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Charitas regni est salus. Semantic Transformations of Charity in Early Modern Representations of State and Society

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Abstract

The concept of charity was widely used in early modern European political theory, taking on a variety of meanings and functions in describing social and institutional reality. The article begins with a genealogical reconstruction of the early history of the concept, outlining its classical and Christian roots and disentangling its three main meanings: charity as love of God, charity as love of one's neighbor, and charity as a principle of social integration. It then turns to some of the peculiar modifications that these meanings underwent in the political literature of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Finally, it focuses on the «crisis» that the political use of charity experienced at the turn of the eighteenth century.

Keywords

Charity - Social Integration - State-building - Early Modern Political Literature - Interest

Introduction

The goal of the Dutch philologist Jan Gruter in compiling his *Bibliotheca Exulum* was to provide his readers with a portable compendium of valuable knowledge that they could easily carry with them in case of unwanted displacement due to religious persecution or other unfortunate circumstances. For this reason, he conceived his compilation of Latin *dicta* – divided into several conceptual *lemmata* arranged in alphabetical order – as a kind of transnational and trans-denominational commonplace book that could «go [...] through every region and every denomination» (Gruter 1624. On Gruter's book, see Blair 2010, 232). With all due caution, it can thus serve as a preliminary and (self-proclaimed) neutral point of entry into the intellectual landscape of European learned culture at the

beginning of the seventeenth century. As such, it contains some predictable occurrences, but also holds some surprises. This is the case with the adages collected under the heading *Charitatis*. While most of them clearly refer to the long moral-theological tradition of the concept («Charity toward God is revealed in charity toward one's neighbor», «Every good flows from the source of charity»), some others refer to another, perhaps less obvious, semantic field: that of politics. Charity is thus said to be «the salvation of the kingdom» (*charitas regni est salus*) and «an unshakable protection for princes» (*principum tutela praesens*), since «the prince who is protected by charity is safe from any army» (Gruter 1624, 149, 150). The reason why charity, the quintessentially theological virtue, could be considered such a firm foundation for political power may be obscure to the modern reader, and it seems to require some explanation from the historian.

The same association between charity and politics can also be found in many iconographic instances from both the Catholic and Protestant worlds, attesting to its circulation far beyond Gruter's readership. In 1664, for example, the Bolognese artist Elisabetta Sirani drew on the iconology of charity to paint an allegory celebrating the distinctive virtues of the House of Medici and the quality of the grand-ducal regime. *La Giustizia assistita dalla Carità e dalla Prudenza* – commissioned to Sirani by Leopoldo de' Medici, brother of the Grand Duke of Tuscany Ferdinand II – depicts three female figures bearing the recognizable attributes of the virtues they embody, according to the models codified and popularized at the time by Cesare Ripa's influential *Iconologia* (see Niccoli 2018). Justice is in the center, holding a sword in one hand and a scale in the other. To her left sits Prudence, holding a mirror over a bulky tome, alluding to the necessary coupling of practical and theoretical knowledge in navigating political reality. Finally, on the other side of the painting, a mother, surrounded by her three children, is breastfeeding one of them: she personifies Charity, following a figurative scheme that originated around the mid-fourteenth century in northern Italian art and was definitively stabilized in the second half of the sixteenth century (see Wind 1937; Tapié 1986; Sperling 2016).

While the identification of the three allegorical figures poses no particular problem, the same cannot be said of their juxtaposition; for although Sirani's painting places them on the same plane, in close proximity to one another, they actually belong to quite different conceptual realms. In the usual classification of the virtues that had taken shape in Christian ethical discourse since the twelfth century, justice and prudence belonged to the group of the four cardinal virtues, which dealt with worldly affairs and, «as political qualities», were centered «around the exercise as

well as the acceptance of temporal power» (Bejczy 2011, 212). Moreover, as a great deal of scholarship on the subject has long shown, these two virtues in particular were regarded by most late medieval and early modern moral and political theorists as the two *virtutes politicae* par excellence, the primary requirements for dutiful and/or efficient political conduct (see, among many others, Sellin 1978; Continisio 1995; Dini 2000; Menegaldo and Ribémont 2012; Lynch and Marks 2016). Charity, on the other hand, belonged to the trio of theological virtues aimed directly at God and the hereafter. And just as prudence and justice were the most political of the political virtues, so charity, *regina virtutum*, had primacy among the theological ones: between the former and the latter one could imagine the same gap that separates the city of man from the city of God.

