ALMSGIVING AND THE FORMATION
OF EARLY MEDIEVAL SOCIETIES, A.D. 700-1025

A Dissertation

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by

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This dissertation undertakes an investigation of a behavior practiced by kings and commoners alike: charity to the poor or, to adopt the term favored then, almsgiving (eleemosina). It covers early medieval England and Francia. This work makes two arguments, one for continuity and one for change. Early medieval Christians embraced their late antique inheritance of almsgiving, entrenching it as a sophisticated and robust system of personal and institutional charity. Nonetheless, early medieval charity evolved its own particular character in light of economic circumstances and especially the influence of the Carolingian and Anglo-Saxon programs of Christianization. Its distinctive aspect was its rejection of the idea of discriminating among poor recipients, and its strong push for universal giving.

The dissertation falls into three parts. The first part outlines the place of almsgiving in medieval Christianity. Almsgiving was defined as an act of mercy, and the interior dimensions of it (including love) were key. The theology of charity revolved around a triangle of relationships between God, giver, and recipient; these relationships are best understood in light of anthropological insights into gift exchange. This theology differed from its patristic roots in its
emphasis on Christ receiving the alms directly without the pauper having to do anything, as well as its incorporation of private penance and purgatory.

The second part describes the practice of almsgiving. It revolved around the liturgical and agricultural cycles of the year, as well as times of crisis or death. All groups in society gave to varying extents, although there was some resistance, especially regarding hospitality. The church played a significant role in the institutional provision of charity through hospitals, the *matricula*, rural churches, and the tithe.

The third part turns to society. Most people were “poor” in some sense, and many faced the possibility of needing charity at some point. Using Marco van Leeuwen’s model of charity as a social negotiation between elites and the poor, the final chapter analyzes what exactly each side gained from charity. Hierarchy was influential, but early medieval religious preoccupations and the impetus for creating community were even more decisive in shaping eleemosynary interactions.
For my parents, in gratitude for their love and support over the years.
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# ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CCSL</td>
<td>Corpus Christianorum series Latina (Turnhout: Brepols, 1953-).</td>
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<td>CCCM</td>
<td>Corpus Christianorum continuatio mediaevalis (Turnhout: Brepols, 1958-).</td>
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<tr>
<td>CCM</td>
<td>Corpus consuetudinum monasticarum, ed. K. Hallinger (Siegburg: F. Schmitt, 1963-).</td>
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<tr>
<td>EETS</td>
<td>Early English Text Society (London &amp; Oxford, 1864-).</td>
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<tr>
<td>MGH</td>
<td>Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Hanover, Munich, and Berlin, 1821-).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Capit.</td>
<td>Legum II: Capitularia regum Francorum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cap. episc.</td>
<td>Capitula episcoporum</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conc.</td>
<td>Legum III: Concilia</td>
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<tr>
<td>DD Ger. Kar.</td>
<td>Diplomata regum Germaniae ex stirpe Karolinorum / Die Urkunden der deutschen Karolinger</td>
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<tr>
<td>DD Karol.</td>
<td>Diplomata Karolinorum / Die Urkunden der Karolinger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epp.</td>
<td>Epistolae (in Quart.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epp. sel.</td>
<td>Epistolae selectae</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fontes</td>
<td>Fontes iuris Germanici antiqui</td>
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iv
LL nat. germ.  Legum I: Leges nationum Germanicarum
Poetae  Poetae Latini medii aevi
SS  Scriptores (in folio)
SRM  Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum
SRG  Scriptores rerum Germanicarum
n.s.  Nova Seria / New Series
SC  Sources chrétiennes (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1943–).

In addition, the first footnote reference to each Old English text includes the short title and Cameron number in accord with the abbreviation system assigned in the University of Toronto *Dictionary of Old English Project*, online at, http://www.doe.utoronto.ca/
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Early medieval writers customarily began their treatises with protestations of their inadequacy for the task at hand and apologies for the infelicities of their style; for a young scholar like myself, such tropes seem quite applicable to the reality of this project. The completion of this dissertation is a testament to the support and guidance that I have received over the past years at the University of Notre Dame. Thanks are due first and foremost to my advisor, Thomas Noble, for his advice and support from time I first entered the Medieval Institute at Notre Dame. John Van Engen, Remie Constable, Thomas Hall, and John Cavadini—the members of my dissertation committee—have given generously of their time in reading chapters and offering feedback in their areas of expertise throughout this project. Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe also gave me useful direction at the beginning of my investigation of the Old English evidence. A number of colleagues in the Ph.D. program at the Medieval Institute have also taken time away from their own research to offer advice on my project. In particular, Amber Handy, Daniel Perett, Emily Gandolfi, Phil Wynn, Marcela Klicova, Stephen Metzger, and Stephen Molvarec have all read multiple chapters and ferreted out useful bibliography for me. And a special thanks must go to Margaret Cinninger, Roberta Baranowski, and the other staff of the Medieval Institute, who not only make it run with a remarkable efficiency, but do so much to the set the tone for this congenial community of students and scholars. Needless to say, any infelicities and misjudgments remaining in this work are my own fault for failing to take full advantage of the support and advice that I have been given.
Two generous fellowships made this project possible. The Notre Dame Presidential Fellowship supported me during my coursework, exams, and the final year of my dissertation work. The Dolores Zohrab Liebmann Fellowship funded the other years of my research and writing, allowing me to devote my full attention during that time to the work contained in the following pages.

Finally, a special thanks to all my family and friends who not only gave me moral support, but also made the past years an enjoyable time. My parents deserve special recognition for nurturing my love of history from a young age, plying me with history books at my request and breaking off from what I am sure they considered more pleasurable parts of family vacations to take me to various historical sites. For that investment of time and for so many other things, I hope they see in the following pages a small down payment on an inestimable debt.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As every good Christmas caroler knows, Good King Wenceslas looked out on the feast of Stephen and, upon spying a poor man out in the bitter cold, sprang to his feet, gathered his wine and meats, and set out through the snow to bring in the unfortunate man, knowing well, “ye who now will bless the poor, will yourselves find blessing.”\(^1\) What the average caroler may not know is that Good “King” Wenceslas was actually Václav (d. 935), duke and ruler of Bohemia (in the modern Czech Republic), a formative figure for his embryonic polity and one who was revered in later days as a martyr. According to one twelfth-century admirer,

As is read in his *Passion*, no one doubts that, rising every night from his noble bed, with bare feet and only one chamberlain, he went around to God’s churches and gave alms generously to widows, orphans, those in prison and afflicted by every difficulty, so much so that he was considered, not a prince, but the father of all the wretched.\(^2\)

There is a whiff of hagiographical embellishment here (why are widows and orphans waiting for alms in churches in the middle of the night?). The first Old Church Slavonic life of Václav, written in the tenth century, brings us closer to reality: “According to the words of the Gospel, he rendered good unto all the poor, clothed the naked, fed the hungry, and received wayfarers.”\(^3\)

\(^{1}\) Traditional lyrics, “Good King Wenceslas.”


\(^{3}\) quoted in Wolverton, *Hastening towards Prague*, 151.
If Václav ever trudged through the bitter winter frost with a solitary servant just to aid a poor man, then he was truly an extraordinary man worthy of acclaim in song a thousand years later. If he did no more than fulfill the Gospel command (see Mt 25:35-6) to feed the hungry and aid the poor, he was only a typical early medieval saint—or even no more than a typical early medieval ruler. He may have given more than most rulers and certainly more than an average man, and perhaps he did so with a more saintly disposition, but this commitment to give something in charity was expected of all his Christian contemporaries. Almsgiving to the poor, to widows, orphans, and travelers, and to churches was a basic pillar of Christian behavior in the early Middle Ages. And, as a practice in which rich and poor, clerics and laity all crossed paths, charity was a significant social phenomenon.

This dissertation maps out the contours of that practice of charity, and explains its religious and social roles. This scarcely explored chapter in the history of charity offers insights into the evolution of care for the poor and into normally opaque aspects of early medieval society, such as the evolution of lay religiosity and the lives of the destitute. I make two arguments, one for continuity and one for change. Charity to the poor remained a fundamental part of Christian practice among clergy and laity alike from the Roman Empire onward. The specifics of that charitable practice, however, evolved during this time period under the influence of economic circumstances and, especially, of attempts to create united Christian realms. The most significant characteristics of early medieval charity were its official rejection of a discriminating charity that sought out the “deserving” poor and its insistence on universal Christian participation.

Unsurprisingly, the implementation of this ideal ran into some resistance, but it still had a marked effect on the treatment of the poor. The practice of charity also constituted a fundamental part of the program of inculcating Christianity, as well as a path towards reinforcing a sense of communal identity or strengthening an individual’s social status within that community.

The driving forces behind these peculiarities of early medieval charity were, on one hand, the decentralized, rural environment and, on the other hand, the program of Christianization. For
charity to function, it had to work over a dispersed network of distribution points. Ideally, it had to be able to survive without central direction. And it had to provide people with ample motive to give even without the pressures (and opportunities) created by masses of the poor gathered together. As we shall see, early medieval charity was well adapted to these constraints. At the same time, many of the elites (especially royal and ecclesiastical) actively attempted to inculcate Christian practices and Christian identities within northwestern Europe. Since almsgiving was an essential Christian practice, almsgiving was part of their program and the desire to have everyone participate in charity shaped these elite actors’ approaches to the problem.

There are, consequently, several threads that weave through the story of almsgiving as told in the following pages. One is the attempt to encourage universal giving, even by the poor. The second is an emphasis on putting almsgiving within wider Christian practice. If almsgiving was practiced independently of other aspects of religion or morality, then its function in building up a Christian life and identity would have been severely undercut. In particular, clerics emphasized the necessity of charity flowing out of a correct interior attitude of love and mercy. Thirdly, theology and practice emphasized Christ as the repayer of alms. Finally, aristocratic interests and the positive valuation of social hierarchy demanded respect and accommodation throughout this time.

I use the word “charity” here in a broad sense of acts done to assist a person perceived as poor (when I wish to speak of the theological virtue of charity/caritas, I use the word “love”). This includes distributing bread or coins, providing hospitality, and many other acts whether done by an individual or through an institution such as churches and monasteries. The closest medieval term for this charity was eleemosina, usually translated as “alms.” As we shall see, eleemosina referred to this whole range of activity as well. I treat almsgiving and charity as synonymous with each other and with eleemosina throughout this work.⁴

⁴ On terminology, see chapter 2. On the variety of things given as alms, see chapter 6.
The heart of a distinctive early medieval custom of charity lies in the late eighth and ninth century on the continent and slightly later (through the tenth century) in England. My investigation focuses on that period, but extends from roughly the beginning of the eighth century through the first quarter of the eleventh. The evolution of charity proceeded quite slowly and the practice of almsgiving was broadly similar over these three centuries, although one can see the early medieval consensus starting to form and then to unravel at the beginning and end of this period. Geographically, I focus on England and Francia (France and western Germany), with brief consideration of their neighbors’ influence as necessary. The English and Franks approached the problem of charity in similar ways and I normally treat them as sharing a common culture of charity. When differences do emerge—in chronology or matters such as institutional development—they offer useful clues as to what forces were driving the evolution of almsgiving.

A final self-imposed limitation of this dissertation is the choice not to engage in broad comparisons with other times and places except insofar as necessary for demonstrating that a particular aspect of early medieval charity was in fact unusual. I treat patristic and high medieval practice only in this sense. The model of charity I use in the final chapter is adapted from early modern history and is implicitly comparative, but no more than that. This work will suggest some pathways for future comparative work and enable us to tell better the long narrative of the development of charity, but I focus here on elaborating the early medieval field of northwest European charity. Charity was an important part of the early medieval world, and that story still needs to be told.

There is little work done on early medieval almsgiving, and standard histories of charity usually only glance at the early Middle Ages in passing. They focus on the oppression and

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5 The chronological boundaries for Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages fluctuate depending on the historian using them. For the sake of easy reference within this dissertation, I limit the early Middle Ages to the period between 700 and 1025 A.D., conceding the preceding five centuries to Late Antiquity. When I refer to the later Roman Empire, I mean the fourth and fifth centuries, while the patristic period extends through the sixth century (so including Gregory I).
ensenment of poor, free peasants, and the seemingly futile Carolingian legislation aimed to prevent it. This standard narrative does note the continuing presence and even development of care by monasteries, although usually pairing this with unfavorable comparisons with late antique and later medieval institutions of charity. Michel Mollat, in his great survey of poverty from the sixth to sixteenth centuries, allocates only nineteen of three hundred pages to the three centuries I am researching, adding more detail on monastic hospitality, but otherwise adhering to this traditional view. Only a couple of authors try to elaborate beyond this narrative to briefly survey the wider customary practice and theology of almsgiving. When James Brodman recently attempted to synthesize current scholarship on medieval charity, he found material for scarcely a dozen pages concerning the early Middle Ages. The material he did find (or rather the lack of material to be found) led him to conclude that, “in the West during the early Middle Ages, however, the practice of charity seems to have been more symbolic than real.” Brodman’s view is logical in light of previous scholarship, but nonetheless in need of substantial revision. Some degree of charitable practice is present in almost every culture, and scientists increasingly claim that charitable impulses

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8 G. Ratzinger, *Geschichte der kirchlichen Armenpflege* (Freiburg, 1884), 188-236 (passim), offers the best survey of efforts by the Carolingian church to aid the poor (with some reference to royal power). He sees a good, organized program to help the poor in the time of Charlemagne (though less so under other rulers). The longest survey of early medieval almsgiving is currently V. Cole, “Royal Almsgiving in Medieval England” (Ph.D. diss., Binghamton University, 2002), 43-149. Her work offers a useful starting point on charity by queens and kings, although unfortunately her unfamiliarity with the early Middle Ages and her failure to search for alternate spellings of eleemosina in the relevant texts lead her into some crucial errors, making these introductory chapters rather uneven: e.g. she incorrectly claims (p. 64) that Jonas’ *De institutione regia* makes no reference to “alms” and uses that evidence to argue that the classicizing authors of the Carolingian Renaissance adhered to pagan ideas of kingship; but cf. Jonas of Orleans, *De institutione regia* admon., 3, 12 ed. A. Dubreuecq, SC 407 (Paris: du Cerf, 1995), pp. 154, 188, 252.

9 J. Brodman, *Charity and Religion in Medieval Europe* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 13; he is cautious enough to reject the suggestion by some of his secondary sources that charity was reduced to a paltry clerical monopoly (pp. 54-5).
are hardwired into human beings.\textsuperscript{10} The early Middle Ages was no exception in this regard. Even a brief survey of the electronic databases now available shows thousands of references to almsgiving and, as we shall see, there is ample reason to believe that this represents a vibrant reality.\textsuperscript{11} The plethora of recent scholarship on late antique, high and late medieval, and early modern charity insistently raises the question of what was really happening during the early Middle Ages.

There are several notable exceptions to this trend towards neglect, though each is limited in scope. The widest ranging is an article by Siegfried Epperlein, an East German scholar. His unremittingly Marxist appraisal of the evidence posits charity as simply a means by which churchmen joined in the general subjugation of the free peasantry to dependency on tyrannical feudal lords. In many ways his was the first to attempt to socially contextualize Carolingian charity, though I do not find his final result convincing.\textsuperscript{12} Jean Devissè’s study of Hincmar of Reims’ (d. 882) life and thought touches on charity in interesting ways, and proposes that this bishop used his material and intellectual resources in assisting the (free) poor as an attempt to


\textsuperscript{11} The Brepols databases (MGH and Corpus Christianorum) return 1509 hits for variant spellings of eleemosina from the eighth through tenth centuries (but note duplicates exist among these); the Old English Corpus returns 496 hits for variants of ælmesse and compounds involving it. The AASS and PL are not searchable by date, but I have found many, many more references in them. Moreover, while references to eleemosina and ælmesse are quite common, the majority of records of charity do not use either term.

\textsuperscript{12} S. Epperlein, “Zur weltlichen und kirchlichen Armenfürsorge im karolingischen Imperium,” Jahrbuch für Wirtschaftsgeschichte 1 (1963), 41-60.
stabilize classes and society during a period of increasing socio-economic polarization. This rhetoric incidentally also helped further Hincmar’s efforts to mark church property as sacred and off-limits to lay ownership.\textsuperscript{13} While Devisse’s remarks treat only one player in the drama of early medieval charity, his cogent thesis is part of almsgiving’s story.

Three more articles focus on the religious thought about charity in the course of making larger arguments. Arnold Angenendt believes that medieval almsgiving evolved out of a general exteriorization and virtual commercialization of a practice of Christianity that previously had privileged interior disposition (revolving around questions of faith, love, and gratitude for God’s gracious gifts).\textsuperscript{14} His challenging conclusions are not quite what I have found in the evidence, though his highlighting of human-divine exchange as a key element in almsgiving is important. John Contreni, in his analysis of the seventh-century Visio Baronti and its Carolingian reception, sketches a fascinating glimpse into ninth-century concerns with greed, wealth, and alms. He posits a renewed interest in almsgiving based on newly won wealth and the perceived need for models of lay piety; the latter point finds a fuller context in the course of this dissertation.\textsuperscript{15} Abigail Firey has written by far the best work on the role of almsgiving as a whole in early medieval thought, along with some insightful remarks on the relation of the poor to the rest of society and how the early Middle Ages compares with the preceding and succeeding periods. Her characterization of the time period as drawing from a culture of gift-exchange, as being preoccupied with the threat of avarice, as having shifting notions of who needed protection, and as lacking the concern for


rationalization evident in the high Middle Ages are all significant and reasonable hypotheses, although regrettably summary.¹⁶

In addition to these works, a number of other more focused studies briefly mention almsgiving. The most lucid descriptive account of Anglo-Saxon charitable practices actually occurs in Ann Hagen’s study of food and drink in Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁷ Works on such topics as early medieval poverty or post-mortem commemoration often make passing mention of almsgiving.¹⁸ A number of scholars have investigated land donations to monasteries.¹⁹ These gifts technically counted as alms, though there are obvious differences between that and giving a beggar a hunk of bread; consequently, these scholars do not analyze land donations in terms of charity.

The best research has focused on the institutional provision of charity (as is true with the general historiography of charity), although I believe that it tends to underestimate the vibrancy and continuity of this aspect of charity.²⁰ Sixty years ago, Émile Lesne conducted the most comprehensive study of these early medieval institutions to date as part of his great opus on French

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²⁰ And argue such in chapters 7 and 8, which give a fuller historiographical account.
church property. He does briefly discuss private alms, but focuses on the hospital and the *matricula* (a fixed set of recipients of charity).  

Egon Boshof authored two lengthy articles on these institutions in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, again focusing on Francia. These two authors offer the most thorough and thoughtful accounts of Carolingian institutional charity, though others have also made contributions to the field.

This sporadic work on early medieval charity leaves the big questions about its general shape and socio-religious function unanswered. It does suggest some pathways for exploration and provides a couple of guideposts along the way: raising the idea of gift exchange, asking if lay and clerical giving differed, pointing to the role of church institutions, and demanding consideration of the relation of almsgiving to the social changes occurring during the early Middle Ages.

In addition to these points concerning early medieval almsgiving in itself, other scholarship on charity in different time periods offers some methodological pointers. James Brodman took

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21 E. Lesne, *Histoire de la propriété ecclésiastique en France*, vol. 6 (Lille: Facultés catholiques, 1943), 96-184. Note that this section studies the eighth through the twelfth centuries. See also his “La matricule des pauvres à l’époque carolingienne,” *Revue Mabillion* 24 (1934): 1-52. Earlier, but now superseded, is


proving the intimate relationship between religion and medieval charity as the theme of his survey. In this dissertation, I take as a fundamental axiom that both religious belief and social pressures require serious attention if we are to understand what contemporaries primarily considered a religious act. Consequently, I begin my narrative with a consideration of early medieval thought about almsgiving, and in subsequent sections on the practice of almsgiving call attention to the influence of theology when visible. I also call attention to places where social pressures or the particularities of belief among the less educated resisted theology’s force.

In the final part of my dissertation, I privilege the social analysis of almsgiving, while still allowing for the primacy of religion in contemporary conceptions of charity. Marco van Leeuwen, in his work on poor relief in early modern Amsterdam, has proposed a model of the “logic of charity” in which he calls attention to the demands placed on the poor in return for receiving charity. He proposes a kind of silent negotiation between the elite and the poor over what the former can demand in exchange for assistance; this negotiation is structured by the alternate options and perceived interests of each group. The questions then of who is giving, what they expect in repayment, and who they expect to reward them become social issues. I address these questions in the course of my description of almsgiving throughout the dissertation, and bring them together in an analysis based on van Leeuwen’s model in the final chapter.


26 For a full account and modification of this model, see chapter 11.
The evidence upon which I base my reconstruction of early medieval charity has the virtue of quantity, but presents some qualitative problems. There are plenty of references to charity, although the evidence tends to cluster around certain periods of greater textual production (ninth century in Francia, later tenth century in England). All of these texts unfortunately come from elite members of society, and often from the clerical portion of the elite. This slant to the evidence inevitably distorts our understanding, though I have compensated where possible. Nonetheless, the degree of distortion should not be overestimated: the leading ecclesiastics generally hailed from the same families as the leading lay aristocrats, and the two worked together under the king. A few valuable lay voices survive to corroborate clerical claims, and the recorded actions of other laity complement those voices.

Charters, wills, and incidental accounts in annals or other narrative sources preserve a sampling of actions taken. This evidence is significant, but insufficient for any kind of accurate statistical analysis (as is true for most aspects of early medieval history). Most evidence is normative: sermons, capitulary laws, conciliar decrees, and theological tracts all explain what people should do. Many of these authors clearly intended that their prescriptions be put into practice, but do not tell us if their hopes came to fruition. Even hagiography, which purports to describe what a person did, had the provision of examples to be imitated as an equal or more important function. The recycling of saintly topoi and even verbatim use of some passages over and over also complicate moving from the reports of hagiography to what people actually did; and this tendency towards recycling old passages extends to other genres as well.

I address these problems in three main ways. First, I employ a wide variety of genres and a large number of sources. Each has its limitations and requires a particular method of reading to understand the underlying concerns, but taken together each helps to compensate for the lacunae in other genres. In a manner analogous to the elementary surveying technique of triangulation, this use of multiple perspectives allows me to pinpoint and map out the reality that each source viewed in a slightly different manner.
Secondly, I have silently selected sources in the following pages that seem relatively reliable or revealing of contemporary concerns. Much extant hagiography, for example, is heavily dependent on older models and was composed decades or centuries after the protagonist’s death. Rimbert’s ninth-century *Vita Anskarii*, however, though showing the influence of older models, was written soon after Ansgar’s death by a close associate and utilizes a lot of contemporary information. Other sources also corroborate some of Rimbert’s claims. Queen Mathilda’s late tenth-century hagiographer not only modeled her *vita* on that of the Merovingian Radegund, a previous charitable queen, but even borrowed long passages directly from the earlier source. Nevertheless, the wealth of unique details about Mathilda’s almsgiving, from the naming of her assistant in charge of almsgiving (Ricburg) to her dedication of Saturday almsgiving on behalf of her husband who had died on that day, demonstrates that the choice of a textual exemplar with material on charity was no accident and likely had strong ties to the Ottonian queen’s actual behavior. With some exceptions (notably the *Vita Sigiramni*, which reveals unique information about its author’s perspective), I have gravitated towards careful use of those sources with a more “historical” approach to their subject matter.

Third, and most importantly, I am not as interested in what a particular person did as with reconstructing the cultural norms of behavior and the general trends in people’s understanding of charity. What hagiographers considered saintly is in itself worth knowing, whether or not that particular saint performed the act in question. When early eighth-century hagiographers in England chose to purloin Isidore’s characterization of an ideal bishop, including a required devotion to charity, to describe their episcopal subjects they demonstrated that they had read

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Isidore and saw his ideas of a typical bishop’s activities as still relevant. Excerpts lifted from previous lives must be handled with care and details of practice within those particular passages may not reflect contemporary mores, but their use reflected an editorial choice.

Peter Brown, borrowing from economic historians, spoke of the necessity of heeding the “background noise” of sources. Behind the texts which were written and the important events or ideas that gripped their authors, daily life continued to unfold with a quiet, but insistent humming. Through careful listening, it is possible to piece together what actions and beliefs medieval writers assumed could be taken for granted. Different kinds of hagiographical accounts, for example, assume the presence of beggars at shrines as an ordinary condition not requiring additional elaboration. When an author included such details or remarked on whether people gave out bread or coins, he drew from his own knowledge of how almsgiving functioned, except when he copied that information verbatim from an old source. There is no reason not to trust him in these cases. Other accounts relied more directly on people’s assumptions of typical behavior. For example, the *Annals of Saint-Bertin* included the detail in its 869 entry that Charles the Bald and his wife had been preoccupied with giving alms when news of his nephew’s death reached them. The *Annals’* author clearly wished to paint a contrast between the pious actions of the happily married couple and those of their nephew, whom God had struck dead in Italy for a scandalous divorce and whose

29 Note too that Cuthbert’s hagiographer inserted an additional phrase into the Isidorean excerpt (“memoriam enim pro libris habuit”) to boast of the bishop’s more unusual accomplishments, which indicates that he felt there was a connection between this passage and reality: Isidore of Seville, *De ecclesiasticis officiis* 2.5.17-9, ed. C. Lawson, CCSL 113 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989), pp. 62-4; use in *Vita sancti Cuthberti auctore anonymo* 4.1, ed. B. Colgrave, in his *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), pp. 110-2; in turn, the source for [Stephen of Ripon], *The Life of Bishop Wilfrid / Vita Wilfridi I ep. Eboracensis* 11, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), p. 24, with the caveat that Stephen included other, more specific references to charity.


kingdom coincidentally now lay open to invasion. For a reader to accept this artfully contrived contrast he would have had to believe it plausible that Charles and his wife gave alms in that manner. If Charles never gave alms, the result of this passage would have been satire, in sharp contrast to this chronicle’s normally positive attitude towards Charles.

In the matter of beliefs, this attention to background noise is also fundamental. The prevalence of almsgiving across a wide range of genres tells us that it was a common category of thought, and its practice was at some level largely assumed. Clerics and moralists had other concerns about almsgiving: encouraging people to give at a new time, or to refrain from sin while giving, or not to give from the motive of seeking social status. By walking the fault line where writers feared that almsgiving was breaking down, one can guess both where charitable behavior was on stable ground and where its ideals encountered resistance. If we find large-scale ad campaigns against driving while drunk, we cannot guess what percentage of drivers are drunk but we are relatively safe in assuming that driving itself is a normal activity. Similarly, when we find numerous medieval sermons and tracts condemning an abuse of almsgiving (beyond rote repetition of older concerns), we can assume that this abuse actually occurred at some unknown though not inconsequential level, and that an acceptable practice of almsgiving existed as a behavioral norm from which this abuse deviated. Where there was friction, there are bound to be some sparks to light up the situation. This recourse to probabilities is the most promising portal into the regular eleemosynary activity of medieval men and women.

With these basic principles as a foundation, this dissertation can embark on the quest of tracing the social and religious contours of early medieval charity: what was done, who did it, what people thought about why they were doing it, what effect charity had on society, and some

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suggestions as to why the practice of almsgiving evolved in the way that it did. My exposition falls into three main parts.

This dissertation first addresses the issue of charity’s theoretical place in Christian Francia and England. Chapter two explains the basic definition of charity, its fundamental place in Christian practice, and the specific early medieval social and religious context in which it operated. The interiority of valid almsgiving is of particular significance here. Chapter three discusses in detail the conceptions of almsgiving that shaped early medieval practice, incorporating anthropological ideas of gift exchange, with relationship as the key idea. Chapter four then investigates areas in which the early medieval conception of almsgiving had developed in a distinctive manner, including the rising concern with post-mortem forgiveness and the partial eliding of the poor from the equation of exchange in favor of an incarnational focus.

The second part of the dissertation moves from a focus on theological teachings about charity to its practice among laity and churchmen alike. Chapter five sketches the framework of when and where alms were given, and argues for the close interweaving of almsgiving into the cycles of lay life (as well as clerical). Chapter six unravels the problem of who gave and what they gave. It argues for a wide range of givers and gifts, but also discovers some areas of resistance to almsgiving. The story then turns to the charity provided by church institutions. Chapter seven describes the most important continuous institution for charity, the hospital, which provided food, shelter, and other services for the poor. Chapter eight shows how church institutions worked with the hospital to provide a network of resources for the poor that supplemented general almsgiving. Here and in chapter seven we have the most detailed evidence for charity in practice, since institutions wrote down and preserved vastly more information than the average individual almsgiver.

The final part of the dissertation asks what almsgiving reveals about society. Chapter nine discusses the poor who received alms. These were a diverse and loosely defined group of people, united by a sense of precariousness. Chapter ten explains why monks and churches were “poor,”
and then turns to the question of how poverty (both voluntary and involuntary) was linked with ideas of sanctity. Chapter eleven offers the heart of my analysis (using van Leeuwen’s model) of the complex maelstrom of social, religious, and political pressures tugging almsgiving in different directions and slowly shaping its evolution. It elucidates the different ways in which almsgiving allowed the negotiation or solidification of social hierarchy, arguing that the ninth century saw a nadir for those possibilities. Nonetheless, charity played a recognizable role in creating an ordered community.
PART I:

THINKING ABOUT CHARITY
CHAPTER 2

CHARITY IN EARLY MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY

In 826 A.D., a Carolingian monk, Ansgar, journeyed across the northeastern boundary of Latin Christendom to preach the Gospel to the pagan Danes and Swedes. When he died as archbishop of Hamburg-Bremen in 865, the fate of that mission to the expanding pagan people in the far north hung in the balance. Ansgar’s successor, Rimbert, composed an account of his mentor replete not only with proofs of the deceased bishop’s holiness, but also with a description of the challenges and possibilities of that missionary enterprise.¹ He recounted one story of how an army of pagan Swedes besieging a town found themselves baffled and thwarted. One of their merchants, who had heard Christian preachers elsewhere, suggested that they might try imploring the Christians’ God for aid. When they (naturally) succeeded in forcing their victims’ surrender, the Swedes repaid Christ with fasts and almsgiving, since they understood that is what Christians did to please God.² In a similar story, the Swedes found themselves besieged, but among them was a good Christian layman who could offer guidance. The Swedes learned that they were to fast and then give alms with full heart and will, while the Christian relied on his faith in God to bring the group’s pleas to heaven.³ To Rimbert’s apparent embarrassment, in neither case did the majority of


³ Rimbert, Vita Anskarii 19, pp. 42-4.
the pagans actually convert, but his stories offered hope to his readers that the Northmen might listen to words about Christ. His stories also assumed another point, that those listening to Christian preachers on the far edges of Christendom would have learned that a person communicated with Christ and served him through almsgiving.

Around the time that Ansgar set out beyond the fringes of the Carolingian empire, Einhard, a learned layman and retired royal aide living in the heartlands of Frankish Christendom, penned a biography of Charlemagne (d. 814), the famous emperor whom he had served. In enthusiastically describing his patron’s qualities, he marveled at the pious ruler’s devotion to alms, his care for throngs of travelers at his central palace, and his concern even for the Christian poor in faraway lands. Einhard copied into that biography Charlemagne’s will, which included provision for the poor in preparation for his soul’s final encounter with God.⁴

The practice of charity within Christianity is a thread that weaves its way through all types of early medieval sources.⁵ It recurs in descriptions of religious activity as something done in common by believers whether at the center of Christian realms or their peripheries. To understand what it meant to be Christian in the early Middle Ages, one must understand charity. Simply put, almsgiving was one of the key post-baptismal practices of both lay and clerical Christians, along with forms of prayer and fasting.

The fundamentals of almsgiving rested on three basic pillars. First, the “use” of charity lay in its role in a person’s relationship with God. In that divine-human interaction, charity most often served as a portal for accessing God’s forgiveness and heavenly rewards, which is one reason Charlemagne included alms in his final will. Second, the definition of almsgiving in itself shaped

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⁵ I use “charity” and “almsgiving” as synonyms in this dissertation (as described in the introduction and explained in section 2 below). I always translated the Latin *caritas* as “love,” reserving “charity” for gifts to the poor.
practice. Christian almsgiving was defined as an act of mercy; therefore it intrinsically involved interior motive, and the rubrics for exterior action reflected that. In Rimbert’s story, the teaching by the Christian Swede of his pagan townsmen concerning the importance of giving from the heart was no accidental addition. Both of these foundations of almsgiving—its goal and its roots—sprang from the ground of biblical teaching and earlier Christian tradition. The early medieval practice of charity, however, also reflected a third influence, that of its particular historical circumstances. The ongoing task of Christianization on the one hand, and interlocked social, economic, and demographic factors on the other, worked together to give early medieval almsgiving some distinctive characteristics, especially in its approach to Christian community and the poor.

This chapter offers an introduction to these three fundamental considerations. The remaining chapters will explore the implications, in thought and in practice, of these basic foundations of almsgiving for early medieval Christianity and society.

1. Charity and Its Uses in the Christian Ethos

Almsgiving operated as one element in the system of medieval Christian life. It was a crucial element, for it served as a means of healing the deadly wounds of sin and entering into the riches of heaven. As implied by the scriptural idiom of charity that early medieval writers employed, almsgiving involved a wonderful and mysterious exchange between human beings and God.

What did it mean for a layman or woman to be a Christian? What was the schema for Christian life and where did almsgiving fit into it? In the first years of the ninth century, Alcuin, one of Charlemagne’s most respected religious advisors, attempted to answer those questions. In response to a count’s request for moral advice, he wrote what would become a very widely copied treatise on lay life. Charity stood squarely in the midst of this mirror for Christian conduct. Alcuin’s preface urged the count to put his words into practice by giving alms, as well as upholding
justice, showing mercy, and doing all things in accord with the hope of eternally dwelling with 
God. He explained in his first chapter that wisdom was the beginning of Christian life, but that 
wisdom consisted of fleeing from the diabolical chains of sins and worshipping God in truth 
through good works (which, as he later explained, included charity). “Therefore he who is wise in 
this manner, without a doubt will be blessed in eternity since blessed life is knowledge of the 
divine. Moreover, knowledge of the divine is the power of good work; the power of good work is 
the fruit of eternal beatitude.” The basic foundation of Christian life sprang from the desire to be 
with God, and that budding relationship demanded good works which in turn led to the desired 
eternal life. The practice of good works aimed at tearing the Christian from his sins and attaining 
heaven, although only within the context of a full Christian life.

As Alcuin explained at length, Christianity made manifold demands on its practitioners 
beyond this initial foundation. These demands began with the theological virtues of faith, hope, 
and love, and the related dispositions of patience, mercy, and their like. The Christian had to avoid 
evil actions and the vices, like fraud, fornication, and pride. When it came to good works—the 
specific positive actions that a Christian performed—Alcuin devoted chapters to the topics of 
praying with scripture, forgiving others, seeking forgiveness (with confession, repentance and 
tears), fasting, almsgiving, and the specific responsibility of a royal official to discharge his duties 
with justice and mercy. In particular, fasting, prayer, and almsgiving joined together with an 
interior turning towards God to call down his forgiveness of sins and reward of eternal life.

Alcuin’s presentation of the Christian life was typical. Christianity rested on the seedbed 
of love, hope, and faith in Christ, and flowered through the cultivation of virtue and the uprooting

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6 Alcuin, De virtutibus et vitiis liber ad Widonem comitem epistola, PL 101, col. 614C. On the genre and 
its historical context, see further below in section 3 of this chapter.

7 “Omnis ergo qui sic sapiens est, procul dubio beatus erit in aeternum; beata siquidem [vita] est cognitio 
divinitatis; cognitio [vero] divinitatis virtus boni operis est: virtus boni operis fructus est aeternae 
beatitudinis.” Alcuin, De virtutibus 1, col. 615A.

8 Alcuin, De virtutibus 16-17, cols. 624-6.
of vice. That gardening of the soul and the harvest of its fruit in heaven occurred through a variety of pious activities, among which the triad of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving had a special efficacy and a central place in the conception of religious practice.

As early medieval thinkers understood their faith, the basic use of almsgiving in the Christian life lay in preparing the believer to face God’s judgment by cleansing post-baptismal sin and producing heavenly reward.9 This understanding drew from the storehouse of previous Christian thought. From the vast hoard of specifically biblical reflections on the poor and charity, early medieval writers selected certain gems time and time again. These sayings encapsulated the idea that the intermingled divine gifts of mercy and heavenly treasure flowed directly in response to our mercy and our giving to others, provided that those human gifts were based on the basic virtues of faith, hope, and love.

Two gospel passages lay as the cornerstones of the early medieval principle of almsgiving. The simple phrase, “whenever you did one of these things to the least of my brothers, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40), rings throughout the vast room of charitable exhortations.10 Here, in the gospels’ most explicit scene of the day of judgment before God, Christ divides the human race between

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10 This summary of frequently cited biblical passages is based on the variety of primary sources listed in the bibliography, as well as subsequent surveys of the relevant quotations in online databases. Here I only cite three or four representative works per passage. Admonitio generalis (789) 75, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 60; Bede, In Lucae 4.11.41, pp. 241-2; Gerhard, Vita sancti Oudalrici episcopi 3, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SS 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1841), p. 390; Jonas, De institutione laicali 1.6, 2.29, 3.10, 3.14, cols. 132, 231, 259.
those who offered food, drink, clothing, and other acts of mercy to him in the person of his brothers, and those who did not. Eternal salvation and eternal damnation are there doled out solely on this basis. God’s mercy and humanity’s mercy are linked. Only slightly less ubiquitous in early medieval texts on charity was Jesus’ explanation in Luke 11:41 that, in contrast to the Pharisee’s preoccupation with external purity rituals, “give alms and, behold, all is clean for you.”\footnote{Lk 11:41 was a popular part of the arenga formula for charters in a way, however, that Mt 25:40 was not, presumably because the latter’s list of good deeds made no mention of land transfers. Hrabanus, \textit{In Ecclesiasticum} 1.14, 2.10, cols. 783, 810-1; Theodulf \textit{Capitula I} 36, p. 135; Thietmar, \textit{Chronicon / Die Chronik des Bischofs Thietmar von Merseburg und ihre Korreier Überarbeitung} 7.74, ed. R. Holtzmann, MGH SRG n.s. 9 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1935), pp. 489-90; \textit{Urkundenbuch der Abtei Sanct Gallen} nos. 39, 103, 116, ed. H. Wartmann, 2 vols (Zurich, 1866 [repr. Frankfurt: Minerva Verlag, 1981]), 1:41, 1:97, 1:109-10, etc. (and overall a common arenga formula in Saint-Gall charters from 788 onwards).} This passage was understood as saying that alms cleansed the soiled soul from sin. The theme in these scriptural proclamations of the tremendous importance of alms for forgiveness of sins and eternal life also appears in the most popular non-gospel exhortation, “water extinguishes burning fire and alms withstand sins” (Sir 3:33 Vulgate).\footnote{Sir 3:29 New American Bible, Sir 3:30 in NRSV (apocrypha). Alcuin, \textit{De virtutibus} 17, col. 626; \textit{Almsgiving} 5-9, ed. G. P. Krapp and E. K. Dobbie, in \textit{The Exeter Book}, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), p. 223 (Alms; A3.27); Ambrosius Autpertus, \textit{Sermo de cupiditate} 14, 15, ed. R. Weber, CCCM 27B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1979), pp. 979, 980; \textit{Urkundenbuch der Abtei Sanct Gallen} nos. 155, 228, 1:146, 1:219.}

The idea of a reciprocal display of mercy in Matthew 25 also found support in relatively frequent references to the general injunction, “give and it will be given to you” (Lk 6:38).\footnote{Bede, \textit{In Lucae} 2.6.37-8, p. 147; Jonas, \textit{De institutione laicali} 3.10, cols. 251-2; \textit{Urkundenbuch der Abtei Sanct Gallen} nos. 39, 102, 200, 1:41, 1:96, 1:190, etc. (also a standard formula).} Other passages that widely resonated with early medieval writers emphasized the necessity of having the right interior disposition in order for God to honor this exchange. Paul’s reminder that “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor 9:7) offered one essential guideline.\footnote{Ambrosius, \textit{De cupiditate} 15, p. 979; Gerhard \textit{Vita Oudalrici} 4, p. 391; Hrabanus, \textit{In Ecclesiasticum} 1.14, 7.5, 7.7, col. 783, 986, 991.} The favored expression of the worth of interior disposition over the external value of a gift came in the form of Jesus’ promise in
Matthew 10:42 that even a cup of cold water given for his sake would be rewarded. With that promise came the implication that anyone could give alms. Surprisingly, the famous story of the widow’s mite (Lk 21:1-4) received only infrequent mention, probably since it lacked Matthew’s pithiness and the explicit mention of reward.

A number of other scriptural texts influenced early medieval thought, but with less regularity. The wisdom books generally offered a convenient locus for exploring God’s love for those who loved the poor. The prophets’ calls to remember the poor found less frequent reception than the wisdom literature in the early Middle Ages, and then more often in relation to justice than almsgiving. New Testament injunctions beyond the gospels also appeared in a number of sources. The discussion in Matthew’s sermon on the mount of the necessity of performing almsgiving, prayer, and fasting in secret (Mt 6:1-6), while accepted in regards to motive, played a relatively minor role in early medieval thought. Exegetes and moralists worried mostly about reconciling it with Jesus’ earlier teaching to “let your light shine before men so that they might see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mt 5:16). The apparent contradiction found solution in motive: was the gift being made for God or for one’s own reputation? This pairing of passages is noteworthy in three respects: as evidence for theologians’

15 Ælfric, CH2 7, p. 64 (B1.2.8); Jonas, De institutione laicali 2.29, col. 232; Paschasius Radbertus, Expositio in Matthaeo libri xii 6.10.42, ed. B. Paulus, CCCM 56, 56A, 56B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1984), pp. 616-7.

16 No single passage dominated, although Sir 4:8 and Sir 29:15 were cited with slightly more frequency. Tobit’s advice to his son (Tob 4:1-23) functioned as a a wisdom book in miniature. Alcuin De virtutibus 17, col. 626; Defensor, Liber scintillarum 49, p. 167; Jonas, De institutione laicali 2.14, col. 193.

17 Most used in connection with almsgiving were Dn 4:24 and Is 58:7. Ælfric, CHI 11, pp. 273-4 (B1.1.12); Hrabanus, In Ecclesiasticum 8.4, col. 1012; Theodulf Capitula I 36, p. 135.


19 Alcuin, De virtutibus 25, cols. 631-2; Ambrosius, In Apocalypsin 6.13.2a, pp. 488-9; Ambrosius, De conftictu 3, p. 911; Paschasius, In Matthaeo 4.6.1, pp. 364-5, also 4.6.2-4, pp. 366-70. Paschasius adds more theological depth than other early medieval authors by meditating on the phrase, ut sit elemosyna tua in
close engagement with a variety of scriptural passages, even when they found them troublesome; for its insistence that almsgiving had to be understood in the context of a life oriented towards God; and in its concern for the community as well as the individual. The way in which an individual gave charity affected his salvation, but that had to be judged also on how it helped or hindered the quest for salvation by other members of the church. The advantages of offering a good example to encourage others’ beatitude took precedence over the potential dangers of public almsgiving.

Considered as a group, the selection of biblical passages emphasized alms as a way of giving linked with a reciprocal gift by God of forgiveness and eternal life. Almsgiving was a path to heaven. Nonetheless, productive almsgiving had to be done in the wider context of a Christian life involving such matters as faith and love.

When early medieval writers discussed almsgiving in light of scripture, their terminology clearly illustrated the expectation that an exchange was taking place in which the almsgiver received forgiveness or heavenly treasure. The learned German monk Hrabanus Maurus (d. 856), in his extended commentary on the Book of Sirach, referred to almsgivers receiving eternal reward and recompense (*merces, praemium*, and *retributio*), meriting these things or gaining merit (*promereri* and *merita*), redeeming and cleansing his sins (*redimere* and *purgare*), thus storing treasure in heaven (*thesaurizare*), all through God, who gave, gave back, and repaid good and evil deeds (*tribuere, reddere*, and *recompensare*; acting as *remunerator*). All of these terms appear frequently throughout other authors, especially *merces* and *reddere*, along with a few similar words (*retribuere, mereri*, and alms as the soul’s *redemptio* and *remedium*). When Anglo-Saxon writers turned from Latin to the vernacular, they adopted analogous Old English terms such as *earnian*,

*abscondito* (Mt 6:4). and suggesting that one ought to hide his alms with his life interiorly *in Christ*, in whom there is only light and outside of whom there is nothing of the Father’s. In other words, the seeking of worldly praise is an attempt to introduce something outside of Christ into one’s relationship with God, but this necessarily fails since that praise is merely a temporal shadow, which *ipso facto* cannot exist with Christ is unadulterated light and will be eternally all in all. Paschasius, *In Matthaeo* 4.6.4, pp. 368-70.

20 Hrabanus, *In Ecclesiasticum* 1.5, 1.11, 1.12, 2.10, 3.6, 4.5 and 7.1, cols. 767-9, 779, 783, 809-12, 846, 877 and 974-5.
sellan, goldhordian, and clænsian. This lexical diversity was the result of a continuing discussion on charity from Christianity’s early days, and many of these terms had their roots in the biblical exhortations towards generosity. 21

This kaleidoscope of words focused on two interlocked ideas: God gave a return in heavenly treasure to Christian almsgivers, and alms cleansed and healed the wounds of sin. Anglo-Saxons and other authors with insular roots seem to have placed slightly more emphasis on forgiveness than eternal riches, while continental writers did the reverse, but these intertwined ideas found expression throughout western Christendom. 22 This double function was the basic role of almsgiving in the Christian ethos. It was one of the most important and fundamental good works through which a man or woman might enter heaven, if he or she had the appropriate relationship with God.

2. The Interior Meaning of Almsgiving

Almsgiving accomplished wondrous things in the minds of early medieval Christians, but it could not “work” in isolation. Good almsgiving presupposed previous faith in God, and moreover had an intimate connection in its very essence with the rest of Christian life. To truly understand almsgiving and its place in the Christian ethos, one has to look not only at its desired effects, but also its definition and interior meaning. Ultimately, the early medieval conception of

21 mercex: Mt 6:2, Mt 10:42, Mk 9:40; praemium: Tob 4:10; reddere: Mt 6:4, Mt 16:27; redimere: Dn 4:24; retribuere: Lk 14:14; thesaurizarz/thesaurus: Mt 6:19-21, Mt 19:21, Mk 10:21, Lk 12:33, Lk 18:22, Jas 5:3, Tob 4:10. The Old English terms translated these terms: goldhordian for thesaurizarz, etc. The above list is not exhaustive, and does not take into account passages where the wording differs but the concept is the same; though cf. B. Jussen, “Religious Discourses of the Gift in the Middle Ages: Semantic Evidences (Second to Twelfth Centuries),” in Negotiating the Gift: Pre-Modern Figurations of Exchange, ed. G. Algazi, V. Groebner and B. Jussen (Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2003), 179-82, 183, 187-9.

22 This evaluation of relative emphases is an impressionistic appraisal of early medieval theologians’ use of scriptural texts. Both themes appear repeatedly in continental and insular sources. Since most of the Anglo-Saxon sources considered here stem from the tenth century and the continental ones from the ninth, this variation in emphasis may be a diachronic shift, not a geographical one.
almsgiving subordinated the exterior action to its interior, spiritual aspects. Practice, as our sources taught, had to flow from the core Christian value of love.

The modern term “charity,” in the sense of giving to the poor, has no strict early medieval equivalent. Its root, *caritas*, simply meant love. Giving to the poor certainly could be a way of expressing love, but charitable giving and love were not synonyms. Nonetheless, the idea that love and charity had something in common is very medieval, and indeed goes back to antiquity.

The primary term that medieval writers did use for charity demonstrates a similar connection.

Latin offered various options for describing a generous action: *liberalitas*, *largitas*, *benevolentia*, or *humanitas*. A person practicing such actions reaped praise in both secular and religious spheres. Such a person often included the poor in his or her munificence, but certainly not always. Retainers, allies, and more prominent guests all had important claims on the generosity of the elite. The heroic sagas praised the archetypal “ring-giver” for his liberality to these high-ranking men. Many a medieval pauper benefited from *liberalitas*, but that term had too broad a


semantic range to be a useful category for thinking about the fundamental Christian obligation to the poor.

A few other terms came closer to the mark. *Stips* referred to small gifts, usually made to the poor, but that word saw little use during the early Middle Ages. The very common references to *opera bona* (good works) included charity to the poor most of the time. These works might be defined according to Matthew 25:31-46 as providing food, drink, hospitality, clothing, care for the sick, and comfort for prisoners; in short, what later (with the addition of burying the dead) would be called the corporal works of mercy.\(^26\) The actual phrase *opera misericordiae* (works of mercy) did see use, although not yet possessing the tightly defined limit of that sevenfold list of works.\(^27\)

This idea of good and merciful works extended beyond mere material care to encompass both spiritual actions and any other deeds pleasing to God. Fasting, prayer, and almsgiving were equally good works, as were other pious practices.\(^28\) Good works will be part of our discussion, especially when context makes clear its inclusion of charity; nonetheless, it could signify many


\(^{27}\) Ambrosius, *In Apocalypsin* 3.3.15, pp. 189-90; Bede, *In Lucae* 1.3.11, p. 79; Hrabanus, *In Ecclesiasticum* 1.11, 4.8, cols. 779D, 886B; *Vita Rimberti* 17, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SRG 55 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1884 [repr. 1977]), p. 95.

things. This range of meaning made the choice of the phrase popular in general exhortations towards Christian living, but when writers wished to discuss charity specifically they turned to another word that captured their meaning more precisely.

The primary early medieval term used in writings about charity was *eleemosina* (alms), Old English *ælmesse*, which was closely tied to the idea of works of mercy. 

29 *Eleemosina* was the closest word that early medieval society had to our modern “charity.” “Almsgiving” carried both a broad definition and a narrower, quotidian sense which flowed out of the former. Borrowing from his patristic forebears, Hrabanus broadly defined “alms” as, “a Greek word, which in Latin is translated as ‘work of mercy’ or ‘compassion’ since, as previously mentioned, the misery of human suffering strikes the heart or spirit.”

30 The word’s Greek roots did not mean that Latin speakers found it an unusual term; *eleemosina* appears a number of times in the Vulgate Bible and enjoyed widespread currency throughout the Christian Latin world from at least the third century onwards.

Hrabanus’ contemporaries generally spoke of *eleemosina* and, like him, understood *eleemosina* to signify mercy. Therefore true alms, as they understood them, had to flow from a giver’s compassionate heart.

This general definition could encompass an extraordinarily wide range of works. Bede (d. 735), the English historian and theologian, not only included corporal works of mercy (feeding the

29 Spelling varied wildly: elemosina, elimosyna, elymosina, aelimosina, heleimosina, etc.: see the testy remarks by Christian, *In Mattheum* 11, col. 1313C. For word searches in Brepols databases, I used el*mos* and ?el*mos*.


hungry, clothing the naked, etc.) in his list of eleemosynary acts, but also the correcting of sinners, praying for them, and forgiving them: “there are therefore many kinds of alms... but none is greater than the one in which we forgive from our heart a sin committed against us.”

Hrabanus’ creative list of alms included Bede’s examples, with forgiveness as the crowning instance, but also extended almogiving to giving counsel, providing medical treatment, guiding the blind, transporting the weak, and comforting the disconsolate. Each author assumed that the reader would first think of alms as providing food, clothing, and shelter, but taught that acts of mercy stretched even further.

Such breadth in the idea of almogiving appeared in sources beyond strictly theological texts. The capitulary from the assembly at Frankfurt in 794 labeled Charlemagne’s forgiveness of the deposed Duke Tassilo for his “crimes” as alms (although this forgiveness, which only followed Tassilo’s imprisonment and forced renunciation of his family’s rights and property, can hardly be considered exemplary). This extension of eleemosina to a judicial context was, however, very rare and occurred in this case because Tassilo’s supposed infidelity had directly wronged Charlemagne. Several charters in which the king or emperor granted a petitioner’s request (usually to confirm the latter’s donations) characterized that royal acquiescence as an act of “alms.” Here eleemosina conveyed the idea of an attitude of merciful and compassionate condescension.

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32 “Multa itaque genera sunt eleemosinarum... sed ea nihil est maius qua ex corde dimittimus quod in nos quisque peccauit.” Bede, In Lucae 4.11.41, p. 242. Similarly, Ælfric, CH2 7, p. 61; Alcuin, De virtutibus 17, col. 626B; Defensor, Liber scintillarum 5.21, p. 25; Vercelli Homilies 3, p. 83. See also Vita Rimberti 14-5, pp. 91-2.

33 Hrabanus, In Ecclesiasticum 1.14, col. 783CD; see also Hrabanus, De institutione clericorum 2.28, pp. 371-2.


expressed by the king’s act, rather than the gift itself.  

On a more personal level, the royal advisor Alcuin (d. 804) wrote that being sent into semi-retirement at the monastery of Saint-Martin on account of his health was done in Charlemagne’s “alms” or mercy.  

This core understanding of almsgiving meant that discussions of it took seemingly peculiar turns, which nonetheless would affect strictures about the practice of charity. In the context of this broad definition of almsgiving, both Bede and Hrabanus repeated the patristic saying that, “he who wishes to give alms in an orderly way should begin with himself, and give them to himself first.”  

As Bede reasoned, the Pharisees seemed to give alms and still merited condemnation by Jesus, so therefore the simple act of giving did not suffice for eternal life. If a person had to love his neighbor as himself (Mk 12:31), then logically he had to love himself first. Love for self meant seeking one’s true good. That entailed faith in Christ and the cleansing waters of baptism, since that combination offered the sole hope of salvation. Care for one’s self also then demanded that a person had to attack any remaining attachments to evil that separated him from true goodness. If

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36 *Die Urkunden Ludwigs des Kindes / Ludowici Infantis Diplomata* nos. 35, 45, ed. T. Schieffer, MGH DD Ger. Kar. 4 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1960), pp. 150, 167. The former gives the rationale and the latter is the clearest example of an act in which the only possible eleemosynary component is Louis’ granting a noble’s request. Compare too Arnulf’s usage of “in elementam” and “in eleemosinam nostram”: *Urkundenbuch der Abtei Sanct Gallen* nos. 663, 667, ed. H. Wartmann (Zurich, 1866 [repr. Frankfurt: Minerva Verlag, 1981]), pp. 266, 270-1. In many charters, whether the royal confirmation of another’s donation is meant to claim a share of spiritual benefits for the king (the normal implication of a donation “in alms”) or just is a reference to characteristic royal clemency is often an insoluable problem.  


Note that while Bede copies part of Augustine verbatim and Hrabanus copies Bede, they each do so while grappling with different biblical verses. Their methodology is to make a choice to use this particular phrase and not merely to duplicate a previous commentary on their respective biblical books. Bede’s exegesis here is inspired by Augustine but not identical to the latter’s work. Hrabanus, on the other hand, knows the principle but puts it in his own words, which is something that he only sometimes does in that particular treatise.  

I prefer passages where authors use their own words, but include those too in which particular patristic citations are clearly chosen with care. In those cases, I normally cite the source if not given by the edition (if analyzing the passage within the chapter). On reading Carolingian theology, see further below, chapter 3.
alms had to stem from the heart, then unless the heart had been made pure, the act of giving could not be pure (cf. Mt 23:26). The Pharisees could not perform true works of mercy without themselves first learning Christ’s mercy and receiving it for their previous sins against love and justice.

This doctrine of the necessity of giving “alms” to oneself by receiving faith in Christ first should be read in light of other passages on free will and grace. In his commentary on Sirach, Hrabanus chose to include a long excerpt from Prosper on how the primeval fall turned human free will to evil, such that only God’s grace could allow one to will to good. In discussing Sirach’s admonishment to be a cheerful giver later in that same work, which included a reference to the Jewish tradition of offering the first-fruits of their agricultural produce, Hrabanus wrote, “first-fruits and the firstborn mystically signify the beginnings of good works; [i.e.] that good will which precedes the work and concerning which the Pelagians committed offense by attributing it to themselves. When God orders them to be given by us to him, he shows that [good works] pertain to his grace.” When a Christian performed good works and gave to others with a properly joyous disposition, he did so through grace. Without establishing the right relationship to God first, namely through baptism, the giver necessarily lacked right intention because he lacked the appropriate grace.

When translated into practical guidelines, the idea of giving alms to oneself first meant that Christian almsgivers had to repent of their sins before giving alms. Excommunicants and notorious


40 “Mystice autem primitiae frugum vel primogenitorum, principia operum bonorum ostendunt, vel ipsum bonam voluntatem, quae prior est opere, quam Pelagiani sibi tribuendo offendunt: Deus autem dum illa sibi a nobis jabet offerri, indicat ad ipsius gratiam pertinere.” Hrabanus, In Ecclesiasticum 8.4, col. 1014AB, drawing on Isidore, Mystericorum expositiones sacramentorum seu Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum, In Exodum 37.
public sinners found their alms completely rejected by the church, at least in theory.\textsuperscript{41} Almsgiving to oneself could also mean that the Christian, while feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, and performing other works of mercy physically, simultaneously sought spiritually to perform those acts of mercy to himself. For example, a Christian who gave to the poor ought also to seek in that act of compassion to fill his own hunger for mercy with Christ, the Bread of Life.\textsuperscript{42} All humanity was in need in different ways.

The other interior aspect of almsgiving alongside mercy was love. As Hrabanus asked, “how can someone have a loving disposition who despises his needy neighbor?”\textsuperscript{43} Love and alms were related, but not equivalents. While theologians agreed that the double command of loving one’s neighbor and loving God held the central place in Christian life, that love focused more on one’s disposition towards all people than specifically on action towards the poor. Disquisitions on love within treatises usually did not discuss almsgiving.\textsuperscript{44} Hagiographical examples of a saint’s love normally proved that love by recounting the protagonists’ joy in interacting with their companions, their cheerful countenance, and their pleasant, wholesome words for others.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{41}Ælfric, CH1 17 (appendix B3), p. 542 (B1.1.19.4); Arnonis instructio pastoralis (Concilium Rispacense, a. 798?) 16, ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1906), p. 201; Concilium Tusey, a. 860, Oct. 22/Nov. 7, epistola, ed. W. Hartmann, MGH Conc. 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1998), pp. 40-1. See also below chapter 3. Almsgiving was ultimately only useful for non-Christian givers as a preparation for entering the church (see chapter 11).

\textsuperscript{42}Theodulf, Capitula I 32, pp. 129-31.

\textsuperscript{43}“Aliter quomodo charitatis habet affectum, qui despicit proximum egenum?” Hrabanus, In Ecclesiasticum 1.15, col. 748C, cf. 1 Jn 3:17, “quomodo caritas Dei manet in eo?”

\textsuperscript{44}Jonas, De institutione 3.1, col. 233; Defensor, Liber scintillatorum 1, 3, pp. 2-6, 15; also Rewards of Piety 8-9, p. 188; passing mention in Alcuin, De virtutibus 3, col. 615C; but some connections existed: see M. E. Jegen, “Charity in the Ascetical Teaching of a Ninth-Century Bishop,” American Benedictine Review 19 (1968), 536-45.

\textsuperscript{45}As in Ardo, Vita Benedicti abbatis Anianensis et Indensis 19, ed. G. Waitz. MGH SS 15/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1887), p. 208; Brun Candidus, Vita Ewigis abbatis Fuldensis (Liber I) 20, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SS 15/1, p. 231; Paschasius Radbertus, Vita sancti Adalhardi Corbeiensis abbatis 25, PL 102, col. 1521A; Ruotger, Vita Brunonis archiepiscopi Colonensis 2, ed. I. Ott, MGH SRG n.s. 10 (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus, 1951), p. 3; Rudolf, Vita Leobaie abbatissae Bisconfesheimensis 7-8, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SS 15/1, pp. 124-5; Vita Aredii abbatis Lemovicini 36, ed. B. Krusch, MGH SRM 3 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1896), pp. 592-3 (cf. c. 37, p. 593).
Nonetheless, love of all did include the love of the poor as well and could therefore include acts of physical kindness. Where Hrabanus spoke of love not ignoring a neighbor’s need, he explained that remark through a discussion of alms and mercy.\textsuperscript{46} If mercy meant being moved in the heart, as its medieval etymology asserted, then that compassion flourished simultaneously as love and mercy.\textsuperscript{47} Love defined the relationship in which mercy was exercised through properly intended almsgiving.

The Christian focus on a double love created an added complication in figuring out exactly what relationship love structured: did almsgiving express love of God, love of neighbor, or both simultaneously? Hrabanus spoke of love of neighbor in connection with almsgiving, as we have seen, but elsewhere simply “the love of God and love of eternal happiness,” without mention of neighbor.\textsuperscript{48} Love of God or Christ received more mention than love of neighbor, unless appeals to mercy are understood as implying the latter. Occasionally the double command of love was invoked.\textsuperscript{49} Usually only a generic reference to love was made and the author’s assumptions remain obscure. Of course, love of God could be a source of nurturing mercy in one’s heart towards one’s neighbor.\textsuperscript{50} Both loves were applicable and not, as we shall see, unrelated.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{46} Hrabanus, \textit{In Ecclesiasticum} 1.15, col. 748C; also Ælfric, \textit{CH2} 19, p. 182 (B1.2.22).

\textsuperscript{47} Ambrosius, \textit{In Apocalypsin} 3.3.15, pp. 189-90.

\textsuperscript{48} “propter dilectionem Dei, et amorem aeternae beatitudinis.” Hrabanus, \textit{In Ecclesiasticum} 1.12, col. 783A.


\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Blickling Homilies} 18, pp. 213-5 (LS 17.1 (MartinMor); B3.3.17.2).

\textsuperscript{51} See chapter 3 below.
One obvious corollary of this focus on the interiority of almsgiving was the frequent condemnation of those who gave merely to boost their reputation: in short, the vice of vainglory. In reference to the Matthean exhortation to give alms secretly (Mt 6:2-4), Alcuin warned, “the one who does any good in order to be praised by people, has that as the reward which he seeks and no hope of recompense from God, since he did it not for love of him, but for the empty boasting of human praise.” Note though that the seeking of praise is condemned, not praise itself. Adoring crowds celebrating the name of a liberal giver constituted a hagiographical staple. Benedict of Aniane (d. 821), we are told, “was loved by all as father, honored as a lord, and respected as a teacher.” Hrabanus implicitly acknowledged that almsgiving would have such an effect when he wrote that useless alms were given “for human favor,” but alms given for love of God were doubly useful: “which here bestow the honor of merits, and eternal glory follows in future repayment.”

The temporal effect was similar; the difference lay in motive.

These condemnations of improper giving were a fundamental theme in early medieval writing on almsgiving. The concern of preachers and moralists lay much more with the question of whether or not a person gave correctly than whether or not they gave at all. What happened inside the heart of the average Christian was not something the clergy could directly control or judge, but they believed it was essential; and so this hidden life was something to which they constantly

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52 “Qui pro eo bonum quodlibet facit, ut ab hominibus laudetur, haec est merces illius quam quaesivit, et nullam a Deo sperare habet retributionem; quia pro eius amore non fecit, sed pro vana humanae laudis jactantia.” Alcuin, De virtutibus 25, col. 631D. Also Ælfric, CH2 28, p. 251 (B1.2.31); Christian, In Mattheum 45, col. 1423-4; Defensor, Liber scintillarum 20.24, pp. 93-4; Statuta Rispacensia, Frisingensia, Salisburgensia 4, ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1906), pp. 207-8; pseudo-Wulfstan, Sammlung 46, p. 234.

53 “ab omnibus amabatur ut pater, venerabatur ut dominus reverebatur ut magister.” Ardo, Vita Benedicti 19, p. 208.

54 “Datum quod non est utile (Sir 20:10a) hoc est, cum homo eleemosynam tribuens expendit eam pro humano favore; et est iterum datum, cujus est retributiono duplex (Sir 20:10b), quando homo eleemosynam pro Dei amore et pro aeternae vitae desiderio facit; cui hic meritorum tribuitur honor, et in futura remuneracione gloria sequetur semper.” Hrabanus, In Ecclesiasticum 4.13, col. 896A; similarly, Almsgiving 3-4, in The Exeter Book, p. 223.
returned with advice and encouragement. This focus on correct interior giving may also stem from the fact that giving itself (as an exterior act) was already an ingrained practice among early medieval Christians.

A less obvious but absolutely key corollary of the importance of motive was the possibility and obligation for everyone to give alms. If the desire to do good mattered as much as the material ability, then even the offer of a cup of cold water earned a full reward, as Christ himself had promised (see Mt 10:42). “This [promise] proves that no tender service, however trifling and trivial, is vain.”\textsuperscript{55} Anyone of any station could perform such small acts of kindness, and so participate in the full Christian life of charity. With that great opportunity came responsibility. The call of Christian love obligated even the very poor to find ways of being useful to their neighbor or to give what they could.\textsuperscript{56} After assuming the life of a wandering pauper, St. Cyran is said by his ninth-century hagiographer to have aided his fellow paupers by helping to carry heavy burdens or sharing the fruit of his fishing efforts.\textsuperscript{57} The rich certainly had responsibility to give more and received a higher proportion of theologians’ tender exhortations, but almsgiving could be a universal and fundamental Christian practice. And theologians believed that it should be, for it expressed the most elementary aspects of the Christian soul.

Almsgiving then could mean a wide variety of acts of mercy, but in most situations it did not. The Latin tongue borrowed the term in order to speak about a specific subset of merciful works, namely using one’s wealth to support the poor and the church. When Bede or Hrabanus

\begin{footnotes}
\item[55] “non inania demonstrat esse singula quamuis leuissima pietatis officia.” Paschasius, \textit{In Matheo} 6.10.42, p. 617. See following note and Ælfric, \textit{CH1} 38, p. 510 (B1.1.40); \textit{CH2} 7, p. 64 (B1.2.8); Hrabanus, \textit{In Ecclesiasticum} 8.5, col. 1015-6; Sedulius Scotos, \textit{Collectaneum miscellaneum} 13.32.15, ed. D. Simpson, CCCM 67 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1988-90), p. 112.

\item[56] Ælfric, \textit{CH2} 6, p. 58 (B1.2.7); \textit{Florilegium Frisingense} 175, p. 18; Jonas, \textit{De institutione laicali} 2.29, col. 234A; Paschasius, \textit{In Matheo} 6.10.42, p. 617; \textit{Vercelli Homilies} 21, pp. 352-3, 356 (HomM 13 (ScraggVerc 21); B3.5.13); pseudo-Wulfstan, \textit{Sammlung} 46, 55, pp. 238, 287 (HomU 37, 44 (Nap 46, 55); B3.4.37, B3.4.44); cf. Ælfric, \textit{CH2} 19, p. 187 (B1.2.22).

\item[57] \textit{Vita Sigiramni abbatis Longoretensis} 22, 28, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH SRM 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1902), pp. 619, 622; similarly, see the fisherman in Odilo, \textit{Epitaphium domine Adelheide} 2, p. 31.
\end{footnotes}
asserted that alms included not only feeding the poor but also other merciful acts, they implicitly acknowledged that alms normally meant the former. Einhard simply equated eleemosina with a generosity limited to paupers: “In supporting the poor, [Charlemagne] was most devoted to that liberal generosity which the Greeks call alms.” In daily usage, alms equaled material charity to the poor and to the church, some of whom, after all, needed daily alms to survive.

The broad definition of eleemosina as mercy nonetheless structured the narrowly understood act of giving. The resultant cultural understanding of almsgiving categorized it as an essentially religious act which melded both interior and exterior parts of a person. Gift-from-the-right-intention-of-the-heart formed one unit. As such, the giver’s interior state mattered a great deal alongside the actual material impact of the gift. “It is good for the well-born man that he keep for himself, / the man rightly mindful, a generous heart within,” as one Old English poem on almsgiving advised. The theological distinction between exterior action and interior motive was absolutely standard in early medieval thought; the heart of almsgiving was the attachments of the almsgiver’s heart.

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61 See Ælfric, CH1 3, p. 203. Also note, even something seemingly abhorrent to Christianity, such as loaning money at interest, could be condoned if the interior motive were to help the poor (as it “often” did) according to God’s command (Mt 5:42) rather than earthly wealth: Paschasius, In Mattheo 3.5.42, pp. 351-2. The utility of a just loan for the poor “in alms” (and the sin of failing to do so if needed) is also noted in Hrabanus, In Ecclesiasticum 6.10, cols. 973-4. For an image of judgment based on discerning the motives for actions, see Ælfric, CH2 20, pp. 192-4 (B1.2.23). For the use of motive regarding sin and war, see Nithard, Historia / Historie des Fils de Louis le Pieux 3.1, ed. P. Lauer (Paris: Champion, 1926), pp. 80-2.
3. Early Medieval Christendom and Its Concerns

When Ansgar undertook his mission to the north, he had as his base a recent acquisition by the Christian Frankish empire: Saxony. Between 772 and 804, Charlemagne ruthlessly imposed his control and the Christian religion on the native inhabitants until all were thoroughly cowed, co-opted into the new regime, or dead. In the midst of this campaign, he issued a capitulary laying down a series of laws designed to enforce the new political and religious order (although the extent to which they were enforced or even enforceable is debatable).

In it he outlawed pagan practices and backed the authority of his officials with threat of draconian punishments. He also demanded adherence to half a dozen Christian commands: baptism for all, honoring churches and their clergy, tithing to them, burial in Christian cemeteries, fasting from meat during Lent (upon penalty of death!), and going to church on Sundays to hear God’s word, pray, and perform righteous works.

It is difficult to see of what these works would consist if not charity. For Charlemagne, being made Christian meant baptism, the triad of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving, and visible participation in Christianity’s communal institutions.

Alcuin seems to have rather disapproved of Charlemagne’s method of conversion, which, although it incorporated preaching (on Sundays and presumably more generally), placed coercion over instruction. When the defeat of the Avars offered a new opportunity for mission, Alcuin quickly wrote his ruler a letter explaining how one ought to shape a people into Christians. They had to be baptized, but only after learning about essential doctrines such as the Trinity, Christ’s salvific sacrifice, the coming judgment, and the immortality of the soul, as well as which sins led to

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63 *Capitulatio de partibus Saxoniae* 1-5, 8, 16-9, 22, pp. 37-41. A repentant Saxon could, however, avoid secular punishment for hidden capital offenses by freely confessing them to a priest and performing the prescribed penance: c. 14, p. 39.
eternal punishment and, “for what goodness and righteous deeds one might enjoy eternal glory with Christ.”

Thus instructed and baptized, the convert had the chance through the Holy Spirit “to be a perfect son of God in works of mercy just as our Father in heaven is perfect.”

Despite his significant differences with Charlemagne as to method, Alcuin also envisioned the threshold of Christianity as proper baptism, followed by works of mercy and separation from sin.

These markers of Christianity were nothing new. Alcuin referred liberally to the old authority of Jerome and Augustine in his letter, and they would have supported his position. Charlemagne’s placement of good works as a fundamental aspect of Christianity and Alcuin’s linking of post-baptismal mercy with eternal life were, as we have seen, foundational parts of the Christian ethos. Nonetheless, the context of these ideas—a Christian king incorporating a newly conquered people into his empire as a political and religious project—was not the norm when Augustine and Jerome wrote.

Early medieval almsgiving was the product of contemporary concerns and realities, as well as of traditional notions of almsgiving’s heavenly benefits and its definition as mercy. While drawing on real continuities with the Christian tradition of charity, early medieval almsgiving adopted a distinctive character from its own times. Christianization (broadly conceived) and the quest to create a righteous community of the Christian people profoundly shaped the idea and practice of charity. Concern to preserve an ordered, hierarchical society also played a critical role. Beyond these goals, simple economic and demographical facts molded what could be done.

Let us begin with the last of these three formative factors. The area of early medieval Europe under consideration here (England and the Frankish lands north of the Alps) was diverse but followed some common trends. England and western Francia had enjoyed the economic

\[64\] “pro quibus bonis vel benefactis gloria cum Christo fruatur sempiterna.” Alcuin, Epistolae 110, p. 159.

\[65\] “sit perfectus filius Dei in operibus misericordiae sicut pater noster caelestis perfectus est.” Alcuin, Epistolae 110, p. 159.
benefits of being part of the Roman Empire, including the nurturing of urban centers. With the advent of early medieval kingdoms, that economy and urban life slid into a depression in Francia and spectacularly collapsed in England. By the eighth century, the economy and urban life had begun to grow in both regions, and continued generally to expand in the following centuries despite a number of short-term ups and downs. Long-distance trade routes ran through the North Sea, the Baltic (connecting from there to the Middle East), into Spain, and across the Alps into Italy, while regional networks moved some bulk goods. The Frankish realm east of the Rhine also participated in this growth. Demographic increase and economic expansion proceeded together. Nonetheless, this was a rural world in which the vast majority of wealth came from working fertile land. Great estates held by a mosaic of royal, aristocratic, and ecclesiastical proprietors dominated the landscape of our written sources, although how fully that reflects the historical reality is an unresolved issue. The population lived dispersed in varied settlement patterns over broad areas with a tendency towards coalescing into more stable villages as time progressed. In short, it was a slowly growing, decentralized world and charity had to take place from that decentralized basis.

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Within this world, a sense of proper order was a primary social ideal despite some complications. Unlike the nobility of the later Middle Ages or the elite Roman classes, the early medieval aristocracy was not legally defined. The relative gap between the very rich and the poor was generally smaller, although there was no large professional middle class in between and that gap did begin to grow again with the economic upswing. In spite of these limitations, early medieval people cared a great deal about social status and reputation. Hierarchy was not only a fact of life, but something valued (at least by those whose views entered the written record, and quite possibly by others as well).\(^{68}\) Successful charity had both to force the elite to take notice of commoners and also to make allowance for their need to preserve or enhance their status while giving.

Alongside these social and economic facts lay the religious and political fact of Christianization. The Saxons officially converted to Christianity at the end of the eighth century, while their Frisian neighbors had done so at the beginning of the century. England’s rulers accepted and sponsored missionaries inside their lands over the seventh century, resulting in newly Christian kingdoms by the eighth century. Most of the Frankish empire had been nominally Christian even before that. The early medieval world described in this dissertation was a land of the baptized, but equating that with a Christian world is more problematic. For Christianity to penetrate culture and seep into people’s worldview and daily habits was a much more extensive

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task than the simple process of conversion and baptism. This Christianization of the populace formed the continuing story of early medieval religion, one which proceeded differently in ancient Christian centers like Arles and newly minted centers like Bremen in Saxony. No one expected the common people to be sophisticated theologians, but they had to be taught enough to turn to God instead of “superstitious” beliefs in crisis, and to act and believe in a manner fitting for salvation.

What unified these different regions was the program of correcting society from above according to Christian ideals, with the aggressive inculcation of Christian belief and practice. Bishops and monks inspired and implemented much of that program, but its organization and support equally rested on royal concerns. Creating a vibrant, uniform religious identity across a kingdom, especially something as vast and diverse as the Carolingian empire, offered practical advantages in trying to obtain cohesiveness and some sort of peaceful unity. A variety of Christian and even non-Christian traditions also expected the ruler to be a solicitous custodian of his people’s supernatural welfare as much as of their military security. In conjunction with this expectation, both the Anglo-Saxons and the Franks conceived of themselves (in slightly different ways) as a “New Israel” called by God to be a holy people; and like the historical Israel, their earthly fate might well depend on how well they lived up to this heavenly calling. In light of these views, the

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state had a vital stake in the full Christianization of its subjects. As a result, the royal and religious elites made concerted efforts to buttress church institutions and educate the laity in the faith. These efforts reached their greatest intensity during the reigns of Charlemagne and his son in Francia, and at the ends of the ninth and of the tenth centuries in England. 71

While I prefer the term “Christianization” to capture the sense of how this program built on previous efforts to inculcate Christianity and how it faced a world that in most places had not yet been thoroughly seeped in Christianity, the idea of “reform,” employed by many historians, might also be used. Most of the Frankish and Anglo-Saxon worlds had already accepted Christianity, and the project of this time was in effect to restructure the church to minister to a converted people and to make that people listen. It was a reformation, but a thorough, sweeping one aimed at reshaping the broad range of social practice and morality as well as specifically ecclesiastical affairs. 72


This renewed wave of Christianization rested on a number of practical policies and efforts. These involved liturgical reform (centered in the case of Charlemagne on his court chapel), patronage of scholarship, endowment of churches and monasteries, the acquisition of relics alongside public promotion of their cults, appointment of reformers to episcopal sees, and the promulgation of laws designed to foster Christian behavior. Naturally, some of these efforts included the encouragement of almsgiving, and the rest of this chapter will consider that element of the program.

4. Christianization and Charity

The religious elite sought to educate everyone on the rudiments of faith, and especially to reform the minds and habits of the lay elite in order to create a vibrant Christian society. Lay aristocrats found themselves exposed to Christian ideals through several mediums. Just being around the court would have been a lesson in itself, given royal interest in various leading intellectual lights and the quality court chapel staff. The occasional royal pronouncements at general assemblies on charity (alongside its frequent mention at religious councils under royal auspices) and the example of the king himself made plain the Christian duties of laymen. Beyond the influence of this general religious atmosphere, the Carolingians also cultivated a genre of advice literature from the late eighth century onwards directed specifically towards the lay elite.


Alcuin’s treatise, mentioned above, offered one especially popular example among many, and anyone reading them would have received a judicious and thorough summary of what any person ought to know about charity and its consequences. There is some reason to be optimistic about their ability to reach their audience.\(^75\) While England lacked that specific genre aimed at the laity, King Alfred (r. 871-99) famously ordered all his lay magistrates to learn to read in order to acquire the Christian wisdom necessary to rule. While the immediate effects of that proclamation fell short of Alfred’s hopes, it does appear that a century later some of the lay elite were reading vernacular religious texts.\(^76\)

Both the lay elite and the common laity benefited from other means of education. Penitential literature included injunctions towards almsgiving. It and concurrent practices affected people across western Europe.\(^77\) Some hagiography was read as part of the liturgy on the feast of a saint, perhaps exposing pilgrims and local residents to the examples and theological lessons contained therein, but certainly providing material that would have been used by monks or clerics anxious to promote their relics to the public.

More than either of those means, the preaching of homilies and sermons offered the best method of widely teaching the doctrine of almsgiving in its depth.\(^78\) Homilies had been the main

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\(^75\) Noble, “Secular Sanctity,” 8-10, 24-30; see also Contreni, “Building Mansions,” 703.


\(^78\) Some scholars have preferred to distinguish the two, limiting sermons to moral exhortation and homilies to scriptural exegesis, though much early medieval material straddles the two and I consequently
mode of instructing the laity during the patristic era, and so the primary vehicle for inculcating
charity. In the early Middle Ages, preaching lost some of its public nature and theological cachet.
A number of homilies either were written simply as an exegetical genre, without the intention of
being preached, or were composed solely for reading during the night office by monks or canons.
Nevertheless, several homiliaries designed explicitly to be preached to the laity are still extant, and
other homiliaries may also have served that purpose.

Carolingian and Anglo-Saxon preaching immersed the people in a piety suffused with a
high regard for works like almsgiving: “Good works played so great a part in all aspects of
Carolingian religious life that it is difficult to find a single sermon which did not contain either a
short reference to or extended discussion of their place in the scheme of salvation.”

Anyone exposed to these sermons would have learned all the important doctrines of charity at least in

use the two words interchangeably: T. Amos, “Preaching and the Sermon in the Carolingian World,” in De
Ore Domini: Preacher and Word in the Middle Ages, ed. T. Amos, E. Green and B. M. Kienzle, Studies in
Medieval Culture 27 (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989), 47-8; but see also T. N. Hall,
“The Early Medieval Sermon,” in The Sermon, ed. B. M. Kienzle, Typologie des sources du moyen âge
occidental 81-3 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2000), 204-12.

On early medieval preaching, see H. Barré, Les homéliaires carolingiens de l’école d’Auxerre, Studi e
testi 225 (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1962); M. M. Gatch, Preaching and Theology in
Anglo-Saxon England: Ælfric and Wulstan (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); P. Szarmach and B.
F. Huppé, eds., The Old English Homily and Its Backgrounds (Albany: State University of New York Press,
1978); T. Amos, “The Origin and Nature of the Carolingian Sermon,” PhD diss. (Michigan State University,

McLaughlin, “Word Eclipsed,” 99-100; R. Finn, Almsgiving in the Later Roman Empire: Christian
Promotion and Practice (313-450) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 137-69; see also J. Cavadini,
“Simplifying Augustine,” in Educating People of Faith, ed. J. Van Engen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004),
63-84.

Eclipsed,” 84-6.

Amos, “Origin and Nature,” 200-36; Clayton, “Homiliaries,” 213-7, 221-9; Amos, “Preaching,” 41-
60; McLaughlin, “Word Eclipsed,” 81-2, 86.

summary form.\textsuperscript{83} Not everyone heard priests preach on a regular basis (although many did), and not all priests had access to a homiliary (although some did).\textsuperscript{84} These handicaps to instruction existed, but should not be overestimated. The doctrine of almsgiving was in its essence, after all, a fairly simple and foundational part of faith: if you want to go to heaven, love God and your neighbor by showing mercy so that you will be shown mercy in turn; give from the incredible gifts that you have been given. A priest did not have to be a masterful exegete to teach his flock the rudimentary lesson that almsgiving pleased God.

Moreover, those promoting the new wave of Christianization understood the potential obstacles to their endeavors and the potential benefits of preparing and mobilizing an army of preachers. Charlemagne tried to promote schooling by monks and by local priests, as well as encouraging preaching generally.\textsuperscript{85} Well-educated bishops and canons preached, and monks continued to be involved in pastoral care (despite some efforts to remove them).\textsuperscript{86} These elite preachers passed on doctrine to the fortunate people in their environs and perhaps set an example for other preachers. Councils of different sizes provided another means of diffusing doctrinal points and charitable reminders. By the ninth century, these exhortations could be passed on at a very local level via episcopal visitations, diocesan synods, and enforcement of episcopal statutes

\textsuperscript{83} See beginning of chapter 3.


(among which, Theodulf of Orleans’ statutes for his priests enjoyed especially widespread diffusion on the continent and in England). When Charlemagne wished to harness the combined prayers and alms of the realm to petition God’s mercy, he turned to the priests to spread the word to his people.

