.

¹⁵ We do not know the number of youth who benefited.

lamb, and some money, distinguishing the poor with different alms¹⁶. In 1694, with a shortage of means to continue supporting the poor on the list, the Santa Casa cancelled this alm. As a result, it received an important contribution that year from D. Friar Luís da Silva, archbishop of Évora, to continue supporting that expenditure. The Misericórdia had interrupted this support, due to its involvement in prosecutions and due to a debt of 200 thousand *réis* to Diego Nunes Tagano, who lived in Portel, according to some chapels that had been instituted in this brotherhood. With the help of this clergyman, the alms were resumed, a fact which greatly pleased the brotherhood. The inability to offer them was a public admission of their financial situation and the consequent loss of prestige, which profoundly displeased the institution.

Easter

From early on, the Misericórdias joined the promotion of spirituality with the celebration of Christ's Passion. They developed important processional manifestations, which included the practice of flagellation as a form of penance¹⁷ and promoted actions of charity during the Passion Week. Among the several processional manifestations promoted by the Misericórdias in this period, we would like to point out the procession on Good Thursday, which was transformed into a "truly great public religious march of the Misericórdias"¹⁸.

Many Misericórdias granted the prisoners a more substantial dinner at this time, which was normally served on Good Thursday. They also received some poor people at their table, where after the ceremony of foot washing (the purveyor washed the feet of 12 poor people, imitating a Biblical ceremony), serving them dinner and distributing clothes and other alms. This practice was not restricted to the Misericórdias. The Church and private people also celebrated this same ritual, which allowed for the inversion of roles between the rich and the poor, even if for a short time¹⁹. The House of Bragança reproduced the ceremony of foot washing. The duke washed the feet of 12 poor people, served them a meal at his table, and offered them clothes²⁰.

In Vila Viçosa, the imprisoned were benefited with better dinners throughout the Passion Week, at the expense of the religious orders of the small town and of the Misericórdia itself²¹. Besides the dinner served to the prisoners on Good Thursday, the Misericórdia of Vila Viçosa chose the Passion Week to make a massive distribution of alms to the poor of the small town. In the hall of its home it provided several thousands

¹⁶ ASCMVC, *Livros de receita e despeza*.

¹⁷ Archive of the Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Arraiolos (henceforth ASCMA) *Livros de receita e despeza*.

¹⁸ About these manifestations of spirituality, see Sousa, Ivo Carneiro de, *Da descoberta da Misericórdia à fundação das Misericórdias (1498-1525)*, Porto, Granitos, Editores e Livreiros Lda, 1999, p. 155.

¹⁹ See Sousa, Ivo Carneiro de "Da Fundação e da Originalidade das Misericórdias Portuguesas (1498-1500)", in *Oceanos*, n° 35, 1998, p. 34.

²⁰ See Sá, Isabel dos Guimarães, *As Misericórdias Portuguesas de D. Manuel I a Pombal*, Lisboa, Livros Horizonte, 2001, pp. 92-93.

²¹ See Anica, Arnaldo Casimiro, *O hospital do Espírito Santo da Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Tavira: da fundação à actualidade. Notas*, Tavira (s.n.), 1983, p. 56.

of poor people with bread, fish and vegetables on Good Thursday, and on Easter Eve it sent them some meat. The alms on Saturday were for the circumspect and ashamed poor people of the small town, and for that reason, they were delivered at night²².

The massive distribution of alms to the poor at this time occurred in several Misericórdias.

The distribution of cereals

The distribution of nourishment to the poor or the direct gift in the Misericórdias, which were normally carried out in their halls, happened frequently. The justifications of merit varied, but they were often associated with illness, old age, the existence of small children to be brought up, a handicap, ashamed poverty, and imprisonment. Some particular situations could also be the justification for alms; the reasons were always known by the confrères. They obtained this information during their frequent visits to the houses, or through elderly people they inquired, in order to testify to their needs and evaluate the merit of the request. In the case of patients, the alm was cancelled as soon as the patient recovered.

Besides these alms, which mitigated the shortage of nourishment for the poor and contributed to the recovery from their diseases, the Misericórdias also had as a common practice the distribution of cereal: wheat, corn and/or rye were delivered at certain periods of the year. They could promote their delivery, fulfilling the will of the benefactors. The donation of cereals normally occurred at Christmas and/or Easter.