Once again, the question arises as to how and why it was possible to represent (and conceive of) charity in an ostensibly political context or in seamless continuity with other political representations, as in the case of the Pelican Portrait or Sirani's Allegory. This article is therefore intended as an answer to this question. Its aim is to show that, in addition to its theological relevance, the concept of charity was also widely used in early modern political discourse, where it was employed to describe a wide range of social and political institutions. I will begin by briefly tracing the premodern history of the notion of charity, outlining the various strands that came together to form a multifaceted and versatile conceptual tool. I will then examine how this tool entered early modern political representations, the purposes for which it was deployed, and the changes it underwent there. Finally, I will show how charity lost momentum among late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century thinkers and was replaced by the quite opposite principle of social integration. My thesis is that this modern "crisis" of charity has less to do with secularization than with a changing view of what creates social bonds and holds society together.

Political Charity: A Genealogy

By the early modern period, the concept of charity already had a history spanning several centuries. Behind the appearance of a single unified signifier, different meanings from different intellectual traditions had actually layered over time to form a composite and multifaceted notion. In fact, *caritas* entered Western philosophical vocabulary through a pagan door, largely thanks to the works of Cicero – and, to a lesser extent, Seneca – and their later reception (Pétré 1948, 30-42). Despite some occasional inconsistencies, Cicero's rhetorical and moral

treatises quite regularly use two different terms to refer to two different kinds of love. *Amor* is a kind of natural, that is, domestic, affection, the kind one feels (or should feel) toward one's parents, spouse, and children. *Caritas*, on the other hand, is a social, or extra-domestic, form of love, that must be directed toward one's homeland (*patria*), community (*res publica*), fellow citizens, and even the whole of humanity (Pétré 1948, 32-5. See also Pizzorni 1995, 74-107). However, *amor* and *caritas* are not two completely different things, even if they are theoretically distinguishable. On the contrary, the latter is directly rooted in the former. Placing himself within the cosmopolitan and natural law tradition of the middle Stoa, Cicero sees *caritas* as nothing more than an extension of our natural love for our closest acquaintances, which gradually extends to larger and larger communities. In Cicero's (and the Stoics') anthropology, human beings indeed have a natural duty, if not a natural inclination, to help one another, to exchange with one another, and to prefer the common good to the private good: «In this we ought to follow nature as a guide and make common utilities commonly available, such as in reciprocating appropriate actions, in giving and receiving, now our arts, now our services, now our resources, and thereby more closely unite human beings in association» (Cicero 2016, 30). The social bond, then, is predicated on the concentric extension of this natural altruism from the nearest to the furthest objects of affection, from «parents» and «children» to the «fatherland», that superset which «alone embraces all that is dear to all of us» (*omnes omnium caritates patria una complexa est*) and for whose sake we are obliged to sacrifice ourselves if need be (Cicero 2016, 45).

A similar combination of love and self-denial is at the heart of the Judeo-Christian conceptualization of charity, although it is framed in an entirely different dimension (Pétré 1948, 43-61; Nygren 1953, 61-159; Anderson 2013; Müller 2014). The Greek term for charity, *ἀγάπη*, is actually rarely found in the synoptic gospels, but it definitely takes center stage in the Pauline reformulation of Christ's message and quickly becomes a true pillar of Christian theology. Paul uses «ἀγάπη» as a technical term to indicate God's infinite love for humanity, which was revealed in the death of His Son on the cross and continues to be revealed in the Christian's love for his neighbor. The Johannine formula – 1 John 4:16: «God is love (*ἀγάπη*). Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them» – will take this idea even further, but its premises are already there in the letters of Paul. Charity is seen as the essential attribute of God and as the bond of love that binds Him to His beloved creatures, who must love Him in return. And just as God took His love for man to the extreme of sacrificing Himself for the sake of mankind, so anyone who wants to

share in this divine love must imitate His example by sacrificing himself for the sake of his fellow human beings. Hence the famous Pauline passage in 1 Corinthians 13, where charity is construed as the opposite of self-aggrandizement and self-love, as a kind of love that «is not filled with its own importance» and «does not seek its own advantage». In this way, *ἀγάπη* could be traced back to the Synoptic commandment to love God «with all your heart» and «your neighbor as yourself» (Lk 10:27). On this basis, from the end of the second century, the Church Fathers would build what would become the standard interpretation of the term, linking the idea of charity as love of God (in both senses of the genitive) and that of charity as mutual love among Christians.