If words failed to move or a priest did not know how to preach, there remained one further method of teaching of great importance. There was teaching by example. Councils and theologians (and, in a more abstract way, hagiographers) reminded clergy that words without deeds were dead. When good bishops traveled, their charity spoke with silent eloquence to their co-workers. Royalty, lay aristocrats, and parents all could give examples too. Even the liturgy came to encode that importance in the tenth century, when the central Christian celebration of the

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87 e.g. Concilium Baiuwaricum, a. 740-750 7, 10, 15, ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1906), pp. 52-3; Gerhard, Vita Oudalrici 6, pp. 394-5; Theodulf, Capitula I 24, 25, 32, 35, 36, 38-9 and 43-4, pp. 121-3, 129-35, 137, 139-40; McLaughlin, “Word Eclipsed,” 107-8; and especially van Rhijn, Shepherds of the Lord, passim.


91 Gerhard, Vita s. Oudalrici 5, pp. 393-4; Rimbert, Vita Anskarii 35, pp. 68-70.

Easter Triduum began with the bishop or others bending knee in imitation of Jesus before twelve paupers, washing their feet and giving them alms.\textsuperscript{93}

The church and the lay rulers who worked through it therefore had a variety of possibilities for promoting almsgiving as an element in their new wave of Christianization. Some of these means could only convey a very basic sense of the importance of good works. Councils and royal proclamations had to distill sophisticated doctrines into sharp, practical rules. Moral treatises for the elites and homilies more generally could develop an exposition of what alms meant at greater length. As both Alcuin and Charlemagne’s approaches to the newly converted Saxons demonstrate, good works were an essential part of the new world of the kingdom-wide community grounded in Christianity that they were striving to create.

Christianization matters in this study for three major reasons. First, it meant that a number of people actively promoted almsgiving in the context of a larger supporting program. Secondly, it meant that the exhortations to give tended to target everyone, since everyone had the obligation to act like a Christian. Preachers and writers emphasized those aspects of eleemosynary theology that underscored the ability of all to participate in the community of the Christian people and so strengthen their diverse society religiously and politically. Thirdly, this reinforcement of unity in the realm paradoxically also reinforced elements of hierarchy. The leaders of the populus Christianus acquired new importance and moral authority as a Christian ethos penetrated society and glued it together.\textsuperscript{94} These consequences of the politico-religious ferment of the early medieval world helped to give its practice of charity a distinctive cast.


\textsuperscript{94} See chapter 11.
Rimbert, at the beginning of this chapter, imagined how pagans in his missionary field saw his Christian homeland. He imagined them having heard of the central place of almsgiving in the Christian’s relationship with God. In the end, it seems very likely that a pagan merchant hearing a few preachers would have understood almsgiving and fasting as a Christian’s standard means of communicating with God, and that a good, aristocratic convert to Christianity also would have understood the importance of faith and a good interior will. The early medieval church had the opportunity and the desire to spread a doctrine as essential to Christian life in this world and the next as was almsgiving; presumably it did so.

5. Conclusion

Almsgiving occupied a critical place in early medieval Christianity. It was a fundamental practice, seen as an essential means towards obtaining forgiveness of sins and a place in heaven, in accord with the understanding of scripture inherited by the early medieval church. Almsgiving operated in a broad Christian ethos of faith and love. Indeed, almsgiving in itself meant mercy and the guidelines associated with it intimately connected with that focus on interior motive.

The distinctive characteristics of the Carolingian and Anglo-Saxon world also shaped almsgiving. Society was hierarchical and, although almsgiving might emphasize loving bonds, it had to respect social status. Charity might even reinforce that hierarchy, but as we shall see, that proved a complex matter in the early Middle Ages. Society was rural and decentralized, although expanding. The pattern of charity consequently would have to rely on a dispersed network if it was to succeed. Looked at another way, almsgiving as part of a larger project of Christianization offered a way to compensate for that decentralization by creating a unified religious culture that answered to an orderly ecclesial institution, which in turn had a close working relationship with the lay monarch. Kings and churchmen further understood themselves as having responsibility to God

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95 See above, n. 1-3.
for the spiritual state of their people. Faced with a world marked by varying degrees of Christian development, these men (and some women) promoted a program of religious renewal and deepening throughout the early Middle Ages. Full-hearted almsgiving was one of the markers of identity for the Christian people they were trying to create and a means for preparing it to stand before God’s face.

This was the basic place and idea of almsgiving in the early medieval world. On the foundations of these factors, a very rich matrix of customs and conceptions arose. The next chapter describes the developed set of thought that formed the theoretical infrastructure of almsgiving, while the following chapters consider the practice that existed alongside these beliefs.
CHAPTER 3

GIFTS, RELATIONSHIPS, AND THE IDEA OF ALMSGIVING

One of the main themes of early medieval history is that of a kind of education. The mantle of Christianity fell across kingdom after kingdom, but that was only the beginning of the story. Christianity was a religion of faith as well as deeds; the process of pondering what it meant to be Christian and of trying to engage the hearts, minds, and actions of peasants and kings with those beliefs often moved slowly towards the goal of a Christian Europe, but move it did. Actual practice inevitably emerged from a complicated amalgam of old customs, new social pressures, chance, and the evolving interpretation of the theological inheritance. The last of these is the subject of this chapter.

When preachers went out, they taught people that as Christians they had to give alms and give alms well. Their listeners learned that almsgiving brought eternal life and the forgiveness of sins.¹ They learned that true and beneficial almsgiving meant having the correct interior attitude of humble love and mercy in almsgiving.² They learned these two basic points, which described the fundamental role of almsgiving in the Christian conception of life, as we have seen; but they also

¹ Ælfric, CH1 38, 17(Appendix B3), pp. 510, 542 (B1.1.40, B1.1.19.4); Ælfric, CH2 7, 19, 20, 21, pp. 60, 63, 187, 196-7, 203 (B1.2.8, B1.2.22, B1.2.23, B1.2.24); Hrabanus Maurus, Homiliae de festis praecepis, item de virtutibus 1, 3, 10, 12, 19, 30, 40, 53 and 57, PL 110, cols. 11-2, 14, 23D, 27A, 38-9, 58, 75-6, 97-8 and 107; Eligius [pseudo], Homiliae 3, 4, 8 and 11, PL 87, cols. 606D, 611B, 616, 623, 632-3 and 635B.

² Ælfric, CH1 3, 11, 35, 17(Appendix), pp. 203, 273, 481, 542 (B1.1.4, B1.1.12, B1.1.35, B1.1.19.4); Ælfric, CH2 7, 28, pp. 61, 251 (B1.2.8, B1.2.31); Hrabanus, Homiliae 10, 12, 34, 45, 53 and 59, cols. 23A, 27A, 66CD, 84-5, 97-8 and 111BC; pseudo-Eligius, Homiliae 8, 11, cols. 616-7, 631CD, 633-4.
learned more. All could give, even if only small amounts or by forgiving others. Christ himself received each of these gifts and repaid them. Almsgiving gave no help to those who preferred to remain in sin or gave from unrighteous profits. Moreover, the wealth entrusted by God to the rich was owed the poor in justice. Homilists also tried to find new ways to explain this theology through appeal to people’s lived experiences, as in the case of one Anglo-Saxon who exhorted his audience to give alms for God’s sake by drawing a parallel with approaching earthly superiors: “in this we may take an example from worldly things: the one who brings a gift to the reeve succeeds better than he who brings nothing.” Homilists urged Christians time and time again to give alms, for God already had given them so much.

Most of what was said disappeared from history when the sound of the preachers’ voices died away, but a handful of surviving sermon collections designed for popular preaching allow one to say that some clerics did proffer a sophisticated understanding of charity as a guide for the

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3 Ælfric, CH1 38, p. 510; Ælfric, CH2 7, pp. 61, 64; Hrabanus, Homiliae 10, 41, 53, cols. 22-3, 95, 98-9; pseudo-Eligius, Homiliae 6, 8, 11, cols. 613BC, 616A, 634C.

4 Ælfric, CH1 31, pp. 446-7 (B1.1.33); Ælfric, CH2 7, 29, pp. 64-6, 256-8 (B1.2.8, B1.2.32); Hrabanus, Homiliae 10, 53, 57, cols. 23CD, 98, 107; pseudo-Eligius, Homiliae 11, col. 635A.

5 Ælfric, CH1 17(Appendix), p. 542; Ælfric, CH2 7, 20, pp. 61-2, 196-7; Hrabanus, Homiliae 53, 62, cols. 97-8, 117; pseudo-Eligius, Homiliae 6, 8, cols. 613BC, 616-8.

6 Ælfric, CH2 7, 19, pp. 62-3, 187; Hrabanus, Homiliae 29, 62, cols. 56C, 117-8; pseudo-Eligius, Homiliae 1, col. 596A.

7 “Be ðam we magon niman bysne be woruldþingum; se man, þe bringð medscæt þam gerefan, se geærendað bet, þonne se, ðe næonne ne bringð.” Wulfstan [pseudo], Wulfstan: Sammlung der ihm zugeschriebenen Homilien nebst Untersuchungen über ihre Echtheit 46 (“Larspell”), ed. A. Napier (1883 [repr. Dublin and Zürich: Weidmann, 1965]), p. 238 (HomU 37 (Nap 46); B3.4.37). The distinction between bribes and gifts were somewhat blurred, but in any case the homilist does not necessarily condone the practice of gifts to the reeve: cf. Lk 16:1-13, also compare Odo of Cluny, Vita sancti Geraldii Auriliacensis comitis, 1.17, 1.25, PL 133 cols. 653-4, 657, and Paschasius Radbertus, Radbert’s Epitaphium Arsenii 1.28, ed. E. Dümmler, Abhandlungen der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Phil-Historische Abteilung 2 (1900), pp. 58-60.

8 Ælfric, CH1 3, p. 203; Ælfric, CH2 7, 20, 29, pp. 60, 62, 196-7, 258; Hrabanus, Homiliae 1, 10, 23, 29, 53 and 57, cols. 11-2, 22-3, 47B, 56BC, 97-9 and 107; pseudo-Eligius, Homiliae 1, 3, 11 and 13, cols. 596A, 606D, 633-4, 640C and 642B.
people. The precepts set out in the preceding paragraph appear in three representative homiliaries. Hrabanus Maurus of Fulda (later of Mainz) composed a homiliary of seventy sermons in the early ninth century in response to Carolingian reformers’ demands for more preaching to the people. An anonymous Frankish bishop (pseudo-Eligius) of the late ninth or tenth century recorded sixteen of the sermons that he had actually preached in his cathedral to his clerical and lay flock. In England in the early 990s, Ælfric, the well-known master of vernacular religious composition, wrote his “Catholic Homilies” partly as a model for popular preaching. For each of these authors, almsgiving was something worthy of care and attention. They thought about eleemosynary issues and sought to apply their conceptions to daily life.

These three authors had the distinction of working their theology into homiletic form, but their contemporary intellectuals also nourished a concern for analyzing charity with an eye towards its application in Christian practice. As the English homilist’s example of the advisibility of

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approaching a reeve with a gift suggests, gift exchange gave them a primary model for framing inherited ideas of why one gave alms and what effect charity had. This exchange between almsgiver, pauper, and God wove together a vibrant collection of threads, resulting in a much more nuanced pattern than might be suggested by a simple notion of gift and countergift. The subject of this chapter is this tapestry of relational ideas, which set the pattern for the teaching of these homilists. One can also see some changes from earlier times within this vivid weaving of thought; this will be the subject of the following chapter.

1. Early Medieval Theology

Many early medieval theological texts appear at first glance to be disconcerting scrapheaps of direct quotations and close paraphrases of patristic theologians. A few texts still appear that way after a careful examination, but only a few. Most authors carefully selected their sources from a wide array of materials and artfully arranged them into a pattern with consistent themes like a mosaic or a patchwork quilt. This theological method was not exactly a means of disguising original views, but rather a certain kind of hermeneutical humility: “Most Carolingian theology… offers an accumulation, a plurality of human texts as the only adequate exegesis of the divine text.” Heretics might ignore and overthrow inherited wisdom, but true Christians learned from it. If Augustine (354-431) could have read eighth- and ninth-century thinkers, he would have found parallels for most of their ideas in his own work or that of his contemporaries. Nevertheless,


Augustine could never have mistaken their writing for that of a contemporary because early medieval theologians created a new pattern out of the ideas they inherited.

The process of excerpting and rearranging allowed medieval theologians to quietly discard certain earlier ideas, to forcefully emphasize others, and to reinterpret patristic remarks by placing them in new contexts. And almost all authors wrote portions of their texts (in some cases, most or all of the text) in their own words, elucidating how they understood their theological inheritance. Consequently, it is possible to observe shifts in thought over the centuries and how early medieval thinkers specifically understood those theologians who had come before them. This fact of change should not obscure how these thinkers also aspired to the ideal of fidelity to a precious, golden gift of truth that had been divinely bestowed and reverently refined within the Christian community over the following centuries. The goal of intellectual endeavor lay in exploring and above all explaining that patrimony of knowledge, rather than engaging in idiosyncratic efforts that meant parting ways with the community formed by Christ’s sacrifice.

My approach to early medieval theology therefore adapts itself to the conventions of our sources in two major ways. First, I focus on those texts in which it is clear either that the author digests earlier material and works it out in his own words, or that the author’s quotation or close paraphrase of a previous theologian on almsgiving is a conscious choice that contributes to the larger context. For example, when Ælfric borrowed a vision account from Gregory the Great (d. 604), which featured a shoemaker’s almsgiving every Saturday resulting in a wondrous house in heaven being built for him week by week, we would be unwise to use that as evidence for a tenth-century English custom of almsgiving on Saturdays. We might, however, suspect that Ælfric chose to copy this passage because he believed that almsgiving had an important role in a person’s post-mortem fate. The discovery that Ælfric edited Gregory’s work down to what he considered its essential themes, and that he then placed it in the context of other visions which emphasized the
efficacy of almsgiving and post-mortem masses in allowing a soul to enter heaven, confirms that hypothesis about Ælfric’s intentions.  

The second aspect of my approach works from their ideal of a community of knowledge. Early medieval theologians in fact agreed upon the major points of eleemosynary doctrine, and it is these commonalities on which I focus. That Hrabanus wrote a bit more on grace than Alcuin did is interesting, but does not indicate any actual disagreement on core doctrines. This chapter focuses on the common threads that bind this era together and only notes disagreements where they become significant or evidence shifting attitudes over time. This attention to the cumulative endeavor of early medieval theologians also offers another advantage: it is much easier to see what choices were being made in excerpting from the patristic heritage. When Hrabanus, for example, omitted the patristic image of the poor as porters for the goods of the rich, it could have been a matter of chance. When he and his contemporaries consistently made such choices, we know that the omission of this image was intentional and that, conversely, the retention of other patristic examples was probably a conscious choice as well.

The basic mode of theological investigation was scriptural commentary. The Venerable Bede (d. 735), a monk from northern England, was undoubtedly the greatest early medieval master of scriptural exegesis, although he is today more famous for his Ecclesiastical History of the English People. That latter work does indicate his interest in matters outside his cloister walls, including the strengthening of an English church capable of carrying out the task of fully Christianizing a people brought to that religion in some cases within living memory. That sense of the urgent need to form a Christian people pervades his commentaries.


While Bede had no contemporary equals in exegesis, he wrote in the midst of an otherwise lively culture of learning that his countryman, Alcuin (d. 804), would help export to the continent later in the eighth century. There Charlemagne (d. 814), his son Louis the Pious (d. 840), and his grandsons patronized an extraordinary revival of culture, including the production of quite a number of scriptural commentaries. The most renowned of these new exegetes was Alcuin’s pupil, Hrabanus Maurus (d. 856), the “teacher of Germany,” a monk and abbot of Fulda, and later archbishop of Mainz. His prolific writing included the first full commentary on the Book of Sirach (also called Ecclesiasticus), a wisdom book which had much to say about the care of the poor. Hrabanus was only one among many talented Carolingian theologians, and a project such as this chapter faces an embarrassment of riches. Ambrosius Autpert (d. 784), Paschasius Radbert (d. ca. 860), and Christian of Stavelot (fl. 860s) represent only a sample of the talent nourished in the Carolingian renewal.

The work of Carolingian thinkers was not confined to biblical exegesis. Alcuin and Bishop Jonas of Orleans (d. 843) both made noteworthy contributions to the genre of ethical treatises or guides for the laity, mentioned in the previous chapter. Their works presented Christian teaching in a clear, accessible manner, and did so without diluting its theological core. Alcuin’s contemporary, Theodulf (d. 821), bishop of Orleans, was another formidable intellectual who did not work strictly in the exegetical genre. In the later period of the Carolingian revival, Archbishop Hincmar of Reims (d. 882), who was more an activist ecclesiastic and politician than an exegete, still found it expedient at several points to fight his battles with a pen.

In the tenth century, the center of exegesis shifted back to England where it took the form of homilies. Some of these were designed for popular preaching and others for the edification of a more learned audience. In addition to the work of the monk Ælfric of Eynsham (d. ca. 1010), a number of other vernacular homilies are extant. A few can be traced to a specific author, especially the key figure of Wulfstan of York (d. 1023). Among the anonymous homilies, the tenth-century collections in the Blickling and Vercelli manuscripts are the best known.
Exegetical works are our best source for early medieval theology, although for almsgiving the ethical treatises are also quite important. Hagiography, conciliar decrees, *florilegia* (collected patristic and biblical excerpts), poetry, and other scattered sources can supplement our knowledge, especially for those times and places when scriptural commentaries are scarce. These sources generally suffer from the disadvantage of brevity. They normally reveal what their authors believed in summary, but not the details or the reasons.

The analysis of these works will fall into two sections. The first, explored in this chapter, explains their conception of almsgiving in the framework of gift exchange and the various personal relationships involved (viewed theologically). The ideas there are largely those of earlier theologians, although their contextualization and elaboration display the results of early medieval rumination. The next chapter then turns to those matters in which early medieval thought developed in some surprising new directions.

2. Gift, Reciprocity, and Relationship

The two foundational principles of early medieval almsgiving were that it involved an exchange with God and that it was an act of mercy and love. The latter presents no problem for modern thinkers (although its importance has not always been acknowledged in the secondary literature), but the former has frequently aroused some consternation among historians.\(^{17}\) Obviously, an arrangement in which charity triggers religious benefits for the giver violates the modern principle of altruism, and could potentially lead to what has been called the “egotism of salvation.”\(^{18}\) Whether altruism ever actually exists is the subject of heated modern debates, and

\(^{17}\) I leave aside here post-Reformation theological critiques. Whatever merit those critiques might or might not have, this period universally held the belief that God justly judged and recompensed both good deeds and unforgiven sins. As we shall see, such a belief did not negate the necessity of faith or that of unmerited grace for performing good deeds and election to salvation.

whether it ought to be the standard of charity is a debate which is beginning to emerge; nevertheless, altruism is still the prism through which medieval charity is usually observed.\textsuperscript{19} The difference between modern and medieval assumptions must be acknowledged if we are to understand the earlier practice of almsgiving and grasp how the principles of love and exchange could so intimately connect with one another.

At a basic level, to give to another without thinking you also needed something from the recipient and from God would be—from the medieval perspective—at best naive ignorance, and likely the prideful act of a person looking to lift himself above his fellow human beings, while ignoring the incommensurate gap between his own weak self and heaven’s divine height. This concern for one’s own salvation by no means precluded love and mercy towards poor neighbors (which was in fact required). Love was not a zero-sum game. A neighbor’s good did not have to come at the expense of one’s own. Each man and woman’s future well-being depended critically on those bonds between giver, recipient, and God, which were articulated and strengthened in the act of almsgiving.

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\textsuperscript{19} The current debate revolves around questions of specific issues, such as whether charity (versus investment) demeans the recipients and whether for-profit charitable organizations should be supported, as well as larger concerns about altruism’s adequacy as a framework for understanding human motivation (including guilt and the “warm-glow” effect) and promoting charity: see esp. Kapur and Chong, \textit{Altruistic Reveries}, passim; A. Malani, and E. A. Posner, “The Case for For-Profit Charities,” \textit{Virginia Law Review} 93 (2007), 2017-67 (with subsequent online responses at http://www.virginialawreview.org/inbrief.php?s=inbrief&p=2008/01/21/index).
The key to understanding those bonds and their relation to alms lies in understanding gift exchange in the context of relationship. The idea of an exchange within charitable giving may disturb us because our minds leap to the idea of commercial exchange. However, almsgiving involved gifts, not purchases. Our own experience of gifts demonstrates that a certain mutuality comes with them, whether it be in the reciprocal exchange of presents at Christmas, a token of thanks given to someone who has done us a professional favor, or a gift brought to a friend’s wedding with the unspoken understanding that your friend would do the same for you at your own wedding as well as immediately providing a nice reception. This modern sense of gift giving is really an attenuated form of its medieval predecessors. In early medieval Europe, expectations regarding gifts played an important role in political, religious, and social relations, and a larger economic role than today.

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The current consensus is that commerce and other means of wealth production and gathering still heavily outweighed gift exchange in economic importance (especially in the more developed Francia): C. Wickham, Framing the Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean 400-800 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 694-6, 807-8, 818; despite the important observations in Grierson, “Commerce,” 123-40; G. Duby, The Early Growth of the European Economy, trans. H. Clarke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), 48-57.
Anthropological theory has played a key role in historians’ understanding of gift giving, although its predictions and applicability to medieval Europe always need to be checked against contemporary evidence.\(^{22}\) The inspiration for the field of gift exchange theory comes from Marcel Mauss’ seminal work in the 1920s. Most of his specific conclusions have been qualified, complicated, or rejected since that time, but that evolution of thought concerning gifts testifies to the enduring vigor of the investigations which he set into motion.\(^{23}\)

The fundamental postulate of gift giving is that it is as concerned with personal relationships (including ideas of social capital) as it is with the commercial value of objects, and indeed is normally much more concerned with the social aspects. The second essential point is that the relationships formed, articulated, or contested via gift giving demand some kind of reciprocity, with the important caveat that reciprocity does not always mean that gift and countergift are equal. The exact nature of the relationship determines the expectation of what return the recipient makes.


To use the terms devised by Marshall Sahlins, a very close relationship may be expressed
by *generalized reciprocity* (sometimes also called *positive reciprocity*).\(^{24}\) Families especially may
share goods without keeping a “ledger” of who has contributed what; all contribute and give, even
if some (such as young children) receive vastly more than others.\(^{25}\)

In contrast, friendly relations among fellow tribesmen, citizens, or allies might be
maintained via *balanced reciprocity*. The gifts exchanged between peers ought to be
approximately equal over time.\(^{26}\) If the recipient cannot repay a gift, then the giver establishes his
social superiority. In this way, lavish gift giving can shame a potential rival or contest another’s
claim to leadership (*agonistic* gift giving), but such imbalance need not be antagonistic. If both
parties acknowledge a difference in social stature and wealth, as commonly occurred in
hierarchical societies such as medieval Europe, then an unbalanced exchange might well be
accepted (hence *noblesse oblige*). The poorer man expects that he will owe a continuing debt to
the richer or more powerful man, who still continues to give gifts which may be repaid with social
respect. In fact, an established leader regularly has a relationship with his individual followers or
subjects that drifts closer to the pole of generalized reciprocity, with the chief man in a quasi-

\(^{24}\) For this and the following paragraphs, see Sahlins, *Stone Age*, 185-230, especially 191-99. For
Sahlins, the lack of a relationship with a neighbor (“Warre”) is itself threatening and provides the impetus for
gift exchange as a means of creating relationship.

\(^{25}\) Over a lifetime, children may repay their parents by caring for them in their own age, but the ideal
relationship would hold even if it were known that such a repayment was impossible. In the case of needy
kinsfolk relying on the generosity of a wealthy relative, no direct repayment would be possible in the likely
future.

\(^{26}\) Time is a complicated factor. In closer relationships, a delay between gift and countergift commonly
preserves the appearance of voluntary and disinterested giving. Chronological gaps also establish temporal
duration for the relationship, since one side usually is bound to the other at any given time by unreciprocated
debt. On the other hand, in Sahlins’ perfectly balanced relationship, there is no social requirement to
preserve the illusion of selflessness, and the distance between parties may be such that there are insufficient
potential social sanctions to guarantee future returns; consequently there is no time delay. A relationship can
still be maintained over time through multiple exchanges, perhaps at regularly recurring meetings.
paternal role. The followers’ parallel bonds with their leader also may serve as a foundation for social unity among themselves.  

At the far end of the spectrum lies negative reciprocity, in which it may be perfectly acceptable to try to get something for next to nothing when dealing with strangers and potential enemies. A person negotiates hostile relationships by the manipulation of reciprocity for personal gain or the extortion of goods and tribute. This kind of reciprocity more frequently occurs outside of gifts, either in hard market haggling or swift raids.

Naturally, this represents a spectrum of relationships. And at any point on that spectrum, the relationship and expectations of reciprocity can be abused. Even kin can excessively “sponge” off more productive members. In those cases, ultimately the relationship breaks or shifts towards the negative pole, sometimes even resulting in violence. Normally, the desire for prestige and social approbation limit such breakdowns. There are always expectations as to how all parties in a gift giving relationship should act, and the quality of those actions strengthens or changes the social relationship.

Gift giving has beyond this basic framework many complexities and special cases. The sharing of a meal often carries a special meaning of domestic intimacy. Recent anthropologists

27 The situation when many give their produce to a leader, who then redistributes it to the group as gifts (pooling), has parallels in medieval taxation and tithing, but their large scale minimized any personal elements of the system and makes the application of gift theory unprofitable.

28 See also Ingold, Appropriation, 223-34. He applies the terms “positive” and “negative” reciprocity to this potential for proper action and abuse. Confusingly, some scholars instead use “positive” reciprocity to refer to beneficial exchanges (i.e. gifts) and “negative” to hostile exchanges and violence (e.g. feud, lex talonis). I avoid both these alternate usages in this work.

have focused on the category of “inalienable gifts,” but medieval almsgiving did not deal in them except possibly in the special case of the donation of familial lands to monasteries.\textsuperscript{30}

With these habits of thought in mind, we are better prepared to understand the medieval idea of almsgiving. If almsgiving was about mercy, love, and eternal life with God, as suggested above, then almsgiving was fundamentally about relationships. And as Christian love is a double love, so too the relationships encoded in these gift exchanges were double; one “gave to the needy and to God.”\textsuperscript{31}

3. Almsgiver and God

Turning first to the exchanges between God and almsgiver, we find a relationship whose complexity delighted medieval writers: “the one who gives is here a steward, generous donor, and recipient,” as the later Carolingian poet Milo wrote.\textsuperscript{32} That the Christian gave something is clear, but the idea of him as steward and recipient is best understood in context of the different ways God might condescend to enter a relationship with him. God appears in eleemosynary theology as

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{30} Inalienable possessions are objects believed to possess a strong element of identity. Such objects may have supernatural power or simply be the bearers of a family’s identity through historical association; they “substitute” for a human or a god. Due to that inherent identity, such possessions are truly alienated or owned only with difficulty, but possessing them does confer social power.

Despite Weiner, \textit{Inalienable}, 33-4, 39-40, I think even ancestral medieval lands would qualify technically as inalienable gifts only in exceptional circumstances, but the parallels are useful and the general inspiration of gift theory to land donations in White, \textit{Custom, Kinship and Gifts} (1988) and Rosenwein, \textit{Neighbor of Saint Peter} (1989) has proved quite worthwhile; see also I. Silber, “Gift-Giving in the Great Traditions: the Case of Donations to the Monasteries in the Medieval West,” \textit{Archives européennes de sociologie} 36 (1995), 209-43. Relics were the only common early medieval European objects which definitely would qualify as inalienable possessions.


\end{quote}
judge, as savior, as exemplar, and as creator. The very inequality of the gifts offered by God and humanity, along with the ambiguity of which was gift and which countergift, formed a key part of those four relationships. All came together in the idea of love.

Before delving into those four relationships, some brief explanatory notes are necessary concerning the idea of exchange and the central place given to love in it. The terminology used in relation to almsgiving clearly illustrates the expectation that an exchange is taking place. God gave a return in heavenly treasure to Christian almsgivers, and forgiveness of sin. Occasionally, the more commercial terminology of debt entered the discussion as well, as when Milo followed the line quoted above with the sardonic assurance, “God himself becomes the debtor; you will not lose your profit, miser.” Generally, theologians felt this notion of commercial interest to be a poor metaphor and rejected the idea of God as debtor or sought alternate similes. Paschasius, for example, explained, “Although these [saved] did not give up everything in this world, because of love they did offer themselves and their possessions faithfully to the Lord. Therefore it is not so much the revenue of what is given that is repaid as its fruit. For the fruit of the gift is love, according to the Apostle, and ‘love covers a multitude of sins’” (Gal 5:22).

33 See chapter 2.

34 “Debitor ipse deus: non perdes fenus, avare.” Milo, De sobrietate 1.849, p. 640; probably also “Ceapa” should be understood as “buy” in a more commercial sense in the later Anglo-Saxon poem: “Ceapa þe mid æhtum eces leohetes...” The Rewards of Piety 35, ed. and trans. F. Robinson, in his The Editing of Old English, “‘The Rewards of Piety’: ‘Two’ Old English Poems in Their Manuscript Context” (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 188 (Rewards; A18), but this is undercut in ll. 23-4, 32, 48-50, 79, pp. 188-90.

explicitly downplay the commercial metaphor suggests that its use was possible, but he also shows that there is some element of fecundity and a blossoming of something under the surface that he and most of his contemporaries felt the metaphor of commerce could not capture. The exchange presupposed—and nurtured—something else that was of greater significance: love.

As Paschasius indicated, the almsgiver gave God not only simple material things, but also love, mercy, and in some sense his very self. That love found a form in the gift of earthly wealth and so the terrestrial token itself earned recompense.\(^\text{36}\) That was the enchanting wonder of this Christian practice, that “heavenly rewards are earned from earthly slime.”\(^\text{37}\) The faithful heart served as an altar on which a Christian could offer his earthly sacrifice to God.\(^\text{38}\) Faith and hope too had their place alongside love in this meeting of celestial and terrestrial things. To give away the decaying things of earth and expect something of infinite and lasting value was frankly ludicrous—but the early medieval Christian accepted it because that was the promise God had made in his scripture.\(^\text{39}\) To trust that this material loss now would be returned a hundred-fold and


See also the slightly different explanation in the debate between a demon and angel over a soul in Ælfric, *CH2* 20, p. 194 (B1.2.23): “Then another devil said, ‘It is written, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’’ The angel answered, ‘This man did good to his neighbor.’ ‘But,’ the adversary replied, ‘it is not sufficient for a person to do good to his neighbor, but he ought to love him as himself.’ The holy angel answered, ‘Those good deeds are a manifestation of that true love, and God repays each person according to his deeds.’” “Pa cwæð sum oðer deofol, ‘Hit is awritten, ‘Lufa ðinne nextan swa swa ðe sylfne.’ Se engel andwyre, ‘Þes wer dyde god his nextan.’ Se wiðerwinna andwyre, ‘Nis na genoh þæt man his nextan god do, buton he hine lufige swa swa hine sylfne.’ Se halga engel andwyre, ‘Þa godan dæda sind geswutelunga ðæe soðan lufe and God forgylt ælcum men be his dædum.’” This is drawn from the seventh-century *Vita Fursei* 3.16, AASS Jan. 2, col. 37.

37 “Caelica terrestri mercetur praemia limo.” Milo, *De sobrietate* 1.844, p. 640.


more later was an act of faith. A sense of wonder tinged any description of God binding himself in that way. Giving alms with expectation of repayment implicitly confessed faith in Christ and in all the good he had done and would do. Charity flowed from the life choice of being Christian, while failure to offer alms broke love and faith, and so broke one’s good relationship with God.

What the almsgiver thought God gave him took on a wide variety of forms, each reflecting an aspect of the divine-human relationship. At the most basic level, God stood as humanity’s just and merciful judge at the consummation of life and time. Each and every person would have to answer for his or her actions, both good and evil. Even during the great Carolingian debate on predestination, both sides agreed that God’s final judgment must be a just reckoning of deeds, albeit one in which a person could not hope for acquittal except through God’s grace enabling those good deeds, the correct, faith-filled motive in performing them, and the prior forgiveness of evil deeds. The happy elect found those good deeds quite generously recompensed with heavenly


treasure according to God's promise, while those who refused to give alms and to repent of their evil works met an evil end.

In the days leading up to that judgment, the giving of alms was the post-baptismal practice decreed by God for achieving the necessary forgiveness of sins (Lk 11:41, Sir 3:33). It was both a concrete offering and an exterior sign of one's heart. The penitential sacrifice of almsgiving did not work automatically, but only as a concrete expression of mercy. In other words, a person who gave alms out of contrition was, in that moment, acting as a true Christian and so returned (through God's generous mercy in accepting him back) to that correct relationship with God which had been sundered by sin. Almsgiving had absolutely no benefit for those who continued in sin without repentance. Councils and moralists emphasized this essential point only slightly less than they did the benefits of charity.

Almsgiving constituted an act marking a return to a Christian lifestyle, but more than that, it was a prayer to humanity's judge. By showing mercy, the sinner also begged that mercy would be shown to him. As everyone knew, the measure which one measured out to others justly would


be measured out to oneself. Since God received alms, they offered an effective prayer in his sight in themselves. Indeed, alms, as an act of mercy and love, sanctified other attempts to communicate with God or offer a sacrifice to him. In particular, the penitential and sacrificial act of fasting for one’s sins became acceptable to God through sharing the forsaken food with the needy. If fasting just entailed not eating, then the devil did as much. Fasting—along with prayer—joined with almsgiving to raise a petition for mercy through mercy.

This beseeching of the terrible, apocalyptic judge rested on one key fact: that judge was also humanity’s savior. The judgment scene of Mt 25 sprang from the paradox that the awesome king on his throne above the world could also identify himself with the least of humanity, *fratribus meis minimis*. God could call humans “brothers” since mercy had already been shown when Jesus had become human and died on the cross to save a fallen humanity. In doing so he bestowed grace and hope. Without the grace bestowed in baptism and afterwards, a person lacked the ability to perform loving and meritorious good deeds. Part of giving alms humbly for God’s glory meant

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47 Alcuin, *De virtutibus*, cols. 625-6; Smaragdus, *Diadema monachorum* 54, PL 102, cols. 651-2.


49 Alcuin, *De virtutibus* 16, col. 625AB.

50 On the Carolingian theology of the crucifixion, see especially Chazelle, *Crucified God*, 14-74, 132-64. For Christ as ushering in a new humanity as the new Adam, into which Christians were incorporated via baptism, see Y. Congar, *L’Ecclésiologie du haut Moyen-Age: de Saint Grégoire le Grand à la désunion entre Byzance et Rome* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1968), 73-81.
acknowledging that the work sprang from God’s initial gift.\(^51\) Since virtuous action came from God, to carry it out faithfully confessed God. The Christian, in the face of the incredible and unmerited gift of grace and faith, gave in return his meager countergift of alms in thanksgiving.\(^52\)

Another way to conceive of this phenomenon was to see Christ as humanity’s exemplar, as well as savior and judge. The one who aided the hungry and naked “followed Christ.”\(^53\) As God had shown mercy, so the Christian should as well. God had humbled himself to become a helpless infant living in squalor; surely the Christian could humble himself in almsgiving and put God’s glory before his.\(^54\) Christ had stretched out his arms on the cross in sacrificial service; surely the Christian could stretch out his hands with aid to the needy.\(^55\) This idea of imitation of Christ’s earlier gift of self is really the religious version of the modern slogan, “pay it forward.” As the Christian had received, he was to give. At least, the Christian was to give what he could, since his gift of alms paled in comparison to what God had done first for him.

The almsgiver also hoped in his giving to become more like Christ by cultivating virtue and combating vice. The sin of greed found its logical counter in nurturing the habit of generosity.\(^56\) This old tradition made a brief appearance in many moral treatises. The threat of the

\(^{51}\) Ambrosius, \emph{In Apocalypsin} 6.13.7b, p. 502; Alcuin, \emph{De virtutibus} 17, col. 625B; Blickling Homilies 3, p. 29; \emph{Concilium Francofurtense}, a. 794 ep. episcoporum franciae, ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1906), p. 157 (here good works); Jonas, \emph{De institutione} 1.3, col. 128BC.

\(^{52}\) See Paschasius, \emph{In Mattheo} 8.16.24, p. 818.


\(^{55}\) Christian, \emph{In Mattheum} 32, col. 1364B; see also Ælfric, \emph{CH2} 19, p. 182; Bede, \emph{In Lucae} 6.22.27, p. 381: \emph{Opus Caroli regis contra synodum} 2.28, ed. A. Freeman, MGH Conc. 2, suppl. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1998), pp. 298-9 (also quoting Augustine and Isidore).

\(^{56}\) Alcuin, \emph{De virtutibus} 30, col. 634B; Christian [of Stavelot], \emph{Expositio brevis in Lucam evangelistam}, PL 106, col. 1506C; Jonas, \emph{De institutione} 2.6, col. 245B; \emph{Paenitentiale pseudo-Theodori} 19.8, ed. C. Van Rhijn, CCSL 156B (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), p. 55; Theodulf of Orleans [pseudo?], \emph{Zweites Kapitular / Capitula II} 10.8, ed. P. Brommer, MGH Cap. episc. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1984), p. 74.
judgment of sin loomed as large here as the idea of finding an exemplar in Christ. Virtue could, however, be in itself an appropriate return to God for his gifts. Meeting Christ as savior and exemplar in these ways resulted in meeting God as Father: “and in doing these things, we will be proved to be children of the Most High in obedience to his commands.”

On a more concrete plane, the wealth that the almsgiver gave—silver, food, drink, land—plainly existed before him or depended on non-human forces beyond his control such as weather. All wealth then came, in a sense, from God as creator and ruler of the world (the fourth of the basic divine-human relationships). The material possibility of giving alms flowed directly out of God’s graciousness. The rich man entered life in debt to God, and almsgiving served as the beginnings of repayment. In another sense, each person served only as a steward of God’s possessions, and at death would have to relinquish them and render an account of their use.

Early medieval theologians never quite managed to agree on one complication that arose from God as the dispenser of riches. He could, if he chose, give earthly wealth or prosperity as a reward for good deeds, including almsgiving; but did he? Several theologians firmly maintained that charity bore its fruit in heaven, and that looking for any return here meant a turning to that greed which was charity’s exact contrary: “Good works themselves are held to be performed not for the sake of God’s earthly and temporal gifts, but rather for those things for which faith hopes

57 Vercelli Homilies 21, p. 355 (HomM 13 (ScraggVerc 21); B3.5.13).
58 “atque haec facientes filii Altissimi in obediendo mandatis illius esse probabimur.” Hrabanus, In Ecclesiasticum 1.16, col. 785C.
59 Ælfric, CH1 18, pp. 323-4 (B1.1.20); Alcuin, De virtutibus 17, col. 625BC; Blickling Homilies 4, pp. 49-51; Christian, In Matheum 56, cols. 1466-7; Hrabanus, In Ecclesiasticum 8.4, col. 1014. See also Ælfric, CH1 12, p. 277.
60 Ælfric, CH2 7, pp. 62-4; Bede, In Lucae 2.6.23, p. 140; Blickling Homilies 4, p. 49; Paschasius, Epitaphium Arseni 1.8, p. 32; see also Rather of Verona, Praelegqua 4.25, ed. P. Reid, CCCM 46A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1984), p. 132; Concilium Quierzy, a. 858 Nov 12, ed. W. Hartmann. MGH Conc. 3 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1984), p. 420. This theory had the consequence, intended or not, of justifying economic inequalities provided that the rich offered sufficient charity; this point will be addressed further below.
from above, which work through love.”61 Others were not so sure. No one, after all, denied that
God could bestow earthly blessings, and God had used earthly tribulations and success before to
nudge his people towards virtue, especially in the Old Testament books which continued to play a
central role in the early medieval imagination. It seemed reasonable for him to be concerned about
the fate of his people in the contemporary world. Consequently, several writers offered the hope of
both terrestrial and celestial rewards.62 In this context, almsgiving functioned as an auxiliary to
prayer, whether prayer petitioning God to intervene in politics or agriculture, or prayer thanking
God for the good fortune which he had already bestowed, as in the case of famous letters by Pippin
and Charlemagne.63 Such alms designed to call on divine pity certainly were important, especially
as communal events, but overall occurred with surprising infrequency in our sources and even
more rarely in theological texts. Judging by the specifically royal (and hence lay) sponsorship of
alms in connection with agriculture, sickness, and war, the conception of alms as an offering made
in partial return for God’s gifts in this world may well have been more prevalent outside the
educated religious elite.

Obviously, the exchange between almsgiver and God was a complex, multilayered affair.

61 Latin text: “…ut ipsa opera bona non propter beneficia Dei terrena ac temporalia facienda credantur, sed potius
propter illud, quod desuper sperat fides, quae per dilectionem operatur.” Opus Caroli 2.28, p. 299; also
Alcuin, De virtutibus 9, col. 619AB; Ambrosius, In Apocalypsin 3.3.15, pp. 189-90.

4.13, col. 897B; Hrabanus, Homiliae 19, cols. 38-9; Wulfstan, The Homilies of Wulfstan 20 (“Sermo Lupi ad
See also Almsgiving 3-4, ed. G. P. Krapp and E. K. Dobbie, in The Exeter Book, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records
3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 223 (Alms; A3.27); Rather, Praelegia 1.3.5, 4.23, pp.
7, 129; R. Meens, “Politics, Mirrors of Princes, and the Bible: Sins, Kings and the Well-Being of the Realm,”
Early Medieval Europe 7 (1998), 345-57.

63 See chapter 5; also Annales Bertiniani / Annales de Saint-Bertin a. 839, ed. F. Grat, J. Vielliard and S.
Clémencet (Paris: Libraire C. Klincksieck, 1964), pp. 28-30; Capitulare missorum Aquitanensium
primum 810 5, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 153; Charlemagne, Epistolae
variorum Caroli Magni regnante scriptae ep. 20, ed. E. Dümmler, MGH Epp. 4 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1895), pp. 528-9;
Conciliun in Francia habitum, a. 779(?), 780(?), ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche,
1906), p. 109; Karoli ad Ghaerbaldun epistola, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1, pp. 244-6; Pippin in
Boniface, Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus ep. 118, ed. M. Tangle, MGH Epp. sel. 1 (Berlin:
Two key characteristics marked that exchange: the inequality of the gifts and the instability of the idea of a discretely paired gift-countergift. Here there was no balanced reciprocity between cautiously friendly equals; rather, in something much closer to the pole of generalized reciprocity men and women approached God as their vastly more wealthy and powerful superior, and also as the head of their loving family. Indeed, God’s gifts of eternal and temporal goods, and above all his gift of his Son in order that humanity might become like his Son, all could be summed up as the generous care of a Father. The Christian enjoyed that gift relation if united in faithful relationship with God, but if he forswore that relationship by refusing baptism or remaining in sin, he forced himself into a relationship of hostility and punishment with God (negative reciprocity).

The inequality of charitable and divine gifts resulted from the unequal relationship which gave them birth. The giving of these two levels of gifts strengthened that relationship by making both parties active recipients and, in their inequality, acknowledging the different natures of each giver, who nevertheless sought each other in love and faith. Such inequality was also necessary for a very practical reason. If the almsgiver who gave a few coins received an exactly equal countergift after he died, the return really would not be worth much in context of eternal bliss or pain. Since the Christian could never equal what he had been given and hoped to be given, his continuing debt underlined the continuing nature of his relationship with his divine benefactor.

The conception of almsgiving as simply a gift prompting an automatic countergift cannot hold. The sources freely speak of God giving a return, but carefully frame it in the context of relationships like faith. The Christian expected a return for his loving deeds of mercy based on God’s word. The sources also describe alms as themselves countergifts for what God had done for humanity as savior, father and creator. Alms healed minor sin, which was nothing other than daily

64 See also Jussen, “Religious Discourses,” 178-9.

65 A similar conclusion based on different interpretations is reached in Jussen, “Religious Discourses,” 184-9.
breaches in the Christian’s relationship with God. It is only in this wider context of God’s graciousness and primacy that the early medieval idea of almsgiving can be understood.

4. Almsgiver and Pauper

God gave lavishly, but what could the pauper offer his earthly benefactor in return for alms? Admiration, deference, and obedience certainly could have been demanded (and, as we shall see later, sometimes were expected), but eleemosynary philosophy vehemently criticized the pursuit of vainglory in almsgiving. A pauper might find an alternate service to repay a mighty benefactor, like the mouse and lion of Aesop’s fable, but such instances of elite need would have been rare. Leaving aside clergy and the vowed religious for the moment, most paupers could not make a return. The exchange between God and humanity understandably then played a much larger role in almsgiving than the role of the needy individual. That imbalance may have been appropriate if, as some understood Jesus’ exhortations, a Christian ought to love God more than himself and his neighbor merely as much as himself. Nevertheless, that neighbor’s dependency did attract some theological attention. First, the recipient of alms had a claim on the giver without giving return gifts by virtue of being part of the Christian family. More importantly, the pauper by virtue of his or her existence and neediness provided a portal through which an almsgiver could commune with God. This opportunity also could constitute an obligation in justice.

The primary bond between almsgiver and pauper was supposed to be love. Almsgiving, as a synonym for mercy, expressed the response of the heart to another’s pain. Almsgiving, as rooted in Christian love, enacted the double command of loving God and of loving neighbor as oneself. In Christ, all were brothers and sisters. In that close familial relationship, Christians had to practice

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66 Theodulf, *Capitula I* 34, p. 132.
generalized reciprocity, giving as needed without reckoning a balance.\textsuperscript{67} If the poor had less to give, then the almsgiver’s role might edge closer to that of a father. Hrabanus urged all givers to help widows and orphans with the affection of their missing father or husband.\textsuperscript{68} The simultaneous expectation of paternal generosity and implied protective authority characterized especially the ideal bishop.\textsuperscript{69} Community and hierarchy co-existed in that image of the church and in the gifts given without return. That did not mean that a patron could look down on the poor. As natural equals before God’s law, the poor deserved respect from their fellow Christians just as much as the rich.\textsuperscript{70}

Mercy to the poor intrinsically pleased God as an act of love and rewarding it would have been appropriate. That in itself could have explained God’s extravagant promises to almsgivers. The relation between almsgiver and pauper was, however, more theologically sophisticated than that. The idea of Christians as a family stemmed from their shared relation to God as Father and from the notion of church as Christ’s body. God was the foundation of the relationship between almsgiver and pauper.

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\textsuperscript{67} Ælfric, \textit{CH2} 19, p. 182; Alcuin, \textit{De virtutibus} 3, col. 616A; Hrabanus, \textit{De institutione clericorum} 2.28, p 372. A ninth-century monastic prayer for one’s blood kin also concluded with prayers for one’s fellow vowed religious and almsgivers to one’s house, who implicitly are accorded status as spiritual kin: \textit{De psalmorum usu} 2.3, cols. 493-4.


\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Florilegium Frisingense} 303-6, pp. 26-7; Hrabanus, \textit{In Ecclesiasticum} 1.5, 3.6, 3.8, cols. 784-5, 846, 853; Jonas, \textit{De institutione} 2.22-3, cols. 213-6; Smaragdus, \textit{Diadema} 6, col. 602C.
When theologians explored God’s part in the relationship between almsgiver and pauper, they developed a kind of incarnational theory of charity that hinged on the particular characteristics of all three parties. Were it not for the poor person, the relationship between God and almsgiver explored above would have foundered on a fundamental principle: God was not in need. He did not need a person’s wealth, nor did he even need a person’s virtues or salvation.\footnote{Paschasius, \textit{In Matheo} 9.21.17-9, p. 1033; see also Blickling Homilies 3, p. 37.} It was simply impossible to show mercy to him as he had shown it to humankind.\footnote{Paschasius, \textit{In Matheo} 9.21.17-9, p. 1033; see also Hrabanus, \textit{De institutione clericorum} 2.28, p. 371.} However, the existence of the needy here on earth created an opening. God, in his divinity, could not suffer and be in need. The Son, in his incarnation as man, could suffer. He had suffered hunger, thirst and pain in his physical body as Jesus. He could continue to suffer in the church, which was Christ’s body, as scripture taught (Col 1:18, 1 Cor 6:15, Eph 4:4). Each person, created from the beginning in the image of God, became incorporated into Christ at baptism. So it could be truly said that the Son of Man suffered in those of his brothers and sisters who suffered (in this case, the poor)—and consequently he truly could and did receive mercy from ordinary people.\footnote{Blickling Homilies 18 ("To sancte Martines mæssan"), pp. 213-5 (LS 17.1 (MartinMor); B3.3.17.2); Christian, \textit{In Mattheum} 56, col. 1470; Paschasius, \textit{In Matheo} 11.25.40, 11.25.42, pp. 1251-2, 1255-6; see also Ambrosius, \textit{De conflictu} 17, pp. 922-3; Hrabanus, \textit{In Ecclesiasticum} 5.1, col. 905CD. On the centrality of the image of the church as the body of Christ, see Congar, \textit{L’Écclesiologie}, 81-90.}

Different authors pushed the idea of incarnational charity to different extents. Councils and moralists frequently reminded people that he who received a poor man as a guest, received Christ.\footnote{Admonitio generalis (789) 75, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1, (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 60; Ælfric, \textit{CH2} 29, p. 256, also see hom. 34, p. 289 (B1.2.36); \textit{Capitulare missorum generale} (802) 27, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1, p. 96; Jonas, \textit{De institutione} 2.29, col. 231; Theodulf, \textit{Capitula I} 25, pp. 122-3; also on feeding Christ in the poor: Alcuin, \textit{De virtutibus} 17, col. 626B.} Paschasius thought that no one at the Last Judgment could be truly ignorant of the fact
that, “he presents to God whatever he gives Christ’s poor.” Several saints’ lives recorded how they believed that they touched Christ’s “members” in touching the poor, felt his body, and saw his face. This kind of material closeness, the full flower of incarnational charity, seems largely to have been limited to those of a saintly and mystical bent. More often, Christians were satisfied with the basic assertion of God’s gracious humility in spiritually joining his least brothers into his mystical body and so identifying with them.

These explanations for the place of the poor in the salutary practice of almsgiving had some immediate implications. In imitating God by showing mercy to the poor, the rich took on something akin to God’s role. The resultant boost to their ego and social capital can probably be assumed (although the rich were also lowered by the same action to the level of a helpless beggar in receiving from God). This theology also implicitly endorsed the right of the rich to their wealth. Almsgiving’s popularity may have owed something to the desire to justify one’s material fortune. This was still only a relative right, subject to the appropriate use of a portion of that wealth in charity.

75 “Sicut hodie nemo est qui ignoret Deo se prestare quicquid in pauperibus Christi tribuit.” Paschasius, In Matthew 11.25.37-8, p. 1251. Here pauperibus Christi probably refers to monks, but for the ambiguity of the phrase, see below, chapter 10.

76 Membra has the double meaning of Christ’s limbs and, by transferral, constituents of a corporation; a medieval sense of humor cannot be ruled out here. Odo, Vita Geraldii, 1.14, cols. 651-2; Vita Aredii abbatis Lemovicini 37, ed. B. Krusch, MGH SRM 3 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1896), p. 593; Vita Geremari abbatis Flaviacensis 12, ed. B. Krusch, MGH SRM 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1902), p. 631; Vita Mathildis reginae posterior 10, p. 165. The objection by the monks of Fulda against their abbot’s restriction of who might wash the feet of the poor probably arose from this spirituality: Supplex libellus monachorum Fuldensium Carolo imperatori porrectus 13, ed. J. Semmler. CCM 1 (Siegburg: F. Schmidt, 1963), p. 325. See also Eleven Old English Rogationtide Homilies hom. 6, ed. J. Bazire and J. E. Cross, 2nd edition (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1989), p. 88: “Þæt is soðlice swa to understanenne; swa oft swa ge ælmesan dydon anum lutfan ðeartan of cristenum mannum, þæt ge dydon Criste, forðam þe Crist sylf is cristena manna heafod and eft þa cristenan syndon Cristes líma.” The text is derived from a homily by Ælfric (ÆHom 11; B1.4.11).

77 E.g. Stephen, Vita Wilfridi 8, pp. 17-8. These brief remarks on the social impact of almsgiving are necessary for the following consideration of justice; the full implications will be evaluated in chapter 11.
The gift of alms was supposed to be primarily about love and mercy, but the idea of justice also played a role and so bridled some of those possibilities for justifying one’s wealth. God created a world with disproportionate wealth in part to make people turn outside of themselves towards others. “God’s justice therefore permits the [needy] to labor under numerous troubles so that he might crown the miserable through patience and the merciful through generosity,” as Alcuin wrote. Christ’s merciful willingness to suffer in his church that its wealthier members might show him mercy required the presence of the needy in this world. In other words, economic inequality was itself just, but only as a preliminary stage towards correct Christian action through generosity on the one hand and patience on the other. The assertion that poor could still give alms to each other for their sins, as well as being patient, received rather more attention by early medieval theologians, but they never rejected this explanation for the disparity of riches, which had its roots in patristic thought. That theory of inequality continued to circulate through mention in writers such as Alcuin, as well as in the copying of patristic texts.

Wealth taken unjustly from the poor or the church emphatically was not the result of the divine dispensation of earthly resources. The unrepentant greed and pride that led to such actions offended against almsgiving’s characteristic mercy, and the tainted spoils therefore could not express love even if subsequently given away. A robber baron had no recourse to alms unless he first repented and undid his injustice. Those who violated this limitation imposed by justice earned the epithet “killers of the poor” (necatores pauperum) since they stole what was needed for survival. The perceived despoliation of church lands caused the most numerous appeals to

78 “Quos ideo sub diversis molestiis justitia Dei laborare permisit, ut et miseris pro patientia, et misericordes pro benevolentia coronaret.” Alcuin, De virtutibus 17, col. 625C. On the disparity of riches justified by almsgiving, but with the duties of the poor also centering around almsgiving instead of patience, see Ælfric, CH2 7, p. 64; pseudo-Wulfstan, Sammlung 55, p. 287. This idea was mentioned relatively infrequently, but was the patristic justification and so would have been in circulation. No one conceived of a temporal world where the division between rich and poor could not exist.

79 That the poor had fewer sins to cleanse remained a possibility: Christian, In Mattheum 2, cols. 1277-8; cf. Hrabanus, In Ecclesiasticum 6.6, cols. 960-1.
justice. Any kind of robbery or violent oppression of the poor still caused pastors anxiety as a threat to the social order, to the lives of some of their flock, and to the souls of others. Ælfric, though writing in a more stable social situation than his continental contemporaries, tried to shock his audience into appreciating the depravity and seriousness of the situation with the gruesome simile that, “Alms given from robbery are as pleasing to God as if someone were to kill another man’s child and bring the father his head as a gift!” Given the frustrated repetition of such injunctions, a number of Christians nevertheless must have found it easier to make ritual amends than to truly change their lifestyles in uncomfortable ways. That they still tried to give alms shows how firmly the external practice of Christian charity was embedded in culture.

Even those innocent of unjust seizures could be guilty of the murder of the poor simply through negligence. Early medieval theologians fundamentally believed that God’s goodness had provided for all humanity’s necessities. For a poor man or woman to die through starvation or

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Specific concerns about those who despoiled church property were, however, not uncommon in the ninth century: Alcuin, De virtutibus 19, col. 627CD; Blickling Homilies 4, p. 53; Concilium Aquisgranense, a. 836 (?), Febr 3.16, ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/2 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1908), p. 28; Concilium Savonnières, a. 859, Jun. 14 decreta 14, ed. W. Hartmann, MGH Conc. 3 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1984), p. 479; Concilium Tusey, a. 860, Oct. 22/Nov. 7, epistola, ed. W. Hartmann, MGH Conc. 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1998), pp. 40-1; Concilium Ver, a. 844 12, ed. W. Hartmann, MGH Conc. 3, p. 43; Hrabanus Maurus, Commentariorum in Ecclesiasticum libri decem 8.3, PL 109, col. 1011; Jonas, De institutione 2.23, col. 215.
exposure meant that someone was hoarding what he did not need and refusing to offer the mercy that was truly needed. To my knowledge, no one ever launched prosecutions or leveled ecclesiastical penalties for this kind of murder, but the principle existed that the poor had a right to sufficient goods to survive. One Welsh law mandated the acquittal of a thief who stole food if he could prove that he had been refused alms at three houses that day, and later canon lawyers vindicated a similar right, at least in theory. Thus the rich only had a claim to a portion of their goods. In that limited sense, they were stewards rather than full owners of their possessions.

The Carolingians and Anglo-Saxons did not disapprove of wealth or differences of economic station, provided that the poor’s just demands were met in charity. The ideal was moderation and the avoidance of excessive pursuit of conspicuous wealth, *modus in habendo*. In almsgiving, the ideals of love and mercy exerted more influence than that of justice. The rise of new commercial money at the turn of the millennium would eventually revive some of the anxieties about wealth that also had been more acute in Augustine’s age. Still, even then thinkers and benefactors focused more on love and mercy.

The relationship between pauper and almsgiver was a crucial element of early medieval charity, although that relationship fundamentally rested on God, at least according to the thinkers

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82 Ambrosius, *De conflictu* 17, pp. 922-3; Blickling Homilies 4, p. 53; Christian, *In Mattheum* 56, col. 1450; Defensor, *Liber scintillarum* 49, pp. 165-70 passim; Vercelli Homilies 3, pp. 351-2; implicit in the term “ælmes-riht” of Wulfstan, Homilies 20 (“Sermo Lupi ad Anglos”), pp. 256, 263, 268. See also above n. 60, 78.


of the time. Since God gave all good things and intended them for all, the rich owed the poor some of them. Charity, however, focused more on love than these exhortations to justice. All Christians formed one family under their heavenly Father and so ought to have given in a generalized way without keeping a ledger. Moreover, Christ himself manifested himself in the poor and, in a sense, truly was present in their person. He suffered in the flesh, almost as though incarnate in them, and so created the possibility for humans to show mercy to a merciful God. God himself received (and repaid) alms given to the poor.

5. Conclusion

The early medieval idea of almsgiving operated on a different principle than the modern criterion of altruism. God, almsgiver, and pauper were intimately bound up in a mutual community of love. This community, initiated by God in various ways, existed through death into the eternity of heaven, but only if not shattered while still in the world by a refusal to show and receive mercy. The basic motives for human giving were supposed to be love of God (including thanksgiving for his goodness, trust in his promises, and the desire to imitate him), generous mercy to neighbor in Christ, and the hope of continuing as part of that community through its triumphant gathering of all its members into heaven.\(^{86}\) Almsgiving, along with the gifts which preceded and followed it, enacted the love that bound individuals together with God, and preserved it from the inevitable trials of sin and injustice.\(^{87}\)

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\(^{86}\) The fear of an altruistic thinker is that the desire to be part of Christ’s body in heaven could be easily and unconsciously simplified into a purely selfish desire for eternal pleasure cut off from true love of neighbor and even God. The legitimate needs of the poor could also consequently be overlooked: Mollat, *Poor in the Middle Ages*, 298-9. This critique seems legitimate to me as a psychological possibility, but the actual theology in place warned strenously against that triumph of self-love. Of course, the idea that one is self-sufficient enough *not* to need anything out of almsgiving would have struck a medieval thinker also as deluded self-love.

\(^{87}\) See also Amos, “Origin and Nature,” 313-22. For its Augustinian basis and his more sophisticated defense of a role for self-love in seeking eternal life, see Canning, *Unity of Love*, 18, 123-65. Ælfric, *CH2* 21, p. 203, simply considered it an example of God’s great mercy that he allowed his followers to help those suffering in this life and help each other to eternal life at one and the same time.
An unequal exchange lay at the heart of interpreting the Bible and earlier Christian theology. That inequality appropriately expressed the relationship of human need (both of rich and of poor) and divine generosity. This was a rich and sophisticated theological system of interaction, which shows the early medieval mind at work on an issue of significance to it. At the same time, the conclusions reached by these theologians described above also managed to hew closely to what had come before. Take, for example, Augustine preaching before his congregation on almsgiving:

When [the Gospel of Luke] says, ‘Give and it will be given to you,’ pay attention to who says it and to whom. God says it to man, the immortal to the mortal, such a father to a beggar. What we gave will not be lost to us … For small, trifling, mortal, decaying, earthly things, he returns eternal, incorruptible, everlasting ones. What more can I say? He who promises, promises it. If you love him, gain him by that. Nevertheless, in some areas, ideas of charity and its place in Christian life did evolve. It is to these that we now turn.

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88 “Quando dicit: date et dabitur uobis (Lk 6:38), attende cui dicit, quis dicit. Homini dicit deus, mortali dicit immortalis, mendico dicit tantus pater familias; neque enim hoc nobis reuocaturus est quod dederimus. Inuenimus quem feneremus; demus in usuram, sed deo, non homini; ei damus qui abundat, ei damus qui dedit quod demus. Et pro modicis rebus, pro friuolis, pro mortalibus, pro putribilibus, pro terrenis reddit aeterna, incorruptibilia, sine fine manentia. Quid multa dicturus sum? Se promittit, qui promittit. Si amas illum, eme illum ab illo.” [He then quotes Mt 25:35-6, 40]. Augustine, Sermones 42, ed. C. Lambot, CCSL 41 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1961), p. 505. Note, however, the more commercial imagery, which reflects the socio-economic situation of the late Roman Empire.
Almsgiving revolved around relationships. In that, as in so much else, early medieval theologians and their predecessors agreed. As seen in the preceding chapter, that agreement came not from slavish imitation but rather from lively engagement with the core ideas of almsgiving inherited by the early Middle Ages. Respect for that inheritance marked the intellectual endeavors of writers like Bede, Hrabanus, or Ælfric. However, given the vibrancy of charity in the continuing Christian tradition, it would have been very surprising if some changes had not entered into it.

Ideas of purgatory and penance evolved in close step with almsgiving and practice. Most significantly, the role of the pauper underwent a radical transformation as the goal of binding each individual to God (and hence indirectly to each other within Christendom) rose into ascendancy.

The ideal of community conditioned the raw material of these changes. The forging of a “New Israel” led to a new appreciation for the ability and duty of all to give, so altering the expectations for paupers. The penetration of that community past the fiery walls of death into eternal life with God also required the extension of almsgiving’s supernatural powers to thrust loved ones into heaven. There was precedent for each of the moves made by Carolingian and Anglo-Saxon theologians, but that fact cannot hide the real evolution of thought.

1. Eliding the Pauper

The most striking change in the theology of charity came in considerations of the pauper. This was a case in which the decision by early medieval theologians to omit an aspect of patristic
teaching led to a marked difference in the final synthesis and in practice. This is not to say that thinkers of both periods (and later writers) disagreed on most matters. The propositions that poverty existed to allow salvation through mercy and patience, and that Christ identified with the poor members of his body existed in antiquity as well as the early Middle Ages. The idea that the misery of the pauper’s bodies should strike the heart of potential benefactors and rouse them to mercy also existed earlier, especially as fodder for the masterful homiletic rhetoric that sought to move its listeners. Preachers in the late Roman Empire generally did not base their sermons on the bodily suffering of the poor, but at least noticed it with more frequency then their early medieval counterparts.

Augustine and many of his contemporaries focused, however, on another way of conceiving the role of the poor in charitable exchanges, which we have not yet discussed for the good reason that it played almost no part in early medieval thought. In patristic eyes, the poor had a countergift to offer in return to their benefactors. To use a favorite image of the time, the poor were “porters” carrying up to heaven the riches of the wealthy. In exchange for material necessities, the poor used their sacrosanct position in God’s sight to offer an essential spiritual

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service. Specifically, they offered their prayers for their benefactors and so earned God’s favor on their behalf.  

In the early Middle Ages this idea of a more or less balanced reciprocity disappeared. Indeed, the very presence of the poor faded into the background, eclipsed by God’s presence. When Smaragdus of Saint-Mihiel tackled the issue of perpetual prayer in his spiritual handbook for monks, written in the 810s or 820s, he quoted Cassian’s advice that since even a monk could not spend all his time in prayer, he should give alms since “whoever accepted those coins, prays for me during that time when I eat or sleep.” Smaragdus summarized this teaching as, “By storing treasure in heaven… one’s treasure always prays without interruption to God.” The alms themselves pray here, not the poor man. The pauper qua pauper disappears from the exchange. Implicitly, Cassian’s mainstream patristic explanation of alms as “recruiting” a substitute prayer-giver to cover the monk’s downtime is overturned. This movement is typical of the shift from the fifth to the ninth century.

In practical terms, this meant the almost complete disappearance of demands that the poor pray for their benefactors. Alms “worked” because Christ received them; therefore “it is not the poor but Christ himself who returns a reward to those who give alms.” When the almsgiver

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4 “Et qui acceperit illos duos denarios, orat pro me tempore quo ego manduco vel dormio: atque ita per gratiam Dei impletur in me quod scriptum est: Sine intermissione orate.” Smaragdus, Diadema monachorum 54, PL 102, col. 652AB.

5 “Pro thesaurizante enim in coelo (sive ille ambulet, seu sedeat, comedat, bibat, loquatatur, taceat, dormiat) semper thesaurus ejus qui in conspectu Domini est reconditus sine intermissione orat ad Dominum” [emphasis mine]. Smaragdus, Diadema 54, cols. 651C. Smaragdus also allowed intentio cordis as another method of continual prayer.

6 “Non enim pauperes ipsi sed Christus mercedem his qui elemosinam fecere redditurus est.” Bede, In Lucae evangelium expositio 2.4.37-8, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 120 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1960), p. 147; similarly
needed to beseech God for mercy or distribute alms for loved ones after their death, there is never mention in hagiography, histories, or homilies that the poor had an obligation to repay that deed. At least, there never was during the ninth century when this attitude reached its zenith.

In consequence, it mattered very little whether the beggar was a good or trustworthy person. He only had to exist, which even the most undeserving pauper generally could manage:

“The one who gives alms to the needy and does not spurn him on account of some sin which he committed, rightly and justly upholds mercy, since nature is to be considered in almsgiving, not the person.”

Remarkably, this condemnation of discriminating among the poor comes as part of Hrabanus’ comments on Sirach’s exhortation, “Give to the merciful and do not receive the sinner” (Sir 12:4). He finds a way via interior motive to interpret Sirach in a manner that still forbids discriminating among the poor, but his interpretation is certainly not the most obvious reading of the passage. While the idea of indiscriminate charity can be found in other centuries, Hrabanus’

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8 “Qui vero etiam indigenti peccatori panem suum, non quia peccator, sed quia homo est, tribuit, nimirum non peccatorum, sed justum nutrit, quia in illo non culpam, sed naturam diligat. Aliet autem si secundum allegoriam peccatorem et impium hic haereticos intelligis: tamdui non est illis communicandum, quandiu in errore perseverant.” Hrabanus, In Ecclesiasticum 3.6, col. 846D.
typically uncompromising reaction against distinguishing the deserving poor from the undeserving sets his period apart from other time periods more than any other fact.  

This nadir of discriminating in giving charity had advantages and disadvantages for the poor. On one hand, it meant that their social superiors had difficulty in using charity as an incentive to shape and control the behavior of the poor. The needy person escaped the humiliation of having to bow his head to the judgment of someone of the exact same nature as him. On the other hand, the almsgiver had less incentive to judge where his limited charity was needed most. He would have been likely simply to give it to the first beggar he met. The natural tendency would have been to think more of God than of the needs of the concrete person in the street, except in the case of assisting a known neighbor.

This ideal of free charity to all certainly affected practice, but occasional hints of tension and skepticism emerge from the sources. In a story recounted in the Vita Anskarii, a woman named

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9 In times when it was present, discrimination based on moral criteria often blurred with that based on the criterion of need, as in the case of spurning able-bodied and hence “lazy” beggars. Neither form of discrimination was condoned in the early Middle Ages. For other times and places, noting that the patristic era was more ambivalent than later times: M. Mollat, The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History, trans. A. Goldhammer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986 [French 1978]), 70-2, 111-2, 251-8; Ramsey, “Almsgiving,” 232-3; M. Rubin, Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 68-71, 91-3; J. Herrin, “Ideals of Charity, Realities of Welfare: The Philanthropic Activity of the Byzantine Church,” in Church and People in Byzantium, ed. R. Morris (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies, 1990), 159-60; A. D. Karayiannis and S. Drakopoulou Dodd, “The Greek Christian Fathers,” in Ancient and Medieval Economic Ideas and Concepts of Social Justice, ed. Lowry and Gordon, 175, 190; Firey, “For I was Hungry,” 339, 361-2, also 346.


12 The suffering of the beggar, an important theme of patristic preaching to arouse pity, rarely appears, although the beggar was not made a “spectacle” in the process either. See above n. 2, and P. Brown, Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 97.
Catla received instruction from holy women at Dorestad on which holy places to visit to give alms and “what to give to each.” \(^{13}\) The story presumed that the amount given to different churches and paupers would vary, although the criteria remain hidden and none were said to be refused. The ninth-century hagiographer of St. Cyran’s mendicant wanderings imagined one occasion on which a prideful woman cross-examined him before giving him alms. \(^{14}\) But she did give him alms, even if only one measly loaf of bread. While the sources offer a few more scattered stories of similar reluctance or of investigation of the poor in practice, the influence of the underlying theology of free giving remained strong. \(^{15}\) Even suspicious almsgivers gave.

The dominance of indiscriminate charity emerged slowly and that process often remains invisible in the sources. This theology obviously had a basic psychological appeal for almsgivers, since the old expectation that the poor pray for their benefactors required that they be trusted to do so. And that trust is a hard thing for the prosperous to give—consider the number of people today who refuse to give to beggars because “they’ll just use it for beer or drugs.” Carolingian preachers never had to address the fear of ingratitude that early pastors like Caesarius of Arles tried to

\(^{13}\) “religiosas ibi exquisivit feminas, quae cum ea loca sancta circuirent et, quid cuique dispensari deberet, eam instruerent.” Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii* 20, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SRG 55 (Hanover: Hannsche, 1884), p. 45; see also Paschasius Radbertus, *Vita sancti Adalhardi Corbeiensis abbatis* 24, PL 102, cols. 1520C.


\(^{15}\) An old, blind beggar in a miracle story worries that, if he is cured, people will not listen to his pleas for alms any more and, being old and weak (*debilis*), he cannot work. This again seems to be a case of degree of generosity, not refusal to give, since the elderly had an established place in almsgiving (see chapter 9) and even among the crowd with whom this beggar begged (and whom Einhard assisted) were other *debiles*: Einhard, *Translatio et miracula SS. Marcellini et Petri* 4.4, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SS 15/1 (Leipzig, Hiersemann, 1925), p. 257. The officers in charge of the poor and beggars at Aachen under Louis the Pious were to take “great care” of these unfortunates, but also were to make sure *simulatores* did not conceal themselves among these indigents: *Capitulare de disciplina palatii Aquitainensis (ca. 820)* 7, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 298. These people simulating poverty could have been criminals and fugitives, whose presence among vagabonds was a documented concern in Carolingian legislation: B-S. Albert, *Le pélerinage à l’époeque carolingienne* (Brussels: Editions Nauwelaerts, 1999), 31-48, 269-70; another possibility, however, is that this capitulary envisioned some kind of need-based test for aid (perhaps based on physical inability to work) for which we simply lack any parallels elsewhere in contemporary legislation. Note that neither of these clearly indicates that almsgivers should discriminate based on moral criteria, but perhaps simply on the criterion of greater need.
overcome: “Give to a poor man, and perhaps some day he will repay you with abuse? You sought praise from the pauper, not reward from God. Now you judge that you acted without reason because you only found ingratitude, as though God, who wishes to reward you for good deeds, won’t or perhaps can’t.” 16 The simple solution was increasingly just to put the emphasis on God rewarding.

This desire for certainty may in part account for the popularity of a theory of charity based on Christ’s incarnation and presence in the members of his church. Such an incarnational idea of charity shifted attention from another person to the divine and justified that shift. 17 Indeed, the main problem in giving gifts to a beggar, at least for one used to gift exchange, was that often there was no chance for forming a relationship or long-term exchange with the recipient; but God was always present. 18 Incarnational charity offered stability in exchange and put it in the context of a more understandable relationship than that of a passing meeting with a stranger.

Several characteristics of the period also made the soil more congenial for the growth of undiscriminating charity. This was a time of Christianization, when the goal was to bring people into an active life in the church. The communal ideal, including the assertion that all had something to give and the responsibility to do so, extended to being inclusive of those receiving as well. The important thing was that the poor could be members of Christ’s body, not that they were


17 The dominance of this theology was new, not the theology in itself: see above n. 1.

18 For this limit to gift exchange and charity, especially in modern giving in which we often never even see the people whom we are supposed to be loving, see V. C. H. Chua and C. M. Wong, “Charitable Giving by Individuals: An Empirical Perspective,” in *Altruistic Reveries: Perspectives from the Humanities and Social Sciences*, ed. B. K. Kapur and K-C. Chong (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 123-4 (who, understandably, omit the religious possibilities in their discussion).
The decline of urban culture had spread out the classical concentrations of the poor across wider rural areas, and so it may be that encountering smaller numbers of the poor made them appear less threatening and less in need of moral policing. In a typical village, there also would simply have been fewer potential recipients from whom to choose.

The tenth and eleventh centuries slowly eroded the interdependent beliefs that the poor should not be judged and were not obligated to pray for their benefactors. Economic development, the progress of Christianization, and the end of the great Carolingian project of creating a united, deep-rooted Christian society reversed some of the conditions which favored indiscriminate charity. Rising anxieties about new wealth and disruptions to social hierarchy also exacerbated reflection on social class and religion. In the end, the residual suspicion of the poor could not be indefinitely suppressed.

Already in the late ninth century questions of which poor deserved charity began slowly to reemerge. Christian of Stavelot (fl. 860s) noted that Christ’s “least brothers” must be those who believed in him and were humble, not proud, although he did not counsel letting that affect

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19 See also below, chapter 11. Of course, the almsgiver was a sinner too, most likely trying to scrub away his guilt through giving alms. On early medieval ideas of universality and unity in the church, with a consequent incorporation of ideals of mission, see Y. Congar, *L’Ecclesiologie du haut Moyen-Âge: de Saint Grégoire le Grand à la désunion entre Byzance et Rome* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1968), 61-73, 90-2.


21 See L. K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); M. R. Godden, “Money, Power and Morality in Late Anglo-Saxon England,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 19 (1990), 54-64; Firey, “For I was Hungry,” 355-6, 361-2; although this process began in the course of the ninth century, despite some ecclesiastical resistance: J. Devisse, *Hincmar, archevêque de Reims*, 845-882 (Geneva: Droz, 1975-6), 2:1113-4. The idea that guilt about riches nurtured a desire for religious poverty in reaction makes sense (as in Little), but it would be quite surprising if some who felt guilt for their new-found wealth did not instead project it into questioning the morality of those without wealth.

Patristic ideas were “essentially characterized by a large gap between the rich and the poor, rigid social structures and economic crisis”: Karayannis and Drakopoulou Dodd, “Greek Christian Fathers,” 168; see also P. Brown, “Augustine and a Crisis of Wealth in Late Antiquity,” *Augustinian Studies* 36 (2005), 6-30. A parallel (albeit less pronounced) decline in discriminating among the poor which coincided with a socio-economic flattening can be found in the high medieval Jewish community in Egypt: M. Cohen, *Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 71, but see also 82-104.
Rather of Verona, an early tenth-century Frankish immigrant to Italy, wrote a scathing admonition to society in the course of which he warned the poor against pride and against choosing begging over work due to laziness, although he showed an awareness of legitimate reasons for being thrust into poverty. He still said nothing about discriminating in almsgiving and his remarks on cultivating virtue assumed beggars would police their own morals. Rather did touch on all the elements of suspicion of laziness, fraud, and immorality among beggars that would break out with a vengeance in the High Middle Ages. The anxieties seem to have been slowly growing in the meantime.

Rather also reintroduced into his miniature mirror for beggars the idea that they owed gratitude and prayers to their benefactors. Although the alternate incarnational theology of charity continued strongly, the pauper began to return directly into the exchange of gift and countergift in the later tenth century. In a manner reminiscent of Augustine’s porter analogy, the standardized constitution of the later Anglo-Saxon Benedictine revival urged that the monks’ surplus should be given in alms so that it be carried to heaven “by the hands of the poor.” In this latter case, however, their monastic constitution’s ease in accepting an intercessory role for the

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22 Christian, In Mattheum 56, col. 1470D.

23 Rather of Verona, Praeloquia 1.29.43-4, ed. P. Reid, CCCM 46A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1984), pp. 43-5. Possibly this suspicion should also be seen in the adaptation of the story of the devil taking the form of a pilgrim in: The Old English Version of the Enlarged Rule of Chrodegang (Regula canonicorum) 84, ed. B. Langefeld (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003), p. 337 (ChrodR 1; B10.4.1); also Ælfric, CH2 19, pp. 187-8 (B1.2.22); and possibly Wulfstan [pseudo], Wulfstan: Sammlung der ihm zugeschriebenen Homilien nebst Untersuchungen über ihre Echtheit 46 (“Larspell”), ed. A. Napier (1883 [repr. Dublin and Zürich: Weidmann, 1965]), p. 239 (HomU 37 (Nap 46); B3.4.37).


recipients of alms may have owed something to their own complex relationship towards receiving alms.

The clerics and monks stood as a partial but important exception to the trend of not requiring a countergift from the recipient of alms. These were technically “poor” since the wealth of the church constituted the “patrimony of the poor” and monks moreover were supposed to have given up personal possessions. That poverty, combined with the idea that Christ received alms in his body, the church, made the ecclesiastical poor perfectly valid recipients of charity. In actual fact, the poverty of monks, especially in rich monasteries like Corbie, looked rather different from that of beggars or poor peasants. Certain differences in treatment inevitably crept in, and the issue of offering return prayers was one of them.

Monks clearly considered it part of their duty to pray for their benefactors. The great monastic reform council at Aachen in 817 prescribed special psalms for almsgivers and the departed. Circumstantial evidence, including the survival of a ninth-century prayer for those donating alms to the monastery, substantiates that exhortation in practice.

While monks prayed for almsgivers, that does not mean they technically prayed “in return” for alms. Although donors knew that their religious beneficiaries would pray for them, the implicit exchange was practically never made explicit in legislation, charters, or other sources. There was

27 See further below, chapter 10.


certainly unease with the idea of priests accepting “alms” or fees for the sacraments. In a similar way, negotiations for prayers may have seemed distasteful. The focus of monastic prayer was God and the communal good of the Christian people, not the repayment of endowments or gifts with a set number of prayers. The ninth-century prayer for almighers made clear that God was the *remunerator* of the gift and the giver’s faith. As Megan McLaughlin argued in her survey of charter donations, which also looked to God for repayment,

*Early medieval nobles did not generally perceive ‘prayers’ as distinct objects in their own right, to be bargained and paid for. Rather they saw prayer as the distinguishing activity of the community with which they hoped to associate themselves. … It was the relationship itself which seems to have had priority.*

I can only agree with her conclusion and point out that this separation of prayer and donation moved in accord with larger trends of almighgiving. As McLaughlin also observes, this separation had the effect of making each gift seem more spontaneous, and disguising any underlying desire for reciprocity. As the ninth and tenth centuries progressed, more and more donors sought

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Some Italian customs did include such provisions: *Ordo casinensis II dictus ordo officii*, ed. T. Leccisotti, CCM 1, p. 123; *Theodomari abbatis Casinensis epistula ad Theodoricum gloriosum* 33, ed. J. Winandy and K. Hallinger, CCM 1, p. 136.

32 “Ne aspicias, Domine, peccata mea, sed fidem illorum atque illarum, qui nobis in fide tui nominis largiti sunt bona temporalia, ut tu Deus remunerator omnium bonorum retribuere illis digneris pro parvis magna, et pro terrenis praemia sempiterna.” *De psalmorum usa* 2.6, col. 495CD.

something concrete in return, even if just the provision of lights for the sanctuary, and eventually regularized commemoration. The monk and other clergy returned to offering specific countergifts, and did so more quickly and thoroughly than the involuntary poor.

The mention of prayers for those giving alms to monasteries did not specify that these alms had to consist of land donations, though we know more about such large gifts. Donation of property was more likely to be written down in an official legal record than a gift of wax or a bag of coins, precisely because such large gifts were exceptional and valuable in comparision (although more common in the tenth century than the fifth). In general, the observations made in this chapter still apply to this subset of alms, including the special question of whether monks and clerics might offer spiritual countergifts (as seen in McLaughlin’s work). Property donations did entail three further complications. First, land was more valuable than loaves of bread, and so the visibility and importance of such a gift drastically increased. Presumably one’s confidence in reward did as well, although the type of reward—eternal life and the forgiveness of sins—and the selection of biblical justifications remained largely the same in charter arrangements as in general exhortations to give. Second, donors to monasteries had a much better possibility of forging useful political and social alliances since they, and others, were giving to a stable, stationary institution instead of an often anonymous and transitory person. This made expectations for return prayers more concrete and would have contributed to the rise of monasteries’ spiritual countergifts in the tenth century. Third, and most significantly, gifts of land formed a kind of “perpetual alms.” Families often felt a continuing connection with the donated property. If the family did not hold the land in benefice after donation, the donor’s descendants sometimes made a point of temporarily reclaiming


35 The phrase itself only achieved popularity in the High Middle Ages, but it adequately describes the early medieval concept.
alienated land. Doing so forced the monastery or church to credit them as charitable benefactors entitled to some degree of spiritual fellowship. In effect, land could function as if it were an inalienable possession, continuing to generate a relationship (and its benefits) between the original owner’s kin and the monastery over a long time.36

This kind of relationship between institution and benefactor was the exception in eleemosynary giving. The main relationship existed, at least in the giver’s mind, between almsgiver and God, who was present via the poor and himself repaid the gifts. During the ninth century, the duty of the poor to serve as active mediators between their benefactors and God was subsumed into the passive role of simply being Christ’s bodily members. And, of course, all members of Christ’s church were his bodily members; this role for the poor and the emphasis on the ability and obligation of all to give “alms” (understood as “mercy”) stressed the common bond of all members of society to God.

2. Purgatory and Post-mortem Almsgiving

The place of the poor in almsgiving reflected the Christian community on earth; another area of evolution focused on the community that transcended earthly boundaries. Almsgiving traditionally cleansed the soul of sin. This seems at first to be a personal concern, but in fact people cared about others’ salvation. If a parent or friend died and went to face their judge while still stained with evil, that was a cause for loving anxiety. The theologian faced the pastoral problem of people whose love for others did not die with the deceased’s death and the practical issue of how to offer hope for salvation to the great mass of mildly imperfect people. In that

context, it is hardly surprising that early medieval people began to experiment with developing older ideas on the ability of almsgiving’s cleansing ability to reach beyond death’s barriers. The full fruition of these explorations in theology and religious practice would come in the later medieval ideas centered upon Purgatory.

