
Fall 1991

"Caritas Christi Urget Nos": The Urgent Challenges of Charity in Seventeenth Century France

Edward R. Udovic C.M., Ph.D.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj>

Recommended Citation

Udovic, Edward R. C.M., Ph.D. (1991) ""Caritas Christi Urget Nos": The Urgent Challenges of Charity in Seventeenth Century France," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol12/iss2/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

“Caritas Christi Urget Nos”: The Urgent Challenges of Charity in Seventeenth Century France

BY
EDWARD R. UDOVIC, C.M.

A Declaration of War

On 27 April 1656 the French state issued yet another declaration of war and yet another urgent call to arms. In a country that was already horribly scarred by almost a century of continual warfare this newly declared war was not to be fought against Hapsburg Spain over the balance of European power.¹ This new war was not to be yet another bloody religious war between French Catholics and French Protestants.² Nor was this new war to be another civil war between the king, the nobility, and the parlement, as the disastrous Fronde had been just a few years earlier.³ In fact this new war was not, strictly speaking, even a new war, but rather it was to be a new phase of an old struggle. This war which the abolitionist French state embarked upon with such a sense of urgency and such a sense of mission was a war which would be fought against an enemy within the borders of France itself, it was a war that was declared against the poor of France.

This declaration of war, which was issued in the form of a royal decree read in part:

We expressly prohibit and forbid all persons of either sex, of any locality and of any age, of whatever breeding and birth, and in whatever conditions they may be, able-bodied or invalid, sick or convalescent,

¹This war had already begun in 1635 and would continue until the Peace of the Pyrenees was finally signed in 1659.

²Religious civil war had consumed France from 1562 to the Edict of Nantes in 1598. This warfare had broken out again in 1625, and ended with the definitive Protestant defeat at the siege of La Rochelle in October 1628.

³The various phases of the Fronde lasted from 1648 to 1653.

curable or incurable, to beg in the city and suburbs of Paris, neither in the churches, nor at the doors of such, nor at the doors of houses nor in the streets, nor anywhere else in public, nor in secret, by day or night ... under pain of being whipped for the first offense, and for the second condemned to the galleys if men and boys, banished if women or girls.⁴

This new phase of the long war that was waged by the French state against the most impoverished, powerless, marginalized, and abandoned of its own subjects could aptly be described as the “War of the Great Confinement.”

The “War of the Great Confinement”

The royal prohibition against all forms of public begging by the countless numbers of the destitute poor of the city of Paris was accompanied by a strict prohibition against all private almsgiving to these beggars. These measures against both begging and private almsgiving were designed to facilitate the creation of what can only be described as a system of “apartheid”⁵ which legislated the forced and punitive institutionalization, or confinement, of the poor in a series of specialized institutions of state control, charity, and profit, which came to be known as the General Hospital of Paris.⁶

On 14 May 1657 the militia in Paris, who were popularly called the “archers of the poor”⁷, began to hunt down the remaining beggars who had not been able to hide or flee from the city, and to herd them forcibly into the various institutions of the General Hospital. Within a few years more than five thousand poverty-stricken men, women and children had been forcibly institutionalized and deprived of their freedom in the city under the terms of the Great Confinement.⁸

In 1662, Louis XIV would further legislate the widespread establishment of these institutions and the use of these same police tactics throughout the kingdom.⁹ For the remainder of his long reign, which

⁴Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, (New York: 1954), 48-49.

⁵Paul Christophe, *Les Pauvres et le pauprété, 11ème partie, du XVIe siècle à nos jours*, (Paris: 1987), 51.

⁶The General Hospital of Paris eventually grew into a series of loosely related institutions including La Salpêtrière and La Pitié which housed women and small children. La Savonnerie which housed little boys and Bicêtre which housed adult men, as well as Scipion which housed pregnant women and nursing mothers.

⁷Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 45.

⁸Foucault, *Madness*, 49.

⁹Léon, Lallemand, *Histoire de la Charité*, 4 vols. (Paris: 1910), 4:262.

lasted until 1715, the king would again and again urge the establishment of these institutions in every part of France so that, in theory, there would be no escape for the poor from the coercive power of the state anywhere in the kingdom.¹⁰

What could possibly explain this extraordinary declaration of war and this new policy of apartheid which was legislated and enforced by the full, if unevenly applied, weight of the nascent French absolutist state against the poor, who were its seemingly most defenseless and seemingly most powerless subjects? These actions can only be explained in light of the predominant contemporary attitude of the French state towards the poor and its understanding of the nature, causes, function, and impact, of their poverty.

The Eminent Dignity of the Poor in the Church vs. the Imminent Threat of the Poor to the State

French society in the seventeenth century was haunted by the inescapable reality of the poverty and the desperate daily struggle for survival of the incalculable numbers of the poor whose presence and whose suffering were on a scale so unprecedented as to be truly harrowing to the poor themselves and all but incomprehensible to the society in which they lived.¹¹

The poor could not be escaped nor could the poor be ignored because they were everywhere one turned and everywhere one went. Whether in the streets of the city or in the fields of the countryside, one could not escape seeing their hungry and pained faces and their pitiful, ragged, dirty appearance. One also could not escape hearing their insistent and unending pleas for bread, for alms, for medicine, for work, or for shelter, just as there was little that one could do to escape the poor, there was little that could be done, or that was being effectively done to help the great masses of the poor.