A relevant episode in this early history is represented by Ambrose's *De officiis ministrorum*, written in the second half of the fourth century: it marks a first attempt to bridge the classical and Christian versions of *caritas*. The title itself is a clear statement of Ambrose's debt to the Ciceronian model, and what he tries to do there is to combine Christian theology with what he considers to be the most valuable aspects of Roman culture. Better still, as Patrick Boucheron puts it, his operation consists in «converting» the latter into the former, in a process that seeks both to transcend and to preserve the «vestiges from the past» (Boucheron 2022, 21-3). Ambrose applies the same method to charity. In its more heavenly sense, *caritas* is for him the indissoluble bond of divine love which gives unity to the mystical body of the Church. But taken in its twin sense of love of one's neighbor, Christian charity can easily be understood as the same social virtue that Cicero thought would «more closely unite human beings in association». In Ambrose's words,

> Justice begins with piety: first, towards God, second, towards our country (*in patriam*), third, towards our parents, and lastly towards all. […] It is from these beginnings that true love is born, which puts others before itself and does not pursue its own interests (*Hinc caritas nascitur, quae alios sibi praefert, non quaerens quae sua sunt*) (Ambrose 2002, 1: 190-1).

The Ciceronian echo of this passage is quite obvious, with the crucial difference being that God is now at the top of the hierarchy of legitimate objects of love. What is interesting, however, is that this overlap in Stoic and Christian notions of *caritas* occurs precisely on the basis of a common understanding of selflessness as the fundamental principle of human sociability. To be charitable is to put the

common good before private interests, which in turn is the necessary condition for the emergence of any society.

Ambrose and his work of hybridization seemed to have cleared the way for charity to be seen as the common root of both secular and ecclesial community. With Augustine, however, the history of the concept would take a different direction. In his *De civitate Dei*, he placed not caritas but self-love (*amor sui*) at the origin of the Earthly City, while limiting the scope of the former to the Heavenly City only, where «all serve one another in charity, rulers by their counsel and subjects by their obedience» (Augustine 2013, 632). True love – which consists in the disposition «to love God not according to man, but according to God, and to love [one's] neighbor as himself» (Augustine 2013, 591) – was beyond the reach of human political associations, and even the just love of the Romans for their country did not qualify as such. Accordingly, in Augustine's doctrine of virtue and the proper order of the objects of charity (*ordo caritatis*) – from first to last: God, one's soul, one's neighbor, one's body (see Frigo 2021, 19-26) – the terrestrial fatherland (Cicero's and Ambrose's *patria*) was no longer contemplated.

Thus, despite the central role of the concept in Augustine's thought, it was only through a partial break with the Augustinian tradition that charity could be reclaimed for late medieval political discourse. Aquinas's reevaluation of civic self-sacrifice for the common good was certainly a first step in this direction, but in his major works he still separated natural love (*amor*) for one's political community from grace-infused love for God (*caritas*) (Frigo 2021, 166-72). It was only in late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Florence, in the context of increasingly violent factional struggles, that charity itself was to be added to the group of political virtues (Mineo 2014). This was done once again – through Cicero and the Aristotelian redefinition of the *bonum commune* (Kempshall 1999) – by exploiting the (so to speak) altruistic component of the concept, emphasizing the Pauline injunction that the meaning of *caritas* is not to seek one's own benefit but the benefit of the whole. This is evident, for example, in Ptolemy of Lucca's continuation of Aquinas's *De regimine principum*, where *caritas* is used to explain the divine favor bestowed on the Romans for their patriotism: «Love for the fatherland is founded in the root of charity, which prefers the common things to one's own, not one's own things to common ones» (Ptolemy of Lucca 1997, 154. Translation modified). For this reason, since charity precedes «every virtue in merit», *amor patriae*, «more than all other virtues, deserves to be rewarded with […] lordship» (Ptolemy of Lucca 1997, 154). Commenting on this passage, Ernst Kantorowicz concluded that by the thirteenth century «the Christian virtue of

caritas [had become] unmistakably political» (Kantorowicz 2016, 242). Its frequent appearance as a central concept in various thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century political (and proto-economic) contexts – from Godfrey of Fontaines to Remigio dei Girolami, Pietro di Giovanni Olivi and Giovanni Villani (see Kempshall 1999; Todeschini 2002a and 2002b; Mineo 2014, 29-39; Frigo 2021, 172-86) – confirms his intuition. Thus, the *caritas* figure in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good Government* (1338-1339) in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena can be read as a testimony to this process of «politicization» (Viroli 2012, 21-8).