Jacques Le Goff famously placed the “birth of Purgatory” in the twelfth century, and certainly people of that time invented the term as a proper name, while elaborating its meaning and more precisely distinguishing it from Hell. 37 Less well remarked is the fact that the first third of his book deals with Purgatory’s gestation before that time. Despite his dismissive attitude towards the early Middle Ages, Le Goff’s work substantially proves the widespread acceptance of the key propositions of temporary, purgative post-mortem suffering for some Christian sinners and of the utility of intercession for the dead with prayers, masses, and alms. 38 The Carolingians and Anglo-Saxons did not have a place called “Purgatory,” but “a place of purgatorial fire” does not seem too far off. 39

As Le Goff argued, Augustine discussed these topics less in themselves than he wrote against those who hoped to use those ideas in support of universal Christian salvation.


Nonetheless, Augustine clearly accepted both as theological postulates. His theology in this matter, as in so many others, served as sanction and foundation for early medieval developments.

Augustine taught that scripture showed the fire of hell to be eternal, and those consigned to it could not be saved by alms or other means. Another fire would test the foundations of a Christian’s life before the Last Judgment; a foundation of faith alone would not suffice, but a minor sinner who nonetheless practiced faith with good works might lose the fruit of any misplaced affections in the fire but himself be saved. Possibly these lackluster Christians would be saved more quickly after this life by that “purgatorial fire.”

Certainly God placed all into an appropriate place between their death and the final judgment. Those Christian sinners deserving neither hell nor heaven immediately could and ought to be helped through prayer and almsgiving, although new merits could not be acquired to save the damned.


41 Augustine, Enchiridion de fide, spe et caritate 18.67, ed. E. Evans, CCSL 46 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1969), p. 85. See Le Goff for a wider selection of relevant Augustinian passages; here I focus on his most influential theological handbook.

42 “tale aliquid etiam post hanc uitam fieri incredibile non est, et utrum ita sit quaeri potest, et aut inueniri aut latere, nonnullus fideles per ignem quendam purgatorium, quanto magis minus ue bona pereuntia dilexerunt, tanto tardius citius que saluari; non tamen tales de quibus dictum est quod regnum dei non possidebunt, nisi convenienter paenitentibus eadem crimina remittantur.” Augustine, Enchiridion 18.67-8, pp. 85-7, here 18.68, p. 87.

43 “tempus autem quod inter hominis mortem et ultimam resurrectionem interpositum est, animas abditis receptaculis continet, sicut unaquaeque digna est uel requie uel aerumna pro eo quod sortita est in carne dum uivuerit.” Augustine, Enchiridion 29.109, p. 108.

44 “Neque negandum est defunctorum animas pietate suorum uituentium releuari, cum pro illis sacrificium mediatoris offertur uel eleemosynae in ecclesia uiant. Sed eis haec prosunt qui cum uiuerent haec ut sibi postea possent prodesse meruerunt. Est enim quidam uiuendi modus, nec tam bonus ut non requirat ista post mortem, nec tam malus ut ei non prosint ista post mortem; est uero talis in bono ut ista non requirat, et est rursus talis in malo ut nec his ualeat cum ex hac uita transierit adiuuari.” Augustin, Enchiridion 29.110, p. 108.
Early medieval theologians widely repeated these ideas, but with growing elaboration.

Augustine never explored a connection between his flames, the idea of an intermediate place, and post-mortem alms. The Venerable Bede tied these concepts more closely together:

Besides there are many just people in the Church who, after being freed from the flesh, immediately gain the blessed rest of paradise… But in truth there are some who were preordained to the lot of the elect on account of their good works, but on account of some evils by which they were polluted, went out from the body after death to be severely chastised, and were seized by the flames of purgatorial fire. They are either made clean from the stains of their vices in their long ordeal up until judgment day, or, on the other hand, if they are absolved from their penalties by the petitions, almsgiving, fasting, weeping and obligation of the saving sacrificial offering by their faithful friends, they may come earlier to the rest of the blessed.

Throughout the three centuries following Bede’s writing of these lines (around the 720s), theologians unanimously adopted some view of a “purgatorial fire” sweeping away venial sins before the Last Judgment.

45 Nedeka, L’evolution, 66.


The general trajectory of thought on this purging fire converged towards Bede’s presentation of it, but with some experimentation. Ambrosius Autpert (d. 784) equated the flames purifying a Christian’s spiritual foundation with those which would consume the world, possibly implying that the personal and general conflagrations occurred at the same time.⁴⁸ His more conservative theology had few followers in this matter. The next two generations of theologians accepted the idea of purification before the final judgment and focused on elucidating matters such as what sins (usually of omission) made the difference between perpetual and temporary punishment.⁴⁹

A number of visionary accounts offered rather varied images of the fate of mild sinners and the effect of intercession by the living.⁵⁰ The late Merovingian Visio Baronti had omitted temporary purgation, but accounted for the fate of lukewarm Christians through the means of miraculous manna which relieved their suffering in hell once a day.⁵¹ That vision’s relative pessimism became rare in the following two centuries. An early Anglo-Saxon vision account third. As will be apparent in the following discussion, early medieval authors felt free to interpret these sources in light of their own thought, though hewing most closely to Bede.


⁴⁹ pseudo-Theodulf, Capitula II 10.18, p. 177; Jonas, De Institutione 1.19, 3.15, cols. 158-161, 262.

⁵⁰ Given the affinity for allegory in this age, one should not assume that these visions are meant invariably as literal or complete accounts of the afterlife. These visions do offer insight into the degree to which purgatorial fire was still connected to hell and illustrating rough outlines of almsgiving’s post-mortem benefits. On early medieval vision literature see P. Dinzelbacher, Revelationes, Typologie des Sources du Moyen Age Occidental 57 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991); P. E. Dutton, The Politics of Dreaming in the Carolingian Empire (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994); C. Carozzi, Le voyage de l’âme dans l’au-delà d’après la littérature latine (Rome: Ecole français de Rome, 1994); J. Contreni, “‘Building Mansions in Heaven’: The Visio Baronti, Archangel Raphael, and a Carolingian King,” Speculum 78 (2003), 673-706. On some of the earliest visionary accounts of purgation, see Smith, “Origins of Purgatory,” 109-24.

⁵¹ Visio Baronti monachi Longoretensis 18, ed. W. Levison, MGH SRM 5 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1905), p. 391. I presume this was indicative of the gradual progress of Purgatory, but it may also reflect the authorial choice to scare its listeners into extensive almsgiving while alive: c. 13-5, pp. 387-9. The later Irish Vision of Adamnan included a similar motif of pre-mortem alms relieving suffering in hell, but (in a manner indicative of shifting sensibilities) thought that those sufferers would be released at the final judgment: The Vision of Adamnán [Fis Adamnáin], trans. O. Davies, in his Celtic Spirituality, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 333-4, also 366-7.
extant in Boniface’s correspondence described both mild sinners plunging in and out of the
margins of hell until their release on judgment day, and also a burning river barring heaven which
the virtuous could cross but into which the slightly imperfect fell for the cleansing of their trifling
sins before entering paradise.\textsuperscript{52} This picture of a distinct place of purgation away from the bowels
of hell, whether a border region of hell or of heaven, met the concerns of the Augustinian theology
on the eternity of hellfire. Increasingly, purgatorial fire moved towards Purgatory as a place,
although the exact nature of the torments and its spatial portrayal varied. Heito’s \textit{Visio Wettini},
composed in 824, pictured a deceased abbot doing penance on a mountain but suffering from the
smell of the tortured souls of the damned next door, while poor Charlemagne stood in an
undisclosed location temporarily suffering from animals gnawing him in a select part of his body.\textsuperscript{53}
Archbishop Ansgar (d. 865), in a vision of his death, was first taken to a specific place of
“purgatorial fire” for three days (though the suffering made it feel like a thousand years) before
going to heaven.\textsuperscript{54} A slightly later ninth-century note of a near-death experience refers clearly to
separate “places of punishment and a place of purgatorial fire.”\textsuperscript{55}

These visions not only showed a growing imagining of post-death purgation, but also
included a number of links with post-mortem intercession. Another eighth-century vision in
Boniface’s correspondence, similar to the one mentioned above, included an exhortation to offer

\textsuperscript{52} Boniface, \textit{Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus} ep. 10, ed. M. Tangl, MGH Epp. sel. 1 (Berlin:
Weidmann, 1916), pp. 9-12. By including two versions of purgatorial suffering (one lasting until the
judgment and one more temporary), this Anglo-Saxon vision straddles the changing conception of the
duration of purgation.

\textsuperscript{53} Heito, \textit{Visio Wettini} 10, 11, ed. E. Dümmler, MGH Poetae 2 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1884), 270-1.

\textsuperscript{54} This is also the first case I know of in which purgation is measured in temporal units (though the idea
of greater or lesser duration of suffering, with the exact quantity of that duration unspecified, was present at
least from the time of Gregory). Rimbert, \textit{Vita Anskarii} 3, pp. 21-2. Rimbert probably gave a truthful account
of Ansgar’s narration of his experience: I. Wood, \textit{The Missionary Life: Saints and the Evangelisation of

\textsuperscript{55} “multa quae vidit de locis penarum et purgatorii ignis loco enarravit.” \textit{Annales Xantenses}
supplementum a. 671, p. 34.
masses for the relief of suffering.\textsuperscript{56} In Hincmar’s ninth-century foray into the vision genre, most of his victims beg the visionary for prayers and almsgiving on their behalf by the living.\textsuperscript{57}

Early medieval people generally acknowledged the possibility and necessity of aiding the souls of the departed. Theologians mentioned that duty in passing, but treated it as a traditional part of their faith that needed little explication. It was simply something that people did as standard practice.\textsuperscript{58} Alms found increasing mention in musings about proto-Purgatory, but only abuses of the norm caused theological anxiety. Moralists like Jonas and Rather of Verona reminded complacent Christians that such intercession by the living only benefited those dead who had led a relatively good life.\textsuperscript{59} Those who had received Christ knew that they would need the adornments of good works at the Last Judgment. Once they had died and could no longer repent, no amount of interceding by friends could reverse the decision made by fallen Christians to harden their hearts against God’s call.

\textsuperscript{56} Boniface, \textit{Breie} ep. 115, pp. 247-250, esp. 248. The concoction of various elements, including the efficacy of masses, in both these Bonifatian visions combines inspiration from a number of Gregorian sources: see Le Goff, \textit{Birth of Purgatory}, 88-95 passim. Hrabanus, \textit{De institutione clericorum} 2.44, pp. 401-2 cites both Bede and Gregory as authorities. See also \textit{Visio eiusdem pauperculae mulieris}, ed. H. Houben, in \textit{Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins} 124, NF 85 (1976), pp. 41-2; Ælfric, \textit{CH2} 21, pp. 201, 204-5 (B1.2.24).

\textsuperscript{57} Hincmar, \textit{Visio Bernoldi} 2, 5, 6, pp. 142, 147; Contreni, “Building Mansions,” 697-701, 705-6; see also C. Berkhout, “Some Notes on the Old English ‘Almsgiving’,” \textit{English Language} Notes 10 (1972), 81-5. Such visions rapidly became a topos moving listeners to action, e.g. Gerhard, \textit{Vita s. Oudalrici} 1, p. 388.


\textsuperscript{59} Jonas, \textit{De institutione} 1.19, cols. 158-61; Rather, \textit{Praeloquia} 1.17.34-5, p. 36; also \textit{The Rewards of Piety} 22-36, 74-5, ed. and trans. F. Robinson, in his \textit{The Editing of Old English}, “‘The Rewards of Piety’: ‘Two’ Old English Poems in Their Manuscript Context” (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 188-90 (Rewards; A18). Typically, Rather offers the strongest and most caustic early medieval attack on putting one’s hope in the post-mortem use of riches that I have read. Such a warning is implicit in many other passages, such as Hrabanus, \textit{In Ecclesiasticum} 4.8, col. 886AB; pseudo-Wulfstan, \textit{Sammlung} 46, p. 238.
In practice, the survivors erred on the side of giving charity in hopes that it would be helpful. One eighth-century version of the English Iudicia Theodori forbade masses for the dead in the case of suicides, who ipso facto were presumed to have died in serious sin, but stipulated that prayers and alms could still be given on their behalf. This generosity of judgment preserved humility in the face of God’s inscrutable mercy, and also acknowledged the inherently good nature of generous almsgiving. As Thietmar (d. 1018) would explicitly observe concerning his kinswoman Liudgard’s unstinting prayer and almsgiving for her unfortunate husband, “anything good done in memory of someone by the faithful in this world, even if it cannot benefit the one for whom it was done, nevertheless God does not allow it to be worthless for the devoted person who attempted to do so.”

Early medieval attitudes towards aiding the dead and the possibility of temporal, purgative suffering hewed closer to tradition than had its attitudes towards the role of poor in offering countergifts. Nevertheless conceptions of what would be called Purgatory became more concrete and more closely tied to post-mortem alms, prayers, and masses. Anglo-Saxon writers such as Bede and Boniface’s anonymous visionary sources may have been more slightly precocious than their continental counterparts in their theological conceptions, but both regions wholeheartedly embraced the correctness of using alms to aid departed souls.

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61 “Dico autem cunctis presentibus atque futuris, quicquid boni in hoc seculo pro alicuius memoria a fidelibus exhibetur, si non licet ei prodesse, pro quo agitur, numquam a Deo ei irritatur, qui hoc facere studiosus conatur.” Thietmar, Chronicon / Die Chronik des Bischofs Thietmar von Merseburg und ihre Korreie Überarbeitung 6.85, ed. R. Holtzmann, MGH SRG n.s. 9 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1935), p. 376. He had no doubt that memoria gifts could aid the departed in other circumstances; in fact, he requested them for himself: 8.12, p. 506.
3. Confession, Penance, and Almsgiving

The early Middle Ages’ most profound and influential innovation in the long term came in the development of private confession and penance. The gradual progress of this pastoral innovation (which did not attain full maturity until the thirteenth century), its theological assumptions, and the Irish role in it have generated an extensive literature, and will not be analyzed here. The spread of penitential literature and private penance did affect almsgiving, and that does deserve brief consideration.

The first, often-unremarked fact is that private penance, insofar as it succeeded in becoming the normal remedy for minor sins, displaced almsgiving from that role. In the pre-confession era of the late Roman Empire, the cleansing of post-baptismal sin stood as a primary raison d’être for almsgiving (excepting serious sin which required the formal process of public penance). Confession, in effect, sought to usurp part of the essential spiritual role which almsgiving had filled. The increased emphasis placed by many theologians on almsgiving as a source of heavenly treasure and a path to eternal life may owe something to the growing competition from the new penitential ideas. Private confession did not yet approach the level of almsgiving’s status as an essential element of Christian life, but it began to appear in exhortations and lists of Christian duties. Jonas, in his ninth-century manual for the laity, advised that they

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63 Penitentials and the actual practice of penance are admittedly two different things. I assume here that the general points made in the penitentials reflect some realities of penance as well as its theological perception.

confess any serious sin to priests, who would assign an appropriate penance, but they could address their lighter, daily sins through “confession to each other, prayers, alms, humility, and contrition of heart and body.” By the end of the tenth century, English homilies listed confession as a basic practice for Lent alongside fasting, almsgiving, prayer, and vigils. The rhetoric of almsgiving as a source of forgiveness still continued throughout the early medieval period and beyond.

Competition between almsgiving and the newer penitential practices was neither intentional nor absolute. Some penitentials of insular inspiration incorporated a list of seven scripturally approved methods of obtaining forgiveness, including almsgiving. Theodulf’s diocesan statutes similarly included that sevenfold list in the chapter requiring laity to confess sins to their priest the week before Lent. A number of penitentials urged almsgiving elsewhere in

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65 “His documentis colligi potest, quod sicut quotidie in multis offendimus, ita quotidie de admissis confessionem alterutrum facere, et orationibus, et eleemosynis, et humilitate, et contritione cordis et corporis ea debemus purgare.” Jonas, De institutione 1.16, col. 154B, see also 1.10, 1.14-15, cols. 138-42, 150-2. Confession of more serious sins to a priest could be a reference to entering public penance rather than private confession. That one could confess minor sins to a lay friend is interesting, and may evidence the laity’s desire for some sort of confessional practice for minor offenses in Christianity.

66 Ælfric, CHI 7, p. 60 (B1.1.8); Vercelli Homilies 3, p. 74 (HomS 11.2 (ScraggVerc 3); B3.2.11.5). See also The Old English Version of the Enlarged Rule of Chrodegang 42, p. 53. At the turn of the millennium, one English name for the emerging parish can be translated as “a district with rights to hear confession” (scrifscir or rihcrscirscir): F. Tinti, “The ‘Costs’ of Pastoral Care: Church Dues in Late Anglo-Saxon England,” in Pastoral Care in Late Anglo-Saxon England, ed. Tinti (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 34.


68 Theodulf of Orleans, Erstes Kapitular / Capitula I 36, ed. P. Brommer, MGH Cap. episc. 1 (Hanover: Hannsche, 1984), pp. 133-5. Theodulf urges daily confession to God in prayer as useful in making one mindful of one’s own sinfulness so that God not be mindful of those sins; he compares that to the advantage of confessing sins to a priest, which washes away sin through the penance or prayer counseled by him (c. 30, pp. 127-8). He then specifies that priests should examine a penitent concerning all eight capital sins whether committed in thought or mind (c. 31, pp. 128-9). After other moral admonitions for leading a Christian life, Theodulf turns to the beginning of Lent, specifying that believers are to prepare themselves through confession to a priest, penance, and reconciling with enemies, and in this context lists the seven ways that sins can be forgiven (c. 36, pp. 133-5). As I understand Theodulf, he envisions confession to the priest as the locus for learning how to do an appropriate penance for one’s specific sins (and he hopes that such advice would be sought at least annually), but the actual forgiveness of sins occurs through penance or one of the other scripturally approved methods (such as almsgiving).
their text. While penance was usually presented in terms of a set number of days of fasting, alms offered an acceptable penitential supplement, even in serious cases. Those unable to perform the appropriate fast or prayers could instead give alms at a fixed rate. Penitentials then promoted almsgiving as well as competing with it. These opposing tendencies, combined with confession’s youthful state of development, limited its immediate effects on almsgiving, except possibly for nudging charity more in the direction of storing up heavenly treasure and foreshadowing a more serious, future shift in the quest for remission of sins.

4. Conclusion

A measure of the success in transmitting ideas to the lay elite can be found in a handbook written by a noblewoman, Dhuoda, in the early 840s for her son and subsequently circulated to others. She urged that he be generous to the poor with compassion and give alms (both of goods and of forgiveness to others) for his own sins, as the doctors of the church and scripture enjoined.

\textit{\textsuperscript{69} Paenitentiale Burgundense 23, ed. R. Kottje, CCSL 156 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1994), p. 64; Paenitentiale Floriacense 9, 21, 25, 43, 45, 47, ed. R. Kottje, CCSL 156, pp. 98-101; Paenitentiale Hubertense 9, 10, 23-5, 28, 49, 51, ed. R. Kottje, CCSL 156, pp. 109-13; Paenitentiale Merseburgense A esp. rec. W10 pref., 6, and also rec. Mel 21, 42, 129 and 146, ed. R. Kottje, CCSL 156, pp. 125, 127, 131-2, 137, 162, 165; Paenitentiale Merseburgense B 7, 8, 18, 23, 24, ed. R. Kottje, CCSL 156, pp. 173-6; Paenitentiale Oxoniense I 18, 22, ed. R. Kottje, CCSL 156, p. 90; Paenitentiale pseudo-Theodori 49.1-14, pp. 120-4; J-C. Dufermont, “Les pauvres, d’après les sources anglo-saxonnes, du VIIe au XIe siècle,” \textit{Revue du Nord} 50 (1968), 198-9; also Angenendt et al., “Counting Piety,” 30. See also chapter 4 below. However, while giving alms might sometimes substitute for fasting, paying someone to fast for you was frowned upon by at least some: \textit{Paenitentiale Merseburgense A} rec. W10 52, and rec. Mel 44, p. 140; \textit{Paenitentiale Oxoniense II} 61-2, ed. R. Kottje, CCSL 156, pp. 202-3; cf. \textit{Paenitentiale pseudo-Theodori} 49.8, pp. 121-2, which allows hiring a substitute if the penitent could not perform the normal penance (which condition may or may not have escaped the condemnations of Merseburgense and Oxoniense). \textit{Pseudo-Theodori} lists multiple rates for redeeming fasting or prayer with alms depending on circumstance, personal wealth and ability to perform a lesser degree of fasting or prayer; usually 1 denarii of alms to three paupers equalled a day on bread and water. Note also the tradition that fasting ought always to include charity: see chapters 2 and 5.}

\textit{\textsuperscript{70} See one early conciliar attempt to regulate private penance with almsgiving: “Qui vero peccata sua sacerdotibus, in quorum sunt parroechii, confessi sunt et ab his agendae paenitentiae consilium acceperunt, si orationibus insistendo, elymosinas largiendo, vitam emendando … horum est devotionis modis omnibus collaudanda.” \textit{Concilium Cabillonense a. 813} 45, ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1906), p. 283.}

\textit{\textsuperscript{71} She includes 10 references to alms and 32 other references to the poor: Dhuoda, \textit{Manuel pour mon fils / Liber manualis} 3.11, 4.4, 4.8, 4.9, 5.9, 6.1, 6.3, 8.7, 8.10, 8.13, 8.15, 10.4, ed. P. Riché, SC 225, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed.}
In that way, he might stand confident at his judgment, knowing that he had shown mercy to others, as God had done to him. Further, he was to give alms on behalf of all the deceased, especially his kin, with the knowledge that God alone knew who might still be saved from eternal punishment in light of past merit and sin. Dhuoda’s differed from monastic texts in some aspects of her treatment of the poor: she very briefly mentioned the power of their prayers, neglected to portray Christ as incarnate in them, and held some suspicions of pride and greed among the poor, but balanced the latter with a castigation of the greedy rich. Other than those significant exceptions, which evidence aristocratic resistance to some more egalitarian theological claims, Dhuoda is a prime example of the lay elite’s absorption of charitable theology. A generation after Alcuin wrote, a worthy and sophisticated successor emerged from the audience he had hoped to reach.

The theology outlined here was never meant to be esoteric knowledge. Bishops, monks, nuns, and other members of the religious elite certainly understood that theology better and read some sources, like Hrabanus’ massive commentary on the Book of Sirach, that never made their way to the wider public. Yet Hrabanus cared deeply about the education of the Christian


72 Dhuoda, Liber manualis 4.8, pp. 252-6.


74 Dhuoda, Liber manualis 4.8, pp. 236-56 passim.

75 For Alcuin, see chapter 2 above.

76 For different levels of patristic dissemination, see Finn, Almsgiving, 116-75. None of the texts considered in this chapter is known to have been written by nuns except for the lives of Queen Mathilda, but their intellectual aptitude and interests should not be underestimated: J. Nelson, “Women and the Word in the Earlier Middle Ages,” Studies in Church History 27 (1990), 53-98; R. McKitterick, ‘Women and Literacy in the early Middle Ages’, in her Books, Scribes and Learning in the Frankish Kingdoms (Aldershot 1994), 1-43, esp. 23; K. Leyser, Rule and Conflict in an Early Medieval Society: Ottonian Saxony (Bloomington, 1979), 49-73. Abbesses took on the responsibility also of instructing their guests: Agius, Vita et Obitus Hathumoda 9, ed. G. Pertz, MGH SS 4 (Hanover: Hannsche, 1841), p. 169; Rudolf, Vita Leobae abbatisae Biscofesheimensis 8, 11, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SS 15/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1887), pp. 125-6.
community. He made sure that his ideas of almsgiving entered into his homilies for the people, and in fact incorporated almost all his essential doctrinal points in them.\textsuperscript{77} The focus on motive, benefits, and the basis for believing in the spiritual richness of almsgiving points to the deeply pastoral nature of early medieval theology. Eleemosynary theology was meant to be eminently practical and useful both for the individual seeking to meet his God and for the community of Christians. It was nonetheless a well-developed system, full of precious insights polished by careful meditation. Theology aimed to nurture true and lasting relationships between people and God in this world and the next. It is these relationships (as theological goal and a practical platform for the interaction of people with each other) that point to the heart of early medieval charity.

Early medieval writers understood almsgiving as a fundamental marker of a Christian life and an essential aid on the road to heaven. These theologians began by meditating on their patristic and biblical inheritance, then reformulated it, disseminated it, and in some important cases expanded it, always maintaining at least the idea (and usually the reality) of fidelity to previous Christian tradition. Their sophisticated doctrine of charity focused on almsgiving as an act of mercy from the heart in response to God’s loving gifts and in hope of his future generosity. Almsgiving out of a proper motive of humble double love, combined with faith, grace, and the continuing pursuit of virtue, led to the appropriately hoped for eternity in heaven with God and with neighbor. It also helped those neighbors who had already died and were being cleansed rather painfully from their lesser imperfections in a (theologically-developing) purgatorial fire. The essentials of this charitable ideal were disseminated as a fundamental part of Christian life through sermons, moral tracts, penitentials, and other writings, as well as the forceful expedient of example.

Contrary to some modern ideals, the almsgiver believed that not only did the pauper need to receive charity, but that his own welfare depended on the pauper receiving it. The giver did not

\textsuperscript{77} See the beginning of chapter 3.
aim to end poverty, which would have been a worthy (if unrealistic) goal, but did aim to make sure
his neighbor survived it until they both entered the plenitude of heaven. Contrary to some patristic
and later medieval ideas, the early Middle Ages drastically downplayed the role of the poor in
carrying treasure to heaven through their prayers. Partially in consequence and partially out of
respect for the gratuitousness of Christian mercy, theologians strongly resisted temptations to
distinguish “deserving” from “undeserving” poor. Instead they emphasized Christ’s presence
through his incarnation and resurrection in all the members of his church, especially the poor who
received that mercy of which God himself had no need.

This was the theory and theology of almsgiving. This ideal reached every level of society,
and every level generally knew it. This held especially true by the mid-ninth century, following the
religious elite’s concerted push to educate everyone in the faith. How far and in what ways early
medieval Christians followed that vision of a charitable life are the subjects of the next chapters.
PART II:

PRACTICING CHARITY
CHAPTER 5

ALMSGIVING IN TIME AND SPACE

In the second quarter of the tenth century, Abbot Odo of Cluny began to investigate rumors of miracles swirling around a recently deceased south Frankish count named Gerald of Aurillac (d. 909). The result was his famous *Vita Geraldi*, a mirror of lay sanctity for those caught in the crosscurrents of worldly pressures. Among other virtues, the holy Gerald abounded in almsgiving, inviting the poor into his presence to eat, and even tasting their drink to make sure his servants had put out top quality refreshment:

Believing that in each of these paupers he received Christ, and reverently honoring him in them, [Gerald] brought in to himself through these [paupers] the one whose relief is, as the prophet says, the refreshment of the weary. Those, however, who send their alms outside their house, without bringing the paupers in, wrongly diminish their own reception of reward. For in this way they are seen to shut out from their houses Christ, who says, “I was a guest, and you welcomed me” (Mt 25:35).

The story of Gerald’s humble reverence towards the lowly probably found more admirers than imitators, and doubtless some blue-blooded scoffers as well. Odo did not expect a plethora of Gerals among the elite, but pushed instead the simple message that their almsgiving would be improved if they at least let the poor into their house to receive alms and personally acknowledged their existence. Through his prescriptive admonition, Odo inadvertently testifies to a normal practice of sending alms out to the needy. The relationship between the early medieval laity and

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1 “In his utique Christum se suscipere credens, et ipsum reverenter in his honorans, hunc ad se per ipsos intromittebat, cujus refrigerium est, iuxta prophetam, reficere fassum. Quam susceptionem mercedis male sibimet illi imminuunt, qui licet foras eleemosynam transmittant, pauperes tamen ad se non introducunt. Nam Christum, qui dicit: *Hospes eram, et collegistis me* [Mt 25:35], ita a suis domibus exclusedere videntur.” Odo of Cluny, *Vita sancti Geraldi Auriliacensis comitis* 1.14, PL 133, col. 652A.
almsgiving consisted of this kind of tension: a widespread practice of the basic religious action
(sending out alms) with a constant urging to do it better and out of a purer sense of its deep
meanings (in the eyes of clerical writers).

This story of Gerald allows the gleaning of small insights into almsgiving: its form as food
and drink, the normalcy of ordering the distribution of alms outside of one’s presence, the
reluctance to breach the sacred precincts of home by contact with poor strangers, and churchmen’s
role in reminding their flock that such hospitality was a religious event. Tidbits such as these lay
scattered across a profusion of early medieval narrative and normative sources: hagiography, royal
biography, histories, homilies, and even counciliar decrees. All of these sources encode
expectations for charity and hints of the underlying realities. Gathered together and read carefully,
they provide a detailed outline of how almsgiving functioned in practice. This chapter sketches the
flow of alms through the year and then turns to its role in times of personal or communal crisis. It
concludes with an examination of the spaces where almsgiver and recipient interacted. Almsgiving
was a key component of the relationship between God and humanity, and the structure of its
practice spread its tendrils to touch potentially the whole of society.

1. Charitable Encounters in the Sacral Year

Early medieval Christians practiced almsgiving throughout the year as a basic aspect of
post-baptismal Christian life, alongside prayer and fasting. The survival of beggars attests that
someone gave them food or money every week. The pace of that giving, however, varied. As a
religious practice intimately involving the needs of the almsgiver as well as the recipient, and as an
acknowledgement of God’s gifts to humanity, almsgiving acquired a distinctive ebb and flow in
harmony with the liturgical calendar.

The cycle of almsgiving encapsulated a Christian sense of time. When pauper and donor
met, the conceptual placement of that moment within the liturgical year helped to sacralize their
encounter and make clear its role in marking a Christian community. Specifically, almsgiving
performed two functions during the year. First, almsgiving prepared people to participate in the Mass on high holy days as a united community. Second, it bound the agricultural calendar with the liturgical, marking the fruits of the earth as divine blessings. The resulting cycle of varying intensity in almsgiving became gradually more entrenched and elaborated over time, but this evolution proceeded very slowly and along a continuous line of development throughout the early Middle Ages.

Almsgiving worked with fasting and prayer to place the Christian in communion with God, especially in preparation for feast days. “It should be known therefore that that fasting is perfect which pierces heaven with alms and prayer,” as Hrabanus Maurus wrote in his homiliary for Carolingian priests. In two other homilies, he reminded the average Christian that since almsgiving transmuted sacrificed earthly goods into divine treasure through the power of mercy, “the very best prayer for one’s sins occurs in fasting and almsgiving, and a prayer raised by such supports speedily ascends to divine ears.” This connection was widespread in prescriptions of practice, although each of the three could certainly appear separately. The frequent repetition of these general guidelines implies that they were part of the standard conception of almsgiving.

2 “Sciendum est ergo illud perfectum esse jejunium quod cum eleemosynis et oratione coelum transit.” Hrabanus Maurus, *Homiliae de festis praecipuis, item de virtutibus* 49, PL 110, col. 90, quoting Alcuin, *De virtutibus et vitiis liber ad Widonem comitem* 16, PL 101, col. 624D.


Insofar as people gave alms as Christians, they did so under the influence of this normative structure.

Fasting and almsgiving enjoyed a particularly close connection as a means of purging oneself spiritually. A measure of their intimate intertwining appears in the possibility of substituting almsgiving for fasting. “If you cannot fast,” Hrabanus taught, “give alms, and however much you are weaker in the first, be generous in the other.”

The friend and successor of Ansgar, bishop of Hamburg-Bremen (d. 865), recounted how the aging prelate gave increasing alms as his declining health prevented his fasting. A century and a half later, one can find similar reminiscences of a good man, hindered by age and deprived of the ability to eat normally by rotting teeth, making up for the lack of additional fasting with fervent almsgiving.

A Christian normally received communion at one or more of the three great solemnities of the year—Easter, Pentecost, and Christmas—although he or she might receive much more frequently. One had to prepare for this encounter for God, and mandatory periods of fasting and almsgiving played a crucial role in creating a pure, harmonious people to partake in the Lord’s Supper. The quattuor tempora, later known in England as Ember Days, led up to these three key

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5 “Ergo si non potes jejunare, eleemosynam tribue; et quanto infirmior es in uno, tanto largior sis in altero.” Hrabanus, Homiliae 10, col. 22D, drawing in part from the Verba seniorum. Similar exhortations can be found in, e.g. Paenitentiale pseudo-Theodori 49.1, 49.8, 49.14, ed. C. van Rhijn, CCSL 156B (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), pp. 120-4; Theodulf, Capitula I 37, p. 136; [pseudo-]Wulfstan, Wulfstan: Sammlung der ihm zugeschriebenen Homilien nebst Untersuchungen über ihre Echtheit 55, ed. A. Napier (1883 [repr. Dublin and Zürich: Weidmann, 1965]), pp. 284-5 (HomU 44 (Nap 55); B3.4.44). Note that this process could not be reversed; fasting did not substitute for alms since the latter provided the essential Christian motor power of love.


feasts, and also included a September fast in the middle of the time between Pentecost and Christmas to cover the fourth season of the year.\(^9\) The Carolingians celebrated these fasts on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday of four selected weeks, with almsgiving as their culmination when the people broke their fast on Saturday before coming to church: “Let the giving of alms sustain our fast four times a year, namely the Saturday before Palm Sunday, the Saturday of Pentecost, the fourth Saturday of this month [i.e. September] or on that feast, and the Christmas vigil.”\(^10\)

The specific dates of this fourfold period of cleansing evolved during the early Middle Ages, but standard Frankish liturgical practice consistently included some form of quadruple period of fasting marking the seasons of the year.\(^11\) Most of the decrees attesting to the practice focus on fasting, since that could be enforced as duty, even by excommunication. Clergy encouraged almsgiving, but felt that they could not command or enforce it in the same way, since true charity had to come from the heart.\(^12\) Of course, the general participation in almsgiving as part of these penitential seasons likely suffered as a consequence, especially during the period when the


\(^10\) “Ut per IIIIor tempora in anno ieiunia nostra aelymosinarum largitas sustentet, id est in sabbato ante palmas et in sabbato Pentecosten et in sabbato IIIIto istius mensis seu ad istam festivitatem et in vigilia natale Domini.” *Concilium Baiuwaricum* 10, p. 53. On Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, see c. 11, p. 53. The reference to “that feast” is unclear (the bishops are meeting “ad istam sanctam solemnitatem,” but do not name it). In later times the September Ember Days were fixed around the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross (September 14 then, though often celebrated in the Frankish church on May 3), but at this time the feast of St. Michael the Archangel (September 29) would have been more important and would fit better with the fourth Saturday of the month: see the principal feasts listed in *Concilium Moguntinense 813 (mense Maio)-Iun.* 36, ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1906), pp. 269-70. Fifty years later another Bavarian council placed it on the third Saturday of September: *Statuta Risapensia, Frisingensia, Salisburgensia* 4, ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1906), pp. 207-8.


\(^12\) *Concilium Moguntinense* 813 34, p. 269; *Statuta Risapensia, Frisingensia, Salisburgensia* 4, pp. 207-8. See also above, chapter 2.
*quattuor tempora* was being introduced into new areas. It is worth noting that even in these cases, the tone of the normative sources betrays no sense of panic or doubt about the ability of the clergy to entrench the new custom, even as the words themselves acknowledge that in this matter almsgiving was not yet the general practice. A Bavarian council in 800 reminded its priests to promote almsgiving during the *quattuor tempora*: “And let no one do this unwillingly or coerced, but let each according to his free judgment strive to bestow his goods according to his strength, since God will not ask how much is offered but with what will.”

The need to improve participation in almsgiving did not override the central teachings concerning the internal criteria which led to charity and by which it was judged.

When composing his set of homilies, Hrabanus saw these days as prime opportunities for instructing the people in their Christian duties and so provided a fuller expression of its meaning. He reminded Christians at the beginning of Holy Week that the final time in Lent had come for dressing oneself in the shining garments of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. In the June Pentecost days, he urged them to give alms from the first fruits of God’s agricultural gifts to his people and as preparation for his mass. In September, he recalled the church’s continuing pilgrimage, made possible by Christ’s expiation of humanity’s sins and appropriately remembered at the time when the Jews celebrated their feast of atonement (Yom Kippur). So too the Christian should seek forgiveness through Christ in penance, fasting, and almsgiving. Finally, in December, fasting and almsgiving sanctified their practitioners for attending their Lord’s birth, and allowed them to give

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13 “Et hoc invitus neque coactus nemo faciat, sed spontaneo iuditio unusquisque iuxta vires suas inpertire studeat, quia non requiret Deus quantum, sed quanta voluntate proferatur.” *Statuta Rispacensia, Frisingensia, Salisburgensia* 4, pp. 207-8.


thanks for the harvest that had been collected at the end of autumn, while asking that such blessings continue.\footnote{Hrabanus, Homiliae 3, col. 14. See also [pseudo-]Eligius, Homiliae 1, PL 87, col. 596.}

A similar practice occurred at Rogationtide (also called the Litanies, letania or letania maior), the three days leading up to the spring celebration of the Ascension. These days of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving were widespread in Francia and quite popular in England. The practice of blessing the ripening crops during that time no doubt made it an occasion in which the common folk had some interest. Scholars have speculated on possible links with pre-Christian rites, but early medieval bishops saw the time as a wonderful opportunity to sanctify their flock and instruct them. A substantial body of Old English homilies survives for Rogationtide, focusing on penitence and almsgiving.\footnote{Ælfric, CH1 18, pp. 317, 323-4 (B1.1.20); Ælfric, CH2 19, 20, 21, pp. 187, 196-7, 201, 203 (B1.2.22, B1.2.23, B1.2.24); Capitulare missorum Suessionense 853 8, p. 269 Concilium Moguntinense 813 32, 33, pp. 268-9; Eleven Old English Rogationtide Homilies, ed. J. Bazire and J. E. Cross, 2\textsuperscript{nd} edition (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1989), pp. 18, 22, 64, 70, 73-4, 83, 87-9, 95, 98-9, 133; Hrabanus, Homiliae 19, 20, cols. 38-42; The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts 12, ed. D. G. Scragg, EETS 300 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 228-9 (HomS 39 (ScraggVerc 12); B3.2.39); M. B. Bedingfield, The Dramatic Liturgy of Anglo-Saxon England (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2002), 191-209, esp. 191; J. Blair, The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 486-9. A tenth-century English lay guild paid an annual set of voluntary dues to their priests in Rogationtide, illustrating the importance of that celebration to their view of the religious cycle: H. Meritt, “Old English Entries in a Manuscript at Bern,” Journal of English and Germanic Philology 33 (1934), 344-5 (Rec 3 ( Förster); B16.3); (on guilds, see chapter 5 below).}

The quattuor tempora and Rogationtide brought the liturgical cycle and the agricultural cycle together. They also brought together the community in almsgiving. Christians were to share the harvest, breaking bread together and celebrating God’s generous gifts, which were meant for all. Rich and poor, emperor and soldier, all had one Father who cared for them.\footnote{Hrabanus, Homiliae 20, col. 40AB. See also Ælfric, CH2 19, p. 182; The Blickling Homilies 3, 4, ed. R. Morris, EETS 58, 63, 73 (1874-80 [repr, London: Oxford University Press, 1967]), pp. 37, 51-3 (HomS 10, 14 (BlHom 3, 4); B3.2.10, B3.2.14); and chapter 3.} Almsgiving sanctified and cleansed these people in the eyes of the divine distributor of blessings. The communal sharing of God’s goods through almsgiving enacted its fundamental meaning as love of
God and neighbor, and so reinforced that aspect of Christianity. Being cleansed by penitential practice and with their love rekindled, the people stood ready to receive the Eucharist.

Lent stood above these sets of three-day fasts as the great season of penance and preparation for encountering God at the Easter mass. Almsgiving, along with prayer and fasting, played a leading role in those forty days.\textsuperscript{20} Certain bishops, according to their hagiographers, set an example for their flocks by meeting and caring for an extra set of poor men and women each day during Lent; Lenten activity extended to that flock as well.\textsuperscript{21} Few homilies from the first Sundays of Lent missed the opportunity to remind their audience of alms, prayer, and fasting. Indeed, the nearly obligatory reminder of this threefold practice usually had the rote air of a stewardess telling airline passengers to put up their seats and tray-tables. Ælfric acknowledged as much, referring to the customs as something known to his audience: “Beloved people, it is known to you all that the course of the year has brought us again to the holy time of the Lenten fast, during which we must … cleanse ourselves from sin with fasts, vigils, prayer, and almsgiving.”\textsuperscript{22} As the rest of the sermon makes clear, Ælfric did worry that his flock would mix their almsgiving with sin and strife instead of the products of a loving heart. He also had a few harsh admonitions for the rich, whom he suspected of giving insufficient amounts or giving from ill-gotten gains. Overall, it is these matters related to proper almsgiving that concerned him, not a question of whether he could convince people to perform the simple act of presenting something to the poor.

Our other extant homilies also tended to concentrate on explaining these practices, with reference usually to Christ’s forty days in the desert and his offering of himself. Alternately, they

\textsuperscript{20} Most thoroughly discussed in the popular early ninth-century diocesan regulations drawn up by the bishop of Orleans, Theodulf, \textit{Capitula I} 36-44, pp. 133-40.

\textsuperscript{21} Gerhard, \textit{Vita sancti Oudalrici episcopi} 4, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SS 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1841), p. 391, also c. 9, p. 396; Rimbert, \textit{Vita Anskarii} 35, p. 69.

\textsuperscript{22} “Men þa leofostan eow eallum is cuð þæt ðæs gearlica ymryme us gebrincð efne nu þa clænan tid lencenlices fæstenes on ðam we sceolon ... us mid fæstene and waecum and gebedum and ælmesdædum fram synnum æoweæan...” Ælfric, \textit{CH2} 7, p. 60 (B1.2.8).
urged the extension of almsgiving, perhaps lecturing on the importance of spiritual almsgiving through forgiveness and preserving peace with one’s neighbors, or even suggesting that sex during this period of purification ran counter to the spirit of their parishioners’ alms and fasting. The homilists’ goal in these sermons was often not so much to exhort the people to perform the Lenten disciplines as to lift their flock’s eyes from what was routine practice to the higher spiritual realities beyond. Only rarely did the worry that people were not giving (as opposed to giving incorrectly) explicitly emerge.  

Isaiah’s admonition to, “break your bread with the hungry, and bring the needy and the wanderer into your house” (Is 58:7), poetically summarized the sharing, sacrifice, and community implicit in the Lenten discipline. Isaiah not only offered practical guidance for how to give alms (share one’s basic foodstuff), but also the obvious Eucharistic parallels emphasized the religious meaning of almsgiving and the unity of all Christians in Christ. While inviting the stranger into

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24 I have not seen this worry expressed as such in the homilies, unless general reminders to give alms without an elaboration of its spiritual meaning are taken to imply that. Nonetheless, Einhard (writing ca. 830), records the supposed words of a demon during an exorcism which explained the recent misfortunes of the Frankish kingdom as punishment for all their sins. These are listed at length, and include the complaint that: “Rari sunt qui fideliter ac devote decimas dent, rariores qui eleimosinas faciant. Et hoc ideo, quia quicquid Deo vel pauperibus dare iubentur id sibi perire arbitrantur.” Einhard, Translatio et miracula SS. Marcellini et Petri 3.14, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SS 15/1 (Leipzig, Hiersemann, 1925), p. 253. The passage is hyperbolic, as in all good calls for reform, but shows that the level of almsgiving and general belief in its supernatural efficacy did not meet everyone’s standards.


26 Explicit in Alcuin, Epistolae 156, p. 254.
one’s home may not have occurred regularly, the admonition to share one’s food at the end of the
daily fast was a mainstay of Lenten teaching. The Lenten penitential season did not differ from
other liturgical fast days, such as the *quattuor tempora*, in this sentiment. It did differ in length and
in the lack of an explicit connection to the agricultural season. Implicitly, there was a connection,
although not incorporated into homilies or theology. Since Lent occurred at the end of winter, food
was scarce and expensive. The need of the poor for help was greater than other times, and so Lent
served a very practical purpose in pooling community resources so that all might survive and
perhaps feel their suffering to be sanctified.

This Lenten preparation culminated in the final week stretching from Passion Sunday to
Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday. “Whoever therefore has been slothful up to this
point, let him busy himself at least in these seven days with fasts and giving alms, with vigils and
prayer, with tears and heartfelt remorse, to find mercy with our Redeemer.” In particular, Holy
Thursday marked the high point of Lenten almsgiving. Holy Thursday, the celebration of the
institution of the Lord’s Supper before Jesus’ crucifixion, when he reconciled humanity to God,
was the day in which those doing solemn penance were reconciled to the church. As such, it was
an appropriate day for the rest of the community to reflect on their own penance and make sure
they had offered sufficient acts of mercy towards God in return for his wonderful gifts. When
writing his early eleventh-century chronicle, Thietmar noted how fortunate the priest Rotmanus
was that his sudden death occurred on Good Friday, since that meant he had cleansed himself with

27 See also Theodulf, *Capitula I* 38, 39, p. 137; Wulfstan, *Homilies* 14, p. 233 (WHom 14, B.2.3.2).

28 “Quicunque ergo hactenus desidiosi fuimus, saltem in istis septem diebus cum jejuniis et eleemosynis
largis, cum vigiliis et oratione, cum lacrymis et compunctione cordis, misericordiam apud Redemptorem

29 Pseudo-Eligius, *Homiliae* 4, 6, 8, 11, 13, cols. 611, 613, 616-8, 632-5, 640-2; J. McCune, “Rethinking
the Pseudo-Eligius Sermon Collection,” *Early Medieval Europe* 16 (2008), 462-70; see also Wulfstan,
*Homilies* 14, p. 235.
confession and almsgiving the previous day. In the eighth or ninth centuries, his confession might not have been a given, but his Holy Thursday almsgiving would have been typical, especially for an ecclesiastic of his standing.

Lenten almsgiving also appropriately culminated at Holy Thursday since there Christ had given an example of service and love by washing his disciples’ feet and ordering them to go out and do the same. Almsgiving provided a means of following that command. The liturgical footwashing of the poor, the *mandatum*, developed over the early Middle Ages and included an eleemosynary component. In the eighth and ninth centuries, only monks regularly practiced a *mandatum* on Holy Thursday for the poor, although it was not unprecedented outside of the cloister. This monastic footwashing of the poor followed a general distribution of alms to the poor and came with additional gifts of clothes, shoes, food, and coins to the twelve paupers chosen for the ceremony. In the tenth century, this ritual migrated beyond the cloister to cathedrals and into general ecclesiastical practice.

One related change accompanied the tenth century. At least in some monasteries, and possibly more broadly, the poor receiving this special treatment found themselves segregated from the rest of the Christian community. Their footwashing took place at a special mass for the poor. These poor received care and alms, but ate, drank, and worshipped away from the rest of the

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31 pseudo-Eligius, *Homiliae* 13, col. 642AB.

community during this sacred time.\textsuperscript{33} The need of monks to sanctify themselves before celebrating the high mysteries took preference over the earlier emphasis on community.\textsuperscript{34}

Beyond this annual cycle of times when almsgiving became especially necessary, one might expect a weekly epicycle in which charity served to honor Sunday as the Lord’s day. Late Roman Christians gave alms on Sundays, and the early medieval beggars surely possessed enough intelligence to try to catch their Christian neighbors in a pious mood. The actual evidence for Sunday distributions of alms, however, is rather thin.\textsuperscript{35}

The light emphasis on Sunday almsgiving highlights how influential the linkage between agricultural blessings and charity was in practice. Theodulf’s statutes include what at first seems an unusual complaint about almsgiving, but one which becomes explicable if this link between harvest and charity was widely assumed. He warned merchants who thought themselves exempt from almsgiving that this was not so, and argued that they ought to give from their profits since, “God gives the craft by which one is fed.”\textsuperscript{36} This is the only passage in which Theodulf felt compelled to enjoin almsgiving itself, rather than merely to regulate details of how to perform it. Theodulf explicitly compared the merchant’s reliance on God for bodily nourishment with that of someone relying on agricultural success, which more obviously depended on God’s blessings of good weather and other aspects of nature; since the merchant also relied on God-given skill, they

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{33} Redactio sancti Emmerammi 18.49-52, pp. 223-6; Regularis concordia angliae nationis 6.66, p. 112. See also Redactio sancti Emmerammi 18.57, p. 232.
\textsuperscript{34} See the remarks in chapter 4 on the growing suspicion of the poor, and chapter 11.

\textsuperscript{36} “Deus dedit artem, qua pascitur.” Theodulf, \textit{Capitula I} 35, p. 133. This \textit{capitula} draws on the assertion by Caesarius of Arles (d. 542) that tithes had to be given from non-agricultural income; Theodulf’s recourse to Caesarius is only unusual in its modification for applying it to almsgiving: Caesarius of Arles, \textit{Sermones} 33.1, ed. G. Morin, CCSL 103 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1953), pp. 143-4.
\end{quote}
likewise owed God a debt that was to be paid in the form of mercy to others. His argument assumes that his lay audience thought that they gave alms largely as a countergift for natural blessings, although it should be noted that Theodulf briefly mentioned the soul’s reliance on alms for its health as well.

As we have seen, theologians split over the propriety of such worldly hopes. Since clerics encouraged almsgiving as part of a seasonal cycle (and, as noted in the next section, a means of petitioning God in times of crisis), the opinions in favor of hoping for God’s care in this life had a de facto legitimacy. And, after all, a good God ought to care for his people.

Nonetheless, passages such as this one from Theodulf and facts such as the Anglo-Saxon popularity of Rogationtide (with its intimate connection with the harvest) suggest that the general perception of almsgiving focused more on earthly benefits than even the words of the more liberal clerics would imply. Of course, the expectation of earthly blessings led to potential problems when these failed to materialize. As Alcuin wrote when addressing the experience of his lay audience, “If anyone suffers tribulations after good works, he should not say to himself, ‘I have lost my good works that I performed!’ For he who said this, is shown to have performed good works not out of love of God, but for the rewards of happiness in this life or for human praise.”

Urging the laity to focus on spiritual concerns was not only better theology, it was good pastoral strategy as well. The

37 See chapter 3.

38 Bishop Daniel of Winchester (writing ca. 724) thought that pointing the success of Christians over that of pagans might convince the latter that the Christian God was really a god, unlike pagan deities, since he obviously acted like one (but note that this is evidence for how Daniel perceived un-Christianized people to think, not necessarily his flock; nor did he likely believe temporal blessings more important than spiritual): Boniface, *Die Briefe des heiligen Bonifatius und Lullus* ep. 23, ed. M. Tangl, MGH Epp. sel. 1 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1916), pp. 39-41.

evidence of postmortem almsgiving, discussed below, shows that the laity used almsgiving to address spiritual concerns as well.

The link between agriculture and almsgiving, considered in isolation, also provides an excellent example of what gift exchange between God and humanity meant. The exchange occurred at the locus of an ongoing relationship; the farmer needed a good harvest year after year until his death. He gave alms both before gathering the harvest as a petition for the future and afterwards as an act of thanksgiving, which also looked ahead to the next agricultural cycle. Additionally, when the farmer gave away a bit of bread as alms, he was giving only a miniscule fraction of the natural blessings he hoped to reap with God’s help. This drastic inequality of exchange was far from a state of balanced reciprocity, and only made sense in light of a claim on God’s love. Both these facts—the longevity and the inequality of exchange—point to the priority of relationship in gift exchange. And it is worth noting that, as bad harvests inevitably occurred, farmers likely had to face the fact that their acts of prudent piety could not coerce God into specific action with certainty; the gifts on both sides retained an element of freedom.

Almsgiving followed a seasonal rhythm. It sanctified the agricultural seasons and the community who hoped God would bestow his blessings upon them. It served as a penitential practice to prepare God’s people to meet their judge and redeemer as a united community, although the tenth century began to qualify that communal function. In addition to this regular cycle, people also deployed almsgiving to meet specific crises. The role of almsgiving in meeting these crises underlines how much charity’s function as a religious act useful in this world mattered to the Christian people in general. This temporal role did not come at the expense of its spiritual teaching (though it may have stretched the license given by theology slightly) and in the case of death brought the laity’s concern about eternal things back to the forefront. It is to these crises that we now turn.
2. Charitable Encounters in Times of Trouble

In the face of various personal and communal ruptures, almsgiving could restore a sense of meaningful, sacred continuity. People believed that almsgiving, as a form of divinely approved petitioning for mercy, brought concrete aid to their distress in those times and opened the door to further good in the future. Almsgiving offered a ready remedy in the face of famine, warfare, sin, and especially death.

Famine was a constant threat in the early medieval world. Even in good years, crop yields were low by later standards and the market mechanisms for transporting grain, while developing, remained relatively primitive. The first line of defense was for the local elite to care for the extended familia of those under them. Royal and ecclesiastical officials had special obligation to do so, and then, ideally, charitably to aid others as they could. The Carolingian monarchs also tried to impose price controls if hunger threatened enough people. The combination of prayer, repentance, and almsgiving offered a further possibility in the face of overwhelming natural disaster. Through these means, people could petition God for supernatural succor and, if they blamed their own sin for the calamity, appease his divine wrath. Almsgiving in these times


41 Capitulare missorum Niumagae datum 806 18, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 132. See also chapter 6.

42 Capitula per episcopos et comites nota facienda, 805-808 1, 6, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1, p. 141; Capitulare missorum Niumagae datum 806 18, p. 132; Verhulst, Carolingian Economy, 123-5, 128-9.

43 Charlemagne, Epistolae variorum Carolo Magno regnante scriptae ep. 20, ed. E. Dümmler, MGH Epp. 4 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1895), pp. 528-9; see also Rather of Verona, Praełożia 1.3.5, 4.23, ed. P. Reid,
functioned both on a practical, material plane to keep the population alive and healthy, and on a
spiritual plane to right the underlying disorder in the universe.

Almsgiving had equal applicability when God chose to give generous agricultural
blessings. God bestowed wealth on the earth and his people showed their understanding of their
dependent relationship by giving gifts themselves. Rogationtide and the quattuor tempora were as
much about thanksgiving as averting disaster. Pippin (r. 714-768) ordered his entire realm to give
alms amid general thanksgiving for an abundant harvest after several difficult years.44

Rulers appealed for communal repentance, prayer, and almsgiving especially after a series
of catastrophes, often including devastating raids and military defeat. Charlemagne (r. 768-814)
put out requests on at least three occasions for all his subjects to ask God to come to the realm’s
aid.45 Others in the ninth and tenth century likewise urged the people to penitence and the showing
of mercy through alms that God might show mercy to them, and undoubtedly did so too for more
local troubles that escape the written record.46 The German dowager queen, Mathilda (d. 968),
moved by concern for her realm, as well as a mother’s anxiety, turned to prayer and generous
almsgiving to avert the possibility of disaster while her son undertook a perilous third expedition
into Italy.47 Despite the clerical focus on alms as a path towards heavenly reward and spiritual


45 Capitulare missorum Aquisgranense primum 810 5, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover:
Hahnsche, 1883), p. 153; Concilium in Francia habitum, a. 779(? 780(?), ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc.
244-6.

46 Annales Bertiniani / Annales de Saint-Bertin a. 839, ed. F. Grat, J. Vielliard and S. Clémencet (Paris:
the time of Alfred in England, see also S. Irvine, “The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the Idea of Rome in

47 Vita Mathildis reginae posterior 21, p. 187.
forgiveness, the lay elite certainly saw almsgiving as an efficacious means of petitioning God for support in the trials of this world. Local and personal concerns, such as the fate of a sick child, attracted minimal attention from medieval writers (unless a relic effected a miraculous cure), but here too anxious mothers and friends must have beseeched God.48

Almsgiving might have served also as a sign of reconciliation and harmony. After all, the expression of love was its purpose. In one case, Mathilda’s normally squabbling sons, Otto I and Duke Henry, together first stripped her of authority and freedom (supposedly on the advice of evil advisors on account of her excessive generosity in giving royal treasures to the poor), and subsequently restored her to favor. “After these amazing things, there was peaceful tranquility among the mother and her sons, and a united will in doing good. They were of one mind in comforting the poor, and in agreement in the building of churches and monasteries.”49 Here almsgiving served as a potent symbol of the restoration of Christian community, although it is difficult to gauge how much of this account is a literary device and how much reflects the actual performance of symbolic public actions.

The most dramatic cases of a personal event leading to massive almsgiving occurred when a man or woman chose to “abandon the world” and enter religious life.50 The oblation of children to monasteries gradually came to dominate recruitment to the religious life by the end of the tenth century, but voluntary adult entry, with the time-honored expectation of the divestment of earthly


wealth, remained a common occurrence in the eighth and ninth centuries.\textsuperscript{51} Indeed, Louis the Pious (d. 840) felt compelled to legislate just how an important person ought to go about the process of giving his wealth to the poor so as not to inconvenience either the administration and defense of the realm or his relatives, who understandably wanted some say in how much wealth actually went missing from the family inheritance.\textsuperscript{52}

In contrast to this renunciation by the few, death came into every life as a common, inevitable rupture. It is here that our best evidence for almsgiving clusters, for it is here that questions of forgiveness and heavenly treasure became most acute. Both the dying man or woman and, subsequently, those left behind turned to charity in hope. Histories and hagiography from across the early medieval world reveal the regularity of bequeathing money and goods to the poor and the church when one felt death’s dark shadow nearing, often recording the specific provisions made by the dying person.\textsuperscript{53} One set of Frankish ecclesiastical regulations took for granted that a dead man often would leave representatives, “whom he had commissioned to give his alms.”\textsuperscript{54} Charlemagne was so concerned to provide that customary charity and to prevent unseemly and

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\textsuperscript{52} Capitula legibus addenda 818/819 6, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 282.


dangerous squabbling among his surviving family, that he drew up a charter three years before his
death specifying how to divide his wealth among the realm’s episcopal sees and the poor, and in
fact began that process of distribution pre-mortem.\(^{55}\)

Once the mortal body had given up the spirit, the community of those left behind worked
to aid the departed soul. The bonds of kinship and friendship, seemingly ruptured by death,
continued to exert a hold on the survivors. The *Opus Caroli*, the polemical Frankish response of
the early 790s to the Greek iconoclast controversy, contrasted the Greeks’ supposed disdain for
their ancestors with the prevalent filial care of the Franks: “We earnestly entreat pardon for our
parents according to the church’s custom through fervent prayer and almsgiving; they seek
punishment for their parents in senseless council meetings.”\(^{56}\) The evidence shows that
Carolingians and Anglo-Saxons took this duty very seriously.\(^{57}\) A medieval person might meet that
responsibility with donations of land to a monastery or distributing loaves of bread to the poor,

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\(^{55}\) He provided that the final distribution occur at his death or entrance into a monastery. Einhard, *Vita Karoli magni* 33, ed. O. Holder-Egger, MGH SRG 25 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1911), pp. 38-40; M. Innes, “Charlemagne’s Will: Piety, Politics and the Imperial Succession,” *English Historical Review* 112 (1997), 833-55.

\(^{56}\) “Nos nostris secundum ecclesiasticum usum per orationum et elemosynarum instantiam deposcimus veniam, illi suis per inanium conciliorum conventus exoptant poenam.” *Opus Caroli regis contra synodum* 2.31, ed. A. Freeman, MGH Conc. 2, Suppl. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1998), p. 325. Needless to say, the slandering of the Greeks was somewhat unfair.

although the latter was exceedingly more common.\textsuperscript{58} When Dhuoda wrote her son in the 840s, she warned him of this obligation to remember and assist his departed relatives and benefactors, and bade him fulfill it through alms; that was one of her primary reasons for almsgiving.\textsuperscript{59}

Dhuoda’s admonition implied a continuing relationship, rather than something done only in the immediate aftermath of a loved one’s death. Since the soul was immortal and the process of purgatorial fire increasingly took on a temporal length, it made sense to keep on giving alms for the salvation of the deceased, unless God deigned to assure the living in a vision of the deceased soul’s entrance into eternal beatitude. By the time of Queen Mathilda, who survived her husband, Henry (d. 936), by more than thirty years, a complex array of anniversaries existed for commemorating the dead. She observed eight day, thirty day, and annual sequences of prayer and almsgiving, as well as honoring Henry on every Saturday, the day on which he had died.\textsuperscript{60} Not everyone would have been so observant, or indeed could have been, but customarily a person offered some aid to the dead according to his or her ability.\textsuperscript{61}

This continuity of community straddling the stark boundary of death found its fullest expression in the growing popularity of prayer associations (also called confraternities). Members of these associations combined the old duty of Christians to pray for one another with the growing importance of post-mortem intercession. Many of these compacts included pledges to give alms for the dead as well as prayers. Beginning with local commemoration, usually within a religious

\textsuperscript{58} Also the conclusion from charter evidence in Innes, \textit{State and Society}, 40.

\textsuperscript{59} Dhuoda, \textit{Liber manualis} 8.10-15, pp. 312-22; McLaughlin, \textit{Consorting with Saints}, 213.

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Vita Mathildis reginae posterior} 17, pp. 180-1; see also chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{61} Stephen, \textit{Vita Wilfridi} 65, pp. 140-2; Odilo, \textit{Epitaphium Adelheide} 20, p. 43. Some references in n. 57 undoubtedly include anniversary commemorations. For commemorations arranged formally through monastic houses, see chapter 8. Odilo (writing shortly after 1002) identifies Adelheid’s commemoration of her son in this way as her custom (\textit{consuetudo}) for all \textit{amicorum et familiarium suorum}. He also speaks of the poor recipients of that almsgiving as her \textit{spiritualibus militibus}, a phrase which puts the poor in an active role in accord with the slow reemergence of reciprocal expectations placed upon the poor participant in almsgiving.
community, prayer associations spread outward to bind together regions and people across vast areas from the eighth century onwards. At the synod of Dortmund in 1005, the assembled bishops and secular rulers of the northern Ottonian world pledged that if any of them died, in addition to masses, prayer, and fasting, the king and queen would give 1500 denarii and feed 1500 paupers for the redemption of the deceased’s soul; each bishop would feed 300 poor, give 30 denarii, and provide 30 candles; and Duke Bernhard of Saxony would feed 500 poor and give out 15 solidi in alms. Nonetheless, one can best appreciate the success of this model of fraternal prayer not so much in these massive provisions as in the scattered references to the laity and local clergy in tenth-century England and Francia setting up their own small versions of prayer associations in the form of rural confraternities and guilds. Much about these guilds is obscure, and they may have had purely secular roots, but when a handful of English guilds wrote down their statutes in the tenth and eleventh centuries they unanimously placed care for departed souls through masses and (normally) almsgiving at the center of their work.

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63 Thietmar, Chronicon 6.18, pp. 294-6, apparently quoting the document from the synod.


65 Rosser, “Anglo-Saxon Gilds,” 31. Almsgiving by the community in the form of coins and bread are specifically mentioned in the Cambridge and Abbotsbury guilds: B. Thorpe (ed.), Diplomatarium Anglicum aevi Saxonici: A Collection of English Charters (London: MacMillian, 1865), 605-6, 611 (Rec 27.1 (Thorpe), Rec 9.4 (Thorpe); B16.27.1, B16.9.4). The Bedwyn statute says that thirty days after a guild-brother’s death, members had to provide a certain amount of food (for a guild memorial feast?) and at their meeting contribute 1d per two members for their souls; that latter donation was probably a matter of almsgiving: H. Meritt, “Old English Entries in a Manuscript at Bern,” Journal of English and Germanic Philology 33 (1934), 344-5 (Rec 3 ( Förster); B16.3). The first Exeter statute only specifies masses and psalms for the dead (though the contribution of 5d each to a member going on pilgrimage to Rome might be considered alms of a different kind): Thorpe, Diplomatarium, p. 613 (Rec 10.3 (Thorpe); B16.10.3). For the guild’s secular roots and functions, see Rosser, “Anglo-Saxon Gilds,” 32-3; H-W. Goetz, “Social and Military Institutions,” in
The giver of alms asked God for mercy and blessings. When crisis arrived, almsgiving offered a ready response, in addition to serving as a means of thanksgiving in good times. Charity purified oneself and, when practiced communally, sought to purify and strengthen the community in God’s sight. It could, in theory, overturn temporal miseries and even connect with people beyond the walls of death, pulling society back into a meaningful, ordered, and sacral world.

The connection of almsgiving with crises and the cycle of the year meant that the level of giving rose and fell, but almsgiving existed even at ebb tide. A Christian ought always to show mercy. Hagiography treated daily almsgiving as a matter of course, hardly worth recording for a saint outside of a general list of virtues unless he or she went overboard in some way; it does not appear to have been an exceptionally rare and noteworthy virtue. And most Christians had minor, daily sins that required charity’s cleansing power. Indeed, the personal crisis of guilt, with the consequent desire to repair one’s relationship with God in the sight of oneself and his or her pastor, may have been the most frequent motivation for almsgiving. That is the assumption of most theological tracts, sermons, and penitentials, as well as some histories. The liturgical seasons of penance provided one outlet for the performance of almsgiving, and daily almsgiving provided another for those who wished to take advantage of it, as they were urged to do. Jonas of Orleans, writing in the 820s in response to a request for a manual for lay religion, suggested that his readers who used their marriage “for lust” might expunge their guilt through such daily generosity.


67 In addition to hagiographical examples and exhortations to give without time frames attached, see pseudo-Eligius, Homiliae 13, col. 642; pseudo-Wulfstan, Sammlung 46, 55, pp. 238, 286.

68 Jonas of Orleans, De institutione laicali libri tres 2.1, PL 106, col. 169BC; with possible evidence of implementation in Thietmar, Chronicon 7.74, p. 489.
One can imagine other reasons for the stirrings of a medieval man or woman’s conscience, although in the end not everyone would have given alms throughout the year without the communal pressure of the liturgical season or the impetus of a specific crisis. Nonetheless, there were enough of these times of giving to have had a real effect on the survival of the poor and the spiritual aspirations of any concerned Christian. Successful almsgiving met concrete needs pertaining to the giver, to the community, and to the poor.

3. Charitable Encounters in Space

In addressing the question of when almsgiving occurred, the giver occupied the most prominent place. In the matter of where almsgiving occurred, the matter is more complicated. Sometimes the recipient sought out the giver, sometimes both parties came together at a place where each expected the other, and sometimes they encountered each other by chance. The religious nature of almsgiving affected these encounters, although the boundaries of sacred space did not demarcate the full limits of charity.

As the example of Odo’s Vita Geraldi showed, the poor might seek out potential donors at their house or, in the case of rich aristocrats like Gerald, multiple houses scattered through their lands.\(^69\) The poor, understandably, particularly besieged the palaces of the royalty and the other establishments where a peripatetic king or queen lodged.\(^70\) If no particularly rich person dwelled in the vicinity, the beggar or pauper in need of shelter had to seek out a fire and a crust of bread at


humbler hearths. Indeed, in sparsely populated area or inclement weather, even a moderately important man might be glad of charity in a shepherd’s hovel.\textsuperscript{71}

The custom of distribution from one’s home reached down to the lower levels of society. The sharing of food before breaking one’s fast during liturgical celebrations implies that a variety of Christians sought out the needy in the vicinity of their home, perhaps aiding a neighbor in the village who had fallen on hard times or lay ill.\textsuperscript{72} In addition, both ecclesiastical and royal pronouncements in Francia, supported to an extent by customs of hospitality, asserted that everyone had an obligation to receive the stranger actually into their home.\textsuperscript{73} As Odo and others testify, that expected generosity did not always materialize. Nonetheless, Odo’s complaint that nobles gave alms while refusing the poor entrance, or Jonas’ chastisement of those who charged travelers for “extra” amenities like food, drink, and a place by the fire, both point to customary giving in the space around the home, even if at a lower level than Christian mercy ought to have provided.\textsuperscript{74} People acknowledged a certain social and religious obligation, but sought to draw lines marking off their own lives and limiting the intrusion of the very poor into them.

Churches and monasteries provided an alternate space for the poor and the rich to meet and, indeed, to seek each other out. These religious places had a certain symbolic appropriateness for what was a religious activity. The quality of the space became a silent advocate for the poor, reminding potential givers of their obligations and their own neediness before God. The richer Christians gave their offerings almost within sight of God’s altar. Therefore the poor sought out

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Vita Cuthberti anonymo} 1.6, p. 70; Bede, \textit{Vita sancti Cuthberti} 5, ed. B. Colgrave, in his \textit{Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), pp. 168-70; also Odilo, \textit{Epitaphium Adelheide} 2, p. 31.

\textsuperscript{72} See above, n. 25, 27.

\textsuperscript{73} For a full discussion of hospitality, see chapter 6; here see \textit{Admonitio generalis (789)} 75, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1, (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 60; \textit{Capitulare missorum generale (802)} 27, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1, p. 96; Jonas, \textit{De institutione} 2.29, col. 231; Theodulf, \textit{Capitula I} 25, pp. 122-3.

\textsuperscript{74} Jonas, \textit{De institutione} 2.29, col. 231; Odo, \textit{Vita Geraldi} 1.14, cols. 651-2.
churches and monastic gates to wait for donors, and those Christians who desired to give alms knew they could find willing recipients there. Moreover, the clergy, monks, or nuns provided a reserve source of alms for the poor should lay generosity prove insufficient.\(^7^5\)

Rimbert, in his *Vita Anskarii*, tells one story from the ninth-century Swedish mission of a wealthy convert named Frideburg of Birka, who was “always exerting herself in almsgiving.”\(^7^6\)

She complained that few paupers lived in Birka and so, at her death, dispatched her daughter Catla to take proper eleemosynary care of her soul across the sea in the Frankish trading port of Dorestad, where she could find multitudes of the needy and many churches.\(^7^7\) These two—paupers and churches—were linked. When Catla sought the poor, she made a circuit of holy places because that is where pious women told her to look. Moreover, the churches’ clerics themselves were potential beneficiaries: she gave alms “for the needs of the poor and [God’s] servants.”\(^7^8\) God received alms in both the involuntary poor and the voluntary. Monks received alms at churches they held through guardians appointed to those places, and that seems to have been a regular part of their income.\(^7^9\) Other clergy also would have relied on these offerings by the faithful.


\(^7^6\) “Ipsa vero elemosinis semper intenta…” Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii* 20, p. 45.

\(^7^7\) Archaeological excavation of Dorestad has thus far uncovered only one identified church, although it seems likely that others existed. Rimbert’s story may or may not be faithful to topographical fact, but does reveal expectations about almsgiving. Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, 683-4; see also A. Verhulst, *The Carolingian Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 109-10.

\(^7^8\) “in necessitates pauperum ac servorum illius…” Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii* 20, p. 46. See also chapter 11.

Catla’s story and the presence of paupers at holy places suggests a third spatial context for almsgiving, that of pilgrimage. Odo tells how Gerald took particular care during his journey to Rome to assist those along the way. For many, the cost and uncertainty of a long journey, on which they had no access to money beyond what they carried in their purse, mitigated the pious desire to help others along the way. Indeed, the pilgrim himself or herself often required assistance. However, upon arriving at their destination, pilgrims could decide that a little pious splurging was in order. The biographer of Alfred even described the king’s purpose in visiting holy places as going, “for the sake of prayer and giving alms.” Beggars knew this tendency well and, as pilgrimage sites developed, they lay in wait for the devout to offer alms in thanksgiving or petition. When the translation of relics brought crowds to new sites, beggars followed. In addition, royalty demonstrated their piety and the reach of their resources by sending alms abroad to major pilgrimage sites such as Rome and Jerusalem.

Finally, charity sprang out of chance encounters in the course of quotidian travel and business. Queen Mathilda, in addition to distributing alms wherever she stayed, had a nun, Ricburg, to offer charity to any beggar they met along the way while the queen prayed the psalms or slept. Her hagiographer related this arrangement because of Mathilda’s prophetic ability to snap

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80 Odo, Vita Geraldi 2.17, col. 680.
81 Boniface, Die Briefe 78, p. 169; Capitulare missorum generale (802) 27, p. 96.
82 “Erat enim sedulus sanctorum locorum uiisitator etiam ab infantia, orandi et eleemosynam dandi gratia.” Asser, De rebus gestis Alfredi 74, p. 55. Also Gerhard, Vita Oudalrici 14, p. 404.
84 Einhard, Translatio et miracula SS. Marcellini et Petri 1.12, 1.14, pp. 244-5.
back into consciousness if Ricburg began to daydream and failed to notice a pauper. The actual chance encounter and the petitioning for alms by the beggar was commonplace. A crowd of petitioners probably followed Mathilda as well; her near contemporary, Bishop Ulrich of Augsburg, brought a train of dependent paupers with him as he traveled. Ulrich’s trailing clients were, however, a trait of the tenth century, and not the earlier Carolingian custom.

There were no strict boundaries to where a poor man or woman and a potential almsgiver might meet. Religious spaces stood as a privileged locus for the recipient and giver of alms to seek each other. Travelers and beggars could also approach houses in quest of hospitality, food, or other charity, although not everyone took kindly to having the sanctity of their home violated by introducing a stranger, especially the kind of seedy and smelly one produced by pedestrian travel. However one responded to an encounter with the poor—and some certainly responded charitably—a potential almsgiver had no lack of opportunity to practice Christian precepts towards the needy, whether he sought them out or a beggar sought him.

4. Conclusion

The thread of almsgiving meandered through early medieval society, potentially crossing most people in a rural society at various times, and drawing them together or connecting them to what they believed to be sacred realities. The rhythm of charity played in harmony with the liturgical and agricultural years. In connecting the two, almsgiving asserted a Christian ordering of the world in which all the people ought to participate, and helped to open a portal to divine blessings and protection through almsgiving’s double function as a purifying act and expression of

86 Vita Mathildis reginae posterior 17, pp. 179-80.

87 Odo, Vita Geraldi 1.14, 1.21, 1.28, cols. 652, 655-6, 658; Rimbert, Vita Anskarii 35, pp. 68-9; Vita Sigiramni 24, p. 620.

88 Gerhard, Vita Oudalrici 5-6, pp. 393-4.
mercy imitative of God. Charity’s ability to communicate petitions, penitence, and thanksgiving to God also made it an important tool in times of crisis. Almsgiver and recipient crossed paths in a variety of places. Beggars and travelers might choose to besiege the homes of potential donors or they might go to sacred spaces to wait. The opportunities for discovering a needy person existed, if someone needed to give alms.

The general structure of this giving remained the same from the eighth to the early eleventh century. The roots of these practices no doubt penetrated deeper into the soil of custom as age hallowed them and as the project of further Christianizing society progressed. The great prayer association of 1005 at Dortmund in Thietmar’s account envisioned giving for the dead on a massive scale to an extent unthinkable for the eighth century. Yet Christians gave alms for the dead at both times.

Although clerics emphasized the ability of alms to prompt heavenly rewards from a loving God, almsgiving in common practice served to meet the perils of this life as well. For many laity, the role of alms in the relationship of generalized reciprocity between themselves and God as the controller of weather and natural fertility may well have been paramount in the normal course of their lives. Nonetheless, when a person died or lay dying, Christians quickly turned to alms as an essential aid for the departing soul and a defiant assertion of the possibility of personal bonds surviving the ruptures of death through God’s mercy.

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89 See above, n. 63.
“Let all hear this together then, that it is fitting and necessary for all ranks and ages, that they, persisting in works of almsgiving in accord with their ability, all together help their neighbors in all things which they need in the way that they would wish to be helped if it was needed by them.”1 This injunction by a late Carolingian bishop captures in a nutshell the early medieval vision of almsgiving. This anonymous bishop set his exhortation in the midst of an appeal to love, noting the example of that love set by God’s sending of Jesus for humanity’s salvation, and then turning to the promise of reward for those who followed God in peace and good works. All of these reasons for love boiled down to this: the duty of each and every Christian to care for his neighbor in whatever ways were needed.

While reality naturally fell short of this lofty ideal, this goal of universal giving mattered. Through preaching, synods, written manuals, and personal example, the religious elite tried to remind people of all kinds to give alms and to give in a variety of ways. As this chapter explores, representatives of many different groups did participate in providing charity. The evidence is most problematic for middling and poorer Christians, but they likely joined in almsgiving at a lesser level. Almsgivers gave in a range of ways, among which the sharing of bread constituted the fundamental currency of charity. Churchmen had the greatest difficulty in enforcing charitable

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1 “Omnes vero in commune auscultent, quod omni ordini, atque omni congruit et necessarium est aetati: ut juxta facultatem virium suarum, operibus eleemosynae insistentes, cuncti in omnibus quibus indigent proximi, sic eis subveniant quomodo sibi si necesse fuerit desiderant subveniri.” [pseudo-]Eligius, *Homiliae* 1, PL 87, col. 596AB; see chapter 2.
hospitality, though their repeated efforts and frustrations had the positive effect of leaving better evidence than in the less contested practices. In the end, almsgiving in its various forms worked as a pervasive part of culture, though with some limits.

1. Almsgivers

Einhard, in his life of Charlemagne, boasted that the emperor’s almsgiving was so great, “that the multitude of the poor seemed truly burdensome not only to the palace but even to the kingdom”; not content with this liberality, the king even sent alms abroad to Christians in Jerusalem, Alexandria, Carthage, and Rome. At the same time, churchmen frequently remarked, “not even a poor man is cut off from giving alms”—or from the obligation to do so—as shown in the Gospel stories of the poor widow and Jesus’ promise of reward for offering even a cold cup of water. No Christian could expect God to show mercy to him or her without offering mercy and love to God in his brothers and sisters. Almsgiving was meant to be a universal Christian practice, and the early medieval accounts of it reveal a wide range of lay and clerical participants.

Einhard’s praising of Charlemagne’s generosity pointed to a standard code of behavior for royalty. They were to give. Writers passed down stories of royal almsgiving for a multitude of early medieval kings and emperors, including Charlemagne, Louis the Pious, Charles the Bald,

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3 “Nis nan þearfa fram ælmesdædum ascyre…” Wulstan [pseudo], *Sammlung der ihm zugeschriebenen Homilien nebst Untersuchungen über ihre Echtheit* 55, ed. A. Napier (1883 [repr. Dublin and Zürich: Weidmann, 1965]), p. 287 (HomU 44 (Nap 55); B3.4.44); Lk 21:1-4; Mt 10:42. See chapter 3.
Henry I, Otto I, Otto III, Miesco of Poland, Vladimir of Kiev, Sebbi of Essex, Oswald, Oswine, Edmund of East Anglia, and Alfred. Queens also reportedly gave with great generosity. Many, although not all, of these accounts were nearly contemporary. Both lay and clerical writers expected a good ruler to aid the needy liberally. Indeed, for a ruler actually to stand out via charity, he or his biographer had to adopt one of Einhard’s themes: either the monarch’s largess strained royal coffers, or extended beyond local paupers and travelers to aid the poor in prestigious holy places abroad.

The case of royal almsgiving in this way provides more subtle commentary on the general prevalence of almsgiving among the elite. For royal almsgiving to be admirable, it had to be so lavish that a normal aristocrat could not match it, and preferably extend overseas. Anyone could patronize the poor within their diocese, but a king cared for poor across Christendom. Alfred (d. 899) in England and Pippin (d. 768) in Francia both minted special coins inscribed Elimosina, most

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6 Asser, *De rebus gestis Alfredi* 86, p. 72, also c. 76, pp. 59-60; Einhard, *Vita Karoli* 21, 27, pp. 26, 31-2.
likely for a particular occasion of public almsgiving, such as the dispatch of an offering to Rome.\(^7\) Offa of Mercia (d. 796) struck a coin labeled “S. Petrvs,” also possibly destined for Rome.\(^8\) These kings were making a statement about their status by giving alms in way only they could. This need to find ways of distinguishing royal almsgiving implies a background of normal almsgiving with which the king or queen’s actions had to contrast.

In fact, those desiring to praise the king usually searched for more noteworthy qualities inaccessible to the common man. A number of early medieval reflections on good kingship based themselves on the pseudo-Cyprian *De duodecim abusivis*, which condemned impious kings and listed the requirements for good ones, including almsgiving. When these later reflections abbreviated their source, they often dropped mention of almsgiving to concentrate instead on the major theme of justice.\(^9\) The laudable king distinguished himself by protecting the poor and weak, and ensuring that his officers did so as well.\(^10\) Anyone could give alms—that was unexceptional—but only a truly important person could impose a right and just order on the world.

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\(^10\) Bishops also traditionally had taken this role upon themselves, although they had less power than Carolingian kings in this regard, and much of the ideology consisted of *interceding* on behalf of the poor rather than punishing the wicked themselves. *Capitulare missorum Aquisgranense primum 810* 20, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnische, 1883), p. 154; *Statuta Rispacensia, Frisingensia, Salisburgensia* 14, ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/1 (Hanover: Hahnische, 1906), p. 209; *Vita Mathildis reginae posterior* 4, p. 153; K. Bosl, “*Potens und pauper*: Begriffsgeschichtliche Studien zur gesellschaftlichen Differenzierung im frühen Mittelalter und zum ‘Pauperismus’ des Hochmittelalters,” in his
Turning from the well-documented case of kings, we find the wider background of lay and clerical giving suggested by the royal evidence. Writers throughout the early Middle Ages unsurprisingly expected bishops, abbots, and other leading religious men and women to care for the poor. Few accounts of good pastors failed to include a passing mention of interest in the poor. It should be noted that equally few made charity a primary theme, perhaps because almsgiving was a canonically mandated duty for bishops (and hence routine rather than saintly). Stephen of Ripon (writing between 709 and 730) paid unusual attention to Wilfrid of York’s giving, but did so to


Others: Thietmar, Chronicon 7.35, p. 440; Vita Sigirammi abbatis Longoretensis 7, 24, ed. B. Krusch, MGH SRM 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1902), pp. 610, 820. While individual monks ought not to have had personal wealth to give as alms, in some circumstances they did: Ælfric, CH2 20, p. 194 (B1.2.23); Thietmar, Chronicon 4.36, pp. 173-5; Visio Baronti monachi Longoretensis 13, ed. W. Levison, MGH SRM 5 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1905), p. 387.

suggest that this controversial and domineering figure only desired his substantial power and wealth so that, “an exceedingly wide door opened to him for giving alms on behalf of the Lord to the poor, orphans, widows, and all fettered by infirmity.” Ansgar and Rimbert, the former’s hagiographer and successor to the frontier bishopric of Hamburg-Bremen, appear to have had a genuine and atypically strong interest in almsgiving, which included founding a hospital and making careful provision for aiding those they met while traveling. Their examples of charity coincided with their task of Christianizing a region which Charlemagne had forcibly converted only a few decades before their tenures, which made inculcating basic Christian practice a more pressing matter. Nonetheless, bishops gave outside of mission territory as well, and I suspect that these two bishops’ predilection for charity was enough a part of their personal spirituality that they would have been notable for that aspect of their piety even if their see had lain elsewhere.