Besides these regular gifts, other occasional gifts could be given. The offer of cereals had no fixed calendar in any of the Misericórdias.

The Santa Casa of Ponte de Lima gave alms with cereals to a wider number of poor people in May.

At that time of the year when the new harvest was delayed, and the cereals normally became more expensive, the brotherhood distributed corn and rye to some poor people who, in their opinion, deserved this alm. Attributed in a moment when the price of the cereals generally increased, this alm gained a special significance and had as an aim to save some families from the world of misery and to ameliorate the difficulties of a hard life.

In the years when the harvest was very poor, the price of the cereals increased; many families had no other alternative but recourse to charity. To the poor, the rise in the price of the cereals was always a problem, since bread was their basic food, and the purchase took up most of their income.

To Aurélio de Oliveira the production of grain had already reached this state in the XVII century, but it became worse in the following century. It reached such a level of uncertainty that “it did not allow a normal subsistence for more than three or four

²² Araújo, Maria Marta Lobo de, “Festas e rituais de caridade nas Misericórdias”, in *Colóquio Internacional Piedade Popular Sociabilidades- Representações e Espiritualidade, Actas*, Lisboa, Centro de História da Cultura/Histórias das Ideias, Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas da Universidade Nova de Lisboa, 1999, p. 506.

months a year”²³. Consequently, the peasants also became day labourers or craftsmen to supplement their receipts and cover domestic expenditures. The farmers lived in a precarious balance and any demographic pressure caused a rise in the price of the cereals and put their survival in danger²⁴. Emigration and the abandonment of fields were ubiquitous. Also, increased begging and idle wandering resulted from the poor agrarian output and the consequent increase of the price of the cereals²⁵. In an economy dominated by the cereal and a state of permanent imbalance, a large proportion of the population lived threatened, in constant trouble and pauperism²⁶.

It became, therefore, urgent to help an impoverished population at a time of the year when the cereal prices reached inaccessible levels. Also, the alm made seeding possible: May was the time to seed the fields. So, having seeds provided hope for the reproduction of cereals, and it promoted self-sufficiency in the next year. Not having seeds and not being able to buy them implied a lack of food and dependence on family, friends and/or institutions of charity.

The activity of the Misericórdia of Ponte de Lima should be understood as a preventive measure; that, in a final analysis, was advantageous to it, too. That is, if the number of poor increased, more alms had to be distributed and if they could not fulfil them, as an institution of aid, the Santa Casa acted in order to minimize the effects of poverty, deciding for the support of some families and single people before they entered the world of misery. The distributed cereals were mainly corn, though some poor were given rye. Being the main crop in the region, corn was more abundant in the brotherhood, and it was also the cheapest cereal. The Misericórdia offered what it had received from rents, quit rents and the collections it made by São Miguel (Saint Michael)²⁷. The alm was offered in small quantities and was delivered to the “conjunctural poor”²⁸.

Besides the usual distribution, in 1674 and in 1680, this alm was augmented and the confrères had some *alqueires* of corn and rye cooked. They offered loaves of bread to some poor: “they had four and a half *alqueires* of corn and one of rye baked which were given to the people named below”²⁹. The list included 18 people in 1680 and some of them also received cereals, which meant, therefore, that some poor benefited twice that month, receiving bread to eat and seeds to plant.

²³ See Oliveira, Aurélio de, “Renda agrícola em Portugal durante o Antigo Regime (XVII-XVIII centuries). Alguns aspectos e problemas”, in *Revista de História Económica e Social*, nº 6, 1980, p. 20.

²⁴ See Lobo, Constantino Botelho de Lacerda, “Viagem sobre a Agricultura da Província do Minho feita no Anno de 1789”, in *O Investigador Portuguez*, vol. XIX, 1817, pp. 433-450.

²⁵ For Alentejo, see Justino, José David Gomes, “Crises e decadência da economia cerealífera alentejana no século XVIII”, in *Revista de História Económica e Social*, nº7, 1981, pp. 29-80.

²⁶ See Lis, Catharina; Soly, Hugo, *Pobreza y capitalismo en la Europa preindustrial (1350-1850)*, Madrid, Akal Universitária, 1985, p. 162.