Charity in Tumult: Continuities and Transformations

By the late Middle Ages, the concept of *caritas* had stabilized around three primary meanings. First, charity denoted the love of God, or, as Aquinas said in the *quaestio* he devoted to the topic in his *Summa Theologiae*, the love based on «a sharing of man with God» (Thomas Aquinas 1975, 34: 6-7). Secondly, but in close logical and theological connection with this transcendental representation, charity stood for the love of one's neighbor, which had to be expressed in concrete acts of beneficence towards others, and especially towards the weakest and most destitute among them. The scholastic canon of the fourteen works of mercy – seven corporal, seven spiritual – was intended to give detailed form to this imperative. Finally, as a direct but conceptually distinct consequence of the latter connotation, charity designated «the model of the social bond for all men» (Guerreau-Jalabert 2000, 38), the principle of social integration that gave birth to and held together communities and societies. In this third strand, Christian and Stoic conceptions of *caritas* dovetailed around the primacy they both gave to selflessness over selfishness. Building on this horizontal understanding of reciprocity and altruistic exchange as the basis of human association, thirteenth- and fourteenth-century theologians, jurists, and political thinkers were thus able to articulate a vertical interpretation of charity as the political bond of love that binds citizens to the common good of the *res publica* or, in its organicist and monarchical versions, the members of the body politic to its head.

Thanks largely to the mediation of Francesco Petrarca, Italian humanism would inherit this complex semantic knot and refine it for its political project. In a context marked by a crisis of legitimacy of medieval political and religious authorities and the rise of new self-asserting centers of power, fifteenth-century humanists used the motif of *mutua caritas* to emphasize the need for the *princeps* (ruler) to govern through the consensus of his subjects and their partial inclusion in decision-making processes (Cappelli 2005 and 2012). The issue was generally discussed under the

heading of whether it was better for the prince to be loved or feared, which the humanists took up from the classical tradition and answered unanimously in favor of the first alternative. The Bolognese professor Filippo Beroaldo (1453-1505), who well epitomized the humanist position on the matter, argued that the good prince «is protected by the love of his citizens (*charitate civium*), which is an impregnable fortress and an unassailable defense»; while, on the contrary, «fear, violence, armies» could not possibly ensure the security or longevity of his regime (Beroaldo 1527, 21r). As for what made subjects love their rulers, the humanists agreed that only virtue could earn the affection of the people. In keeping with its privileged attention to the personal qualities of rulers over the constitutional forms of rule, humanist «virtue politics» insisted on the moral excellence of the prince as what could win him «trust, obedience, and love from the ruled», and lead them to place his best interests above their own (Hankins 2019, 37).

As with a number of other consolidated tropes, Niccolò Machiavelli's *De Principatibus* (1513 ca.) acted as a corrosive solvent on the Renaissance reconfiguration of charity, breaking the humanist consensus on its meaning but also opening it to its modern history. In fact, the term «*carità*» appears only twice in Machiavelli's text, but both times with very interesting implications. The first occurs in Chapter X, where Machiavelli evokes the danger that «self-interested considerations» (*la carità propria*) might lead the people to abandon their loyalty to their ruler (Machiavelli 2019, 38). The shift in emphasis is subtle but significant: here charity is no longer synonymous with selfless devotion, but is used to denote the very impulse of self-love.