The ecclesiastical origins of most early medieval sources inevitably led to a focus on clerics and monks, as well as the undeniably important monarchs; lay, non-royal almsgiving is consequently more obscure to us, but was nonetheless real. Odo’s Vita Geraldi not only provided an innovative blueprint for a lay noble achieving great sanctity in part through almsgiving, but also testified to a larger, normal group of laity, “who send their alms out of their doors.”

13 “large crescebat ei porta aperta elemosinarum pro Domino in pauperes, pupillos ac viduas omnique languore infirmitatis colligatos.” Stephen, Vita Wilfridi 8, pp. 16-8.

14 Rimbert, Vita Anskarii 35, pp. 67-70, see also 19, 20, 30, 41, pp. 41-3, 44-6, 60-3, 75-7; Vita Rimberti 6, 14, 17, 22, pp. 84, 91-2, 95, 99

15 That region of Saxon was finally pacified in 804. Ansgar served from 831-865, and Rimbert from 865-888.

16 e.g. Gerhard, Vita Oudalrici 3-6, 9, 14, 26, pp. 389-6, 404, 411-2. The fact that Rimbert, Anskar’s hagiographer, had a close relationship with the former archbishop makes it more likely that insights into their personal spirituality can be gleaned from these vitae.

Christian lives and the rewards of heaven were not limited to those within cloister walls.\textsuperscript{18} The wave of Carolingian moral tracts aimed at the nobility made clear the benefits of almsgiving to them, and the noble woman Dhuoda’s own advice manual of the 840s for her son and his peers illuminates the reception of these ideals.\textsuperscript{19} Rimbert carefully noted the giving by local elite converts in Sweden, such as Frideburg and Catla, as a marker of their new Christian piety.\textsuperscript{20} Hagiographers might report a devotion to charity by those who would later enter the monastic life, such as Wala of Corbie (d. 836).\textsuperscript{21} Thietmar’s wide-ranging history of Ottonian Germany not only recorded almsgiving at times of death, but also took note of a few aristocratic men and women who made a regular practice of giving alms during their lives for their troubled consciences.\textsuperscript{22} The ample evidence of gifts of land preserved in charters provides evidence for a different kind of almsgiving. Although a clerical writer needed special motivation to note aristocratic charity (which makes certain individual stories less trustworthy), lay nobles had an open invitation to give alms and faced some expectation to imitate their royal counterparts in doing so.

While it is true that the elite gave alms, it is more precise to say that most of the aristocratic almsgivers ordered alms to be given from their wealth. The “better” class of person considered it one thing to discharge an eleemosynary duty and another to have their inferiors cluttering up their


\textsuperscript{20} Rimbert, \textit{Vita Anskarii} 19, 20, pp. 43-6.

\textsuperscript{21} Paschasius Radbertus, \textit{Epitaphium Arsenii} 1.8, ed. E. Dümmler, \textit{Abhandlungen der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Phil-Historische Abhandlung} 2 (1900), p. 32.

\textsuperscript{22} Thietmar, \textit{Chronicon} 1.39, 4.20, pp. 89-90, 154. See also Gerhard, \textit{Vita Oudalrici} 29, p. 424.
dwellings; to personally serve the poor was beyond the pale.\textsuperscript{23} The idea that Christ manifested himself in the poor encouraged belief in the supernatural utility of almsgiving, but only the saints had faith enough to actually see him in a filthy, smelly wreck of a human being or in the poor neighbor down the street. Those who actually touched the poor, like Queen Mathilda, or even supposedly wished to do so, like Louis, the heir of Charlemagne, were presented as marvels to be admired.\textsuperscript{24} One Frankish bishop performed penance by personally touching and washing paupers’ feet, accompanied by almsgiving.\textsuperscript{25} The more regular performance of the mandatum on Holy Thursday was meant as an act of humility.\textsuperscript{26} Even charitably inclined saints, including Gerald, or bishops like Ulrich and Ansgar might decide that direct supervision of almsgiving at mealtime rather than personal service sufficed to express their Christian love.\textsuperscript{27}

Outside of mealtimes, Gerald sometimes distributed coins himself to those he met, and at other times did so through a trustworthy servant.\textsuperscript{28} The latter was the norm for the religious and secular elite. We have already met Mathilda’s designated almsgiver, the nun Ricburg, and the bishops Ulrich, Rimbert, and Ansgar similarly had officials to give alms (although, being saintly, the prelates might also personally step in at times).\textsuperscript{29} Even non-saints—or rather especially non-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} See Odo, \textit{Vita Geraldi} 1.14, col. 652; Paschasius, \textit{Epitaphium Arsenii} 1.10, p. 37.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Notker, \textit{Gesta Karoli} 2.21, p. 91; \textit{Vita Mathildis reginae antiquior} 8, p. 128; \textit{Vita Mathildis reginae posterior} 17, p. 181.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Notker, \textit{Gesta Karoli} 1.21, p. 28.
\item \textsuperscript{26} \textit{The Old English Version of the Enlarged Rule of Chrodegang (Regula canonicorum)} 56, ed. B. Langefeld (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003), p. 289 (ChrodR 1; B10.4.1).
\item \textsuperscript{27} Gerhard, \textit{Vita Oudalrici} 3, p. 390; Odo, \textit{Vita Geraldi} 1.14, cols. 651-2; Rimbert, \textit{Vita Anskarii} 35, p. 69.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Odo, \textit{Vita Geraldi} 1.14, col. 652.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Gerhard, \textit{Vita Oudalrici} 3, p. 390; Rimbert, \textit{Vita Anskarii} 35, p. 69; \textit{Vita Mathildis reginae posterior} 17, pp. 179-80; \textit{Vita Rimberti} 14, p. 92.
\end{itemize}
saints—had servants trusted with money to dole out to the poor. These servants or officials were often called *dispensatores*, although the term could refer to other managers of property or even the bishop’s role as dispenser of the sacraments. Hincmar of Reims, in his treatise on the government of the palace, which probably updated a work from the earlier ninth century, listed the *dispensator* as an officer reporting to the *camerarius* and then to the queen; this could refer to a regularly appointed official whose duty simply consisted of managing royal almsgiving, perhaps derived from *magistri* established by Louis the Pious to handle beggars at Aachen. Carolingian and Ottonian queens did have a good deal of authority in running the royal “domestic” economy, and other elite women probably had parallel roles in their households. It would make sense to have had such an officer dealing with the throngs of beggars trying their luck at the palace doors, and helping the queens care for the well-being of their spouses and the realm through judicious almsgiving from the wealth that they managed.

When writers of the tenth and eleventh centuries describe the deeds of women, they lay particular stress on almsgiving. The claim to sanctity of holy women often lay in charity, alongside prayer and fasting, especially since these good works could be dedicated to aiding their spouses,

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whether through beseeching God for their well being in this life or honoring their memory and aiding their souls after death. The good wife sought to sanctify her husband in this world and the next. In the second half of the Middle Ages, female saints often would appear heavily invested in charity, but in a disruptive way, “squandering” the household resources under their management upon the poor. Traces of this attitude turn up during the tenth century, as in the case of charges brought against Queen Mathilda for mismanagement of royal resources, but on the whole authors viewed almsgiving by women in a positive light and as a standard element of the marital compact. While female charity attracted less attention during the eighth and ninth centuries, women played an important role there as well. When, in the example of Rimbert’s story, the Swedish Catla wanted to give alms for her mother’s soul in Dorestad, she turned to a group of local *religiosas feminas* for guidance.

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37 *Vita Mathildis reginae antiquior* 5, pp. 122-3; *Vita Mathildis reginae posterior* 11, p. 167.

38 Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii* 20, p. 45. See also the example of Dhuoda, and *Annales Bertiniani* a. 869, p. 156; Rudolf, *Vita Leobae* 11, 12, pp. 126-7.
2. The Social Spectrum of Almsgivers

Everyone had an obligation to give alms, even those quite far down the social ladder. Unfortunately, there was a distinct lack of peasant saints in the early Middle Ages whose vitae might shed additional light on the subject, and annalists were not much interested in recording whether one of the king’s tenants shared a loaf of bread with a passing stranger. The lay elite’s daily religious practices were recorded by our clerical authors only in exceptional circumstances outside of normative sources, with average performance revealed in oblique hints such as the discernible presence of officials tasked to carry out almsgiving on their superiors’ behalf or the chiding of the normal aristocrat for just sending alms out of their doors without encountering the poor. The sources serve the non-elite lay members of society even more poorly. Nonetheless, there are hints that the normative sources described reality. In particular, a careful consideration of the norms of almsgiving and our information about peasant society show a large group of people able to give in the required manner and who had motive to do so. In the absence of contradictory evidence, this leads to the conclusion that many most likely participated in almsgiving.

Through preaching, clerical example, and the experience of publicly organized petitionary almsgiving in times of famine or war, the poorer members of society had opportunity to learn about the practice of charity.\(^\text{39}\) In organizing itself to promote the regular practice of almsgiving during the quattuor tempora, the Bavarian church reminded its priests to set a good example for the flock and to guide the laity peacefully in following it: “Let no one be forced but rather invited to [almsgiving] and, out of his own free belief, strive to give, each according to his strength; for God does not examine how much is bestowed, but rather with what kind of will.”\(^\text{40}\) In addition, the

\(^{39}\) See chapters 2 and 5; and e.g. Concilium Baiuwaricum, a. 740-750 7, ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1906), p. 52; Theodulf of Orleans, Erstes Kapitular / Capitula I 25, ed. P. Brommer, MGH Capit. episc. 1 (Hanover: Hannsche, 1984), pp. 122-3; [pseudo]Wulfstan, Sammlung 46, 55, pp. 238, 287 (HomÜ 37, 44 (Nap 46, 55); B3.4.37, B3.4.44); cf. Ælfric, CH 19, p. 187 (B1.2.22).

\(^{40}\) “Et hoc invitus neque coactus nemo faciat, sed spontane iudicio unusquisque iuxta vires suas inpertire studeat, quia non requiret Deus quantum, sed qua quanta volunate proferatur…” [emphasis mine]. Statuta Rispacensia, Frisingensia, Salisburgensia 4, 207-8.
advice tracts written for the formation of the lay elite may have reached the top level of the peasantry. Ambrosius Autpert addressed heads of households who had people “under them” (probably non-kin familia such as slaves) and who worried about whether they had enough resources to feed both this group and the poor. These members of his audience are obviously people of substance, able to support dependents, but not of vast wealth. Ambrosius urged daily almsgiving in this tract, and responded to the concerns of those of his readers who feared this was too much by suggesting that almsgiving was still possible even if the quantity was lesser, provided that they cultivated a merciful attitude. The formation of local, rural prayer guilds that probably gave alms for a member’s death points to the successful diffusion of these ideals to at least the upper class of peasants. On rare occasions one can also find stories of aristocrats being forced to rely on the generosity of a poor man for food or shelter.

The concerns of Ambrosius’ audience raise the question of who had the ability to give and how much they could give. The social ladder in the early Middle Ages was peculiarly ill-defined despite a strong contemporary belief in the importance of order and hierarchy. There was no legal definition of the aristocracy, and to the best of our knowledge wealth (based on land holdings) ran


42 Some religious guilds were clearly heavily aristocratic (albeit the minor aristocracy): B. Thorpe (ed.), Diplomatarium Anglicum aevi Saxonici: A Collection of English Charters (London: MacMillian, 1865), pp. 610-3 (Rec 9.4 (Thorpe); B16.9.4); but others apparently included the local elite as full members and others at a lesser level: Thorpe, Diplomatarium, pp. 606, 613 (Rec 27.1 (Thorpe), Rec 10.3 (Thorpe); B16.27.1, B16.10.3). A late eleventh-century guild statute mentions fourteen additional guilds that apparently existed on the very local village level: Thorpe, Diplomatarium, pp. 608-10 (Rec 10.2 (Hickes); B16.10.2). These hints lead to the conclusion that the guilds certainly included the lowest levels of the elite and most likely extended further down the social scale (though sometimes giving the non-elites a socially-appropriate lesser standing in the guild): G. Rosser, “The Anglo-Saxon Guilds,” in Minsters and Parish Churches: The Local Church in Transition 950-1200, ed. J. Blair (Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1988), 31. For the poorly documented Frankish situation, see J. Smith, “Religion and Lay Society,” in New Cambridge Medieval History, vol. 2, ed. R. McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 676-7.

43 Bede, Vita Cuthberti 5, p. 168; Odilo, Epitaphium Adelheide 2, p. 31.
across a continuous spectrum of amounts without any sharp delimitations between levels.\footnote{H. Fichtenau, \textit{Living in the Tenth Century: Mentalities and Social Orders}, trans. P. Geary (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991 [German 1984]), 135-56; W. Goetz, “Social and Military Institutions,” in \textit{New Cambridge Medieval History}, vol. 2, ed. R. McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 452-8; C. Dyer, \textit{Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain, 850-1520} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 26-35, 50-8; C. Wickham, \textit{Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 153-258 passim; J-P. Devroey, \textit{Puissants et misérables: Système social et monde paysan dans l’Europe des Francs (VIe-IIXe siècles)} (Brussels: Académie royale de Belgique, 2006), 21-46, 203-64, esp. 216-9.} One could argue about whether a locally important man with substantial land and unfree dependents, and who contributed military service was a rich peasant or an aristocrat, but he definitely belonged to the class of people who could easily give alms and who aspired to earn the admiration of their peers.\footnote{In her micro-history of Breton society, Wendy Davies calls the average land donors “rich peasants” while Warren Brown, in his study of roughly contemporary Bavaria, speaks of “minor aristocrats,” but the two groups are extraordinarily similar: W. Davies, \textit{Small Worlds: The Village Community in Early Medieval Brittany} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); W. Brown, \textit{Unjust Seizure: Conflict, Interest and Authority in an Early Medieval Society} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). This ambiguity caused medieval elite anxiety, and perhaps a large part of the attraction of holding royally-appointed offices (\textit{honores}) was its clear mark of social status: see Noble, “Secular Sanctity,” 21-4.} Rural society included a wide range of non-elites below them, all of whom might be called “poor”: peasants who regularly produced a large surplus and comfortably supported their family and other dependents; small proprietors and tenants (free and servile) with varying degrees of economic stability; households who struggled even in a normal year to make ends meet; and those who could only stay on their land if others assisted them.\footnote{Fichtenau, \textit{Living in the Tenth Century}, 333-78, esp. 346-7, 361-3; Goetz, “Social and Military,” 458-66, 476-7; Dyer, \textit{Making a Living}, 35-42; Wickham, \textit{Framing}, 442-518 passim; Devroey, \textit{Puissants et misérables}, 203-12, 265-517, esp. 485-7.}

Obviously, “poor” almsgivers had quite different abilities to give charity. It is crucial to keep in mind what churchmen expected of these almsgivers. Since alms technically could consist of such things as offering a glass of cold water or forgiving someone who injured you, then even the poorest peasant could participate in almsgiving in the broadest sense of the word.\footnote{See chapter 2.} Churchmen actually expected more out of poor almsgivers, but not much more. It was the rich who had the
most pressing duty to give alms, even if the call to give was universal. While certain writings, especially the treatises on the virtues and vices aimed at the aristocracy, emphasized the benefits of daily almsgiving, the normal cycle of almsgiving sketched in the previous chapter was much more limited. To be a good Christian, the non-elite members of society had only to try to give about five times per year (the quattuor tempora and Rogationtide, though more frequent Lenten giving was desirable) and on the death of a family member. No amount was specified. Half a loaf of bread given with a good will sufficed. It is hard to believe that even the poorer households found their material situation a bar to participating in charity at that level. Many peasants were capable of doing much more and, at a reasonable guess, different peasants gave at different frequencies, depending on their personal piety and sense of social stature in their local community (or hope of increasing that stature).

Logically, alms could not be given unless there was a population to take on the recipient’s role, and there must have been a stratum of the very poor who did not give unless they managed to rise in the world. This included beggars and probably the poorest level of farmers. In addition, others lacked control over wealth to give, even if they were not regular recipients of charity: children, household slaves (in contrast to serfs), and the religious poor (though they gave as a community).

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49 On poverty and social mobility, see chapter 9. As noted in that chapter, the lower strata of society probably included people who switched between the role of benefactor and recipient depending on changing life circumstances and whether a truly elite benefactor was present (when Queen Mathilda rode through town tossing out free lunches and especially coins, there was surely no shame in accepting royal beneficence).

50 The degree of personal wealth of minor members of the aristocratic or royal household without land of their own is mysterious, and assuming they had enough discretionary wealth to give alms regularly, they may have been content with distributing alms on behalf of their lord. Did dispensatores also give alms from their own possessions? We simply do not know.
The reformers of the eighth and ninth centuries placed more emphasis on the universal call for all to participate in a community of love than the practical difficulties of the very poor in the giving of alms. Their theology focused on cultivating merciful attitudes, and assumed the poor would find some way of being kind to others even if they had little material wealth to share. As such, writers rarely addressed the *de facto* exclusion of the absolutely destitute from material almsgiving or the fairly poor from daily almsgiving, unless their occasional revival of the idea that the poor might find salvation through patient endurance was meant to address this problem by offering a path of following Christ parallel to that of more prosperous citizens’ almsgiving.51

There are hints in the tenth century that this pastoral problem was beginning to intrude on the clerical consciousness as the push towards creating a virtuous, unified Christian people lost steam. One possible response lay in elaborating on how a poor man might find something to give. A tenth-century English text from the Vercelli book briefly departed from its Latin source to address precisely this issue: “We know, dearly beloved, that there are many on earth who are so poor that they hardly know what one might give to another, since they have but little for themselves to give.”52 This author’s solution lay in Isaiah’s admonition to break one’s bread with the poor; surely, he thought, everyone could at least share part of their meal with another on occasion. The Christian call to give embraced both rich and poor, which the homily emphasized while simultaneously indicating the unease some apparently felt about the latter’s ability to answer that call.

The other possibility lay in admitting that a group of people existed who could not give: “However, not all people can do this [i.e. give alms], but those must do it to whom God has entrusted this world; and therefore he gives earthly fortune to that one, so that he should help the

51 See chapter 3; e.g. Alcuin, *De virtutibus* 17, col. 625C.

52 “& mænig ys on eorðan we witon, men þa leofestan, swa earm þæt he wat lýt hwæt he oðerum sylle, þonne he him sylfum næfð butan lytel to donne.” *Vercelli Homilies* hom. 21, p. 352.
A tenth-century tendency began to emerge which pressed the rich to give abundantly, the middling sorts to be content with their wealth and to give small tokens to the poor as they were able, and the truly poor (equated with those asking for alms) to bear their burdens patiently, trusting in God and not falling into sin. Here the poor are perceived as beggars (including those for whom begging supplemented shortfalls in their regular income, but did not replace it), the middling as farmers trying to make ends meet, and the rich as a relatively wide category encompassing those with economic security. Each had his or her proper path to salvation. All, however, still participated in almsgiving, some as givers (daily or occasional) and some only as recipients.

If the means to give alms as commanded were widespread, though not universal, did the peasantry have the will to put that means into effect? Poor people had as much or more reason to want to enjoy eternal happiness as their rich counterparts, and our normative sources certainly dangled the heavenly carrot in front of the general Christian populace. The perception of the pagan Swedes, as portrayed in Rimbert’s *Vita Anskarii*, was that the basic acts pleasing to the Christian God consisted of fasting and almsgiving; it is not unreasonable to suppose that Christian peasants also might have wanted God’s favor.

Like Rimbert’s pagans, whose interest lay in Christ’s ability to extricate them from sticky military situations, the average Christian peasant cared about the divine ability to help with worldly

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53 “Ne magon þis þeah ealle men don, ac hit sceolan don þa þe God þas world to forlæten hælf; & forbon þe he him world-speda syleb, þæt hi þæs earman helpan sceolan.” *Blickling Homilies* 3, pp. 37-9 (HomS 10 (BIHom 3); B3.2.10), but cf. the traditional dogma of all giving in hom. 6, p. 73 (HomS 21 (BIHom 6); B3.2.21).


55 On the working poor resorting to begging, see chapter 9.

56 Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii* 19, 30, pp. 42-4, 60-3; see also chapter 2.
concerns. Insofar as peasants became convinced that the Christian God had power over nature, they had a strong present interest in gaining his aid. Everyone engaged in agriculture, with its wide natural vicissitudes, needed supernatural crop insurance, and the premiums paid through almsgiving were really very cheap for the poor. They had only to share a fraction of their own meal half a dozen times over the course of a year. Since the poor lacked large grain reserves, this kind of insurance was especially useful for them. Moreover, they received eternal benefits in heaven as well. If a poor peasant believed in Christianity, he would have had to be an idiot not to participate in almsgiving.

Beyond these personal benefits, the poorer members of society almost certainly did care about some of their neighbors and tried to help them. In modern times, when statistical work becomes possible, the working class often has given more than the upper class. Sharon Farmer’s exploration of poverty in thirteenth-century Paris (through the medium of inquests into the post-mortem miracles of Louis IX) revealed networks of concern among the poor, especially those crippled or ill, although not enough in the cases studied to prevent a resort to begging as well as mutual aid. The same held true during the early Middle Ages. Occasional stories from collections of miracles concerning saints’ relics offer unexpected insights into how the relatively poor helped each other survive. We learn in Saxony of a blind woman, Ikkia, whose friend gently badgered her into seeking a cure at the tomb of Saint Willehad at Bremen. The healthy woman

57 See chapter 5; also Theodulf, Capitula I 35, p. 133.


assisted her friend to the shrine, where Ikkia miraculously received the desired cure.61 Another Saxon woman, who was crippled, and her blind daughter were carried to the shrine by relatives and neighbors.62 One can find similar stories in other miracle collections, like Bernard’s early eleventh-century account for Saint Foy’s shrine in southern France, in which villagers carry the crippled or blind to where they can seek aid.63 These acts were “almsgiving” in the broad sense of the word, but they are more significant for showing a willingness to show mercy to others.64 In each case, we glimpse a local ethos of what has been termed mutual aid or horizontal almsgiving.

This willingness of local people to serve some of their neighbors only intruded on the written record because of the subsequent claims of a miracle. Other forms of aid to those neighbors in difficulty only can be assumed, but there is no reason to doubt that a middling or poor friend would share bread with a more needy acquaintance as well as a pair of eyes or a strong back. Ikkia is said to have survived her disability for seven years before being cured, and similar claims are made for other beneficiaries; someone must have aided them.65 Chris Wickham, in his economic history of the early Middle Ages, hypothesized the dominance of a “peasant mode of production” in which surpluses were shared for social stature and communal solidarity instead of being sold.66 Such an economic system could also simply be called regular horizontal almsgiving. This is not to say that people automatically banded together simply because they were poor or lived

61 Ansgar, Miracula s. Willehadi 9, AASS Nov. 8, col. 849AB.
62 Ansgar, Miracula s. Willehadi 5, col. 848DE.
64 Hrabanus Maurus, Commentariorum in Ecclesiasticum libri decem 1.14, PL 109, col. 783CD; Ælfric, CH2 6, p. 58 (B1.2.7) (but note the Gregorian source for Ælfric).
65 Ansgar, Miracula s. Willehadi 9, col. 849A.
66 Wickham, Framing the Middle Ages, 535-551, 558, 570-8.
in the same area. Greed, rivalries, and petty grudges must have been commonplace; but so was extending a generous hand to the community or to some specific friends within it.

For non-elite members of society, almsgiving constituted an obligation that they could meet. The amount of giving varied according to wealth and personal preference, but, in light of the very small amounts that a poor Christian was told to give, a very large group of the peasantry had the ability to give before high holy days and upon the death of family. For even a quite poor peasant, investing a couple loaves of bread in order to receive fair farming weather as well as eternal life would have been a very good deal. The instances of mutual aid in miracle stories indicate the bonds of care and willingness to help a friend that one would expect to exist at the village level. The poor had the means and the motive to give; the rest only can be assumed.

3. Almsgifts

The judgment scene in the Gospel of Matthew laid out the works of mercy that the saved performed and the damned failed to carry out: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, sheltering the guest, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and coming to the prisoner. This list offered a ready-made way to discuss almsgiving, and medieval writers used it as such, but in truth this exhortation from a distant antique land did not fully express what early medieval Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Christians actually gave.\textsuperscript{67} Food, hospitality, and clothing remained eleemosynary staples, and charity also took other forms such as ransoming captives and increasingly the donation of coins.

The basic currency of almsgiving was food and specifically bread.\textsuperscript{68} The poor needed food on a daily basis more than anything else, and those giving could spare part of their bread better than


\textsuperscript{68} Ælfric, \textit{CH2} 29, p. 258 (B1.2.32); Alcuin, \textit{De virtutibus} 17, col. 626B; Bede, \textit{Vita Cuthberti} 5, p. 168; Blickling Homilies 3, 4, pp. 37, 41 (HomS 10, 14 (BIHom 3, 4); B3.2.10, B3.2.14); Odo, \textit{Vita Geraldii} 1.14,
scarcer objects, like clothes or coins. The liturgical idea of breaking one’s bread with the poor when breaking one’s fast had a very practical, literal meaning. By fasting, a person set aside a means for aiding his or her neighbor who might be involuntarily fasting. Almsgiving could include other forms of food and drink as well, and Mathilda’s hagiographer praised her for feeding the poor not only with staple bread, but even with food of royal quality. The leftovers from aristocratic feasting likely benefited some beggars, along with the elite’s servants.

Hospitality offers a special case in charity for a number of reasons. Since exhortations to practice it liberally met more resistance than other forms of almsgiving, early medieval writers wrote more about it. The evidence for it is considered in a separate section below.

The fourth work of mercy, clothing the naked, occurred less often; clothing after all cost more than a loaf of bread. Even in the case of the charitable bishop, Ulrich of Augsburg, his hagiographer only reported him giving away clothing at the Holy Thursday mandatum. Bishops and aristocrats, like Odo’s Gerald, had the means to give away clothing occasionally, and so some paupers managed to change their rags for someone else’s discarded clothes (or perhaps even new). The regularity of such gifts remains uncertain. Of course, even a well-used tunic would aid a pauper much longer than the more frequently given loaf of bread.


70 _Vita Mathildis reginae antiquior_ 8, p. 128; see also Gerhard, _Vita Oudalrici_ 3, pp. 389-90; Odo, _Vita Geraldii_ 1.15, col. 652D; _Vita Mathildis reginae posterior_ 17, p. 179.

71 See also _Blickling Homilies_ 4, p. 53.

72 Gerhard, _Vita Oudalrici_ 4, p. 392.

73 Odo, _Vita Geraldii_ 1.14, 1.28, cols. 652, 658; also Ælfric, _CH2_ 29, p. 258; Ambrosius Autpertus, _Expositio in Apocalypsin_ 2.3.1-2, ed. R. Weber, CCCM 27-27A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1975), pp. 158-9; Bede,
A number of sources refer to donations to the poor in terms of money (usually denarii). Normally one cannot know if actual coins were changing hands or if denarii simply functioned as estimates of value rather than physical objects. That being said, from the second half of the ninth century onwards, a number of sources clearly make reference to coins being carried around in a purse and distributed. The convenience of a small sack of silver pieces over a wagonload of bread is obvious, and it is no coincidence that most of the stories involving identifiable coinage occur in the context of travel.\(^75\) This trend reflected increasing economic growth, but also the importance placed by some on always having access to a means of giving.

Almsgiving was, as Bede suggested, a broad category.\(^76\) It encompassed even small acts of mercy, like forgiving another’s sins. It also included several more substantial acts, which due to their nature or cost occurred less frequently. Several sources mention the ransom of captives, which had been a popular charitable activity in Late Antiquity as the Roman Empire gave way to warring barbarian peoples.\(^77\) Archbishop Rimbert, living along the dangerous northeastern frontier of Christendom, supposedly sold church plate for ransom (like Augustine and Caesarius of Arles in antiquity), and performed a miracle in one case to stop Christian slave traders from selling their co-

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\(^74\) Except for the regular donations of used clothes by monasteries discussed below, chapters 7 and 8.


\(^76\) Bede, *In Lucae* 4.11.41, p. 241; see chapter 3.

religionists in pagan Denmark. Another possible but rare form of almsgiving was the gift of livestock in alms. Ulrich’s successor built a bridge over the Lech and allowed free passage as almsgiving. The gifts of land to the church are well known. Aristocrats sometimes, along with land, gave slaves to a monastery as alms; ironically, the gift was not given to the less fortunate, but rather the less fortunate were the gift. Almsgiving truly could take a variety of forms. Among them, the provision of food stood out. And shelter sometimes came with it.

4. Hospitality, a Case Study

Of the six works in the Gospel of Matthew, the provision of hospitality, as Jonas of Orleans wrote, “is among Christians the outstanding and most distinguished work of mercy.” Since almsgiving included any work of mercy, and most especially those of Matthew, writers assumed that it included hospitality: “For not only those who give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, hospitality to those traveling, and the other things of this nature, but


79 Stephen, Vita Wilfridi 65, pp. 141-2; Rimbert, Vita Anskarii 35, p. 69.

80 Gerhard, Vita Oudalrici 28, p. 417.

81 Although, in theory, a slave’s sustenance was much more assured than that of a beggar, so perhaps slaves were not the least fortunate. Württembergischen Urkundenbuch Online 6.NC, http://www.wubonline.de/ (Landesarchivs Baden-Württemberg, 2008 [repr. and updated from Wirtembergische Urkundenbuch, 11 vols., 1849-1913]), pp. 498-9.

also those who grant pardon to sinners give alms,” as Bede wrote.\(^{83}\) When Dhuoda urged her son to good works, she similarly sandwiched the injunction to provide travelers with hospitality in between admonitions to be a helper to the poor and to lend a friendly hand to widows and orphans.\(^{84}\)

Hospitality nevertheless had a special relationship with almsgiving. The Bible often mentioned hospitality next to charity, as though it were a parallel category instead of a subordinate one (Rom 12:13; Heb 13:1; 1 Pt 4:9). One eighth-century collection of patristic and biblical quotations put excerpts related to hospitality in a distinct subsection from other forms of charity, but included there passages normally associated with almsgiving (Lk 6:38; 2 Cor 9:7).\(^{85}\) Nonetheless, no early medieval theologian really explored this potential base for distinguishing hospitality from almsgiving.\(^{86}\)

Hospitality could constitute a separate category of thought in a different respect. Hospitality was also a secular custom, aspects of which predated Christian conversion, and a legal obligation owed to one’s superior and his officers.\(^{87}\) The legal duty owed a lord had little or no

\(^{83}\) “Non solum enim qui dat esurienti cibum sitienti potum nudo uestimentum peregrinanti hospitium et cetera huiusmodi uerum etiam qui dat ueniam peccanti elemosinam dat.” Bede, *In Lucae 4.11.41*, p. 241. See also Ambrosius, *De cupiditate* 15, p. 979; Hrabanus Maurus, *De institutione clericorum* 2.28, p. 372.

\(^{84}\) Dhuoda, *Liber manualis* 4.8, p. 236.


\(^{86}\) Except perhaps in one ninth-century Frankish penitential whose language could be understood as meaning that almsgiving (presumably of food) was part of hospitality but that the two were not precisely equivalent: “Quicumque hospitem non recipit in domum suam sicut Dominus precepit et regna caelorum promittit, ubi dicit: Venite bendici Patris mei, percipite regnum, quantum tempus hospites non recepit et mandata evangelica non implevit, nec pedes pauperum lavavit nec elemosinam fecit, tanto tempore peniteat in pane et aqua si non emendat.” *Paenitentiale pseudo-Theodori* 19.4, ed. C. van Rhijn. CCSL 156B (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), p. 54.

connection with charitable hospitality. Customary hospitality was also of a different nature, although the situation there is more complex. This kind of hospitality was often highly regulated (though much less so in early medieval Francia than the British Isles). It focused especially on kin and friends, though hospitality by the elites certainly could extend beyond their peer group to the poor. This kind of hospitality revolved around honor and creating or solidifying social ties with specific individuals. In contrast, charitable hospitality worked with ideals of mercy and of community with the whole of society. The poor traveler was privileged in its discussions, not elite ones. Nonetheless, there was some overlap on the practical level of honoring those who opened their homes freely to travelers in need, and Christian preachers no doubt tried to tap into these commonalities.

The strength of this native custom of hospitality should not be exaggerated. The stranger was potentially an enemy, thief, or disruptive force within the hosting household. When Cuthbert traveled the missionary territory of rural northern England at the end of the seventh century, according to his vitae, he had a habit of relying on God to provide him with food and shelter. In


88 Gautier, “Hospitality,” 23-7; generally on Anglo-Saxon hospitality, see also A. Hagen, A Second Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink: Production and Distribution (Hockwold-cum-Wilton: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1995), 342-5. Research on Carolingian hospitality has focused on the king and legal obligation (see previous note), but probably fit this general pattern, albeit with considerable minimal regulation in customary law. The Irish example is better documented, though it is likely hospitality was more developed there (including the insistence that people of all classes be received): K. Simms, “Guesting and Feasting in Gaelic Ireland,” Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland 108 (1978), 67-100; F. Kelly, A Guide to Early Irish Law (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), 36-8, 139-40; O’Sullivan, Hospitality in Medieval Ireland (2004), passim.


part this reflected an old topos of the harmony between Christian ascetic and nature, and a general affirmation of God’s ability to care for his devotees (a matter of some importance in an area where conversion was still a concern). It also reflected problems in hospitality. On one case, when Cuthbert and a boy journeyed through the region of the Teviot River and were still a long ways from their destination, the saint asked his companion where they might find a midday meal. The boy responded, “that he knew nobody on the way related to them, and he did not hope for any kind of mercy from unknown strangers.” There indeed was a pessimistic appraisal of hospitable possibilities in a relatively traditional society.

Medieval notions of hospitality thus were not confined to the orbit of eleemosynary acts, but rather fell on a spectrum of meanings ranging from a fixed due, equivalent to a rent or tax, to charitable care of the poor. Outside of legal texts and grants of immunity from exactions of hospitality, most references in our surviving sources fall squarely into the eleemosynary end of the spectrum. When churchmen discussed the general Christian duty to provide hospitality, they viewed it through the lens of mercy and their favorite scriptural passages on almsgiving.

Hospitality was a facet of almsgiving that provoked resistance. As the example of Odo’s *Vita Geraldi* informed us earlier, a number of lay elite almsgivers drew the line at admitting the needy into their homes. It threatened personal space and social boundaries, as well as doubtlessly inviting occasional acts of larceny. At the same time, Christ had clearly listed hospitality among

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92 Odo, *Vita Geraldi* 1.14, col. 652A; see chapter 5.
the great works of mercy upon which a soul’s fate depended. The intimacy of welcoming the poor traveler into one’s home as commanded testified both to the unity of the Christian family of all social classes and to the belief that Christ’s body was present in his poor members. The imperfect provision for caring for paupers in a permanent location, the growing numbers of pilgrims, and the perils of damp, chill winter weather made aiding the peripatetic poor a priority. This clash of values inevitably created controversy, a few traces of which still survive.

The injunction to offer Christian hospitality had royal backing, and the evolution of those royal pronouncements sketches a picture of aspiration and reality. In his 789 Admonitio generalis, which aimed to order his realm along just, Christian lines with special reference to the clergy, Charlemagne ordered, “for everyone, it seems appropriate to us and traditional, that guests, travelers, and the poor enjoy a regular and lawful reception throughout many places.” When he became emperor, he renewed this command for everyone through his instructions for his traveling officers (missi) in 802:

And we order that in all our realm no one dare to refuse hospitality, neither to the rich nor to the poor nor to peregrinis; that is, let no one deny a roof, fire, and water to someone, whether peregrinis wandering the earth for God or anyone journeying for love of God and the salvation of their soul. Moreover, if anyone wishes to do them more good, let him expect the best of repayment from God.

Charlemagne backed both of these capitulary commands with appropriate scriptural quotations, clearly locating these injunctions as part of his program of imperial religious renewal.

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93 “Omnibus. Et hoc nobis competens et venerabile videtur, ut hospites, peregrini et pauperes susceptiones regulares et canonicas per loca diversa habeant.” Admonitio generalis (789) 75, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1, (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 60. In context, especially with the reference to canonical reception, Charlemagne may have primarily intended this mandate for the clergy and religious, but this is uncertain (his 802 decree clearly targeted all his subjects). Compare the ambiguous target of the earlier Concilium Baiuvaricum a. 740-750 15, p. 53 (“Ut peregrinos et hospites in domos suas recipiant”).

94 “Precipimusque ut in omni regno nostro neque divitibus neque pauperibus neque peregrinis nemo hospitium denegare audeat, id est sive peregrinis propter Deum perambulantibus terram sive cuilibet iteranti propter amorem Dei et propter salutem animae suae tectum et focum et aquam illi nemo deneget. Si autem amplius eis aliquid boni facere voluerit, a Deo sibi sciat retributionem optimam.” Capitulare missorum generale (802) 27, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1, p. 96.
It is, however, the differences between the two that are suggestive. In his second, general decree, Charlemagne chose to offer two explanatory specifications. First, he defined the third group of recipients, the *peregrini*, as including both pilgrims and those permanently wandering for God, who presumably were the kind of non-cloistered ascetics among which some Irish monks are most famous.\(^95\) Since almost everyone fell under the categories of rich or poor, his addition of *peregrini* as a separate group is at first puzzling. One solution is to suggest that Charlemagne hoped for universal hospitality, but by singling out *peregrini* for special treatment, he implicitly set a lower standard for those who resisted; someone unwilling to receive the common tramp might still receive a traveler dedicated to God. A rather different solution is that Charlemagne’s target audience had been discriminating previously against either of the two groups of *peregrini*. One could see a Christian refusing to assist an unstable gyrovague who flaunted his disregard of the growing norm of stability and simply did not look like the monks at the local monastery.\(^96\) Alternatively, a Christian might have preferred to help an ascetic holy man rather than some peasant off to visit a tomb. Each solution has a common thread: potential hosts did not embrace a gratuitous sense of hospitality for all kinds of people.

The second noteworthy aspect of Charlemagne’s 802 decree was the limitation of what the host had to provide to shelter, warmth, and water, with the hope that he would do more. This provision carries the ring of compromise. Universal hospitality was a tough sell, and this made it easier. A spot under a roof, sharing in the household’s fire, and water all came cheap. Anyone who owned a house could offer that much.\(^97\) The difference between that kind of treatment and

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\(^95\) On defining *peregrini*, see chapter 9; while “traveler” is more normally meant, here Charlemagne used it in a more precise sense.


\(^97\) Given the area of early medieval Europe still forested and contemporary settlement patterns, fuel ought to have relatively easy to gather, though this was the most likely item of the three to be problematic.
what a more important guest might expect also incidentally preserved markers of social status.

That Charlemagne, however, so precisely defined hospitality and hoped his definition would be exceeded implies some resistance to the Christian ideal.

It is not clear that Charlemagne’s solution enjoyed extensive success. While moralists and homilists continued to remind ordinary Christians of their charitable obligation to hospitality, subsequent legislation on the subject focused almost exclusively on bishops, priests, and religious houses. It may be that kings and bishops felt it inappropriate to demand as a duty what ought to be a free gift of mercy, but the difficulties in extracting free hospitality from everyone probably convinced those in charge that concentrating on church institutions offered more promising results.98

Our most detailed description of hospitality and its abuse comes from two ninth-century bishops of Orleans. Theodulf devoted a chapter of his diocesan statutes to this issue:

The [laity] are to be admonished that they love hospitality and not refuse to receive any guest. If they have offered hospitality to someone, they should accept no reward from them unless, perhaps, the one being received gives something freely. … Let them know full well that whoever loves hospitality, he receives Christ in his guests. For that kind of hospitality is not only unfeeling but even cruel, in which a guest is never received into the house, unless first the cost of providing hospitality is paid. And so what God ordered to be done on account of the heavenly kingdom’s command, [instead] is done to acquire worldly things.99

98 On the importance and limits of hospitals, see chapter 7; but note the church was still imperfect in its provision of hospitality: e.g. *Concilium Aquisgranense, a. 836 (?)* 3, ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/2 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1908), p. 707.

When Jonas of Orleans wrote his religious manual for the nobility in the 820s, the problem had not improved despite Theodulf’s tutelage. His rather extensive barrage of patristic and biblical admonitions on hospitality began with his complaint about current practice:

> Although hospitality is recalled briefly in the Gospel among the six works of mercy, nevertheless it remains necessary to collect fuller testimony in this chapter on account of those who neglect it. … Hospitality, which is among Christians a worthy and most distinguished work of mercy, is so neglected by many that the great glory of Christianity is blackened on their part in this, as in many other things. For it is held of little account by certain people to such an extent that they have large and spacious houses, and scarcely deign to receive a traveler under their roof, or rather, Christ in the traveler, who says in the Gospel: “I was a guest, and you welcomed me.” But they do not receive into their homes those arriving in need of shelter, unless first it is agreed in a suitable pact what they ought to give for a space on the floor, what for each dish, what for lighting a fire, and innumerable other things which they might use. But if it happens that without this pact they seem to receive them at first charmingly and with service of a simulated love, they bother them afterwards with such weariness, so that by no means might the [guests] rest until the [hosts] compel them to give that which they greedily extort from them. Such a deed is so abhorrent to Christian religion that anyone who falls into this crime may be a disciple of Christ in name, but is not one in deed. … With what confidence can one await the day of judgment who has refused to receive Christ in his guests?"  

The invocation of Matthew 25—Christ’s self-identification with the traveler—puts their admonitions in the charitable register and presumably included rich and poor travelers, as in Charlemagne’s injunction.  

100 “…for each person” may instead be “for [a space on the] floor.” “Quanquam hospitalitas intra sex opera misericordiae breviter in Evangelio commemorata sit, necessario tamen in hoc capitulo propter quosdam qui eam negligent, prolixiora testimonia colligenda restant. … hospitalitas quoque, quae est apud Christianos insigne atque excellentissimum opus misericordiae, ita a plurimis negligentur, ut et in hoc, sicut et in nonnullis alis, Christianitatis decus magna ex parte fuscetur; quoniam in tantum a quibusdam parvipenditur, ut cum amplas et spatiosas domos habeant, vix dignentur sub tectum suum recipere peregrinum, imo in peregrino Christum, dicentem in Evangel.: ‘Hospes fui, et collegistis me’ (Mt 25: 35). Sed neque advenientes hospitio carentes, in domos suas aliter recipiunt, nisi prius pari conventione statuatur, quid pro solo, quid pro singulis vasis, quid pro igne accenso, et caeteris innumeris rebus, quibus usi fuerint, dare debeat. Verum si contigerit ut sine hac pactione eos primum blandae ac simulatae charitatis officio suscipere videantur, tanto taudio postea eos afficiunt, ut nullatenus quiescant, donec id quem ab eis exigunt, eos dare compellant. Quod factum a Christiana religione ita abhorret, ut quisquis huic vitio incumbit, licet nomine, non tamen opere discipulus Christi existat. … Cum qua ergo fiducia diem expectat judicii, qui Christum in hospitibus renuit suscipere?” Jonas, De institutione 2.29, col. 231. Several pages, mostly of quotations, follow: cols. 231-4.

101 Presumably the poorest travelers were turned away at the door upon being confronted with the request to pay, being the ones in whose persona Christ is refused in the final sentence quoted from Jonas (and also the minimi mei of the Matthean passages quoted by him). See chapter 9 on the scope of non-elite travelers termed pauperes or peregrini.
part of Christianity. And both felt that its reduction to a commercial transaction or formal exchange of gifts constituted a pervasive problem.

Theodulf and Jonas blamed avarice, although the motives of the inhospitable may have been more nuanced. Poorer hosts lacked the resources to provide easily for crowds of inopportunity guests. Richer people, who were Jonas’ targets, not only made money by charging travelers, but also ensured a minor degree of respectability on the part of those they admitted into their house through what effectively served as a means test. The desperately poor could not afford to pay, so only their betters would enter the houses of the elite. Indeed, those of middling or higher social station may have fully expected to enter a reciprocal gift exchange, perhaps with a pretense of free-will offerings, to signify their relative independence and social worth. Part of Jonas’ and Theodulf’s problem may have been an unwillingness to acknowledge the existence of other customs of hospitality, which included gift exchange, alongside their instinctively Christian, charitable notion. Moreover, northern Europe at this time lacked any system of commercial hospitality; we may be seeing here the first steps of entrepreneurs, cognizant of growing networks of communication, towards developing a proto-inn in France.

Jonas’ and Theodulf’s strong rhetoric should not mislead us into thinking that the project of hospitality was an abject failure, even when measured by their standards of generous Christian love. Their attribution of such acts to “many” tells us little about what percentage of hosts charged all their guests, except that these bishops thought the problem frequent enough to be worth condemning. Jonas’ revelation that some demands for gifts came only after the traveler had entered the house expecting free hospitality also undermines his dramatic writing. What traveler would have fallen for such a ruse unless he had previously encountered the free and charitable gift of shelter? “Some” must have given it. Further, hospitality at its minimum need not have

102 Jonas briefly addresses this problem, reminding poor hosts that whatever they have to offer—even just cold water—was acceptable: Jonas, De institutione laicali, 2.29, cols. 232AB, 234A.
consisted of more than a spot on the ground underneath a roof. Jonas wrote that bad hosts charged even for this tidbit of comfort, but was that the norm? Theodulf simply complained of travelers reimbursing their host for the cost of hospitality, yet that the minimal provision of shelter cost the host nothing. People may have extended this kind of minor charity and still drawn the bishop’s wrath for not giving food or warmth to those unable to pay for these extra services. The bishops failed to differentiate these mildly bad hosts and so obscured the activities of a group of people in a position to aid the poor in concrete ways (ones that would have been quite appreciated on cold, rainy nights). The nuances of the bishops’ complaints suggest that charitable hospitality was definitely a problem, but was not unknown.

When Routger of Trier (915-929) wrote out regulations for his priests, he placed the burden of local hospitality on them. If the number of guests proved more than they could handle, he instructed the priests to chose a leading member of their parish to care for the overflow. He allowed that selected layman to sell provisions to either the guests themselves or to the priest.103 Perhaps shelter, fire, and water still came free, but, even so, one wonders what Jonas or Theodulf would have said. The writings of Routger and his predecessors indicate that the proponents of almsgiving found that the inculcation of charity had its limits. Some, of course, willingly gave a wanderer shelter for nothing, and some of these also provided food. Many laity proved resistant to opening the sanctuary of their homes to strangers who could not reciprocate in some fashion. One can only guess which group was the rule and which the exception, but the evidence shows that free hospitality was not universal and potentially only practiced by a minority of Christians. When Jonas claimed that hospitality was the highest work of mercy, he could have as truthfully said that it was also the most difficult.

5. Conclusion

Early medieval almsgiving was a varied, adaptable phenomenon. Almsgivers hailed from a wide spectrum on the social scale. Even those who had merely a small surplus might give, prompted by the liturgical season, penance, or death. The gifts that they gave took on a wide variety of forms, from lavish endowments to a piece of a humble loaf of bread. Nonetheless, the poorest members of society—the destitute who relied on alms—would have found it difficult to participate in that communal practice of giving. The rich had an easier time giving, but shied away from letting the poor come too close. Hospitality proved difficult to inculcate, though clerical injunctions were not all without effect. Through judicious use of servants or officers to give alms and control of who entered the doors of their house, the elite maintained social distance from their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Christianity demanded almsgiving from all its adherents, whether lay, clerical, or monastic. Many laymen and women clearly gave alms. Nonetheless, most early medieval sources, including those mentioning charity, focus on the actions of clergy and the vowed religious. These leaders of Christianity had a special call to care for the poor and give an example for their flocks. In order to penetrate more deeply into the details of the early medieval network of charity, it is necessary to turn to the specific ecclesiastical structures devised for providing alms.
CHAPTER 7

THE HOSPITAL

Most almsgiving consisted of individual gifts, but the vast majority of those acts never had any reason to enter the written record. That record does provide better evidence for a subset of medieval charity. When almsgiving grew from personal distributions to those organized institutionally and bureaucratically, then their supervisors created rules and regulations which still survive. Charters, hagiography, and councils provide further invaluable documentation. Institutional charity offers a privileged window into the actual provision of aid to the poor and into its broad reach.

The institutional provision of charity was the business of the church. Clergy and religious had a special duty to be exemplars of mercy towards neighbor and to hold their wealth as a gift from God meant for all his dependent children.¹ A favorite patristic dictum taught, “A layman who receives someone or a few people has fulfilled the duty of hospitality, but a bishop, unless he has received all, is inhumane.”² To truly receive all required an organization, as did other forms of


² “Laicus enim unum aut paucos recipiens implevit hospitalitatis officium, episcopus, nisi omnes receperit, inhumanus est.” Institutio canonicorum Aquisgranensis 10, ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2.1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1906), p. 328; Isidore’s use of this quotation from Jerome is also itself quoted in c. 9, p. 325.
mass charity. Monks and nuns owned all their property communally, at least in theory, and so could only practice almsgiving as a community. The scale of the resources which they handled and the number of people seeking their help encouraged their charity to develop into a carefully organized service or even an institution in its own right.

The early medieval church developed a complex and widespread network of charity in accord with its theological ideals in order to supplement individual almsgiving. The most important of these institutions was the hospital. The term “hospital” seems familiar, but its modern usage can mislead us when we confront the medieval *hospitalia*. “Hospital” derives from Latin *hospitalis* (concerning guests, hospitable). The *xenodochia*, the Roman predecessor of hospitals, has a similar etymological root in the concept of caring for strangers. Following current academic convention, I call all these institutions “hospitals,” but always with two implicit caveats. First, these institutions existed to serve the guest, the stranger, and the needy, although sometimes their charity also included medical care as a subsidiary service. Second, hospitals were not necessarily independent, incorporated institutions, nor did early medieval patrons usually see such a status as a goal.

The fact that the modern hospitals evolved from early medieval and antique institutions has understandably caught the interest of many scholars. The early medieval institutions usually receive short shrift in histories of the hospital, in part because they do not resemble the teleological ideal of the autonomous medical institution as much as their later medieval counterparts, and in part because many scholars have seen the early medieval period as marking a collapse of hospital

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3 And this council instructed bishops and their canons to do just that, i.e. erect hospitals: *Institutio canonicorum Aquisgranensis* 141, pp. 416-7.

4 Many scholars have made this first warning, but it still needs repeating: P. Horden, “The Earliest Hospitals in Byzantium, Western Europe and Islam,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35 (2005), 389. The dangers of the second teleological bias seems less well recognized. A few scholars speak of “sub-hospitals” or “quasi-hospitals” for hospital-like services run by another institutions (e.g. a monastic guesthouse), but such terminology goes against the usage of medieval writers. I conform my broad usage to the medieval one.
care after some promising late antique foundations. Nonetheless, a few scholars have done painstaking and foundational research on the period, though I disagree with their conclusions on issues such as the degree of transition during the eighth century and the significance of hospitals attached to other institutions.

This chapter begins with a description of the daily functioning of the most common type of hospital, the monastic hostel, and examines the experience of the poor traveler in it. The next section turns to the variety of types of early medieval institutions. The third and fourth sections place this variety of hospitals in context of the institution’s evolution, noting the high degree of continuity. The chapter closes with a brief investigation of the nebulous hospitalia scottorum, which have occupied a position of dubious prominence in some attempts to understand the early medieval hospital.

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These scholars previously discovered most of the hospitals that are discussed here by me, although I normally restrict my citations to the primary sources. The interpretation of their significance is my own unless footnotes indicate otherwise.
1. Hospital Care

How did the hospital work in practice? What did a poor traveler experience when seeking the gift of hospitality, and what specifically did he receive? These questions are hard to answer for most types of early medieval hospitals, but we are fortunate to have evidence for the inner workings of perhaps the most common type of hospital, namely that attached to a larger monastic house. The appearance of detailed commentaries on the Rule of St. Benedict in the ninth century and other customaries allows such a reconstruction. Smaragdus of Saint-Mihel near Verdun composed the first of these commentaries shortly after the 816 and 817 councils at Aachen. Hildemar, originally from Corbie in Francia, wrote a long, detailed exposition of the Rule from the Italian monastery of Civate in the 840’s. The mixture of Italian and Frankish influence in Hildemar demands a measure of caution in using his work, but his helpful practice of distinguishing some customs as peculiarly French or Italian combined with the quick transmission of his commentary back to the north inspires confidence that most of his explanations offer an insight into Carolingian monasticism in general. Abbot Adalhard’s Statuta of 822 for the governance of Corbie provide a third trove of useful details. To these can be added a source of a rather different nature: the St. Gall Plan. Most likely composed at Reichenau between 819 and 826, this plan diagrams the blueprint of an idealized Carolingian monastery. While never actually built, this plan shows in detail how a monastery ought to have been structured, including its facilities for guests (see fig. 7.1).

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Fig. 7.1: Sketch of the main hospitals from the St. Gall Plan
(translations based on St. Gall Monastery Plan,
http://www.stgallplan.org/StGallDB/plan_components/).

KEY: (1) Here let the throng of travelers find friendly reception; (a) house of the travelers and paupers; (b) stove; (c) dwellings of the servants; (d) dormitories; (e) supply room; (f) cellar; (g) brewery; (h) bakery; (i) for cooling the beer; (j) for leavening the bread.

(2) [Church and annexes]; (a) cloister of the monks; (b) entrance and exit into cloister for speaking with guests and performing the *mandatum*; (c) dwelling of the *provisor pauperum*; (d) here let the entire crowd of the servants enter the monastery quietly; (e) the arriving people wait here together; (f) at this point the guests will either go out or enter quietly under the roof of the church, likewise the noble youth who attend the academic school; (g) the porter’s receiving room, his bedroom and privy; (h) reception of visiting monks.

(3) This building, too, serves for the reception of [rich] guests; (a) dining hall; (b) rooms with beds, privies; (c) rooms for servants; (d) stables for horses; (e) exit to the [servants’] privy; (f) larder; (g) kitchen of the guests; (h) brewery; (i) bakery; (j) here let the beer be cooled; (k) place where the dough is made.
Imagine a typical poor traveler in the Frankish countryside of the 830s. Walking down a

dirt road through forests and villages, he would have seen across the outlying fields a group of

buildings, whether a bustling complex centered around a church with soaring towers or simple

shelters for a dozen monks, their livestock and a few serfs. On approaching the monastery, the

traveler had to figure out where he was to go. Traditionally, the monastery’s *porta* received all

guests, and without other direction the traveler would have found his way there.\(^8\) Hildemar
demanded that there be two porters, in part so that one could maintain his post and the other escort
the poor to the appropriate hospital—for each kind of guest found a different reception.\(^9\) The St.
Gall Plan listed different buildings for receiving the poor, more distinguished guests, visiting
monks, the monastery’s own vassals, and servants from outlying estates, and even included a royal
hospital for the king’s entourage. Needless to say, most monasteries would not have needed such
elaborate accommodations. Some even would have done without separate buildings. Division
between the poor, the elite (rich or noble), and other monks was the standard practice, but
variations were common. Hildemar advised that if three hospitals could not be maintained, then
two buildings should be provided—or at very least two separate rooms (*cubicula*)—so that bishops
and counts would not be received with the poor, travelers, monks, and abbots.\(^10\) He did not say
whether the inclusion of monks with the poor indicated a fear of the nobles’ negative influence, the
poor’s greater susceptibility to control, or the association of poor guests with Christ and the monk’s
self-conception as pauper. He and other monks did notice the laity’s untoward habits of staying up

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\(^9\) Hildemar, *Expositio* 66, p. 605. At Corbie, the porter supervised the hospital brothers: Adalhard,
*Statuta* 2.10, p. 312. Smaragdus advised that dignitaries be met by the abbot, and all others by another
brother: *Expositio* 53.3, p. 280. On the division of the *porta* into separate hospitals for different groups, see

\(^10\) Hildemar, *Expositio* 53, pp. 506 and 507; he defines reception of known monks into the cloister of the
resident monks as a Frankish custom: c. 63, pp. 582-3. See also Lesne, *Histoire*, 6:122-6; Witters, “Pauvres,”
194-7.
late and telling unedifying stories when left to themselves, which implies that a certain supervision of the less influential travelers was considered desirable.\textsuperscript{11}

Unsurprisingly, the hospital of the rich had more luxuries. That it included a stable was a practical necessity. That it had its own kitchen or one shared with the abbot and had, at least in the St. Gall Plan, a private dining room, heated bedrooms, a privy for the guests, and a separate privy for the servants was not strictly necessary, but probably expected.\textsuperscript{12} It is hard to believe that in a hierarchical society, the poor and rich could have received the same treatment even if the monks had wished to offer such, and that must have been true even before the creation of separate hospitals. The theory justifying this triage of guests lay in Benedict’s injunction that guests be received with “fitting honor” (\textit{congruus honor}). Clearly, treating a pauper and prince identically would not be fitting and, indeed, a grave, uncharitable insult. The solution to the apparent discrimination against the poor lay in the standard ethical distinction between the interior dispositions and its expression in exterior acts. Smaragdus advised that, “for although one love is held towards all interiorly, it is fitting that exteriorly one care for the poor in one way, but for the powerful another.”\textsuperscript{13} Hildemar agreed, and indeed went further by saying that the poor should be preferred in mind by the monks, although his claim that feeding the poor too well would be a sin, since they knew no moderation, rings a bit hollow.\textsuperscript{14}

When our hypothetical traveler had been judged and found poor, the porter would have directed him to the appropriate officer to be greeted. The master of the hospital of the poor passed

\textsuperscript{11} Hildemar, \textit{Expositio} 67, p. 611; Smaragdus, \textit{Expositio} 53.23-4, p. 284.


\textsuperscript{14} I suppose they would have taken advantage of a feast and copious drink, but the nobility were not exactly abstemious teetotalers themselves. Hildemar, \textit{Expositio} 53, p. 502. For his frequent use of this exterior/interior distinction, see Hildemar, \textit{Expositio} prologus, 2 and 53, pp. 6, 48, 105-6 and 501.
under different names: *procurator pauperum, portarius pauperum, provisor pauperum, frater hospitalis* and, in the eleventh century, *eleemosinarius* (almoner), but, most commonly, the *hospitalarius or hospitarius* (hospital brother). The hospital brother was a junior officer of the monastery, generally subordinate to the porter, but still of some importance. Adalhard provided for two brothers to serve simultaneously. The hospital brothers of Saint-Gall witnessed charters there with some frequency and when an “Irfing hospitarius” witnessed charters from 863 until 874, while Ruadho filled that role on December 3, 868 (a scant two weeks before Irfing’s next charter), it seems that they shared their office as well. The hospital brother could have expected help from other monks as necessary and from servants or lay members of the monastic *familia*. Those seeking entrance to the monastery stayed with the guests and also assisted in their service for a period of two months. Most of the Saint-Gall hospital brothers served in other offices: Ruadho had been porter first and later prior and dean, Uazo and Cotescalch both served as priors, and a certain Notker discharged the office of librarian and frequently served as scribe, although he is more famed for his sequences and historical writing. Wala of Corbie, a high aristocrat turned

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16 Although Ruadho, who had served in 858-861, could have been a temporary substitute. Wartmann, *Urkundenbuch* nos. 541, 542, 2:154-6; also nos. 460, 464, 475, 481, 484 and 489, 492, 497-9, 512, 515, 518, 520, 530, 543-4, 547, 556-7, 560, 568 and 577, vol. 2, pp. 77, 81, 91, 98, 100 105, 108, 112-4, 127, 130, 132, 144, 158, 162, 170, 171, 174, 181 and 190.


18 I assume that the poor guests are meant because of the religious symbolism involved, the greater opportunities for service and especially Hildemar’s reference to removing shoes, which must refer to the *mandatum* described below. Hildemar, *Expositio* 58, 60, pp. 534-5, 552; *Synodi primae Aquisisgragensis* 33, p. 466; *Regula sancti Benedicti abbatis anianensis sive collectio capitularis* 33, ed. J. Semmler, CCM 1 (Siegburg: F. Schmidt, 1963), p. 525.

monk, began as hospital brother before becoming abbot.\textsuperscript{20} The hospital brother had a position of responsibility and a well-run monastery put some thought into appointing him.

The poor traveler would have found the hospital brother in a special cell outside the cloister or in the hospital itself. Such an arrangement prevented guests from disturbing the peace of the cloistered monks at odd hours. No guests could enter the hospital before mid-afternoon in Hildemar’s monastery, but interruptions inevitably required the hospital brother’s attention at unexpected intervals.\textsuperscript{21}

At the sound of the guest, the hospital brother greeted the traveler with an inclination of the head (or a full prostration for dignitaries) as prescribed by the Rule. Perhaps a ritual greeting, such as “Deo gratias,” would be used. After the kiss of peace, the hospital brother led the traveler in prayer and sometimes read him the passage of the Rule concerning guests. The hospital brother provided food and drink to refresh the traveler, except for fast days applicable to the laity and presumably when a meal would soon be served.\textsuperscript{22}

Before offering food, however, some monasteries performed one more ritual service for the traveler as Benedict had prescribed: the \textit{mandatum}, the washing of feet in imitation of Christ’s

\begin{quote}

The following hospitarii served Saint-Gall from 820-914, the period of the hospitarius’ existence for which substantial numbers of charters remain: Gerbald (821, 829); Elolf (826-8, 830), Uazo (837), Theothart (849, 853-4), Cotescalch (856), Raddeo (858-61, 868), Irving (863-8, 868-72, 874), Engelramm (873, 874), Job (878-9), Ruado (882-5), Odewin (886, 890), Notker (892-4), Ratpert (897-8), Winidhere (902), Hilterich (903), Tuotilo (904, 909-12), Wito (913-4).

\textsuperscript{20} Paschasius Radbertus, \textit{Radbert’s Epitaphium Arsenii} 1.10, ed. E. Dümmler, \textit{Abhandlungen der königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Phil-Historische Abteilung} 2 (1900), p. 37. See also Ardo, \textit{Vita Benedicti abbatis Anianensis et Indensis} 2, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SS 15/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1887), p. 202. Thierry of Fleury’s humane customary of the early eleventh century advised that the hospital brother be a conversus—a brother raised outside the monastery who then entered the religious life—since he would have greater understanding and sympathy for his charges; coincidentally, Wala was one such conversus. Thierry, \textit{Consuetudines} 14, pp. 24-5.


\textsuperscript{22} Smaragdus, \textit{Expositio} 53.3-11, pp. 280-1; Hildemar, \textit{Expositio} 53, pp. 502-5; \textit{Vita sancti Cuthberti} 2.2, pp. 76-8. See also Thierry, \textit{Consuetudines} 14, p. 25.

\end{quote}
assumption of the role of a servant to his disciples at the Last Supper. Originally monks washed the feet of all guests upon their arrival, as did certain religious laity.\(^{23}\) By the ninth century, this old ritual of humble service continued with a different, more limited resonance. Only the poor received the *mandatum*. Indeed, the rich considered it humiliating since the Christian use of the rite implied that the one washing was normally superior to the recipient.\(^{24}\) Nor did all the monks usually perform the *mandatum*. Most commonly, a select group of monks (such as those who brought the offerings to the altar at Mass that day) would process to the hospital in the evening after Vespers, wash the feet of the paupers, and bless them, while singing psalms or hymns.\(^{25}\) Ratgar of Fulda (802-17) put an end to the practice of all the monks performing the *mandatum* daily. The brothers vehemently and successfully protested that change, demonstrating both the ritual’s importance for them as an act of spiritual mercy and the uneven evolution of the customs of monastic hospitality.\(^{26}\)

The footwashing evolved in the tenth-century monastic reforms to include a more regular rotation among monks, carefully specified hymns, the offering of coins or other alms, and special

\(^{23}\) T. Schäfer, *Die Fußwaschung in monastischen Brauchtum und in der lateinischen Liturgie*, (Beuron: Beuroner Kunstverlag, 1956), 8-10, 20-27; see also the historiographical notes in Albert, *Le pèlerinage*, 310-5. The latest examples known to me are from late seventh-century England, where it is still *more hospitalitatis*: Bede, *Vita sancti Cuthberti* 29, ed. B. Colgrave, *Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), p. 252; *Vita Cuthberti anonymo* 4.3, p. 114. At the end of the Carolingian period, even the quasi-monastic Count Gerald did not think to carry out this ritual of charity despite welcoming Christ himself in the poor (perhaps because of its high liturgical elaboration at that time), according to Odo of Cluny, *Vita sancti Geraldi Auriliacensis comitis* 1.14, PL 133, cols. 651-2. But, while noting its earlier sources, see also *Paenitentiale pseudo-Theodori* 19.4, ed. C. Van Rhijn, CCSL 156B (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), p. 54.


provisions for Lent. Bishops practiced a special *mandatum* during Lent in the ninth and tenth centuries, as did nuns if they did not do so throughout the year. Fleury had a custom of washing the feet of the poor as they arrived and the same was initially true in England. Hildemar and most monasteries preferred to perform the ritual in the evening for all guests at once. However, Hildemar insisted that each and every poor traveler receive the *mandatum*, and bade the hospital brother to wash the feet immediately of those who arrived at night.

This *mandatum* of the poor guests should not be confused with other footwashing ceremonies. We have already noted the Holy Thursday *mandatum* of the poor in monasteries and cathedrals. Monks and canons also had a separate set of rituals for washing each other’s feet. A fourth practice of some monasteries was codified in the English *Regularis concordia* as the *mandatum trium pauperum*. Most monasteries and cathedral chapters supported a number of the local indigent who received a daily allowance. The English selected three of these daily on a rotating basis to have their feet washed, and on that day fed them special food. Hildemar also included a group of poor fed daily by the monastery in his schema of footwashing. His injunction to wash their feet follows after his explanation that monks ought to wash the feet of guests from the monastery’s neighborhood as well as those from afar since, “the house in which they stay is to be


30 See chapter 5 above.


32 On these permanent beneficiaries, see chapter 8.

heeded, not the nearness of the place from which they come.”

This criterion for footwashing implies that since Hildemar’s permanent recipients of charity were eligible for the mandatum, they resided in the hospital. Certainly some hospitals had both permanent and temporary residents. In 883 a certain Willebold willed his holdings to Saint-Gall on the condition that he be allowed to stay in the domus peregrinorum and receive a stipend there for the rest of his life. Usually the permanent poor had their own separate dwellings, as with the multiple houses for the poor at Saint-Wandrille or Saint-Gall, and as such would not have regularly been washed with the itinerant.

The size and layout of the hospital that met the incoming traveler would have varied from place to place. Hildemar suggested a layout similar to the monastic infirmary for monasteries that could afford it, although this is less revealing than it ought to be since he limited his comments on the layout of the infirmary to saying that different rooms should exist to house different kinds of the sick. The St. Gall Plan envisioned a structure estimated at fifty by sixty feet, centered around a large room with a fire in the center and benches along the walls. Side rooms opened onto the central hall and fireplace: two houses for servants of the monastery, two dormitories for the poor, a supply room and a cellar. A brewery and bakery for the guests stood alongside, although more commonly one kitchen prepared food for monks and another combined preparations for the abbot, the rich, and the poor. The dormitories could easily have held a dozen guests, according to Horn and Born’s estimates, and probably more. Other guests could have been housed on the benches in

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36 Gesta ss. patrum Fontanellensis 13.7, p. 111; Walafrid, Vita s. Otmari 2, p. 42; see section 2 below.

the main hall if desired. The evidence makes no mention of how male monasteries received guests of both sexes, but the Saint-Gall’s plan provision of two rooms could have been a concession to propriety. The Council of Aachen instructed nuns to harbor widows and female paupers inside the cloister and to maintain a separate hospital outside for other paupers.

Hildemar spoke of a multitude of guests beating down the doors of his monastery, but it is hard to know how many actually came seeking shelter and how many an average hospital could have received. One answer is suggested by Adalhard’s allocation of supplies to the porta for the provision of food to twelve travelers, which accords with the St. Gall Plan. Twelve is, of course, a highly symbolic number, especially when we consider that these guests would have their feet washed like the twelve apostles. Adalhard’s choice of twelve marked a ritual choice. Indeed, the whole regime of the monastic hospital with its carefully choreographed greetings, prayers, footwashing, and repeated insistence that this was about the reception of Christ himself, all meant that hospitality was a ritual activity. But it was a charitable ritual. Hospitality, these commentaries insist, was an act rooted in love of God that meant concretely providing what humans needed.

Adalhard’s choice of budgeting for twelve paupers aimed at their practical needs: the amount of food given was to be adjusted for greater or lesser numbers of guests, taking into account the length of their journeys and the presence of children. For his statutes to have had any relevance (and he


39 Institutio sanctimonialium 28, p. 455. It is possible that the word describing female poor allowed inside—pauperculae—only refers to female children (perhaps the children of the widows), but given the Carolingian propensity for using diminutive word forms for the lower classes, such a limited reading of the term is unnecessary.


41 Adalhard, Statuta 2.10, p. 372.


43 Adalhard, Statuta 2.10, pp. 372-3
claimed that he was recording the actual custom of the monastery), his provision for that number of guests must have been a realistic average.

Adalhard’s Statuta therefore imply that these hospitals dealt with relatively small numbers of the needy at any given time. Corbie was a large institution in a relatively densely populated area and still expected only twelve overnight guests at a time. That does not mean Corbie’s hospitality was insignificant. The arrival of twelve paupers every day would mean that Corbie’s hospital served over 4,000 guests in a year. Repeat guests would have lessened the number of individuals who found shelter and food, but Corbie’s hospitality nonetheless required a considerable outlay of resources and affected many people.

Neither Smaragdus nor the customaries stemming from the tenth century reforms worried about limiting the number of beds available or an overflow of guests. In most cases, it seems that the experience of showing up at a monastery and finding a bed was normal, provided one did not look for an extended stay.44 There are exceptions and it would be a mistake to think that the system of hospitality sufficed for every occasion. Some monasteries really were poor and struggled to provide for their own inmates as well as their guests.45 One mute girl came to Germanus’ shrine amidst a crowd of paupers and discovered that the hospital there had no more room. So she began a cold vigil in the chapel and St. Germanus repaid her somewhat involuntary devotion with a miraculous cure.46 Stories that did not end so happily are lost to us, but must have happened especially when crowds flocked to newly acquired relics or places rumored to be producing a sudden burst of miracles.

44 Ansgar, Miracula s. Willehadi 3, AASS Nov. 8, 848B; Lesne, Histoire, 6:146.
46 Heiric, Miracula sancti Germani episcopi antissiodorensis 1.5, PL 124, col. 1235.
A problem of that sort might lie behind Hildemar’s uniquely recorded agonizing over his inability to receive all comers. Benedict’s Rule said that all travelers should be received, and Smaragdus urged that this meant “not only those guests coming to us, but that we seek, worry about, run after, and search everywhere for guests, so that they will not have to rest perhaps in the street or lie without a roof.”47 In contrast, Hildemar wrote, “Where he says all, it seems hard and very difficult, since the guests are numerous who come to the monastery.”48 He pled that few guests came in Benedict’s day and in his time all simply could not be received. The Rule must have meant that one had to receive as many as possible, or else that interiorly one should want to serve all travelers like they were Christ, although only a few could actually be helped. His provision that no guest be admitted until mid-afternoon allowed the hospital brother to perform a kind of triage, granting first priority in housing to the weak and disabled. Once admitted, however, a pauper’s right to hospitality could by no means be revoked.49 Hildemar’s uncomfortable attention to this problem and extensive pleading speak to the Italian situation in which this Frankish monk found himself. With the Alpine passes funneling pilgrims to Rome, and a growing northern Italian economy putting people in motion, Hildemar’s adopted monastery probably faced challenges that he never had had at Corbie, where beds for twelve travelers sufficed.

The poor traveler primarily expected shelter and food within the hospital. The poor received a lesser quality of food than did the rich and the brothers, but they received full meals. Adalhard provided each of his guests a large loaf of mixed-grain bread, two cups of beer (or wine

47 “Non illud solum ostendit ut venientem ad nos hospitem sed et requiramus et solliciti simus et sectemur ac perquiramus ubique hospites, ne ubi forte in plateis sedeant, ne extra tectum iaceant.” Smaragdus, *Expositio* 53.1, p. 279. We need not believe monks literally made a practice of doing such, but Smaragdus was not the only monk to use this kind of language: see Christian, *In Mattheum* 56, col. 1470B, with reference to Tob. 2:2.


49 Hildemar, *Expositio* 53, p. 508. His admonition that a monastery be endowed with sufficient land to supply food for monks and guests without relying on the vicissitudes of lay alms to the monks speaks to his difficult experience: c. 66, p. 607.
at the prior’s discretion), and a small fixed portion of the cellarer’s stores such as cheese, meat, or eel. This portion consisted of a fifth of the porter’s tithe of the cellar—that is, one fiftieth of the monastery’s total food renders—with the remaining four-fifths going to other guests and the workers of the *porta*. When they left the following day, poor travelers received an extra half-loaf for their journey. Since the two hospital brothers each received one loaf, the bread must have been passably edible and possibly even the same eaten by the monks.\(^{50}\) Higher quality bread “like that which vassals receive” was baked for clerics and the sick.\(^{51}\) This division of foodstuffs did not hold universally true. Hildrad’s hospital at Saint-Quentin only served meat three days per week, although that may also be because his foundation catered to permanent residents.\(^{52}\) On the other hand, Hildemar complained about abbots who cooked delicacies for their guests—“as much for the poor as for the rich”—so that they could gorge themselves too.\(^{53}\) Fleury proudly insisted that the poor receive food from the monks’ own kitchen and not that of the servants, whatever the custom in other monasteries. There the hospital brother also collected leftovers from the monks’ main meal and higher quality food from the monastic infirmary so that he would have food on hand whenever needed.\(^{54}\) In some other monasteries at the turn of the millennium, the poor received the food prepared for monks on days when the brothers fasted on bread and water, but apparently only in connection with those fasts.\(^{55}\) Here we can see attempts to put into practice the teachings on almsgiving from fasting and from one’s own table.

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\(^{50}\) Adalhard, *Statuta* 2.10, 6.1.18, 6.2.19, pp. 372-3, 388, 389. For a similar division of revenues, see *Concilium Verberie, a. 869*, B, p. 337. Whether the hospital brothers always ate with their charges is unclear; in Thierry, *Consuetudines* 14, p. 26, the hospital brother ate one meal a day in the monastic refectory.


\(^{52}\) Recueil des Actes de Charles II le Chauve no. 251, ed. G. Tessier (Paris 1943-55), 2:74.

\(^{53}\) “tam pro pauperibus quam pro divitibus…” Hildemar, *Expositio* 53, p. 504.

\(^{54}\) A “fixa atque inconvulsa consuetudo,” Thierry, *Consuetudines* 17, 37, pp. 30, 60.

\(^{55}\) Redactio sancti Emmerammi 18.62, p. 239 lists twelve such days plus Good Friday. cf. Smaragdus, *Expositio* 4.14, pp. 98-9. The ninth-century *Vita Sigiramni* suggests that a finicky monk could obtain
The shelter and beds provided would also have been adequate by the standards of the time. Benedict prescribed straw beds, which both Hildemar and Smaragdus thought somewhat ascetic, although Hildemar still considered them appropriate for the poor. Given later hospital customs, beds may have been shared by two travelers. Adalhard’s porter (not the hospital brother) would buy bed linens, pots, and other such necessities for the hospital out of his share of the porta’s funds.

As prescribed by Benedict, the poor also received the used shoes and clothes of the monks, and the hospital brother had a responsibility to determine if any of his guests needed new garments from the camerarius’ stores. The result must have been a lot of men looking like seedy monks tramping up and down the roads of Europe. The need to distinguish true monks from guests might lie behind Hildemar’s peculiar provision that monks assigned to the hospital brother be issued clean, new clothes.

The traveler’s spiritual needs were partially met at his greeting and the initial prayers, but monasteries occasionally went further. The 817 Council of Aachen ordered that “learned brothers be chosen to speak with guests.” The Saxon abbess Hathumoda fed her guests interiorly with permission to give food he disliked to the poor: Vita Sigirammi abbatis Longorensis 20, ed. B. Krusch, MGH SRM 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1902), pp. 617-8.

58 Adalhard, Statuta, 2.10, p. 374.
59 Adalhard, Statuta 2.10, p. 373; Smaragdus, Expositio 55.9, p. 287; Thierry, Consuetudines, 14, p. 26.
60 Done “propter honestatem.” Hildemar, Expositio 53, p. 509.
61 “Ut docti fratres eligantur qui cum hospitibus loquantur.” Synodi secundae Aquiagranensis 29, p. 479. However, it is possible that only the rich guests received this service.
holy words as well as exteriorly. In each case, however, it is quite possible that only rich guests received this service.

Finally, we return to where we began the discussion of hospitals: the provision of medical care if the traveler needed it. Monastic infirmaries, herb lore, and other medical treatments have attracted wide scholarly interest, and recent scholarship has made at least some favorable pronouncements on it. Hospitals were not primarily infirmaries and little evidence suggests that they were sought out as such, but ill guests did arrive and presumably monks and clerics put their knowledge to use on behalf of the poor. For herbal medicine, this must remain only a probability, but monks certainly provided other types of care.

The linchpin of medicine was diet. Adalhard’s statutes charged the porter and hospital brother to work together closely to provide whatever food sick guests needed. His vita memorialized his active attention to that detail. Rest and sufficient food, including meat, would have been a major boon for an ill pauper. Bathing also formed part of the standard medical care.

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64 Some hospitals, discussed in the following section, catered to permanent residents who suffered from leprosy or were *infirmi* and *debiles*. These may have been exceptions to the rule that hospitals were not infirmaries, although there is no firm evidence that the kind of care given there differed from that given in a typical hospital for transitory *pauperes et peregrini*.

65 Adalhard, *Statuta* 2.10, p. 373; Paschasius Radbertus, *Vita sancti Adalhardi Corbeiensis abbatis* 59, PL 102, col. 1539A.
given in monasteries. A frequent hagiographical topos had the hero—a high-born aristocrat, abbot, or queen—washing the wounds and sores of the poor with his or her own hands. 66 By implication, for a noble to act in this way was unusual, but the kind of care would have been standard. Food, rest, hygiene, and possibly herbal remedies all offered the ill pauper hope of comfort and recovery, although the care remained basic. Of course, the numerous miracle accounts remind us of another sense in which the hospital assisted the poor. Healing ultimately lay in the hands of God, and therefore also in that of his friends, the saints. In assisting poor pilgrims to reach powerful shrines or sheltering them while they awaited a miracle, monastic hospitals provided hope for a cure.

2. The Variety of Hospitals

The hostel attached to a male or female monastery is the best documented form of the early medieval hospital; it was not the only form in existence. Some hospital founders tried to aid particular groups of people. Many of these provided long-term care, instead of just a couple nights' food and shelter. In addition, the constitution of the hospital varied from a room attached to a monastery or church to a distant charitable outpost of a motherhouse to a fully autonomous institution. This network of permanent and temporary institutional hospitality provided a mesh of different kinds of care dispersed over a wide area and attempting to assist a dispersed and varied mass of the poor.

The hospital founded by Quintilianus, father of a bishop of Auxerre by that same name, at Moutiers-en-Puisaye illustrates the kind of thought and specific concern that might shape a hospital. This hospital was an independent institution staffed by monks which he designed to care

66 Walafrid, *Vita s. Otmarii* c. 2, p. 42; Paschasius, *Epitaphium Arsenii* 1.10, p. 37; *Vita Mathildis regiae antiquior* 8, ed. B. Schütte, MGH SRG 66 (Hanover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung, 1994), 127-8; Thietmar, *Chronicon* 4.36, pp. 173-4. This is not to be confused with the ritual washing of paupers’ feet, although in many vitae it is hard to know which is meant by references to washing.
for a very specific group of travelers: British pilgrims bound for Rome.\footnote{Gesta pontificum Autissiodorensium / Les gestes des évêques d’Auxerre 1.29, ed. G. Lobrichon (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2002), p. 133. The source is ninth or tenth century and records a seemingly genuine early eighth-century foundation. “British” (\textit{Brittonum}) could refer to the Irish or possibly one of the other northwestern Celtic peoples or the English.} This was a unique specification of clientele.

Usually other groups with special needs received special care. Major monasteries maintained a variety of hospitals for these groups in addition to their main building for receiving temporary guests. Abbot Adalhard, author of Corbie’s statutes, established multiple houses for orphans, the weak, and also transitory guests, with, we are told, carefully prepared menus to preserve or restore health.\footnote{Paschasius, \textit{Vita Adalhardi} 59, col. 1539A.} The intriguing reference to the “weak” (\textit{debiles}) may refer to the kind of house of healing appealing to the searcher for the roots of the modern hospital, but most likely meant those with a permanent debilitating illness or injury. Abbot Ansegis of Saint-Wandrille (d. 833) willed money to the elderly who resided in that monastery’s hospital, as well as to other houses of the poor.\footnote{Gesta sanctorum patrum Fontanellensis coenobii 13.7, eds. F. Lohier and R. P. J. Laporte (Paris: Picard; Rouen: A. Lestringant, 1936), p. 111.} Lepers acquired their own house separated from other paupers at eighth-century Saint-Gall.\footnote{Walafrid Strabo, \textit{Vita s. Otmarii} 2, ed. G. Pertz, MGH SS 2 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1829), p. 42.}

Those hospitals that cared for the elderly, lepers, and the disabled cared for groups in need of a permanent residence. Occasionally, other lucky paupers found a permanent home without belonging to one of the above groups. The ninth-century \textit{Vita Geremari} mentioned an existing \textit{xenodochium} founded during Merovingian times in which twelve paupers found continual care, originally in return for their prayers.\footnote{Vita Geremari abbatis Flaviacensis 15, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH SRM 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1902), p. 632.} The contemporary canon Hildrad’s hospital at Saint-Quentin provided continual care within the cloister for twelve poor without mention of prayers (as one
would expect for this time period). Canons who fell into poverty could seek one of those twelve spaces as well.  

Major bishoprics probably also cared for multiple groups of people, as shown by the example of Hildrad. Archbishop Ansgar (d. 865) founded a hospital for the poor and sick at Bremen; a century later his successor, Adaldag (d. 988), expanded it to include twenty-four permanent paupers alongside the passing guests.  