²⁷ In Setembro the Misericórdia of Ponte de Lima organized a collection in several parishes which formed several municipalities.

²⁸ See Geremek, Bronislaw, *A piedade e a força...*, pp. 122-125.

²⁹ ASCMPL, *Livro de receita e despeza de 1680-81*, nº478, not paginated.

The celebration of the Saints

The Commemoration of the dead takes place on two consecutive days in November (first, All Saints' Day and second, All Souls' Day) and constitutes a moment of charity towards the deceased.

The belief in the existence of Purgatory and the certainty of their own eventual death united the living and the dead around salvation. After dying, people were subjected to two Judgments: one soon after their death and the other at the Last Judgment. Waiting for Resurrection, the deceased received help from the living so as to obtain forgiveness of their sins and purification of their souls. Only then could they enter Paradise. It was necessary to have pity on the souls that were suffering in Purgatory, and the Church supported this idea scrupulously. A chain of solidarity between the living and the dead was established, the clergymen being the intermediaries. The analysis of the wills shows this preoccupation. When death seemed to be near, efforts were made to face and prepare for eternal life. The intercession of all was requested, in particular of the most awaited people: the Holy Virgin and the Guardian Angel. These were considered the most powerful before the Creator.

Between the first and the second judgment people remained in Purgatory³⁰. The help of the living, which was fundamental to leave this life and obtain eternal happiness, could be obtained by means of very distinct practices: celebration of masses, prayers, responses, donation of alms in favour of the souls of the deceased, offers of sacrifices and more actions towards fellow men³¹. This is why private people and institutions made offers to the poor on this day, giving them to the souls in Purgatory.

In all the parishes, brotherhoods and convents, the festivity of the Saints was celebrated with particular intensity. The Misericórdia of Ponte de Lima changed it into a festivity of charity towards the deceased. Beyond accomplishing religious celebrations, it also established as a priority the donation of alms to those who needed them most, offering them in the name of the souls they were praying for³². Some Misericórdias made a distribution of alms to the poor on this day, and this help was part of the festivity that celebrated the deceased.

Recall that the Santa Casa of Ponte de Lima provided a dinner for the prisoners on Good Thursday. This was repeated on All Souls' Day. This was only part of the alms it distributed, because most of them were given to other poor people. We do not know the beginning of this tendency; we only know about it from 1633 onwards, through the journals of receipt and expenditure, where we can find an annual list of those who received alms on All Souls' Day. We know that it continued until 1740.

³⁰ On this topic, see information in Abreu, Laurinda Faria dos Santos, *Memórias da alma e do corpo. A Misericórdia de Setúbal na Modernidade*, Viseu, Palimage Editores, 1999, pp. 99-105.

³¹ For the study of the contribution of the beneficiary actions of the soul, see Vovelle, Michel, *Les âmes du purgatoire ou le travail du deuil*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, pp. 82-115.

³² See Depauw, Jacques, *Spiritualité et pauvreté à Paris au XVII^e siècle*, Paris, Histoire Éditions, 1999, pp. 83-84.

These offers delivered to the poor at home were intended for a wider group of people in need: many of them were ill or recovering; others had small children to bring up; some were old; still others were disabled and unable to provide for their survival.

Some of the poor described their clinical situation by giving details about their diseases in order to justify their incapacity to work and receive the alm. They were normally elderly and lonely people, cases in which the illness was associated to their weak condition. The alm was extended to the “old women of the hospital in the outskirts”, the ancient hospital of the pilgrims, and which since the XVII century had changed into a hospital for the elderly, where they remained until they died.

In some cases it was also noted that the alm was intended for the poor parturients, people with economic difficulties and health problems. Many women who were helped passed away in these circumstances.

Others who received benefits were soldiers, patients who had fought in the War of Restoration (1640-1668) and who, after the battles, remained there to be helped, either because they were mutilated or suffered some consequence of the conflict that rendered them unfit for work.

When those who worked for the Santa Casa were ill, they were always provided for with the alms that were distributed to the poor. We refer not only to the hospitallers, because they were in direct contact with the interneers of the Santa Casa and who frequently caught diseases, as a result. In these cases, the brotherhood ordered them to be given more substantial daily rations of food. We have mentioned the others who worked for the Misericórdias and to whom the brotherhood gave benefits on these occasions because they were ill.