The second instance occurs in the infamous Chapter XVIII, one of the most impactful in the entire book. A wise ruler, Machiavelli argues, should know how to use both human and beastly means, and that he «cannot keep his word, nor should he, when such fidelity would damage him» (Machiavelli 2019, 60). Expanding on this idea, the Florentine secretary continues as follows: «And it must be understood that a ruler […] cannot always act in ways that are considered good because, in order to maintain his power, he is often forced to act against faith, charity, humanity, and the precepts of religion» (Machiavelli 2019, 61. Translation modified). In fact, little attention has been paid to the peculiar phrasing of this passage, and especially to the meaning of the word «charity» in this context. It may therefore be useful to compare it with another passage from the third book of the *Discourses on Livy* (1531), which discusses the problem of whether a generous act is more politically effective than a cruel and fearful one. Machiavelli began by recalling how Camillus conquered the Falisci not by force but by a touching display

of moral integrity, and then he commented: «Here it is to be considered with this true example how much more a *humane* act full of *charity* is sometimes able to do in the spirits of men than a ferocious and violent act» (Machiavelli 1996, 261. Emphasis added). The text deploys the same terminological association – humanity and charity – that we have already encountered in the above passage from *The Prince*. It is not implausible, then, that even in the latter case Machiavelli was referring – by way of a semantically condensed recapitulation – to the question he had raised in the previous chapter, where the humanist question of «whether it is better [for a ruler] to be loved than feared» (Machiavelli 2019, 56) had been posed again, only to have the standard humanist answer reversed, as Machiavelli claimed that, all things considered, fear could prove a much more useful instrument of government than love. *Carità* (and *umanità*) would thus stand here for all those acts and qualities that lead the prince to be loved by his subjects, but over which he «is often forced» to prefer a more fearsome display of power.

This rejection of the then-common idea of *mutua caritas* and «political love» (Orwin 1978; Cappelli 2016) would become one of the main targets of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century anti-Machiavellian polemics, eliciting the fierce reaction of those who recognized in it one aspect of Machiavelli's «unprecedented attack on 2,000 years of Greek, Roman, and humanistic reflections on the value of civic concord» (Pedullà 2018, 1). The earliest treatises intended as explicit refutations of Machiavelli and of those who, from the second half of the sixteenth century, began to be disparagingly referred to as the «*politiques*», vigorously reaffirmed the importance of *mutua caritas* and rejected *The Prince*'s alleged predilection for fear and cruelty as a means of rule as tyrannical. Thus, for example, the Oratorian Tommaso Bozio (1548-1610) urged secular rulers to keep Machiavellian advisors at bay and instead to follow the example of Christ, who founded his Church «through a union of the most ardent love, which [...] binds peoples together with an indissoluble bond of the most vigorous charity», and did not coerce them through fear, which is in fact a «poor guardian for a long-lasting state» (Bozio 1596, 524).

Something had changed, however. For all their hostility to Machiavelli, his opponents found it increasingly difficult to simply restate old beliefs about the political merits of selfless mutual devotion between rulers and ruled. After all, what *The Prince* had questioned was not so much the moral value of charity as its effectiveness in ensuring the stability of the body politic, given the essentially self-seeking nature of its members and the seemingly irrefutable fact that «fear can be aroused, but love cannot». If this was the case, then the ruler was somehow obliged to opt for «well-dosed frightening measures» (Reinhard 1999, 107-8),

because they were the only ones over which he could exercise control. The task of anti-Machiavellian writers, then, would be to show that the opposite was true: love *could* be aroused, and – an added advantage – it could be aroused by love itself.

This became a recurring motif, especially in Jesuit treatises on the Christian prince (on which see De Franceschi 2007; Barbuto 2017). Roberto Bellarmino (1542-1621) devoted an entire chapter of his *De officio principis christiani* to the «paternal charity necessary for the prince to rule the peoples», a necessity that was as much ethical as it was political. The prince must act as a charitable father to his subjects, not only because charity is what distinguishes the good king from the bad tyrant, who always pursues his own interests (*in omnibus quaerat quae sua sunt*), but also because «love is won by love, so that whoever wants his power to be firm and strong» must begin by showing love to his people: indeed, when they «realize that they are loved by their prince, they will love him in return, risking their possessions and their own lives for him if need be» (Bellarmino 1619, 39-44). A very similar idea can be found in Bellarmino's fellow brother Adam Contzen (1571-1635), who also reserves a special chapter in his anti-Machiavellian *Politicorum libri decem* for charity as the safest art of government. The state is like a «triumphal arch», the stones of which are not held together by lime or iron, but only by their mutual support, just as the citizens support each other and their ruler, and they are supported by him: «Charity is indeed reciprocal […]. If the people feel themselves loved by the prince, the senate, the nobility, there is nothing so arduous that they will not do for their sake; if the prince feels himself loved by his country, he will make every effort to be useful to those who love him» (Contzen 1621, 178-80).

