

*Per una Storia della Congrega della Carità Apostolica di Brescia: Vol. I, **Marco Dotti**, Il mercato dell'incertezza. Pratiche sociali e finanziarie viste attraverso la lente di una grande confraternita urbana, Bologna, il Mulino, 2016, pp. 336; Vol. II, **Giovanni Gregorini**, Il merito della povertà. La Congrega della Carità Apostolica di Brescia in età contemporanea fra spazi sussidiari, nuove marginalità e culture sociali, Bologna, il Mulino, 2016, pp. 368; Vol. III, **Luciano Maffi**, "Eredità". Benefattori, origine e sviluppo del patrimonio della Congrega: un'efficiente rete di supporto sociale in età moderna e contemporanea, Bologna, il Mulino, 2017, pp. 300.*

This compelling trilogy is dedicated to the history of the Congregation of Apostolic Charity of Brescia, an institution of great importance not only locally but also in the context of religious assistance and credit organizations in Lombardy during the modern and contemporary eras. The three monographs are intended not so much to reconstruct the interesting vicissitudes of the agency as to read its action within a broader context, extending beyond the narrow confines of urban and

institutional history. The works place the examination of the forms of solidarity within a careful analysis of social and economic phenomena, paying attention to cultural and anthropological aspects. This enables the authors to identify the choices made by the confreres over the centuries as the manifestation of a remarkable creative intelligence.

The first volume, *Il mercato dell'incertezza* ("The market in uncertainty"), by Marco Dotti, focuses on Baroque Brescia as a case study to discuss a broader range of issues, both socially and chronologically. During the Old Regime, uncertainty – the word is intentionally used by the author in the broad sense – permeated the choices and the actions of individuals and social groups. The question – never quite dormant – appears to have become current once again for contemporary Western societies, especially on account of global dynamics and the crisis of the welfare state. Dotti's work takes readers on a journey through the belly of the Baroque city, intercepting pathways of social integration and affirmation that do not always achieve lofty goals, but reveal the physiology of the urban society of the epoch which, more than its physiognomy, appears strictly connected with finance, the economy, but also with a ritual universe and a pragmatic code. The micro-analytical reconstruction of a series of historical portraits brings to light multiple factors that were decisive for the integration of Brescian society, from which there derived a substantial citizenship that precedes and is often prelude to the institutional recognition of local rights and privileges.

In this picture, one feature that stands out is the role of the charitable institutions, and especially that of the main city charitable confraternity, namely the Congregation, whose dialogue with the inhabitants went beyond assistance, selectively orienting social actors' socio-economic strategies and helping to reduce the inherent social and economic risks. This organization, which unlike most other local institutions was not in the hands of the City Council and the families that controlled it, enjoyed considerable prestige both among the Venetian authorities and in the Brescian curia, whose prelates left substantial legacies to the institution; the Congregation also used the social and political importance

of its credit relations to defend and further its interests in the public arena. Indeed, the agency served as lender of last resort for the local institutional machinery, providing credit to the City, to local institutions, to the community of the territory and also to the families that exercised a centuries-old control over the Brescian Council.

In last part of the work, the author delves into what he calls the “ordinary exceptionality of an anonymous family of craftsmen.” Thanks to intensive exploitation of original source material, Dotti traces the story of the Battezzi family, whose surprising vicissitudes disclose a daily “hand-to-hand combat” against uncertainty, ranging from the inescapability of the plague to the difficulty of asserting economic and socio-political rights in a context of contradictions and profound disparities. Following the family’s affairs step-by-step, one is immersed, almost unconsciously, in a universe of practices from which there surfaces a complex accounting model that enables us to read the different transactions in the light of a series of economic, social, political and ritual objectives, frequently interlinked and framed within articulated, pragmatic strategies. These practices of estimation – observable, like a watermark, throughout the text – find systematic application in the constitution of the Apostolic Congregation’s annuities. It was a common occurrence for private parties to ask the confraternity to convert uncertain resources, mainly negotiable instruments or disputed properties, into services that went beyond modest annuities to include obsequies, masses *pro salute animae*, the care of relatives and others, and the distribution of alms within a specified social perimeter. The annuities themselves thus constitute an effective summary of the economic culture that the book explored.

The second volume, *Il merito della povertà* (The merit of poverty), by Giovanni Gregorini, contributes to the history of the Congregation of Brescia in the 19th and 20th centuries, analyzing it as an integral part of a welfare system that in contemporary times has come under very considerable pressure for change, both from wavering Italian national legislation and from cultural transformations under way in its institutional referents.

Drawing on statistical information contained in the Congregation's annual financial statements and specific data on charitable activity from its rich archives, Gregorini describes the organization and the management of the institution, without neglecting portraits of the confreres. They were often among the local protagonists of social Catholicism, with active roles in the civil society of Brescia, and participated in ecclesiastical life through an institutional experience that was laic and totally autonomous from the local and the central Church. That is, the volume describes a social assistance organization firmly rooted in the social and cultural fabric of the city, governed by a complex of procedures and practices – including accounting – on whose basis the confraternity pursued a variety of interrelated economic, political and above all moral values, reflecting a certain idea of charity and the relational charisma of the Congregation's leadership.

In the third volume, *Heredità*, by Luciano Maffi, the growth of the Congregation's patrimony is traced as a way of shedding light on much broader economic and social questions. The author examines the wills of some of the major benefactors of the confraternity, starting in the 17th century, and follows the accumulation and long-term management of the institution's assets. This is a story of great administrative competence, which resulted in significant lending activity, the interest earnings then being allocated to charity. The fundamental purpose of the brotherhood, in fact, was charity, giving, which was effected by means of an impressive social support network for the neediest. The capital came chiefly from generous individual donors in the form of bequests to the Congregation.

The first part of the book analyzes the wills, researching the motivations and descriptions of legacies and bequests, considering them as testimony to the spiritual, charitable and economic nature of the donor. The second part investigates the actions of the recipient, i.e. the Congregation itself, to increase the value of the assets, to procure and build up resources for solidarity and social assistance. The author describes cases in which the confraternity managed all the assets of entire

families. The confreres demonstrated great management skills, favoured by their social prestige and by their network of local relationships. In most cases they succeeded in what Maffi calls the “purification” of the inheritance from other bequests and from debts, by means among other things of credit collection and the application of the testamentary provisions. These actions enhanced the reputation of the institution and of its benefactors, who through the Congregation perpetuated their social support action over the centuries. Copious documentation enabled the author to examine the modalities by which, in managing the inheritances over the long run, the Apostolic Congregation built up its own patrimony. This involved relating the phases in the life of the confraternity, as a social support network and as an economic actor, to those of the local territory. The third part of the volume is dedicated to these aspects: it shows how the assistance organization succeeded in transforming risks into opportunities, strengthening its social support system and taking advantage of generational transitions that risked ending with failures or the break-up of inheritances, owing to the lack of direct heirs.

Taken together, the three volumes show the Congregation of Brescia as an effective charitable enterprise, capable of adapting to social change and mutable needs thanks first to its lending activity (16th-17th centuries) and then to the management of its property assets (19th-20th centuries). The institution succeeded in becoming what recent historiography defines as a “social support network” of solidarity and assistance activities. Thus, this three-volume set offers a contribution, innovative in some respects, to the lively scientific literature on the history of social welfare provisions in Italy, which suffer from a relative lack of international and domestic comparative work as they face the critical financial situations of the present and the future challenges of the new poverty.

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