When the disease contaminated the whole family, the alm was extended in order to help all family members. In 1667, Martinho Gonçalves, a currier, was provided with mutton and bread for being ill together with his wife and children.

The alms consisted of bread, meat (beef, mutton and/or chicken) and/or fish (whiting and sardines). Some of those in need received eggs and wine, too, but very few people received these alms. At the beginning, some poor people were helped with money, though it was reserved just for a few, that is, to the “poor of the House”. However, still in the XVII century, the poor were largely favoured with alms in money, especially after the brotherhood received more gifts by will and was endowed with more significant receipts. The receipts and the amount depended on the financial situation of the brotherhood and its form of management. When the receipts made it possible, and there were no other priorities, a more generous alm was offered to a larger number of people in need. If not, the number of recipients was reduced and the alm was smaller.

The poor who were on the list were “visited” by the confrères in their homes, but the institution distributed more alms in the “hall of the House”, a place where other poor people gathered, who were also provided with alms. The significance of the distribution in the hall of the House distinguished it from the other alms. While the former were protected from the other people’s observation, since the alms were sent home, the poverty of the latter was publically exposed. The alm was given in plain view. The Misericórdia was and still is located in the centre of the small town opposite the square of the Mother Church and one of the main streets. Everything that took place in the hall could be observed by the pedestrians or by anyone else who was willing to see the act of delivering the alms. It was enough to look.

The number of people provided with alms in the hall varied every year. It was an alm offered in addition to those distributed to the members of the “list of Holy Souls in the Purgatory”. The extra-list poor gathered at the brotherhood and waited for the brothers to come down the Consistory to offer them the alm. They went along the “balcony of the alms”, went down the staircase made of stone, and they entered the “hall of the House”. The trip was short. Interestingly, the gifts were offered near the churchyard of the poor. Those who had been buried under “God’s love” had their tomb in the hall, the place where the poor gathered. Therefore, these alms delivered in the hall established a direct relation between the deceased and the charity that was practiced in their honour, a conjoined act of imploration between the living and the deceased. The poor were in between, waiting for their imploration for the souls of the deceased.

On All Saints’ Day the brothers had as a statutory obligation to meet in the brotherhood in order to personally and charitably collect the bones from the gallows and bury them in a Christian fashion³³. The action of the Misericórdias went beyond this. These brotherhoods offered a linen *saió* (a large, wide coat without buttons) to the convicted and accompanied him to the gibbet, offering the services of their chaplain to help them die³⁴.

The offering of clothes

The gift of clothes to the poor in the Misericórdias was an alm with no calendar, though in some of these brotherhoods it might fall on Christmas or Easter, or during some religious festivity. It could also be associated with other annual festivities, as was the case on Santa Isabel’s day³⁵.

However, the clothes were usually offered whenever they were requested.

The clothes were a blessing which the poor tried to obtain in order to cover their body or to achieve a more refined social representation. Ragged and tattered clothes denounced them and gave them a degrading image³⁶. The poor were immediately identified by the clothes they wore. The question of appearance was so important that assisting them in improving their appearance by means of alms might be understood as a preventive measure against misery.³⁷

Depending on status, clothing obtained different meanings to the poor: to some, it was to protect the body from the cold and to cover the skin; to the ashamed poor, the

³³ About the burying of the bones, see Calongue, Garcia, Francisco Ángel, “Reos de muerte y caridade cristiana”, in *Hispania Sacra*, Año 52, Enero-Junio, 2000, pp. 177-182; Araújo, Ana Cristina, “Cerimónias de execução pública no Antigo Regime-escatologia e justiça”, in *Revista da Sociedade e Cultura*, 1, 2001, pp. 182-187.

³⁴ Correia, Fernando da Silva, “A Misericórdia de Lisboa”, in *A Medicina Contemporânea*, nºs 19 a 21, Ano LX, 1942, p. 35; Weissman, Ronald F. E., *Ritual Brotherhood in Renaissance Florence*, Nova Iorque, 1982, pp. 85, 96.

³⁵ The House of Bragança practiced this act of charity by delivering much clothing which was distributed to the poor of Vila Viçosa at Easter and on Santa Isabel’s Day.