Given the participation of bishops in hospital foundations, even if they are less prominent in our sources than monastic foundations, many cities over time would have acquired multiple hospitals and some of these would have been specialized.

All forms of male and female monasteries and all bishops had an obligation to care for the poor. This was an antique principle, and one reinforced in early medieval legislation, most notably at the great reforming councils at Aachen in 816 and 817. The religious leaders at Aachen already expected that hospitality would be provided, but wished to improve the organization of the hospital. They enjoined all three groups to separate out a dedicated stream of revenue for the hospital, perhaps giving the hospital a more prominent place in the religious house’s organization.

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72 Recueil des Actes de Charles II no. 251, 2:73-5. On prayers, see above chapter 4.


75 Institutio sanctimonialium 28, p. 455; Institutio canonicorum Aquisgranensis 141, pp. 416-7; Synodi primae Aquisgranensis decreta authentica 25, 33, ed. J. Semmler, CCM 1 (Siegburg: F. Schmidt, 1963), pp. 464-5, 466; Synodi secundae Aquisgranensis decreta authentica 9, ed. J. Semmler, CCM 1, p. 475. cf. Hildemar, Expositio 53, p. 305. There is no reason to think that the possession of a hospital by nuns was new to the Council of Aachen; rather, the concern was clausuration and endowment; sources are scarce on specifically female monastic hospitality throughout this period, but see Rudolf, Vita Leobae abbatissae Biscofesheimensis 11, ed. Georg Waitz, MGH SS 15/1 (Hannover: Hahnsche, 1887), p. 126; Thietmar, Chronicon / Die Chronik des Bischofs Thietmar von Merseburg und ihre Korrever Überarbeitung 4.33, ed. R. Holtzmann, MGH SRG n.s. 9 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1935), p. 171; Le Maho, “Hospices et xenodochia,” 52-3. Canons, however, may not have always had some form of hospital, since their close association with the bishop may have allowed them simply to send guests over to whatever provision he may already have made for them.
They also sought to regulate women’s hospitality to preserve claustration. In regards to the bishop, the council decided to involve his increasingly well-defined community of canons as primary participants in his hospitality. These latter two provisions, insofar as nuns and canons followed them, may have required many communities to build new hospital buildings outside the nun’s cloister walls and attached to the canons’ complex respectively.

Most hospitals possessed a connection to another religious institution (cathedral or monastery), but the nature of this connection varied wildly and some hospitals enjoyed at least practical autonomy. Defining “ownership” or “autonomy” is a difficult matter.76 Consider, for example, a bishop deciding to found a hospital in his own city. On one hand, the creation of a separate building with its own rectors indicates a self-contained institution. On the other hand, the bishop usually maintained oversight and, if the hospital was founded next to his cathedral complex, he clearly intended it to provide additional space for that complex’s provision of hospitality to the needy. In that sense, it was merely an annex to the cathedral complex.77 Sometimes related issues provide greater clarity, such as whether someone outside the hospital oversaw its functioning, how a hospital was endowed, and whether a hospital existed at a substantial distance from any motherhouse. And it is these questions that best give us insight into how the structure of institutional charity worked.

The monastic hostel for receiving poor guests was, of course, quite dependent on the religious community, but it came to be a well-defined subunit of it. In the ninth and tenth centuries a custom grew of allocating certain revenues or the rents of specific properties to different areas of a monastery or community of canons. The allocation of such revenues to the hospital indicates a

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growing sense of organization and identity, although that endowment no more made it a separate institution than the similarly endowed porta or cellar would be.\textsuperscript{78} Even a small physical separation could heighten this modicum of autonomous identity. Odila’s foundation (d. 720) of an easily accessible hospital so that guests would not have to trek up the mountainside to her nunnery of Hohenburg eventually mutated from an alternate guesthouse to the fully independent monastery of Niedermünster.\textsuperscript{79} Independence, however, did involve a mutation from hospital to a monastery which offered hospitality in addition to performing other functions.

One can identify a scattering of hospitals that functioned as more than dependent guesthouses and, since our best sources for hospitals come from monastic charters and regulations, other independent hospitals must escape our notice.\textsuperscript{80} Hospitals with permanent residents, such as the elderly, by definition could not have been simply guesthouses, although the specifics of their administration remain a mystery, and they likely remained under the close control of the mother institution. A letter of Charlemagne’s from around 813 recorded a donation to a number of monasteries, churches and canons, among which he referred to two hospitals, Saint-Romanus and Saint-Genesius.\textsuperscript{81} Since Charlemagne listed them alongside independent beneficiaries, he may have considered them part of the same category of independent institutions as well. When Lothar II exempted the hospital at Mont-Iovis from his transferal of various counties, bishoprics, and

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\textsuperscript{79} Vita Odiliae abb. Hohenburgensis 14, ed. B. Krusch and W. Levison, MGH SRM 6 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1913), p. 44. The vita was written over two centuries after the hospital was founded, but its account seems a plausible explanation for the proximity and history of the sister monasteries.

\textsuperscript{80} See for example the sources used in Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 288-331.

monasteries to his brother in 859, he must have been referring to an important and largely autonomous institution to warrant its being singled out. Saint-Victor began as an Irish monastery devoted to providing hospitality to Alpine pilgrims. It fell under Saint-Gall’s jurisdiction in the ninth century, but maintained its charitable purpose and, given its physical distance, control over its day-to-day operations. Perhaps most important for the Carolingian development of the hospital are the underappreciated traces of hospitable cellae in our evidence. A cell was a church or small convent (sometimes formerly independent) staffed by a few monks living onsite outside the motherhouse; Saint-Victor became one such place after losing its independence. A rough parallel can be found in some Merovingian monastic hospitals based around churches owned by the monastery. The larger Carolingian monasteries governed a far-flung empire of estates and ecclesiastical properties, including cells both nearby and at some distance. As miniature monasteries or churches, all of these cells presumably practiced some hospitality and that in itself would have created a wide network of service.

Some cells specialized in charity as hospitals. In addition to Saint-Victor, Saint-Gall owned at least one other separate cell dedicated to guests. The letters of Lupus of Ferrières (abbot 840-862) detail his long struggle for control of the cell of Saint-Josse, which had been richly

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82 Annales Bertiniani a. 859, p. 82.


84 Lesne does note the continued presence of hospitals away from the main monastic or episcopal complex: Lesne, Histoire, 6:106-8.

85 Sternberg, Orientalium, 159-161.

86 At Ober-Glatt, Zürich, Sept, 8, 885: Urkundenbuch der Abtei Sanct Gallen no. 646, ed. H. Wartmann (Zurich, 1866; repr. Frankfurt: Minerva Verlag, 1981), pp. 251-2. For hospitals not called cellae but apparently functioning as such, see the aforementioned foundations by Alcuin, Ansegis, and Adalhard: Cartulaire de Cormery no. 4, ed. J. J. Bourassé (Tours: Guilland-Verger; Paris: Dumoulin, 1861), p. 10; Recueil des Actes de Charles II le Chauve no. 284, 2:127-9; Gesta ss. patrum Fontanellensis 13.7, p. 111; Paschasius, Vita sancti Adalhardi 59, col. 1539A; Lesne, Histoire, 6:106-8.
endowed under Charlemagne for giving alms and hospitality to travelers. The original gift of that cell to Ferrières and its subsequent restorations always preserved the original charitable function of Saint-Josse, with Ferrières siphoning off “what was left over” from Saint-Josse’s considerable income.  

Lupus’ letters shed further light on the administration of cells in general. He wrote one letter acceding to Bishop Herard of Tours’ request on the appointment of an abbot (abba) for a cell, while in another he mentions a kinsman who was also abbot of the cell of Cormery. The mother monastery thus controlled cells by appointing a governing monk (the “abbot”), collecting a portion of its income, and presumably having rights of inspection. The abbot of the motherhouse had the power to alienate or exchange cells, at least with royal approval. Local abbots would have handled day-to-day governance. The ability of cells like Saint-Josse to be alienated or subjugated to different monasteries demonstrates that particular cells were not an intrinsic part of the mother house.

This far-flung network of cells and the heavy emphasis on monastic hospitals point to the predominantly rural character of the early medieval hospital. Such a rural network, of course, was well-adapted to the deurbanized character of society as a whole. Still, this ruralization of the hospital should not be exaggerated. Several Carolingian men, such as Alcuin, Theodulf, and

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87 “ut quicquid residuum esset hospitalitati quae peregrinis illic sollemniter exhibetur in usus fratrum.” Recueil des Actes de Charles II 3, 1:11; Lupus, Correspondance, epp. 19, 42, 86, ed. L. Levillain, 2 vol. (Paris, 1927-35), 1:102-4, 1:176, 2:76; T. Noble, “Lupus of Ferrières in his Carolingian Context,” in After Rome’s Fall, ed. A. C. Murray (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 237-44; cf. Wood, Proprietary Church, 415-6. Whether Saint-Josse’s owners actually put its charitable functions first is a different question, but all participants in the debate seem to have agreed that they ought to have done so and they at least pretended to do so.


89 On parallel cases and limits, see Wood, Proprietary, 260-3, 340-1
Hincmar, founded urban hospitals. Monasteries, even if originally rural, attracted settlement and industry, and by the ninth-century at least possessed some urban characteristics. This was a complicated and varied world, and the structure of Carolingian hospitals reflected that reality.

3. The Evolving Hospital I: Merovingian and Carolingian Models

The anonymous Vita Cuthberti (written ca. 700) tells a story concerning the saint when he was a new young monk at Lindisfarne. Cuthbert had charge of receiving guests that day and, upon seeing a traveler battle his way through the elements to the monastery door, Cuthbert brought him inside the guesthouse, washed his hands and feet, warmed him from the cold North Sea wind, and then ran over to the monastery kitchen to find food. On his return, he discovered that he had been entertaining an angel. Except for the dramatic ending, this homely portrait of the reception of guests in a small, attached house could have been told of an average monastery at almost any point in late antique or medieval history. And yet, while churchmen practiced a continuous tradition of charitable hospitality, the practice of it in the varieties of the hospital evolved over time and manifested itself differently in different places.

In 796 Alcuin, the expatriate Northumbrian scholar and semi-retired religious adviser to Charlemagne, wrote a long letter of advice to Eanbald II, his former pupil and the new bishop of York. In it he included a personal suggestion:

Let your most industrious faithfulness in alms reflect on where you might order xenodochia, that is, hospitalia, to be made for the daily reception of the poor and travelers;

90 Cartulaire de Cormery no. 4, p. 10; Theodulf, Carmina 59, pp. 554-55; Recueil des Actes de Charles II le Chauve no. 284, 2:127-9; Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 320-25; Lanotte, Médecine, médecins et hospitalité, 4.4.1.2, pp. 66-68.


and let these receive comfort from our wealth. For I am wearied by two troubles: old age and sickness. Most faithful son, labor for the soul of your father…

The expatriate’s touching plea to his friend to use his now abandoned ancestral property (and probably that of the new archbishop) in eleemosynary efforts shows the common, active concern for salvation that could lead to charity. The curious thing about this letter is Alcuin’s decision to use the word *xenodochia* for hospital foundations instead of the word *hospitalia*, with which he immediately glossed it. *Xenodochium* was a popular early word for the hospital derived from the Greek terminology, but there is no evidence it had any currency in England. In fact, there is no evidence of hospitals in England before the eleventh century beyond the dependent guest hostels of religious houses.

Living on the continent, Alcuin knew what *xenodochia* were; but why did he use that word in writing to someone who did not? He meant something that could not be conveyed by a reference to *hospitalia*. He wanted Eanbald to found something more than a guesthouse attached to a church or monastery, and presumably his messenger could have elaborated what this alternate, alternat...
continental-style hospital was. Alcuin’s foundation in Francia of the *hospitale sancti Martini* at Pont-sur-Seine at about the same time may capture his vision. This hospital for twenty paupers existed physically separated from any monastery (and, indeed, served as a refuge in case of Viking raids for the more exposed monks of Cormery), although its mother monastic house continued to oversee its income and operation. If Alcuin hoped to bring something similar to England, he failed to inspire Eanbald. The already existing hospitality offered by English religious institutions and concerned laity apparently sufficed.

The story of Alcuin’s abortive attempt to bring *xenodochia* to northern England raises some key points: the regional variability in hospitality, the development of more distinct institutions, and the question of whether some major shift occurred between sources discussing *xenodochia* and those treating *hospitalia*. This section explores how the hospital evolved over late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. It argues for a high degree of continuity, but gradual changes undoubtedly occurred.

Whatever faults the later Roman Empire may have possessed, a lack of charitable creativity certainly was not one of them. In the Greek-speaking half of the empire, *xenodochia* existed for housing travelers, *ptochotrophia* for the poor, *nosocoma* for the sick, *cherotrophia* for widows, *orphanotrophia* for orphans, *brephotrophia* for children, and *gerontocomia* for the elderly. *Diaconiae* and *matriculae*, discussed in the next chapter, also distributed alms to worthy paupers. From the fourth century onwards, bishops and wealthy lay Christians founded places to meet the acute needs of the poor and travelers, to reap the benefits of public patronage, to save their souls, and to follow the proddings of love and pity. These institutions provided shelter, food, and care to

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95 Cartulaire de Cormery no. 4, p. 10; Recueil des Actes de Charles II le Chauve no. 284, 2:127-9.

96 If Eanbald acted, no record remains and the institution failed to spread. He conceivably could have founded a short-lived hospital that later failed due to the conquest of York by the Danes in 866.

their residents, and often to those outside. Monks or clerics generally staffed these institutions. Bishops maintained some oversight, although the founding charters could carefully delineate rights and some councils forbade bishops to alienate or redirect the endowments of *xenodochia*. As with any experimental institution, variety ruled in the range of care, recipients and supervision, although the importance of religion remained constant.  

Unsurprisingly, the first charitable entrepreneurs who founded this type of institution lived in the eastern cities, which formed the heartland of Christianity. Italians and North Africans quickly became acquainted with the novel foundations under the name of *xenodochia*. The names of its cousins (*ptochotrophia*, *gerontocomia*, etc.) remained specific to the east; the sick, the elderly, and the poor, as well as pilgrims and other travelers, sought care under the aegis of institutions operating under this single name.  

Hospitals spread to Arles in southern Gaul at the end of the fifth century. They subsequently advanced along rivers and trade routes northward to the English Channel and eastward towards the Rhine, but then ground to a halt. The sixth-century heyday of Gallic *xenodochia* coincided with an England on which the imperial sun of Rome had set, and in which urban life and bishops had all but disappeared. Germany too lacked cities and episcopal sees, except in the Rhineland. Both these regions lagged in the development of hospitals. A look at the late antique hospital suggests that this correlation was no coincidence.

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I translate the Latin word *peregrini* as travelers throughout this dissertation, except where pilgrims are clearly meant. For further discussion, see Sternberg, *Orientalium*, 147-9; M. Dietz, *Wandering Monks, Virgins, and Pilgrims: Ascetic Travel in the Mediterranean World, A.D. 300-800* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 27-8; and chapter 9 below.

Early Gallic hospitals sprang from autochthonous roots as well as foreign inspiration, and here bishops were key. Their *domus episcopi* in the cathedral complexes developed as organized centers of hospitality and charity out of their *ex officio* responsibility to receive guests. Monasteries too received the needy traveler in rooms or separate guesthouses.\(^1\) Both of these institutions served as hospitals, although obviously neither could be thought of solely as a hospital nor usually even primarily as one. The foundation of *xenodochia* in close connection with bishops, monasteries, and church suggests the convergence of the foreign influence and earlier means of discharging the duty of hospitality. Even in Carolingian times, the vast majority of known hospitals were founded by or through bishops and abbots.

Bishop led the early push towards developing specialized institutions of hospitality. They were based in cities which, if declining from their Roman zenith, still had a large enough concentration of people to create a demand for modest hospitals. As nodes on the trade routes, cities also were better places to learn of the east Mediterranean hospital experiments. Previous scholarship on the early hospital suggests that the period from the sixth to eighth centuries saw a marked shift from urban to rural foundations and a linked shift from bishops to monks as their primary sponsors.\(^2\) Thomas Sternberg’s magisterial investigation of Merovingian hospitals, for example, found a strong emphasis on urban sites in the early period and then, of the eleven

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\(^2\) Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 282-3; Boshof, “Armenfürsorge,” 167-8; Sternberg, *Orientalium*, 300-1; for this shift as a change from connecting hospitals with cathedrals to connecting them with travel routes (using monks but still involving bishops), see Le Maho, “Hospices et *xenodochia*,” 57-8.
institutions known for the century between 650 and 750 A.D., ten appeared outside of cities and somehow connected with monasteries.\textsuperscript{103}

During the seventh and eighth centuries society became more rural than it had been, and consequently hospitals adapted to that demographic dispersion. The rural population needed their services, and the dwindling urban poor already enjoyed the benefits of the first wave of hospital foundations.\textsuperscript{104} In this environment of rural dispersion, monks displaced bishops as the primary providers of hospital care. Increasing pilgrim traffic from the eighth through eleventh centuries also created greater demand for facilities on travel routes outside cities. When Lothar II transferred a substantial alpine region to his brother’s control with all its bishoprics, monasteries and counties, he specifically exempted the hospital at Mont-Iovis.\textsuperscript{105} The special attention given it indicates an institution of some importance and hence something of the scale of hospitality needed by travelers bound for Italy, including pilgrims.\textsuperscript{106} The growth of hospitals in rural areas later than in cities also followed the general pattern for Christianization and monastic development. In 500 A.D., Christianity still centered itself around bishops in urban spaces, although rural proto-parishes were beginning to appear. By 700 A.D.—and especially by 900 A.D.—rural monasteries and churches


\textsuperscript{104} Jetter, \textit{Hospitäler}, 235; M. Mollat, \textit{The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History}, trans. A. Goldhammer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986 [French 1978]), 45-50. One does not have to posit mass numbers of wandering poor men forced off their lands by oppressive landlords to account for this new geography of demand, but some such poor existed: R. le Jan-Hennebique, “‘Pauperes’ et ‘paupertas’ dans l’occident carolingien aux IXe et Xe siècles,” \textit{Revue du Nord} 50 (1968), 180-1; Boshof, “Armenfürsorge,” 168; see also chapter 9. On the debate about the pace of ruralization in general, for summary and bibliography see C. Wickham, \textit{Framing the Middle Ages} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), esp. 591-6. The suggestion that the urban market for poor relief was already partially saturated was made to me by Phil Wynn.


\textsuperscript{106} On increased pilgrim traffic, see L. Schmugge, “Zu den Anfängen des organisierten Pilgerverkehrs und zur Unterbringung und Verpflegung von Pilgern im Mittelalter,” in \textit{Gastfreundschaft, Tavern und Gasthaus}, ed. Peyer, 39, 41; Albert, \textit{Le pèlerinage}, especially 298-9, but on her ideas in pp. 277-9 see the section on \textit{hospitalia scottorum} below.
littered the landscape. Rural hospitals had this religious transformation and growth as a precondition for their own multiplication.

Some caution is needed in evaluating this shift. Rural and urban, episcopal and monastic all are inexact dichotomies imposed by historians. It is doubtful that a bishop’s city and one of the great monasteries differed much in their degree of urban characteristics in the ninth century. As Sternberg perceptively observed, when the Council of Aachen told bishops to establish hospitals through their college of canons, whose lifestyle had certain monastic characteristics, the hospitality of these bishops was not actually that distinct from monastic hospitality. Carolingian bishops not only created urban foundations, but also supported new ventures in the countryside outside of their old cathedral complexes. Monks and bishops also cooperated with each other freely. When the abbot Ansegis bequeathed substantial sums to his monastery and its hospitals, he appointed Bishop Hildemann of Beauvais as co-executor of his will. He also included bequests to him and the archbishop of Rouen for priests and the poor, as well as to numerous groups of canons. Complex networks of hospitality and charity existed between bishops, canons, and monks.

Laity played a minor role in creating hospitals, but they were occasional active, especially in the case of royalty. They normally worked through monasteries or bishoprics, such as Louis the Pious’ foundation at Mont-Cenis through Novalese. More often laity made general donations to

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107 See above, n. 91.


110 *Gesta ss. patrum Fontanelensis* 13.7, pp. 110-7, esp. 110, 112 and 114. See also Sternberg, *Orientalium*, p. 158.

111 *Die Urkunden Lothars I* no. 4, ed. T. Schieffer, MGH DD Karol. 3 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1966), pp. 60-2; Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 332-3. For other possible early medieval cases see *Gesta pontificum*
bishops or abbeys, although occasionally singling out a monastery’s hospital to receive the donated income. In this, the Carolingian and Merovingian eras were not dissimilar. There were no civic hospitals as there would be in the later Middle Ages, much less any secular institutions. In this rural environment, the lack of cities seeking to articulate an identity and build a community meant that little motive existed for such hospitals. The laity had a duty to provide alms, but did not conceive of the possibility of creating permanent charitable foundations apart from working within the church.

While the monastic network of cellae, including hospital cells, developed mainly in the eighth and ninth centuries, the other variations on degrees of independence on the part of hospital institutions arose early in their development. Historians have tended to look for hospitals free of cloister or cathedral, standing on equal footing with monasteries and baptismal churches in a manner not unlike the great hospitable institutions of the late medieval and early modern periods. The concrete embodiment of that ideal can be found at the 549 Council of Orleans, which approved the governance of Childebert and Ulthrogota’s royal hospital at Lyons by a panel of bishops (presumably to preserve its independence against the local prelate) and simultaneously passed a canon protecting together the property of churches, monasteries, and xenodochia. What is often not appreciated is just how unique that foundation and conciliar canon were. The organization of the royal hospital at Lyons found no imitators. The appearance of the triad of church, monastery,

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_Autissiodorensium_ 1.29, p. 133 (for the early eighth century); and _Die Urkunden des Königs Otto I / Otto I regis diplomata_ no. 81, ed. T. Sickel, MGH DD Reg. Ger. 1/2 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1882), pp. 160-1 (tenth century). It is possible that evidence for independent lay foundations simply would not have been preserved if those hospitals failed to survive.

112 Urkundenbuch der Abtei Sanct Gallen, no. 257, 1:245-6; Sternberg, _Orientalium_, 294-7. On almsgiving to monasteries, including land donations, see chapter 4.

and hospital (with its implicit equality between these institutions) almost never occurred again in
Frankish councils, with the exception of those held in Italy.\footnote{114}

The vast majority of both Merovingian and Carolingian hospitals fell on a spectrum
between these two poles of a fully independent institution owning corporate property in its own
right, as in Lyons, and a simple room or outbuilding where guests might sleep, as in their ancient
roots. Since hospitals (both \textit{xenodochia} and \textit{hospitalia}) had their antique origins in small
guesthouses, the retention of that aspect of their character is hardly surprising.\footnote{115} One of the
monastic rules copied by Benedict of Aniane in the early ninth century still mentioned a
\textit{xenodochium} in this limited sense of a guesthouse.\footnote{116} In aggregate, hospitals probably became
more dependent on churches and monasteries for supervision and operating revenue over the eighth
and ninth centuries, especially as urban concentrations of population and institutions faded away,
but a variety of degrees of dependence existed over this time.\footnote{117}

\footnote{114} The only exception being Chalons 647-653: \textit{Concilium Cabilonense} 7, ed. C. de Clercq, CCSL 148A,
p. 304. For numerous references in Carolingian Italy to the triad, see \textit{Capitulare cum episcopis
Langobardicis deliberatum} c. 5, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 189;
\textit{Capitulare Olonense} c. 1, ed. A. Boretius. MGH Capit. 1, p. 316; \textit{Die Urkunden Ludwigs II / Ludovicus II
Diplomata}, no. 37, ed. H. K. Wanner, MGH DD Karol. 4 (Munich: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, 1994),
p. 143; for tenth-century continuity see Ratherius Veronensis, \textit{Praeloquia} 4.34, ed. P. Reid, CCCM 46A


\footnote{116} Benedict of Aniane, \textit{Concordia regularum} 60.4, ed. P. Bonnerue, CCCM 168A (Turnhout: Brepols,
1999), p. 509, here quoting Pachomius’ Rule; its contemporary lexical significance is admittedly uncertain.
See Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 282 on such a meaning for \textit{hospitale}.

\footnote{117} Most recent scholarship (stemming in part from the constitutional approach of Schönfeld, “Die
Xenodochien,” 42-9) posits such a shift. I am in agreement that a \textit{small} shift is likely, but we simply lack
evidence for how early \textit{xenodochia} were managed outside of Lyons, whose board of multiple bishops must
be exceptional and only possible for a royal foundation. The foundation of \textit{xenodochia} by bishops as adjuncts
to their normal hospitality inclines me to think that a close supervision of the hospital similar to that observed
in Carolingian times occurred. What lends the idea of a shift some plausibility is predominance of monastic
guest hostels in our Carolingian sources. These relied on allocation of a portion of the monastery’s revenue,
rather than a separate endowment; in contrast, we can say that \textit{some} Merovingian hospitals did have their
own endowments (but, as seen above, so did a few Carolingian ones). The fact that Carolingian sources refer
to \textit{Italian} hospitals as though possessing endowments like monasteries and churches is explicable in the
greater survival of urban life and economic complexity in certain regions south of the Alps, and shows one
possibility for what hospitals in late antique Gaul looked like. On the Italian situation, which notably also
included hospitals attached to monasteries, see Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 270-80, 303-7; Boshof,
The variety of people cared for by Carolingian hospitals also stems from the earlier experiments. The early hospital mainly catered to transient guests, whether sick or traveling, but the evidence has ambiguities. The classic dyad of “poor and travelers” often summed up the hospital’s beneficiaries, without specifying whether the “poor” were vagabonds or permanent residents. The sick and disabled made up a substantial third group. Some xenodochia existed solely for lepers, whose long-term disease implies a residential population. Candés’ hospital permanently housed paupers in the “house of guests” (domus hospitum). In the eighth and ninth centuries, Abbot Otmar’s founding of a special house to isolate lepers from other guests and Abbot Ansegis’ xenodochium for the elderly (alongside other houses of the poor) both speak to increasing specialization in monastic care. Hospitals still normally catered to the poor and travelers


118 Sternberg, Orientalium, 192-3. cf. 304, elaborating on: Imbert, Les hôpitaux, 46-8. cf. Rouche, “La matricule,” 90-1; Jetter, Hôpitaler, 233; Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 280-3. Since chapter 8 on the debate among the above scholars as to what extent early hospitals cared for permanent populations before Carolingian times and to what extent this kind of care was limited to the matricula. As the examples cited here indicate, there is certainly evidence for some permanent residents in Merovingian times, although it is probable that hospitals for such residents became more common in the ninth century as the matricula evolved in different directions.

119 Sternberg, Orientalium, 147-50. If infirmi or the less frequent debiles included the blind and lame, these too may have been permanent dependents. The Council of Tours in 567 commanded every city to feed its own poor and needy so that they would not wander; whether this was to be done via a hospital, matricula or (most probably) without any institution at all is unclear: Concilium Turonense 5, ed. C. de Clercq, CCSL 148A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1963), p. 178.

120 On leprosaria, see Sternberg, Orientalium, 171-74 and 211-5; since that “leprosy” included other diseases besides Hansen’s Disease, cures may have been possible and residency therefore temporary for some.

121 Sternberg, Orientalium, 118-9 and 208-9, argues that Candés must therefore have been a matricula, perhaps mixed with a hospital, but that is based only on his theoretical definition of each.

throughout the early Middle Ages, but the experiments in targeting specific groups proved successful.

As the hospital moved from its late antique adoption in the west into its Carolingian incarnation, there were no major innovations or discontinuities in its structure, but there were more or less pronounced trends towards becoming more rural, more monastic, more dependent on a motherhouse, and more open to specializing in certain clients. In scholarly literature, this change is often summed up as a shift from xenodochia to hospitalia. At the terminological level, there was a break between Merovingian and Carolingian times.

When Alcuin wrote his letter glossing one term with the other in the late eighth century, he stood in the middle of a terminological shift. This lexical drift is relatively clear. After the early eighth century, our sources are silent about the creation of new xenodochia north of the Alps, with the solitary exception of Theodulf of Orleans, who recorded his foundation in a poem.\(^{123}\) Even here, Theodulf’s foundation may only have been called a xenodochium in accord with a poet’s preference for elevated diction. Its very obscurity explains the term’s appearance a century later in Abbo’s gratuitously erudite poetry.\(^{124}\) Writers of the first half of the ninth century spoke of already existing xenodochia on several occasions, indicating that this institution continued to play a role in the Carolingian era, but subsequent references only cropped up sporadically throughout the rest of the Middle Ages.\(^{125}\) The Council of Quierzy’s pronouncement in 858 A.D marked one of the last

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\(^{123}\) Theodulf, *Carmina* 59, pp. 554-55. Jetter, “Hospitäler,” 244-5 lists several Carolingian references to xenodochia, but these (with one exception) are either not called xenodochia in the sources or were founded before 750. The one exception is St. Guillaume-le-Desert (Gellone). Duke William created a monastic complex at Gellone in 804, but the claim that his foundations there included a xenodochium stems from a twelfth-century vita: *Vita s. Willemi ducis postea monachi* c. 9, AASS Maii 6, col. 813C.


\(^{125}\) *Gesta ss. patrum Fontanellensis* 13.7, p. 111; Hincmar, *Vita Remigii episcopi* 32, ed. B. Krusch, MGH SRM 3 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1896), p. 344; *Historia translationis s. Vedasti Bellovacum* 15-6, AASS Feb. 1, cols. 811-2; *Vita Geremari* 15, p. 632; also see following note. There are some other problematic instances of the word being used: e.g. “Orphanorum quoque et debilium, necnon et hospitum in isdem locis
conciliar references to xenodochia outside Italy, and there the word required hospitalium as a
gloss.126 The council authors could no longer assume familiarity with the old institutional name on
the part of their Frankish audiences.

While this lexical shift undoubtedly occurred, its importance even on a terminological level
needs qualification.127 Simply because historians tend to refer to Merovingian hospitals as
xenodochia and Carolingian foundations as hospitalia does not mean contemporaries were so exact
in their language. Merovingian houses included receptaculum pauperum, cellula, debilium
mansiones, hospitium, and hospitale, some of which were called xenodochia in the same
document.128 Carolingian foundations included many hospitals, but these frequently passed under
the name of a domus or mansio of some deserving group: pauperum, peregrinorum, seniorum, or

opportunius velut xenodochium constitueterat, ut res ecclesiae hujus suum quasi patrimonium
possiderent.” Paschasius Radbertus, Vita Adalhardi 59, col. 1539A. The introduction of “velut” before
“xenodochium constitueterat” probably just serves to highlight Paschasius’ cleverness in using a slightly
archaic word of Greek origin (compare Einhard’s proud display of his knowledge that the common Latin
word eleemosina was of Greek origin: Einhard, Vita Karoli magni 27, ed. O. Holder-Egger, MGH SRG 25
(Hanover: Hahnsche, 1911), p. 31 and chapter 2 above). It is possible, however, that Paschasius felt that
Adalhard’s institutions did not technically qualify as xenodochia for some reason, whether it be a lack of
antiquity or some formal aspect of their constitutions. That leaves open the question of what these
foundations actually were: mansiones, domus or hospitalia? Or simply the endowment of extra charitable
services at existing dependencies? Thegan’s claim that Louis the Pious “Cottidie ante cibum aelemosinarum
largitionem pauperibus exhibuit, et ubicumque erat, semper xenodochia secum habebat,” might provide
evidence that xenodochia could refer to services instead of a physical institution, but I read Thegan as simply
speaking metaphorically: Thegan, Gesta Hludowici imperatoris 19, ed. E. Tremp, MGH SRG 64 (Hanover:
Hahnsche, 1995), p. 204.

126 “xenodochiorum, id est hospitalium.” Concilium Quierzy 10, p. 418; Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 283-
4. In fact, the primary addressee of the council, Louis the German, had encountered the term before, when he
granted a diploma concerning a xenodochium in the Alps: Die Urkunden Ludwig des Deutsche / Ludowici
However, other Franks (both east and west) would not have been so well traveled.


128 receptaculum pauperum: Sternberg, Orientalium, 201; cellula: Ibid., 210-11, 227, 255, 257; debilium
Most names were descriptive, not technical, and that did not change over the course of late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The fact that, in the array of possible terms for a hospital, *hospitale* displaced *xenodochium* is not surprising. It was an obvious word for a place pertaining to guests (Latin *hospites*), and saw use before 700 A.D. in England, Gaul, and Italy, though only rarely. The early Middle Ages did not coin the term, but popularized it in the late eighth and ninth centuries. For speakers of Latin or its proto-French derivation, such a native Latin term carried a familiar air that the more exotic Greek *xenodochium* did not. As familiarity with Greek declined in the west and the hospital became an ingrained part of ecclesiastical culture (rather than a foreign import), the preference for the Latin name was quite reasonable.

Roman sources adopted the term *hospitale* early (late eighth century) and it is possible that the popularity of the term stemmed from that location. After all, the Carolingians emulated the “correct” Roman way in many areas. Rome had a well-developed and evolving system of charity for its own poor and for incoming pilgrims: *diaconiae* provided food for the poor and perhaps pilgrims, *xenodochia* provided food, lodging and occasional medical care, the *scholae nationum* organized permanent pilgrim-immigrants, possibly also assisting visitors from their homelands, and

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129 Walafrid, *Vita s. Otmari* 2, p. 42; *Institutio canoniceorum* 141, p. 416; *Institutio sanctimonialium* 28, p. 455; *Gesta ss. patrum Fontanelensis* 13.7, p. 111; *Urkundenbuch der Abtei Sanct Gallen* no. 572, 2:185; *St. Gall Plan*.


monasteries staffed charitable organizations or themselves provided hospitality. It is quite likely that the Roman provision for the influx of pilgrims influenced some northern efforts. In the matter of terminology, however, the influence most likely went the other way. Italy as a whole retained a preference for xenodochia through the ninth century, and Rome’s uniqueness in that milieu is best explained as the adoption of the common word used by pilgrims seeking shelter in that city.

Alcuin’s use of xenodochia and hospitalia as near synonyms, but with the former term probably implying a more independent institution, is as near as the evidence brings us to seeing a distinction between the two terms. The Council of Quierzy in 858 A.D. also equated xenodochia with hospitalia without indicating any difference, while the 845 Council of Meaux-Paris freely used antique canons on xenodochia to support their decrees on hospitalia. The xenodochium of Gregory the Great in Rome seems to have simply been renamed as a hospitale, and such a process could have occurred north of the Alps as well, as for example at Lyons. The equation of the two


134 On the divide between Italian and Frankish terminology, see e.g. Capitulare Missorum 865 5, ed. A. Boretius and V. Krause, MGH Capit. 2 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1890), p. 94: “senodochia autem sic, ubi sunt neglecta, ad pristium statum revocent; hospitales vero pauperum tam in montanis, quam et ubicumque fuisse noscuntur, pleniter et diligentii cura restaurentur.” Also Schönfeld, “Die Xenodochien,” 15; Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 285-6. Cellulae do appear alongside xenodochia in ninth-century Italy, although whether these included hospitals is unclear and perhaps unlikely: Urkunden Ludwigs II nos. 21, 27 and 42, pp. 106, 120 and 151.


monikers for hospitals by contemporaries is hardly surprising, since the shifts in the character of the average hospital (as elucidated above) were not seismic changes requiring anyone to think of the Merovingian and Carolingian hospitals as fundamentally different institutions.\(^\text{137}\)

4. The Evolving Hospital II: Carolingian Survivals and Growth

Proponents of the idea that the eighth- and early ninth-century shift from *xenodochia* to *hospitalia* marked a real change in the reality of the early medieval hospital have suggested that a crisis occurred at that time leading to the destruction of the old system.\(^\text{138}\) It is quite doubtful whether warfare and rapacious lay magnates could have swept away enough existing *xenodochia* to create a blank slate for *hospitalia*, but an overview of the eighth and ninth centuries does suggest some of the difficulties faced by hospitals and also a great deal of resilience in spite of them.

Sternberg lists the probable foundation of forty-eight institutions in Francia from the sixth through the first decades of the eighth century.\(^\text{139}\) Afterwards, only a handful of hospitals of any description were founded under Pippin III and Charlemagne.\(^\text{140}\) Alcuin’s hospital at Pont-sur-Seine and Theodulf’s *xenodochium* already have been mentioned. Otmar, abbot of Saint-Gall from 720-759, founded a *hospitiolum* in alms for lepers so that they could be isolated from the residents of

\(^{137}\) For a contrary opinion, see Boshof, “Armenfürsorge,” 162-3, 167-8; Sternberg, *Orientalium*, 18, 298-301, 306. Lesne assumes continuity without arguing his case: *Histoire*, 6:127, 6:142-6. For examples of early *xenodochia* that were rural and monastic, in contrast to the German scholars’ ideal Merovingian *xenodochium*, see Radegunde’s foundations at Athies and Saix, or the closer binding of the two at Longuyon: Sternberg, *Orientalium*, 220-4, 265; note also Benedict, *Concordia regularum* 60.4, p. 509.

\(^{138}\) Sternberg summed up this explanation as the coming together of “secularization [of church lands in *precaria*], political instability, the decline of urban culture, and the tendency within church institutions towards dissolution”: Sternberg, *Orientalium*, 301. Beyond these causes, Walter Schönfeld suggested that the lack of the idea of corporate personality in Germanic law, as opposed to Roman jurisprudence, made institutions like the *xenodochia* vulnerable, leading to the loss of their independence. On the whole, current scholarship is skeptical of his claim and the chronology simply does not work: Schönfeld, “Xenodochien,” 42-9; Lesne, *Histoire*, 1:409-11 and 6:102-9; Sternberg, *Orientalium*, 295-6 and 301; cf. Wood, *Proprietary Church*, 181-2 on the civil personality of monasteries.

\(^{139}\) Sternberg, *Orientalium*, 194-290.

\(^{140}\) Sternberg, *Orientalium*, 298.
the monastery’s other houses of the poor.\textsuperscript{141} Charlemagne received many guests and travelers at his newly constructed capital at Aachen; in what buildings he did so is unrecorded, but some have assumed a hospital.\textsuperscript{142} We know that he did found or enlarge one hospital—but in Jerusalem, appropriately enough on the field supposedly bought with Judas’ blood-money for the burial of pilgrims.\textsuperscript{143} Other notices of hospital foundations no doubt still lie buried in the sources.\textsuperscript{144} The total numbers are far too small for statistical analysis, but it seems that the foundation of new hospitals continued only at a diminished rate between the Carolingian usurpation of the throne and the 816 Council of Aachen under Charlemagne’s son.

Predatory laity usurping donated lands threatened some existing hospitals. As Gerhard Uhlhorn has observed, the rector of an autonomous xenodochium was unlikely to have wielded the protective political power of a wealthy abbot or bishop, making its endowment a potentially easier target for rapacious laity.\textsuperscript{145} Hospitals more closely tied to a cathedral or abbey would have been naturally selected for survival, leading to their subordination and loss of their status as separate institutions; but, of course, many hospitals already had a dependent status. Moreover, Paul Fouracre has demonstrated that the extent of alienation of church property under Charles Martel has been greatly exaggerated, and other work has shown that precaria or other lay involvement in

\textsuperscript{141} Walafrid, \textit{Vita s. Otmari} 2, p. 42.


\textsuperscript{144} Jetter, “Höspitaler,” 244 lists two Aquitanian foundations which I have not been able to verify: “Libourne (Gironde), Hôpital des Lépreux, 770 gegründet. St.-Jean-d’Angély (Char. marit.), Hôpital, vor 800 gegründet.”

ecclesiastical institutions did not necessarily have bad results. Rapacious laity (and bishops and abbots) probably caused the end of some individual foundations, but belief in widespread destruction would require further evidence.

Warfare and raiding doubtlessly devastated other hospitals. Monastic communities might have found asylum in another friendly religious house during the raid or while the buildings of their home were repaired. The community of people endured. A hospital existed as a place of shelter; if that sheltering roof burned down, the hospital ceased to exist until someone chose to rebuild the physical structure. And that assumes that the income for its operation continued to flow after war had passed through. Hospitals, even those attached to monasteries or cathedrals, would have been particularly vulnerable.

Despite these twin threats, there are relatively few documented cases of the destruction of hospitals. In 823 A.D, the bishop of Chur appealed for aid, claiming that “xenodochia and the [provisions for the] reception of the poor have been destroyed.” His rhetoric played on contemporary fears of what could happen, but his Alpine territory was hardly a hotbed of war, and medieval bishops complained of the loss of ecclesiastical property of every type in every century. When Louis the German confirmed the bishopric’s possession of the senodochium sancti Petri twenty-six years later, it seems to have been doing fine. At Reims the old xenodochium probably was destroyed, but only as part of the expansion of the cathedral cloister and it was simultaneously replaced by Hincmar’s new hospital. One highly speculative possibility comes from the ninth-

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149 P. Lanotte, Médecine, médecins et hospitalité 4.4.1.2, pp. 66-68.
century *Vita Geremari*, which recounted how the Merovingian founder of St-Germer-de-Fly also founded a *xenodochium* for twelve paupers to pray for the soul of his deceased son up through the present day. A different, possibly late ninth-century recension of the life rewrote this passage as twelve monks (*monachos*) praying at a church (*eclesiam*). This could reflect an actual change in the composition of the hospital, and that change might have resulted from the sack of Fly by the Northmen in 851. A similarly speculative case can be made for Fosses. These cases of destruction occurred in the ninth century after the *hospitalia* were well entrenched.

The case of Saint-Germer-de-Fly raises the possibility that Merovingian hospitals survived, but changed in nature and perhaps in name. After all, a house of twelve men living and praying together through others’ gifts because they were born poor, as in the original *xenodochium*, mirrored a monastic house of men living and praying together through others’ gifts because they chose to be poor. Several Frankish *xenodochia* did eventually end as monasteries, although the timing for that switch is consistently uncertain. Since monks often staffed early hospitals, this would not have been a major change in every case, at least at first. While some probably focused on prayer, some likely continued to focus on charity even after the loss of their original designation. In fact, many early hospitals were called something else in the sources, as in the case

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150 *Vita Geremari abbatis Flaviacensis* 15, ed. Bruno Krusch, MGH SRM 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1902), p. 632; Sternberg, *Orientalium*, 255. Given the Carolingian trend against exchanging alms for prayers, Geremar perhaps would not have been wholly displeased by the switch.

151 Sternberg, *Orientalium*, p. 276, describes Foillan’s foundation at Fosses/Bebrona as originally serving as a hospital and being destroyed by Vikings in 881, then being refounded. Fosses/Bebrona (not to be confused with St-Maur-des-Fosses) was consistently described as a monastery from its seventh-century foundation, perhaps with a focus on hospitality, but we have no evidence for or against its charitable activities in the ninth or tenth centuries before or after Viking activities.

of the *conventus* and church of Saint-Victor in the Alpine passes.\textsuperscript{153} Charles the Fat granted control of Saint-Victor, which apparently was originally an independent community dedicated to charity, to Saint-Gall specifically to ensure the “support of the poor and wayfarers.”\textsuperscript{154} That subjugation to a powerful religious center demonstrates either Saint-Victor’s vulnerability to being taken over or the necessity of relying on a larger institution for support in a region with increasing pilgrim and commercial traffic, but in either case shows the preservation of the charitable institution’s original function.\textsuperscript{155}

A number of old *xenodochia* survived as hospitals for centuries. The original Carolingian author of the *Vita Geremari* specified that Geremar’s hospital existed “to the present day.”\textsuperscript{156} Many of our reports of Merovingian *xenodochia* actually come from the Carolingian era, and may well have been inspired by surviving institutions.\textsuperscript{157} The *Gesta ss. patrum Fontanellensis coenobii* made a positive reference to this survival in the abbot Ansegis’ will (d. 833), which supported the monastery’s *xenodochium* and other houses of the poor.\textsuperscript{158} A mid-ninth-century stational liturgy for Metz listed two churches “in sinodochio,” one of which still survived as a very old

\textsuperscript{153} Lesne, *Histoire*, 6:100, 6:103, Sternberg, *Orientalium*, 224-7, 274-6, 280-2, Sternberg, *Orientalium*, 265; see also Dey, “*Diaconiae*,” 415-6. By “hospital,” I mean an institution whose primary purpose was to care for the needy, particularly *pauperes et peregrini*.

\textsuperscript{154} “peregrinorum et sustenacula pauperum.” *Die Urkunden Karls III / Karoli III Diplomata* no. 60, pp. 101-2; see also no. 98, pp. 158-160.


\textsuperscript{156} “usque in presentem diem.” *Vita Geremari* 15, p. 632


\textsuperscript{158} “senibus in illo exenodochio et ceteris mansionibus pauperum solidos X.” *Gesta sanctorum patrum Fontanellensis* 2.2, 13.7, pp. 16, 111.
xenodochia at the turn of the millennium.\textsuperscript{159} A xenodochio in Poitiers may have even lasted until the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{160}

The story of the hospital from the seventh through early ninth centuries is that of general continuity coupled with a slow evolution to meet the demands of rural Francia. The same pattern of continuity and slow evolution can be seen over the ninth and tenth centuries as well. Hospitals remained generally associated with cathedrals and cloisters, but gradually became better defined and funded, so preparing the way for the experiments of the High Middle Ages.

The Councils of Aachen in 816 and 817 promoted the trend towards the organization and endowment of hospitals attached to monastic houses and canons, not least in its injunction that a specific portion of revenues be turned over to the hospital.\textsuperscript{161} It is no coincidence that the first mentions of a hospitale as something worthy of special funding and a hospitalarius in the charters of Saint-Gall occurred in 820 and 821.\textsuperscript{162} Hildemar wrote that in former times the monastic cellarer cared for guests, but now the influx of travelers had proved too overwhelming. Therefore separate hospitals existed to care for nobles, the poor, and monks (although this division almost certainly reflected social expectations as much as it did the necessity of managing an increasing workload).\textsuperscript{163} A large number of Frankish monasteries adopted a division between a hospitale

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{160} Sternberg, \textit{Orientalium}, 227.
\item \textsuperscript{161} On this revenue, see the notes on tithing in chapter 8. On the limits of implementation of Aachen, see Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 296-8, 325; le Jan-Hennebique, “Pauperes,” 178-9; more generally, see J. Semmler, "Benedictus II: una regula – una consuetudo," in \textit{Benedictine Culture 750-1050}, eds. W. Lourdauyx and D. Verhelst (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1983), 1-49.
\item \textsuperscript{163} Hildemar, \textit{Expositio} 31, 53, pp. 379, 506.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
nobilium and a hospitale pauperum, with specialized officers for each, in the late eighth and ninth centuries.\textsuperscript{164}

After this split of the \textit{porta} into multiple \textit{hospitalia} and efforts to make sure the hospital had sufficient revenue and organization to meet its goals, the west Frankish hospital entered into a more or less stable state for over a century. Monasteries and cathedral chapters made some provision for hospitality. This provision usually consisted of an attached hospital with its own officer and perhaps dedicated lands or income as an endowment. More prosperous communities owned other hospitals attached to churches, existing as \textit{cellae} or perhaps just as free-standing buildings with endowments. A few autonomous hospitals lay scattered around the landscape. All types of the needy found care on both temporary and permanent bases.

Those areas of Europe without the benefits of building on surviving Roman infrastructure developed more slowly. The regions east of the Rhine, which were only Christianized in the eighth or early ninth century, lagged in numbers and sophistication of hospitals.\textsuperscript{165} As Christian institutions spread throughout Germany, this gap gradually disappeared. Tenth-century German sources treated hospitals as unexceptional.\textsuperscript{166} The great contemporary monastic reforms at Cluny, Gorze, and Fleury affected the ritual of footwashing and further emphasized the need to preserve

\textsuperscript{164} Witters, “Pauvres,” 194-7; Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 293-5.

\textsuperscript{165} Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 333-34: beyond the obvious factor of the youth of Christian institutions, Boshof also notes that east Francia had a more stable social structure and a relatively more peaceful experience than the west, resulting in less impoverishment from war. It should be noted that while this is true, east Francia did suffer civil wars, some Viking raids and Magyar incursions.

claustration against lay guests; but these reforms focused on liturgical and spiritual goals, leaving the constitution of the hospital unchanged.\textsuperscript{167}

The monastic reforms of first Aachen and then Fleury reached England in the tenth century, but mainly affected liturgical practice.\textsuperscript{168} The lack of discernible development of more sophisticated English hospitals in the tenth century is peculiar, especially in light of developments in Germany.

When the first millennium had given way to the second, Europe from England to Italy saw a boom of hospital foundations as the medieval economy heated up, cities multiplied, and ecclesiastical buildings spread, “clothing [Europe] everywhere in a white mantle of churches.”\textsuperscript{169}

In time, some of these new hospitals broke further from the cloister, some cities created almshouses or leper houses, and some monastic communities (especially of women) devoted their active ministry to hospitality. The tenth century provided a stable base for these latter developments. The appearance at the very end of the early Middle Ages of a new name for hospitals—domus eleemosinaria or helemosina (almshouse)—hints at the percolating vitality of these institutions of hospitality, which were ready to explode beyond the already widespread network of cathedrals, monasteries, cells, and a few independent institutions.\textsuperscript{170}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{167} Witters, “Pauvres,” 194-213. See above, section 1, on the mandatum.
\end{itemize}
5. The Problem of the *hospitalia scottorum*

The *hospitalia scottorum*—the hospitals of the Irish monks—traditionally have assumed a significant place in the history of the early hospital. Many historians have believed that the *hospitalia scottorum* was a unique institution, a network of a particular type of hospital designed by Irish immigrants to the continent to care for *peregrini*, whether that meant wandering monks or pilgrims.\(^{171}\) Some have even seen the *hospitalia scottorum* as the source of the name *hospitalia*, from which our modern word hospital derives.\(^{172}\) In the story of the hospital recounted in the preceding sections, I have been forced to dismiss the Irish hospitals from their starring role. There is in fact very little evidence for these *hospitalia scottorum* as an institution, and what evidence does exist in turn suggests that the real story is not about Irish innovation, but rather about a remarkably successful Irish adaptation to continental tradition.

As was the case in England, Ireland lacked any kind of religious hospital before the eleventh century other than small, dependent guesthouses attached to monasteries and churches.\(^{173}\) One solitary Irish source calls this guesthouse a *hospitale*; none talk about *xenodochia*.\(^{174}\) While


\(^{172}\) Boselph, “Untersuchungen,” 286.

\(^{173}\) K. Simms, “Guesting and Feasting in Gaelic Ireland,” *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 108 (1978), 68-71. The monastic obligation to provide hospitality was enforced in secular law by the withdrawal of legal protections if guests were not received: F. Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), 139-40. C. O’Sullivan, *Hospitality in Medieval Ireland, 900-1500* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004), 143-5, notes a number of sources which portray early saints as acting like the secular *briugu* described below, but these are mainly twelfth-century sources and appear to describe contemporary reality more than facts about the early saints (p. 145); important hospitals associated with monasteries are known from annals in the eleventh century (p. 146). She does note a number of earlier sources (pp. 142-4) which show *hospitality* to have been a key virtue earlier, but no evidence of specialized ecclesiastical institutions of hospitality.

\(^{174}\) *Vita prima sanctae Brigitae auctore anonymo* 3.22, AASS Feb. 1, col. 121AB.
this means that the Irish did not have a native model of hospitals upon which to draw, this does not mean that hospitality was unimportant. Hospitality was a fundamental aspect of Irish culture as presented in the legal tracts. The position of public hospitaller, or briugu, was an officially recognized social rank. The briugu offered the promise of food and shelter that on the continent was provided by hospitals; but in Ireland this primary locus of hospitality was provoked by social and legal custom, not religion, and was offered by a prominent individual instead of an institution.175

Since the Irish did not import a particular type of hospital from home, our quest for evidence has to focus on sources demonstrating that they created a new hospital form on the continent. The role of the Irish monks, like Columbanus, who chose voluntary exile on the continent beginning in the late sixth century is well known and well documented, as are their contributions to continental monasticism.176 The evidence for their activity in something called a hospitale scottorum is not well documented. In fact, only two surviving texts use this term.

The first passage comes from the Council of Meaux-Paris in 845, at which the victorious young Charles the Bald gathered his bishops, including Hincmar of Reims, after several trying years of civil war in order to establish correct order in his realm.177 One of their concerns was the damage done to the network of hospitals and especially to those of the Irish, the hospitalia scottorum:

175 Kelly, Guide to Early Irish Law, 36-8, 139-40; O’Sullivan, Hospitality in Medieval Ireland, passim, esp. 120-41 on the briugu. It is unclear which the briugu’s hostel was a separate structure or an extension of his own dwelling, but the latter accords better with at least some sources: O’Sullivan, Hospitality in Medieval Ireland, 122.


His royal majesty is to be warned concerning hospitals, which in the time of his predecessors were founded and honored, and recently have been reduced to nothing. And even the hospitalia Scothorum [hospitals of the Irish], which holy men of that people built in this kingdom and increased with goods won by their sanctity, are estranged completely from the office of hospitality. And not only are those arriving at those same hospitals not received, but even those who served the Lord in religion from childhood in these same places are thrown out and are known to beg from door to door. [Canons condemning those who despoil churches and xenodochia follow.]

The wording at the beginning of the second sentence (sed et) implies that the hospitals of the Irish are a subset of the general category hospitalia referred to in the first sentence. What is unclear is if the adjective Scothorum here specifies a type of hospital—that is, if the council has a specific institution named hospitalia Scothorum in mind—or if Scothorum simply indicates possession—that is, if the hospitals owned by Irishmen were in especially bad shape. It is entirely possible that the Irish, as foreigners without local kinship ties, were vulnerable and suffered more than others from opportunistic predators during the civil war. They then would have appealed to the king for redress and so merited special attention in the conciliar canon.

The Council of Quierzy does not do much to clarify this ambiguity. In 858, Louis the German invaded the realm of his brother, Charles the Bald, while the latter was absent in Italy. Louis demanded that the fealty of the Frankish bishops, but instead the bishops, led by Hincmar of Reims, delayed. The letter sent by these bishops, who gathered at Quierzy, was basically a

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178 In full, the canon reads, “XL. Admonenda est regia magnitudo de hospitalibus, quae tempore praecedessorum suorum et ordinata et exculta fuerunt et modo ad nihilum sunt reducata. Sed et hospitalia Scothorum, quae sancti homines gentis illius in hoc regno construxerunt et rebus pro sanctitate sua acquisitis ampliaverunt, ab eodem hospitalitatis officio funditus sunt alienata. Et non solum supervenientes in eadem hospitalia non recipiuntur, verum etiam ipsi, qui ab infantia in eisdem locis sub religione domino militaverunt, et exinde eiciuntur et ostiitim mendicare coguntur. Unde pertimescenda est canonica sententia et maxime decretalis Symmachi papae definitio, quia ut necator pauperum et Christi traditor Judas isdem, qui huius sceleris auctor et perpetrator esse dinscitur, praesenti et perpetuo est anathemate feriendus. Qui reculam, inquit Symmachus papa, vel quicquid fuerit ecclesiae, petunt a regibus et corrumpendae pietatis institutio substantiam rapiunt, irrita habeantur, quae obtinent, et a communione ecclesiae, cuius facultatem auferre cupiunt, excludantur. Item in canone Aurelianensi: Si quis quolibet tempore contra hanc constitutionem nostram venire temptaverit aut aliquid de consuetudine vel facultate senodochii abstulerit, ut senodialium, quod avertat deus, esse desinat, ut necator pauperum irrevocabili anathemate feriatur.” Concilium Meaux-Paris, 40, pp. 103-104.

179 Nelson, Charles the Bald, 188-9; E. Goldberg, Struggle for Empire: Kingship and Conflict under Louis the German, 817-876 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 257.
stalling tactic in which the bishops outlined how a king ought to behave and, in doing so, implicitly critiqued Louis’ actions.

Like the Council of Meaux-Paris, the wording implies that the *hospitalia scotorum* were a subset of *hospitalia*:

> “Keep fast the hospitals for travelers, just as are those of the Irish and those which were built and established in the time of your royal predecessors, in order that they are held to that for which they were created, and are ordered and guarded by God-fearing rectors so that they not fall into ruin. And command the rectors of monasteries and *xenodochiorum*, that is, *hospitalium*, that (just as canonical authority and the capitularies of your father and grandfather instruct) they be subject to their own bishops, and that they rule the monasteries and *hospitalia* entrusted to them with [the bishops’] counsel. And since, together with your brothers, you have often granted fitting laws and justice to people of every order in repeated declarations, let all men and women clothed in religious or clerical habit, and travelers and paupers, in whom Christ is especially received, feel that your favor is always with them.” ¹⁸⁰

Whether *Scotorum* was part of a technical name or simply denoted possession is again unclear.

The force of the passage was to remind Louis the German that kings protected church institutions such hospitals, with the implicit reminder that civil war threatened them. The point that the *hospitalia Scotorum* “are” (*sunt*, present tense) under royal protection was an unsubtle reference to the provision passed at the Council of Meaux-Paris under the same Hincmar and Charles the Bald, the present, legitimate king of west Francia. Given also the reference to previous canons and

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¹⁸⁰ “Hospitalia peregrinorum, sicut sunt Scotorum et quae tempore antecessorum vestrorum regum constructa et constituta fuerunt, ut ad hoc, ad quod deputa sunt, teneantur et a rectoribus deum timentibus ordinentur, custodiantur, ne dissipentur, obtinete. Sed et rectoribus monasteriorum et xenodochiorum, id est hospitalium, praecipite, ut sicut canonica docet auctoritas et capitula avi et patris vestri praecipuiunt, episcopis propris sint subiecti et monasteria atque hospitalia sibi commissa ipsorum regant consilio, quoniam, episcopi paternam sollicitudinem eis secundum ministerium illorum studebunt impendere. Et quia saepe unicumque in omni ordine competentem legem et iustiam una cum fratribus vestris frequenti annuntiatione perdonastis, ecclesiastici et religiosi habitus viri ac feminae atque peregrini et pauperes, in quibus specialiter Christus suscipitur, perdonationem vestram sibi sentient semper adesse.” *Concilium Quierzy* 10, pp. 418-9. The phrase “et quae tempore…fuerent” could refer to the the hospitals of the Irish rather than being a parallel category: e.g. Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 285. There is no reason to doubt the relative antiquity of Irish hospitals (see n. 183 below for possible seventh-century, pre-Carolingian examples), although I think interpreting *tempore antecessorum vestrum* as implying a boom of Irish hospitals under the Carolingians reads too much into the evidence even so. I translate the phrase as I did because in Meaux-Paris the reference to the hospitals’ antiquity clearly modifies hospitals in general, not just Irish hospitals. I presume the point of making that remark in the original council, as here, was simply to establish the protection of hospitals as a traditional characteristic by which a legitimate claimant to kingship as a Carolingian could be recognized.
xenodochia, both used in Meaux-Paris, Quierzy’s reference to hospitalia scottorum seems to derive directly from the earlier council. It is not an independent testimony to that term.

A wider search for these hospitals of the Irish can uncover a number of potential candidates for such institutions, but no clear evidence for a well-defined institution passing under that name. Irish monasteries and those influenced by Irish monastic customs certainly made provision for guests, and presumably had a hospital as part of their care. Ninth-century Bobbio in Italy owned a number of outlying cells including both xenodochia and (less frequently) hospitalia. Standard usage north of the Alps involved only the latter term. It is possible that there was something special about these hospitals, but there is no evidence for them being singled out as a distinct type of institution, much less one specifically called hospitalia scottorum. We also know of half a dozen other foundations from the seventh to tenth centuries somehow connected to the Irish and dedicated primarily to charity and hospitality: Mazerolles, Fosses, Wormhoudt, Moutiers-en-Puisaye, Saint-Victor, and Waulsort. None of these was called a hospitale, but rather a monasterium, xenodochium, or conventus (all perfectly common names at the time of their foundation). There was no preference for calling Irish hospitals hospitalia, raising serious questions about whether an early medieval speaker would have recognized hospitalia scottorum as

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181 Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 304-7; see also Albert, Le pèlerinage, 375.

182 This list is based on Gougaud, Christianity, 178-80; Sternberg, Orientalium, 302-4 (also 224-7, 274-6, 280-4). For Waulsort, see the 949 Die Urkunden des Königs Otto I no. 81, pp. 160-1, which specifies in a typical manner, “ut illius monasterium perpetuo in usus peregrinorum et pauperum stabiliatur firmetur atque corroboretur” [my emphasis]. Gougaud lists it with his monasteria scottorum consequently, and not the hospitals. See also Lesne, Histoire, 6:103-4; Albert, Le pèlerinage, 374-5; both of whose lists of hospitals include monasteries which, like every other monastery, offered hospitality to guests, but whose primary mission was not hospitality. Note that the connection to the Irish in some of these foundations (especially Moutiers) is slightly tenuous.

a technical term and casting considerable doubt on the suggestion that the Irish had anything to do with popularizing the new name for hospitals.

Whether or not Irish hospitals were considered a distinct institution under any name is a more complicated question. The Council of Meaux-Paris explicitly tells us only that Irishmen founded these hospitals. The way it talks about the hospitals and their endowment, however, seems to imply that the bishops had independent institutions or possibly cellae in mind, and not just guesthouses attached to monasteries. The Council of Quierzy supports this impression. Its second sentence refers to “rectors of monasteries and xenodochiorum, i.e. hospitalium.” In other words, it treats hospitals as an institution parallel to monasteries and presumably as autonomous as they were. It also equates hospitalia with xenodochia, and the latter term may have carried an implication of partial independence in most circumstances, although not with perfect consistency.

The six known Irish hospitals were all small, independent monastic houses at the time of their foundation. It is entirely possible that the hospitalia scottorum in these ninth-century councils shared the common structure of being such small, autonomous communities. This did not make them unique, but by the ninth century such foundations were a definite minority. If there were something distinctive about the constitution of hospitalia scottorum then this would be it.

There is no reason to think that the services provided by Irish hospitals were any different. One hospital—Moutiers—was founded to serve Insular pilgrims, but from what we know of the others, they served the traditional mix of pauperes et peregrini. Saint-Victor, for example, was founded to provide peregrinorum et sustenacula pauperum. When the Council of Quierzy listed

184 Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 284-6 (with Sternberg, Orientalium, 304) on the hospitalia scottorum as a new term for hospitals just for pilgrims must be read against this fact, along with Alcuin’s early reference to a hospitale for pauperum et peregrinorum (see above, n. 93). On the variety of meanings of peregrinus and its normal translation as “traveler” instead of “pilgrim,” see chapter 9 and Dietz, Wandering Monks, 27. Briefly, see the contemporary definition offered by Hildemar: “Hospites sunt, qui de eadem regione sunt, i.e. de propre. Peregrini sunt, qui de alia regione.” Hildemar, Expositio 56, p. 522; with possible influence from Cassiodorus, Expositio psalmorum 38.13, ed. M. Adriaen, CCSL 97-98 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1958), p. 361.  

185 Die Urkunden Karls III / Karoli III Diplomata no. 60, pp. 101-2.
those who suffered from the decline of the hospital, it placed *peregrini et pauperes* together, along with monks and nuns.\textsuperscript{186} The Irish foundations were to all appearances typical hospitals of the times in almost every respect, as the description of their duties and the names by which they were called suggest.

There was one other significant way in which Irish hospitals differed from other ones. They were initially staffed by Irishmen. This point is so obvious as to be easily overlooked, but it is essential. Meaux-Paris made a point of noting that these hospitals were founded “by holy men of that people,” and that they attracted patronage “by their sanctity.”\textsuperscript{187} When the German founder of Walsort convinced a group of Irish monks to staff that hospital, he specified in the foundation charter that the abbot had to be chosen from among Irish monks, as long as one of them still lived.\textsuperscript{188} There was something attractive about the Irish monks themselves. A hospital was a religious institution, and the question of the sanctity of its staff mattered as much to its founders than details of its operation or nomenclature. Whether the admiration of the Irish came from some of their particular rules and customs of monastic life, or whether the act of voluntary exile elevated them over monks given as children to a local monastery, or whether there was just a good “buzz” in the air about existing foundations, the Irish sometimes received special treatment. The treasure of holy leadership deserved special protection even at the level of royal councils, whether or not other aspects of Irish hospitals were distinctive.

In light of those observations, I suggest that the important story is not about Irish hospitals, but rather Irishmen and hospitals. When Irish monks came to the continent they found a vibrant tradition of hospital foundations, including hospitals organized as small, independent monasteries

\textsuperscript{186} Concilium Quierzy 10, p. 419.

\textsuperscript{187} “Sed et hospitalia Scothorum, quae sancti homines gentis illius in hoc regno construxerunt et rebus pro sanctitate sua adquisitis ampliaverunt…” Concilium Meaux-Paris, 40, pp. 103-104.

\textsuperscript{188} Die Urkunden des Königs Otto I no. 81, pp. 160-1.
devoted to serving the poor and travelers. Perhaps their surprise at the lack of socially constituted secular hostellers—as existed in Ireland itself—motivated the Irish to pay special attention to the provision of hospitality and to embrace hospitals. This is a case, nonetheless, of the Irish learning about something new on the continent that was not present at home. They then adapted their religious lifestyle to continental norms.

Continental hospitals represented a partnership of the Irish and local people. Most of the six hospitals listed above had a local aristocrat provide the land and perhaps even inspiration for the foundation. As the Walsort charter’s assumption that eventually no Irish monk would be left alive makes clear, the Irish hospital staff also recruited local boys.\textsuperscript{189} Meaux-Paris’ complaint about monks at these hospitals who had “served the Lord” from childhood, implies that these Irish hospitals too were recruiting oblates, presumably from the local populace.\textsuperscript{190}

Above all, the singling out of the Irish associated with these hospitals as holy men shows the success of the Irish in melding their monastic tradition with continental institutions. People who had seen hospitals run by monks of their own ethnicity admired what the Irish had done, and they were in a position to judge. That is not to say that the Irish were universally admired or sought out as hospital staff, and there is no evidence for believing that how the Irish treated the poor earned them any extra adulation. Nonetheless, the Irish managed to join in the continental tradition of hospitality and to succeed in their efforts.

6. Conclusion

In early medieval Francia, a web of hospitals spread over the realm and offered a regular system of aiding the poor. Hospitals generally aimed at providing hospitality (food, shelter, and

\textsuperscript{189} \textit{Die Urkunden des Königs Otto I} no. 81, pp. 160-1.

\textsuperscript{190} “verum etiam ipsi, qui ab infantia in eisdem locis sub religione domino militaverunt, et exinde eiciuntur et ostiatim mendicare coguntur.” \textit{Concilium Meaux-Paris}, 40, pp. 103-104.
occasionally other goods) to travelers and to those poor wandering from place to place. An increasing number of hospitals also accepted permanent guests, often drawn from the elderly and those unable to work (the disabled or chronically ill). Hospitals existed as independent institutions, but their prevalence in the landscape stemmed from their attachment to other religious institutions (monastic houses, cathedrals, and other churches). All Christians had an obligation to provide hospitality, but churchmen and their communities had a special duty to do so. By burdening them with organizing regular provision for those demanding food and shelter, the church created countless small nodes of care.

The Frankish hospital evolved over the Merovingian and Carolingian eras, becoming more rural and monastic, and more likely to exist as an adjunct to a mother institution. The range of terminology in normal use shifted to exclude xenodochia and include hospitalia. Some old hospitals ceased to function while others came into existence. None of these things marked a fundamental discontinuity in the hospital’s history. Germany and especially England lagged in the development of their hospitals. England never went beyond the loosely organized guesthouse of monasteries and major churches until the eleventh century.

The hospital was the most important locus for the institutional provision of aid to the needy, but it was not the only one. It is to these other efforts by ecclesiastical institutions that we now turn.
The major problem of a system of charity based on institutional hospitality is obvious: only the poor on the move could receive aid. The fact that some hospitals put up small groups of the needy on a permanent basis helped, especially in caring for those too feeble to survive the rigors of travel, but the demand that the poor come to the givers of charity and then keep on moving to other potential donors was a real weakness in the system. Fortunately for the poor, the early medieval church had other institutionally organized means of distributing alms. These either were supplementary alms (aiding those who received other food as wages or from begging) or else limited to a select number of those in special need, but they played a key role in filling the breach in early medieval charity.

Monasteries and major churches gave out a regular charitable dole from their gates. The department of the *porta* usually took charge of this kind of supplemental aid. The *matricula* provided a community of paupers with a permanent home and charitable income in antiquity. Over the course of the early Middle Ages, it continued to provide care, though its nature slowly changed, becoming less focused on charity and losing its communal nature. This did not mean that those with permanent disabilities suddenly found themselves without succor; other institutions, like the hospital, picked up some of the slack created by the evolution of the *matricula*. Arguably the most significant innovation for ecclesiastical charity, however, was not an institution, but a new, legally enforced obligation: the ecclesiastical tithe. While the income generated from tithing supported a variety of non-charitable endeavors, part of it went to assisting the poor. Tithing undergirded the
growth of the monastic hospital, the distributions from the *porta*, the charitable functions of the early medieval *matricula*, and the role of parish (or proto-parish) priests in caring for the poor on a very local level.

1. The *porta* and Daily Distributions

The early medieval church had a variety of ways to offer food and other necessities without providing shelter or long-term commitment to individuals. Over the course of the early Middle Ages, these distributions acquired greater organization and structure, though they had their origin in the old, simple expectation that churchmen would give alms as servants of God.

Monasteries and cathedral complexes had traditionally offered aid to those who came to their gates, and not just those seeking hospitality.1 The Rule of Benedict placed the cellarer in charge of this care for the sick, children, guests, and the poor. Even at the end of the eighth century, some monasteries still fed their monks, cared for guests, and provided for the distribution of alms to the poor through the monk of the cellar.2 At that point, however, the *porta* had already taken over the care of the guests and poor in most places. From the mid-ninth century onwards, the *porta* received endowments and these often specified that they be used for care of the poor, as was the case at Saint-Riquier.3

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The porter kept watch at the main threshold between monastery and world, making him the logical choice to deal with beggars. However, since the porter’s adjunct hospitalarius took over care of poor guests, he often adopted the responsibility for almsgiving as well.⁴ Adalhard’s Statuta provide a unique glimpse into the daily operation of the monastic distribution to the poor at a time when the hospital of the poor had been just recently established. He ordered fifty large loaves of bread made each day; on an average day, twenty-five of those would have been divided and distributed to a hundred poor knocking at the gate. The hospital brother had charge of this stock in consultation with the porter, so as to ensure that enough bread would be on hand for guests spending the night. The hospital brother had charge of any other food available for distribution and of used clothing, which he gave according to custom, presumably after thinking of his guests first. He also received a fifth of the silver given to the porter to distribute to the poor, with a guaranteed minimum of four denarii, enough to feed a man for twelve days even when bread prices rose.⁵

Adalhard defined the recipients of this charity in contrast to the hospital’s as “those other paupers who come and leave on the same day.”⁶ This included travelers seeking a small midday meal on their journey, but, given the number receiving alms, Corbie’s beneficiaries also included local poor who returned to their homes after receiving from the porta a supplement to their income (whether from begging or their labor). Agius records that the abbess Hathumoda even sent out

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⁶ “Caeteris vero pauperibus venientibus et eadem die recedentibus…” Adalhard, Statuta 2.10, p. 373.
food to the sick away from the monastery. The *porta* at Saint-Riquier around 831 provided alms on a daily basis to 300 paupers, 150 widows and 60 poor clerics. On a smaller scale, one such Carolingian pauper, a crippled girl, lay at the gates of the nunnery of Tauberbischofsheim during the day accepting alms, and additionally received food from the abbess’ table as well as used clothes. The distribution from one’s own table was an ideal, but not necessarily a frequent practice even in monasteries until the tenth or eleventh century. At that time, Fleury customarily gave out this leftover food through the hospital brother, while Cluny appointed a special officer, the *eleemosinarius* (almoner), to carry out that task.

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7 It is possible that this was typical, but by no means clear. The recipients may also in this case have been religious “poor”, not the local indigent: Agius, *Vita et Obitus Hathumodae* 10, ed. G. Pertz, MGH SS 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1841), p. 170.

8 “Sepultura pauperum et advenarum in Novavilla in Sancto Albino reddit per annum centum solidos ad portam nobilium ad faciendam inde eleemosinam. Elemosina abbatis per unumquemque diem V solidoes. Paupers cotidiani CCC, vidue CL, clerici LX.” Hariulf, *Chronique de l’abbaye de Saint-Riquier*, app. 7, p. 307, see also 3.3, pp. 86-97. The manuscript of Hariulf which copies this document stems from the 13th century and the phrasing is cryptic and unusual, but the manuscript probably copies an original document: Hariulf, *Chronique*, p. xxvi; Bosshof, “Untersuchungen,” 308-9; E. Bosshof, “Armenfürsorge im Frühmittelalter: Xenodochium, matricula, hospitale pauperum,” *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 71 (1984), 173; cf. George, “L’hospitalité,” 322-3. These numbers would seem high if these 510 poor all received full meals, but appear reasonable (and in accord with the reach of a little over 5 solidi per day) if we assume that the 300 paupers only received supplementary alms (cf. Adalhard, *Statuta* 1.1.1, p. 365 which made provision for the full support of 150 provendarii of various kinds, while the hospital daily served 100 poor a quarter-loaf each).


Special endowments for daily distributions would have increased this charity, though such endowments became more common at the end of the early Middle Ages. Still, ninth-century records include occasional examples of this kind of gift. Charles the Bald gave Saint-Denis lands in hope of heavenly reward so that five paupers would be daily fed in alms, along with new clothes in Lent and one denarius apiece for the twelve recipients of the Holy Thursday mandatum.\(^{11}\)

Another innovation came in the form of almsgiving via anniversary feasts. In the late tenth and eleventh centuries, the ninth century practices of endowing an annual meal for monks in one’s memory came together at Cluny and other monasteries (or houses of canons) with the practice of endowing the porta for daily care of the poor. As they increasingly took on care for the memoria and eternal rest of the deceased, the monks offered an annual commemoration in which a set number of poor would be feasted and receive alms. For abbots, kings and queens, this would be twelve poor, who were fed a hearty meal with meat, although higher numbers could be offered in exceptional circumstances (i.e. if the price was right). Cluny developed a custom of using a deceased monk’s entire prebend for almsgiving on his anniversary. The popularity of anniversary alms and its employment on behalf of deceased abbots or other monks alongside certain lay benefactors added another regularized outlet of monastic charity.\(^{12}\) Of course, in this system, unlike earlier donations to the porta, the benefactor’s name stayed attached to his or her charity.

Finally, the monastic porta served the community as an emergency storehouse in times of famine, a constant threat in the early Middle Ages. During a severe emergency, the poor flocked to

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the doors of Benedict’s young monastery at Aniane and lived in shelters there until the harvest. His *vita* dwelled at length on the sacrifices the monks made to feed their neighbors (which still failed to prevent some deaths), but even monasteries without exceptionally saintly monks would normally have had some reserves of food to share.¹³ Nor were monasteries the only source of relief, since bishops too had responsibilities for care. During a particularly severe famine, Hrabanus Maurus, then archbishop of Mainz, fed three hundred poor daily in addition to those who usually received charity.¹⁴ In late Anglo-Saxon England, a few churchmen even plundered the gold from their own church ornaments to provide aid for the hungry.¹⁵

The emerging parish church assisted in bishops’ efforts to discharge their duty to use part of their dioceses’ wealth in almsgiving. Councils and diocesan statutes firmly commanded that these rural priests provide the aid needed in their areas in hospitality and other forms of alms.¹⁶ Individually, this charity probably constituted only a small amount of service by each priest; collectively, this meant that a lot of revenue collected by the church remained in isolated villages to alleviate both temporary and permanent hardships. The ongoing development of the parish under

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the Carolingians made this network both feasible and essential.\textsuperscript{17} It is no surprise that when Ulrich, the charitable Ottonian bishop of Augsburg, gathered and interrogated his priests, one of his top concerns was their care of widows, orphans, and guests.\textsuperscript{18}

Of course, the power of this network should not be exaggerated. Not all priests were honest and dutiful. Systems for auditing them existed only in rudimentary form under proactive bishops.\textsuperscript{19} This network made no provision for reallocating church resources from a rich parish to a poor one where it would be more needed, which was a perennial problem until early modern poor relief.\textsuperscript{20} In times of regional famine, even a conscientious parish priest would have been quickly overwhelmed. The early medieval system of charity, while extensive, demanded that the poor come to one of its nodes. That is not, however, to say that a pauper was doomed to a life of restless

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wandering; the church also had a system of caring for a certain number of the needy and desperate in one place.

2. The *matricula* and Its Successors

The history of the *matricula*, the other great late antique institution of charity, is both like and unlike the history of the hospital. It evolved from late Roman roots into a flourishing Merovingian institution, but then fell into what scholars agree to be a decline of its charitable functions until, in the high Middle Ages, the *matricula* had ceased to concern the poor. Its Carolingian transformation helped move it away from its old role as a venue of almsgiving in a way that did not happen with the hospital. That evolution, however, was slow and uneven across the Carolingian era, and the connection with charity was the most tenacious characteristic of the old *matricula* during this period. In addition, other methods of similar care sprang up, compensating for some of the gaps created by the *matricula*’s changing course. There was a partial discontinuity of institutions but a continuity of care.

The bishop of the late Roman Empire had many responsibilities: not only preaching, administering Christian rites, and resolving disputes among his flock, but also providing financial support for his clerics, church servants, and the poor, especially certain groups of them such as widows. The word *matricula* simply means list, and specifically meant the list of those who received a regular allowance from the bishop, including (and often exclusively) the clergy.


In sixth-century Gaul, an unexpected lexical drift began to occur: writers such as Gregory of Tours spoke of the *matricula* as the exclusive province of the poor.\(^{23}\) The *matricula* by the seventh century had attained widespread diffusion across Gallic cities (and a few monasteries) in a relatively standard form. A select group of the local poor, the *matricularii* (or, rarely, *nonnones*), lived communally in a house next to the porch of a church or cathedral. Unlike the hospital, the *matricula* ensured that at least some poor were cared for in their native place instead of wandering. Their number was soon fixed, sometimes as high as forty per church but increasingly at twelve.

Some cities could boast of multiple *matriculae* at its churches. These poor or a representative begged at the church doors and presumably fared better than some other beggars who lacked this official mark of worthiness. These lucky *matricularii* were not, however, entirely dependent on the vicissitudes of daily lay generosity; they belonged to the church and its saint, and therefore received alms from the church. Often documents acknowledged that relationship with titles such as *pauperes sancti Martini*. The church or house of the poor could be endowed with property for the *matricula*, giving it at least a quasi-corporate status. A variety of poor received sustenance, including men and women, especially widows. The debilitated and those strong enough even for military service found refuge too. Whether these poor owed some kind of service to the church beyond living and praying there is unclear, although they were obligated to pray for their benefactors. Some formularies indicated that they had responsibility for foundlings left at the doorstep of the church, which may explain the lack of orphanages among Merovingian hospitals. They also have been credited with protecting the right of sanctuary in the church.\(^{24}\)


For the period between 700 and 1000 A.D., we have only snapshots of the continuing evolution of the *matricula*. Our evidence principally consists of Chrodegang’s original rule for canons, a number references in the writings of Hincmar of Reims, and a dozen charters. No evidence exists for an English *matricula*, and only a little evidence for *matriculae* east of the Rhine, mimicking the early development of the hospital. That the French *marguilliers*, lower-level church servants unconnected to charity, eventually emerged from the *matricula* and that this evolution had advanced by the eleventh century has led to the reasonable deduction that the gaps in our evidence should be filled in with a narrative of loss. However, Sternberg has rightly cautioned that the charitable *matricula* did exist in some form even as late as the eleventh century, when, for example, there is a clear reference to a “*matricula of the needy*” in Cologne. Other eleventh-century tales of a woman *matricularia* who rang the bells at one church or a *matricularius* with the keys to a monastic church clearly show their incorporation into the working structure of ecclesial *familia*, but do not necessarily mean that appointments to those positions were no longer charitable.

The changes that occurred unfolded gradually enough to escape exciting alarm from contemporaries or to call down conciliar condemnations. Nonetheless, it is possible to observe certain trends unfolding at different rates in different places: the loss of the *matricula*’s communal nature, its reconception as something closer to a fund for pious purposes rather than an institution, and the attachment of new duties to the position. Some degree of connection with charity held throughout the early Middle Ages, though it probably weakened.

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Chrodegang, bishop of Metz, attempted a thorough-going renewal of his city as a truly Christian center in the 750s; at the forefront of this effort he composed a rule for the canons of his cathedral who would implement his vision. Chrodegang’s efforts focused on ritual and education. He had little to say about the direct care of the poor, but in the final chapter of his rule he ushered the matricularii of his city into the inner circle of reform. He did this quite literally: the existing matricularii were scattered around the city at different churches, and he required them to come as a group to the canons’ private church by the cathedral twice a month for prayer and preaching. The matricularii became symbols of the lay role in the reformed city, as Martin Claussen has argued. Unfortunately, this rule tells us little more than that matriculae existed in urban and suburban churches at Metz, seemingly more or less in accord with late antique norms. Chrodegang says nothing about their daily support, prayers, or activities, other than their election of one of their members as primicerius to ensure their attendance at the fortnightly gathering and at their semi-annual confession.27

Unfortunately, Chrodegang does not tell us much about the matricula outside his own city in his own time, though it occupied a significant position within it, preserving its mature Merovingian form. His rule had limited circulation in its original form. Both Aachen’s Institutio canonicorum and the later enlarged versions of his rule (Latin and Old English) omitted any remark on the matricularii.28

There is scant evidence between Chrodegang and, a century later, Hincmar. An unpublished letter by Charlemagne around 802 recorded the judicial summons of a party from

27 The idea that he reformed the matricula along the lines of the Roman diaconiae has been convincingly refuted. Also, the chapter’s closing paragraph (which prescribes the food that the matricularii were to receive at their fortnightly meetings) is a later eighth-century addition. Chrodegang, Regula sancti Chrodegangi 34, ed. J. Bertram and J-B. Pelt, The Chrodegang Rules (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 49-51; M. A. Claussen, The Reform of the Frankish Church: Chrodegang of Metz and the Regula canonicorum in the Eighth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 60, 107-112; cf. Rouche, “La matricule,” 95-9, 104-5.

28 The Old English Version of the Enlarged Rule of Chrodegang (Regula canonicorum), ed. B. Langefeld (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003) (ChrodR 1; B10.4.1).
Saint-Martin at Tours for a court case, including six *matricularii*. The case revolved around a violation of sanctuary, which had caused a crowd of people, including “paupers” (possibly the *matricularii*) to riot.²⁹ Adalhard made a quick mention of twelve *matricularii* in his statutes. They, along with thirty other lay members of Corbie’s *familia*, assisted at various workshops and service areas of the monastery.³⁰ Here they clearly had responsibilities, without sacrificing their communal nature or presumably their status as paupers.