It is easy to recognize the pervasive «spirit of the gift» here that permeated early modern societies and their «culture of obligation, stemming from family life, state development, and religious custom» (Zemon Davis 2000, 10. See also Starobinski 2007; Krausman Ben-Amos 2008; Zionkowski and Klekar 2009). This was not, however, a *contractual* obligation, one that derived from a legal agreement between the parties. Rather, its source was what Bartolomé Clavero has called «the anthropology of grace», a peculiar way of framing and organizing social relations centered on the mechanism of *antidora*, the «non-obligatory obligation» to return what has been graciously given (Clavero 1991, 100). In a social structure composed not of individuals but of hierarchically arranged estates, whose asymmetrical relationships responded «to principles of correspondence and favor, not reciprocity and equivalence» (Clavero 1991, 195), political obedience could not be based on free consent and individual liberty. Nor could it be expressed in terms of mere subjugation, which would have smacked of despotism and tyranny – or, perhaps

worse, of Machiavellianism. This is where charity came in, as a way of conceptualizing submission to authority without turning it into slavery, and instead rooting it in the «natural» compulsion to reciprocate the benefits received. The dialectic between charity and obedience is well illustrated in a treatise dedicated by the Salernitan scholar Marco Antonio Pitsillio (or Petilio) to Philip III in 1603:

> Charity makes the prince care for his subjects, and the subjects obey their prince. This is also illustrated by the persons of the ineffable Trinity: the Father is the prince who, by bestowing his riches on [his subjects], makes himself worthy of reverence; the Son represents the subjects who, conquered by love, voluntarily pay tribute to [the prince]; the Holy Spirit is the sacred bond that binds the latter to obey the former, and the former to protect the latter (Pitsillio 1603, 12-3).

Pitsillio also clarified what the care of the prince could mean in concrete terms. In a chapter exploring the political meaning of the Lord's Prayer verse «Give us this day our daily bread», he reminded his readers that «when famine (*caritas*) strikes harder, the prince should raise his charity (*charitas*) higher» (Pitsillio 1603, 92), by relaxing taxes and providing food for his subjects. Again, this was to be done not only out of moral goodness, but also because it was what «true reason of state» dictated. Among the most important duties of the prince, as Giovanni Antonio Palazzo wrote in his *Discorso del governo e della ragion vera di Stato* (1604), was to provide his subjects with «plenty and abundance of food with which to sustain their lives», both from public reserves and by bringing supplies from abroad, so that through this «charity» he could «maintain the friendship and benevolence of the peoples» (Palazzo 1604, 166-7). Some fifteen years earlier, in the text that would inaugurate the reason-of-state tradition, Giovanni Botero (1544-1617) had already advised his prince against the accumulation of treasures, since it «hinders all the works of charity and beneficence, from which it follows necessarily that the roots of subjects' love for the prince are torn up which are in large part the benefits that they receive from him» (Botero 2017, 122).

In this context, charity was in fact shorthand for the complex of ideological values that governed the institutional reality of the grain market regulation and *annona* systems that had developed in many parts of Europe since the thirteenth century (Clément 1999; Marin and Virlouvet 2003; Kaplan 2015; Vries 2019). But it could also be invoked to characterize, more generally, that growing area of public activity aimed at meeting social needs, from the early modern expansion of poor relief

programs to welfare arrangements in times of epidemic (Coccoli 2023). The model of reference was that of the «good family father» and his «economics», his virtuous management of the domestic sphere, on which a rich literature developed from the second half of the sixteenth century (Frigo 1985), and which would become the incubator both for the emergence of new practices of administrative power and for the fledgling field of political economy (Sebastianelli 2017).

