Quantifying the unquantifiable? Informal charity in southern Europe, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries

On 4th May 1795, Antoni Vidal, a baker, petitioned the authorities of the Barcelona workhouse, asking them to release his wife Francisca.[1] According to his petition, Francisca had been wrongfully arrested for begging on the city wall. Her husband swore that she had not been begging, and had no need to, since he had the means to keep her. He added that he needed her help at home. The authorities agreed to release Francisca, but were clearly not convinced by her husband's claims, since they did so on the understanding that she would not be seen begging again. A similar petition requested the release of Maria Rosa Izquierdo, also arrested for begging. In her case, it was claimed that 'a charitable person customarily gave her alms, but without [Maria Rosa] begging.'

Almsgiving was an important form of charity in the past, but probably the least visible to historians. It was also arguably the most contentious for contemporaries. As in the examples above, it was a practice that was frequently subject to policing, if not repression, by the authorities. It is the policing of begging and almsgiving that has attracted most scholarship, in part because it is the most visible aspect for historians. The significance of almsgiving as a form of redistribution is harder to assess and has thus received less attention, yet remains no less important.

Historians of social spending disagree about the relative magnitude of sums transferred through formal poor relief compared with private charity before the welfare state. For some, charity was always less significant than state expenditure.[2] Others dispute this.[3] This debate feeds into another, larger question regarding the relative generosity of social spending between northern and southern Europe. Southern Europe is regarded by many as having been less generous than northern Europe in terms of expenditure per capita and as a proportion of GDP. Such claims, however, are based overwhelmingly on estimates of formal social spending. The most recent study, by van Bavel and Rijpma, is praiseworthy in its broad approach to poor relief, encompassing assistance from charitable and religious institutions alongside public expenditure, and also attempting to include formal entitlements to rights of commons and gleaning.[4] However, the authors explicitly exclude alms and collections for the poor.[5] Given that a frequent criticism by contemporaries of southern European regions was the abundance of almsgiving, the omission of this practice may bias estimates of social spending downwards to a greater extent than for northern Europe.[6]

[1] Arxiu Històric de la Casa de Misericòrdia de Barcelona (henceforth AHCMB), AF 9, caixa 9, lligall 3.
[2] Peter Lindert, 'Poor relief before the welfare state: Britain versus the Continent, 1780-1880', *European Review of Economic History*, 2 (1998), pp. 101-40.
[3] Colin Jones, 'Some recent trends in the history of charity' in M. Daunton (ed.), *Charity, self-interest and welfare in the English past* (London, 1996), pp. 51-63; Lynn Hollen Lees, *The solidarities of strangers. The English poor laws and the people, 1700-1948* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 13, 43-6.
[4] Bas van Bavel and Auke Rijpma, 'How important were formalized charity and social spending before the rise of the welfare state? A long-run analysis of selected western European cases, 1400-1850', *Economic History Review*, 69,1 (2016), pp. 159-87.
[5] Ibid, p. 162.
[6] Almsgiving remained widespread in northern Europe as well. See Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *The culture of giving. Informal support and gift exchange in early modern England* (Cambridge, 2008) , pp. 113-42; Joanna Innes, 'The mixed" economy of welfare in early modern England: assessments of the options from Hale to Malthus' in M. Daunton (ed.), *Charity, self-interest and welfare in the English past* (London, 1996), pp. 139-80 and the special issue of *Continuity and Change*, 27,2 (2012) on 'Giving in the Golden Age: charity in the Dutch Republic', especially the contributions by Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk and Daniëlle Teeuwen.

Omission derives largely from a lack of evidence, to the extent that almsgiving may well be regarded as unquantifiable. Certainly, the evidence that does exist is fragmentary. The same could be said of much of the evidence on other forms of charity and poor relief, however. Coming up with national or regional figures is impossible, but the evidence does allow for some assessment of how almsgiving functioned at a local level. Drawing on examples from Spain and France, this paper will offer a first, very tentative, attempt to quantify sums transferred by almsgiving in different communities, through records of collections for the poor. Where possible, these sums will be set alongside other types of charitable funds, in order to assess their relative significance. This paper will also examine just how widespread almsgiving was, and the role such informal charity played within particular local economies and social structures. Almsgiving was frequently attacked, yet the ways in which it was policed often varied between rural and urban settings, and often reflected a desire to control certain aspects of the practice, such as begging by women, rather than an outright suppression.

France and Spain have been chosen for various reasons, not least the linguistic abilities of the author. Spain has tended to be neglected in analyses of poor relief, particularly with regard to rural areas. What attention has been paid has focused mainly on the large charitable institutions of the cities, the records of which are easier to access.[7] Contemporaries, however, argued that almsgiving was ubiquitous, though they disagreed about the implications of this, and one historian has gone so far as to claim that it was the only source of relief in rural areas.[8] France, by contrast, has not been neglected by historians of poor relief, but views of charitable provision at the end of the ancien régime tend to be overwhelmingly negative. Hufton characterises formal poor relief in rural areas as 'wholly inadequate' in terms of the sums transferred, a verdict that has proved extremely influential.[9] Informal relief such as almsgiving, however, has received much less attention. Both France and Spain show similarities over the eighteenth century in terms of the debates over the proper role of charity, attempts at reform of poor relief, particularly centralisation of provision and, above all, intense efforts to police begging and almsgiving. Arguably both were experiencing a 'crisis of charity' at the end of the eighteenth century.[10] A fuller picture requires a longer-run approach that takes into account the greater dynamism of charitable efforts in the seventeenth century, following Trent.[11]

Formal versus informal charity

What constitutes informal charitable giving is a difficult question and in practice the line between formal and informal was often blurred.[12] Here, almsgiving or informal charity is taken to encompass all charitable activities for which there was no formal legal obligation. In other words, formal charity includes hospital provision and charities with an endowment of land or other forms of income, usually

[7] Pedro Carasa Soto, *El sistema hospitalario español en el siglo XIX. De la asistencia benéfica al modelo sanitario actual* (Valladolid, 1985); idem, *Pauperismo y revolución burguesa (Burgos, 1750-1900)* (Valladolid, 1987); idem, *Historia de la beneficiencia en Castilla y León. Poder y pobreza en la sociedad castellana* (Valladolid, 1991)**;** Elena Maza Zorrilla, *Pobreza y asistencia social en España, siglos XVI al XX. Aproximación histórica* (Valladolid, 1987); Montserrat Carbonell, *Sobreviure a Barcelona. Dones, pobresa i assistència al segle XVIII* (Vic, 1997).