The traditional ecclesiastical sources of institutionalized, parish, and personal charity were overwhelmed, disorganized, inadequate, and ineffective in dealing with the new tidal wave of poverty which was then inundating France. The poor and their poverty were a tremendous challenge which urgently demanded a response, and which soon received one, both from the Church and from the state.

¹⁰For example in 1676 Louis XIV sent a circular letter to all the bishops and intendants of justice in the kingdom once again urging the foundation of local General Hospitals in their jurisdictions.

¹¹Pierre Gutton, *La Société et les pauvres en Europe (XVIe-XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris: 1974), 12.

In 1659, at the beginning of the age of the Great Confinement, a young disciple of Vincent de Paul,¹² and one of the foremost preachers in the history of the Church in France, Jacques Benigne Bossuet, who would later become the bishop of Meaux, preached a powerful sermon on which was entitled; "On The Eminent Dignity of the Poor in the Church."¹³ This famous sermon, which was firmly rooted in the Church's ancient tradition of a Christ-like love and service of the poor, also reflected the influence of the contemporary 'Vincentian' charism of evangelistic charity which was then dynamically renewing this tradition in France, due in large part to the activities of Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, and their followers.

Just as the theme of Bossuet's sermon expressed the predominant view of the Church towards the poor in the seventeenth century it would also be accurate simply to paraphrase its title to capture the predominant attitude of the French state towards the poor in this era, a paraphrase which would read in this way: "On The Imminent Threat of the Poor to the State."

The "Imminent Threat" of the Poor to the State revealed as the "Eminent Fear" of the poor by the State

To the developing absolutist French state the desperate plight of such vast numbers of the poor, their marginalization within the society and economy, and the experience of the crime, violence, and social unrest, which surrounded their poverty were all seen as a "constant menace"¹⁴ to the peace, security, prosperity, and future of the nation, which they undoubtedly were.¹⁵ However, because it was the poor themselves who were perceived as being a threat, it was thus the poor who were thought to represent a power that was to be feared, and because the poor were feared by the state they then became, by definition, an enemy of the absolutist state.

The poor, like all other enemies of the state, were to be fought at all costs: controlled, terrorized, exploited, defeated, and punished. Thus it was that, instead of declaring war on the endemic poverty which its

¹²For more information on the relationship between Vincent de Paul and Bossuet see, Pierre Coste, C.M., *The Life and Works of Saint Vincent de Paul*. Trans. by Joseph Leonard, C.M. 3 vols. (Westminster, Maryland: 1952), 2:123, 124, 137-41; 3:402,406.

¹³Jacques Benigne Bossuet, "Sur la Eminente Dignité des pauvres dans l'église." *Oeuvres Completes*, 14 vols. (Paris: 1862), 8:186-192.

¹⁴Gutton, *Société*, 51.

¹⁵See also, Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French: Four Centuries of Popular Struggles*, (Harvard: 1986).

own economic, domestic, and foreign policies had consciously created and continued to sustain, the French state chose instead to declare and wage war upon the poor.¹⁶

The Transition from the Love of the Poor of the Age of Faith to the Disdain of the Poor of the Age of Reason

In the long centuries of the "Age of Faith" with its deep roots in a common scriptural and patristic christian heritage poverty had been seen as being a virtuous state of life, sanctified by the example of Jesus Christ himself, who in the unfathomable mystery of salvation, chose to be poor. Thus poverty was seen as a clear sign of divine election, and in the Church the poor were honored as "the poor of Jesus Christ."¹⁷

The rich for their part were salvifically obligated in charity to come to the aid of their poor neighbors, who were seen to be their privileged intercessors before the throne of God and thus the indispensable instruments of their own salvation from the temptations of their earthly riches and power.¹⁸ The poor themselves were, in turn, to find salvation by fully embracing their providential poverty in imitation of Jesus Christ, that is to say, with patience, humility, trust, and resignation.

The dawning Age of Reason gradually substituted a comprehensive new world view, a "new sensibility,"¹⁹ of absolutism, individualism, humanism, secularism, and capitalism, in the place of the traditional elements of the Christian world-view. The Age of Reason thus made "sense" of poverty, the poor, and charity, in ways that radically differed from, and which directly undermined and attacked, the world-view of the traditional Christian faith ethic.

In the Age of Reason poverty simply did not make "sense" as a grace, a blessing, or a sign of election but rather it made "sense" only as a burden, a curse, and a proof of personal moral failure and worthlessness. In the Age of Reason it did not make "sense" for the poor to be loved, honored, and served, but it did make "sense" that they be feared, disdained, and controlled. In the Age of Reason charity did not make "sense" as an obligation of Christian faith, love and respect, and so it was to become disfigured by its transformation into a "sensible" fiscal and political weapon of the state and the bourgeoisie that was used to

¹⁶Catharina Lis, *Poverty and Capitalism in Pre-Industrial Europe*, (Great Britain: 1979), 117.