Hincmar’s remarks are much more revealing. They come principally from his legislation for the priests of his diocese and similar material in his more extensive *Collectio de ecclesiis et capellis*, along with a few remarks in his hagiographical writing. Hincmar had three concerns about the *matricularii* in his diocese. First and foremost, he worried that his parish priests would embezzle their portion of the tithe.³¹ He worried that these priests would “demand or accept any gift, or labor in their fields, or anything else in their service in return for a place in the *matricula*.”³² Finally, he worried that these priests would appoint their own kin or the young and able-bodied to the *matricula* instead of the truly deserving: the poor, unfit, the old, and the ill.³³ Theft, simony, and nepotism—certainly the *matricula* would have been in poor shape if these were the norm.


³² “ut nemo presbyter pro loco matricularum quodcumque xenium vel servitium in messe vel in quocumque suo servitio praesumat requirere vel accipere.” Hincmar, *Capitula IV* 2, p. 82. The reference here is to bribes including offers of personal service, not service owed to the church.

³³ Although he did allow relatives to be selected if poor and weak. Hincmar, *Capitula II* 17, p. 50; Hincmar, *Collectio de ecclesiis* 2, p. 105.
unjust appointment of the able-bodied may have been a step along the way for the *matricula* to cease being about the poor.\(^{34}\)

It is noteworthy, however, that Hincmar’s concerns presupposed a norm for the *matricula* that still maintained it as a charitable institution. The *matricula* was to benefit the truly needy out of the funds collected from church tithes. This care was to be free of any personal countergift to a priest for appointing *matricularii*, although that does not necessarily mean they owed no service to the church itself. This evidence in itself cannot reveal whether Hincmar’s castigation of those abusing this system was the act of an attentive bishop ruthlessly uprooting a few bad apples from the midst of more conscientious priests, or a failed outcry against widespread changes in the system. Other evidence from Hincmar and his time, though, suggests that while change did occur, the *matricula* itself did survive as a charitable endeavor.

The *matricula* in fact survived and spread in spite of potential abuses. It now extended into the rural regions of parochial priests, possibly into every baptismal church of some dioceses for the first time, which is evidence of a healthy, evolving institution.\(^{35}\) In the process, the pauper’s normal portion of church income, especially tithes, in Hincmar’s diocese seems to have been reserved for the parish *matricularii* instead of for more discretionary almsgiving by the priest. Such a formal selection of some parish poor as *matricularii* did not become the universal norm, but that arrangement did exist in other dioceses. Individual churches in Metz and in the rural regions nearby had their own *matriculae* in Chrodegang’s time, sowing the seeds of a diocese-wide application. In 846 on the other side of the Carolingian realms, Lothar granted a lay vassal a rural chapel and its possessions, including the right to appoint the members of its *matricula*.\(^{36}\) Whether

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\(^{34}\) Boshof, “Armenfürsorge,” 172; see also Sternberg, *Orientalium*, 140-1.


these rural *matriculariae* in Hincmar’s time were communities of the poor or simply a list of those entitled to receive regular alms from the church is uncertain.

Hincmar could take credit for one innovation that nudged the *matricularii* along the path towards being minor church employees, without yet challenging its charitable nature. The growing economy and population strained the current ecclesiastical structure as people began to form new farmsteads and villages. This caused problems because approving new churches deprived the old of their perceived tithe-rights, and there was some justifiable suspicion that nobles wanted to create their churches to keep control of their estates’ tithes. Bishops eventually devised rules to cover these circumstances, and aristocrats erected their illicit churches anyway, but in the meantime Hincmar devised a system of outlying chapels in under-served areas with priests riding the circuit. Without a resident priest, these chapels needed someone to maintain them, so Hincmar assigned a *matricularius* (singular) to each chapel. The priest had the duty to convey the due portion of the tithe to him when able or, if distance made this unworkable, to assign him a tiny plot of land (one *iugerum*) at the chapel from which to live. Only a poor man would have accepted such an arrangement (or been eligible to receive part of the tithe), so the *matricula* still benefited the needy, but it came with a new type of responsibility to work for the church and with the separation of the *matricularius* from a communal life.

The charters provide evidence that the *matricula* existed in some form and received tithes throughout the ninth and tenth centuries both in west and east Francia. An 896 charter of


38 Hincmar, *Collectio de ecclesiis* 1, p. 75.

Zwetibold referred to the provision of *pauperum et matriculariorum*, implying that the *matricula* still served the needy.\(^{40}\) An early charter of Charles the Bald referred to a special officer at Saint-Denis, the *archicustos matriculae*, whose influence had prompted the royal beneficence.\(^{41}\) Otto’s later reference to an abbot and a *custos of matriculae* indicates the possibility of a well-ordered, communal life continuing, although the specific duties of these officers remain unknown.\(^{42}\)

The most suggestive charters are two acts of Charles from 862 and 867 on behalf of Saint-Denis and Saint-Vaast. In the first, the donation is made on behalf of “the treasury or *matricula*,” whose guardians were to feed twenty paupers daily as alms for Charles’ deceased parents.\(^{43}\) The *matricula* here seems an account from which to pay charitable expenses instead of being a community housed in its own building. The 867 charter heightens this impression; the donations received by the *matricula* went “to the expenses of lights, of the *matricularii* and other things needed for the churches in the monastery.”\(^{44}\) The *matricula* was not just for the *matricularii* anymore, at least for the authors of this charter. This transference of the corporate name to a church fund might account for Hincmar’s willingness to separate a lone *matricularius* from the traditional community through placing him in a solitary chapel.

There was no wholesale destruction of the *matricula* during these centuries, but it did encounter some difficulties beyond a simple mission drift. The *Gesta sanctorum patrum Fontanellensis coenobii* recorded a *matricula* being held in benefice (with the *matricularii*

\(^{40}\) *Die Urkunden Zwetibolds* no. 7, p. 30.

\(^{41}\) *Recueil des Actes de Charles II* no. 185, 1:489-90

\(^{42}\) *Die Urkunden des Königs Otto I* no. 101, pp. 183-4. These officers could have been simply administrators of charitable fund, but the reference to an *abba* with its monastic connotations strongly implies a more organized community of the poor.

\(^{43}\) “matriculariae vel thesaurō… viginti pauperibus cottidie alimonia refectionis ab ejusdem thesaurī vel matriculariae custodibus perpetualiter ministretur…” *Recueil des Actes de Charles II* no. 238, 2:31.

presumably losing some of their income) during the eighth-century reign of Abbot Teutsinde, a supposed villain who made a habit of alienating church land to his cronies. The *Vita Rigoberti* described another alienation of the *matricula*’s endowment which, at its restoration, supported canons instead of *matricularii*. Both of these sources date from the ninth century and describe abuses rather than norms, but are plausible for specific cases.

The *Vita Rigoberti* stands as nearly our only evidence for such a transformation of *matricula*, although the analogy with the parallel transformation of some *xenodochia* to monasteries suggests that it may not have been unique. A few clerics, especially Alcuin, referred to themselves in their letters as *matricularii*, but that was a humility trope not an office; certainly Boniface’s claim to be an “unworthy *matricularius* of the universal church” could not have referred to an ecclesial prebend. It served the same purpose as calling oneself a slave or servant, with perhaps slightly more emphasis on one’s dependence on God. In tenth-century Bavaria, one vita did seemingly link canons and the matricula again. Gerhard’s *Life of St. Ulrich of Augsburg* equated the office of bishop with the *pastor matriculae*, spoke of the *matricula* as a church with a choir space, and made several references to *matricularii* who sang psalms, led processions with crosses and incense, and ate with the bishop and other clergy. The reasonable deduction is that


these were the cathedral canons; at the very least, the *matricula* was very different from its Merovingian roots, assuming it had any link with the old institution. However, no previous charitable *matricula* is recorded in Augsburg, leaving open the possibility that someone inappropriately lifted the term from ancient texts without understanding it. Gerhard even may have derived the word from the common phrase “mother church” (e.g. *in matrici aecclesia*), which Gerhard did use.\(^{49}\) In any case, Gerhard uniquely witnesses to the idea of the *matricularius*-canon in his time period, leaving us with little more than speculation.\(^{50}\)

One further transformation of the matricula lay in its relation with the hospital. Hincmar described a Merovingian “*matricula* of St. Mary, which is called a *xenodochion*, where 12 paupers wait for alms.”\(^{51}\) The equation of the two reflects ninth-century realities, not Merovingian ones. A 948 diploma of Otto I also placed *matricularii* inside a *xenodochium* in the western part of his realm.\(^{52}\) Once hospitals began caring for permanent residents, very little separated those poor from the *matricularii*. It may in fact be that the new association of the *matricula* with church service owed something to the hospital’s annexation of its previous role and population.

In short, there is a considerable fog blurring the path or paths taken by the Carolingian *matricula* from its Merovingian roots as a community of the permanently poor, supported by begging and a church allowance, repaid with some minimal ecclesial responsibilities. In the second half of the ninth century, at the time of Hincmar, it appears as a fund based largely on tithes

\(^{49}\) Gerhard, *Vita s. Oudalrici* c. 13, 27, 28, pp. 403, 413, 417.


\(^{52}\) *Die Urkunden des Königs Otto I* no. 101, pp. 183-4.
operating in many scattered churches for the support of individuals who owed varying degrees of service, though this evolution was very uneven. The *matricula* remained generally charitable throughout its early medieval evolution, even as its fate varied and it drifted from its original mission and form.

This drift is, however, not quite the end of this institutional tale. Other initiatives supplemented gaps left by the *matricula*‘s slow mutation. The poor in need of a permanent dole and unable to work had recourse to other resources. Those hospitals which aimed at their needs, such as Ansegis’ *xenodochium* for the elderly, provided one potential safety net. Other poor no doubt lived a vagabond life, wandering from hospital to monastic hospital, the premiere charitable institution of early medieval Europe.

The hospital was not the only recourse beyond the *matricula*. A new select group of poor found care as *elemosinarii* in the Ottonian empire. The word generally referred to an almsgiver and then, in eleventh-century France, to an officer charged with helping the poor, but for a century or more it took a detour and denoted those poor who found a firm patron. Gerhard first revealed their presence as the recipients of Ulrich’s miracles sometime in the two decades after his death in 973. One debilitated woman was introduced as “a certain *elemosinaria* of Abraham, bishop of Freising.” A noble matron from Burgundy traveled to Augsburg with her crippled *elemosinarius*, who also found healing. These two paupers both “belonged” to someone, or rather had patrons, whether lay or clerical. As clients with permanent disabilities they found care in a stable, quasi-

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institutional relationship. Their relationship nevertheless appears less formal and less communal than that of the *matricula.* Although the word is never used of Ulrich’s poor, crowds of them did accompany him on his journeys and may have been *elemosinarii* or a social group that would soon evolve into them.⁵⁵ Unlike his *matricularii*-canons, these *elemosinarii* seem to have met a need and appeared throughout the empire in the eleventh century, usually in connection with churches.⁵⁶

Of course, no institution or special name was needed to extend regular help to a known person. Wealthy individuals and local priests seem to have often struck up such semi-formal arrangements.⁵⁷ England, despite normally being inhospitable terrain for charitable institutions, made the first baby step towards regular provision of welfare by the state when Æthelstan (d. 939) ordered each of his reeves to maintain one poor man with food, clothes, and coin.⁵⁸ Eadred (d. 955) made provision to support at a number of estates transferred to church control twelve beggars each in perpetuity, with each poor man being replaced upon his death.⁵⁹ These initiatives derived

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⁵⁵ Gerhard, *Vita s. Oudalrici,* 5-6, pp. 393-5.


⁵⁷ See above, and also Aimoin, *Translatio ss. martyrum Georgii monachi, Aurelii et Nathaliae* 3.3, PL 115, col. 950D-951A.


⁵⁹ “þonne wille ic ðæt man nime to ælcan þissa hama twelf ælmesmen, and gif hwæt hera ænigan getide, sette man þær ðeðere to and stande þis eal þa hwile þe Cristendum beo, Gode to lofe, and minra sawle æleisnesse.” *Select English Historical Documents of the Ninth and Tenth Centuries* no. 21 (“Will of King Eadred”), ed. F.E. Harmer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), p. 35 (S 1515); N. Orme and M. Webster, *The English Hospital,* 1070-1570 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 18. Some of these estates do not seem to have been bestowed as he had wished: S. Keynes, “The ‘Dunstan B’ Charters,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 23 (1994), 188-9. This seems to have been more a personal spiritual act than the discharge of official responsibilities, insofar as one can distinguish the two: similarly see the precedent in Asser, *Life of King Alfred / De rebus gestis Alfredi regis* 16, ed. W. H. Stevenson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), p. 15.
from the more traditional act of post-mortem almsgiving from royal estates. And that is to say nothing of the monasteries that regularly provided food to certain paupers. Some may have been brought into the monastic familia as provendarii or servants (although neither was technically charity), but more seem to have been adopted formally or informally as regular recipients of alms. This held true for Hildemar’s Corbie or Civate, ninth-century Saxon nunneries, and tenth-century England. Adalhard’s Statuta suggest that in addition to Corbie’s 150 provendarii, others found support at several of the monastery’s cellae. And the magnificent generosity at the porta of Saint-Riquier cannot be forgotten.

3. The Tithe and Ecclesiastical Charity

How was all of this generosity possible? To give out money and food, or to erect buildings for wayfarers, meant that the giver first had to have goods from which to give. When bishops railed against usurpers of church resources as murderers of the poor (necatores pauperum), as they had for centuries, what they said was actually quite true despite any possible exaggeration or self-serving motives. For rich givers, charity would not have been a problem, and many bishoprics


62 Adalhard, Statuta 1.1.1, p. 365.

63 Hariulf, Chronique de l’abbaye de Saint-Riquier, 307, on which see above n. 8.

and monasteries possessed enough endowments that they could sustain a measure of charitable donations except during exceptional disruptions (war, famine, etc.). Aristocrats promoted to church or monastic office brought their personal wealth with them. Many monasteries especially had accumulated a considerable amount of land by the later eighth century, although by no means all.65

These religious endowments, while considerable in the aggregate, still did not meet all the expenses of the church, including charity. This was true even as the economy grew during the ninth century and beyond. The church did not merely give to the poor out of its own patrimony, but also collected wealth from others and redistributed a portion of that to the needy and weak. This pooling under religious auspices initially drew on voluntary lay offerings and customary payments for sacraments (although these latter were officially frowned upon).66 Then, in 779, Charlemagne made payment of the ecclesiastical tithe (decimas or “tenth”) obligatory and enforceable, followed much later by Æthelstan in tenth-century England. The tithe was not a charitable institution in Carolingian times, but its royal enforcement meant a sudden and large-scale influx of revenues into church coffers and then (partially) back out into charitable work. Carolingian institutions of charity would have existed without the tithe in civil law, as their Merovingian counterparts did, but their actual scale and history would have been unthinkable.67


67 The general history of the tithe has been well mapped by numerous previous scholars, several of whom have noted its importance for ecclesiastical charity. I discuss primary sources which are underutilized or need further reinterpretation where possible, but for most of what follows see especially: P. Viard, Histoire de la dîme ecclésiastique, principalement en France jusqu’au Décret de Gratien (Dijon: Jobard, 1909), 1-148; Lesne, Histoire, 1:186-90; É. Lesne, “La dîme des biens ecclésiastiques aux IXe et Xe siècles,” Revue d’histoire ecclésiastique 13 (1912): 477-503, 650-73, and 14 (1913): 97-112, 489-510; E. Perels, “Die
The ecclesiastical tithe ultimately stemmed from the obligatory tithes to the poor and to the Levites imposed on the Israelites in Mosaic law (Lv 27:30, Nm 18:21-29, Dt 14:22-9), but its practice by Christians was by no means a foregone conclusion. Augustine and other patristic writers, reflecting on the Gospel report that the Pharisees paid tithes faithfully (Mt 23:23, Lk 11:42), and on another verse urging that “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:20), applied the language of tithes and first-fruits to almsgiving. The tithe/tenth served as an example and a guideline for the minimum amount that a Christian ought to give in alms. Only at the beginning of the sixth century did Caesarius of Arles offer the first formulation of what became the Christian ecclesiastical tithe. His doctrine of the ecclesiastical tithe posited that it was a duty incumbent on every Christian to pay ten percent of their income, whether derived from agriculture or other revenue, to the church, which would then distribute it in its entirety to the poor; nevertheless, the tithe was distinct from almsgiving, which could only be paid from the remaining nine-tenths.  

Unsurprisingly, his radical idea did not meet with universally overwhelming approval and no church council backed it during his lifetime. Only at the Council of Mâcon in 585, fifty years after Caesarius’ death, did the Gallic bishops begin to impose the tithe on their dioceses, and there

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is slender evidence of regular imposition of tithes even after that until the eighth century.\(^69\) During that period Caesarius’ doctrine quietly gained influence, largely due to his highly successful sermons masquerading under the name of Augustine or Athanasius. Indeed, early florilegia on the tithe draw exclusively on his pseudonymous sermons and the Bible.\(^70\) By the eighth century, the right of the church to receive tithes according to Caesarius’ doctrine had found general acceptance as an ancient Christian custom—at least among the churchmen who would be receiving it—with one important modification. The poor no longer enjoyed exclusive rights to the tithe. Tithes merged with regular church income and as such were subject to the standard three- or fourfold division between bishop, clergy, church fabric and the poor. And that division was not necessarily equal.\(^71\)

Excommunication, the initial sanction against tithe-evaders, was a threat Christians might take seriously and no doubt a number of Franks paid their tithes, but nonetheless a large gap yawned between theological acceptance of the tithe and its practical enforcement. That changed with Charlemagne’s 779 Capitulary of Heristal, which ordered everyone to pay.\(^72\) There is little question that this law was effective, since charters soon began treating the tithe as a precious commodity and bishops quickly began regulating the tithe in detail or resolving disputes about its collection. The fact that the religious and (increasingly) the secular elite could benefit themselves

\(^69\) The Council of Tours 567 is usually cited as the first legislation on the tithe, but there is nothing in its wording incompatible with the Patristic idea of the tithe as a model of (voluntary) almsgiving: Sternberg, *Orientalium*, 28.


no doubt helped actualize this important source of funds for, among other things, charity. It was the tithe, above all else, that brought stable revenue to the parishes and allowed poor relief to occur there.\textsuperscript{73}

There were limits to that revenue. Despite legal enforcement, there were tax evaders. Agobard complained that some of his rural flock chose to pay instead the religious experts in whom they had the most faith: weather shamans.\textsuperscript{74} Jonas of Orleans warned his aristocratic readers that they had no control over their tithes after they had paid them and could not require any services in return, even extra masses.\textsuperscript{75} Perhaps the most serious problem from the charitable point of view was the rapidly sprouting custom of bishops, abbots, kings, and lords granting away the tithe or part of the tithe as though it were regular income, or a lord’s collection of part of the tithe of his churches as his own income.\textsuperscript{76}

A good deal of care must be taken in discussing the Carolingian tithe because Caesarius’ victory was not quite complete in another sense as well. Tithing not only existed as an ecclesiastical tax and a convenient percentage for some secular rents, but also as the old customary practice of giving a tenth in alms for some special purpose. The two co-existed. Wala, while still a layman, was “generous in alms, and a most munificent distributor of tithes… After the annual

\textsuperscript{73} On parochial wealth, see van Rhijn, \textit{Shepherds}, 182-200; cf. Nelson, “Making Ends,” 26-34. Also Constable, \textit{Monastic Tithe}, 29-30, 35-8, 50-1; Contreni, “From Polis,” 157-60. Charlemagne’s insistence on the tithes’ payment by the newly conquered Saxons was not mere legalism or insensitivity to its impact on Christianization (although probably both affected him), but also a realistic perception that building the ecclesiastical structure in Saxony from the parish level upwards required money: cf. Alcuin, \textit{Epistola} 110, pp. 157-9.


\textsuperscript{75} Jonas of Orelans, \textit{De institutione laicali libri tres} 2.19, PL 106, cols. 204-6. Once again the authorities cited constituted only scripture and Caesarius’ sermon 33. Jonas assumes that his readers pay their tithes.

tithing, he unceasingly gave a daily one to Christ's poor." Wala paid his due ecclesiastical tithe annually, but also distributed eleemosynary tithes on a daily basis. Similarly, Ansgar granted his hospital in Bremen the tithes from several villages, but he also made his own donations from the tithes that he had collected as bishop. He bestowed a tithe of his tithes on the poor (beyond their already allotted share?); in every fifth year he offered an extra tithe of his animals as alms before making a regular tithe from them; and he also gave away a fourth part of the silver that was given to his churches. In addition to making the collection of tithes more palatable to his occasionally restive Saxon flock, his practice demonstrates how an eleemosynary tithe could be practiced alongside the obligatory ecclesiastical one. And sometimes, at least when discussing the portion of the tithe bestowed on the poor, alms and tithes could still be treated as synonyms even by learned theologians.

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78 “Specialius tamen hospitalem paupe rum in Brema constitutum habebat, ad quem decimas de nonnullis villis dispositus, ut ibi cum cotidiana susceptione pauperum aegroti quoque recrearentur. Per omnem quoque episcopatum suum decimas animalium et omnium re ditione decimasque decimarum quae ad eum pertinebant in pauperum expensionem distribuebat. Et quicquid argentum vel cuislibet census illi proveniebat, in usus indigentium decimatub. Insuper in quinto semper anno omnium animalium, licet ante decimata fuerint, ad elemosinarum dationem iterum ex integro decimationem faciebat. De argento etiam, quod ad ecclesias in monasteriis veniebat, quartam partem ad hoc ipsum destinatam habebat.” Rimbert, Vita Anskarii 35, p. 69.

79 Hincmar, Capitula IV 2, pp. 82-3, who explains that priests who give the matricularii their portion of the tithe are selling what the faithful have given to God for the sake of mercy; and since Christ is mercy and identifies with the recipients of almsgiving (Mt 25:40), such bad priests are selling God. His argument explicitly relies on the translation of eleemosyna as misericordia; by putting mercy at the center of tithing (instead of justice), Hincmar is free to incorporate scriptural passages normally linked to almsgiving, but does so at the price of blurring the distinction between the two practices. He is, admittedly, encountering a tricky theological problem that was not directly addressed, much less resolved, by early medieval thinkers: priests and other churchmen were called to give alms and to set an example for their flock in doing so, but they actually gave from the communal wealth of the church—the “patrimony of the poor” to which the poor had rights—so in what sense was this really almsgiving if it was owed rather than a free gift? Hincmar pushes this gray area in the direction of it being a free gift so that even the obligatory tithes from the lay faithful are a work of mercy. Caesarius had separated tithing as an obligation of justice from almsgiving as a voluntary work of mercy, but the two themes had co-existed uneasily in previous patristic thinkers and normally continued to do so in the early Middle Ages (for justice and mercy, see chapter 3 above). Hincmar
Hospitals were major beneficiaries of the ecclesiastical tithe. Aachen commanded the nuns and canons to endow their hospitals with tithes from the church’s property (but not including those tithes collected by the churches from *villa*). These were the ecclesiastical tithes from estates owned directly by the cathedral or nunnery. Monks, nuns, and canons also were to give a tithe of all the gifts and alms that they received to their hospitals. Both sources of tithes then were already church property. Technically even bishops and church lands owed the ecclesiastical tithe, but since the clerics at least would be paying themselves, this was generally ignored and the allocation of the full tithe to the churches’ charitable work no doubt seemed sensible. The continuing custom of voluntary alms from a tenth of one’s income quite possibly inspired this legislation.

The actual practice of tithing in hospitals proved more complex. It had to compete with other interests and needs, including the *matricula*, whose endowment with tithes sometimes preceded that of the hospital. Corbie, as we have seen, granted a tithe of its income to the *porta*, wrote, “Saepe vos admonui de matriculariis, quales suscipere debeatis et qualiter eis partem decimae dispensare debeatis…”

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82 *Recueil des Actes de Charles II* no. 433, 2:468.
but only a fifth of that to the hospital, and other monasteries also followed a similar division. A few generous monasteries gave a tithe to the hospital of the poor and a second tithe (the nona) to the hospital of the rich, as Hildemar suggested. Boshof’s extensive study of the actual practice of tithes and hospitals suggests that Aachen’s ideal did not usually describe the evolving customs of the ninth century, but that it was not without influence.

The English adopted the practice of tithing relatively late, even though knowledge of continental tithing made its way to England much earlier. Theodore of Canterbury’s late seventh-century judgments on the tithe taught that all, except for priests and the poor, were to pay tithes to the poor and travelers, and the laity was to hand over its tithes to the church. Theodore may not have promoted the tithe extensively and, in the decades after him, the common Anglo-Saxon view

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83 Adalhard, Statuta 2.10, 6.1.18, 6.2.19, pp. 373, 388, 389; also Concilium Pitres p. 172; Concilium Verberie B, p. 333.

84 Hildemar, Expositio 53, p. 505; Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 295.

85 Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 307-31, 335-6; with the caveats that these charters only cover a fraction of hospitals, that they rarely describe a hospital’s full endowment and that piecemeal endowments of tithes as property became increasingly common with time in general.

86 Iudicia Theodori (Die Canones Theodori Cantuariensis und ihre Überlieferungsformen), version G 45, 53 and 155, version U 2.2.8, 2.14.1, 2.14.10 and 2.14.11, ed. P. W. Finsterwalder (Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus, 1929), pp. 243-4, 255, 314, 332-3. All of this is consistent with Caesarius, although developed in some different directions than on the continent. His source could have been Caesarius’ own sermons, or the one of the Gallic councils, to whose decrees he did have access: M. Brett, “Theodore and the Latin Canon Law,” in Archbishop Theodore: Commemorative Studies on his Life and Influence, ed. M. Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 123-5, 137. It should also be noted that these canons are somewhat unclear: Constable, Monastic Tithe, p. 25, n. 2; F. Tinti, “The ‘Costs’ of Pastoral Care: Church Dues in Late Anglo-Saxon England,” in Pastoral Care in Late Anglo-Saxon England, ed. Tinti (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), 29. The most important passage (U 2.14.11) also occurs in our least reliable version and not in the earlier G: T. Charles-Edwards, “The Penitential of Theodore and the Iudicia Theodori,” in Archbishop Theodore, ed. M. Lapidge, 153, 163-5.

Some Irish made attempts at forging a doctrine of tithing as part of their adoption of elements of Mosaic law: C. Etchingham, Church Organisation in Ireland A.D. 650 to 1000 (Maynooth: Laigin Publications, 1999), 240-71. Based on his collection and translation of the Old Irish evidence, as well as my own reading of the Latin evidence, this effort had no connection with Caesarius and represents a novel theory different from later tithing practices. This teaching seems to have had limited effect in Ireland and no influence outside, unless perhaps in partially influencing the Iudicia Theodori.
in of tithing was limited to the eleemosynary tithe, the tithe as alms.\textsuperscript{87} A 786 legatine synod tried to impose continental practice on the English, but the legislation was “a dead letter.”\textsuperscript{88} Only in Æthelstan’s first law code from the late 920’s did tithes gain royal backing, and the charters reflected that switch. Eadgar’s law code (between 959 and 972) gave ample motivation for tithe payments; his fines made a very literal application of Caesarius’ spiritual warning that from those unwilling to pay one tenth, God would exact nine tenths of their possessions, with royal agents here taking on God’s role.\textsuperscript{89}

Even in the tenth century, the Anglo-Saxon church preserved certain peculiarities. Rents on products besides grain were not always paid. Laity did not usurp tithes directly. The division of tithes between new and old churches followed an orderly arrangement, and alienations of tithes from churches to monasteries were less common.\textsuperscript{90} Some churchmen still repeated the idea that tithes were in fact alms, despite their obligatory character.\textsuperscript{91} The Anglo-Saxon church had previously funded itself with a probably much lighter agricultural rent (churchscot), and that

\textsuperscript{87} [Stephen of Ripon]. \textit{The Life of Bishop Wilfrid / Vita Wilfridi I ep. Eboracensis} 65, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), pp. 140-2; Bede, \textit{In Lucae evangelium expositio} 4.11.41-2 ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 120 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1960), pp. 241-3; both use alms and tithes as synonyms and neither refers to a regular, annual collection.

\textsuperscript{88} Blair, \textit{Church}, 435-6; Alcuin, \textit{Epistolae} 3, c. 17, pp. 25-6.


\textsuperscript{91} “...þonne forleosan ge þa ælmesan þe ge nu for Gode syllap, & hie eow to nænigre are ne beliempþ. On þissum godspelle sæg þæt æt þeopan sceattas syn earma manna gafol.” \textit{Blickling Homilies} 4, p. 41. The second sentence comes again from Caesarius, \textit{Sermones} 33.1, p. 144, but here used in a very un-Caesarian manner.
continued strong alongside the tithe and a number of other peculiarly English dues.\textsuperscript{92} With the tenth-century introduction of obligatory tithing, the English church would have gone from being relatively under-funded in comparison with the continent to exceptional financial strength.

This economic difference explains much of why English institutional charity lagged behind that of the continent. The collapse of urban and Christian culture at the end of Roman Britain before charitable institutions could embed themselves meant that the new Anglo-Saxon church had to build up its infrastructure from scratch. Dioceses, cathedral centers, and basic monasteries understandably attracted investments of time and money, while the problem of reinventing specialized institutions of charity did not.\textsuperscript{93} The massive Viking attacks of the ninth century put an additional strain on ecclesiastical resources. The English church could have tried to introduce tithing earlier to boost its revenue, but did not. Even assuming that traditional practices of hospitality still left demand for more institutional support, good reasons existed for not meeting that demand by enacting the tithe. As a fledging missionary church in its early years, the English church would have had difficulty in coercing excessive taxes from its flock without hampering its efforts at Christianization. The enforcement of tithing also required the development of a powerful, religiously motivated monarchy. And, of course, English churchmen had first to accept the theology behind the tithe.

4. Conclusion

The evidence for the early medieval network of institutional charity is uneven, but promising. The very fact that charity was an adjunct function of most religious institutions made

\textsuperscript{92} Blair, \textit{Church}, 434-48. These peculiarly English dues continued after the conquest, but faded in importance as Norman influence increased: Tinti, “Costs of Pastoral Care,” 46-9.

\textsuperscript{93} To what extent these institutions were distinct is part of the perennial “minster debate” among Anglo-Saxonists, but need not concern us here. Blair, \textit{Church} (2005), offers an extended investigation of the minster with bibliography, though note too Foot, \textit{Monastic Life} (2006).
the provision of poor relief possible at thousands of small nodes across much of Europe: major churches, parishes, oratories, autonomous hospitals, monasteries, and tiny cellae. Such a framework suited both the rural demographics of the needy and charity’s primarily religious roots in divine love and spiritual practices. The growth of tithing backed by secular enforcement multiplied the possibility of beneficence at parishes and beyond. That is probably the greatest Carolingian contribution to the history of the institutional provision of charity in the Middle Ages.

The general trajectory of institutions also points towards success and certainly an organic vitality. The transition from Merovingian to Carolingian eras did not come as a major destructive shock, although it was a period of evolution. Hospitals became more dependent on monasteries, but also increased in complexity, organization and number. The needy of all varieties, including the local poor, found care at a spectrum of hospitals and at monastic portae. The matricula began to drift away from its charitable focus, but only in fits and starts. Meanwhile hospitals, the system of the elemosinarii and other such services for the permanently needy addressed some of the consequent deficit. Of course, greed caused continual attrition to good intentions, wars affected some foundations, and other religious priorities sometimes came before love of neighbor. The fate of the tithe—most successful when partially diverted towards the needs of the powerful—encapsulates a central problematic paradox of charity.

A few patterns do emerge from the evidence. West Francia led in number and quality of institutions throughout the eighth and ninth centuries, building on its late antique heritage. East Francia lagged slightly, especially outside its western and southern regions, but in the tenth century stood on par with its neighbors. Indeed, some of its developments—like the elemosinarii—show perhaps greater strength. England remained relatively underdeveloped institutionally, although that began to change too in the tenth century.

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While charity from church institutions is the best documented aspect of early medieval care for the poor, it is important to keep in mind that this charity grew out of the individual responsibilities of churchmen as Christian exemplars to give alms and that individual almsgiving retained a certain priority through this period. Ecclesiastical care provided a skeleton, ensuring a minimal level of support across the land, but personal almsgiving had the job of providing the muscle behind early medieval charity.

Adalhard closed his statute on the hospital and *porta* by charging the future officers of Corbie that they always “heed God’s will in gifts and the distribution rather than our own stingy example, since each one will have to answer for himself.”95 The constant provision of hospitality and other largesse indicates that religious men and women of the early Middle Ages did hold in mind Christ’s precepts and future judgment, at least some of the time. But what of those people whom they served? The silent poor still await discussion.

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95 “ut in largitate ac distributione dei potius attendant voluntatem quam nostrae parcitatis exemplum, quoniam unusquisque est pro se redditurus rationem.” Adalhard, *Statuta* 2.10, p. 374.
PART III:

CHARITY AND SOCIETY
CHAPTER 9

THE FACES OF THE POOR

Cyran (d. ca. 655) began his life as a fairly typical Merovingian saint, at least according to his ninth- or tenth-century hagiographer. Cyran hailed from a noble family, but disdained the expected path of secular success. Giving his goods to the poor, he became a deacon at Tours and eventually founded two monasteries in the diocese of Bourges at Lonrey and Méobecque, the former of which would later bear his name. In the tradition of Benedict and other saintly abbots, Cyran managed to annoy his monks with his demands that they behave like saints and soon found himself ousted from his own monastery.¹

There were signs, however, earlier in his vita that Cyran’s saintly path might prove atypical in its particularly vehement attitude towards wealth. The anonymous author stated that Cyran gave away all his possessions while only a deacon and not yet a monk. He not only explained this act with the expected reference to Christ’s command to sell all and follow him (Mt 19:21), but also expanded on that theme to insist that stripping oneself of all possessions was a key component of following Christ since he himself had owned nothing (Lk 14:33, Mt 8:20): “so that, naked, he

¹ Cyran, also known as Sigiramnus or Siran: *Vita Sigiramni abbatis Longoretensis* pref., 1-21, ed. B. Krusch, MGH SRM 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1902), pp. 606-619; for background and context, see J-C. Poulin, *L’Idéal de Sainteté dans l’Aquitaine carolingienne, d’après les sources hagiographiques (750-950)* (Quebec: Presses de l’Universite Laval, 1975), 81-98, 173. Especially given the time gap between Cyran’s life and the extant vita, and the lack of surviving sources for this vita, it is unclear how much we can say about Cyran’s actual historical career (although the broad outlines of it seem credible). My interest here is the anonymous hagiographer’s attempt to picture and describe a life of the kind lived by Cyran.
might follow Christ in all things that, moreover, he might be crucified with [Christ].” Then, in an interlude between his clerical and monastic career, Cyran joined with an Irish bishop and his company on a pilgrimage to Rome. Observing the locals sweating to gather in the harvest from the vineyards and, we are told, moved by the fraternal love and pity that he customarily bore towards the poor and needy, Cyran lent his strength to their labors while his companions rested. This willingness to part with his fellow religious—to say nothing of his old aristocratic peers—and take part in the life of the lowly made the saint a spectacle of humility before angels and men. It also made him unusual even by the standards of early medieval hagiography.

Cyran’s vita charged down this idiosyncratic path after describing his expulsion from his own monastery at Lonrey. Instead of founding another monastery, as Benedict had done, Cyran took to the road and adopted the life of a wandering pauper, alternately begging and working for his food. This decision no doubt flowed logically from earlier references to his appreciation of Christ’s poverty and humility. And certainly monks were expected to embrace those virtues. His journey to Rome with the Irish (or more general familiarity with wandering Irish monks on the part of his hagiographer) exposed him to their spirituality of ascetic travel and voluntary exile. Yet Cyran engaged in a perpetual traveling without ending at a pilgrimage site, a monastic foundation, or a missionary field, one of which was frequently the case for the better-known Irish monks on the continent. Such a life of permanent ascetic travel was not unprecedented, but it was alien to the normative Carolingian monastic milieu. Cyran’s loving solidarity with the common poor in this

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2 “ut Christum… per omnia nudus sequi posset, quin potius cum illo qui pro nobis omnibus patibulum crucis sustinuit, cum ipso crucifigeretur crucemque post ipsum deferret abnegare se ipsum.” *Vita Sigiramni* 8, p. 611.

3 *Vita Sigiramni* 10, pp. 611-2.


5 “…omnibus diebus vite sue velut peregrinus peregit.” *Vita Sigiramni* 22, p. 619.

vita, however, set him apart even from other wandering monks. When on that journey to Rome he entered the vineyards while his fellow religious rested, Cyran entered a new world. When he began his perpetual pilgrimage, he became “just like one of the little beggars.”7 In this world of the lowest classes, we see him tramping down the roads, fishing for food, helping laborers pull carts along, joining and chatting with a group of beggars as they sat together outside a church, and patiently meeting the disdain of potential almsgivers—who nonetheless gave him food, while wrinkling up their noses at his filthy, mendicant guise.8

“If a man would make himself invisible, there is no means more certain than to become poor,” as a Spanish folksong teaches, but occasionally that veil of invisibility partially lifts for the historian.9 The Vita Sigiramni is, to my knowledge, a unique early medieval source, in which a writer (and, by virtue of that fact, a member of an elite class) tried to picture what life looked like when viewed from the bottom of society. It is hardly an unproblematic source: the author drew on earlier traditions (probably both written and oral) and his concern lay in proving his hero’s sanctity.10 And the anonymous author clearly felt conflicted about portraying someone who, as a

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7 “veluti unus ex pauperculis.” *Vita Sigiramni* 22, 29, pp. 619, 623; see also c. 24, p. 620. The homeless, mendicant monastic experiment in the fifth-century eastern Roman Empire, by contrast, insisted on its monastic identity (and a corollary right to material aid from the community, like the apostles) in part through wearing the monastic habit. Cyran is closer to the Byzantine “Fool of God” tradition in which a holy man appears to be a regular, pitiable person. If this influence reached Francia, Cyran is our sole exemplar of an attempt to make a hybrid of such a life with more typical saintly monasticism: see D. Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 158-62, 245-6.


10 *Vita Sigiramni* pref., p. 606 refers to an older *vita*, but no trace of one survives for comparison. This *vita* survives in an eleventh-century manuscript. The ninth- or tenth-century date is based largely on linguistic analysis. The monastery of origin is unspecified, but Saint-Cyran at Lonrey is the logical
proper early medieval saint, ought to have been a benefactor of the poor, a *pauperibus pater*, instead of begging and laboring for his living. Nonetheless, it is this kind of source that begins to reveal details about those people on the receiving end of almsgiving and the attitudes towards them by their social superiors. This chapter begins by exploring Karl Bosl’s famous *pauperes/potentiores* dichotomy and suggests ways in which that definition of *pauperes* needs to be expanded in order to understand the sources concerning charity. It then moves into a more detailed investigation of the common poor and the causes for their needs. Several categories of the poor received special consideration in medieval sources (widows, orphans, and *peregrini*), and so they receive it here as well.

This chapter does not aim at offering a comprehensive account of early medieval poverty. Other scholars have made attempts at doing so, primarily relying on legislative sources, polyptychs or other estate inventories, and archaeology. I propose here, first, simply to indicate the quite

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11 See *Vita Sigiramni* 31, p. 624, and below, section 4. That uneasiness and the consequent discontinuities within the *vita* suggests that the author did inherit a basic framework of stories regarding Cyran, but arranged and interpreted them according to how he believed a saint ought to have thought and acted. I assume that the details of his anecdotes regarding the poor reflect ninth- or tenth-century realities, although it is possible that they stem from seventh- or eighth-century sources and instead reflect that earlier time period.

12 The lack of early medieval concern about distinguishing the “deserving” poor from the “undeserving” ones, and the acceptance of poverty as a natural condition, both contributed to a mindset among the literate that discouraged close investigation of the poor. Although that is true, there are enough scattered references throughout all the genres of sources considered thus far to make a sketch of almsgiving’s recipients.

wide variety of people who could receive alms. Second, viewing poverty through this lens of early medieval charity offers some new insights into how the poor lived, especially the non-working poor who often fail to appear in the normal sources. Vulnerability, as well as acute material need, characterized views of poverty; and this widespread vulnerability helped make charity a foundational part of the functioning of society.

1. Defining the Poor

The longest episode in the *Vita Sigiramni*’s account of Cyran’s wandering occurred when he approached a woman for alms. With one glance at his rags and his dirty face, she held him in contempt, although she gave him a loaf of bread *pro misericordia* (reflecting the early medieval emphasis on showing mercy to everyone, regardless of their “worth”). In the chapter following that story, Cyran found a little man (called *homuncio* and *homunculus*) struggling to carry a burden and, calling him brother (*frater*), willingly put his own neck in the peasant’s yoke. Another laboring man whom he similarly assists appears in the story as a little man working a little farm (*homunculum ex ruriculis, infelix homuncio*), and is also identified as a pauper (*pauper miserrime*).

The poor here are those who are small and insignificant. They are those who can be looked down upon by their betters. These paupers might have land from which to support themselves, but they appear insubstantial in comparison to the kind of people an aristocrat or the monk of a prominent monastery considered their peers.

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14 *Vita Sigiramni* 24, p. 620. The story continues in c. 25-7, pp. 620-2, with the woman’s realization of her ill-founded judgment after a minor act of divine retribution.

15 *Vita Sigiramni* 28, p. 622.

16 *Vita Sigiramni* 30, p. 623.
In a seminal article, Karl Bosl argued that this kind of social definition held the key to understanding early medieval references to the poor. Contrary to the practice in antiquity or the latter part of the Middle Ages, early medieval people contrasted the poor (pauperes) with the more powerful (potentiores), not with the rich (divites). The poor were free proprietors of small to middling tracts of land living in uneasy proximity to men with political and military power, which they used in the service of building up their great estates. Poverty carried the danger not of starvation, but rather of harassment through violence or legal maneuvers with the goal of forcing the poor free man off his land or compelling him to sacrifice his freedom to one of the potentiores in exchange for protection.\(^\text{17}\)

The initial evaluations of Bosl’s thesis positively endorsed it for both the Carolingian and Anglo-Saxon worlds, with the important and nearly unanimous qualifier that this social weakness also had an economic component.\(^\text{18}\) Certainly, a number of extant royal and ecclesiastical sources protested the oppression of pauperes by potentiores or potentes (the more powerful or simply the powerful).\(^\text{19}\) Jean Devisse, noting that Hincmar of Reims (845-882) both protested the oppression of the poor and promoted charitable aid, reasonably suggested that Bosl’s definition linked these


\(^{\text{19}}\) *Alcuini sive Albini epistolae* ep. 3, c. 13, ed. E. Dümmler, MGH Epp. 4 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1895), p. 24; *Capitulare missorum generale* (802) 1, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 92; *Concilium Moguntinense 847 / Mainz, Oktober* 847 17, ed. W. Hartmann, MGH Conc. 3 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1984), p. 170. Gerald of Aurillac seems to have spent a good part of his saintly career protecting his peasants from bandits, neighboring aristocrats, his own men, and (in the case of a particularly attractive girl) himself: Odo of Cluny, *Vita sancti Geraldii Auriliacensis comitis* 1.7-9, 1.17-20, 1.22, PL 133, cols. 646-9, 653-6.
two activities. Hincmar aimed to stabilize the social order and prevent the erosion of the small, free peasantry by providing some economic aid.20

Early medieval legislation supports the idea that economic pressure was used against these weaker men and women, providing an earlier context for Hincmar’s complaints. Charlemagne, for example, instructed his officers to ferret out avaricious judges who imposed the army tax on poor men, whom Charlemagne had exempted; this was one concrete way the powerful could put pressure on the poor.21 Bavarian law forbade any attempts to expel a free man from his hereditary land “no matter how poor he might be.”22 Here economic weakness led to threats to social status. While just enforcement of the law and the condemnation of greed provided a direct approach to the structural problems leading to this kind of social threat, it is easy to see how charity could also have assisted pauperes, understood as this kind of socially vulnerable freemen.23 In this regard, it is worthy of note that Paschasius’ summary description of Adalhard (d. 826) as a good abbot of Corbie’s estates lauded his concern to keep (free) members of his familia from the yoke of servitude; Paschasius introduced this claim immediately before describing Adalhard’s extensive charitable concerns, suggesting the continuing connection of the two.24


21 Capitulare missorum generale (802) 29, p. 96.

22 “Quamvis pauper sit…” Lex Baiwariorum 7.5, ed. E. von Schwind, MGH LL nat. germ. 5/2 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1926), p. 352. Nonetheless, the law specifies that a man might alienate either of his own free will (ex spontanea voluntate), which would have been hard to judge in the face of economic pressure. See also Riche, Daily Life, 103-4; Devroey, Puissants et misérables, 283-4.


24 Paschasius Radbertus, Vita sancti Adalhardi Corbeiensis abbatis 59, PL 102, col. 1538D.
Most references to the dichotomy of *pauperes* and *potentiores*, however, occur in secular and ecclesiastical condemnations of acts of oppression, rather than sources related specifically to almsgiving. There are certainly exceptions—one early ninth-century exposition of the Rule of Benedict mentions the division of monastic hospitality between the poor and the powerful—and Devisse’s hypothesis that charity ought to be understood in the context of the potential struggle between the two groups is plausible for a subset of medieval charity.\(^25\) And yet, to take the example of the hospital, our sources freely employ other pairs of terms: *dives/pauper*, as well as *alias/pauper*, and *hospes/pauper*.\(^26\)

When Jean-Claude Dufermont examined Bosl’s thesis in light of Latin sources connected to Anglo-Saxon England, he found that, of his corpus of 183 clearly defined uses of *pauper*, 72 appeared in contrast with *divites*, 45 in contrast with *potentiores*, and 66 in contrast with *servi*.\(^27\) He still supported a unitary early medieval definition of the poor, which combined Bosl’s social vulnerability with economic weakness. While all three dichotomies could overlap, several other scholars have accepted that the term *pauper* actually carried different connotations in different texts.\(^28\) This variety of possible meanings, in which *potens/pauper* offered one of several options, best fits the evidence considered here, although vulnerability of different kinds still usually entered


\(^{27}\) Dufermont, “Les pauvres,” 189. His sources apparently include some Irish material and Insular writers living on the continent.

into the definition. By implication, the *pauperes* and other recipients of almsgiving in our sources were most likely a diverse group.

When Hincmar was denouncing the oppressions of the powerful, Christian of Stavelot, a monastic scriptural scholar, was pondering the mystery of God’s having become a pauper, born to the poor Mary and Joseph. He contrasted the poor couple not with the powerful, but with the rich. 29 This contrast of the poor with the rich was quite common. As in the examples of Dufermont’s work and the hospital, one can easily find the pairing of *pauperes* and *divites* in a variety of sources across the early medieval world. 30 In sources concerned with giving someone a hunk of bread or a coin, one might reasonably suspect *a priori* that material want was at issue. The recipient of alms in these situations is frequently termed a *pauper*. Sometimes the source makes explicit the link of being a pauper with actual need. In his guide for lay Christians, Ambrosius Autpert (d. 784) characterized the hungry whom scripture enjoined Christians to feed as needy paupers (*egenti pauperi*). 31 In his guide to lay life, Alcuin’s (d. 804) chapter on almsgiving alternated references to the needy and the poor, clearly assuming that the two were equivalent. In one sentence he spoke of duty to the poor and travelers (*pauperibus ac peregrinis*), in the next of care for the needy, infirm, and travelers (*egentium, et debilium, et peregrinorum*); and so continued

29 Christian [of Stavelot], *Expositio brevis in Mattheum evangelistam* 2. PL 106, col. 1277D. A homily of Gregory I (later quoted by both Bede and Hrabanus Maurus) makes a similar contrast of God’s choice to be born among the poor rather than the rich, but that homily focused on Christ’s openness to suffering, whereas Christian chose to focus on the virtues of the poor: Gregory I, *Homiliae in evangelia* 1.2, ed. R. Étaix, CCSL 141 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1999), p. 18.


in this vein. The *Vita Mathildis reginae posterior* from the turn of the millennium still was using *pauperes* and *egentes* as synonyms.

Old English sources support the idea that paupers could be defined simply by need. Ælfric (d. ca. 1010), for example, wrote of *ðearfa*, from *ðearf* (need, want), where his Latin sources used *pauperes*. This word’s connection with material want can be confirmed by Ælfric’s use of *ðearfa* to translate “beggar” (*mendici*) and another Anglo-Saxon source’s equation of it with *egentes*. Another popular translation for *pauperes* was *earman*, which carried the sense of wretchedness. Earm could also translate words having to do with need, like *egenus* and *inops*. *Wædlan*, another frequent term for the poor, often appeared as the antonym of *welig* (rich, prosperous) as well as translating *egenus*. A final, less common word for the *pauperes* defined

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32 Alcuin, *De virtutibus* 17, col. 625CD. For a similar substitution of *egentes* for *pauperes* in the classic dyad of *pauperes et peregrini*, see the Ottonian Thietmar, *Chronicon* 4.33, p. 171.

33 *Vita Mathildis reginae posterior* 17, p. 180.

34 Ælfric *CH2* 7, 19, pp. 63, 187 (B1.2.8, B1.2.22), with M. Godden, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary*, EETS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 397, 527. These Old English translations of Latin are indicative of how the translators understood *pauper* but conclusive; translators could modify meaning in their adaptation of Latin sources or subordinate meaning to aesthetic concerns, such as Ælfric’s experiments with rhythmic prose.

them in reference to receiving alms as ælmesmenn (alms-folk).\textsuperscript{38} The Old English version of Chrodegang’s Rule for Canons uses this word to describe the various poor for whom the community cared in its hospital and elsewhere, which may suggest that the term referred more to beggars (as the online Dictionary of Old English project suggests) than peasant pauperes facing the powerful.\textsuperscript{39}

In itself, this dichotomy of rich and poor did not mean that power was not a key issue. The coupling of divites and pauperes could appear in the context of protests against oppression.\textsuperscript{40} Moreover, some references to apparent economic difference actually stemmed from pre-medieval sources, notably the Vulgate. Nonetheless, the evidence for charity points to material need or vulnerability to future material need as the fundamental component for many or most references to poverty.

The fuzziness of the term pauper stems from the purpose of its usage. Writers were not interested in creating a scientific taxonomy of society, but rather expressing relationship and especially social distance.\textsuperscript{41} More often than not, the poor man stood in contrast to the more powerful (potentiores) rather than just the powerful (potentes). Authors generally wrote from an elite perspective. From that vantage point, what mattered was who might require action from the secular or ecclesiastical elite, whether in the form of protection or charity. The variety of people potentially in need of succor mattered less than their common characteristic of demanding aid. In reality, of course, that mass of the “poor” included a diverse group of people, differentiated by property (with ownership of varying amounts of land), gender, degrees of freedom, and other

\textsuperscript{38} Dictionary of Old English: A to G online, “ælmes-mann.”

\textsuperscript{39} The Old English Version of the Enlarged Rule of Chrodegang (Regula canonicorum) 4, 43, 80, ed. B. Langefeld (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 179, 255, 329. (ChrodR 1; B10.4.1)

\textsuperscript{40} Hincmar, De cavendis vitiiis et virtutibus exercendis 1.2, ed. D. Nachtmann, MGH Quellen zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 16 (Munich: MGH, 1998), p. 134.

\textsuperscript{41} Fichtenau, Living in the Tenth Century, 362; Devroey, Puissants et misérables, 204-7.
significant details for a rural society, such as whether or not one owned a cart or draft animals. A shoeless beggar on the highway and the wealthiest peasant in a village might both be considered paupers in the eyes of a neighboring aristocrat or abbot. Nonetheless, few sources distinguished a middling class from the poor. When they did, it was usually to clarify that a free man was not a member of the top, noble layer of society. In the exception that proves the rule, Rather of Verona, writing in the context of tenth-century Italy, made the unusual decision to divide his audience into the rich, middling (mediocres), and beggars (mendici). His description of the slightly different spiritual needs of the latter two groups identified the middle group as the working class, who possessed only scant means; but both groups—mediocres and mendici—were still pauperes in his eyes.

Even the non-free sometimes received alms, although it is unclear whether they were called pauperes. Charlemagne’s will donated some goods in usum pauperum, and gave a separate


43 Devroey, Puissants et misérables, 209-12.

44 Rather, Praeloquia 1.18.39, 1.19.43, pp. 40, 43; generally see 1.17.34-1.19.44, pp. 34-45. He emphasizes the need to give alms mostly for the mediocres but, in the end, reminds both beggars and the working poor that a glass of cold water given in charity garnered heavenly reward: 1.18.39, 1.19.44, pp. 40, 44. Ælfric, CH2 19, p. 187 (B1.2.22) also distinguished the rich, merchants, middling persons, and the poor (presumably beggars, since they ask others for food); however, his distinction between the middling (medeman) and the poor (ðearfan) closely follows his antique source and so may not reflect much of his habitual thought (although it should be noted that the category of merchants is his own): Godden, Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies, 527. Notker refered to boys of noble, middling, and poor families being sent to study, but provided no clues as to how these distinctions were to be understood: Notker the Stammerer, Taten Kaiser Karls des Großen / Gesta Karoli Magni imperatoris 1.1, ed. H. F. Haefele, MGH SRM n.s. 12 (Berlin: Weimanns, 1959), p. 2.

45 Devroey, Puissants et misérables, 319 considers pauperes servi to be an oxymoron, in accord with Bosl. Fichtenau, Living in the Tenth Century, 361, also 362-3, 368, is more cautious, saying it was “less common” (seltener) to describe servants as “poor.” From the perspective of almsgiving, the sources usually give no indication of free status or otherwise. Since the tenth century eroded distinctions between free and servile tenants, and even free proprietors increasingly fell under a lord’s bannus like tenants, it seems reasonable to assume that calling a serf a pauper would have been more common at that time than in the preceding century. Nonetheless, given the demonstrable range of the term pauper even in the eighth and ninth centuries, I am skeptical of the view that serfs could never be pauperes before the tenth century.
portion to the slaves of the palace as “alms.”46 The 806 Capitulary of Nijmegen ordered the royal fideles to care for “their poor” (suum pauperum) to prevent them from going about begging.47 The use of the possessive means that these poor were under the aristocracy in some capacity, plausibly as serfs. It is certainly easy to see why the lord of a great estate would prefer to let others charitably care for one of his servile tenants in trouble even though, in the worst case, he could lose the serf to de facto freedom of life as a wandering beggar.48 The non-free could enter the ranks of the needy who received alms; those settled on tenancies had to provide their own food, and were thus vulnerable, like the free, to disaster when they failed to do so. Perhaps our best evidence, an early eleventh-century Old English homily, listed slaves (peowum mannum) alongside the poor, widows, orphans, and strangers as potential recipients of alms.49

This ambiguity in conceptions of the poor meant that the large majority of early medieval people potentially were eligible to receive alms in the eyes of the elite.50 And, partially in consequence, the sources usually paid little attention to who specifically received alms. When Archbishop Ansgar toured his Saxon diocese and invited the local poor into the dignitaries’ meal,

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47 Capitulare missorum Niumagae datum 806 9, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 132.

48 Having to replace tenants was not an unusual or normally problematic occurrence: Devroey, Puissants et misérables, 384-5. One reason offered for the early medieval shift from slaves to serfs (done in by part by settling former slaves on their own patches of land within the great estate), was the reduction of responsibility on the part of the master for his unfree dependents: Duby, Rural Economy, 37-9; note, however, that more recent scholarship has focused instead on the positive economic benefits of this mode of production: Devroey, Puissants et misérables, 364-5.

49 “And weow biddað, for eowres dréhtnes lufan, þæt ge dæghwanlice dælan ælmesenasan be þám dælæ, þæt ælcum men to onhagige, þæh hit ne sy butan feorðan dæl anes hlares, godes þances ælmesmannum oððe wydewum oððe steopcildum oððe þeowum mannum oððe ælþeodigum mannum.” pseudo-Wulfstan, Sammlung 46, pp. 238-9.

50 I speak here of material almsgiving; even the highest elites could be the recipients of spiritual alms, such as forgiving one another (see chapter 2).
how were these paupers selected? How destitute were they? There were doubtless many in the local villages normally able to grow enough grain to feed their family and even aid a few passing beggars, but who still would have benefited from a free meal, especially one of the quality eaten by the elites. When great episcopal or royal retinues swept through a region, there was no clear mechanism for separating out different kinds of the poor who might hope for alms, nor much evidence that these elites desired such a system. After all, Christ repaid the alms, not the pauper. Adalhard’s Statuta for the monastery of Corbie envisioned giving a quarter-loaf of bread to a hundred people per day beyond those staying overnight at the monastery. How many of that hundred were transient beggars? How many were middling folk traveling for one reason or another and planning on stopping elsewhere for the night? How many were local people with too little land to support their families without supplementary aid from a generous donor?

While answering these specific questions is normally impossible, we can say something about the range of charity’s beneficiaries. On one hand, destitute beggars (for example, those haunting pilgrimage shrines) received alms. Rudolf’s story of an eighth-century crippled girl (a paupercula), who lay outside a nunnery begging for part of her food and also receiving an allowance from the nuns, shows someone who was clearly not a member of the laboring poor. On the other hand, we can also unearth scattered examples of the more prosperous receiving aid. Gerald found a woman in the fields plowing due to her husband’s illness and gave her money to hire help; this recipient of charity obviously owned land and possibly survived quite well in a

52 See chapter 4.
53 Adalhard, Statuta 2.10, p. 373; see chapter 8.
54 See chapter 5.
normal year.\textsuperscript{56} Indeed, even during these circumstances that forced her into unwomanly work, she may still have been able to offer eleemosynary tokens to those who were poor compared to her.

In Cyran’s life as a pauper, he mixed with both small, free landowners and beggars. His vita shows money and food being offered to wanderers like him, paupers begging at the shrine of St. Saturninus, and a poor peasant with land and a handcart.\textsuperscript{57} The poor, as considered in sources on charity, were a diverse group. Their only consistent characteristic was that they were not the elite, whether they lacked power, wealth, or both. Nonetheless, among this undifferentiated mass, one can discern some more specific recurring concerns and some kinds of people in special need.

2. Being and Becoming Poor

Cyran “was feet for the lame and eyes for the blind.”\textsuperscript{58} This was a frequent hagiographical trope, and one that pointed to a hard truth. People were vulnerable, and destitution hovered behind any potentially disabling accident. The poor peasant, whom Cyran encountered pulling a cart by hand since he lacked oxen, possessed an agricultural income; but what if a bad fall with a heavy load were to break his leg?\textsuperscript{59} The peasant could hardly have kept up with the heavy manual labor on which he relied to survive and so, unless his extended family could intervene, would have faced the bleak prospect of slipping from the working poor to the utter destitution of a beggar.

This vulnerability helped to make almsgiving an important social phenomenon as well as a religious one. In discussing the causes of poverty, historians normally distinguish structural and conjunctural poverty. The former kind of poverty is the result of social and economic structures, while conjunctural poverty is the result of unfortunate circumstances, such as breaking a leg. For

\textsuperscript{56} Odo, \textit{Vita Geraldi} 1.21, cols. 655-6.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Vita Sigiramni} 24, 29, 30 pp. 620, 623.

\textsuperscript{58} “pes extitit claudio atqueocculus coeco…” \textit{Vita Sigiramni} 31, p. 624.

\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Vita Sigiramni} 30, p. 623.
the early Middle Ages, a degree of structural poverty affected the majority of the population. Most people were born into the laboring class, produced only moderate surpluses in agricultural work, and saw a substantial portion of that surplus lost to taxes, rents, and tithes. Small, independent landowners faced fewer exactions than free tenants, who in turn normally fared better than non-free tenants. The tenants of the great estates owed labor services of varying types rather than direct rents, but this siphoning of their work to the lord’s crops had the same effect of keeping the livelihood of the poor somewhat precarious. The still-developing state of agricultural techniques and markets limited opportunities for securing a better income, though these had improved by the tenth and eleventh centuries. Good agricultural land was also a limited resource. Both lords and peasants cleared new land for crops, but the division of tenancies on great estates into smaller and smaller units suggests that these clearances did not keep up with the demand for land. In families with multiple surviving heirs, the next generation had to make do with a lesser amount of land and hence less income from which to support themselves. One strategy to cope with the partition of familial land was to favor one heir (usually the eldest son) over the others, but this still left the other children vulnerable to poverty.

In the best of times, the structural poor survived without the need for aid, and the demographic expansion during this period encourages the supposition that times often were not too bad. Nonetheless, life was precarious. Bad harvests hit a large percentage of the populace quite forcefully. Ardo’s *Vita Benedicti* recounted crowds temporarily abandoning their homes to live at

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the gates of the monastery of Aniane and living off of the monks’ stores, though this came too late for some: “Yet several times someone was found dead with bread still in his mouth.”

The *Annals of Fulda* recounted how, during the Rhineland famine of 850, a woman carrying a child collapsed just outside the distribution point for aid, while the child tried in vain to suckle at his dead mother’s breast. Another couple journeying with their little boy in search of charity contemplated killing their child for food rather than watching all three of them starve.

Both authors dramatized the situations, and the story of proposed cannibalism (without witnesses, unlike the other stories) is the kind of sensationalist rumor that would circulate during famines. Still, the suffering was real enough to provoke frequent royal legislation against grain speculators, who hoarded precious food and sold it at outrageous prices beyond the reach of the poor. It is worthy of note in each of these cases that the poor went to seek aid. Bishops and monasteries had reserve stores of food, and orders given to royal officials and others to care for their poor suggest that the aristocracy had a surplus as well. Famine therefore could be said to result from a structural inequality that left certain groups of the population without a reserve of grain or sufficient money to buy food when scarcity drove up its price, alongside of the conjunction of modest agricultural technology and bad weather.

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66 *Annales Fuldensis* a. 850, ed. F. Kurze, MGH SRG 7 (Hanover: Hahnsche 1891), pp. 140-1.


69 *Capitulare missorum Niumagae* 9, p. 132.

70 For the classic argument that famines occur not only due to crop failure but the also inequality in the mechanisms of distribution (i.e. the poor are hurt first by shortages and may starve even in those cases where the total food supply is actually sufficient to prevent it), see A. Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on*
being poor. This structural inequality in wealth also had a flip side. Charity was a latent aspect of
the normal social relationship between the elites and the poor, even those who normally did not
rely on alms. The elites had various rights to the surplus produced by laborers, but with it came a
social and religious responsibility to temporarily reverse that flow of wealth during a crisis.

How faithfully the elite discharged that responsibility is another question. It is
encouraging that what Ardo deemed praiseworthy in his account was not the monks’ willingness to
aid the hungry, but rather their willingness to starve themselves to feed their social inferiors.
Similarly, what the Annals of Fulda found remarkable was the suffering and number of those trying
to get to distribution centers, not the existence of those centers. That laity, religious, and clerics all
gave alms during normal times lends credibility to believing they did so with their stored surpluses
during crises. Still, people suffered hunger, temporary displacement, and death. The search for
food amid skyrocketing grain prices put a strain on families that reduced some paupers to begging
or serfdom, permanently altering their place in society. Voluntary charity offered only a partial
solution to the perils of poverty.

Some of the working poor lived a more precarious life than others. The division of
inherited property, degradation of the land’s fertility, climate change, loss of resources (such as
livestock), or changing family situations all could leave a household without sufficient income to
support itself and little means of improving its lot. One possibility for such a household would be
regular reliance on alms from neighbors or pious travelers (if enough of the latter passed by). In
the section of Rather’s Praeloquia that offered advice for beggars, he imagined engaging in

Entitlement and Deprivation (1981); for bibliography on its reception and a critique, see S. Devereux, “Sen’s

71 See chapter 6, also chapters 5 and 8.

72 Capitulare missorum Niumagae 9, p. 132; Mollat, The Poor, 34-5.

73 Those with land by an important pilgrimage site had opportunities for begging that those in an isolated
village did not. On other options for the poor, see chapter 11.
conversation with a member of the working poor considering mendicancy. After admitting the right to beg of those too infirm to work, he turned to another excuse: “‘I am healthy,’ you say, ‘but a multitude of children pulls me down.’” Rather gave the obvious reply that this poor man struggling to feed his family ought not to have sex with his wife if he could not support another child; Rather then grudgingly acknowledged that this solution would find few men willing or able to follow it. And so, he advised:

Beg for what is necessary, and avoid what is in excess; take care that you do not just feed mice and worms with it. You are healthy—help others, visit the sick, bury the dead, share with everyone the blessing given you by God. Be eyes for the blind, ears for the deaf, a tongue for the mute, feet for the lame, and never be worried about what will befall you tomorrow. If the road takes you by a church, do not pass by it until there you beg pardon for your excesses and eternal life for your benefactors.

Rather offers us a portrait of a poor man, with a wife and children, lacking the income to support them and so supplementing or replacing it by begging. Some people’s labors only kept them on the brink of bare self-sufficiency and some tiptoed over it. On the positive side, Rather imagined this person as still integrated into the community. The man did not have to abandon his family; he begged for alms in order to keep them together. And he was still expected to take part in the wider community, offering what aid and company he could. A beggar was not necessarily one who had lost all.

Rather’s conclusions seem plausible for the English and Frankish situations, but note that he is writing in Italy. Note too that his audience is relatively elite, making his consideration of beggars primarily just a subsidiary element in his sketch of how Christian society should look. Despite these caveats, Rather offers a consideration of details here that rarely penetrated the concerns of his contemporaries, making him an important witness.


“Mendica quod sufficit, et caue superfluentiam; uide ne mures exinde pascas et uermes. Tu qui sanus es, subleua ceteros, uisita infirmos, sepeli mortuos, partire cum omnibus benedictionem tibi collatam Domini; esto cecis oculus, surdis auris, mutis lingua, claudis pes; neque sis unquam tui causa de crastino sollicitus. Si est uia tibi iuxta ecclesiam, caue pertranseas, donec et illic scilicet mendices tibi pro excessibus ueniam, et benefactoribus uitam eternam.” Rather, Praeloquia 1.19.44, p. 45.

In this matter, Rather demonstrates the continuing influence of the Carolingian emphasis on the universal call to participate in acts of mercy; yet one can also glimpse the gradual return both to discriminating between those with “legitimate” and unworthy reasons to beg, and to the idea that the poor ought to repay their benefactors with prayer.
Rather opened his interrogation of the beggar with a reference to *infirmitas*, a term which encompassed a variety of physical ailments, whether sickness, injuries, or crippling deformity. Such infirmity was the leading cause of conjunctural poverty in the early Middle Ages. The woman plowing her fields, to whom Gerald of Aurillac gave coins, was forced into that position of receiving charity because her husband had fallen sick for a long time. Young people who had been crippled and could not work and contribute to their families were among those begging alms a century later at the shrine of Saint-Foy in Conques. And the examples can be multiplied. Those who could not work needed someone to give them food. Some found places in the *matricula* or a hospital, others found a rich patron to take them in, others had families that managed to produce enough of a surplus to care for a debilitated worker, and others begged.

The elderly made up one segment of the infirm, and the church also singled them out for special care. Some hospitals and *matriculae* sometimes specialized in catering to their needs. One anecdote suggests that the disabled fared better than the elderly in the competition for alms. Einhard’s account of the miracles associated with the Roman relics he brought north in 827 include the story of one blind beggar who, on being offered the gift of miraculous healing by the saints, initially refused: “What would I do now with sight that I lost a long time ago? It is better for me that I should lack it than have it. That way, everyone pays attention to [me] begging and gives what is needed; for it is not fitting for [me], while seeing, to beg. As an old and weak [debilis] man,


however, I cannot work.”

This man’s companions in begging include simply the poor and weak (pauperes ac debiles), so the question here is not one of absolute disqualification from begging, but how to make people pay attention to him among a crowd of other needy people. The most pitiful beggars no doubt fared best.

In theory, the elderly’s children should have been repaying their parent’s earlier sacrifices by caring for them during the twilight of their lives. Some, however, did not have surviving children and some did not have appropriately grateful children. Rather of Verona had biting criticism for those who enjoyed new wealth while their parents begged. Give alms to everyone, he admonished his readers, but first give to those of your own household and especially those of your own blood. This concern was not limited to Rather and tenth-century Italy. Jonas’ early ninth-century manual for lay life made a similar admonition to his aristocratic audience: honoring one’s parents “consisted not so much in offering courtesies in speech as in alms and the giving of gifts.”

Hrabanus Maurus, Jonas’ contemporary, offered a similar warning in his exegesis, backed up by a battery of biblical texts. All three authors called this support “alms,” which, as signifying an act of mercy, implied a certain measure of choice and freewill. The combination of social, religious, and emotional spurs to caring for one’s parents surely prompted most people to make some effort,

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81 “Quid,’ ait, ‘mihi nunc cum visu, quem iam olim perdidit? Melius mihi est, si eo caruero, quam si habuero. Modo mendicantem omnes exaudiunt et ea quae necessaria sunt praestant. Nam videntem mendicare non deceat; senex autem et debilis operari non possum.’” Einhard, Translatio et miracula SS. Marcellini et Petri 4.4, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SS 15/1 (Leipzig, Hiersemann, 1925), p. 257. The question of whose view this represents, especially since Einhard claims to know the beggar, is vexing.

82 Rather, Praelectuqia 2.7.16, pp. 59-60.

83 “non tantum in salutationum officiis deferendis, quantum in eleemosynis, ac munerum oblatione sentitur.” Jonas of Orleans, De institutione laicali libri tres 2.15, PL 106, col. 196CD.

84 Hrabanus Maurus, Commentariorum in Ecclesiasticum libri decem 1.11, PL 109, cols. 779-80. His warning of the necessity of aiding one’s parents and giving them alms follows directly from the pericope on which his commenting; nonetheless, the length of his explanation and his tone seem to indicate real concern. Note too that his interpretation of passages to fit this paradigm is sometimes quite “inventive,” even allowing for the allegorical style of his exegesis: e.g. “Quod autem dicit: ‘Pro peccato matris restituetur tibi bonum’ [Ecclus 3:16]. Peccatum hic tropica locutione ipsam eleemosynam nuncupat, quae delet peccata. Sicut et alibi hostiam, quae pro peccato offertur, peccatum vocat.”
but it is striking that both Jonas and Rather thought even the formerly prosperous—or at least those with prosperous children—were vulnerable.

Those poor who barely scratched out their daily bread from the soil lived a more precarious life than their more prosperous neighbors, but a degree of vulnerability also entangled those higher up the social scale. Raids from Vikings, Magyars, and Muslims could devastate the possessions of the well-to-do and result in captivity and slavery. Even a towering figure like Abbot Maiolus of Cluny was not immune to these raiders, though he could survive them.85 While the rich could provide their own ransom or fall back on revenues from other estates, even a relatively wealthy peasant might not have been so fortunate.86 Of course, as Bosl’s definition of the *pauper* reminds us, even supposedly Christian neighbors could prove dangerous. Peasants who lacked political influence or the ability to resist harassment from a local lord’s armed retainers could find their social vulnerability quickly developing into real economic privation. As the Council of Mainz in 847 lamented:

> We admonish your royal clemency concerning the oppression of free paupers, that they not be oppressed and compelled by the more powerful through any evil strategy or device, contrary to justice, to sell or hand over their possessions. If this should happen, their families would be humiliated unjustly, obedience to the king diminished, and the poor themselves, on account of their need, made beggars, thieves, or criminals.87

Weakness could come in many forms, and each could end with begging.

The Carolingian, Ottonian, and Anglo-Saxon worlds did not offer most of their inhabitants easy upward social mobility, although some certainly managed to move up in the world through


86 On the ransom of captives as charity, see chapter 6.

87 “Monemus regiam pietatem de oppressione pauperum liberorum, ut non a potentioribus per aliquod malum ingenium contra iustitiam opprimantur vel cogantur, ut res suas vendant sive tradant, ne forte parentes eorum contra iustitiam fiant exereditati et regale obsequium minuatur et ipsi propter indigentiam mendici vel latrones seu malefactores efficiantur.” *Concilium Moguntinense 847* c. 17, p. 170; based on the admonition in *Capitulare missorum in Theodonis villa datum secundum, generale* 16, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 125.
luck, perseverance, or incremental strategies of improvement.\(^88\) Slipping down the social scale was probably easier, whether due to violence, infirmity, the pressures of providing food and an inheritance for one’s children, or losing essential possessions during famines or other natural calamities. Some who donated land to monasteries wrote provisions into their charters that either obligated the monks to provide the donor with a stipend should he or she fall into poverty or else allowed the donor to revoke the free donation and instead sell the property to the monks.\(^89\) When Christian taught his monastic pupils in late ninth-century Stavelot about Christ’s teaching concerning marriage and the implicit perils of choosing an imprudent wife, he appealed to their experience of people sliding both up and down the social scale.\(^90\) Another contemporary monk in Italy, Hildemar, made similar references to the observed experience of the rich falling into ruin.\(^91\) Hincmar of Reims instructed his priests to choose their matricularii from the old, the infirm, and also the poor in their parish, “from whom they or their predecessors had received the tithe.”\(^92\) Those that had paid the tithe were once productive members of the local community. Now, instead of having wealth to contribute to the community, they relied for their basic needs on those who still labored and could pay the ecclesiastical tax.

In most systems of charity, those from a higher social status who fall into poverty are accorded a special status (the “shame-faced poor” in later medieval parlance) and given preferential

\(^{88}\) Fichtenau, Living in the Tenth Century, 373-8; M. Innes, State and Society in the Early Middle Ages: The Middle Rhine Valley 400-1000 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 82-93, 147-52; Wickham, Framing, 563-70; Devroey, Puissants et misérables, 23-5, 366-8, 393-5.

\(^{89}\) É. Lesne, “Une source de la fortune monastique: les donations à charge de pension alimentaire du VIIIe au Xe siècle,” Mélanges de philologie et d’histoire 32 (1927), 38.

\(^{90}\) Christian, In Mattheum 42, cols. 1413-4.


\(^{92}\) “Matricularios vetulos vel vetulas atque infirmos vel quacumque necessitatem afflictois et pauperes de sua parrochia, a quibus decimam ipsi vel sui antecessores acceperant, pro decime quantitate habeant.” Hinemar, Collectio de ecclesiis 2, p. 106.
Hincmar’s reference to this class of poor is striking since early medieval sources rarely suggest that these poor should be given any special treatment in almsgiving. Two factors explain this lacuna. First, early medieval doctrine frowned on discriminating among recipients of charity. Second, as noted above, no large middle class existed from which the shamefaced poor could fall. True aristocrats likely fell into extreme poverty in small enough numbers so as to not warrant special consideration in writings on charity, whereas relatively wealthy peasants were still pauperes in the eyes of elite writers even before a descent into penury and so not worthy of special consideration. For those reasons, the shame-faced poor do not appear in our texts as a distinctive group, although it is quite plausible that newly impoverished individuals could in reality use their former social standing to gain preferential treatment.

Hincmar, Hildemar, and Christian all hailed from west Francia and wrote either there or in Italy, and that background conditioned their view of upward and especially downward mobility. The subjugation of the free peasantry and the general threat to socio-economic stability was probably more pronounced in the northern half of west Francia. The social structure in the east was relatively more stable after its integration into the Frankish empire, although the loss of freedom and the precariousness of life were not absent by any means (indeed, greater social stability was predicated on already widespread non-freedom). The gap between England’s elites and the regular peasantry was smaller than in Francia at the beginning of the Middle Ages, and presumably slippage into poverty came that much easier. By the tenth and eleventh century,

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94 Though cf. Rather, Praeloquia 4.27, p. 133.

95 Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 333-4; Devroey, Puissants et misérables, 274-6. Note that the period of Saxony’s incorporation into the Frankish empire involved significant social upheaval: Wickham, Framing, 585-8.
however, England’s economic growth had begun to put new strains on the old social structure and
to abet the rise or fall of some Anglo-Saxons.\textsuperscript{96}

Despite these regional differences, a certain vulnerability continually marked the lives of the poor and occasionally threatened even their betters. Charity offered a hedge against the risks of the world. Charity could enable a peasant to weather a momentary crisis such as crop failure; it could help a poor tenant with insufficient land feed his children on a regular basis; and it could give the utterly destitute and homeless their daily bread. As the Old English \textit{Blickling Homilies} collection taught, “as many poor men as die in the neighborhood of the rich and wealthy... of all those men’s death shall he be guilty and a murderer before the throne of the eternal judge.”\textsuperscript{97} From the perspective of the poor, almsgiving was not a marginal religious practice for the pious, but a fundamental hope and social expectation in the face of real threats.

3. Widows and Orphans

When Cyran embarked on his life of wandering mendicancy and day labor, he devoted himself to caring for his guests by fishing and to caring for all the needy, especially widows, as his hagiographer immediately reassured his readers.\textsuperscript{98} There is something a bit odd about a wandering pauper having “guests” (\textit{hospites}), but narrative logic here collides with hagiographical logic: if you are a saint, you must care for certain types of people. Cyran was a saint; therefore he must have cared for widows and guests. The hagiographer’s gesturing towards Cyran’s mastery of the


\textsuperscript{97} “Swa feala earmra manna swa on ðæs rican neaweste & ðæs welegan sweltaþ... bonne þib he ealra þara manna deaþes sceldig & myrþra beforan þæs ecan Deman heahsetle.” \textit{Blickling Homilies} 4, p. 53 (HomS 14 (BLHom 4); B3.2.14), with translation by R. Morris. This specific homily urged the payment of tithes here for the church provision for the poor. The motifs are antique in origin (here probably Caesarius of Arles), but prevalent in the early Middle Ages.

\textsuperscript{98} \textit{Vita Sigiramni} 22, p. 619.
fisherman’s art attempted to reconcile the discrepancy. And one could imagine Cyran standing along the edge of a stream, clear water lapping at his bare, dirty feet. Seeing a poor and tired traveler passing by, he calls out to him, invites him to sit, and promises him refreshment as soon as he can get a fire started and the morning’s catch cooked.

Whether or not Cyran actually managed to fulfill his saintly obligations in this way, our sources continually single out certain groups of the poor who had a special claim on charity: widows, orphans, and the stranger or traveler. All three groups had been singled out since biblical times as archetypes of the needy. All three faced real issues of vulnerability in the early Middle Ages. Aid to “widows, orphans, and the poor” in particular was a stock phrase of early medieval writers.99 When Ardo wished to recount to suffering during the famine which sent multitudes to Benedict of Aniane’s monks, he described the victims in terms of these three usual suspects.100 On rare occasions, the phrase became “widows, orphans, and peregrini.”101 While most authors did not lump the stranger, foreigner, pilgrim, or traveler (each of these English translations of peregrinus is possible) together with widows and orphans, they still normally singled him out as a special object of charity. The categories of the widow, the orphan, and traveler highlight the issues of vulnerability and the complexity of defining the poor introduced in the preceding sections of this chapter.


100 “multitudo pauperum, viduarum, pupillorum.” Ardo, Vita Benedicti abbatis Anianensis 7, p. 204.

Widows (viduae, wydewen) faced real disabilities. As women, they were seen as weaker and hence easier prey for unscrupulous neighboring potentiores. Capitulary and conciliar legislation referred more frequently to widows and orphans’ need for protection than for alms, although a woman who lost her land to an avaricious aristocrat shortly would have needed food from somewhere. Even widows of some social standing had to be careful and to search for allies if they lacked reliable surviving family. Widows had legal rights and access to the resources of their possessions, but nonetheless sometimes felt compelled to trade away some of their property rights in return for outside protection.

Beyond the issue of vulnerability, producing enough food was simply harder for one adult working alone than for two working together. The infirmity of age or, alternatively, caring for young children compounded the challenge. These issues affected men as well, and led Adalhard of Corbie to give both single men and women without families a stipend; but this equality was unusual. Cultural ideas about what constituted appropriate work for each gender increased the difficulties for women forced to rely on their own labors. A certain amount of waged labor existed for help plowing or bringing in the harvest (and it was on this that Cyran relied), but it is

102 Ansegis, Collectio capitularium Ansegisi / Die kapitulariensammlung des Ansegis 2.6, 2.33, 4.15, 4.44, ed. G. Schmitz, MGH Capit. n.s. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1996), pp. 527, 555, 628, 649; Concilium Aquisgranense, a. 836 (7), ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2.2 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1908), p. 716; Concilium Quierzy, a. 858, “Collectio de raptoribus,” ed. W. Hartmann, MGH Conc. 3 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1984), p. 394. The call for defenders (defensores) was often coupled with one for helpers (adiutores), which could have been meant either in a judicial or charitable sense. Other legislation, however, clearly singles out a charitable goal: Concilium Cabillonense a. 813 6, ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1906), p. 275.


104 Paschiasius, Vita Adalhard 59, cols. 1538-9. On the provisions for retirement or security in case of poverty at monasteries by more prosperous widows and widowers, see É. Lesne, “Une source de la fortune,” 38, 41.

105 Fichtenau, Living in the Tenth Century, 110-1; Devroey, Puissants et misérables, 22, 398-403.
rather unlikely that a woman could have competed effectively with men for such employment. 106

Carolingian records demonstrate that single women sometimes possessed their own holdings on
great estates, but they were only a marginal population with atypically small plots of land. 107

Widows, while weak, enjoyed a certain amount of respect. The Bible praised virtuous
widows like Anna, and more generally created a role for them as pious (albeit needy) members of
the Christian community. 108 The late antique church even created an “order of widows,” in which
bishops could enroll them. Women in this quasi-religious state had a special place in public
worship and received a stipend from the church. Despite some resistance, widowed women in
Carolingian times continued to have the option of a life of pious chastity, spending the rest of their
days as veiled deo sacratae. 109 Ardo’s life of Benedict of Aniane mentioned his care of widows
and nuns in the same breath, indicating the kind of pious category which they could occupy. 110
Even unconsecrated widows had an important social and religious role in caring for the memory of
the departed. Though their husbands had died, the widow continued to honor the bond of marriage

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106 On the presence of wage labor, see below n. 148.