³⁶ Romon, C., “Les pauvres à Paris au XVIIIe siècle”, in *Annales Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 37^o année, nº4, Juillet- Août, 1982, p. 750.

³⁷ See Le Gall, Jean - Marie, “La charité royale au bébit du XVIe siècle”, in *Nouvelle revue du XVIe siècle*, 13/1, 1995, p. 63.

clothes meant social representation. Clothes were the evidence of poverty or wealth, and dressing poorly was a sign of social decay, of impoverishment, and of financial troubles. It was, thus, necessary to appeal to charity to hide poverty and continue disguising degeneration.

The existing duality between the so-called poor and the ashamed ones was evident in the petitions they addressed to the institutions where they asked for clothes. In addition to mentioning their lack of clothes and their rags, the poor noted situations of illness, incapacity to work due to their age and large families, normally with children. They frequently invoked situations of deficiency, associated with blindness and other weaknesses which made them more vulnerable and incapable to support themselves.

The ashamed poor made considerations of different kinds. They said they lived poorly; they needed clothes to go to church and declared being ashamed of their old and degrading clothes. Though both asked for clothes, their objectives differed. For the former, it was an urgent need, while for the latter it was a matter of decency, of social representation, and maintenance of dignity, issues that were far from the concerns of the other poor. The quality of the clothes they were offered derived from the difference of social positions. The poor were offered old and new clothes, normally ready-made, while the ashamed poor were given some ells³⁸ or wrapped³⁹ cloth, giving them the possibility to make the clothing according to their taste, and also giving them the necessary additions for any garment or even money for manufacture.

When demands for clothes were accepted, the Misericórdias respected the wishes of the poor, and they were provided with the necessary objects or cloth so that they could have the clothing made. The Santas Casas operated in different ways. They could offer ready-made pieces or give the cloth to have them made⁴⁰. The Santa Casa of Ponte de Lima adapted its activity to the poor in question⁴¹. Normally they delivered the previously made pieces to the poor, or they simply sent them wrapped cloth of *burel* (coarse woollen cloth). The ashamed poor were given the cloth for whatever purpose. Also, they were provided with an alm to pay for the making of clothes or any other necessary garment.

The Santa Casa of Ponte de Lima sent coarse blankets to the prisoners to wear in jail, but it established the condition of having the clothing returned when the prisoners left jail. As they were poor and supported by the brotherhood, the Santa Casa acted in a way so as to avoid criticism of its activity and to maintain its prestige. That is why it had prisoners dressed when they moved to other prisons.

But the coarse blankets could also be given to poor people who used them to beg. In these cases, these pieces might have a double use: during the day they were used to warm the body; also, they were put over the back to hide rags; and during the night they were placed on the bed. The same use could be given to the wrapped cloth of *burel* offered to some people in need. The Santa Casa also offered wrapped cloth of *burel* to the poor who could use them in bed or in the making of pieces of clothing. The coarse

³⁸ A *côvado* was an ancient unit of measurement of length, equivalent to 0,66 metres.

³⁹ A *rodo* is a quantity of wrapped cloth.

⁴⁰ The Misericórdia of Arraiolos, like other similar institutions, had two ways of acting, according to its financial situation. See ASCMA, *Livro de receita e despesa 1695*, fls. 42-43.

⁴¹ The same happened in the Misericórdia of Coimbra. See Lopes, Maria Antónia, *Pobreza, Assistência e Controlo Social. Coimbra (1750-1850)*, Viseu, Palimage Editores, 2000, pp. 235-240.

blankets were asked for by those who were ill or receiving treatment in their own houses. Letting the poor determine what was more convenient relieved the brotherhood of expenditure and conferred to the poor some power of decision over the alms.

In the Misericórdia de Ponte do Lima the offering of clothes to the poor happened all year round and achieved great importance on account of the quantity of the clothing annually offered. The Santa Casa disposed of few pieces left by those who had died at the hospital, because they were claimed by their relatives. For this reason, the Santa Casa spent much money obtaining clothes to give to the poor. The clothes offered in Ponte de Lima were mainly pieces of clothing to wear. It was rare to offer bed clothes, and that offer was only made to the ashamed poor. There were people who were ill and asked for bed clothes and straw-mattresses in order to have a proper appearance while they were ill.