¹⁷Gutton, *Société*, 93-97.

¹⁸Lachat, *Bossuet*, 8:191.

¹⁹Foucault, *Madness*, 45-46.

correct, pacify, control, exploit, and even punish the poor.

Such massive shifts in the consciousness and conscience of a civilization are accomplished only at a great cost over a long period of transition, and not without tension, conflict, and a great deal of contemporary confusion, ambiguity, and inconsistency. Seventeenth century Europe, and thus seventeenth century France, found itself caught up in the middle of just such a complex period of transition. The poor were also caught up in this complex period of transition, but they were caught up in it primarily as its helpless victims.

Throughout this period these European countries all continued to consider themselves to be “Christian” states that were governed by avowedly Christian principles of culture, religiosity, society and economy. Yet, imperceptibly at first, then increasingly, and finally undeniably, they began comprehensively to redefine themselves in ways that would eventually lead them to an explicit and complete rejection of the values of the Christian faith. The progressive rejection, marginalization, abandonment and punishment, of the poor by the state and society were in retrospect the logical first steps toward this eventual rejection of the Church and the heritage of the Christian faith which would emerge in the eighteenth century at the height of the Age of Reason and which still largely characterizes western civilization to this day.²⁰

The Absolutism of Poverty:

The Experiences of the Poor in Seventeenth Century France

In France the growing political absolutism of the power of the Bourbon monarchy, and the growing economic absolutism of the emerging bourgeoisie were both linked to a growing absolutism of another sort, the growth of the absolute power of poverty over the great majority of the people of France. The development of French political and economic absolutism directly resulted in the proportional growth of this absolutism of poverty, and the impoverishment of a nation. Thus to the three traditional causes of poverty — war, plague, and famine, all of which caused great havoc in seventeenth century France — there was added a fourth which caused the greatest havoc: state policy.

²⁰It must be noted that what was going on in France during this period with respect to the position of the poor within society was a European wide phenomenon. For example, the General Hospitals of France were matched by the poor houses of England. For more details on this movement in the other European countries see, Lallemand, *Charité*, Volume 4.

The World of the Poor: Unity in Diversity

Poverty in seventeenth century France was as diverse in its forms and in its causes as it was pervasive in its presence. Yet this great diversity of the forms, the types, and the experiences of poverty did not exclude an even greater unity,²¹ a solidarity among the poor themselves which joined together in a common world of suffering the varied experiences of human poverty that were shared by the foundlings, the beggars, the vagabonds, the homeless, the unemployed, the underemployed, the hungry, the sick, the dying, the galley slaves, the prostitutes, the widowed, the orphaned, the uneducated, the neglected elderly, and the victims of war, plague, and famine.

The apparent differences between the various classes of the poor and the various types and experiences of poverty was always therefore "one of degree and not one of nature."²² The poor together shared a common, precarious, threatening world of destitution, despair, and abandonment. For the state the only meaningful distinction between the poor were those who were under its control and therefore defined as the "deserving" poor, and those who were still beyond its control and who were therefore classified as the "undeserving" poor, or even more ominously, as the "dangerous" poor.²³

The Downward Spiral of Poverty: The Plight of the Rural Poor

The most pervasive poverty in France during this era was to be found in the countryside where well over 90 percent of the population still lived and eked out a precarious living. Almost all of the rural masses regularly lived in a state of "absolute impoverishment."²⁴ For although the French peasants had escaped from the personal bonds of feudal servitude these ancient restraints had only been exchanged for a new set of economic, political, and social restraints, which were in their own ways just as harsh and unyielding.

The crown, for its part, did all that it could to protect the peasant land holders from the threat of the encroaching power of the nobility, but this protection always had an ulterior and an eminently selfish motive. The landholdings of the peasants were protected only so that

²¹José María Ibáñez, "Las Obras de las Hijas de la Caridad en sus orígenes", *Vincentiana*, XXXIV, 170, 171, 172. 1990, 585.

²²Gutton, *Société*, 79.

²³*Ibid.*, 12.

they could be directly taxed by the crown as a source of wealth which did not depend on the control of the nobility and the parlements. With the church and an expanding nobility exempt from all taxation an unrelenting royal taxation proved to be one of the greatest factors in deepening the experience of rural poverty. The power of the absolutist Bourbon monarchy, both at home and abroad, was being built on the foundation of an ever increasing burden of expenditures which required an ever increasing burden of taxes which were levied directly, solely, and mercilessly, on the peasant classes.