107 Devroey, Puissants et misérables, 402.

108 Lk 2:36-8; 1 Tim 5:3-16; Jas 1:7.

109 Although it should be noted that reformers critiqued a number of perceived abuses of this option,
including the lack of claustration: Nelson, “Wary Widow,” 89-94; B. Jussen, Der Name der Witwe:
Erkundungen zur Semantik der mittelalterlichen Bußkultur (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2000),
167-206; also Finn, Almsgiving, 70-3. Compare the Anglo-Saxon widow-nun in Vita sancti Cuthberti auctore
anonymo 2.7, ed. B. Colgrave, in his Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1940), pp. 88-90; for another possible but less certain instance see Bede, Vita sancti Cuthberti 5, ed. B.
Colgrave, Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert, p. 168, with remarks in A. Gautier, “Hospitality in pre-Viking Anglo-
Saxon England.” Early Medieval Europe 17 (2009), 34-5. In one case from the later Middle Ages, at Figeac,
widows took on the role of religious sisters running a hospital: D. Le Blec, “Le rôle des femmes dans
l’assistance et la charité,” in La femme dans la vie religieuse du Languedoc (XIIIe-XIVe s.), Cahiers de

110 This chapter describes Benedict’s generosity to both the involuntary poor and poor monastic houses:
Ardo, Vita Benedicti 19, p. 208. Cyran encountered an aristocratic widow in a nun’s dress, although she
appears as a potential almsgiver, rather than a recipient; not all widows were poor! Vita Sigiramni 24-7, pp.
620-2.
by praying for his soul. These constructions of the widow as a valuable religious figure helped to secure her place as one specially entitled to aid.

If adult women were vulnerable, then orphaned children (*orfani, pupilli, steopcildas, steopbearnas*) were even more so. One of the great regional councils of 813 sternly warned those who would deprive a child of his legal inheritance from his father or mother, and admonished the king and his officials to defend these rights. That this council specifically referred to both parents is significant. Several pieces of seventh-century evidence demonstrate that the orphan’s constitutive weakness lay in the lack of *male* protection. An Irish pseudo-Hilary glossed orphans and widows by saying that, “they who do not have a male helper are the Lord’s debtors, since orphans lost a father; widows, however, were deprived of a husband.” A similar conclusion could be drawn from Isidore’s *Etymologiae.*

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saint is described after her father’s death as an “orphan girl” (orfana filia) in the very same sentence that relates the grief of her still very much alive mother, Itta.115

The Carolingian evidence unfortunately does not definitively prove whether or not the equation of the orphan with the fatherless continued, and the Anglo-Saxon evidence offers no help.116 While the legislation of 813 demonstrates that some orphans lacked both parents, the continuing concern that widows needed a male protector meant that children with a deceased father also needed a protector whether or not their mother still lived. The frequent references to widows and orphans together reflects in part a situation in which the death of a father left both his wife and children simultaneously needy from a judicial and economic perspective.

Dhuoda, in her manual for her son at Louis the Pious’ court, advised him to care for “widows and orphans, and also pupillis or those less strong.”117 Upon Anskar's death in 864, all mourned his passing, especially “the clergy, orfanorum, widows, pupillorum, and the needy.”118 Injunctions to protect both types of orphans were quite common.119 Both Latin terms mean orphan and had no other meaning in early medieval Latin, yet these sources listed the two words as though


116 It is worth noting that the medieval Jewish community defined the orphan as the fatherless and aided widows with their “orphaned” children: M. Cohen, Poverty and Charity in the Jewish Community of Medieval Egypt (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 236-9. Some biblical verses refer simultaneously to orphans deprived of their father and widows bereathed of their husbands, which may reflect an understanding of orphans rooted in a common antique, scriptural inheritance: Sir 4:10; Lam 5:3.


119 e.g. MGH Capit. 1, nos. 23 (c. 17), 34 (c. 19), 35 (c. 59), 44 (c. 2), 98 (c. 2), 112 (c. 14), 167 (c. 2), ed. A. Boretius, pp. 63, 101, 105, 152, 205, 228, 333. The combined (and incomplete) MGH-Corpus Christianorum database at Brepols lists thirty-four instances for the eighth through tenth centuries, and several examples after that period as well.
they referred to two separate groups. While the use of rhetorical parallelism cannot be ruled out, an intriguing possibility is that some ninth-century writers tried to distinguish between children with a mother but no father (*orphanus?*) and those without either parent (*pupillus?). Certainly both kinds of orphans needed aid.

4. The *Peregrini*

The final person with a special claim on Christian aid was the stranger in need of food and shelter. This was the guest (*hospes*) of the *Vita Sigiramni* and the stranger (*advena, peregrinus*) of the Bible. In the Latin Bible and generally in antiquity, to call someone a *peregrinus* meant emphasizing their foreignness rather than itinerancy; the opposite of a *peregrinus* was the citizen (*cives*), not a sedentary host. Thus the majority of inhabitants of the Roman Empire were *peregrini* until Caracalla’s extension of citizenship in 212, and some (such as barbarian immigrants) continued to be even afterwards. Non-citizens normally suffered certain legal disabilities within society. Those who truly did move from another region or realm also lacked a local network of kin and allies to turn to in times of crisis. In consequence, the biblical joining of the stranger to the widow and orphan as privileged recipients of charity and protection made sense.

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120 For Isidore, the only difference between the two synonyms was the Greek origin of *orphanus* (*Etymologiarum* 11.2.12). Pseudo-Hilary used *pupillus* for the fatherless, while the *Vita Gertrudi* used *orfanus*.

121 Note that the 813 legislation used *orfani* for those who might have lost both parents, but that this council occurred over two decades before Dhueda wrote and half a century before the *Vita Anskarii*.


During the early Middle Ages, with Roman ideas of citizenship long past, the term *peregrinus* acquired more general connotations, though it still might spring from the idea of the foreign. The most romantic group of early medieval *peregrini* in modern eyes has been the Irish monks who voluntarily left their homeland to dwell in foreign lands as ascetic exiles. Once on the continent, some enjoyed a relatively stable life in monasteries, others drifted into the mission fields, a number undertook pilgrimages to Rome and elsewhere, and a few practiced a life of permanent wandering between monastic houses. The Irish were not alone. The Anglo-Saxons sent streams of men into missionary fields, while the life of wandering monks (“gyrovagues”) drew Benedict of Nursia’s ire long before the Irish moved onto the continent. When Boniface (d. 754), the Anglo-Saxon reformer and missionary to the Germans, contemplated his approaching mortality, he sent a letter to Fulrad asking him to intercede with the king to make provision for his disciples, “for they are almost all *peregrini*. Some are priests… some monks… others the aged, who have labored with me for a long time and aided me. I am concerned about all of these, that they not be ruined after my death but instead have your Excellency’s counsel and patronage.”

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124 Thus Dietz, *Wandering Monks*, 27: “*Peregrinatio* can, and should most often, be translated simply as ‘journey,’ and *peregrinus* as ‘traveler’ or even ‘foreigner.’” She identifies the seventh century as when *peregrinus* first began to mean a pilgrim and does not venture a guess as to when it became the primary meaning. A good, brief summary of the evolution of the meaning of *peregrinatio* through the lens of monasticism (primarily Benedictine) can be found in A. Albert, *Untersuchungen zum Begriff peregrinatio bzw. peregrinus in der benediktinischen Tradition des Früh- und Hochmittelalters* (EOS Verlag Erzabtei St. Ottilien, 1992). In this context, Albert places the shift from stranger (which still had religious connotations due to Mt 25) to pilgrim around the turn of the millennium, though in my opinion the texts he cites do not need to be taken as referring to pilgrims until the twelfth century: Albert, *Untersuchungen zum Begriff*, 71-8.


126 Caner, *Wandering, Begging Monks*, passim, esp. 1-23, 158-62; Dietz, *Wandering Monks*, passim. Nonetheless, the wandering monastic tradition has so far not been conclusively linked with any group in the later Carolingian realms not associated with the Irish. This is assumed to be always the appropriate definition of *peregrinus* in Lesne, *Histoire*, 6:103-4.

127 “Sunt enim pene omnes peregrini. Quidam presbiteri per multa loca ad ministerium ecclesiae et populorum constituti; quidam sunt monachi per cellulas nostras et infantes ad legentes litteras ordinati; sunt
were vulnerable as foreigners. Though not necessarily “poor” in consideration of their birth or clerical training and status, nonetheless the physical distance separating them from kin and old allies made finding local patrons and securing royal backing essential. Presumably those foreigners without an advocate like Boniface or without the recognizable status of his associates faced even greater uncertainty.

When Charlemagne enjoined hospitality on his subjects in 802, he included the monastic kind of *peregrini* in his command, but also another sort of traveler. “And we order that in all our realm no one dare to refuse hospitality, neither to the rich nor to the poor nor to *peregrinis*; that is, let no one deny a roof, fire, and water to someone, whether *peregrinis* wandering the earth for God or anyone journeying for love of God and the salvation of their soul.” These final travelers were pilgrims journeying to holy places, whether to those far away like Rome or to local ones like the shrine of St. Willehad at Bremen. They existed in consequential numbers from the beginning of the early Middle Ages and continued to grow in importance throughout those centuries. These too were *peregrini*. The term sometimes had denoted pilgrims in Late Antiquity and, over the second

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128 “Precipimusque ut in omni regno nostro neque divitibus neque pauperibus neque peregrinis nemo hospitium denegare audat, id est sive peregrinis propter Deum perambulantibus terram sive cuilibet iteranti propter amorem Dei et propter salutem animae suae tectum et focum et aquam illi nemo deneget.” *Capitulare missorum generale* (802) 27, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1, p. 96. Another possible translation would take the part following “id est” as two separate statements clarifying who counted as *peregrini* (i.e. both wandering monks and pilgrims) and what was the minimum for hospitality: “And we order that in all our realm no one dare to refuse hospitality, neither to the rich nor the poor nor *peregrinis*, whether *peregrinis* wandering the earth for God or anyone journeying out of love of God. And, on account of his soul’s salvation, let no one deny someone a roof, fire, and water.”
half of the Middle Ages, “pilgrim” became the primary meaning of *peregrinus*. Gerald of Aurillac, for example, made frequent pilgrimages to Rome as *sancti Petri peregrinum*, and assisted other pilgrim *peregrini*, as well as the needy and the monks along the way.

Early medieval references to aiding *peregrini* encompassed pilgrims and foreign monks, but also extended to a much broader mass of people on the move. From the beginnings of the hospital, its episcopal and monastic founders summed up their target population with the phrase, *pauperes et peregrini*, drawn from general exhortations to hospitality. These calls to shelter *peregrini* predated both the Irish experiment of voluntary exile and the heyday of pilgrimage. Presumably some pilgrims sought shelter in early hospitals, but clearly the primary understanding of the term centered on the classical definition of a stranger lacking friends or family to take him in.

Since Benedict had charged monks in his Rule to care particularly for *pauperes et peregrini*, his ninth-century commentators thoughtfully explained what they understood the latter term to mean. Hildemar wrote that, “guests (*hospites*) are those from the same region, that is from

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131 Peter Chrysologus, *Collectio sermonum* 121.5, ed. A. Olivar, CCSL 24A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981), p. 729; A. de Vogüé, “The Meaning of Benedictine Hospitality,” *Cistercian Studies* 21 (1986), 192-3; Albert, *Untersuchungen zum Begriff*, 10-11, also 50-55, 59-71; Sternberg, *Orientalium*, 51, 147-50, and 160 n. 90. Interestingly, the only scriptural basis for this doublet in the Vulgate is Lv 19:10 and Lv 23:22, neither of which deals with hospitality. This suggests that the original use of the doublet may have responded to contemporary problems, instead of only being derived from exegetical reflection (I have not, however, extensively surveyed Old Latin translations of the Bible).
[the monastery’s] own region, *peregrini* are those from another region.” Smaragdus defined them etymologically: “*Peregrinus* is named such because he is set a long way from his country’s fields.” Adalhard’s *Statuta* called the guests of Corbie’s hospital *pauperes* except for those coming from particularly far distances; he called these paupers *peregrinos*. These commentators still considered the notion of foreignness to define a *peregrinus*. That Old English sources translated *peregrinus* as “foreigner” (*elþeodig*) also underlines how this definition of *peregrinus* enjoyed a long life. There were, however, new nuances to the classical definition of a *peregrinus* as a non-citizen. The question here was not citizenship (many “regions” owed allegiance to one king), but geographical distance. Furthermore, the assumption of these texts was that a monastery’s guests would leave. A ninth-century *peregrinus* could still be a “resident alien,” such as the Insular émigrés, but increasingly the word carried a connotation of travel and mobility.

Adalhard’s placement of *peregrini* in his *hospitale pauperum* and the continuing references to guests elsewhere as *pauperes et peregrini* highlight another shade of meaning: *peregrini* were

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135 *The Old English Version of the Enlarged Rule* 41, 73, 84, pp. 254-5, 312-3, 338-9; *Dictionary of Old English* online, “elþeodig,” see esp. “Lat. equiv. in MS” section. The frequent references to owing *elþeodige* care in religious tracts parallels Latin references to *peregrini* even in cases where the Old English work is not directly translating a Latin source. *Fremde* sometimes translate *peregrinus* outside of the context of charity (cf. Ælfric, *CH1* 11, p. 273: “læd into ðinum huse wædlan & þa earman ælfremedan menn,” paraphrasing Is 58:7, “et egenos vagos que induc in domum tuam”).

136 See Charlemage’s capitulary of 802 above, n. 128. Since most of our relevant sources deal with hospitality, the picture they paint could be misleading, but note the developing equation of *peregrini* with pilgrims.
often poor, albeit not exclusively so.\textsuperscript{137} This poverty took on two forms: the vulnerability of travelers in general and the pre-existing condition of destitution that forced some onto the road. Travel in the early Middle Ages was inherently dangerous. Robbers and bandits plagued roads well into modern times, though the ideal king might aspire to make them safe.\textsuperscript{138} If the traveler himself was accused of a crime, he had no one in the area who knew him well enough to take an oath testifying to his innocence in judicial court. The quality of roads and bridges varied. Disease and unfamiliar foods could cause discomfort or even death. Without ATMs, wire-transfers, or even letters of credit, the traveler had to carry all of his money for the journey with him, and if he should exhaust his supply halfway home (or be robbed of it), he had no means of survival except for charity.\textsuperscript{139} When Boniface warned against English nuns making pilgrimages to Rome—claiming “many of them die, few keep their virtue; there are, indeed, very few cities in Lombardy, Gaul, or Francia without mistresses and whores of the English race”—there was a grain of truth to his worry.\textsuperscript{140} Travel, even for the moderately well-to-do, was an inherently risky business. The


\textsuperscript{140} “…quia magna ex parte pereunt paucis remanentibus integris; perpauce enim sunt civitates in Longobardia vel in Francia aut in Gallia, in qua non sit adultera vel meretrix generis Anglorum.” Boniface, Epistolae 78, p. 169; Boniface earlier attempted to dissuade Abbess Bugga by raising the spectre of rampaging Saracen warbands in the vicinity of Rome: ep. 27, p. 48.
knowledge that the Christian system of free hospitality and aid provided a safety net allowed people to move about when the risks might otherwise have limited them to their home region.

Travelers set out on the road for different reasons. The sources naturally take most note of those making pilgrimages to shrines or the elites going about the business of government and war. Some peasants owed transport duties to their lord, and had to travel for that reason. Others engaged in trade either on a permanent basis or for the occasional selling of surpluses at a market. Public assemblies and legal business also pried people out of their homes. Petitioning a secular or church official often required traveling to meet them. Going to court, either to plead one's own case or to take an oath on another’s behalf, sometimes involved a commitment of several days.\(^{141}\)

It is unknown how frequently any one of these groups sought out charitable hospitality, although none was explicitly disqualified by the standards of surviving customaries and legislation. Merchants in particular probably preferred to camp with their wares, unless they knew a private host whom they trusted and who had secure space for their goods.

Placing non-aristocratic travelers into the same hostel as the poor made sense. These *peregrini* were poor in the sense of needing protection and, as a practical matter, would be glad to put up with humble accommodations in order to make their resources last for an expensive journey. And, as we have seen, the “poor” included a wide swathe of society, which meant that many travelers belonged to the class of *pauperes* before leaving home, despite not actually being destitute.

\(^{141}\) A. Hagen, *A Second Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink: Production and Distribution* (Hockwold-cum-Wilton: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1995), 326-7; Verhulst, *Carolingian Economy*, 88-94. Indeed, one of the ways in which *potentiores* could oppress *pauperes* was to summon them to frequent assemblies, a practice which Carolingian legislation sought to prohibit: Devroey, *Puissants et misérables*, 335-6.
Other *peregrini* were destitute. An expanded version of the *Regula canonnicorum* from the ninth century envisioned those seeking shelter as “guests and begging *peregrini.*”\(^{142}\) The will of King Æthelwulf of Wessex (d. 858) arranged for the permanent provision of support until Judgment Day for certain *pauperes* to be chosen from both the needy (*indigenam*) and the wandering (*peregrinum*).\(^{143}\) These *peregrini* were not pilgrims traveling to a particular location who had a home to which they might return. These were the wandering beggars (in contrast to local workers no longer able to make ends meet without help). Charlemagne, noting the presence of “beggars who roam about the country,” urged the elite to care for their poor so that they not be reduced to this state; he also affirmed the right of the elite to put their poor to work in exchange.\(^{144}\)

Nonetheless, Charlemagne elsewhere put those traveling on account of poverty or hunger under his

\(^{142}\) “*hospites et peregrinos mendicantes.*” *The Old English Version of the Enlarged Rule* 41, p. 254. The tenth-century Old English translator of the rule inserted an “*and*” between “begging” and *peregrinos* (a variant not recorded in the Latin manuscripts): “*þa cuman and þa wædlan and þa ælþeodigan*” (p. 255).

\(^{143}\) “*Pro utilitate namque animae suae, quam a primaeuo iuuentutis suae flore in omnibus procurare studuit, per omnem hereditarium terram suam semper in decem manentibus unum pauperem, aut indigenam aut peregrinum, cibo, potu et ustitimento successoribus suis, usque ad ultimam diem iudicii, post se pascere praecepit; ita tamen, si illa terra hominibus et pecoribus habitaretur et deserta non esset.*” Asser, *Life of King Alfred / De rebus gestis Alfredi regis* 16, ed. W. H. Stevenson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), p. 15. For a similar division from Ottonian Germany, see *Vita Mathildis reginae posterior* 17, p. 179.

\(^{144}\) “*De mendicis, qui per patrias discurret, volumus, ut unusquisque fidelium nostrorum suum pauperem de beneficio aut de propria familia nutriat et non permittat allicubi ire mendicando. Et ubi tales inventi fuerint, nisi manibus laborant, nullus eis quicquam tribuere praeasumat.*” *Capitulare missorum von Niuwegen* 806 9, p. 132. Given the normal provision for the wandering poor and the uniqueness of the final clause of the c. 9, I cannot see this capitulary as evidence for a general condemnation of begging and fear of vagrancy; rather, in response to a time of famine (c. 18, p. 132), Charlemagne was concerned about an increasing number of peasants forced from productive work and wished to open up the reserves of food held by the elite to stabilize this loss of men, with the understanding that the rescued beggars ought to be put back to work. Itinerant beggars were an expected part of society (which is, of course, not the same as saying they were liked); but for contrary opinions cf. Riché, *Daily Life*, 252; E. Boschof, “Armenfürsorge in Frühmittelalter: Xenodochium, matricula, hospitale pauperum,” *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 71 (1984), 168; Goetz, “Social and Military,” 464. See also following note. Carolingian rulers were concerned about both clerical and lay fugitives, however, and legislated on this kind of vagabond: Albert, *Le pèlerinage*, 31-48, 269-70. Nonetheless fear of criminals among vagabonds did not imply a condemnation of beggars in general: e.g. *Capitulare de disciplina palatii Aquisgranensis* (ca. 820) 7, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 298, which shows the ready provision for beggars at the royal palace, though sifting out *simulatores*; similarly, see *Capitulare missorum generale* (802) 30, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1, pp. 96-7. On possible late antique anxiety about vagrancy, see *Concilium Turonense a. 567 5*, ed. C. de Clercq, CCSL 148A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1963), p. 178: Boschof, “Armenfürsorge,” 156; P. Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 98.
royal protection.\textsuperscript{145} Lords willing to take back or regularly aid poor tenants in need of supplemental income offered one solution for stabilizing the lives of the poor. Certain hospitals with permanent residents, the \textit{matricula}, and Ottonian patrons of \textit{eleemosinarii} absorbed another portion of the wandering poor through a stable stipend in a fixed place. Such voluntary efforts were significant, but never cared for more than a fraction of those who could not afford a home. For a number of men, women, and children, their best hope of survival lay in making a perpetual circuit of monasteries, churches, the dwellings of the secular elite, and more modest villages in between, relying on their willingness to show mercy for a meal, a night, or a few days of food and rest.

These itinerant beggars entered their mendicant life for different reasons. Free men and tenants forced off their land by debt, dearth, or the oppression of the powerful might lack options other than the open road. Refugees from raids, outlaws, and those somehow outcast by their families from their inheritance all faced the possibility of swelling the ranks of the mendicant poor. One can only pity those other paupers forced into the rough life of a wandering pauper because bodily infirmity prevented them from working. The admonition of Hincmar and others giving a privileged place in the \textit{matricula} and other local means of support to the crippled and elderly makes a great deal of sense in this light.\textsuperscript{146} A relatively healthy person might survive the rigors of constant travel, but such a life of exposure to the elements and physical exhaustion would kill the weak. Given the demographic dispersion and deurbanization of the early medieval world, only

\textsuperscript{145} This provision presumably included temporary refugees from famines as well, who would hopefully have returned to a normal livelihood after securing temporary aid, or found a permanent home along the way, even if as a serf: “De his quos vult domnus imperator, Christo propitio, pacem defensionem habeant in regno sue, id sunt qui ad suam elementiam festinant, aliquo nuntiare cupientes sive ex christianis sive ex paganis, aut propter inopia vel propter famem suffragantia quærunt, ut nullus eos sibi servito constringere vel usurpare audeant neque alienare neque vindice; sed ubi sponte manere voluerint, sub defensione domni imperatoris ibi habeant subfragia in sua elymosina. Si quis hoc transgredere praesumpserit, sciant se exinde damnun pati vitam praesumptiosus dispositum iussa domnum imperator.” \textit{Capitulare missorum generale (802)} 30, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1, pp. 96-7.

\textsuperscript{146} See above, n. 92.
major pilgrimage shrines were likely to generate a large enough throng of almsgivers to allow a beggar to survive without moving around unless he or she found a patron.

The homeless poor who were able-bodied, in addition to being more resilient against hardship, occasionally could find temporary work. Cyran supposedly did so, and there are a couple further incidental stories that suggest others also sought such opportunities. There were real limits to this possibility. Hired labor was a small sector of the economy to begin with, and owners of large estates most likely drew such supplementary workers from underemployed men on small, neighboring patches of land. There is no evidence for significant migrant labor. A handful of itinerant artisans and peddlers plied their trade, and some of these wandering workers likely relied on charity at times, but it would have been hard for unskilled beggars to acquire the skills or trade goods to join their ranks.

Some idea of the toil of the road can be garnered from the care given these unfortunates. A hagiographical topos has saintly men and women washing the sores and wounds of the poor and travelers. The shoes removed from their feet by the monks were filthy, stinking, and mean, though at least some had shoes. The poor accepted clothes from the monks that the latter

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147 Vita Sigiramni 21, p. 619; Miracula s. Maximini 34, PL 137, col. 813; Fichtneau, Living in the Tenth Century, 372-3. See also Odo, Vita Geraldi 1.21, cols. 655-6.

148 Duby, Rural Economy, 39; Riché, Daily Life, 103-4; Innes, State and Society, 85, 110; Verhulst, Carolingian Economy, 120-1; Dyer, Making a Living, 39-40.

149 The modern phenomenon of massive migrant agricultural workers is based on commercial agriculture and the massive regional specialization of crops; someone can work the strawberry harvest in one area and then move on to the peach harvest in another. In the Middle Ages, each area cultivated a variety of crops, which spread the labor throughout the year. Peak times for work certainly existed, but these did not vary enough regionally to keep a migrant worker employed for more than a few weeks out of the year.

150 Verhulst, Carolingian Economy, 84, 89; Dyer, Making a Living, 39-40.


152 “tam horrida et faetida diligenter adtrectare? non dico vilia calciamentorum…” Paschasius, Epitaphium Arsenii I.10, p. 37; see also Hildemar, Expositio regulae 58, pp. 534-5.
thought “could not be borne” even in the summertime, which makes one wonder how these beggars bore the rain and cold in such castoff rags when they could not find shelter. Some beggars traveled great distances. Alfred bequeathed money to the poor “of whatever race who come to him,” while his grandson ordered his reeves to care for an English pauper or, if none was present, one of another race. These English kings of the ninth and tenth centuries expected that foreign beggars had entered their kingdom from its Celtic neighbors, the Danelaw, or even further abroad.

The wandering beggars were thus the poorest of the poor, the utterly destitute, separated from property and kin. They exemplified the vulnerability and need into which a person might fall. They were a minority group on the margins of society. The majority of society also could be considered “poor” in different ways. Without a firm category of mediocres, any person not belonging to the elite was, by default, something of a pauper. And, in reality, some of these were economically needy and others knew they were vulnerable to oppression or to catastrophic bad luck, whether in the form of disease, failed harvests, or finding themselves old and without surviving family. This does not mean in any way that the average early medieval man or woman was miserable or lived through an uninterrupted series of calamities. It does mean that enjoying a continually good life was uncertain, and that the safety net of charity could be vitally important.

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153 Though the monks’ frequently aristocratic standards were no doubt different from the average person’s. “Istud enim, quod dicit, ‘vetustum quod est, reddant,’ intelligitur: quod non potest portari.” Hildemar, Expositio regulae 55, p. 515.


155 The existence of a group of poor who needed charity or welfare to supplement their income in order to survive, and a more extensive group who needed charity occasionally is hardly unusual. Such people exist in our own society and seem to have comprised an even larger group in the later Middle Ages and early modern Europe, when the first (albeit quite imperfect) statistics become available: Mollat, The Poor, 211-50; Geremek, Poverty, 102-20; van Leeuwen, Logic of Charity, 108-18.
5. Conclusion

When Cyran joined the ranks of the poor, he joined a very large, diverse group. Any person vulnerable to the ravages of the powerful in society, any person who sometimes struggled to provide for his or her family, any person dependant on resources held by the community of the church, in short anyone who might need aid in order to maintain his way of life or life itself could be considered a pauper. Any one of these people could receive alms.

The overarching theme that emerges from the different strains of poverty in sources on early medieval almsgiving is one of precariousness. At any stage of life there were threats to the delicate equilibrium of life. The sudden death of a father or both parents left young children potentially without a protector or someone capable of earning their bread. A woman who lost her husband found herself in only a slightly better position. A young man might worry about whether his inheritance could actually support a family. If he was successful, he had to worry about powerful and greedy neighbors threatening his possessions through economic tricks or outright violence. In old age, a man or woman engaged in a losing struggle to match their earlier productive labor as their health and strength declined. If their family could not support them, then they came up short in the end. At any time, a bad harvest could strain an entire community, putting most people in temporary need and forcing those with the least reserves into permanent debt. Given the relatively low crop yields, the number of people without large grain reserves must have been considerable. Illness or disability could strike without warning, drastically reducing someone’s ability to provide for himself. Those who sought out shrines on pilgrimage for healing or traveled for other reasons faced substantial expenses and the dangers of the road far from the aid and protection of their family. And the most precarious of all were those who for one of the above reasons became homeless, wandering around and hoping each day to find willing almsgivers.

The specifics of this poverty no doubt varied over time and place. The spread of serfdom, the devolution of political power in the tenth century (with the possible concomitant spread of endemic violence), and the accelerating economic growth and urbanization of Europe are well
documented and must have had an impact on the experience of poverty.\textsuperscript{156} The gradual
development of church infrastructure with its charitable role also affected the poor.\textsuperscript{157} Nonetheless, the sources considered here present few obvious trends in their picture of the poor over time or between regions. This stasis stems in part from the poor quality of the sources and their greater interest in almsgivers than recipients; but it also raises a point of caution about the trends that have interested historians. For the majority of people, the basic fact of laboring in the fields for their living, the fears of famine, the threat of illness, and the unceasing uncertainties of life on the road all remained constant. The basic categories and causes of poverty held true throughout the early Middle Ages, though the relative importance of different aspects of poverty and charity must have evolved.

Poverty and, significantly, the threat of poverty were a basic part of the social structure. The majority of people, while normally capable of supporting themselves, nevertheless knew that their self-sufficiency was not guaranteed. Everyone surely knew someone who relied on almsgiving to survive, whether on a daily basis, for part of the year such as the Lenten period before the harvest, or during the inevitable year marked by particularly bad luck. As such, almsgiving was an integral part of the social structure and a necessary component in the survival strategy of a significant stratum of people.

\textsuperscript{156} See chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{157} See chapters 7 and 8.
CHAPTER 10

THE CHURCH AND POVERTY

Cyran (d. ca. 655) first embraced poverty as a deacon, then as a monk, and only then as a wandering holy man living like “real” paupers. At least today, the distinction between religious men and women who embraced some form of voluntary poverty and those involuntarily poor (who were usually in much greater danger of insurmountable privations) seems clear. From the perspective of early medieval almsgiving, however, a discussion of the “poor” is woefully incomplete without a short discussion of these voluntary claimants to the mantle of poverty.

“Therefore [as scripture teaches] the cry of the poor comes to a judge’s ears,” explained Hrabanus, “since the anxieties of the church, which she holds in many troubles, reach the ears of the most righteous Judge and he snatches her from all tribulation.”\(^1\) The church herself was a pauper, and the guardian of paupers. This theological belief was no inconsequential point. Cyran exemplified the embrace of a literal poverty on behalf of the church; even before his vagabond years, he sought real material poverty for himself and later his monks, “so that, naked, he might follow in all things Christ, who likewise said of himself, ‘the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’” (Mt 8:20).\(^2\) Yet beyond this consequence of literal poverty for some members of the poor

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\(^1\) “Ex ore enim pauperis deprecatio ad aures judicis veniet, quia anxietas Ecclesiae, quam habet in diversis tribulationibus, perveniet ad aures piissimi judicis, et ipse eam ab omnibus tribulationibus suis eripiet.” \(\textit{Hrabanus Maurus, Commentariorum in Ecclesiasticum libri decem}\) 5.1, col. 905D, similarly 8.5, col. 1016B.

\(^2\) “\(\text{immo etiam ita semet ipsum ex omnibus nudare vel expoliare studuit, ut Christum, qui nihilhominus de semet ipso ait: Filius hominis non habet, ubi capud reclinet [Mt 8:20], per omnia nudus sequi posset…}” \(\textit{Vita Sigiramni abbatis Longoretensis}\) 8, ed. B. Krusch, \(\textit{MGH SRM 4}\) (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1902), p. 611.
church, this image of the church’s poverty gave it certain entitlements. The church had need of aid, like the vulnerable involuntary poor discussed in this chapter, and indeed had a right to it. A major part of that aid came from God, in the form of protection, sanctification, and ultimately salvation and the redressing of wrongs at the final judgment. The king and the aristocracy owed her some temporal protection.³ And, as paupers, the clergy and vowed religious of the church could receive alms.

Monks, nuns, and the clergy also received alms and were considered poor, but in a different manner than the poor considered in the last chapter. The monks’ quest for salvation as voluntary paupers raises in turn the question of the meaning of the phrase pauperes Christi and the sanctity of the poor. If, as theologians taught, Christ was present in poor recipients of almsgiving, did that make the poor holy? The answer to this nexus of issues is complex.

1. The Peculiar Poverty of Church and the Monks

That monks and other clergy received alms and rightfully so was simply assumed. The 817 Synod of Aachen concerned itself not with whether monks ought to accept alms, but with how they should be divided: “From all things given in alms, as much to the church as to the brothers, let a tenth be given to the poor.”⁴ Christ’s assurance, “Give alms and everything will be clean for


you” (Lk 11:41) was a one of the standard arrenga formulas in charters at Saint-Gall recording donations of land to the monks. Another small set of charters refer to the land donation being made in elemosina elsewhere in the text. This set of donations tended to be made for the souls of one’s parents or other close family. The inclusion of the term “alms” linked these transactions to a host of biblical and clerical promises of eternal life that would have resonated with someone mourning the beloved dead. This desire to assist the departed (and so also console the living) explains the reference to alms; it also testifies to the uncontested belief that free, pious donations to monks qualified as alms.

The testimony of the above canon from Aachen lists both churches and monks as recipients of alms from the faithful. The ability to subdivide those donations into tenths indicates that these were gifts like coins and food presented to the rectors of local churches (which, in the case of this synod, belonged to monasteries). Two decades after Aachen, Wala confirmed this fact when he listed the reception of alms as part of the duties of the guardians of Corbie’s churches (custos ecleiae). This practice of giving alms to local churches suggests that churches not owned by monasteries also received small gifts from the faithful, and that this was part of their regular income for supporting the parish priest, as well as the poor, the fabric of the church, and the bishop.

The rules of canons also took their right to receive alms for granted. The 816 Council of Aachen made similar provision for a tenth of all gifts of alms to be redirected to the use of the poor.

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7. The guardians or rectors of these local churches were to pass on the alms to the monks. Wala, *Breve memorationis*, “custos ecleiae,” ed. J. Semmler, CCM 1, p. 421;
at the canons’ hospital. The expanded version of this rule (in its continental Latin tradition and the later Old English translation) dealt with the issue of priests receiving alms as individuals. They could do so in return for praying for their benefactors, but the expanded rule implicitly encouraged the donor to give to the whole community, since it was better able to shoulder the burden of intercession than one weak and sinful cleric.

Anchorites and other solitary holy men and women likewise received gifts, although the sources give them much less attention. One of Alcuin’s letters recorded “alms” being sent through him by Charlemagne for distribution in England. Alcuin listed what each monastery was to receive, and included a fixed amount alongside that to be given to individual hermits. These poor, pious men and women likely received other, smaller donations on a frequent basis from admiring bishops and local lay admirers.

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8 Institutio canonicorum Aquisgranensis 141, A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1906), p. 416

9 The Old English Version of the Enlarged Rule of Chrodegang (Regula canoniciorum) 40-1, ed. B. Langefeld (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 250-1 (ChrodR 1; B10.4.1).


11 Rimbert, Vita Anskarii 35, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SRG 55 (Hanover: Hannsche, 1884), p. 69; Thietmar, Chronicon / Die Chronik des Bischofs Thietmar von Merseburg und ihre Korreier Überarbeitung 8.8, ed. R. Holtzmann, MGH SRG n.s. 9 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1935), pp. 502-4, and probably 8.12, p. 508. It must be stressed that we have very little information of any kind on hermits in the Carolingian realms or in England between their eighth and eleventh century heydays, but some existed: see M. Clayton, “Hermits and the Contemplative Life in Anglo-Saxon England,” in Holy Men and Holy Women: Old English Prose Saints’ Lives and their Contexts, ed. P. Szarmach (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), 147-75, esp. 156-8. J-C. Poulin, L’Idéal de Sainteté dans l’Aquitaine carolingienne, d’après les sources hagiographiques (750-950) (Quebec: Presses de l’Université Laval, 1975), 67-80, provides some evidence for hermits in southern Aquitaine, but since hagiography focused on Merovingian saints, any Carolingian continuity is uncertain; though see the reference to some kind of non-Benedictine holy men in Ardo, Vita Benedicti abbatis Anianensis et Indensis 3, ed. G. Waitz, MGH SS 15/1 (Hanover: Hannsche, 1887), pp. 292-3. Consequently, it is different to say anything about their numbers, larger significance, or the extent to which they relied on their own labor for food, on a stipend from an associated monastery, and on gifts. Some certainly seem to have sought a real isolation: Vita sancti Cuthberti auctore anonymo 3.5, ed. B. Colgrave, in his Two Lives of Saint Cuthbert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940), p. 100. Perhaps symptomatic of an early preference for relative isolation as a means to sanctity (even if in reality visitors sought out hermits) is the fact that almsgiving and hospitality play a relatively minor role in vitae of these hermits: Poulin, L’ideal, 79-80; see also the lives of Cuthbert (above) and Felix’s Live of Saint Guthlac, ed. B. Colgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 60-173; see also Clayton, “Hermits,” 151-6.
Why then was the right of the clergy and religious to receive alms so widely taken for
granted? The identification of the church with the body of Christ was the key image in early
medieval ecclesiology.\textsuperscript{12} Giving to the church was obviously then giving to Christ. Almsgiving
also entailed giving to Christ in the person of the poor. It is easy to see how these forms of giving
to Christ could appear the same. Hrabanus even urged Christians to honor priests with material
support (as well as social respect) since they received Christ in the persons of his humble ministers
and so merited reward; he used the same Gospel passage (Mt 10:42) in support as he did for
helping the involuntary poor.\textsuperscript{13}

A fundamental aspect of early medieval thought on the possessions of the church was the
conception of them as the “patrimony of the poor.” This theology, based on the fifth-century
writings of Julianus Pomerius with resonances elsewhere in patristic thought, taught that the church
held its wealth for the service of the body of Christ and especially its most needy members. The
Carolingian church emphasized this ideology in part to condemn the theft and alienation of its
property, but it affected issues of alms and religious self-identification as paupers as well. The
Gelasian division of church income between the poor, the priests, the bishop, and the church fabric
(and similar contemporary variations on this division) expressed the rights of the needy members
of the church to its resources. It also asserted that those individuals and buildings dedicated to
serving the needs of the Christian people had equal rights to this general fund. After all, since the
primary income of most clergy came from ecclesiastical land and revenues, they were dependent
like the involuntary poor on this common deposit. The clergy were stewards of the patrimony, but

\textsuperscript{12} Congar, \textit{L’Eclésiologie}, 73-97, esp. 76.

\textsuperscript{13} Hrabanus, \textit{In Ecclesiasticum} 2.10, cols. 809-10; he also noted that the worker was worth his wage. For
the Augustinian precedent of identifying Christ’s \textit{minimi} with multiple groups, including his ministers, see R.
Canning, \textit{The Unity of Love for God and Neighbour in St. Augustine} (Heverlee-Leuven: Augustinian
Historical Institute, 1993), 377-93.
also its “poor” recipients. In such a situation, alms to the church obviously served the poor, without necessarily distinguishing which “poor” were meant.\footnote{14}

Monks and nuns could make an even greater claim to being poor. They gave away their possessions to enter the monastic life.\footnote{15} True, some monasteries owned great property, but corporate and individual ownership were quite different things, at least in theory. The individual monk depended totally on what the church and specifically his house held communally. In that, he was no different than any beggar asking for alms at the monastery gate. The monk, however, had the advantage over the beggar in social status and in the security of knowing that the monastic stewards of this communal property would care for their own.

This is not to say that monks and nuns did not strive after a genuine material simplicity. Poverty, according to Smaragdus, was the furnace in which the life of the monk was refined and proved.\footnote{16} Wealth and power could lead to spiritual danger.\footnote{17} Christ had promised that those who

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\item[15] Even child oblates technically had to sign away the property given to the monastery by their parents when the oblates reached the age of reason and could formally profess their vows. They were “voluntary” paupers \textit{de iure}, though barely \textit{so de facto}. Oblates were a minority of monks at the beginning of the early Middle Ages, but became the norm over the ninth and tenth centuries. M. de Jong, In Samuel’s Image: Child Oblation in the Early Medieval West (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), 16-155.


\end{footnotes}
gave up everything would be rewarded and sit with him in judgment at the end of the world.\textsuperscript{18}

Monks fully hoped to be there, sitting secure with him in glory, while the laity who tried to balance temporal and spiritual gain barely squeaked by through faith and good works (or, for some, failed to pass muster).\textsuperscript{19} Monks hoped, but they did not assume. Poverty offered a path to eternal glory, but the monastic life was still a struggle that one might lose to temptation and unrepented sin.\textsuperscript{20}

Poverty, nonetheless, laid the spiritual foundation for this great monastic hope. As such, questioning whether the ideal monk counted as a pauper and thus a valid recipient of alms seems not to have entered people’s minds.

The reality behind this ideal was (unsurprisingly) complicated. Some monasteries (and some clergy) struggled financially.\textsuperscript{21} Other monks found it difficult to part with all of their individual wealth, to the distress of many pious early medieval authors. In one didactic vision of an English monk, devils and angels debated over to whom the monk’s soul belonged. One of the demon’s most telling accusations was that the monk had secreted away some of his own wealth.

\textsuperscript{18} Based on Mt. 19: 28-9; also Mt. 13:23. This interpretation of the Gospel in support of a hierarchy of the blessed at the end is not the only possible one, but was rational and well-entrenched in tradition: Augustine, \textit{De civitate Dei} 15.21, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb, CCSL 48 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1955), p. 494; Jerome, \textit{Adversus Iovinianum} 2.18-34, PL 23, cols. 312-333; Gregory the Great, \textit{Moralia in Job} 15.31.37, ed. M. Adriaen, CCSL 143A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1979), p. 772; Isidore, \textit{Sententiarum libri tres} 1.27, PL 83, cols. 596-7.


\textsuperscript{20} Smaragdus, \textit{Diadema} 15 and 18, cols. 611-2 and 614-5.

possessions, betraying his monastic state and manifesting his preference for earthly things over heavenly. The angel admitted the truth of this charge, but successfully pleaded that that personal resources were being kept solely to give to the poor. Charity saved the day for this monk (as many lay folk hoped it would do for them), but this harrowing post-mortem debate was precisely what monks wished to avoid by claiming the status of pauper.

Fundamentally, the dialogue about charitable gifts was a religious one. And in the logic of the religious sphere, the almsgiver gave to Christ, whom both the church and the economic poor could validly claim to represent. Since monks and clergy lived out of the communal stores, in return for their sacrifice to serve Christ and his followers, these were in a sense dependent like other paupers on the mercy of their brothers and sisters.

2. Pauperes Christi and Holiness

The powerful rejoice at receiving gifts,
While beggars suffer through hunger’s pain,
But at the end into hell will go
The rich who drink orphans’ tears;
The poor, however, will ascend to bliss.  

Thus wrote an unusually vehement Carolingian poet. The condemnation of the rich needs little explanation. If they not only withheld God’s gifts from those who needed them, but even took

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23 “Gaudent potentes dum adquirunt munera / Mendici dolent prae famis inopia / Post finem vero divites in tartara / Qui consumptur orfanorum lacrimas / Pauperi autem pergunt ad sublimia.” De fide et caritate seu cavenda cupiditate (Rhythmi aevi merovingici et carolini num. 34) 11, ed. K. Strecker, MGH Poetae 4/2-3 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1923), p. 536. The author is unfortunately anonymous. The whole poem has a similar theme, equating riches with greed with the suffering of the poor and hence with damnation: pp. 534-6. The surviving manuscripts are ninth and tenth century, but accompanying poems are also preserved in eighth-century manuscripts. This is the sole reference to potentes in the poem, while the dives/pauper distinction appears multiple times. On the translation of “pauperi” as nominative plural, see critical apparatus and note the context in the poem; esp. cf. stanza 7, p. 535: “Dives et pauper mutaverunt gloriam / Dives in ignem, pauper in sublimia…”
advantage of the weak and robbed them ("drink their tears"), then the rich would justly suffer eternal damnation. But what of the poor ascending to bliss? Were all the poor automatically blessed? The religious aspect of involuntary and voluntary poverty still requires some explanation.

The *Vita Sigiramni* offers an initial answer. During his wanderings, Cyran came to the shrine of St. Saturninus and sat down for a while with the beggars outside. As they chatted, he began to talk to them about God; indeed, in the author’s personal opinion, he slipped in among the beggars, “in order that he might teach them how they might conduct themselves in holy poverty, just as in his own life.”

Specifically he urged them that, “just as he strove to love poverty freely, not from necessity, out of his love for Christ, so they should also join him always in praising God in their poverty, constantly ruminating without doubt on what the Lord said in the gospel: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of God is theirs.’”

Cyran’s hagiographer asserted that the poverty was holy, meriting heaven, even for the involuntary poor. The only requirement was to align one’s interior disposition with one’s exterior state and embrace the forced humility of poverty with love. In other words, not all paupers could claim holiness, but poverty could nonetheless sanctify anyone who sought to find God in it. Christ had embraced poverty; therefore, the poor were religiously privileged. They could find Christ there and love him.

The *Vita Sigiramni* blurred the boundary between the voluntary and involuntary poor, but not to the extent of guaranteeing the latter a place in heaven. Their poverty “from necessity” required a spiritual effort from them. The dregs of temporal society might prove themselves the

24 “Namque, ut opinor, illud hoc peregit studio, ut ipsos instrueret pauperes, qualiter omnem vitam suam in sanctam deducerent paupertatem.” *Vita Sigiramni* 29, p. 623. This revealing digression seems to be the author’s attempt to quash the logical assumption that Cyran actually sat around begging for his food with the dregs of society, with a secondary didactic purpose of showing the value of embracing Christ in poverty as a keystone of Cyran’s exemplary spirituality.


26 See above, n. 2.
dregs of post-mortem society as well. Of course, the same was true of monks. And since many of them were given to their monastery as child oblates, the message that one had to embrace poverty voluntarily and with interior love certainly had applicability for the vita’s monastic audience. In this manner, the “voluntary” monastic poor and the involuntary beggars were more similar than first appears.

Early medieval religious authors had the sense that the poor in general were likely to possess fewer vices than the rich. Christ chose a poor couple as his human parents for this reason, as Christian of Stavelot explained: “And he did not arrange to do this through the rich, who are in the habit of being full of vices, but rather through the poor, filled with virtues from perfection.”

When Hrabanus confronted the task of explaining passages in the Book of Sirach that highlighted the sins of the poor, he shied away from their obvious meaning. Sirach claimed many sinned on account of destitution; Hrabanus hastened to explain that, “Many therefore sin on account of poverty, but more on account of the poverty of the heart than of the body.”

These authors, like that of the Vita Sigiramni, believed any material poverty opened a path to virtue; both involuntary and voluntary poverty placed their practitioners in a special relationship with God. The common phrase “the poor of Christ” (pauperes Christi) could encompass both the vowed religious and the economic poor. In Brun Candidus’ description of the controversy at Fulda which led to Abbot Ratgar’s replacement with Eigel in 818, he portrayed Louis the Pious as castigating bad abbots who squandered on fancy buildings “the alms of the lay faithful, which, for

27 See above, n. 15.

28 “Et non curavit per divites hoc agere, qui solent esse pleni vitiis, sed per pauperes plenos virtutibus a perfectione.” Christian [of Stavelot], Expositio brevis in Mattheum evangelistam 2, PL 106, col. 1277D. This was part of the attraction of lives of extreme, anonymous poverty for Cyran, Adalhard, and Benedict of Aniane (see below, n. 48).

29 “Multi ergo per inopiam delinquunt, sed magis propter inopiam cordis quam corporis.” Hrabanus, In Ecclesaisticum 6.6, col. 960 (on Sir 27:1); see also 6.3, cols. 945-6.
the salvation of their souls, they had given to the Lord to nourish the paupers of Christ."\(^{30}\) The involuntary poor who received charity from the monks may have been included among these paupers of Christ, but the main intended beneficiaries were monks. For Jonas of Orleans, Christ’s poor were simply those oppressed by the powerful and those who suffered because the rich refused them aid.\(^{31}\) English homilies from the end of the millennium referred to God’s poor in similar ways and in some cases specified that they were those lacking the basic necessities of life.\(^{32}\) Odilo’s description of Adelheid’s (d. 1002) charity listed the poor of Christ as her beneficiaries in chapters describing her aid to monks, nuns, and beggars, potentially including all three under that term. Only at the end of this life did the identity of these “spiritual warriors” and the “poor of Christ” resolve itself as the poor populace (pauperum plebes) and the needy flocking to her for aid.\(^{33}\)

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\(^{33}\) “Confluxerant ad eam ex adiacentibus locis, ut semper faciebant, pauperum plebes. Erat ei consuetudo talis, ut in amicorum et familiarium suorum anniversariis spiritale donativum suis spiritualibus erogaret militibus, elemosinam dico, Christi pauperibus. Erat autem indigentium multitudo ordinatim constituta in
Christ’s poor in their different guises were united in being under God’s special protection. The simple fact of being poor also potentially united them to Christ since he had undertaken a life of poverty at his Incarnation, but this sanctification of the poor frequently came with a major caveat. The call of the *Vita Sigiramni* was to choose to imitate the naked and suffering Christ.\textsuperscript{34} And, at least for the *Vita Sigiramni*, the involuntary poor received no exemption from this requirement of actively willing to follow Christ if they were to be *pauperes Christi* in this sense of the phrase.\textsuperscript{35} It was the interior state of being poor that ultimately mattered, although the exterior state helped one forgo an attachment to temporal riches. Christian of Stavelot had thought it appropriate that Mary and Joseph possessed little in the world, but later in his commentary on Matthew specified that the truly blessed paupers were the poor in spirit who desired to be like Christ, and so wished not to possess riches.\textsuperscript{36} In fact, those rich men who gave alms generously and those who had a chance to become rich but forsook it both were really paupers, whereas the poor man filled with a desire for wealth was really rich.\textsuperscript{37} True “monks” who followed Christ by loco.” Odilo of Cluny, *Die Lebensbeschreibung der Kaiserin Adelheid / Epitaphium domine Adelheide auguste* 20, ed. H. Paulhart, Mitteilungen des Instituts für österreichische Geschichtsforschung 20/2 (Graz and Cologne: Hermann Böhlaus, 1962), p. 43; also c. 10, 11, pp. 37, 38. The reference to *spiritualibus militibus* occurs here since the text stems from the early eleventh century, when once again the poor recipients of alms were expected to pray on behalf of their benefactors. In the ninth century, such a phrase would have only been applicable to clergy, monks, and nuns. The *donativum* derives from the gifts made by Roman emperors to their temporal armies.

\textsuperscript{34} See also, Agius, *Vita et Obitus Hathumodae* 28, ed. G. Pertz, MGH SS 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1841), p. 175: “Ipsa Christum pauperem paupercula secuta…”

\textsuperscript{35} See above, n. 25. Hrabanus calls the poor in heaven *pauperes Christi* and equates them with those who follow poverty willingly, but it is unclear whether this includes only monks or also the patient and faithful involuntary poor: Hrabanus, *In Ecclesiasticum* 3.4, col. 841D. Elsewhere in this work, his *pauperes Christi* certainly include the involuntary poor, explicitly both the virtuous and sinners: Hrabanus, *In Ecclesiasticum* 3.6, col. 846D; see also 3.8, col. 853. Paschasius, *In Matthaeo* 11.25.40, p. 1252, differentiates paupers in general and paupers of Christ on the basis of whole-heartedly following Christ and his will, but this is in the (monastic) context of elucidating who will sit in honor with Christ at the Last Judgment; I do not believe questions concerning the involuntary poor enter into Paschasius’ mind here.


\textsuperscript{37} Christian, *In Mattheum* 43, col. 1418. The general idea is patristic, but the fourfold division of the “rich” (including also the greedy rich man who is, obviously, really rich and sinful) is unique to Christian.
not worrying about material things lived both inside and outside the walls of the monastery community. \textsuperscript{38} Consequently, Alcuin urged the involuntary poor to practice patience in their suffering, and so be glorified in the end. \textsuperscript{39}

The texts that laid out this theory of poverty and holiness had one of three goals in mind: to encourage the rich to give generous alms (so becoming poor in spirit); to frighten the powerful out of oppressing the poor (by showing the latter to be under God’s special protection); or to impress upon monks and nuns the value of their embrace of poverty (even when the religious house’s power might allow them to live like the rich). They did not directly aim at creating a religious theory of involuntary poverty or providing pastoral instruction to the poor. Nonetheless, the assumptions of this theory concerning the joint place of the voluntary and involuntary poor in God’s care and the potential function of their mutual poverty as a path towards sanctification can reasonably be assumed to have rippled outwards. Whatever specific encouragement or admonition the poor received evolved in the shadow of this theology, as did other people’s perception of the poor in Christian society.

The elite, as we have seen, still looked down upon the poor in social interactions, and the religious description of the poor as a privileged group did not undermine that fact. \textsuperscript{40} That these elites still gave alms to the involuntary poor in hopes of divine blessing is interesting. Though

\textsuperscript{38} Hildemar, \textit{Expositio regulae ab Hildemaro tradito} prologus, ed. R. Mittermüller, \textit{Vita et regula Ss. P. Benedicti una cum expositione regulae} 3 (Regensburg: Friderich Pustet, 1880), p. 47; Paschasius, \textit{Epitaphium Arsenii} 1.9, p. 35.

\textsuperscript{39} Alcuin, \textit{De virtutibus et vitiis liber ad Widonem comitem} 17, PL 101, col. 625C. The virtue of patience was generally commended, but it should be noted that the major path to salvation open to the poor in the early Middle Ages was still through acts of mercy combined with faith. The idea of parallel tracks to salvation for the rich via almsgiving and the poor via patience belongs more to antiquity, although this early medieval ideal of voluntarily embracing involuntary poverty can be seen as the development of the older idea of patience in suffering poverty (since both emphasize interior disposition) in a manner consonant with the early medieval emphasis on the necessity of everyone giving alms. See chapters 3 and 4; also Ælfric, \textit{CH2} 7, p. 64 (B1.2.8); pseudo-Wulfstan, \textit{Sammlung} 55, p. 287 (HomU 44 (Nap 55); B3.4.44). On patience in suffering as a way of following Christ generally, see \textit{Blickling Homilies} 3, p. 33 (HomS 10 (BILHom 3); B3.2.10); Smaragdus, \textit{Diadema} 10, cols. 606-7.

\textsuperscript{40} See section 1 above, and chapter 6.
donors did not expect the poor to directly intercede with God for them—which would have made the good standing of the recipients with God a more pressing issue—the belief that Christ received alms in the person of the pauper meant that the donors believed the poor to be associated with Christ in some fashion. Therefore, the idea that the poor held a position close to God must have received some credence among them. In this regard, the blurring of the boundary between the voluntary poor (dedicated a life of service to God) and the involuntary poor (without a clear religious duties) is significant. This blurring was not simply an illusion perpetuated by monastic sources, but was accepted by the laity. Donors sought out both involuntary and voluntary paupers for receiving alms. Wills and deathbed bequests normally spread out money and other goods between churches, monasteries, beggars, and other poor.41

3. Distinguishing the Voluntary and Involuntary Poor

The ability of monks, clergy, beggars, and poor farmers to all receive alms suggests that people had no desire to distinguish between involuntary and voluntary poverty. Monks conformed their lives to the poor in subtle ways. At Adalhard’s Corbie, poor guests and monks ate the same bread.42 The rich refused to have their feet washed; monks not only washed the feet of the poor but also, in a separate ceremony, allowed their own feet to be washed by each other.43 Gerald of


42 Adalhard, Statuta seu Brevia Adalhardi abbatis Corbeiensis 2.10, ed. J. Semmler, CCM 1 (Siegburg: Franciscum Schmitt, 1963), pp. 372-3; see also Thierry, Consuetudines Floriancenses antiquiores 17, 37, ed. A. Davril and L. Donnat, CCM 7/3 (Siegburg: Francisicum Schmit, 1984), pp. 30, 60; but this was not the case everywhere: see chapter 7.

Aurillac occasionally masqueraded as an actual beggar, and then passed on his alms to the involuntary poor while praying for his benefactors. In this praying, Gerald acted like a monk. Upon closer inspection, distinctions between the two kinds of poverty emerge from the sources. The regular poor did not have that obligation to repay alms with prayers, and the desire of monks to do so points to one difference between the voluntary and involuntary poor. Giving the gift of prayer to benefactors (even though not in explicit payment or exchange for their benefaction) established a balanced reciprocity between religious and laity. This relationship preserved the social status and dignity of both parties. Monks felt a certain reluctance to push their identification with the poor to the extent of accepting the potential social degradation of unbalanced reciprocity. The anonymous author of the Vita Sigiramni placed poverty and humility as the center of Cyran’s life, but clearly felt conflicted about portraying someone who, according to convention, ought to have devoted himself to being a father to the poor, instead of himself begging and doing menial waged labor. In one anecdote, he insisted Cyran refused to take alms, but the narrative logic of another demanded that Cyran ask for them. Cyran appears numerous times as assisting the poor in their labors, but we never actually see him doing so for pay, although he is supposed to have sought to support himself by his own hands as scripture enjoined. For a monk to stoop so low was apparently too socially humiliating to dwell upon.

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44 Odo of Cluny, Vita sancti Geraldi Auriliacensis comitis 1.14, PL 133, col. 652AB.
45 As in fact claimed in Vita Sigiramni 31, p. 624.
46 Vita Sigiramni 24, 29, pp. 620, 623.
47 Vita Sigiramni 10, 21, pp. 612, 619.
48 Interesting, two other Carolingian vitae assert that their monastic protagonists considered seeking a life of more extreme poverty and wandering, but ultimately rejected it in favor of more traditional modes of monastic sanctity. The life of someone like Cyran inevitably exercised a certain fascination in a milieu seeking to assert the value of voluntary poverty, but it was fascination implicitly condemned for its social disruptiveness (and its violation of the increasingly important ideal of stability and claustration): Ardo, Vita Benedicti Anianensis, p. 201; Paschasius Radbertus, Vita sancti Adalhardi Corbeiensis abbatis 11, 13, PL 102, cols. 1514-16.
Occasionally other hints of distinction between the voluntary and involuntary poor crop up. The common formula in grants of immunity by Louis the Pious, for example, justified the protection of monastic property to provide “for the feeding of the poor and the stipends of the brothers.” Here it is assumed that *pauper* would be naturally understood as meaning just the involuntary poor. At one point, Louis even tried to increase the percentage of alms given to the church that went to the poor, showing he was well aware of the differences among those living off of the “patrimony of the poor”:

It is decreed that whatever has been given freely to the church during our reign [i.e. not tithes or regular rents], in richer places let two-thirds be given to the needs of the poor and one-third to the stipends of clerics or monks; in lesser places, however, let it be equally divided between clerics and the poor, unless the donors specifically have designated where it should be given. Room existed for questions over how precisely to allocate resources and, with it, a slight, practical possibility came for distinguishing between the voluntary and involuntary poor. Nonetheless, the shared right of clerics, monks, and the poor to pious gifts and to use of the “patrimony of the poor” was clearly established.

The fact that both the involuntary and voluntary poor received alms and, indeed, sometimes sought alms at the same places (i.e. churches), combined with their potential access to sanctity via their mutual poverty, raises a question: did beggars and churchmen compete for alms? No surviving source admits the existence of such a competition. Condemning vagrants or harping on the pride or laziness of beggars would have been obvious clerical tactics in the face of heated competition if it had existed, but churchmen do not seem to have adopted such tactics.

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50 “Statutum est ut, quicquid tempore imperii nostri a fidelibus ecclesiae sponte conlatum fuerit, in dicioribus locis duas partes in usus pauperum, tertiam in stipendia cedere clericorum aut monachorum, in minoribus vero locis aequae inter clerum et pauperes fore dividendum; nisi forte a datoribus, ubi specialiter dandae sint, constitutum fuerit.” *Capitulare ecclesiasticum 818, 819* 4, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 276; Boshof, “Untersuchungen,” 300.
There are only a few scattered indications that people thought about the difference between giving to the church and to the needy in deciding how to distribute their alms. Rimbert’s story in his *Vita Anskarii* (ca. 865) concerning the Swedish matron Frideburg describes the dispatch of her daughter Catla to give alms in the Frankish city of Dorestad. Frideburg, who “always had exerted herself in almsgiving,” sent Catla overseas to give alms because in Dorestad “there are a great number of churches, and priests and clerics; there [there is] a multitude of the needy,” in contrast to the “few” paupers in pagan Sweden.\(^51\) The attraction of Dorestad was not only the greater number of the poor, but also the chance to give alms to the church as well. Rimbert imagined this lay woman as having an active desire to divide her alms in order to aid both groups, instead of allowing one to monopolize her generosity.

Two other texts suggest that the involuntary poor may have had a slight edge in attracting compassion. Hildemar, in his commentary on the *Rule of Benedict*, made a passionate appeal to his monks on the importance and spiritual value of caring for their sick brethren. In the course of that appeal, he emphasized (quoting Jerome in support) that Christ’s command in Matthew’s Last Judgment scene to visit the sick applied to the voluntary poor as well as the involuntary. Did some of his monks see caring for the truly indigent as more virtuous than caring for fellow monks?\(^52\) Even more suggestive is a charter from Saint-Gall from the first decade of the tenth century. A layman, Othere, granted Saint-Gall an estate and received it back in benefice for himself and his heirs in return for an annual rent of three days provisions to the monks in the cell of Saint-Martin at Jonswil. If he or his heirs defaulted on those payments, then the whole estate reverted to the direct control of the monks at Saint-Martin. Added to this unremarkable arrangement was another contingency clause: if his kin or heirs then violently seized the land from Saint-Martin, the

\(^{51}\) “Ipsa vero elemosinis semper intenta… ‘Et quia hic minus pauperes inveniuntur, post obitum,’ inquit… ‘vade ad Dorstadum. Ibi sunt ecclesiae plurimae et sacerdotes ac clerici, ibi indigentium multitudo.’” Rimbert, *Vita Anskarii* 20, p. 45.

\(^{52}\) Hildemar, *Expositio regulae* 36, pp. 403-4; see also 4, p. 150.
monastery of Saint-Gall would claim the land and use it to provide an annual distribution to the paupers and travelers at the monastery’s hospital in commemoration of Othere’s soul.\textsuperscript{53} The author of these provisions acknowledged that Othere’s kin might contest ownership of the land with monks, but hoped that they would balk at stealing food from the mouths of the involuntary poor, at least when that distribution was linked to Othere’s eternal salvation. In other words, these elite laity potentially considered support of the voluntary and involuntary poor to be somewhat distinct enterprises. If there was competition between the two groups for alms, then the monks feared they might lose this round.\textsuperscript{54}

In contrast to these examples, a certain Ronzonus found himself a poor cripple in early tenth-century Bavaria. He enclosed himself in the cemetery of the local monastery and dedicated his life to prayer, effectively transitioning from beggar to anchorite. Ronzonus then managed to attract charity more as a religious person than as a typical poor mendicant. This may have been more profitable, although there is no particular reason to suspect that this change in tactics regarding charity was more than a side effect of more pious motives.\textsuperscript{55}

If these texts are representative, then the blurring of distinctions between the voluntary and involuntary poor benefited both sides in attracting alms. Churchmen became associated with those whose need was plainly visible and which might provoke compassion. The poor became associated with the primary human mediators of the divine, making their role as Christ’s hands for receiving alms more plausible. They were both Christ’s paupers.

\textsuperscript{53} Urkundenbuch der Abtei Sanct Gallen, no. 727, 2:330.

\textsuperscript{54} In contrast, the charge in the eastern Roman Empire against begging monks was that they only adopted the monastic habit to get more alms than other beggars (but note the crowded urban environment of these complaints): D. Caner, \textit{Wandering, Begging Monks: Spiritual Authority and the Promotion of Monasticism in Late Antiquity} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 158-62.

\textsuperscript{55} Gerhard, \textit{Vita sancti Oudalrici} 26, p. 412.
4. Conclusion

The poor were characterized by vulnerability and by Christ’s ability to receive alms in their person. Monks (and, to a lesser extent, canons and other clergy) chose a life of dependence on the church which, if less precarious than that of their secular counterparts, still entitled them to the title of pauper. Clerics and religious could claim to represent Christ, also allowing them to fulfill the role of pauper in the eleemosynary exchange. This right went uncontested in our surviving sources.

The claims to charity by both the voluntary and involuntary poor was fundamentally religious. The blurring between the two groups may have aided the destitute by imbuing them with a greater aura of sanctity and the churchmen by associating themselves with those whose need was manifest. The end result was clear: both groups benefited from an association with holiness through their poverty. This equation of poverty with holiness was by no means absolute; one had to embrace Christ interiorly. Such interior devotion was not, however, necessarily visible to the donor and, during this time, the exterior condition of belonging to a group of the poor was enough to serve as Christ’s hands in receiving the gifts of the Christian people.
“Did you not see when he was in charge of hospitality of what quality and degree he was? How humble, how devoted? For when have you seen a noble without fail long for such foulness and bear with such rudeness? Or industriously handle such filthy and smelly items? I do not just speak of the foulness of the guests’ shoes, but even of the paupers’ sores. Sometimes he would wash their stinking clothes as if carrying sweet-smelling spices!”

In this way, the great Carolingian aristocrat Wala (d. 836) blazed his trail towards sanctity; that is, he subverted the social hierarchy with humility. Throughout this dissertation, four major themes concerning the relation between almsgiver and recipients have repeatedly emerged. The first—a rule demonstrated well by Wala’s exceptionality—is the disdain felt by the average aristocratic almsgiver for the poor and his reluctance to enter too closely into contact with them (the feelings of a peasant almsgiver towards beggars or a poor neighbor are, alas, much more obscure). The second theme is the love and mercy that religious leaders constantly reminded Christians they had to possess if their alms were to have meaning, and of which Wala’s treasuring of the pauper’s rags was an extreme form. Third, the eyes of the almsgiver focused on Christ as the recipient (and repayer) of his alms. In the case of Wala’s nose, he smelled rich spices in place of filthy clothes


2 This vignette occurs in discussing Wala’s caritas and dilectionis offica: Paschæius, Epitaphium Arsenii, 1.10, p. 37.
presumably in light of Christ’s self-identification in scripture with the smelly wearers of those clothes. Finally, there is the fact of giving. People, including lay aristocrats, did give to the poor.

Some of the interplay between these themes is obvious. The appointment of regular officers (dispensatores) to give out alms stemmed from the twin factors of managing substantial amounts of charity (theme four) and simultaneously allowing the elite to keep their personal distance from malodorous vagrants (theme one). Some of the harmony and conflict between those themes is not quite so obvious. The motives of love, mercy, and heavenly reward (themes two and three) certainly would prompt an early medieval Christian to give alms (theme four), but do they explain all of that giving? The disdain for lower classes (theme one) clearly conflicted with the call to love all Christians (theme two), but was it in tension with the act of giving itself (theme four)? Could the strengthening of social hierarchy in fact have been a consequence of almsgiving through, for example, the public demonstration of who had wealth to spare and who did not? Wala’s extravagant humility in caring for the poor violated division between social classes, but for the average almsgiver, even aristocratic ones, the question of charity’s effects on social hierarchy and the structuring of community was much more complex.³

This chapter attempts to unravel that complexity. It begins with a discussion of Marco van Leeuwen’s theory of the logic of charity; namely, that the provision of charity can be modeled as a process of negotiation between the elite and the poor in which, to accomplish a variety of personal and social goals, they choose different strategies (including charity) depending on their “cost.” The second section describes the interests and options of the elite, while the third treats the “negotiation” from the perspective of the poor. The fourth argues that the final package placed

³ It is, incidentally, unclear to what extent Wala’s reported humility would have troubled upholders of proper social order. Paschasius’ comment on the unwillingness of other well-born monks to discharge these duties demonstrates that as a monk and an aristocrat Wala was counter-cultural, but if viewed as a saint, he was supposed to be exceptional and conform to a different standard of behavior. His failure to observe normal social propriety then would not challenge those notions for others since they did not apply to them. In other words, if Paschasius’ account of Wala’s behavior is accurate, did his strivings for sanctity excuse him from normal social codes?
surprising light conditions on the reception of charity. The fifth section discusses the social, religious, and economic factors structuring this negotiation, which explain the relative limits of almsgiving’s power to create and strengthen social hierarchy directly (in comparison to what was common at other times). The sixth section approaches the problem of charity and society from the perspective of community, suggesting that almsgiving’s role as a social glue enjoyed proportionately more significance during the early Middle Ages. This communal dimension, however, did not challenge hierarchy and, in fact, indirectly benefited the elites specifically as well as society in general.

1. Modeling the Logic of Charity

Marco van Leeuwen’s model of the social logic of charity unites two historiographical trends. First, historians of poor care have continuously assumed that the elites gave because they derived real social, economic, or political benefits from their generosity. Second, social historians (especially in the subaltern school of studies) have increasingly tried to view society from the perspective of the frequently voiceless poor and to restore a sense of their agency in history. Now if the goals of the elite explain why they gave, then the question naturally arises of whether the elites had other means of achieving those same goals and, if so, why they chose or rejected charity. If the poor were actors in history and not just its passive victims, then we also need to ask what options they had in life and why they also chose or rejected charity. Logically, charity was only given and received when both groups perceived it as an attractive option. That means that there was room for a kind of silent bargaining. If the elites increased the burdens that came attached to

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accepting charity (social deference, moral policing, etc.), then the poor might turn to other means of survival (theft, family support, etc.). Alternatively, if the elite did not receive sufficient benefits from giving, then they would give little until favorable conditions returned.

What constituted an acceptable package of benefits and obligations changed according to circumstance. The economic climate helped to determine the demand for charity (i.e. the number of people in need of aid if they were to survive) relative to the supply; a large number of paupers clamoring for help naturally meant that the rich could increase the cost of accepting charity (usually involving more stringent social controls). This simple supply-demand relationship, however, depended also on the changing attractiveness of the other options of the elites and the poor. If crime was relatively easy to commit, then an increase in poverty might simply result in an increase in robbery rather than more demanding requirements for receiving charity. It is this relative economics of charity to other options that van Leeuwen stresses. Culture—broadly defined to include religious belief—also affected the fluctuating cost of charity. If, as often was true, elites felt a duty to help the poor, expected admiration from their peers for being charitable, or felt the prick of religiously-formed conscience, then they might dispense charity without demanding as much of the poor. Conversely, if they felt their obligations to the poor to include “civilizing” or otherwise morally educating the lower classes, they might refuse to offer a package of charity that did not address this goal.

Van Leeuwen’s model of the logic of charity relies on three explicit assumptions. The first is that similarities among various early modern approaches to poverty justify labeling all of them as “poor relief” and treating them as variations on a single institution. To extend this model of interaction to pre-modern care for the poor, that term needs to be replaced by “charity” and

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5 Consequently the other factors, given equal weight here by me, are less prominent in van Leeuwen’s work.

6 van Leeuwen, Logic of Charity, 2-4.
encompass private as well as public provision of goods (insofar as the public and private can be separated in the pre-modern world). I propose that looking at charity as this kind of negotiation is still useful since, as we shall see, many of the factors identified by van Leeuwen as key elements in the logic of charity operated long before modernity.\(^7\) The switch from the paradigm of poor relief to charity, however, necessitates some broadening of his categories of interest to give equal weight to goals beyond controlling the poor.

The second assumption is that on average we can explain people’s actions (individually or in groups) as purposeful attempts to attain their perceived interests. We need not assume all action is rational, or that people correctly assess what is in their own interest, but only that most people in most situations will choose what seems to them the best option to gain what they desire given the constraints of their particular society. People may make their decisions based on personal interests, group interests, or the public interest (especially if they are leaders). In practice these three categories of interest tend to blur into each other: it is in the personal interest of an aristocrat to preserve the privileges of the elite, and he or she will usually assume that preserving a stable social order is in the public interest.\(^8\)

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\(^7\) On elements of charity as an element of social control by elites in Late Antiquity see, for example, P. Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), passim; R. Finn, *Almsgiving in the Later Roman Empire: Christian Promotion and Practice (313-450)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 205-14.

\(^8\) van Leeuwen, *Logic of Charity*, 10-11, acknowledges the distinction, but privileges group interest, assuming that over the long term that socially-constructed incentives adapt themselves to support prevailing group interests; or, in other words, any stable social system will encourage people to act in ways that reinforce the system. This simplification is necessary for analyzing large groups, although this dissertation still tries to elucidate the individual decisions that, in aggregate, determine group action. This does not mean that a strong class consciousness always existed. During the early Middle Ages, social hierarchy was important but consideration of class interest rarely emerges explicitly: for exceptions demonstrating that class could be used as a category for defining interest see E. Goldberg, “Popular Revolt, Dynastic Politics and Aristocratic Factionalism in the Early Middle Ages: the Saxon Stellinga Reconsidered,” *Speculum* 70 (1995), 467-501. Note also Thegan’s famous comment on Ebbo of Reims, a former *servus* raised by Louis the Pious to the rank of archbishop, who later joined the opposition against Louis: “O qualem remunerationem reddidisti ei! Fecit te liberum, non nobilem, quod inpossibile est.” Thegan, *Gesta Hludowici imperatoris / Die Taten Kaiser Ludwig* 44, ed. E. Tremp, MGH SRG 64 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1995), p. 232.
The final assumption is that we can conceive of charity as an exchange between the elites and the poor. In the context of early modern poor relief, this assumption is a reasonable simplification of reality. The elites debated poor relief, civic and national political leaders played key roles in instituting it, and, where the background of public administrators is known, those of elite or semi-elite backgrounds largely administered poor relief. Van Leeuwen acknowledged that broadening the area of investigation to include charity generally, even in early modern times, would call this assumption into question. This assumption is even more problematic in addressing early medieval charity, which was not public, governmental action in the manner of poor relief, and which both poor and rich Christians actually had an obligation to practice.

I will set aside the question of non-elite almsgiving until the fifth section of this chapter for several reasons. While the elites did not have a monopoly on charity, they had a special obligation to give and were probably the most significant source of alms on days outside of the *quattuor tempora* and Rogationtide. The religious elite were the main promoters of almsgiving. Furthermore, from the perspective of analyzing the social meaning and effects of charity, it is a reasonable assumption that the elites (local, regional, and trans-regional) had a specific set of concerns that differed in several respects from those of poorer almsgivers, and this difference is essential for understanding the interplay of hierarchy and charity.

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9 van Leeuwen, *Logic of Charity*, 11-12, 54-68.

10 van Leeuwen, *Logic of Charity*, 3.

11 By “elites” in this section, I include royalty, aristocrats, the richest level of peasants (insofar as they can be distinguished from the aristocracy), bishops, other high ranking clergy, abbots, abbesses, and other important monastic officers. What is said about the elites also mostly applies to the “near-elites”: relatively prosperous farmers with one or more non-kin workers in their households, most local clergy, and monks and nuns in general. On the problem of defining even the “nobility,” see J-P. Devroey, *Puissants et misérables: Système social et monde paysan dans l’Europe des Francs (VIe-IXe siècles)* (Brussels: Académie royale de Belgique, 2006), 203-39; T. Noble, “Secular Sanctity: Forging an Ethos for the Carolingian Nobility,” in *Lay Intellectuals in the Carolingian World*, ed. P. Wormald and J. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 21-4.
The resulting interaction can be pictured as a flow chart (see figure 11.1). The background social structure gives rise to two main groups, the elites and the poor, with particular goals and options for obtaining them. The deliberation within each group (or member thereof) leads people to decide whether they would wish to give or receive charity. Over the course of many interactions and (sometimes) explicit debate about the role of charity, a normal practice of giving by the elites with the concurrent expectations of certain kinds of reciprocal behavior from the poor is silently negotiated. The resulting package of charity helps structure social hierarchy and the economy, which in turn may alter the initial social context of interaction (in those circumstances in which charity is sufficiently large to have significant effects, as was almost certainly the case in van Leeuwen’s early modern world).

2. The Elites and the Logic of Charity

What then were the interests and options of the elite? And which of these were the most pressing in the early medieval world, as opposed to van Leeuwen’s early modern one? At the most basic level in most times and places, the elites needed a workforce. In certain circumstances, a combination of charity and wages made more economic sense than employment alone. If work was seasonal, for example, then it was often cheaper to dole out basic charity in the off-season to keep workers alive rather than to pay them full wages. In other situations, the cost of hiring another worker could exceed the profit from the marginal output produced by that worker; in that case, charity could preserve reserve workers until the situation changed, while simultaneously serving the other interests of the elite.¹²

In the early Middle Ages, most work was not waged labor. The elites relied on rents, taxes, and tithes from tenants and independent proprietors, or on the fruits of labor on the elite’s

Figure 11.1 A Model of the Logic of Charity (modified from van Leeuwen, *The Logic of Charity*, fig. 1.1, p. 32).
own field (the lord’s demesne) by slaves, serfs, and free tenants. In either case, the elites relied on poorer workers, but had less need of a large reserve of unemployed workers as supply for a labor market. One might infer that regulating the labor market was not the major preoccupation of the early medieval elite (in contrast to their early modern counterparts), but that inference requires two caveats. The elite did not need a large reserve workforce, but still relied on some waged labor from their poorer neighbors during the harvest and so found a small reserve labor pool useful. More importantly, the elites had a vested interest in preserving their active labor force from especially rapid attrition, since there were limits to replacing it from a largely stationary population. In times of severe famine, when potentially large losses of their tenants to vagrancy or starvation could have disrupted production during the next agricultural cycle, the elites benefited from providing enough free food to rescue their own poor.

Another frequent social function of charity lay in its ability to legitimize the social order, especially the power and wealth of the elites. The elite’s redistribution of part of their wealth to the poor gave the poor a stake in preserving the existing system. In effect, the rich might buy off opposition to economic inequality through giving charity to the system’s apparent losers. The poor then were less likely to challenge the system and repaid the elite with respect and deference. Indeed, insofar as the elite’s status existed because they received acknowledgement of that status by the public, the garnering of that deference from their social inferiors was an invaluable element in the strategy of elite power.

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15 van Leeuwen, Logic of Charity, 6; see also P. Brown, Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 71-117.
We have already seen how early medieval theology explained the disparities of wealth as part of God’s dispensation, in which the rich were allowed more wealth as stewards for God with the responsibility to care for his wider household (i.e. the church and the poor). This system, as theologians taught, was just. If the rich gave alms at a reasonable level, they legitimately possessed the rest of their goods, even if that meant they lived at higher standard than their poor brothers and sisters. Almsgiving clearly played a role in legitimizing economic disparity. The promise of heaven to the poor who bore with their suffering patiently and so accepted charity graciously might also be viewed as added incentive for them to accept quietly the social structure along with alms, but it must be emphasized that this cynical view lacks any corroborating medieval evidence.

Evidence that the poor repaid almsgiving with social deference is also absent for the core of this period, but by the tenth century almsgivers could demand that their regular clients trail after their patrons in what functioned partially as a public celebration of the patron’s munificence and hence elite status.

Almsgiving could legitimize other forms of medieval power to an extent. Accounts of kings, bishops, and others include descriptions of their charity with enough frequency to demonstrate that the literate elite considered this activity part of the basic requirements of being a good ruler. When the west Frankish Annales Bertiniani wished to cast a favorable light on the

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16 See chapter 3.

17 On the poor and heaven, see chapter 10.

18 Gerhard, *Vita sancti Oudalrici episcopi* 5, miracula 29, ed. G. Watz, MGH SS 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1841), pp. 393-4, 424; and see section 3 below.

19 See chapter 6. This group of the literate elite were mostly churchmen, but the example of Einhard (a layman) and his *Vita Karoli* demonstrates that at least some laymen also bought to this ideal. Heinz Löwe suggests that Pippin III’s coin bearing the word *elemosina* (a solitary example survives) is an example of regular royal use of the ideology of almsgiving similar to what is portrayed in Einhard: H. Löwe, “’Religio Christiana,’ Rom und das Kaisertum in Einhards *Vita Karoli magni*,” in Storiografia e storia: Studi in onore di Eugenio Duprè Theseider (Rome: Bulzoni, 1974), p. 7. This is an example of a layman (Pippin and his moneyer) adopting alms as part of their ideology of power; since Pippin was a usurper, this legitimization was all the more important.
takeover by Charles the Bald (the current west Frankish ruler) of a portion of his nephew’s kingdom upon the latter’s demise, the annals portrayed Charles as being piously engaged with his wife in almsgiving when he received the news of the younger (bad) king’s death. Charles’ charity did not give him the right to rule in itself, but still assisted in constructing an image of him as a responsible holder of power.

A major elite concern, linked with legitimizing wealth or power, was preventing social unrest. Bread riots were a recurrent fear in early modern cities. Peasant revolts sprang up in different times and places across medieval Europe, including the early medieval Stellinga revolt in Saxony, although it is not clear how impoverished the rebels always were. The elites could normally squash these disturbances, but only at the cost of killing or injuring potential workers and suffering the destruction of property by rioters in the meantime. Preventing social unrest in the first place made a good deal of sense.

For reasons discussed below, our early medieval sources do not show much fear of the lower classes rising (although when those rare disturbances took place, the surprised elites were quite put out); if anything, the elites were normally considered the threat to social order and the poor the victims. While almsgiving justified the rights of the rich to their wealth on the part of the giver, it also served to maintain the status of its vulnerable recipients from the depredations of the

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powerful. Both church and crown frequently protested against the unjust seizure of lands (from the economic poor and the church), the coercion of the free into serfdom, and the perversion of the judicial system by powerful local players. Charity played a lesser role than judicial reform and exhortation in stabilizing the social order, but likely did serve to offset some of the economic pressure exerted by the powerful in their quest for more power. Early medieval culture considered a stable social order a good in itself, and the state also benefited from preserving the status of free men who were eligible for military service (or paying the fine for not participating).

Fear of crime being committed by the impoverished was a more realistic and pervasive concern. The assumption that beggars turned to theft when they could not otherwise survive seems eminently reasonable. Thus a council in Mainz demanded that the free poor be protected against the predatory elite since, “their families would be humiliated unjustly, obedience to the king diminished, and [the poor victims], on account of their need, made beggars, thieves, or criminals.” The social order suffered from the loss of land and freedom by the poor, and crime increased.

The bandits that plagued travelers would have welcomed healthy recruits. Probably most crime was petty theft. Infrequent late antique and medieval efforts to quell vagrancy through the provision of charity can be explained by the loose association of beggars with thieves and criminals.

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24 “ne forte parentes eorum contra iustitiam fiant exereditati et regale obsequium minuat et ipsi propter indigentiam mendici vel latrones seu malefactores efficiantur.” *Concilium Moguntinense 847 / Mainz, Oktober 847* 17, ed. W. Hartmann, MGH Conc. 3 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1984), p. 170.

25 See chapter 9 above.
in the Council of Mainz’s canon.26 It should be noted, however, that pre-fourteenth-century efforts
to eradicate vagrancy though legal coercion or charity were never more than feeble and sporadic
efforts in comparison to early modern policies. Indeed, there is scarcely any piece of early
medieval legislation other than the Nijmigen capitulary of 806, which expressed a fear of vagrants
without specifying fugitives as its primary concern.27 The right to beg went practically
unchallenged, and the necessity of moving from place to place to do so (in light of the lack of
urban concentrations of population) was a fact of life. The exchange of alms in return for these
beggars abstaining from theft was in a sense an explicit part of early medieval conceptions of
charity, although phrased differently. Since the rich held their wealth in stewardship and the poor
had a right to a subsistence share in God’s bounty, then a certain amount of alms were owed the
beggar in justice and technically any theft committed by him or her was not a crime if the rich
refused to offer any alms.28 Outside of this particular instance (whose practical effect is uncertain),
the exchange of charity for restraint on the part of the poor from crime and social disruption was an
implicit part of the elite’s set of interests.