The brotherhood often sent sheets, shirts and mattresses to those poor people. The institution also offered clothes to the patients with contagious diseases.

The Misericórdia sent pieces of clothing (shorts, shirts and coats) to boys who were recovering from scurvy, and shoes to those infected with syphilis, either recovering at home or at the hospital of São Marcos in Braga. The Santa Casa of Ponte de Lima sent these patients to Braga because here there was a specific treatment for this illness.

The brotherhood did not always mention the kind of cloth used in the pieces it offered, but when it did, it made it possible for us to know the kind of cloth the poor wore. The most common cloth was the *burel* followed by *saragoça* (a brown woollen cloth), the coarse tow and the baize. Vary rarely did it buy linen and cotton. These two kinds of cloth and the bombazine were used in pieces offered to the ashamed or to the servants of the House, but they have never been used in the clothes given to the other poor. The Santa Casa saved as much money as it could in this act of charity and bought rough cloth to dress the poor, sometimes inadequately. Feeble and unprotecting cloth gave the poor a reason to say that they died of cold in winter, so they asked to be better protected.

Deprived of ornaments and relatively formless, the clothes offered by the Misericórdia of Ponte de Lima were of soft and pale colours. This colourless chromic palette is meaningful and has a parallel in the pale colours and in the black shades studied by Margarida Durães and used by the farmers from Minho in the XVIII and XIX centuries⁴². Poverty was associated to modesty and a quiet life that was also expressed by the behaviour and the way one dressed. According to Michel Pastoureau, The Catholic Reformation favoured the return to a stricter and darker clothing, leaving behind the more richly patterned and attractive material⁴³. The clothes should show the sobriety of those who wore them, always accompanied by a touch of discreetness. That is why in the clothing provided for by the Santa Casa of Ponte de Lima very few colourful pieces were registered; perhaps they were offered second hand.

The distribution of clothes in the Misericórdia of Vila Viçosa did not have the importance of the one in Ponte de Lima. The clothes offered by that brotherhood came mainly from the poor who died at the hospital. However, the Santa Casa did not give

⁴² For the study of the colours worn by the peasants from Braga, see Durães, Margarida Pereira Varela, *Herança e Sucessão. Leis, Práticas e Costumes no Termo de Braga (séculos XVIII-XIX)*, vol. I, Braga, 2001, p. 222, copied doctoral dissertation.

⁴³ On this subject, see Pastoureau, Michel, *O tecido do diabo, uma história das riscas e dos tecidos listrados*, Lisboa, Editorial Estampa, 1996, pp. 55-56.

them this use. The ones that were considered more valuable were sold, together with the other belongings of the deceased, to the benefit of the brotherhood; the profits were used to pay for the costs of the treatment. Clothing was also recycled for the needs of the House; for example, to dress the orphan boys⁴⁴ or to give to the workers of the brotherhood.

When the goods of the deceased were not claimed by the family, and the owner was not determined, the most common convention was for the Misericórdias to take possession of those belongings. They then used them in whatever way they found most convenient. This was in fact the rule. The hospitals were the legal owners of those belongings, provided that there was no will that was opposed to it⁴⁵. Many Misericórdias followed this convention.

Not all the Misericórdias had clothing left by the poor in the hospitals in sufficient quantities to respond to the solicitations which were addressed to them. They were, thus, forced to buy cloth to meet the needs in this area. In Ponte de Lima it was the solicitor that had to go to Braga to make the purchase.

In spite of having amassed inherited property, the Misericórdias did not always have the quantity to satisfy the number of requests.

Through the ritualized alms, frequently (but not always) associated with the liturgical calendar, the practice of acts of charity of the Misericórdias contributed to relieve the daily suffering of the poor population. Relieved with these alms, the poor found support for their weaknesses in the Misericórdias, who, despite limiting the recipients of charity, were the principal promoters of charity in Portugal.

⁴⁴ The Santa Casa of Vila Viçosa ran a school of orphan children, founded by the House of Bragança.

⁴⁵ On the subject, read Carvalho, Augusto J. da Silva, *Crónica do Hospital de Todos-os-Santos*, Lisboa, s.n. 1949, p. 246.