Even in the best of times French agriculture, and thus the French peasant, was barely self-sufficient. After the "subtraction of the cost of seed, labor costs, royal taxation, ecclesiastical tithe, and seigneurial dues they retained an insufficient surplus to support a family even in the best of years."²⁵ Typically, then, "the life of this pitiful mass was hence a daily struggle for mere existence, a struggle whose outcome was always extremely uncertain."²⁶

In these times of crisis, caused by increased taxation, the failure of a crop for natural reasons, the destruction or the pillaging of a crop during wartime, or a period of economic recession, there immediately resulted an irresistible increase in the force of the downward spiral of rural poverty which quickly brought untold numbers of peasants and their families past the borders of their usual experience of subsistence poverty to deeper levels of poverty and even to the very edge of starvation and beyond, to their deaths. In France, the century after 1630 was "a scarcely uninterrupted series of subsistence crises."²⁷ It was not the best of times, it was rather, for the poor, very much the worst of times.

Forced to live in a state of constant alert and fighting against the force of a spiral downward through concentric circles of poverty that were caused by a stagnant agriculture, structural overpopulation, taxation, and a host of other factors totally beyond their control, in these times of crisis the class of independent peasant landholders found themselves forced downward into the deeper poverty of sharecropping, or even beyond.

²⁴Lis, *Capitalism*, 54.

²⁵Ibid., 58.

²⁶Ibid., 73.

²⁷Ibid., 102.

For the sharecroppers who inhabited the next lower level of rural poverty, the least crisis of any kind easily forced them downward into seasonal labor, while at the same time seasonal laborers found themselves forced downward into the core of poverty by being compelled to abandon the now hopeless poverty of the land, for an even more precarious wandering life of poverty and begging in the cities and towns. The dispossessed rural poor discovered, however, that the town was "not only a refuge for the poor, but that it too generated the poor."²⁸

The Cost of the Triumph of Commercial Capitalism: The Downward Spiral of Urban Poverty

The developing commercial capitalistic economic system of the day was inherently opportunistic and exploitative of its abundant supply of cheap labor. The new class of entrepreneurs specialized in a system which was "extremely mobile due to a minimal investment in durable means of production."²⁹ This system consistently emphasized quick short-term profits at the expense of long term investment and new technological development. When profits in a particular business or region declined, for whatever reason, the entrepreneurial class would simply, "withdraw their capital quickly and with little financial loss and transfer it to another business or region," with disastrous results for the impoverished classes of workers and the local economies that were left behind in ruins.³⁰

A major factor in the development of this type of capitalism in France was the consuming desire of the entrepreneurial class among the bourgeoisie to amass as large a fortune as possible, as easily and as quickly as possible, in order to enable them to buy their way into the ranks of the hereditary nobility. Another of the traditional short-term means for the monarchy to raise independently large amounts of money was to sell these noble titles and offices to the entrepreneurial class. This purchased noble status would then exempt the new nobles and their heirs from all taxation and enable them to live solely off of the incomes of their state offices, leaving behind the strong social stigma which was still automatically accorded to those who "lowered" themselves to work in the world of business, commerce, or manufacturing.³¹

²⁸Ibid., 63.

²⁹Ibid., 67.

³⁰Ibid., 68.

³¹For details of this situation see: Roland Mousnier, *The Institutions of France under the Absolute Monarchy 1598-1798* (Chicago: 1979), 115.

In the long run this aspect of the system also had the effect of increasing the “fiscal brutality”³² of the state towards the poor, since the share of the taxes that were forever lost by the elevation of wealthy members of the bourgeoisie to the nobility were made up for by passing them directly onto the already overburdened backs of the poor.

Under this economic system only the relatively small number of those entrepreneurs and master craftsmen who produced for a local market or the limited luxury market could maintain or advance their socio-economic position, and this as we have seen is what they did. Meanwhile, the masses of small craftsmen, journeymen, and apprentices as well as the workers in the four basic labor-intensive industries; textiles, construction, mining, and metallurgy found themselves caught up in the vortex of the downward spiral of poverty caused by the chronic unemployment, underemployment, personal debt, inflation, and recession, which characterized the economic cycles of this era of commercial capitalism.³³

More than half of those who lived in the towns were reduced to a proletarianized mass who owned little or nothing else but their labor, and whose labor itself was worth little or nothing. In the end then, for these classes of impoverished urban workers and their families, there was also no other alternative to a life of a daily dependence on some form of charity.

The Right of the Poor to Beg, The Right of the Poor to Charity

Traditional Christian theology had always ultimately accorded to the poor, in cases of true necessity, the carefully conditioned but undeniable right to beg for alms honorably and freely from the Church and from their neighbors.³⁴ Under these circumstances the rich and the Church were under an understood moral obligation to respond gladly, and to the best of their abilities, to these urgent requests for charity, since in coming from the poor these pleas for alms were considered as coming from the person of Jesus Christ himself.³⁵ It was this traditional theology which represented the last earthly hope of the poor, as they were forced into a life of begging. It was the expectation of this right and

³²Luigi Mezzadri, C.M., *Vincent de Paul*, (1581-1660), (Paris: 1985), 108.

³³Lis, *Capitalism*, 71.