A tangentially related early modern concern was the role of the poor in spreading disease.
Early modern authorities knew that concentrations of people in deplorable living conditions bred
epidemics that threatened the whole population, including the elites, and sometimes invoked this

26 On Carolingian attitudes towards beggars, see chapter 9 above. In short, for antiquity, see Concilium
Turonense a. 567 5, ed. C. de Clercq, CCSL 148A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1963), p. 178; E. Boshof,
“Armenfürsorge in Frühmittelalter: Xenodochium, matricula, hospitale pauperum,” Vierteljahrschrift für
Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte 71 (1984), 156; Brown, Power and Persuasion, 98. For the Carolingians,
cf. Riché, Daily Life, 252; Boshof, “Armenfürsorge,” 168; but note the explicit extension of the king’s
protection to those traveling to seek aid for their poverty (inopia) or hunger in Capitulare missorum generale
(802) 30, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1, pp. 96-7.

27 Capitulare missorum Niumagae datum 806 9, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche,
1883), p. 132, discussed above in chapter 9. On early modern vagrancy laws see Mollat, The Poor, 290-2;
Geremek, Poverty, 122-6, 146-7, 173-4; see also van Leeuwen, Logic of Charity, 170-2.

28 See chapter 3.
Given the state of medical knowledge and the dispersed population of the early Middle Ages, this was not an issue then.

Certain kinds of charity or conditions attached to charity might be imposed with the goal of “civilizing” the poor. The elites “knew” themselves to be better than the poor and sometimes felt an obligation to morally improve the latter, whether through offering educational services that included moral formation, demanding labor services from recipients of poor relief in the belief that work edified the soul, or requiring that the poor adhere to certain moral standards to stay eligible for aid. The surprising absence of such provisions for early medieval charity indicates that while a segment of the elites felt responsible for “improving” the general populace through Christianizing them, they did not feel that using charity to morally police the poor was an attractive strategy. Why this was will be explored in the course of this chapter.

Elites could also use charity for more personal goals. In systems with an advanced bureaucracy (such as early modern poor relief), doling out jobs administering that charity could be a source of patronage. The most common and pressing goal, however, was to build up one’s own prestige and status. Physical capital was exchanged for social capital. Those who received alms presumably felt gratitude towards their benefactor and would be more likely to follow his leadership, making the elite giver a more potent political force. A simple demonstration of respect for him by the poor helped to mark him out as a legitimate member of the elite. In a culture in which generosity to the poor was valued by the elites (whether for religious reasons or some other

\[29\] van Leeuwen, *Logic of Charity*, 7, 23, 70.


\[32\] There are obvious parallels with charity’s role in legitimizing the social order in general or a particular political regime. The difference here is that the goal is not the justification of a group’s power or wealth, but competition within that group for status relative to putative peers.
sense of noblesse oblige), a generous benefactor directly garnered that most precious commodity, the respect and admiration of his peers.

This elite interest is the one best documented in medieval sources. That documentation usually comes in the form of condemnation of those seeking honor and praise from their gifts. Thus Hrabanus stridently declared, “alms are not therefore to be given on account of the acclamation of human praise or greed for temporal things, but on account of love of God and ardor for eternal happiness.” By implication, someone could give alms and as a result reap praise, leading to the more concrete benefits that adhered to those of high social status. Sometimes this desired praise specifically came from those receiving the alms. Most of the time, while those from whom almmsgivers sought praise or to whom they boasted remain unnamed, the sources assume that the gift is being done for an audience seemingly beyond that of its immediate recipients. In another condemnation of giving alms for human glory, Hrabanus wrote, “First, therefore, [scripture] urges that you give alms with a simple spirit... That is, take care to refrain this in your spirit: that when you live justly or do some kind of good word, you set your good there, so that people may see you, and you please them, and you seek to receive praise from them; but on account of this, you lose the fruit of reward.” The people whose esteem lay in the balance were those seeing the giver, not necessarily those receiving the gift.

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33 See chapter 2; and e.g. Ælfric, CH2 28, p. 251 (B1.2.31); Alcuin, De virtutibus et vitii liber ad Widonem comitem 9, 25, PL 101, cols. 619AB, 631D; Statuta Rispacensia, Frisingensia, Salisburgensia 4, ed. A. Werminghoff, MGH Conc. 2/1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1906), pp. 207-8.

34 “Non enim propter favorem humanae laudis ac cupiditatem praesentium rerum facienda est eleemosyna, sed propter dilectionem Dei et amorem aeternae beatitudinis.” Hrabanus Maurus, Commentariorum in Ecclesiasticum libri decem 1.12, PL 109, col. 783A; similarly 4.13, col. 896A.


36 “Primum enim hortatur ut simplici animo facias eleemosynam... Id est, cavete hoc animo tenere, ut cum juste vivatis, sive alicui boni operis faciatis, ibi bonum vestrum constituatis, ut vos videant homines;
The frequency with which clerics inveighed against vainglorious motives suggests that this was a continuing, contemporary problem from the standpoint of Christian ethics. While the number of people motivated by pride rather than love is unknowable, the fact that people had the option of “pride,” or rather of advancing their social position through charity, is significant.

Einhard, a pious layman, was in fact quite comfortable with baldly stating that the praise Charlemagne received compensated for the financial burden of giving: “he balanced those great inconveniences against praise of his generosity and the reward of a good reputation.” Elite culture had adopted the Christian valuation of generosity towards the poor and made that criterion of excellence its own. This Christian success created a compelling social force moving the elites towards participating in charity.

Finally, there is the religious motive. The elites worried about their salvation, as their endowment of monasteries or the popularity of Alcuin’s treatise on the virtues and vices demonstrate. Religious motive plays only a bit part in van Leeuwen’s analysis of early modern Amsterdam, but its role is hard to ignore in early medieval Europe. Almsgiving was, as we have seen, an essential part of Christianity. It was a key part of dealing with the death of family, and maintaining bonds past that rupture through caring for the souls of the dear departed via charity in their name. The religious element in charity also had a much more practical side from a temporal perspective. Almsgiving helped secure divine favor in matters ranging from the chancy business of agriculture to victory in war. Although clergy preferred to emphasize the eternal fruits of the

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39 See chapter 5.
almsgiver’s piety towards God, the laity also valued the various temporal benefits quite highly.\(^{40}\)

This aspect of the charitable exchange—the repayment of alms by God, not the pauper—was a critical factor in the negotiation of poor care.\(^ {41}\)

In summary, elites traditionally had a wide variety of reasons that might compel them to give alms. These ranged far beyond the much-lauded motives of love and mercy, albeit without excluding their influence. For the early Middle Ages, the evidence points to three key elite interests. First, they wished to stabilize the social order. This could include the desire to stop those on the lower steps of the social ladder from slipping down its rungs, though the primary focus was on explaining the existing discrepancies in wealth as legitimate and just through charity’s quasi-fraternal sharing of limited resources. Second, individual members of the elite sought to attract admiration through almsgiving in order to increase their social status relative to their peers. Third, the almssgivers sought to implore divine aid for themselves and their family in this life and the next. The surviving evidence supports the second and especially the third goals most abundantly, but this may simply reflect the ecclesiastical bent of our sources and the extent to which the first (and, to a much lesser extent, second) interests were embraced unconsciously by individuals. The socio-cultural environment assumed the positive value of an orderly hierarchy and would have subtly encouraged such unconscious impulses.\(^ {42}\)

The elites had other options to attain these interests besides charity. Van Leeuwen describes these options as alternate “control strategies,” which seems too narrow a phrase for everything that he wishes to include under that rubric, but illustrates what he (and many other historians of charity) consider the core elite interest. This core interest was the maintainence of the

\(^{40}\) See chapters 3 and 5.

\(^{41}\) As stated above, the negotiation of charity depended on what people perceived their interests to be; the actual effects of almsgiving on harvests or battles is immaterial to an analysis of that negotiation so long as the belief remained.

\(^{42}\) And predisposed people to reject ideas and interests that questioned the existing norms. On this kind of unconscious natural selection, see van Leeuwen, *Logic of Charity*, 2-4, 23-4.
social position of the elite as a group and therefore included containing any potential disruptions from their social inferiors.

The elites had two basic methods at their disposal. First, they could ease the hardships of the poor. This meant increasing wages and employment, or decreasing the price of goods. The early Middle Ages was not primarily a wage economy; instead, the poor received land on which to get their daily bread in return for rents and labor services. Decreasing those rents would have served as an equivalent to raising wages. There is, however, little evidence that the early medieval elites considered such an option. The elites did try to control the price of grain during times of dearth, although their success in doing so is uncertain. Another strategy would have been to subsidize the purchase of food. This option relied on an efficient bureaucracy managing taxes, trade, or both over a distance, and unsurprisingly saw more use in the early modern world as well as the Roman Empire.

The other major method of controlling the poor was direct coercion. Violence, the threat of violence, and variations of police action all could potentially cow disruptive mobs into submission and grudging acceptance of the current order. As the Stellinga revolt’s bloody fate indicates, the early medieval elites were not shy about using violence when pressed. The high cost (both fiscal and ideological) of maintaining control solely through such means is patent.

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43 van Leeuwen, Logic of Charity, 144-62.

44 See chapter 5; Capitula per episcopos et comites nota facienda, 805-808 1, 6, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 141; Capitulare missorum Niumagae datum 806 18, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1, p. 132; Verhulst, Carolingian Economy, 123-5, 128-9.

45 Subsidizing food was the “bread” in the famous Roman strategy of managing the crowds via “bread and circuses.” The availability of subsidized bread to all citizens continued in Rome and Constantinople until the seventh century, but was not practiced in medieval Francia or England: see T. Noble, The Republic of St. Peter: The Birth of the Papal State, 680-825 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 230-4; M. McCormick, Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce A.D. 300-900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 104-11; on the antique system, see the classic study of Paul Veyne (though one which deemphasizes the aspect of conscious social control), in his Le pain et le cirque (Paris: Le Seuil, 1976).

Although not explicitly part of van Leeuwen’s schema, soft ideological power offered a useful supplementary control strategy. If the order of society or the power of the monarch can be made to seem natural or divinely given, then people are a good deal less likely to rebel against it. This strategy often worked in conjunction with the other methods. Assuring that grain was sold at a just price, for example, not only offered the poor a practical reason to suppose that the government might benefit them, but also gave that government an extra aura of legitimacy by identifying it with an intangible good: justice. The theology that economic disparity flowed from God’s plan and accorded with his divine justice when combined with almsgiving offers an early medieval example of this soft power working in conjunction with direct material benefits.

These “control strategies” would not in themselves satisfy the elite goals of increasing their social status or securing salvation and divine favor. Each of these required a different set of strategies from which elite actors could choose. The prestige earned from Christian generosity was by no means the only path to self-advancement. Ownership and display of wealth, including patronage of high culture (artists and intellectuals), alliances with other elite actors, and military success all offered alternate paths to admiration and advancement. I suspect that in almost all pre-industrial societies these exceeded charity in importance, albeit to varying degrees.47

Almsgiving was also not the only divinely approved behavior. A person might reasonably rely on other pious practices like prayer, fasting, and penance to implore God’s favor in this life and for the next. As we have seen, almsgiving often functioned in conjunction with these alternative strategies of salvation. Alternatively, a person could rely on simple faith, although this was more an early modern ideal.

The relative attractiveness of all these options for social control, prestige, and salvation played an important part in determining the evolution of early medieval charity. Before evaluating

47 With the probable exception of artistic and intellectual patronage.
their role in the “economics” of negotiating charity, it is necessary to first examine the position of the other party in this negotiation: the poor.

3. The Poor and the Logic of Charity

Why did the poor accept charity? The short answer is that they needed or wanted the items given. That answer is incomplete. Charity came at a cost to the recipient as well as the giver. The gift often came with an implicit or explicit demand that the recipients follow a certain set of behaviors in return: praying for their benefactors, adhering to certain moral prescriptions, showing public deference to their patron, or refraining from challenging the existing social norms. Even if none of these demands were present, accepting charity might also come at a cost to one’s self-esteem or social status. The “shame-faced” (verecundus) poor had that name since they felt shame at having to rely on another’s mercy. Where the poor saw charity as an entitlement or a normal part of the lower classes’ existence, they may not have felt any shame at seeking help, but even in such a case their lack of shame stemmed from their acceptance of a lower place on the social hierarchy. In those situations where a successful beggar had to be itinerant in order to find sufficient numbers of donors, turning to charity then also required a person to abandon his home and his kin. What interests then prompted the poor to choose charity over other options for acquiring life’s necessities?

The primary goal of the poor was survival. The food, money, clothes, and other goods they received as charity allowed poor men, women, and their families to survive or to live at a

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48 In a case, however, where a certain benefit is freely extended to all members of society (not just the poor), then no shame or acknowledgement of social inferiority would attach to receiving this service. See, for example, the subsidized grain sales in Rome, national health care services in parts of modern Europe, or American public schools.

49 This cost to accepting charity was not present in the specific case of poor relief. Organized systems of poor relief in the modern era usually tried to prevent vagrancy and so denied aid to those not residing in the city or their home parish. On vagrancy as a necessity for some early medieval beggars, see chapter 9.

50 van Leeuwen, Logic of Charity, 13-22.
slightly more comfortable standard. The range of people receiving alms in the early Middle Ages certainly included people who would not have immediately starved or died of exposure without aid, but one can reasonably assume that the primary attraction of receiving charity even for these more fortunate ones was the desire for the material goods.  

Social status mattered for the more genteel poor who found themselves in sudden need. Presumably even among the mass of the “poor” small differences in social status also mattered, whether stemming from possessions, occupation, or degree of freedom/servile status. In this way, a large segment of people had an extra interest in acquiring enough goods to maintain appearances and the duties of their social status, while simultaneously being leery of aid packages which might impose an unbefitting dependence upon them. In the early Middle Ages, the donation of food around feast times may have made the recipients feel part of the community and allowed the recipients to take part in the communal celebrations rather than being excluded by their economic status. In other words, if someone did not have the food or money to celebrate, then they could only join the communal conviviality if others were generous. Unfortunately, the lack of extant information about these local workings of society and the minute variations of status there make all such suggestions speculative.

Those poor who found a permanent position as the client of a church or noble may have actually improved their social status via that association. The provendarii of Adalhard’s Corbie (assuming that they were poor) and the matricularii of a cathedral could claim to be part of a

51 See chapter 9. Modern charity also included non-material benefits such as education, which (like food) had a value in themselves in helping navigate a difficult world (van Leeuwen, Logic of Charity, 21-2). Early medieval charity included non-material things like forgiveness and minor favors, but those acts whose value are difficult to measure do not fit well into this scheme of a negotiation of charity.

52 van Leeuwen, Logic of Charity, 22, 131-2; see also chapter 9 above.

respected institution. On a practical level, they could also count on a protector. When the elite began accepting poor clients as continual recipients of alms (eleemosinarii) in tenth-century Germany, they potentially gave those paupers a lower-level analogue to königsnahe (proximity to the powerful). One revealing miracle story revolving around Ulrich’s tomb in Augsburg concerned the crippled elemosinarius of a Burgundian lady. She ordered two of her attendants (ministris) to prepare a horse for the cripple so that he might accompany her on her pilgrimage to Augsburg. These attendants purposefully lamed the horse while shoeing it, “in order that the informer [i.e. the cripple] concerning their activities (on account of his loyalty to his mistress), as customarily happened, not remain on the journey.” The crippled tattletale was a threat to them and whatever kind of embezzlement or other misdeeds that they practiced. By virtue of his status as a privileged and permanent client of the lady’s charity, he had access to her and hence to a power that he otherwise would have lacked.

If both poor and rich could worry about status, then both could also worry about the religious benefits of participating in the charitable exchange. True, the religious benefits of giving alms vastly exceeded those of receiving them, but there were ways in which receiving alms mattered to a soul. The patristic theory that the rich had a duty to give alms and the poor to repay with prayer gave the poor a ministerial function predicated on their willingness to receive charity. While this active duty of the poor to pray was then abandoned until the end of the early Middle

54 See chapter 8; especially note the example of Alcuin trying to protect his matricularii for their disruptive role in opposing Theodulf’s extradiction of a cleric from sanctuary; the case even reached Charlemagne: R. Meens, “Sanctuary, Penance and Dispute Settlement under Charlemagne,” Speculum 82 (2007), 290.

Ages, the poor may have still valued their exalted role as passively serving as Christ’s hands in the reception of alms.\textsuperscript{56}

The choice to receive charity therefore had several real benefits for the poor. It was an attractive option; nonetheless, it was not the only option. If the amount of charity was in low supply or if it came with too high of a cost to status and submission to elite control, then the poor could turn to alternate means of raising money. These had their own costs.

The simplest alternative to begging was working. Unfortunately for the poor, this normally was easier said than done. In the early Middle Ages, the market for waged labor was limited. Cyran, according to his \textit{vita}, fished and worked when he could, but relied on begging at other times.\textsuperscript{57} Land was also limited, whether considered in light of ownership or tenancy. The process of clearing new land for farming slowly accelerated in the tenth century. This created new opportunities, whether rich landowners sought to expand their great estates and increase the rent from tenants or peasants themselves cleared land to farm. This addition of new farmland, however, was not large enough in scale to absorb the majority of the poor and in many cases simply served to enlarge the land cultivated by moderate proprietors.\textsuperscript{58} One area of work open to poor women was prostitution and, according to Boniface’s complaints, some poor female pilgrims did turn to it.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{56} See chapter 4; also Finn, \textit{Almsgiving}, 179-88. The parallel theory (which survived into the Middle Ages) that the rich were saved by mercy (in almsgiving) and the poor by patience (in suffering) did not explicitly require the poor to receive alms, but still implied that someone ought to do so. I am not personally aware of early modern parallels to this situation, although presumably the pious poor’s concern for their own salvation undoubtedly predisposed them to more peaceful survival strategies and made them more open to certain kinds of moral policing.

\textsuperscript{57} See chapter 9 generally; for Cyran, see \textit{Vita Sigiramni abbatis Longoretensis} 22, 24, 31, ed. B. Krusch, MGH SRM 4 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1902), pp. 619, 620, 624.

\textsuperscript{58} Duby, \textit{Rural Economy}, 65-75; Verhulst, \textit{Carolingian Economy}, 11-13, 26-8, 41, 54; Devroey, \textit{Puissants et misérables}, 364-8. That being said, for families with some pre-existing resources and lots of patience, there were some viable long-term strategies for increasing wealth: Devroey, \textit{Puissants et misérables}, 393-5.

There were obvious reasons why a woman might not find this an appealing option, and it is an open question how many prostitutes the relatively simple early medieval economy could support anyways.

In cases of temporary crisis, the poor could try to bring in immediate cash or food through borrowing or through selling possessions (or pawning them in the more developed system of the late Middle Ages and later). 60 A passage in Paschasius Radbert suggests that a rudimentary credit market may have served the poor in the early Middle Ages, but it is doubtful that many poor people had access to it, if it even existed. 61 Informal borrowing from neighbors may have been the most feasible approach to loans for a temporary situation. Borrowing was not a solution to long-term problems. Failure to repay loans would have eventually tried the patience of the most sympathetic lenders and racked up a large debt for those borrowing with interest. Nor was selling possessions a viable solution for anything beyond a brief, one-time problem. The ability to sell possessions depended on how much of a surplus a person had, and eventually this surplus (probably never large to begin with) would be whittled down. If a person had capital stock (agricultural tools, livestock, etc.) then being forced to sell these items would have only hastened the day of reckoning.

The logical extreme of such a strategy was to sell oneself or one’s children. In societies which accepted slavery or serfdom (i.e. most societies in history), such a practice was not uncommon. 62 The Iudicia Theodori, addressing the situation in England at the beginning of our

60 van Leeuwen, The Logic of Charity, 19, 162-6.

61 Paschasius Radbertus, Expositio in Matthaeo libri xii 3.5.42, ed. B. Paulus, CCCM 56, 56A, 56B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1984), p. 351. See also Hrabanus, In Ecclesiasticum 6.10, col. 973B. There is a chance both authors are simply thinking of pre-medieval writings and not their contemporary situation. There are rare, scattered references to usury in councilian pronouncements and theological writings, but it is quite difficult to know what the authors meant by it and to what extent they are simply adopting biblical language. On early medieval credit or lack thereof, see R. Lopez, The Commericial Revolution of the Middle Ages 950-1350 (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971) 70-3.

62 In the early modern situation, selling the freedom was not a particularly readily available option since there was not a large slave market within Europe. The use of indentured servitude, however, was a sophisticated version of this old strategy and certainly played a very significant role in the strategies of those poor attempting to improve their position via emigration.
period, acknowledged the right of a father to sell his child, while imposing (new?) limits on that option: he could only do so in cases of necessity and also needed the child’s permission if the latter was age seven or older.  If there was no food to go around, the latter might well have given permission. A tenth-century manumission deed from England freed a whole group of people—men, women, and children—who had bowed their necks to the yoke of servitude in return for food in the past “evil days” (probably a time of severe dearth). These freedmen included an “Ecceard smith;” those forsaking their freedom were not the dregs of the social order but even encompassed skilled craftsman and their families. On the continent, as we have seen, increasing numbers of people submitted themselves to serfdom. While sources protesting enserfment portrayed this trend as the result of oppression by the powerful, other evidence suggests that for some peasants enserfment was a voluntary survival strategy. Bavarian law protected a free man from being forced from his land or enslaved “no matter how poor he might be,” but simultaneously protected his right to choose to do so. The implied reason for such willing submission was to escape poverty.


65 See chapter 9. On the rise of serfdom, including those who saw it as advantageous, see Poly and Bournazel, *Feudal Transformation*, 119-40; Devroey, *Puissants et misérables*, 280-6, 312-5; Barthélemy, *The Serf, the Knight*, 37-136, esp. 51-64; see also Fichtenau, *Living in the Tenth Century*, 360-7.

66 “Quamvis pauper sit, tamen libertatem suam non perdat nec hereditatem suam, nisi ex spontanea voluntate alicui tradere voluerit; hoc potestatem habeat faciendi.” *Lex Baiwariorum* 7.5, ed. E. von Schwind, MGH LL nat. germ. 5/2 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1926), p. 352. Admittedly “free will” may not always have been truly free, but there is no reason to doubt the law’s claim that it could be. Compare a roughly contemporary formula (early eighth century) from Tours which states that the reason for man commending himself into the power, protection, and service of a lord is his own lack of means to buy food and clothing “as is known to everyone” (“Dum et omnibus habetur percognitum, qualiter ego minime habeo, unde me pascere vel vestire debeam, ideo petii pietati vestrae…”): *Formulae Turonenses* no. 43, ed. K. Zevmer, MGH Formulae Merovingici et Karolini aevi (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1886), p. 158. This is a commendation formula to become the faithful man of lord and explicitly did not entail the loss of freedom; nonetheless, if a man of enough social status to keep his freedom while submitting to a lord’s service was not able to provide himself with reasonable food and clothing (relative to his station at least), then it is reasonable to suspect a man
Those who entered servitude paid the obvious price of losing their notional freedom and concomitant social status, but garnered attractive benefits. Slaves were more or less guaranteed sufficient (if poor) food, and certainly more so than a beggar. While they could be sold, they would most likely enjoy greater stability of residence than someone relying on begging. And they enjoyed the protection of their master from being oppressed and abused by anyone except for himself and his officers; charity provided no such protection. The situation is slightly more complicated for serfs, as opposed to slaves directly attached to their master’s house. Serfs lived on their own tenancy and worked for their own food, while owing labor services and other dues to their lord. Serfs enjoyed their lord’s protection (since his income relied on their productivity and, hence, safety) and those becoming a serf could receive new land on which to earn their bread. The extra stability and landed capital meant that becoming a serf was a rational response to poverty. A serf also still had some relative freedom (including the ability to improve his land) and more social status than a slave. In some ways, however, becoming a slave was a better solution to poverty in the short term. The economic advantage gained by aristocrats in developing great estates worked by serfs lay precisely in the fact that the serfs were in charge of feeding themselves and so labored more diligently. The lack of a guarantee of food was a force that drove increased productivity. Nonetheless, the lord had an interest in making sure that the tenancies he initially doled out were submitting to a lord as a serf might come from more desperate straits and accepted enserfment for that reason of poverty.

Divining what early medieval sources meant by the term servus and drawing an exact line between different kinds of servitude and degrees of freedom is a perennial frustration for social historians, but the basic model of slave (directly supported by his master and lacking land) and the serf (supporting himself from his own land, to which he is legal bound) approximates the reality of the situation well enough for most analysis: H-W. Goetz, “Social and Military Institutions,” in New Cambridge Medieval History, vol. 2, ed. R. McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 458-61; Devroey, Puissants et misérables, 265-74, 281-315; Barthelemy, The Serf, the Knight, 77-100, 117-23.

large enough for a household to support itself, and if extra land was available at the price of freedom, such a deal would have been attractive to a poor proprietor.

In different times and places, migration to cities or to regions with better economic opportunities offered another option to the poor. There is no evidence that any such economic frontier area drew significant numbers of the poor during the early Middle Ages.

We have already encountered the possibility (and fear) of the poor turning to life of crime. In the end, we do not have a good way of evaluating how attractive a turn to robbery would have been. It is unlikely, given the lack of large urban crowds in which to hide, that a potential thief could have relied on crime as a survival strategy unless he combined it with vagrancy to escape capture or joined a group of bandits along a major travel route. There was no organized police force to track him down should a robber flee to another district, but if private citizens or the local aristocracy caught him, then the robber could expect a severe punishment. Some percentage of paupers found the risks proportionate to the rewards.

This was not true of the case of revolt. The only significant peasant rebellion in the eighth or ninth century was the Stellinga revolt in Saxony (from 841-843). The circumstances leading to this revolt were unusual. Saxony had only been conquered and Christianized within living memory (771-804), and the revolt was aimed at restoring old customs changed during that time and the free exercise of pagan religion. The chaos of the Frankish civil war (840-843) made the rebellion

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69 van Leeuwen, Logic of Charity, 17-8, 146-7, 173-4.

70 See section 2 above; also Concilium Moguntinense 847 17, p. 170; van Leeuwen, Logic of Charity, 18-9, 172-3.

71 Ælfric CH2 17, pp. 187-8 (B1.2.20).

72 Count Gerald of Aurillac had a peculiar Christian foible of forgiving sinners, but his men sometimes managed to get around it and maintain good order by trying to blind or execute thieves before the saintly count arrived on the scene: Odo of Cluny, Vita sancti Geraldii Auriliacensis comitis 1.18-20, PL 133, cols. 654-55.
possible and earned the peasants some elite support (from the Emperor Lothar and his followers).\textsuperscript{73}

In short, it took the conjunction of parties with interests beyond rebelling against economic trouble to launch a rebellion. It was, like most peasant revolts in history, brutally crushed. It was not until the end of the tenth century that revolts became a problem again.\textsuperscript{74} Why revolt was not a more pressing issue is uncertain, though at least three factors contributed to keeping that threat under control. First, the poor did not live in a concentrated mass. They were dispersed and simply did not look as threatening as the rioting crowds of early modernity. Second, the warming climate and improving economy alleviated some of the poverty that otherwise could have turned to anger. Third, order was assumed to be a good by practically all surviving sources, and it is quite probable that the relatively lowly peasants accepted that prevailing cultural norm.

The final option open to the poor was accepting charity. This did not mean they had to rely solely on charity for their income; many may have only needed an occasional supplement and then could otherwise maintain their profession, residency, and style of life. This aid could have come from family, kin, or neighbors as well as or instead of elite almsgiving.\textsuperscript{75} This mutual aid or “horizontal almsgiving” was charity according to the definitions of our clerical sources.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{73} Goldberg, “Popular Revolt,” 467-501, esp. 469.

\textsuperscript{74} Poly and Bournazel, \textit{Feudal Transformation}, 136-7; Fichtenau, \textit{Living in the Tenth Century}, 430. The one possible exception sometimes cited is the action of certain peasants in the lower Seine basin in 859 who armed and organized themselves to fend off seaborne raiders. The local aristocracy became concerned and violently broke up this upstart military force. These peasants were \textit{not} rebelling, but it seems that the aristocracy worried when they saw their inferiors picking up weapons; though improbable, rebellion was possible and the nobility knew that. Nonetheless, peasant “resistance” could have taken subtle forms, such as trying to cut corners on what work was owed to a lord: Riché, \textit{Daily Life}, 110-1; Goldberg, “Popular Revolt,” 467-8, 470.

\textsuperscript{75} In van Leeuwen’s model of poor relief, this “mutual aid” was a separate category from accepting poor relief, as was “begging,” since in each case the poor could receive aid without submitting to the conditions attached to official public poor relief (van Leeuwen, \textit{Logic of Charity}, 19, 166). The effect of considering mutual aid and elite charity as part of the same category of “almsgiving,” as done in the early Middle Ages, will be considered in the following sections.

\textsuperscript{76} See chapter 5 above; also chapter 9 on supporting one’s parents. It is possible that local villagers placed this kind of help (at least if given within the extended family) in a separate conceptual category than charity, but, in the absence of evidence from a peasant perspective, I assume that common people accepted the definition of charity articulated in the sermons preached to them.
The poor had other options for survival and did not have to accept charity. These other options came with costs to status as well, and possibly more severe consequences like separation from family or death. For those poor unable to survive from their current work and land holdings, the only alternate strategy that significant numbers of them adopted besides charity seems to have been selling their freedom. And not all of those entering servitude did so voluntarily or did so primarily to escape poverty (as opposed to seeking a protector). This suggests that the poor considered charity a relatively attractive choice among their options, and that they had managed to “negotiate” reasonable costs to accepting charity relative to supply and demand. This, of course, raises the question of what the actual negotiated package of charity was, and what elements of the cultural and social situation shaped it.

4. The Charitable Package and its Cost

The cost of receiving charity was, in theory, extraordinarily low during the early Middle Ages. During the ninth century, and generally in the century before and after it, one looks in vain for demands being placed on the recipients of charity. Bede, writing at the beginning of the eighth century, warned that, “for the paupers will not themselves return a reward to those who have given alms, but Christ.”\footnote{Non enim pauperes ipsi sed Christus mercedem his qui eilemosinam fecere redditurus est.” Bede, \textit{In Lucae evangelium expositio} 2.6.37-8, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 120 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1960), p. 147.} The poor did not need to do anything. As the early Middle Ages progressed, clerical writers stopped even explicitly reminding their listeners that the poor need not do anything, and instead simply talked about God repaying alms (with the exception of the contested ground of hospitality).\footnote{For hospitality, see chapter 6. For an example of the tenth/eleventh-century return of the explicit reminder, see Hall, “Latin Sermons,” serm. 1, p. 157.}

There is also little direct evidence that receiving alms carried a social stigma that compromised a person’s status. Theologians taught that everyone needed mercy, so accepting
mercy in the form of physical goods ought not to have singled out a person as especially weak or pitiable. In fact, on a practical level, the wide range of people considered poor and the variety of temporary situations that might cause a person to seek aid (famine, illness, or the introduction of the very young or old into a household) suggests that it was not unusual for a non-elite person to receive alms at some point in his or her life. This range of recipients would have diluted any stigma that may have been attached to being dependent on others, at least among the non-elite themselves. For an elite member to seek charity would presumably still have been a shocking and shameful act.  

While the prescriptive sources surely exaggerate in saying that there was no cost to the poor in the charitable exchange, the demands could have been much higher. Gerhard’s *Vita Oudalrici* portrayed a train of poor clients following the eponymous hero, and also regular lay aristocrats in tenth-century Bavaria having small groups of such clients. The poor received a stable stream of charity, but paid for it by surrendering their freedom of movement to that of their patron and by agreeing to serve as a public spectacle displaying their patron’s generosity and wealth. The money spent was spent to be seen (in addition to whatever other pious or social motives the giver had) and so could easily be converted into social capital through the role accepted by the poor. In contrast, previous to Gerhard, there is little or no evidence for making the poor take on the public role of client in return for alms. When the rich gave alms, the poor did

79 Except in cases where it could have been fit into the paradigm of sanctity. See the discussion of the *Vita Sigirmanni* in chapter 10; also Odo, *Vita Geraldi* 1.14, col. 652B. While not technically a matter of charity, the monk Hildemar testifies that it would have been shameful for the rich to submit to the mandatum of guests (as the poor did) when staying at a monastery: Hildemar, *Expositio regulae ab Hildemaro tradito* 53, ed. R. Mittermüller, *Vita et regula Ss. P. Benedicti una cum expositione regulae* 3 (Regensburg: Friderich Pustet, 1880), p. 502; on the mandatum, see chapter 7.


81 Given the extra stability of income that came from public clientage, the lucky paupers offered it were probably quite willing to pay the extra cost of public subordination; but it was an extra cost.
not have to repay by joining their train. At the royal court and at churches, an elite almsgiver sometimes gave in front of an audience and the poor agreed in a sense to be part of a spectacle in those cases. Indeed, the crippled or those putting on a particularly pitiable air may have sought to be a spectacle in hopes of getting more alms in these situations. There was, nonetheless, an institutional lack of ability on the part of the elites to turn such a temporary and opportunistic spectacle into a traveling display of munificence. And, when beggars approached the elites at their houses, on the road, and in situations without crowds, the ability of the elite to demand services that would allow them to convert charity into social capital in the eyes of their peers was even more circumscribed.  

The development of anniversary feasts illustrates a similar trend towards more efficiently turning charity into social prestige, although in this case one with less cost to the poor. The elite throughout the early Middle Ages made donations to monasteries and the monks prayed for their benefactors. These donations sometimes included an allowance for the poor assisted by the monks, as in the case of Charles the Bald’s endowment to feed five paupers daily, along with new clothes in Lent and one denarius apiece for the twelve recipients of the Holy Thursday mandatum. At the turn of the millennium, Cluny and other monasteries began to offer donors the opportunity to arrange special anniversary feasts in which a set number of the poor would be fed and given alms. The number was determined by the social status of the donor and done explicitly in his name and

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82 On places where almsgivers and their recipients interacted, see chapter 5. Einhard’s description of the crowds of paupers besieging Charlemagne at Aachen is probably his attempt to exploit the possibilities of spectacle given the restraints of the time: Einhard, Vita Karoli 21, p. 26; similarly, Notker the Stammerer, Taten Kaiser Karls des Großen / Gesta Karoli Magni imperatoris 2.21, ed. H. F. Haefele, MGH SRM n.s. 12 (Berlin: Weimanns, 1959), p. 92; Thegan, Gesta Hludowici imperatoris / Die Taten Kaiser Ludwigs 19, ed. E. Tremp, MGH SRG 64 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1995), p. 204.

In this way, the provision of charity developed to affirm forcefully the social prestige of the giver and honor his or her name in a more efficient manner.

Even the simple demand that the poor pray for their benefactors disappeared in the early Middle Ages. This obligation that came with receiving charity was absolutely central to its functioning in late antiquity and common in the later part of the Middle Ages. While the poor did not repay this obligation publicly, perhaps the private repayment of this debt was actually more valuable from a certain social perspective. The one praying for a benefactor qua benefactor was likely to internalize a sense of gratitude; in turn, an internalized sense of gratitude made it more likely that the pauper would develop a concurrent sense of deference and acceptance of the existing structure, provided that the elite behaved fairly in other respects. Of course, whether or not this psychological process occurred in times when the cost of receiving alms included prayer, the primary interest of the elite in receiving prayers was receiving salvation from God. In the early Middle Ages, they received that salvation independently of receiving prayers.

The best option for an early medieval elite person who wished to flaunt his charity in return for social power was to found a hospital. So long as the founder and his family were remembered in connection with the hospital, the building and its services stood as a continuing testament to his or her power and generosity. Such a foundation required substantial resources and independent hospitals (as opposed to those run by a monastery to provide hospitality) were relatively rare in the early Middle Ages. Even here, however, the ability of the founder to generate social capital and fulfill his duty to “civilize” his inferiors by making demands on the

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86 See chapter 7.
beneficiaries of the hospital was miniscule compared to the systems evolved during the later Middle Ages. During those times, the moral life of permanent hospital residents was strictly regulated. The poor who accepted charity there agreed to surrender a great deal of their freedom. In addition to accepting control, the poor also normally agreed to pray for their donor, rendering that spiritual service. These hospitals served as a marker and source of community pride for the elites, and solidified their claims to leadership.⁸⁷

The ability of the elites to make demands on the poor in return for charity was underdeveloped in the early Middle Ages. They did not or could not institute formal systems to extract higher social benefits from the giving of charity, even in comparison to what could be done in the eleventh century (much less in early modern times). Were there implicit demands that accompanied the provision of charity which might have added to the cost of receiving charity? The lack of laws limiting the activities of the free poor indicates that any implicit costs originating from the level of government were muted. There is, however, other evidence that in accepting charity, the poor also accepted some implicit conditions that slightly raised the cost of charity.

It seems reasonable to assume that the duty to refrain from rebellion and crime came with receiving aid. It is certainly hard to imagine a noble giving alms to a known rebel or criminal. In a situation where crime and rebellion was a major issue, one would expect the elites to show anxiety about the poor and demand that the recipients of charity prove themselves to be members of the “good” poor. The low cost of early medieval charity was contingent on a continuing behavioral norm that did not provoke such fears. Indeed, the increased incidence of violent social unrest after

⁸⁷ Rubin, Charity and Community, 176-81, 184-7, 289-96; N. Orme and M. Webster, The English Hospital, 1070-1570 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 52-5, 121-6. Note that these hospitals (which boomed in numbers) often catered to permanent guests only; thus, while the cost of accepting charity rose, the number of people asked to pay that cost decreased. The elites had to address the majority of issues surrounding the poor via other means. The lives of the permanent residences of Merovingian xenodochium and matricula is more obscure, but there is some reason to believe that they were at least obligated to pray for the donors and the good of the realm: Boshof, “Armenfürsorge,” 164-5.
the late tenth century and the concomitant rise of a return to a more discriminate charity are probably linked.\(^{88}\)

The ideal of social deference was not specifically linked to receiving charity, but also probably functioned as an unspoken condition. Moralists condemned the proud pauper and such a one presumably fared worse in the quest for alms.\(^ {89}\) Since moralists also condemned the haughty giver who failed to treat the poor affably (though normally not as an equal), even the pious rich had reason to frown on the poor who failed to show a similar humility appropriate to their station.\(^ {90}\)

The condemnations of those who gave in order to reap praise and honor from men could include an assumption that the praise would come from the poor recipients of alms. It is equally likely, however, that those whose praise the elite sought were their peers and that the adulation of their inferior beneficiaries was not a matter of particular concern during this period.\(^ {91}\)

It is worth noting that these two implicit social costs to accepting charity—refraining from crime and respecting the social hierarchy—were things the poor in general might have seen as benefits for themselves as well as demands. Order was a driving passion of the mindset of the time as portrayed in our written sources, and there is little reason to think that the poor did not share this cultural ideal. This is especially true when one remembers that the poor themselves included such a range of people that they must have had some sense of hierarchy among themselves.\(^ {92}\)

\(^{88}\) On the increase in rebellion, see above, n. 74. On the return to a discriminate charity, see chapter 4.


\(^{90}\) Hrabanus, *In Ecclesiasticum* 1.15, col. 784D; Jonas of Orleans, *De institutione laicali libri tres* 2.22, PL 106, col. 213. The fact that surviving sources usually aimed at an elite audience skews our evidence; it may be that if we had more surviving sermons concerned about the poor, then the link between humility and accepting alms would be more explicit.

\(^{91}\) See above, nn. 33-36. Of these examples, the only source that specifically identifies those praising the giver as the poor dates from around the turn of the millennium: Hall, “Latin Sermons,” serm. 1, p. 157. For a late antique example, see Caesarius, *Omelia de spe*, ll. 30–4, p. 274.

\(^{92}\) Fichtenau, *Living in the Tenth Century*, 362-3; see further chapter 9.
married, stable free proprietor did not have a vested interest in disrupting a system which also put him above a poorer serf, who turn could look down on slaves or beggars. And these members of the poor who had some possessions and some food certainly would not have approved of paupers inclined to steal from them either at home or as brigands on the road.

In addition to these costs, the prejudice against introducing moral judgments of the deserving and undeserving poor did not completely eradicate that natural tendency towards discriminating charity. The evidence for the intrusion of moral conditions into accepting charity is exceptionally thin—and that is an indicator that moral policing was not a major part of the charitable package—but one unusual story concerning these issues survives. In Rudolf’s ninth-century *Vita Leobae*, a crippled girl begged alms at the door of the female monastery of Bischofsheim and also regularly received alms from its abbess. This girl, deceived by the devil’s temptations, had sex with an unnamed man and became pregnant. She concealed her pregnancy in its advanced stages by faking illness, and then drowned the infant after birth. After the locals discovered the corpse and falsely accused the nuns, who in turn resorted to dramatic acts of prayer, the poor girl “miraculously” confessed. Rudolf explained the girl’s motives in concealing her pregnancy and killing her child as simply the work of the devil: she was “equally the captive and agent of the ancient foe.” One logical interpretation is that this poor girl, apparently entirely dependent on the free goodwill of the nuns and those living in the area for her sustenance, feared that if her fall from the norms of sexual morality became known, she would lose that charity. Whether such fears were justified is another matter, but the story does suggest that those receiving

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93 One would like to know what brought the man and girl together, and what he did when she became pregnant (if he was still around).

alms may have felt pressured to adhere at least publicly to major moral norms.\textsuperscript{95} The lack of corroborating evidence (and the unusually visible nature of this moral transgression) implies that charity functioned as a minor tool for extracting moral compliance from the poor, although no more than that.\textsuperscript{96}

When St. Cyran was out begging for charity, one lady,

on seeing him approach vilely dressed and judging him not according to the interior man but rather by his appearance, demanded information of him with a haughty face, asking who he was, whence he came, or where he went. He received these injuries inflicted by her as though being reproached.\textsuperscript{97}

Nonetheless, she did throw him a loaf of bread out of mercy, and that is significant. Even this bad almsgiver did not ask for repayment. She saw him as a suspicious character, but still gave him alms. Cyran did show deference to her in his patience though. In the end, members of the elite like this woman seem to have demanded a small price from the poor in the form some deference and moderately acceptable behavior, but the cost was low. The early medieval elites exercised a relatively minimal amount of control over the poor through the distribution of charity, and their

\textsuperscript{95} The girl’s actual fate is left frustrating vague. She appears not to have been punished directly, but one would hardly expect her to have continued receiving alms from the nuns she inadvertently framed for murder. All we know is that, “moreover, that wretched girl did not deserve to be cleansed, but the enemy held the right of power over her until the end of her life” (“Misera tamen illa purgari non meruit, sed usque ad finem vitae suae ius in ea potestatis inimicus obtinuit”). Whether this meant she remained crippled, was possessed, or simply kept liking sex is unclear. It tells us nothing about her continued ability to receive charity, except insofar as usque ad finem vitae suae implies she lived for a while longer in the same area; since she apparently couldn’t work (except as a prostitute?), she probably still had to beg for alms to continue to survive for that time. Rudolf, \textit{Vita Leobae} 12, p. 127.

\textsuperscript{96} See chapter 4. The officers in charge of the poor and beggars at Aachen under Louis the Pious were to take “great care” of these unfortunates, but also were to make sure simulatores did not conceal themselves among these indigents: \textit{Capitulare de disciplina palatii Aquisgranensis (ca. 820)} 7, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 298. These simulatores could have had a moral dimension, but it seems unlikely.

\textsuperscript{97} “Cumque illa hunc almificum in vili abitu adesse conspiceret et non secundum interiorem hominem, set eum secundum faciem iudicaret, tumido vultu eius noticiam percunctare cepit; quis etiam esset aut unde veniret vel quo ire vellet, velut exprobrando ab ea inlata convitia accepit.” \textit{Vita Sigiramni} 24, p. 620.
tools for turning their charity into social power were fairly rudimentary in comparison to other eras in European history.

5. Negotiating the Charitable Package

Why then was the cost of accepting charity so low? What social and cultural factors determined the negotiation of such a package of poor relief? There are three basic kinds of factors that would drive down cost: lowering of benefits, low demand for charity, or a high supply.

Lower benefits were a factor in the low cost of charity. People did live off of charity, but in few cases did those providing care for the poor guarantee a specific person care. The additional demands in tenth-century Germany for the poor to serve as a spectacle of their patron’s generosity came with the guarantee that their patron would continue to care for them.98 The most stringent control of the poor over the course of the Middle Ages in general was placed on those who accepted permanent residency in a hospital.99 Yet this cannot be the whole explanation. The early Middle Ages also cared for members of the poor on a permanent basis in their hospitals and the matricula without apparently imposing such strict behavioral controls. And there is no reason to think that most charity provided without a personal guarantee of its continuance was otherwise inferior in quality to that of other time periods.

Low demand for charity would depress the price that the elites could “charge” for it, yet this also is an unpromising solution to the early medieval question. We do not know the percentage of people who needed alms to survive, but the number of people who would have benefited from alms was reasonably high. Since most people were “poor” from the perspective of the elites, most people were eligible for alms. Based on that, one would expect a reasonably high

98 See above, n. 80.

99 See above, n. 87. One could see the controls imposed by early modern poor relief system as the development and expansion of the systems worked out on a small scale in these hospitals and almshouses.
demand for alms. Moreover, the other options that the poor had for survival, as discussed above, do not seem to have been particularly attractive relative to seeking charity and, in actual fact, only servitude was resorted to as a possible alternative by significant numbers of people. Low demand cannot explain the low cost of charity.

There are a number of reasons to believe that the supply of charity was high. Or, to put it another way, the early medieval elite had good reasons to give charity without expecting a great deal in return from the poor recipients of alms (despite a number of complicating factors in the system). This section details the influence of the three sets of alternative elite strategies (for achieving social control, for building personal prestige, and for securing gifts from God), and then turns to other extrinsic factors that affected the supply of charity. Note that this discussion of a “high” supply is not meant to imply that the number of almsgivers exceeded those willing to take the alms; what I mean here is that the degree of willingness of people to give relative to the number of the poor potentially interested in receiving alms was higher than in times when the elites only provided alms if they could attach considerable demands on the recipients.

In the field of control strategies, the elites had the two basic alternatives of coercing the poor or improving their economic situation to reduce poverty. While most workers were not waged laborers, the elites could have decreased rents or alienated land from their desmesne. Such options, of course, directly cut into the elite’s wealth, an essential part of their status. Any gains made by such measures also could have easily been lost to subdivision of peasant tenancies through inheritance. Given the apparent ease with which lords of large estates replaced tenants, often from slaves without land, it seems that the land/labor market was favorable to the owners and there was little direct pressure to improve their tenants’ lot. Those poor who were not tenants were more difficult to help, even if the will was there. Charlemagne’s forgiveness of the army tax from the poorest of these free proprietors was one of the few means even possible for alleviating their woes

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through direct economic measures.\(^{101}\) On the whole, early medieval economic measures (analogous to raising wages in a more advanced economy) did not offer a good alternative to almsgiving, hence helping to increase the supply of the latter. Moreover, the lack of a strong central bureaucracy may have also made it more difficult for the elites to act as a united front, and so weakened their bargaining power.

The powerful were willing to use coercion to control the poor. Since there was no regular police force, this inevitably had to take the form of *ad hoc* oppression. The church and the crown characterized this violence as illegitimate, and tried to impose costs on its practitioners in the form of secular justice or eternal punishment. The attractiveness of this option relative to charity is difficult to gauge, but some elites certainly chose it instead.\(^{102}\)

Charity’s function as a tool for increasing social status is an interesting case. It earned admiration, but it was only one of many strategies for doing so. Einhard’s glowing portrayal of Charlemagne devoted three chapters to his charity (if one includes his last will), showing its importance in the eyes of a pious layman, but far more space is given to Charlemagne’s wars and other actions.\(^{103}\) The advice manuals for lay aristocrats made mention of almsgiving as an essential virtue, but only one of many.\(^{104}\) Moreover, the fact that everyone was supposed to give alms made it much harder to stand out by virtue of one’s charity;\(^ {105}\) the higher supply of early medieval alms made investing in charity to earn respect relatively inefficient compared to other options.

\(^{101}\) *Capitulare missorum generale (802)* 29, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 96.

\(^{102}\) See chapter 9, and generally remarks above about the oppression and involuntary enserfment of free men; also Devroey, *Puissants et misérables*, 345-50.


\(^{104}\) On their other concerns even within the realms of religion, see Noble, “Secular Sanctity,” 10-16. The nobles themselves probably placed less emphasis on religion than clerics and more on “secular” pursuits like war, hunting, and acquiring fine goods.

\(^{105}\) See chapters 2 and 6.
Charlemagne and Alfred had to send alms overseas to differentiate themselves from the mass of other almsgivers.\textsuperscript{106} A minor aristocrat could have given more alms and given them more regularly than wealthy peasants in the neighborhood, but would have had to work hard to make his ability to give seem to function at a qualitatively different level than them, much less differentiate himself from his aristocratic peers. Until the new institutional “technologies” of eleemosinarii and Clunaiic anniversaries increased the efficiency of converting alms into social status, charity’s success would have led to its decline as an attractive strategy if personal status had been the sole elite interest in almsgiving.\textsuperscript{107} Women may have been an exception to this trend. Since they were excluded from a number of other elite strategies for pursuing status (such as war), charity still was an attractive option for them.\textsuperscript{108}

In calculating the cost of charity to the poor, one should also note that in the quest for personal status peer admiration was a key goal. Adulation by the masses was certainly nice and could reinforce peer views, but since members of the elite thought charitable generosity a virtue in itself, they paid some of the desired prestige directly to the giver without the poor having to take part in repaying the giver. This helped keep down the cost of the charitable package. However, in this rural milieu without large urban concentrations, the elite audience for any public display of munificence by one of their peers would have been quite small most of the time, making any one time gift less useful in attracting peer esteem. In short, the quest for personal status did not lead to


\textsuperscript{107} But even in the tenth century these “technologies” were still in embryonic development and other, better options existed: Fichtenauf, Living in the Tenth Century, 30-77, 135-52.

\textsuperscript{108} On female almsgiving, see chapter 6.
a particularly higher supply of charity, although the concern for peer admiration may have
deflected some of the attention on getting a return from almsgiving away from the poor.

It is in confronting alternative salvation strategies that a strong incentive to offer charity at
a low cost to the poor is most apparent. The first reason for this is that no alternative strategy could
substitute for almsgiving. Almsgiving was not sufficient for earning salvation, but it was a
necessary condition (along with items such as faith, baptism, and other manifestations of love). 109
When Paschasius Radbert explicated the judgment scene in the Gospel of Matthew, he had to take
pains to refute the idea that, “as certain people wish, the just are rewarded on account of generosity
alone.” 110 Jonas’ chapter on almsgiving in his guide to lay Christianity is mostly a long refutation
of the belief that almsgiving compensated for all other failures to live a Christian life. 111 The
problem was not that the elites picked other options for salvation over almsgiving; the problem was
convincing them that they needed to do a better job adopting other strategies (like avoiding sin) in
addition to almsgiving. 112 The lack of other salvation strategies that could eliminate the need to
give alms encouraged the elites to give no matter what the poor could give in return.

109 Except, presumably for those who converted and were baptized on their deathbed—a rather
ininfrequent occurrence during the early Middle Ages. Almsgiving here is meant in its widest sense of showing
mercy; hence it was possible for even the very poor (see chapter 2).

110 “sicut quidam volunet propter solam humanitatem iustos remunerat…” Paschasius, Expositio in
humanitas is identified with elemosina in 11.25.31-2, p. 1242. He resolved the problem by arguing that love
and faith were implicit conditions of giving, and other matters pertaining to salvation could all be brought in
under the rubric of those two theological virtues.


112 Though even in proper perspective, almsgiving was an obvious example of something necessary for
salvation. Thus Pope Nicholas, in his long set of instructions to the newly converting Bulgars (written in
866), used almsgiving as an example (alongside other virtues) in explaining the distinction between
necessary and superrogatory acts of piety: “Sed in hoc sciendum est, quoniam aliae sunt virtutes, sine quibus
ad vitam ingredi non possimus, aliae vero sunt, quae nonnisi ab sponsore requiruntur; sine humilitate quippe,
castitate ac elemosynis et orationibus nullus ad vitam ingredi valet, et ista sunt cum his similibus, quae
requiruntur ab homine.” Nicolai I papae epistolas ep. 99, c. 87, ed. E. Perels, MGH Epp. 6 (Berlin:
Weidmann, 1925), pp. 595-6.
The key here is that the poor did not give the return. The elites were interested in some exceptionally valuable things—not only salvation, but also success in war and economic matters—and they believed that these came from God regardless of what the poor did. In this early medieval perception of the charitable package, almsgiving came with a high price tag but the poor were not expected to pick up the tab (nor could they have provided the desired benefits). The logical result of these perceived interests and returns would have included increasing the supply of charity and drastically lowering the effective cost of charity within the realm of secular social relations.\footnote{On the complications of the exchange between God and almsgiver, including its inequality and the numerous implicit conditions, see chapter 3.}

These three sets of alternate options for elite strategies present a complex matrix of competing pressures on the interaction of the elite and the poor in almsgiving. The most significant factors explaining the willingness of the elites to give while only expecting a relatively low return from the poor were almsgiving’s non-negotiable role in seeking divine favor and that fact that other actors paid (or were perceived as paying) the cost of the poor receiving charity: God repaid alms in the form of eternal or temporal blessings, and other elites did so in the form of admiration.

One other factor that had a potent effect on the supply of charity was the obligation of everyone to give.\footnote{See chapter 2.} Charity was not solely a matter of elite giving, but of mass Christian giving (including mutual aid or horizontal almsgiving). Insofar as fellow members of the widely-conceived “poor” were willing to give without demanding deference or other social costs in return, then the elites had a much weaker hand in demanding such a price for their charity. In actual fact, it is impossible to determine if poorer almsgivers’ interests in policing their own communities had radically contrasting aims from elite almsgivers in most respects as both likely valued order and had certain ideals of moral behavior. Nonetheless, at least in the matter of using charity to dramatically distinguish rich from poor and demand unambiguous displays of public deference
from the latter, the exhortations towards more horizontal almsgiving must have retarded the ability of the elite to create a vertical hierarchy from charity.

This curtailment was not entirely to the disadvantage of the elites. Charity helped alleviate the social pressures created by poverty regardless of its ability to place additional demands on its recipients; a person getting food was less likely to turn to crime, riot, die just when someone needed more laborers, or otherwise cause trouble. The elites received these benefits no matter who gave the alms in question. These were collective goods. Because the church encouraged everyone to give, the elites shared the financial burden of providing relief for the poor more broadly and so found the financial cost of charity to themselves reduced. One major issue in most systems of charity and poor relief is the presence of “free-riders” who reap the collective goods of charity but do not themselves give charity. They place a drag on the system, increasing the financial cost per person providing charity and possibly leading to more people refusing to contribute unless they could demand a higher social price from the poor.\textsuperscript{115} In the early medieval system, the social and religious pressure for everyone to give reduced some of the risk of people choosing to be free-riders and spread the cost of picking up the deficit created by those who still chose the route of being a free-rider.

Another way of viewing this turn to horizontal almsgiving alongside vertical is as an emphasis on an ideology of ordered community. The conceptual linkage of participation in almsgiving (both on the part of givers and of receivers) with participating in community had social and religious effects beyond simply affecting the price to which the poor agreed when accepting charity. It is to these final effects that we now turn.

\textsuperscript{115} On the free-rider issue, see van Leeuwen, \textit{Logic of Charity}, 8-9, 83-4, 187, who also notes the role of religion in reducing the free-rider problem.
When Charles the Bald called his annual summer assembly in Pîtres in 869, he was enjoying a time of relative stability within his realm and possibly already casting an acquisitive eye on his nephew’s neighboring kingdom (which he would successfully invade later that year upon his nephew’s death). Potential rivals, including a Carolingian relative, had died in the previous few years and the Danish raids had been momentarily stymied. Yet, Charles still faced the problem of controlling a restive, quarrelling, and sometimes rebellious aristocracy. In the midst of this situation, Charles and his assembled ecclesiastics made a fairly routine series of pronouncements designed to remedy moral and administrative abuses, and in the midst of doing so explained their purpose: “That bishops, abbots, counts, our vassals, and all faithful laymen take care to struggle together with harmonious love and unanimous will—and without envy, malice and unfitting contention—for the honor and standing of God, the holy church, us, and our realm, and for our common salvation.”

The good of the realm was the good of the church, and both were part of the common good. Pippin of Aquitaine, Charles’ kin and greatest internal threat, was captured and sentenced in 864 as a “traitor to his country and to Christendom.” The creation of a loving community to which all contributed was a useful ideology for unifying a sprawling realm filled with fractious aristocrats and commoners, as well as a Christian imperative for the rectors of the realm. How to build such peace and unity was another question. The quotation from Pîtres comes from a chapter which focused on the necessity of paying one’s tithes to the church. The church was a concrete


institution to which people might have a common allegiance and which was present on a very local level. Tithing was a concrete action acknowledging membership in the Christian community and enacting the duty of all to contribute. The fact that the portion of the tithe dedicated to the poor served to aid the community (along with the aid provided by the religious services of the church) strengthened the communal role of this practice. The promotion of Christianity offered a path towards achieving a useful concord and common identity over a wide collection of diverse regions.  

The promotion of almsgiving within Christianity preceded the Carolingians and Anglo-Saxons, and went back even to the earliest period when Christian political influence was no more than a risible dream. As such, it was obviously more than a tool of power but the creation of community was still part of almsgiving’s core function. On the one hand, the ideology of almsgiving based itself on fraternal love and the idea that in helping one another, Christians fulfilled a horizontal debt. These horizontal bonds which an almsgiver acknowledged in almsgiving were an acknowledgment of community. On the other hand, almsgiving within its Christian milieu acknowledged the role of God as father and Christ as lord and judge. In this way,

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118 That is not to say that the king did not affect local government through officers (counts and missi), taxes, and laws, or that loyalty to him was not also a potentially unifying force. The church, however, had the potential to be more intimately local and have a much greater degree of daily interaction with the subjects of the realm than the secular system of hierarchy. On the role of religion as a unifying force in the early Middle Ages, see J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, *The Frankish Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 258-303; L. von Padberg, “*Unus populus ex diversis gentibus: Gentilismus und Einheit in früheren Mittelalter,”* in *Der Umgang mit dem Fremden in der Vormoderne*, ed. R. W. Keck and E. Wiersing (Cologne: Böhlaü, 1997), 155-93, esp. 183; P. Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 440-61; R. McKitterick, *Charlemagne: The Formation of a European Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 214-91; on the efforts to bring reform down to the local level, see especially C. van Rhijn, *Shepherds of the Lord: Priests and Episcopal Statutes in the Carolingian Period* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), esp. 49-170. On the impact of Carolingian government at a local level, see the extended studies of W. Brown, *Unjust Seizure: Conflict, Interest and Authority in an Early Medieval Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Innes, *State and Society*, 141-263, noting that Innes’ conclusions may be a bit too pessimistic in light of the facts discussed earlier in his book.
all participants in almsgiving made a gesture of fealty to a common sovereign. This shared loyalty also united them.\textsuperscript{119}

Almsgiving was more than a personal act of piety, as the theology illuminating it illustrates. Alms “worked” in securing salvation because the poor receiving alms were Christ’s hands. As members of his church, they were members of his body. Since Christ therefore received alms in his “hands,” he then justly repaid those alms. The almsgiver benefited individually then from his almsgiving, but only could do so because of the pre-existing community to which the poor, Christ, and he belonged.\textsuperscript{120} The almsgiver needed to belong through faith if he was to benefit, since good works without faith were useless for salvation. Pagans could not attain salvation through alms, but a disposition towards charity was a natural virtue that prepared them to receive faith in Christ.\textsuperscript{121} They needed to enter into the community formed about the head of the church, Christ, and manifested and strengthened in the act of almsgiving.\textsuperscript{122}

It is easy to see how this theory worked on a practical level to help reinforce a sense of community and collective identity. In aiding others, people expressed communal solidarity and no doubt created a sense of obligation on the part of those receiving towards the good of the community. This was primarily a matter of local community, since alms were usually not sent

\textsuperscript{119} On these theories of almsgiving, see chapter 3.


\textsuperscript{121} Bede, \textit{In Lucae evangelium expositio} 2.7.8, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 120 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1960), p. 156. The most common point for thinking about pagans and almsgiving was the story in the \textit{Acts of the Apostles} of Cornelius, a pagan to whom Peter was sent by God on account of Cornelius’ devotion to prayer and almsgiving: Bede, \textit{Expositio actuum apostolorum} 10.5, ed. M. L. W. Laistner, CCSL 121 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1983), p. 49; Paschasius Radbertus. \textit{Expositio in Matthaeo libri xii} 6.12.10, ed. B. Paulus, CCSL 56, 56A, 56B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1984), pp. 668-70; \textit{Remigii homiliae duodecim [in Mattheum]}, hom. 3, PL 131, cols. 883-4; for a narrative application, see Altfrid, \textit{Vita sancti Liudgeri} 1.1-2, ed. G. H. Pertz, MGH SS 2 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1829), p. 405; cf. Florus of Lyons, \textit{De tribus epistolis liber} 22, PL 121, col. 1025BC, who argued in the context of the predestination controversy that if one lacked the root faith in God (who is theroot of truth and goodness) then apparently good works actually stemmed from bad interior motives, like greed or pride.

\textsuperscript{122} Christian, \textit{In Mattheum} 14, col. 1322-3; Jonas, \textit{De institutione laicali} 1.3, col. 128C; Hrabanus, \textit{In Ecclesiasticum} 1.5, col. 768.
abroad, although those who received alms from the peripatetic royal train or a bishop touring his
diocese came thereby into direct contact with a wider community. The fact that strangers could
also find shelter in a hospital or home reinforced this sense of a local community having fraternal
bonds extending outside itself. More significantly, when a person became convinced that
almsgiving was worth trying as an avenue to supernatural aid or avoiding an eternity of post-
mortem unpleasantness and so gave charity, he or she literally invested in a Christian worldview.
The process of making sacrifices for Christianity and incorporating a Christian practice into one’s
regular cycle of living would have subconsciously reinforced allegiance to that religion. This gave
people in different areas something held in common and so opened them to the possibility of
seriously consider appeals made to the whole realm from the language of Christian motifs.
Almsgiving, of course, did not make everyone a self-sacrificing neighbor or a pious and obedient
subject, but its structure nudged people towards conceiving of themselves as part of a local
community to which rich and poor both belonged, and as part of a wider community of Christians.
It also directly eased the danger of the poor slipping into serfdom, which at least some viewed as a
threat to the social order and stability of the realm.

There is no question that the Carolingians and many Anglo-Saxon rulers as an active part
of their ideology endeavored to buttress Christianity in their realms and bring their subjects into
correct practice of this faith that they were supposed to share. Indeed, a number of late eighth

123 On this idea in regards to hospitals, though conceived in a different context, see D. Jetter, “Hospitäl-
aus der Zeit der Merowinger und Karolinger (481-751-987),” Sudhoffs Archiv; Zeitschrift für

124 See chapter 2, and n. 118 above. On a specifically royal direction, see especially von Padberg, “Unus
populus;” 175-80; Devroey, Puissants et misérables, 30-8, 47-53; McKitterick, Charlemagne, 269-70, 292-
380. While most studies have focused on mission territory or the perspective of the realm (or Christendom)
as a whole, the quest for Christianization could focus more locally. M. A. Claussen describes Chrodegang’s
reform efforts in eighth century Metz as an attempt at “spiritual ethnogenesis” for the Frankish people, with
an emphasis on modeling it within the orbit of his control: Claussen, The Reform of the Frankish Church:
Chrodegang of Metz and the Regula canonicerorum in the Eighth Century (Cambridge: Cambridge University
Press, 2004), 46, also 206-47.
century sources simply refer to Charlemagne’s subjects as the *populus Christianus*. The promotion of almsgiving was part of this quest. When Charlemagne conquered pagan Saxony at the end of the eighth century, almsgiving was part of the Christian culture Saxons were encouraged to adopt. When he wanted the realm to come together as God’s obedient people in order to win relief from famine and military threats, he enjoined almsgiving on every person. They faced God as a united kingdom, and merited his favor or punishment as such. Susan Irvine has characterized Alfred’s sending alms to Rome from England in the 880s, along with other aspects of his religious reform and concern about Roman ideals, as an effort to “establish [England] as a significant force in Christian history.”

In this context of the marriage of religious identity and the common good (as pictured by the elites), it is no wonder that the early medieval church emphasized the idea that all Christians had an obligation to give, that they should give to all paupers without judging them, and that this took place among individuals (recipients and givers) constituting one body in Christ. This doctrine and the related practices examined in this dissertation threw the net of almsgiving as widely as possible to entangle as much of society as possible in the web of its practice. Charity was more than a bargain between the elites and the poor or, as has been suggested for another time period, a

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126 See chapter 2.

127 *Capitulare missorum Aquisgranense primum 810 5*, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1 (Hanover: Hahnsche, 1883), p. 153; *Karoli ad Ghaerbaldu[m] epistola*, ed. A. Boretius, MGH Capit. 1, pp. 244-6; further see chapter 5.

128 S. Irvine, “The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the Idea of Rome in Alfredian Literature,” in *Alfred the Great*, ed. T. Reuter (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2003), 77. These alms went to the poor, the provision of lights, and the discretionary use of the pope. Charlemagne’s sending of alms abroad to the poor may indicate an even grander design by establishing himself as a patron of Christians throughout Christendom, even though the area he actually ruled was by no means co-terminous with Christianity. Compare here Einhard, *Vita Karoli* 27, p. 31, with the portrayal of Charlemagne’s superiority over at least Irish Christian kings in c. 16, p. 19.
clamp holding society together by defining the top and bottom tiers of society through giving and receiving alms. Early medieval almsgiving also functioned as a social glue, sticking people together throughout the social spectrum.

Hierarchy was not particularly under attack in the early Middle Ages. The social and political problems were, as Charles’ council at Pîtres said, a matter of the failures of harmony. The problem was convincing the elites and the lower tax and military base of free proprietors that they had common interests with others in the kingdom. The problem was convincing the powerful and the weak paupers to work together instead of falling into the roles of predators and prey. In these situations, the crown and its supporters needed to build up a sense of community, not hierarchy. Almsgiving and its corollary doctrines, like the damnation of those who stole from the poor or otherwise oppressed them, encouraged that community.

Beyond the social and political problems, there was the religious problem of Christianization. The king and his supporters had a vested political interest in using Christianity to provide a shared identity within the kingdom and to promote fraternal care in the place of tensions that might threaten their fiscal and military resources; the religiously-inclined members of this group and the ecclesiastical elite also shared a perceived moral interest in promoting Christianity as a good in itself. At the beginning of the early Middle Ages, paganism was a live issue in parts of western Europe—such as Francia’s northern and eastern frontiers, and much of England—and the rather shallow enculturation of Christian ideals and identity over many other regions was another area of concern to the Christian elite. Since almsgiving was a fundamental element of Christian

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129 For the metaphor of “bracketing” society, see Brown, Power and Persuasion, 94.

life, then promoting it was a fundamental element of the push towards reaping the benefits of a united Christian people.\textsuperscript{131}

The evolution of the early medieval paradigm towards a more discriminating charity supportive of hierarchy at and after the end of the millennium coincided with the end of these factors that favored an emphasis on communal, Christian dimensions. The European countryside in France, western Germany, and England was much more thoroughly Christianized in 1000 than in 700 A.D. Consequently, there was less need to carefully cultivate and promote the adoption of a Christian identity. The decline of royal power in the Frankish realms deprived this program of Christianization of a major sponsor and made the issue of trans-regional unity less pressing.

In the matter of social history, the efforts against the oppression and enserfment of the poor seem to have failed conclusively by the beginning of the High Middle Ages. In the meantime, the process of raising money and armed men had evolved and could function without a wide base of free proprietors. There was no longer a need to protect these people.\textsuperscript{132} What mattered now to aristocrats, especially the new military elite, was confirming their status, not community. Since kings were no longer in a position to bestow honores in France, and were relatively weak in Germany, the elites needed to exploit fully other means of building up their social capital.\textsuperscript{133} This included the development of better methods noted above of communiting charity into status.

\textsuperscript{131} See chapter 2.


\textsuperscript{133} Thus S. MacLean, “Review Article: Apocalypse and Revolution: Europe around the Year 1000,” Early Medieval Europe 15 (2007), 91-2, summing up recent scholarship, writes: “Court texts described comital power in terms of parcels of sovereign rights delegated by the rule, but in reality it was constituted at least as much by the symbolic capital of reputation, interpersonal ties, and the possession of significant properties. These foundations were unstable, and counts’ authority was thus extremely fluid and often contested… All this suggests that, well before the millennium, successful lordship depended less on the control of delegated office or on the gathering of followers bound by formal and exclusive bounds of fealty
In all these cases, the need for creating a unified Christian people was of lesser importance. These trends had advanced further on the continent than in England, and one would expect that a close study of the eleventh and twelfth centuries would reveal a more conservative culture of almsgiving in England. Certainly the Anglo-Saxon homilists (such as Ælfric) in the late tenth and early eleventh centuries preached a doctrine consistent with the early medieval consensus.¹³⁴

It should be emphasized that this emphasis on Christian community was not intended to threaten hierarchy. When Hrabanus early in his commentary on Sirach admonished almsgivers to treat the poor with respect and avoid the sin of pride, he hastened to explain: “For it is proper for a Christian that he be friendly and gentle to equals or inferiors, though submissive and humble to seniors, since haughtiness of every kind is pride.”¹³⁵ Hierarchy was good for Christians. As noted above, the ideology of Christian community was beneficial for the leaders of that community: kings and bishops primarily, but also lay aristocrats, monks, and priests.¹³⁶ With the potential benefits came responsibility. Since a responsible bishop or king was supposed to promote Christian community, then failure to do so invited fear of punishment by God and the loss of respect among one’s neighbors or subjects. Even that sense of responsibility, however, assumed the existence of a hierarchy within the Christian community.

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¹³⁴ See for example the summary of themes in Ælfric’s homilies at the beginning of chapter 3.

¹³⁵ “Decet enim Christianum, ut aequalibus seu inferioribus sit affabilis et mitis, senioribus autem sit subditus atque humilis, quia omnis exaltatio genus est superbiae.” Hrabanus, In Ecclesiasticum 1.15, col. 784D.

¹³⁶ The lay aristocracy were supposed to be Christian leaders: Noble, “Secular Sanctity,” 11-3, 16. In fact, they gained control of many local churches (the famous Eigenkirche) and their kin became abbots and bishops. For a good local study of this jockeying for power via leadership over churches and their assets, see J. Nightingale, Monasteries and Patrons in the Gorze Reform: Lotharingia, c. 850-1000 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000); more generally, see Fichtenau, Living in the Tenth Century, 182-97.
Nonetheless, this explicit approval of hierarchy and the long-term interest of Christian leaders in promoting Christianization did not entirely remove the suspicion that some aspects of early medieval charity implied a hint of egalitarianism. The demands placed on the poor to directly acknowledge hierarchy were light, and the theology of almsgiving rested on the notion that everyone stood as needy, trembling supplicants before God. Sometimes these touches of being humbled before God struck an exposed nerve. The elites shied away from too close of contact with the recipients of their alms, and especially from letting them into their house and table.\textsuperscript{137} When Dhuoda wrote her lay interpretation of Christianity for her son at the court of Charles the Bald, she diverged from her otherwise well-informed agreement with ecclesiastical sources to hint that the poor should pray and she failed to meditate on Christ’s presence in the recipients of alms (though still believing that Christ repaid the gift).\textsuperscript{138} This noblewoman was not about to grant the poor too exalted a place in the Christian community! Some anxieties concerning the communal implications of almsgiving existed, and these aided the push towards more explicit ways of reinforcing hierarchy and creating social capital out of charity when the special conditions of the early Middle Ages began to change. Until the new millennium, communal impulses shaped charity as much or more than hierarchical ones.

7. Conclusion

If we conceive of charity as a strategy (adopted consciously by individuals or evolved consciously or unconsciously among larger groups) for attaining varied interests, then some of the reason for the shape of almsgiving described in previous chapters becomes clear. This was a decentralized, disunited, only imperfectly Christianized world. The dispersed members of the poor

\textsuperscript{137} See chapter 6.

\textsuperscript{138} Dhuoda, \textit{Manuel pour mon fils / Liber manualis} 4.8-9, ed. P. Riché, SC 225, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Paris: Editions du cerf, 1991), pp. 234-58, especially 244, 252-4; see chapter 4.
were not normally seen as a threatening mob consequently in need of strict social control. In fact they needed protection if the elites were to maintain the contemporary social order, as those opposed to enserfment wished. This mitigated the need to use charity as a control strategy. Charity was also a relatively inefficient means of distinguishing oneself from one’s peers. Since one sought the adulation of one’s peers as much or more than that of one’s inferiors, then there was less pressure also to force the poor to make a direct return to the almsgiver. Almsgiving was, however, an essential strategy in securing divine favor. Since God repaid the alms, the poor again could escape without paying a high cost for receiving charity. Consequently, charity was a fairly attractive option for the poor, who had only to pay a light price of relative deference and the avoidance of exceptionally disruptive behavior (which anyways would have harmed the community of the relatively poor as well).

The push to Christianize western Europe—as a worthwhile goal in itself and as a strategy for building interregional unity—strengthened the emphasis on charity’s communal function. All were supposed to participate in almsgiving and to give to the poor simply because they were also members of Christ’s body. As a consequence, Christianity and a common Christian identity (rooted in fraternal relations and oriented to a common head, Christ) were abetted at a local and personal level.

The balance of motives among individuals must have varied enormously, and I make no claims about particular people here. Some people were moved by ambition, some by compassion, some by piety, others by a sense of duty appropriate to their clerical or lay office, and still others by fear of the social order’s disruption. There were always complex and countervailing forces at work in the negotiation of charity.
CHAPTER 12

CONCLUSION

In his foundational survey of charity, Gerhard Uhlhorn entitled his first chapter concerning pre-Christian Rome, “A World without Love.”¹ The early Middle Ages was a complex, evolving, and imperfect world, but whatever else it was, it was not a world without love. The birth and ascent of Christianity during the Roman Empire moved love and charity for the poor into the central region of social discourse, and the transition from antiquity to the medieval era did nothing to reverse that move, but instead entrenched charity. Giving to the poor remained a fundamental aspect of Christianity, a duty incumbent on all believers, and one actively promoted. Moreover, this giving was not a “merely” ritual act, devoid of interiority and automatically efficacious in compelling divine action. All the early medieval teaching about charity emphasized its connection to the central Christian commandment of love, and especially its very definition as an act of mercy: mercy to one’s neighbor, an invocation of God’s promised mercy towards repentant sinners, and an act of mercy to oneself (in the virtue of almsgiving’s function in seeking the spiritual goods that were necessary for every person).

Early medieval thinkers had a rich and sophisticated Christian conception of almsgiving. The center of this conception was the triangle of relationships of gift exchange among God, almsgiver, and recipient. Early medieval writings on almsgiving laid particular emphasis on the ability and duty of all Christians to participate in almsgiving, and so to enter into a communion with God as well as with fellow believers. Since the heart of almsgiving lay in the interior disposition towards charity (and not in what was given), all had the opportunity to participate. A corollary of this development was the insistence that Christ directly received alms in the person of the pauper (who, since they were presumed to be Christians, were members of his body), in this way allowing everyone to enter a direct relationship with God. Consequently, the morality of the pauper or his willingness to pray for his benefactors became inconsequential concerns. This particular cast to early medieval almsgiving is explicable as the efforts of a concerned religious elite to Christianize a general populace who may have initially worn a Christian identity only lightly.

The Carolingian and Anglo-Saxon churches made demonstrable efforts to inculcate a spirit of charity in the hearts and minds of the Christian people, while simultaneously working to organize a parallel network of giving based on church institutions. The structuring of expectations for giving around both a Christian calendar and the cycle of people’s lives—especially agricultural work and the death of loved ones—tied the practice of charity to common experience and concerns. The cultural and material framework for widespread almsgiving clearly existed in the early medieval world.

The actual practice of almsgiving seems to have followed this structure, although imperfectly so. A wide variety of sources assumed almsgiving to be a normal part of the Christian life, and the casual ubiquity of mentions of almsgiving by thinkers and storytellers of all stripes lends assurance that the conceptual framework of almsgiving helped to shape the reality of people’s lives. The evidence of wills, mentions of giving in narrative sources, the deputation of officials to manage the elite’s almsgiving, the hovering of beggars in the background at shrines, the
greater concern of moralists for how almsgiving was practiced than whether it was, and the harvest of references to charity reaped in the preceding chapters all indicate that almsgiving was a widespread practice, though undoubtedly it became more common as Christianization progressed. The rich were quantitatively more significant almsgivers than the poor, but participation probably extended a long way down the social ladder during the seasonally mandated times of giving and during periods of personal crisis. This is especially true if one considers that the “poor” was a quite broadly conceived category at this time, and that this category included many farmers anxious to ensure fair weather and a good harvest.

The special concern for temporal benefits and especially agricultural success was an aspect of early medieval almsgiving downplayed by our clerical sources, but probably a central part of the common, lay perception of almsgiving. Clerics allowed that almsgiving could be used in petitioning God for his paternal care in this world, but understandably sought to cultivate their flock’s concern for the next. While the laity did give alms for the benefit of departed souls and for their sins, the extent to which the laity adhered to clerical teaching on the necessity of truly loving their beneficiaries or abstaining from acts condemned as sinful when giving was less than their teachers desired. The lay elite (and, in many ways, the clerical elite as well) did insist on maintaining a firm sense of hierarchy, and balked whenever the demands of charity seemed to place them in too close of contact with their social inferiors, most notably in the case of hospitality.

The ecclesiastical network of charity relied on assigning eleemosynary duties to the existing network of church institutions. Local priests, for example, had to care for the poor in their area and to provide hospitality for travelers. Monasteries and houses of canons were called upon to expand their accommodation for the peripatetic poor and to distribute alms more generally. Their hospitals and portae formed the backbone of regular distribution of charity. While autonomous hospitals continued to exist, this development of charity as an auxiliary function of larger religious...

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2 This is true of any era; whether it was more of a problem in the early Middle Ages is uncertain.
houses and their scattered cellae was well suited to the dispersed, rural population of the early Middle Ages. The antique matricula too moved from centralized houses of the poor in cities to a more dispersed model of providing care. Supporting this whole system of parochial, episcopal, and monastic charity, the imposition of tithing stood as a key guarantee of ecclesiastical revenue. This system had some structural weaknesses, notably inadequate means to provide for sufficient numbers of the poor without condemning many to itinerancy and little ability to shift resources from rich regions to poorer ones. Nonetheless, if ecclesiastical charity is considered as an adjunct to general Christian almsgiving, it appears as a relatively robust and well-developed skeleton for the early medieval system of poor care.

The poor themselves were a diverse lot, ranging from relatively prosperous free proprietors who were vulnerable to the machinations of the more powerful to homeless beggars. All faced some sort of vulnerability and at least the potential of being in need. Crop failure, illness, accident, old age, unexpected numbers of small children, and ruthless neighbors all could send even a normally well-off peasant into temporary or permanent need. In this sense, the hope of charity played a fundamental role in stabilizing early medieval society. Widows, orphans, and travelers had a special claim to aid among the poor. Churchmen (especially monks and nuns) also counted as the poor, since they were dependent on the goods held by the church on behalf of the common good. The distinction between these religious paupers and the involuntary poor was blurry, perhaps purposely so.

A myriad set of motives and factors shaped the place of almsgiving in early medieval practice and social relationships. For the poor, accepting charity offered an attractive survival strategy. The elites and poorer almsgivers gave this charity with few strings attached. The religious conception of almsgiving partially explains this exchange: almsgiving was perceived as the sine qua non for receiving good things in this life and the next from God. This belief, combined with the universality of the call to charity and the theological insistence on not making
demands of recipients if almsgiving was to be efficacious, helped to ensure a supply of charity without much repayment being demanded of its (human) recipients.

In addition, the poor, a predominately rural population, usually did not gather into threatening crowds and so the imperative to control them played a much smaller role than in, for example, the bursting cities of early modern Europe (and on the very rare occasions when early medieval peasants caused trouble, force proved an effective response). The predominant concern was actually protecting the fiscal and military base of the free poor from depredations from the elite.

Charity was a viable strategy for earning admiration and so increasing social standing, but was still a less efficient means of accumulating social capital than other strategies for achieving personal distinction. Admiration on the part of the poor offered limited benefits, since being beloved by the mob is generally only useful if the poor are gathered in one space as a mob. An almsgiver was able to earn his peers’ admiration through generosity (and this speaks to the success of inculcating Christian ideals), but it was hard to distinguish oneself in a culture in which all were supposed to give—and then one also had to find a way to make that generosity known to one’s scattered peers. The means for translating generosity into social capital (in part through placing new demands on the beneficiaries of almsgiving) only began to develop at the end of the early Middle Ages. Of course, the elite who could lay claim to be leaders with the new Christendom benefited from creating an orderly, Christian society whether or not their personal almsgiving translated directly into personal social prestige. I make no claims here as to how often these motives were conscious or unconscious, and to what extent genuine compassion mingled with or surpassed temporal desires; trying to discern such matters was a source of frustration to medieval clergy and an impossibility today.

It was from these foundations that the later medieval and modern experiments in poor care arose. The efforts made during these last centuries of the first millennium helped entrench a sense of responsibility towards the poor as a fundamental element in the culture of northwestern Europe.
One need only look at our modern English terms for alms (which entered into English from its Greco-Latin roots during our period) and for the hospital (whose Latin counterpart became popular in the eighth and ninth centuries) to glimpse the shadow of the early Middle Ages’ legacy.³ It is not unfitting that the early medieval figure most frequently on the lips of non-medievalists—“Good King” Wenceslas, with whom this study opened—should be remembered as someone who cared for the poor. After all, almsgiving was supposed to bear fruit that would last long beyond death.⁴

³ *Ælmesse* or “alms” could have entered Old English with the first Christian missions to the Anglo-Saxons in the seventh century, but it is unlikely it was at least a widespread term until the more thorough Christianization of the period considered here.

⁴ And, to be fair to the perspective of Duke Václav of Bohemia, he hoped that the fruit of his alms (in whatever the form they actually took) would outlast even our fickle memory, extending to the consummation of the world and beyond (Mt 25:31-46).
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