[8] Henry Kamen, *The Phoenix and the Flame. Catalonia and the Counter Reformation* (New Haven, 1993), p. 203.

[9] Olwen Hufton, *The poor of eighteenth-century France, 1750-1789* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 173-6.

[10] Hufton, *Poor*, p. 201; Colin Jones, *Charity and bienfaisance: the treatment of the poor in the Montpellier region 1740-1815* (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 76-94.

[11] Colin Jones, 'Perspectives on poor relief, health care and the Counter-Reformation in France' in Ole Peter Grell, Andrew Cunningham and Jon Arrizabalaga (eds.), *Health care and poor relief in Counter-Reformation Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 215-29.

[12] Ben-Amos, *Culture of giving*, pp. 9-12.

created as the result of an individual legacy and thus with stipulations as how the income was to be distributed. Informal assistance, by contrast, includes alms to beggars in the street, in other public spaces or at the door of one's house; alms distributed at specific events such as funerals or festivities and collections for the poor. The last could be *ad hoc* collections in response to particular events or crises, or regular collections carried out either in church, or on particular days. These regular collections are the most visible and thus those that will be used below in attempting to quantify such giving, but they arguably also represent a more 'formal' kind of almsgiving: one which occurred at set times and in set ways. In fact, as will be seen below, much of what might appear to be 'casual' almsgiving at the doors of houses, churches and monastic buildings also followed set patterns and expectations. It might be more useful to think in terms of 'voluntary' charity compared with 'involuntary', but the line was also blurred here: the absence of formal written legal obligations did not preclude a strong element of custom and moral obligation behind much informal giving.

Almsgiving sometimes has the impression of having been insignificant in financial terms or, at least, as involving sums that were inferior to those transferred by more formal poor relief. One example of this impression is given by the surveys of poor relief carried out by the French authorities at the end of the ancien régime, in which parishes were asked to state what resources were available for the poor. [13] A frequent response was that parishes had no formal endowment or established charitable organisation, only the alms given by better-off inhabitants. Similar replies are to be found for a survey of poor relief in the Spanish diocese of Girona in 1774-6.[14] The 'only' is telling: Hufton and Jones in their use of the French surveys have implicitly assumed that it meant the sums were unimportant, in that they record such parishes as having no poor relief. Whether 'only' did indeed mean that almsgiving was insignificant is less clear. For many of the respondents, the distinction between formal and informal relief may have been less about the sums transferred, and more about the legal entitlement to relief that an endowment could bestow. The parish of La Caze in the diocese of Castres acknowledged that every year the countess of Poitiers, as *seigneur* of the parish, distributed 93 *setiers* of grain to the poor and did so because of two legacies supposedly left by her ancestors, but emphasised that no titles existed obliging the countess to do so.[15] Certainly, a frequent and bitter complaint was that the tithe, which by rights could be said to belong to the poor, had usually been appropriated by others.[16] There were clear reasons why formal relief might be preferable to informal, but whether informal relief was less generous than formal relief remains to be proven.

Quantifying the unquantifiable?

A systematic investigation of informal relief is impossible to carry out. Unlike the analysis of hospital provision and endowed charities, for which surveys do exist from the late eighteenth century at regional and sometimes national level, there has been as yet no identification of equivalent investigations into informal charity in France or Spain by either civil or ecclesiastical authorities. Studying informal charity thus relies upon fortuitous discoveries in archives, rather than the

[13] These surveys into poor relief include those carried out in the 1760s and 1770s under Turgot and Terray, and the reports of the Comité de Mendicité in 1790. See Hufton, *Poor* and Jones, *Charity*, pp. 71-5, 263-73.
[14] See Julie Marfany, 'Family and welfare in early modern Europe: a north-south comparison' in Chris Briggs, P.M. Kitson and S.J. Thompson (eds.), *Population, welfare and economic change in Britain 1290-1834* (Woodbridge, 2014), pp. 103-27.
[15] Archives Départementales (AD) de l'Hérault, C563, undated but appear to be replies to inquiry of 1770 by Terray.
[16] Jones, *Charity*, pp. 38-42.

identification of a particular series of documents. Mentions of almsgiving are frequent, but few include details of actual sums.

A rare example of an official investigation that explicitly asked parishes to comment on voluntary almsgiving was one carried out in the Rouen area in 1788. Responses survive for 215 parishes.[17] They consist of printed forms on which each parish was asked to provide figures for different categories of poor (the old and infirm, families with many children whose earnings were insufficient to cover their needs), estimates of the sums needed to support these different categories and also the cost of apprenticing poor children, and a final column asking what resources the parish had to raise these sums. This final column asked four specific questions: one, what endowments or foundations the parish had to provide poor relief; two, what alms were given by either the abbey or the priory on which the parish depended; three, what alms were given voluntarily by the priest and inhabitants and four, what means there was in the parish of providing work for the poor. It is this final column and particularly question three that is of interest here. It is not clear on whose instructions the survey was carried out, but the responses in all cases were drawn up and signed by members of the municipal assembly, sometimes including the parish priest, sometimes not.

The question on voluntary almsgiving within the parish highlights the problems of attempting to quantify informal assistance. A couple of parishes read the question as how much income could be raised through voluntary collections, but most took it as how much was usually raised. The most common response was that such sums could not be known or calculated, that they varied according to the need of the poor and the ability to give. The authorities of Salmonville la Rivière, for example, pointed out that 'no one usually keeps a register of what he gives out of pure charity'.[18] Others were reluctant to give the information, clearly considering it to be a private matter. The parish of Saint Gervais claimed they could only give a rough estimate as their priest refused to say how much he gave, while the assembly at Radepont described alms as 'sécours cachées (hidden help)'.[19] Some parishes were uncertain as to what the question asked. The parish of Montreuil filled in the blank space for the question with 'nothing', but then added a note below stating that the parishioners had agreed to support the poor, and that the *curé* gave generously despite only receiving part of the tithe.[20] It seems as if for some parishes, alms were understood as more formal aid.