³⁴Lallemand, *Charité*, 4:222.

³⁵Matthew 25:31-46.

this freedom that was to be attacked at its root by the policies of the Great Confinement.

The Polarization of the Rich and the Poor

The social, economic, and political evolution of early modern France in the seventeenth century was also characterized by a widening polarization between a very small minority who were growing richer and richer, and a very large majority who were growing poorer and poorer.³⁶ The speed of this polarization and the distance between the poor and the rich increased in an inverse proportion during this era. As the conditions of rural and urban poverty worsened and the poor were dragged under by the force of the downward spiral of poverty, the bourgeoisie by contrast were profiting from the very conditions which were impoverishing most of the rest of France and they were being thrust upward in a dizzying spiral of conspicuous wealth, privilege, and power.

Reaching the very bottom of the downward spiral of poverty, only one small step away from starvation, only one small step away from death, countless numbers of both the rural and urban poor, who had no other choice, left their homes in desperation and began a life of wandering and begging hoping to be able to find work somewhere, hoping to be able to find their next meal somewhere. For these poor the towns "were merely temporary stops in a long series of moves on a doubt-ridden and often fruitless search for the most elementary means of existence."³⁷

These swelling numbers of the most abandoned of the poor who were driven to a rootless, desperate life, filled the propertied classes, the nobility, and the state, with a personal sense of horror, dread, and fear. Anxiety over the asocial behavior and crime among the poor, joined with the fear of the poor as carriers of disease and plague, caused the rich to avoid contact with them, and in fact to flee from them. There was an increasing spatial segregation in the cities as either the rich moved away from the poor, or the poor were forced to live in ghettos away from the rich. In addition, the chronic malnutrition of the poor with its inevitable consequences on their physical and mental development served to heighten this sense of difference and thus distance between the poor and the rich.

³⁶Lis, *Capitalism*, 71.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 79.

This increasing gap between the rich and the poor could not help but hasten the breakdown of the faith ideal of Christian solidarity and community in French society. This distance weakened, and all but destroyed, the common links of both faith and humanity between the poor and the rich. The poor were literally no longer the neighbors of the rich. For the rich, the propertied, the nobility, and ultimately the state the tendency was simply for the poor to be recognized no longer as being brothers and sisters in Christ. The question became not what could be done, what should be done, what had to be done out of love and respect "for" the poor and their needs, but rather what could be done, what should be done, what had to be done, out of fear and disdain, "about" the poor.

What to do 'about' the Poor?

As the seventeenth century progressed there was little or no doubt in the mind of the French state and propertied classes about what needed to be done "about" the poor: the poor needed to be strictly isolated and controlled. The goal of this control was to keep the poor immobilized at all costs, to keep them from wandering, to keep them from begging, and most of all to keep them from joining forces to become a serious threat to the vested interests of the established socio-economic-political order.

At first it was thought that simple, but draconian, tactics of police repression, martial law, summary justice, and exemplary punishment, including imprisonment, branding, and banishment would be enough to keep the poor under control. Although this policy was repeatedly legislated, the desperation that was born of the poverty and hunger of the masses proved to be stronger than the limited ability and the will of the local justice and police officials to enforce this type of policy effectively and consistently.

The political absolutism of the French state both at home and abroad was still coming into being, and there was a very large gap between absolutist theory and aims and the real ability of the state effectively to enforce its will. In many ways the local and national administration of France remained a confusing, conflicting, muddled, and ineffective apparatus, which in this case worked in favor of the poor. This situation caused the government to search for a "new solution." If a policy of exemplary punishment had failed to control the poor, perhaps a policy of confinement would succeed in its place.

In a very rigid, hierarchical society that was governed by strict unbending rules of privilege, precedence, and a sense of order the poor who were being forced to live at the very edges, or beyond, of this society of privilege had little experience, opportunity, ability, or reason, to live or behave within the accepted order or norms of that society. French society and the French state both instinctively realized the tremendous threat of the power of the destitute poor whom they had dispossessed and marginalized and who now had no stake or place in the established order, and little to lose. The experience of the frequent popular revolts which took place among the poor helped to confirm this fear.³⁸ From these very real fears came the state's plan to make the poverty of the poor complete by depriving them of their last human possession, their freedom.³⁹

The "New Solution" of the Great Confinement

The penal institutions of the Great Confinement wanted not only to control the poor who were placed so unwillingly under their confining jurisdiction, but also to make good use of their incarceration. These institutions were thus designed not only to confine and to control the poor, but also to "correct" the poor.⁴⁰ In light of the view that it was primarily their own moral failings and vices, especially that of laziness and idleness, that was the true cause of their poverty, these institutions, in theory, had the correctional function of using the opportunity of their incarceration to cure the poor of their asocial behavior (which was defined as their poverty) by putting them to work, (hopefully for the profit of the state), teaching them how to be "good" (that is, submissive, non-threatening), subjects and "good" (that is, obedient and resigned) Christians. It was on the basis of this last point, in particular, that the state expectantly appealed to the Church for its approval and support.