Charity was at the center of this theoretical and institutional knot. On the one hand, it embraced all those relationships – such as those between a father and the members of his family, or between a sovereign and his subjects – in which a natural and irreversible inequality of power made it impossible to apply the commutative principles of justice (Ago 1998, xvi-xvii). On the other hand, it could delimit a reserve of authority whose essential performance was not merely to enforce the law, but to care for the prosperity and welfare of its subordinates, even if this meant loosening the strictness of legal prescriptions. This is well expressed by Antoine de Montchrestien (1575 ca.-1621), the inventor of the term «political economy», in reference to the sovereign's due concern for the enrichment of his subjects: «In no other matter has [he] more license than in this to lower his hand and keep the bridle loose. For charity to the country narrows (and sometimes widens, according to the times and seasons) the limits of justice (*équité*) to its advantage» (Montchrestien 1999, 117). This is also what Bellarmino, Contzen, and many other Catholic political writers alluded to when they described the *charitas paterna* of the prince: being like a father to his children (and not, as Machiavelli allegedly implied, like a master to his servants), he too has a duty to see that his subjects grow and prosper. This «economic» function was clearly perceived as requiring a loving solicitude on the part of the ruler that could not be reduced to the impassive application of the *ordo iuris* and therefore could not be fully subsumed under the language of *iurisdictio*. Still lacking a new term to describe this emerging political reality – the world *administration* would not fully enter the continental political vocabulary until the mid-eighteenth century (Mannori 2021) – early modern authors resorted to the old notion of charity as love of one's neighbor, with the subjects cast as the neighbors of their loving king, to try to account for it.

However, the notion of a mutual charitable relationship between ruler and ruled was only a specification of a more general understanding of charity as a fundamental principle of social integration. In this respect, the prince was no different (if not in degree) from any other person who benefited his fellow men, for this altruistic inclination was precisely the cement that held society together. As we

have seen, the political potential of this representation was already at work in the thirteenth century, and it was still fully operative in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources. Indeed, Italian reason-of-state writers readily enlisted the binding effects of love and charity in the service of their «conservative paradigm» (Borrelli 1993). In a paragraph searching for the means by which the state can achieve stability, Gabriele Zinano (1557-1635 ca.) begins by excluding that they can consist in the «abundance of luxuries and honors», military strength, or great wealth. Not even justice is the key to solving the problem, for many nations of the past, once considered just, are now nothing but ruins. The only thing capable of «keeping a state in its perfect being» is to make all its citizens happy (Zinano 1626, 263-4). But this in turn raises the question of how this general happiness can be realized, given the very different natures, statuses, and (therefore) desires of the people who make up the body politic. Zinano's answer is straightforward:

> Only love can work such wonders. Let all the citizens love each other and be loved as much as the lovers of their prince, and all these seemingly impossible effects will be seen in the state. The lover wants what his beloved wants. Since every citizen is both lover and beloved, who can doubt that one does not immediately want what the other wants?

Hence the impossibility of internal uprisings or external defeats. For Zinano, however, a final clarification is in order, since it is not every kind of love that can do the trick. In fact, «such a virtuous love does not consist in licentiousness, but in charity» (Zinano 1626, 266-7). The transcendent dimension and the indissoluble nature of the latter elevate it above any profane affection, whose inconstancy can never establish any political permanence.

This notion of charity as a higher form of love, essential for binding society together, was not confined to the Catholic world. Some decades earlier, for example, the idea of charity as a *virtus unitiva* had been put to fruitful political use by Johannes Althusius[1]. In his *Politica methodice digesta* (1603, 1610, and 1614), he translated charity into that «symbiotic principle» which for him was the essence of politics, and which consisted in the art of association by which men establish social exchanges among themselves, giving rise to ever larger communities – from

[1] A serious examination of the political uses of charity by Protestant authors and their differences from their Catholic counterparts would indeed require a separate essay. The case of Althusius can only serve as a reminder that the subject was not a Catholic monopoly.

families to villages, cities, provinces, and, ultimately, realms and commonwealths. This symbiosis is based on *communicatio*, or the sharing of goods and services necessary for the survival of the community: «These are performed by one citizen for another who needs and desires them in order that love may become effectual through the observance of charity» (Althusius 1995, 47). Indeed, it is this «mutual benevolence», i.e., «that affection and charity of individuals toward their colleagues» (Althusius 1995, 37. Translation modified), that makes each association a single body, as distinguished from a mere assembly of individuals. Retrieving the traditional mix of Pauline and Ciceronian quotations, Althusius presents this life-sharing attitude as a *conditio sine qua non* of politics itself: «What would a commonwealth be without communion and communication of things useful and necessary to human life? By means of these precepts, charity becomes effective in various good works» (Althusius 1995, 12).