What is most striking is that, while only 50 parishes (24%) gave an actual figure for voluntary alms, only 54 (25%) denied that there was no almsgiving, including those who simply left that part of the form blank, as opposed to explicitly writing 'nothing' or 'zero'. Just over half of the parishes (51%) gave responses that made clear there was almsgiving but that it could not be quantified. Moreover, such almsgiving far outweighed formal relief within the responses. Only 50 parishes (24%) had any endowment for the poor, including two with hospitals, and still fewer, 29 (13%), had any charity from religious institutions, including those parishes that interpreted the question to include seigneurial charity. These figures fit with Hufton's gloomy view of formal poor relief in much of France, including Rouen. Moreover, in most cases where alms were estimated and an endowment or other regular forms of charity also existed, the sums transferred by the former were higher than the latter, by varying degrees. Only in four cases did formal relief outweigh informal, though very few parishes have figures for both.[21] The sums estimated for informal relief ranged from 10 *livres* to 600 *livres*,

[17] These are in AD Seine-Maritime, C2210, C2211, C2212.
[18] AD Seine-Maritime, C2212.
[19] Ibid.
[20] AD Seine-Maritime, C2210.
[21] Jainville (C2211), St Gervais, Servaville, St Martin de Boissas (C2212).

with a mean of 161 *livres* and a median of 110, though without estimates of population size such figures mean little. Some parishes such as Bierville and Saint Ouen du Breuil claimed proudly to be able to support their poor or, at least, that no one needed to beg.[22] Other parishes testified to the 'crisis of charity' identified by Hufton and Jones. The poor of Saint Victor la Campagne had been helped up until now, but costs were rising.[23] The assembly of Morgny expressed the desire to be charitable, claiming that everyone gave what they could, but prices were high and the numbers of the poor growing.[24] The decline of cotton manufacturing and poor harvests were frequently cited as growing pressures on charity. Similarly, the role of the parish priest as a pivotal figure in charitable giving was exalted by the authorities of Montreuil, who noted his generosity despite how little tithe he received. The poverty of parish priests was often cited in defence of modest sums, as in Saint Martin des Arbres, where the priest had only a small income, and other parishioners were also unable to give very much.[25]

Too much weight cannot be placed on the actual sums recorded. Most were described as estimates, and given in round figures. Those that were more precise were often only partial figures, usually based on church collections, as in Voissel, where the reply was that such collections produced about 60 *livres* but other gifts could not be estimated.[26] An interesting exception was La Vaupalière, where the sum of 182 *livres* was based on a tax of all households, listed on the back of the form.[27]

In the absence of other surveys, the easiest type of almsgiving to quantify is indeed collections for the poor. As noted, they were more likely to be recorded once they were formalised to some extent. The examples here are all of collections that formed part of the income stream of established charitable institutions and thus were recorded in the accounts. The most common form was collections in church, either at the door or passing a plate round the congregation, or a fixed collection box which was emptied every so often. In addition, in some cases collections were held door to door, or after the harvest. The charitable confraternity in Péret in the diocese of Montpellier stipulated in its foundation statutes of 1683 that collections would be held in church and door-to-door on Sundays, but also after the sheep shearing, and the grain, grape and olive harvests.[28] The dioceses of Nîmes and Montpellier saw various *bureaux de charité* (charity committees) founded in 1688 and 1689 respectively as part of reforming drives by their bishops. 56 were founded in Montpellier according to the pastoral visit of 1689.[29] For Nîmes, no list survives, but the accounts and registers of four *bureaux* examined so far trace their foundation back to 1688, while at least one other appears to have a similar foundation date.[30] Other *bureaux* can be identified in the archives which may have been founded at the same time, or at a different date. From the surviving statutes and account books of these *bureaux*, it is clear that collections formed their main source of income.

[22] AD Seine-Maritime C2212 (Bierville), C2211 (St Ouen).
[23] AD Seine-Maritime, C2211.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid. On the poverty of parish priests, see Timothy Tackett, *Priest and parish in eighteenth-century France. A social and political study of the curés in a diocese of Dauphiné, 1750-1791* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 118-47.
[26] AD Seine-Maritime, C2212.
[27] AD Seine-Maritime, C2211.
[28] AD Hérault, Archives Communales (AC) Péret 197 EDT 20, Confrérie de la Charité, unfoliated volume.
[29] AD Hérault, G1353, copies from 1740 of extract from register of pastoral visit of 1689 and foundation statutes of the different *bureaux*.
[30] AD Gard, 144 J 42, Bureau de charité de Soudorgue; AC Saint-Bonnet-de-Salendrinque, E dépôt 186/5; AC Roquedur, E dépôt 118/5; AC Montpézat, E dépôt 33/11. The accounts of the bureau of Ribaute-les-Tavernnes start in 1690, but with 14 pages missing at the start. AC Ribaute-les-Tavernnes, E dépôt 206/16.

Table 1: Sums collected by the bureau de charité of Lasalle, 1774-1786

Year	Total sum
1774 (second half only)	205 *l*, 0 *s*, 0 *d*
1775	569 *l*, 19 *s*, 6 *d*
1776	664 *l*, 4 *s*, 1 *d*
1777	581 *l*, 3 *s*, 3 *d*
1778	574 *l*, 0 *s*, 0 *d*
1779	601 *l*, 17 *s*, 9 *d*
1780	532 *l*, 17 *s*, 6 *d*
1781	644 *l*, 0 *s*, 3 *d*
1782	869 *l*, 5 *s*, 3 *d*
1783	622 *l*, 16 *s*, 5 *d*
1784	735 *l*, 12 *s*, 6 *d*
1785	654 *l*, 18 *s*, 2 *d*
1786	807 *l*, 16 *s*, 8 *d*

Source: AD Gard, AC Lassalle, E dépôt 27/141.