There was another important way in which the philosophy, legality, and structure of the institutions of the Great Confinement represented a decisive break with past traditions. In the intimate union of Church and state that was characteristic of the Age of Faith it had

³⁸Tilly, *Contentious French*, 119-161.

³⁹A contemporary of Saint Vincent, the Capuchin Yves of Paris strongly denounced this when he said in 1661, "to imprison the poor is to make a crime of their poverty, and to increase their misery instead of to relieve it ... Their freedom is all that they have. The rich have reduced the poor to this extreme state by their avarice, and then they won't have to see them ..." See Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 46.

⁴⁰Gutton, *Société*, 131.

always been the Church whose sole responsibility, and right, it was systematically to provide, direct, and coordinate all forms of charity for the poor. Although there was a legislated religious presence, justification, and ethic, in these newly created institutions in terms of their daily life, religious instruction, and worship, the absolute control of these so-called institutions of "charity" was for the first time to lie legally and morally with the absolutist state, and not with the Church.⁴¹

The goal of the Bourbon monarchy in establishing these institutions was also, in fact, to take over the independent direction and control of all charity from the Church, thus further reducing the authoritative role, voice, and the independent power of the church not only with respect to the poor, but also ultimately within the absolutist state itself.

**Attitudes Diametrically Opposed:
The Eminent Dignity of the Poor in the Church vs.
The Imminent Threat of the Poor to the State**

The clarity and force of the opposition of the Church, and the faithful, to the depersonalization and the desacralization of the poor grew slowly in proportion to the gradual development and emerging clarity of these forces and the attitudes of the "new sensibility" that appeared within France, and even within the Church itself. At the time, it was not at all clear that the Great Confinement itself represented such a radical break with Catholic tradition, and significant groups within the Church did not hesitate to support its establishment, at least in theory.

This explains why some of the lay and ecclesiastical elite of the contemporary Catholic reform movement who belonged to the powerful and highly secretive Company of the Blessed Sacrament,⁴² as well as some Jesuits and some among the secular clergy,⁴³ not to mention the papacy,⁴⁴ were originally among the greatest proponents of the confinement of the poor, and said that they theoretically saw nothing inconsistent with the Catholic faith, and the Church's tradition of charity towards the poor, in this position.

⁴¹Lallemand, *Charité*, 4:257.

⁴²For a discussion of the role and influence of the highly secretive Company of the Blessed Sacrament in the foundation of the General Hospitals in France see Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 42-43; also, Coste, *Life*, 3:271-285.

⁴³See Lallemand, *Charité*, 4:149-214.

⁴⁴Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 43.

What Crime have the Poor Committed?⁴⁵

The king himself in the decree establishing the General Hospital specifically denied that this system of confinement was a “police” measure,⁴⁶ but rather he strongly insisted, in the traditional theological language of Christian charity, that this system was designed for the sole purpose of relieving the suffering of the poor members of Jesus Christ.⁴⁷ Yet in the end, the true nature of these laws and the institutions that they established were not to be judged by these justifications but rather judged by the inconsistency that was revealed in their spirit and in their actual treatment of the poor.

In retrospect, therefore, there was something undeniably inconsistent with the Catholic tradition that was revealed in this treatment of the poor. There was something radically inconsistent with the Catholic tradition in this attitude of utility, disdain, fear, and hatred, towards the poor which was unmistakably revealed by these policies and these institutions.

While the Church realized that new, more efficient and effective forms of charity were needed in this new world of poverty to meet the spiritual and corporal needs of the poor, it also sensed the need to once again proclaim unambiguously and reaffirm in both word and deed the authentic Catholic tradition concerning the “eminent dignity of the poor in the Church,” and the right and duty of the Church to animate and direct the charity of the nation, and thus its soul.

Christian Opposition to the Great Confinement

When the French state issued its declaration of war upon the poor, it had not counted on a vibrant revival of the Church’s theology of charity among the faithful, especially the wealthy and powerful, nor had it counted on the strength of the solidarity of the resistance of the poor, nor had it counted on a powerful alliance between the poor and the Church. The French state also greatly overestimated its own power and will to wage and win this war in Paris, let alone on a nationwide level.

⁴⁵Lallemand, *Charité*, 4:227.

⁴⁶“Police”, in the precise sense that the classical epoch gave it, that is, the totality of the measures which make work possible and necessary for all those who could not live without it. See Foucault, *Madness*, 46.

⁴⁷Lallemand, *Charité*, 4:264-268. The king himself, for example, stated that the new policies were based on the consideration that “the poor beggars are living members of Jesus Christ, and not useless subjects of the state so that the sole motive of this policy is charity and not the policing of the poor.” 4:256.

Opposition to the policies and sensibilities of the Great Confinement were forthcoming both in word and deed. The “archers of the poor” frequently found that their attempts to arrest beggars were often met with active resistance from those they were trying to arrest, as well as from bystanders who would physically come to the defense of those who were being abused or arrested.⁴⁸ Private almsgiving and charitable services continued and in fact increased and expanded, being largely unaffected by the government’s repeated prohibitions.