In many respects, Althusius' peculiar handling of the notion of charity can be seen as illustrative of a broader early modern theoretical configuration. Not only does it defy any rigid demarcation of «secular» and «religious» elements, thwarting any attempt to identify a fault line between the two (see Henreckson 2019, 127-32), it also testifies to the significant role that charity continued to play on the threshold of modernity as a tool for describing a changing institutional and political reality.

Conclusion: The Sunset of Political Charity

In his contribution to the seventh volume of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Mohammed Rassem traces the semantic field of charity (*Wohltätigkeit*) back to the Greek «*euergesia*» and the Roman «*beneficentia*», and then follows its evolution through the Middle Ages and the early modern period until its «crisis» in the eighteenth century, when charity began to disappear from the political radar. Rassem attributes this progressive evaporation – which explains our current unfamiliarity with the tradition of political charity – to the ever-growing separation of religion and morality, which was already underway but was greatly accelerated during the revolutionary *Sattelzeit* (Rassem 1992).

Although Rassem's overview partially coincides with the trajectory outlined above, the account offered in this article perhaps allows for a partially alternative – though not entirely contradictory – version of the decline of charity as a political (and not merely religious) concept. As seen above, at least two conditions were necessary for charity to be applied to political reality: that society be understood not as a simple collection of identical individuals, but as an organic communication of

naturally different bodies, orders, estates; and that «selfless» dispositions can be seen as the first and true foundation of that society. If society arises not from selflessness but from (some kind of) selfishness, there will be less and less room for charity as a principle of sociability.

Now, between the second half of the seventeenth century and the end of the eighteenth century, both of these conditions were shaken to the point of being no longer attainable. And this happened on both the theoretical and the institutional levels. On the one hand, the gradual emergence – mostly within modern natural law traditions – of the «possessive individual» and his appetites as the basic constituents of political ontology produced a «paradigmatic shift» (see Borrelli 1993, 7-9, n.1) towards different mechanisms of social integration. On the other hand, the definitive affirmation of the modern state, the elimination of intermediary powers, and the development of a modern market economy produced – at least where these phenomena actually took place – a form of «civilization» whose internal coordination was ensured more by an effective public administration and the internalization of interested cooperative behavior than by a paternalistic «moral economy» dependent on the maintenance of formal inequalities (see Scognamiglio 2013; Di Donato 2021).

A quotation from Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) can be chosen to epitomize this transformation. This is arguably one of the most famous passages in the history of political economy, read and (mis)interpreted countless times, in which Smith argues that «It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest». But less often quoted are the lines that immediately follow:

> Nobody but a beggar chuses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens. Even a beggar does not depend upon it entirely. The charity of well-disposed people, indeed, supplies him with the whole fund of his subsistence. But though this principle ultimately provides him with all the necessaries of life which he has occasion for, it neither does nor can provide him with them as he has occasion for them. The greater part of his occasional wants are supplied in the same manners those of other people, by treaty, by barter, and by purchase (Smith 1979, 1: 26-7).

This passage not only makes the reference to charity explicit. It also paints a picture that is almost the exact opposite of that which emerges from our survey of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century political literature: for the authors reviewed

above, it was *precisely* out of charity and benevolence that social exchange among men was established. Although Smith's work represents only one step in a much longer dynamic of the universalization of self-interest as a basic principle of sociability, the tendency is already sufficiently clear, and it consists in a kind of overturning of previous notions, according to which interest was in fact an obstacle to – and not an agent of – socialization (Hirschman 1977. See also, among many others, Ornaghi and Cotellessa 2000; Force 2003; Engelmann 2003).

This is only an impressionistic sketch, providing the broad outlines of a process that is of course more nuanced and articulated. But I think it can offer an account of the «crisis of charity» not in general terms of secularization, but as a consequence of institutional transformations and changes in the general understanding of where societies come from. If it is individual self-interest rather than benevolence that holds society together, then charity – as a form of disinterested love – is bound to fall by the wayside, and other instruments of social integration – the contract, the market, the state – will have to be deployed. Except for a few later reappearances (see Georgel 1998), charity would thus be confined to the sphere of private almsgiving, where not «even a beggar» could fully rely on it.

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