Table 1 shows the annual sums collected in church by the *bureau de charité* of Lassalle, in the diocese of Nîmes for twelve years of surviving accounts. The amounts fluctuate slightly from year to year, but show a sustained income for just over a decade, at the highest end of the range identified for the Rouen parishes. Here, there is no sign of a 'crisis of charity', given that figures were rising at the end, just before the revolution. Again, population figures are needed to set these sums in context, but the main point for the moment is that income was raised here almost entirely from weekly collections. There were a few legacies, no more than one a year, and a small income from interest on loans, which was never more than 35-50 *livres* a year.

In the village of Batea in south-west Catalonia, collections for the poor formed the main source of income for the short-lived (thanks to the Napoleonic wars) charity committee or *Junta de Caritat*.[31] Population figures are not available before 1840, when the village had 2,444 inhabitants. In the 1780s, it is likely to have been smaller, though it is impossible to say by how much. Accounts survive for only two years, 1787 and 1790. What is striking, however, is that both years the committee ended in credit; in 1790 with almost double the funds available at the start. In 1787, the only source of income cited is alms in cash and in kind. Ending in credit does not seem to be because the committee was parsimonious in its support. In 1787, 3% of expenditure went on indoor relief in the small local hospital. Of the rest, 43% was spent helping 37 households through short-term periods of illness and paying for food, and the remaining 53% was spent on daily pensions to a crippled artisan, a poor widow with four children, another two widows and a young woman. In addition, the relatives of two orphan children were being paid to look after them and they were being educated. Finally, the committee had brought two local girls, Benita Bernad and Francisca Altés, back from the Barcelona workhouse, along with an unnamed orphan boy, and was paying them to teach cotton spinning and carding to others, as well as apprenticing the boy to a rope-maker. The accounts for 1789 are even more impressive. Again, income from collections in church and door-to-door made up the bulk of income, only 12% came from two legacies and from municipal funds. Again, expenditure on the hospital was minimal: just 4.5% including the salary of the warden. The bulk of expenditure had gone on outdoor relief, either temporary help with illness or regular pensions to widows, orphans and labourers "burdened with children", including milk for two babies, but also on the school for poor

[31] The committee was established in 1786 and lasted until the French invasion of 1808. A description of its foundation and the two years of surviving accounts (other papers were lost or destroyed in the war) are in Arxiu General de la Diputació de Barcelona (AGDB), *lligall* 13.

children. A new expense had been the purchase of five oilskins to loan to local families to carry oil up from the mill to their houses (the local economy was based on grain and olives).

The town of Vilafranca del Penedès, also in Catalonia, was similarly able to channel almsgiving through its charity committee, set up in 1799 under the auspices of an enlightened lawyer, Manuel Barba i Roca.[32] The income raised was used to run a soup kitchen, a school for girls, and to provide clothing and other forms of outdoor relief to the poor. Again, while some income came from legacies, the bulk was from alms that had previously been given by nineteen of the richest families in the town.

Many hospitals also included almsgiving as part of their income stream. Colin Jones has analysed the significance of informal giving to the various poor relief institutions of Montpellier.[33] In particular, the Hôpital Général, Hôtel Dieu and Miséricorde (a charitable confraternity providing outdoor relief), benefited from collections outside church doors on Maundy Thursday and door-to-door collections in the spring. In the 1740s, income from collections made up 29.2% of the total charitable income of the Hôpital Général, 32.1% of the charitable income of the Hôtel Dieu and 20.1% of the charitable income of the Miséricorde. Most of the remainder of the charitable income came from legacies. Charitable income in turn was 18%, 15% and 66% respectively of the total income of the three institutions, reflecting the longevity and thus ability to build up income from rents, subsidies and municipal rights of the two hospitals. In absolute numbers, the sums collected by the Hôpital Général outweighed those of the Hôtel Dieu, which in turn outweighed those of the Miséricorde. Over the eighteenth century, Jones shows that income from collections fluctuated from year to year, but was rising over the last two decades or so before the Revolution, though high prices in those years deflate the trend in real terms.

A interesting contrast is provided by two smaller rural Spanish hospitals, Berga and Vilarrodona, both in Catalonia. In 1787, Berga had a population of 3,259, Vilarrodona 1,428**.** Both hospitals have surviving accounts for the eighteenth century, and both record collections as part of their income. The Vilarrodona accounts were kept in a more simple form, distinguishing essentially between income from land, income from legacies and income from either a collection plate or box in church (the Catalan word *baci* literally means 'bowl', but could also refer to a fixed collection box).[34] The distinction may be important, since a collection bowl passed round the congregation might be harder to ignore than a box fixed to a wall. Certainly, the Vilarrodona collection never raised more than a few shillings a year, and represented only a tiny part of the hospital's income. By contrast, the Berga hospital collections made up 38% of income on average, alongside legacies, some income in kind in the form of grain from land owned by the hospital and income from various annuities.[35] There was also a *baci*, which seems to have been a collection on one day, the feast of the patron saint, St Barnabas (17th June). Again, this raised only tiny sums relative to other collections. These were held every Sunday in Lent, with two collectors, one at each door of the church and thus presumably harder to ignore. In addition, the hospital held a door-to-door collection once during Lent and collected at the two annual fairs, one also in Lent, the other in September.

[32] Ramon Arnabat, *Manuel Barba i Roca (1752-1824). Entre l'humanisme i la Il.lustració* (Vilafranca del Penedès, 2006), pp. 127-61, 269-79.
[33] Jones, *Charity and bienfaisance*, pp. 78-80.
[34] Arxiu Diocesà de Barcelona (ADB), Parroquies, 196, 'Llibre de comptes de l'hospital'.
[35] Arxiu Comarcal del Berguedà, Hospital de Berga, 6: 'Ospital. Entradas y Exidas' (1723-1800), 9: 'Llibre del hospital de la vila de Berga…' (1677-1723).

What these examples might suggest is that almsgiving was more likely to yield significant sums if organised and frequent, but this is complicated by the fact that institutions had to organise if they wished to receive alms. Hospital patients could not beg directly, they needed someone to do it on their behalf. Obtaining the right to beg from religious or civic authorities was often crucial, and may explain the differences between Berga and Vilarrodona, though there is no surviving reference in either case to permissions or licenses to beg. Similarly, charities needed actively to solicit alms. There is a strong impression here that having a face-to-face element in the form of collectors, rather than just a box, was more effective in raising income, a point which will be returned to below.[36] We cannot assume, however, that almsgiving that was ad hoc, in response to specific requests on the doorstep or in the street was necessarily less generous, but it is impossible to know. We catch only scattered glimpses of these kinds of irregular payments.