The policies and sensibilities of the Great Confinement were understandably very unpopular in a nation composed largely of the poor and which was still vibrantly connected to the authentic charitable tradition of its Christian faith. With the ultimate failure of the Great Confinement as a definitive solution to the problem of the poor and their poverty, the government learned to its dismay both of its own weaknesses and of the evangelical power of the poor and their defenders.

The Church’s Christocentric focus:

The poverty of Jesus and the Love of Jesus for the Poor

In the seventeenth century the theological focus, clarity, and consistency, of the Church’s opposition to the absolutist state’s attitudes toward, and treatment of, the poor was fundamentally Christocentric and thus deeply scriptural and patristic. Any comparison between the clear evangelical witness of Jesus’s love of the poor and of his own service to them, as well as his own complete poverty could not help but reveal the great chasm which separated the traditions of Christian charity of the Age of Faith from the emerging traditions of secular utilitarianism of the Age of Reason.

By keeping its focus on the person of Jesus Christ, the example of his own poverty, and the example of his own loving service of the poor the French Church was thus able to give birth to a strong renewal of its charitable mission to the poor. This movement attempted to restore the poor to their proper and honored place by bringing them from their exile to the despised and forgotten margins of an earthly kingdom to the center and highest rank in the kingdom of heaven on earth, the Church.⁴⁹

In this era the primary means by which Divine Providence dynamically was to reaffirm and renew the Church’s faith commitment to the imitation of Jesus Christ in its own loving service and defense of the

⁴⁸Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 45.

⁴⁹Lachat, *Bossuet*, 8:186-193.

poor, as well as in its opposition to the new sensibilities and institutions of the Age of Reason, and in its concrete response to meeting the urgent contemporary needs of the poor, was the charism given jointly by the Holy Spirit to the collaboration of Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac.

**The Vincentian Charism as an Evangelical Sign of Contradiction:
“Our Lords and Masters the Poor”**

It would be difficult to imagine a more radical challenge to the attitudes and policies of fear, disdain, and confinement of the poor than that posed by the Vincentian charism of charity both in its theory and in its practice. When Saint Vincent and Saint Louise said over and over again that the poor are “Our Lords and Masters, and we are unworthy of rendering them our small services,”⁵⁰ they issued their proclamation from the very heart of this charism of evangelical charity, and their affective proclamation and their effective charity both stood together as an unmistakable evangelical sign of contradiction to the “new sensibility” towards poverty and the poor which was being enshrined in the attitudes of French society and in the state policy of apartheid against the poor.

To make the clarity of the evangelical sign of contradiction which resided at the heart of the Vincentian charism even more transparent, and even more unmistakable, it was revealed to Vincent and Louise not just as an urgent call to defend, honor, and lovingly served the “poor”, but as an urgent call to defend, honor, and lovingly serve, “the most abandoned of the poor.”⁵¹ It was a charism that identified and served those of the poor who were the most marginalized, the most despised, the most feared, the most suffering, and the most abandoned whether by society, the economy, the state, or even the Church.

**Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac:
Putting the charism into action**

The implementation of the Great Confinement required a police force, a judiciary, and an administrative structure whose onerous task

⁵⁰For example, see Pierre Coste, C.M., *Saint Vincent de Paul; Conférences, entretiens, documents*, 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), 11:392ff. z

⁵¹Specific references to the mission “to the most abandoned of the poor”, abound throughout the writings of Saint Vincent and Saint Louise. Very frequently when they speak of the “poor” they specify “the most abandoned of the poor.”

it was to organize, implement, and oversee the policies of apartheid, by herding the poor into institutions of confinement, by patrolling the streets to prevent any recurrence of begging or almsgiving, and by ensuring the proper “correction” of the institutionalized poor.

In a similar way, the effective implementation of the Vincentian charism in meeting the urgent challenges of charity of the most abandoned of the poor also required a large force of disciplined, organized, trained, and dedicated servants. Therefore, within the world of attitudes, policies, institutions, administration, and staff of the Great Confinement there emerged, under the collaborative leadership of Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul, a parallel and contradictory world of charity.

In this world of charity the most abandoned of the poor were recognized, loved, honored, and humbly served through charitable apostolates, and institutions, which were staffed by those men and women who considered themselves to be the mere servants of the poor, and who dedicated their lives to this service through the various works of the parish Confraternities of Charity, the Ladies of Charity, the Daughters of Charity, and the Congregation of the Mission.⁵²

“Given to God for the Poor,” responding to the most urgent challenges of charity of the most abandoned of the Poor

The works, apostolates, institutions, and rules of life, of the various communities of charity which providentially emerged from the charismatic leadership of Louise and Vincent were shaped by a distinctive process of discernment which was based both on a Christocentric-Incarnational theology of charity and a prayerful and always calm attentiveness to the continual providential revelation of the specific urgent challenges of the desperate spiritual and material needs of the most abandoned of the poor.⁵³

The beginning point of this Vincentian process of discernment was the revelation of the urgency of a specific spiritual or material need of the most abandoned of the poor which was not being met and which had no prospect of being met by any other charitable source. The final

⁵²The seventeenth century also saw a flourishing of other newly founded apostolic communities of men and women dedicated to the service of the poor. See Christophe, *Les Pauvres*, 54-56.