One type of informal or voluntary almsgiving was donations by large ecclesiastical institutions, presumably in response to specific petitions. The surviving accounts of the cathedral chapter of Nîmes for 1781 and 1782 list various payments described as *aumônes* to the poor of different parishes, though each year also contains a payment to a single family.[37] The payments are listed along with various other one-off payments for goods and services under the heading 'Depenses communes'. In 1781, there were eleven, ranging from 12 to 60 *livres* and totalling 312 *livres*. In 1782, there were 12 payments. This year, they were larger, ranging from 24 to three payments of 150 *livres*, all three to the parish of St Charles in Nîmes itself, reflecting either greater population density or a stronger sense of obligation to the 'local' poor. The sums for 1782 totalled 816 *livres*. No explanation is given of the need behind the payments, in terms of why particular parishes or families were the recipients, though it may simply be that they solicited aid directly, or that the cathedral chapter had seigneurial rights in these locations. Whatever the reason, the sums were trivial in terms of the overall income and expenses, amounting to only 0.15% of the chapter's income in 1781 and 0.45% in 1782. Certainly, as has been mentioned above, the reluctance of ecclesiastical institutions and seigneurs, particularly tithe owners, to support the poor was a source of much bitterness in France at the end of the *ancien régime*.

In Spain, ecclesiastical institutions were more likely to be criticised for excessive almsgiving, though these complaints should not be taken at face value, since they reflected the desire to control begging and the belief that it encouraged idleness. The monastery of Sant Pere de Rodes, in a particularly isolated and mountainous part of north-eastern Catalonia, offered shelter to all passers-by, and gave bread and sardines to poor visitors, as well as distributing small rations of bread to beggars after mass. Despite its location, the monastery sometimes witnessed as many as a hundred paupers a day asking for relief by the late eighteenth century, according to one account.[38] Similarly, the monastery of Montserrat outside Barcelona, also located at the top of a mountain, saw families from the nearest village climbing up daily to request alms. Again, it is impossible to say how generous such aid was. It may have been more regular perhaps than that given by equivalent institutions in France, according to the current historiography, although even in France such charity may have shown marked regional variations.[39]

[36] Daniëlle Teeuwen draws the same conclusion for collecting boxes in Dutch towns: see D. Teeuwen, 'Collections for the poor: monetary charitable donations in Dutch towns, c.1600-1800', *Continuity and Change*, 27,2 (2012), pp. 271-99, here p. 277.
[37] AD Gard, G734 and G735.
[38] Francisco de Zamora, *Diario*, pp. 345-6.
[39] A diocese where ecclesiastic charity seems to have been more evident was Castres: see AD Hérault, C563.

Nonetheless, the replies to the 1788 survey of the Rouen district analysed above suggest that charity was more evident within communities and among neighbours than from above. The parish priest has already been identified as a key figure both in the distribution of relief, and the identification of those in need, but he was also clearly often the most important source of charity, subject to his own income.[40] Other households also gave actively, responding to requests at their door, in the street, and at important occasions such as saints' days, christenings and funerals. Such charity was commonplace and usually not recorded, but there are occasional mentions. A minor Catalan noble describes in his diary the regular distribution of alms within his Barcelona neighbourhood on the feast day of his patron saint, when he also provided a dinner for his tenants.[41] Similarly, on a visit to his country estate in 1794, he distributed alms in the village.[42] The Riembau family, fairly well-to-do peasant farmers from the parish of Sant Hipòlit de Voltregà, in central Catalonia, recorded in their account books various sums spent on alms at funerals, in both cash and kind, including donations of grain to the hospital of Vic as well as alms to the poor at the church door.[43] In 1725, over five *lliures* (Catalan pounds) was spent in cash at one funeral; 17 *lliures* worth of grain was distributed in 1757 at another, and 9 *lliures* given out in cash in 1786. At the funeral in 1752 of Francesc Quatrecases, another peasant from Pruit, a small village near Vic, the number of poor to whom alms were given was around 650, according to Quatrecases' son, though the amount given was recorded simply as 'the customary donation'.[44] In a report of 1786, the mayor of Vilafranca del Penedès listed nineteen wealthy families of the town who distributed alms to the poor from their doors.[45] The parish of Saint Martin du Plessis, near Rouen, in their response to the 1788 inquiry, stated that there were 26 households in the parish, of which the 6 households with land of their own and the parish priest were responsible for taking care of the poor.[46]

These examples illustrate that almsgiving was widespread and indeed a mainstay of poor relief in many areas of France and Spain. At the same time, they highlight the obstacles for the historian in attempting to quantify such informal, voluntary assistance in any meaningful way. What is potentially easier is an understanding of how informal charity functioned within communities, and why it was the subject of so much debate by the later eighteenth century.

Indiscriminate charity or Christian duty?

By the eighteenth century, informal voluntary charity of the kind described above was under attack from Enlightened reformers. The English traveller and author of a work on poor relief, Joseph Townsend, was scathing of charitable giving by bishops, convents and monasteries in his travels around Spain. He saw such indiscriminate daily alms as responsible for the swarms of beggars in the streets of every town and city, as in his description of Leon:

[40] Gutton, *La société*, p. 15; Kathryn Norberg, *Rich and poor in Grenoble, 1600-1814*(Berkeley, 1985), pp. 193-4; Tackett, *Priest and parish*, pp. 157-9; Puigvert, *Església*, pp. 88-110 and Pullan, 'Charity and poor relief', pp. 77-9.
[41] Rafel d'Amat i de Cortada, Baró de Maldà, *Calaix de sastre* ed. R. Boixareu, 11 vols (Barcelona, 1987-2005), vol. III, p. 275, vol. IV, p. 249.
[42] Ibid, vol. II, p. 224.
[43] Arxiu Episcopal de Vic, Arxiu patrimonial Mas Riembau, 22, *Llibre de comptes (1660-1791)*, fols 78, 80.
[44] 'Llibre de comptes i notes de Joan Quatrecases, Vicenç Quatrecases i Francesc Quatrecases (1696-1812)', reproduced in *Guerra, pau i vida quotidiana en primera persona* ed. Rafel Ginebra (Vic, 2005), p. 198.
[45] Manuel Llorca Agulló, 'Informe del Alcalde Mayor (1786)', reproduced in R. Arnabat and B. Moreno (eds.), *El Penedès durant la segona meitat del segle XVIII: textos inèdits* (Vilafranca, 2006).
[46] AD Seine-Maritime, C2210.