⁵³For a survey of Saint Vincent’s method of discernment see, Douglas Slawson, C.M. “Vincent de Paul’s Discernment of his own vocation and that of the Congregation of the Mission, *Vincentian Heritage*, 10, no. 1. (March 1989), 1-25.

clarity of this revelation in the circumstances of events, in the signs of the times, or in a specific request for assistance from some authority of Church or state combined to determine in each case the acceptance and development of a specific charitable apostolate. This pattern can be clearly seen, for example, in the formation, foundation, and early history of the Company of the Daughters of Charity by Louise and Vincent.⁵⁴

The Example of the Foundlings

There is no better contemporary example of an urgent challenge among the most abandoned of the poor in seventeenth century France than the care of the foundlings who were literally the most abandoned of the poor. These unfortunate infants were daily abandoned in the streets of Paris. Evidence suggests that the great majority of these children were forsaken by their parents primarily because of their own absolute poverty and their inability to provide for their needs. In times of economic crisis the numbers of infants that were abandoned always rose even more dramatically.⁵⁵ The mortality rate among these children was horrifying, in that it was all but universal, and absolutely nothing was being done by anyone to save them because no one really cared about their fate, until Louise, Vincent, and the Daughters and Ladies of Charity stepped in.⁵⁶

In the same way all of the other primitive apostolates of these early communities of charity providentially emerged from Louise and Vincent's continual prayerful and calm attentiveness to the revelation of the urgent needs of the most abandoned of the sick, the most abandoned of the uneducated poor, the most abandoned of the galley slaves, the most abandoned of the aged, the most abandoned of the mentally ill, the most abandoned of the orphaned, the homeless, and the hungry.

“Caritas Christi Urget Nos”:

The Urgent Challenges of Charity in Seventeenth Century France

In seventeenth century France, the France of Vincent and Louise, the urgent challenges of charity were unmistakable. There was the challenge of the state's attempt to deform Christian charity and to

⁵⁴See Ibàñez, *Las Obras*, 589-591.

⁵⁵See chapter on the Foundlings in Robert Forster and Orest Ranum ed., *Deviants and the Abandoned in French Society*, (Baltimore: 1978).

⁵⁶For details on the work of the Foundlings see Coste, *Life and Works*, 2:255-279.

devalue, exploit, and persecute the poor, and there was the reality of the urgent human and spiritual needs of the poor themselves, especially of the most abandoned of the poor. It was to this world, to these specific challenges, and to the most abandoned of God's poor that the gift of the Vincentian charism of charity was given, a charism of discernment and service based on a deeply felt edge of urgency which as Saint Louise herself realized was identical to the urgency of the salvific love, the charity of Jesus Christ crucified, hence, "*Caritas Christi Urget Nos.*" This is what Saint Louise realized in her life. This is her continuing legacy of charity to the ages, to the poor, and to us.

The Legacy of Charity

If the legacy of Louise de Marillac is captured in the motto which she herself chose for the Company of the Daughters of Charity, it is important to remember that it is a legacy which is larger than just the Daughters of Charity. The legacy of charity of Louise de Marillac stands inseparable from the legacy of charity of Vincent de Paul. Their legacy of charity is the legacy of the charity of Jesus Christ, and it is a legacy which has been handed down through the lives and ministries of the countless thousands of men and women in the communities of charity who have gone before us and dedicated their lives to the service of the most abandoned of the poor. This legacy of charity is our mission of charity, our vocations to charity, and it continues to speak powerfully to all those in the Church today who seek to serve God's beloved poor, especially the most abandoned of the poor.

In these days when religious communities and institutions are concerned with formulating precise charismatic mission statements to guide their contemporary works, perhaps we who live the one legacy of Charity of Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul, of Elizabeth Ann Seton, of Frederick Ozanam and Rosalie Rendu can have no better common mission statement than the shared legacy of charity which is reflected in the spirit of our respective mottos. The charity of Jesus Christ Crucified urges us on, to preach the gospel to the poor, to serve rather than be served, for no work of charity is foreign to our legacy, for the poor are our legacy.⁵⁷

⁵⁷The motto of the Daughters of Charity, "*Caritas Christi Urget Nos*", (the charity of Christ urges us) comes from 2 Cor 5:14. The motto of the Congregation of the Mission, "*Evangelizare Pauperibus Misit Me*", (He has sent me to preach the gospel to the poor), comes from Luke 4:18. The motto of the Ladies of Charity, "*To serve rather than be served*", comes from Matthew 21:28. The motto of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society is "*No Work of Charity is foreign to the society.*"