> 'Beggars abound in every street, all fed by the convents, and at the bishop's palace. Here they get their breakfast, there they dine. Besides food they receive every other day, the men a farthing, the women and children half as much. On this provision they live, they marry, and they perpetuate a miserable race.'[47]

The secular authorities were most concerned with begging, as evident in the move in both countries, earlier in France, to 'confine' the poor as far as possible, through the *dépôts de mendicité* and *hospicios*.[48] Many clerics in both countries, however, were becoming sensitive about the standard portrayal of unthinking charity practised by the clergy, in which, in the words of one French bishop, it was 'a struggle to discern legitimate begging'.[49] The bishops of Barcelona and Girona were instrumental in reforming the existing workhouse in the first city and founding a new one in the second. Josep Climent, bishop of Barcelona, in a 1772 pamphlet promoting the reformed workhouse, promised to set a good example by giving to the institution the alms he gave on a daily basis at the door of his palace.[50] There were complaints that crowds engaged in unseemly pushing and shoving at funerals in order to get a share of alms. The parish priest of Igualada, Francisco Davesa, in his will in 1738, stated that no alms were to be distributed at his funeral, because 'of the pressure of the many poor who come, which leads to dangers such as pregnant women miscarrying, or the babies they carry in their arms breaking an arm, as has happened'.[51]

The association between begging and violence was particularly strong. In both Spain and France, there were complaints that many beggars roamed the countryside extorting alms from remote households through threats of violence.[52] It is in urban areas, however, that perhaps the highest levels of anxiety about begging were to be found, particularly in years of high prices and unemployment. The 1790s saw an intensification of complaints about beggars on the streets of Barcelona, following factory closures and an influx of refugees fleeing south from French troops. The Baró de Maldà, a minor Catalan aristocrat, complained bitterly in his diary about the hordes of beggars pestering people like 'impertinent flies' for alms in the streets and not just in church doorways but inside the church itself, even during services.[53] In part, this reflected fears of revolution spreading south, exacerbated by the experience of bread riots (*rembomboris de pa*) in 1789, after which the aristocracy of Barcelona hastily made donations to the Junta de Caritat (charity committee) set up to deal with the crisis created by soaring bread prices.[54]

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[47] Josep Townsend, *A Journey through Spain in the Years 1786 and 1787*, 3 vols., (London, 1791), I, pp. 378-9. For other examples, see II, pp., 6-9, 84-5, 98, 278, III, pp., 16-18, 57-60, 251-4.

[48] Gutton, *La société*, pp. 298-303, 438-67; William Callahan, 'The problem of confinement: an aspect of poor relief in eighteenth-century Spain', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 51,1 (1971), pp. 1-24.

[49] Jean-Pierre Camus, bishop of Belley, cited in Gutton, *La société*, p. 334. For Spanish examples of criticism of indiscriminate charity among clerics by other clerics, see Francisco Antonio Lorenzana, *Cartas, edictas y otras obras sueltas* (Toledo, 1786), pp. ii-iii, and Callahan, 'Problem of confinement', pp. 8-11.

[50] Josep Climent, 'Noticia que tendrán presentes los Señores que componen la Junta de la Real Casa del Hospicio y Refugio de la Ciudad de Barcelona, para disponer su mejor régimen y gobierno, y formar sus Ordenanzas' in *Obras* 3 vols, (Madrid: Imprenta Real, 1788), vol. III, p. 46.

[51] Arxiu de la Corona d'Aragó, Notariales, 825, Vicens Cots, *Testaments*, fols 140r-149v.

[52] Hufton, *Poor*, pp. 201-10; Gutton, pp. 196-211; Callahan, 'Problem of confinement', p.1; Borrell, *Pobresa*, pp. 30-3.

[53] Amat i de Cortada, *Calaix de sastre*, vol. V, p. 27. See also vol. III, p. 217, p. 290, vol. IV, p. 46, p. 169, p. 174, pp. 260-1, pp. 263-4.

[54] Ibid, vol. I, p. 207. See also J.M. Delgado, 'El impacto de las crisis coloniales en la economia catalana (1787-1807)' in G. Anes (ed.), *La economia española al final del Antiguo Régimen*, vol. III (Madrid, 19820, pp. 99-169.

In particular, however, it was begging by women that aroused the ire of the Baró. In one instance, he makes a sarcastic reference to 'poor men and "poor women"' (*pobres y "pobras"*), the quotation marks suggesting scepticism as to the real poverty of the women. Female beggars are described as particularly demanding and forward (*dones importunes*), and strident in their language.[55] As in the examples cited at the start of the paper, there seems to have been an unease with women begging, to the extent that even their presence in certain public spaces could be suspicious. It is significant that Francisca Vidal was on the city wall when she was arrested for begging, since this was a favourite stroll for Barcelona residents and thus a common location for beggars. To be on the streets, soliciting alms, was increasingly viewed as inappropriate for women. The line between prostitution and begging was blurred and, in the case of Barcelona at least, women on the streets were a threat in other ways. Of the five individuals executed for their part in the 1789 food riots, one was a woman. Female beggars outnumbered males in the Barcelona workhouse by a ratio of 1.4:1 in the period 1780-1803, although it is possible men caught begging were forcibly conscripted instead.[56] Female beggars also outnumbered male in the Charité workhouse in Lyon, though Gutton believes this is because male beggars were more likely to wander longer distances and thus end up being arrested elsewhere and sent to the *dépôts de mendicité* instead.[57] Certainly two-thirds of the population of the Grenoble *dépôt* in the 1780s were male.[58] Whatever the reasons for a particular dislike of female beggars, it is interesting that such a dislike should be so evident by the end of the eighteenth century, given that, as will be discussed shortly, women had previously had an active role in collecting for the poor.

A greater desire for social control thus underlay a vocabulary of 'indiscriminate' or 'undiscerning' charity that reformers saw as fostering the very evil it was aimed to alleviate. However, the crackdown on begging should not be conflated with a crackdown on charitable giving. The fact that almsgiving is most visible to us in the semi-formalised guise of collections for the poor is precisely because the authorities for the most part sought not to suppress the practice, but to channel it towards suitable ends. Above all, they wanted to eliminate, or at least reduce, face-to-face interactions between donor and recipient, hence the promotion of *bureaux de charité* and *Juntas de Caridad* that would stand between donors and recipients and, it was claimed, distribute relief more effectively and only to the deserving. Very few in either France or Spain proposed any other method of funding poor relief other than through charitable donations, though it was understood in Spain at least that existing endowments and funds for the poor could be transferred to new charity committees or workhouses, not always without a fight.[59]

Attitudes towards begging and almsgiving were complex, however, and there was no consensus in either theory or practice as to how they should be viewed. In the first place, the idea that charity was a Christian duty continued to be upheld throughout the period, in Spain at least. A standard tribute to bishops and other clerics in funeral sermons was their generosity towards the poor. Bishops were both inundated with petitions from the poor throughout the eighteenth century, though how generous they were at responding has yet to be investigated.[60] The convent of Saint Augustine in Torroella de Montgrí reluctantly agreed to pay a *quartera* of grain to the Girona workhouse which had previously

[55] Amat i de Cortada, *Calaix de sastre*, vol. V, pp. 27-9. See also p. 39 and pp. 50-1.
[56] For details, see Montserrat Carbonell-Esteller and Julie Marfany, 'Gender, life-cycle and family "strategies" among the poor: the Barcelona workhouse, 1762-1805', *Economic History Review* (forthcoming, 2017).
[57] Gutton, *La société*, pp. 111-22.
[58] Norberg, *Rich and poor*, p. 221.
[59] For details of such conflicts, see Julie Marfany, 'The extent and nature of poor relief in Catalonia, c.1550-1820', paper presented to the Rural History conference, University of Girona, September 2015.
[60] For examples, see the petitions to the bishop of Vic in AEV 1852/2, 1853/4, 1854/2. 1855/1, covering the period 1781-1811. Notes in the margins suggest many petitioners were helped.

been given to the poor. The prior wrote to the workhouse in 1795 and 1796, however, to inform them that, since no one had come to collect the grain, and there were many local households in need, it had been distributed to them. While offering to reimburse the workhouse, the prior remarked sharply that the convent did not intend to ignore the poor at its gate.[61] Within communities, charity remained a duty that was owed to those less fortunate, particularly where ties of kinship or neighbourliness existed. In rural areas, despite occasional fears of violence from vagrants, a strong tradition of hospitality and shelter to passers-by persisted, especially in areas of dispersed settlement.[62] This tradition was particularly marked in north-eastern Spain, where some farmhouses had rooms designated for passers-by and a custom of giving grain or bread to the poor on a regular basis. In his memorandum book, a peasant farmer from a tiny village near Vic in Catalonia recorded that, in the year of harvest failure of 1764, his household had fed 25-30 poor every evening, up to 65 on one occasion, 'many of whom were known to us, or kin'.[63] His son later explained his family's ability to weather the difficult years of 1788-91 and pay for rebuilding of the house without going into debt by the fact that, throughout, they had kept up their support for the poor, thus God had shown them charity.[64] Similarly, peasants from the Penedès district saw almsgiving as 'a duty inherited from their forebears; and in the recent years of scarcity, some insisted upon fulfilling this'.[65] Crisis years, such as the poor harvests of 1764, 1788-91 and 1809-12, saw many comments in peasant diaries and account books on the help offered to the poor.[66] It was not, however, only in exceptional years that alms were given, rather, the comments imply that almsgiving was so much a part of the social fabric that it only needed to be noted in exceptional years.

Moreover, against the anecdotes of mobs at funerals, there are also comments that suggest alms were often distributed in an orderly fashion, to known recipients. One eighteenth-century traveller described the distribution of alms by the Convent of the Mercenarios in Vic, where the poor queued according to a set order.[67] Similarly, the alms distributed by the monastery of Sant Pere de Rodes, described above, could only be claimed once every fifteen days. The monastery at Montserrat also distributed alms on a daily basis, but at the set time of seven in the morning, and with only the top half of the door open.[68] According to the mayor of Vilafranca del Penedès, nineteen wealthy families in the town distributed alms to the poor from their doors, but on set days and at set times.[69]

It is also clear that begging and almsgiving in rural areas often persisted because both were part of both the social fabric and local economic structures. As Gutton points out, it was often hard to distinguish vagrancy in rural areas from seasonal migration and other types of activity, such as tramping artisans and peddlers, to the extent that legislation often had to make exemption for specific cases.[70] A Spanish traveller and government official, Francisco de Zamora, circulated an enquiry round Catalonia in 1789, asking local authorities a series of questions about the local agriculture,

[61] Arxiu Històric de Girona (AHG) 677.
[62] Gutton, *La société*, p. 200.
[63] 'Llibre de comptes de Joan Quatrecases, Vicenç Quatrecases i Francesc Quatrecases', p. 182.
[64] Ibid, p. 124.
[65] Manuel Barba i Roca, 'Apéndice a las respuestas al interrogatorio sobre Villafranca del Penedès (1790)', reproduced in Ramon Arnabat, *Manuel Barba i Roca (1752-1824). Entre l'humanisme i la Il.lustració* (Vilafranca del Penedès, 2006), pp. 253-63, here p. 263.
[66] See examples in Antoni Simon Tarrés (ed.), *Pagesos, capellans i industrials de la Marina de la Selva. Memòries i diaris personals de la Catalunya moderna* (Barcelona, 1993).
[67] Zamora, *Diario*, p. 58.
[68] Amat i de Cortada, *Calaix de sastre*, vol. II, p. 138.
[69] Manuel Llorca Agulló, 'Informe del Alcalde Mayor (1786)', reproduced in R. Arnabat and B. Moreno (eds.), *El Penedès durant la segona meitat del segle XVIII: textos inèdits* (Vilafranca, 2006).
[70] Gutton, *La société*, pp. 139-58.

industry, climate, population and other aspects.[71] Among the questions was one that asked specifically if the inhabitants needed to leave the village to find work elsewhere at any season of the year, and another that asked about the extent of poverty in the village. While not explicitly linked, the second of these questions usually followed the first, and many respondents made a connection between seasonal migration and begging. In particular, parishes in the north-west of Catalonia, probably the poorest area of the region, all replied that seasonal migration down to the plains of central Catalonia and towards Barcelona was common.[72] Those who migrated looked for work, but if they could not find it, begged. What is interesting is that views on this were mixed: some, such as the reply from the district of Talarn, written by a local lawyer, saw the practice as detrimental to the local economy. The village of Aramunt, by contrast, argued that such migration was of benefit in that it reduced the number of poor during the winter months. Similarly, the authorities in the village of Tírvia argued that such migration 'does more good than harm, for those households have fewer mouths to feed and when [the migrants] return, they bring back some money for grain, or to pay debts and taxes'. In most of the parishes around Barcelona, where viticulture and proto-industry flourished, those who needed alms were supported by the parish priest or by neighbours.[73] In the Pyrenees, begging meant to leave the village, with no clear distinction between seasonal migration of labour and vagrancy. The village of Agramunt commented that there were poor labourers who could not earn enough to support their households, but also no rich families in the parish able to give them alms. Those who needed to beg thus had to leave the village in order to do so.

What was clear was that the persistence of almsgiving in rural areas owed much to a preference for the kind of face to-face interaction that the authorities were keen to suppress. Many of the replies to Zamora were clear that one's own poor (i.e. those from the parish) should be kept from having to beg elsewhere if possible. Similar sentiments were expressed in the replies to the Rouen enquiry of 1788. Hence the comment cited above by a Catalan peasant that many of those fed by his household in 1764 'were known to us'. Part of the resistance to the centralisation of poor relief in urban areas and consequent appropriation of rural funds proposed by the Spanish administration in the late eighteenth century stemmed from the desire to give locally, to those known to the donor. Even the Baró de Maldà, for all his angry comments, developed a rapport with certain individuals whom he considered to be deserving, and gave to them accordingly. In particular, a weaver named Rafel Ferrer, who shared the same Christian name as the Baró, features heavily in the diary as a recipient of charity while out of work.

The importance of face-to-face giving is evident in the greater success of collections for the poor by collectors, compared with the anonymity of collection boxes. The hospital accounts for Berga described above illustrate this clearly: the collection box or plate in church never raised more than a few shillings, whereas the collections at the church doors every Sunday in Lent were particularly successful. Notably, these collections were all carried out by women, usually women of some status within the parish. Female collectors were a common feature of French charitable activities as well. The bureaux de charité of Montpézat in the diocese of Nîmes and St Jean de Bueges in the diocese of

[71] There is no complete edition of these enquiries, and it is not even clear how many survive. Only those for some localities have been published.

[72] *Resposta del corregiment de Talarn al qüestionari de Francisco de Zamora* ed. R. Boixareu (Lleida, 1989); *Respostes d'Aramunt, Erinyà, Pessonada, Rivert, Sant Martí de Canals, Serradell, Sossís, Toralla i Torallola al qüestionari de Francisco de Zamora*, ed. P. Coll (Lleida, 1990); *Respostes de la vall de Cabdella al qüestionari de Francisco de Zamora (1790)* ed. M. Boneta (Lleida, 1991); *Respostes de la Coma de Burg, Tírvia i la Vall Ferrera al qüestionari de Francisco de Zamora (1789-1790)*, ed. J. Oliver (Tremp, 1997).

[73] *El Baix Llobregat al 1789. Respostes al qüestionari de Francisco de Zamora*, ed. J. Codina, J. Moran and M. Renom (Barcelona, 1992).

Montpellier, and the charitable confraternity of Péret, also in Montpellier, all appointed female collectors.[74] In Péret, the confraternity was made up entirely of women. Such a charitable role for women has long been recognised, but it creates an interesting contrast with the hostility towards women who begged on their own behalf, as opposed to on behalf of others.

Moreover, begging continued to be sanctioned where it was licensed. The practice of granting individuals licenses to beg in certain circumstances, often in an emergency such as losing homes and possessions to fire, and often with the proviso that they only beg within a restricted area, was common in both France and Spain in the eighteenth century.[75] Again, certain features are standard: such as keeping begging as a 'local' activity. The poor were less of a threat if not mobile. At the same time, though, there was a clear recognition that being able to solicit alms for oneself might sometimes be desirable and perhaps more effective in awakening a charitable response.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to offer a few preliminary thoughts on the question of almsgiving, or voluntary, informal charity in southern Europe. Such practices pose a problem for the historian of poor relief: they were ubiquitous and therefore need to be noticed, yet they are mostly unquantifiable. On the rare occasion when some estimates can be provided, the sums vary and their significance is often hard to assess. Given that informal, voluntary charity may nonetheless have outweighed formal relief in many areas of southern Europe, estimates of social spending that exclude such practices run the risk of significant downwards bias, and hinder comparisons of poor relief across Europe.

Where the evidence is a little firmer is on the ways in which almsgiving was viewed and how it fitted into particular local contexts, especially rural ones. Attitudes to almsgiving and begging were changing over the eighteenth century, and hostility to both practices was growing, but the debate was complex. Traditional notions of Christian duty and neighbourliness remained powerful. Almsgiving was often more regular and less indiscriminate than the label 'informal' and contemporary criticisms would suggest. Above all, there was a strong preference for face-to-face giving. Even those institutions that attempted to channel charitable impulses and stand between donor and recipient needed to create a form of face-to-face interaction by appointing individuals to serve as collectors, rather than relying on collection boxes.

[74] AD Gard, AC Montpézat, E dépôt 33/11; AD Hérault, G1353 and Archives Communales (AC) Péret 197 EDT 20, Confrérie de la Charité, unfoliated volume.
[75] For licenses granted by the bishop of Rouen, see AD Seine-Maritime, G847 and G848.