Famine grew in Bologna, such that you couldn’t find anything to live on, and in every part of the city one heard cries and laments... the Senate commanded the Captains of the Gates not to let in any people from the countryside. These were so desperate, that in order not to die from hunger they ate the roots of plants, and made bread from grass roots, crushed grape skins, and nut shells... they collected the blood of cattle and the skins of eels and ate them... It happened that many girls, forgetting themselves in hunger, went around in public to ask at the doors for alms for the love of God. Some citizens, fearful of God and for the honor of these girls, quickly came and led them to the hospital of S. Giobbe, and dressed them all in gray. They laid no obligations on them other than that they pray to God at certain hours, and then work, and these citizens gave the girls something to eat. They were later conducted to S. Vitale, where there was a house, and they called them the girls of Santa Marta... Many poor and young boys were also brought to the hospitals, and helped so that they would not die of hunger.¹

The priest Ghirardacci’s account is shot through with the chaos of famine. Young women forget themselves in desperation, throwing aside the reserve that
their now-dead parents had taught them, and roaming from door to door in search of something to eat. Some citizens hear of this and rush to intercept them, less afraid of the girls’ literal death from hunger than their potential social death from public begging. Possibly cursing themselves for having allowed the situation to degenerate to this point, they hurry the girls to the newly opened charitable hospital of S. Giobbe. Since it shields and cures the victims of syphilis, it offers more secretive and protective enclosure than any other hospital in the city. Who could pause to appreciate the irony of its becoming a shelter to protect the sexual honor of adolescent girls? The Bolognese citizens who hustle the girls into the shelter have no leisure for irony. More to the point, they have no clear model to follow when gathering these orphaned and abandoned girls, no priority beyond getting them off the dangerous and endangering streets. They are breaking new ground, because nothing like this has been tried before in Italy or even beyond the Alps. They turn the abbandonate into ersatz nuns, clothing them in identical habits, asking them to pray the canonical hours, finding a bit of work to keep the girls occupied, sharing the responsibility of keeping the girls fed, and, no doubt, wondering what to do next.

Gradually a conservatory takes shape through this welter of improvisations and makeshifts that begins in the autumn of 1505. The backdrop of chaotic famine shifts by the end of the next year to become the backdrop of disordered politics as the Bentivoglio family that had controlled the city for decades flees in the advance of Pope Julius II, who is intent on exercising the papacy’s claims over Bologna to the fullest. The family and their supporters had progressively tightened their grip on Bologna’s charities over the previous decade as one of many strategies of expanding their power, and it is by no means clear what direction these charities will now take. No one expects the Bentivoglio to sit idly in exile, so local politics are increasingly provisional, suspicious, and fearful, and cast their shadow on local charity.

Through this period, the number of individuals and groups claiming a stake in the girls’ welfare expands. Among these is the Compagnia dei Poveri Vergognosi (the Company of the Shamefaced Poor), a charitable confraternity that discreetly gathers and distributes alms for distressed gentlefolk who would be shamed by public begging. The Poveri Vergognosi are represented by someone whose name is among the first to be associated with the girls, Carlo Duosi. This exclusive brotherhood numbered in its ranks some traditional opponents of the Bentivoglio, but Duosi’s own politics are unclear. The confraternity running the Ospedale di S. Giobbe also claims an interest in the girls, as does a third, more
loosely organized group made up most likely of some of the original citizens who had aided the girls and who appointed legal representatives to look after their interests. Cooperation among these three groups sometimes becomes testy over the decades that follow.

The girls themselves, so far as we can tell, live largely day to day: praying, possibly doing piecework for the silk trade, and moving from one temporary shelter to another as their guardians improvise their care. The series of homes was all in the eastern end of the city, near the Ospedale di S. Giobbe, the old Porta Ravennate market, and the emerging Jewish quarter, and frequently in the shadow of Bologna’s landmark two towers, the leaning Garisenda and the towering Asinelli. Perhaps after a few too many ribald jokes had been made about housing virgin girls in the company of syphilitic men, they left S. Giobbe for a house on nearby Via S. Vitale, a major street skirting the Bentivoglio neighborhood. From there it was on to other borrowed rooms in the same district. In 1515 this decade of moving came to an end when the girls’ legal guardian, Carlo Antonio Rubini, likely acting as the agent for the informal group of sponsors, bought a home. They were back on Via S. Vitale but a little closer to the city center. They were now popularly called the “girls of S. Marta,” suggesting that they were expected to be practical and domestic, if not necessarily married. Their care was guaranteed by the Compagnia dei Poveri Vergognosi and the Ospedale di S. Giobbe. Should the informal group represented by Rubini ever fall apart, the charitable confraternities of S. Giobbe (run by families of the Bentivoglio faction) and the Poveri Vergognosi (with a heavier representation of anti-Bentivoleschi) would gain title to the house and share responsibility for its girls.2

As the girls grew older their ambivalent status became more troubling to their guardians. Some had reached the age of marriage, but those who had been 13 or 14 when the citizens first swept them off the street in 1505 would have long passed it by the time they could move as the “girls of S. Marta” into their home on Via S. Vitale. Some would have returned to their extended families in the years since that catastrophic famine, and others might have found their way out through marriages arranged by these families or other guardians. There are no documents to tell us. Yet many girls remained, and they weren’t girls in anything but the strictly legal sense of being unmarried dependents. Having spent another decade in the social limbo between convent and community, some of these women were persuaded that their best option would be to become actual nuns in a proper convent of their own. Steps in this direction had already been taken when Car-
dinal Bishop Lorenzo Campeggi threw a group of nuns out of their convent of Santa Maria delle Pugliole on grounds of overdue reform. In March 1526, thirty-two of the girls walked out of the door of their conservatory on Via S. Vitale and followed in procession behind five nuns drawn from Bologna’s leading convent, Corpus Domini, to the recently vacated cloister. This they renamed S. Bernardino e S. Marta, in memory both of the prominent fifteenth-century preacher who had stayed at the convent on his first visit to Bologna and of their own saintly protector S. Marta. These thirty-two took the habit and rule of the Poor Clares.

Far from settling matters, their departure only set the stage for yet another upheaval. The new nuns and their guardian Rubini seem to have assumed that the girls remaining in S. Marta would find their exits through vows of matrimony, leaving the eventually vacant house on S. Vitale to be folded into the convent’s patrimony. Yet as the thirty-two were processing out the front door, a new contingent of abandoned girls was being ushered in the back door by another confraternity, the Compagnia di S. Maria della Castità. Its origins and rights were unclear, but by 25 May 1526, this confraternity compensated the newly formed nuns of S. Bernardino e S. Marta, and became the proprietor of the home and the sponsor of its expanded community of abandoned girls. There seems to have been more than a little strong-arm pressure on the part of the upper-class members of S. Maria della Castità, who planned to restrict entry to the poor daughters of Bolognese citizens. However, shaped by expedients, uncertainties, and the competing visions of three confraternities, S. Marta had by 1526 an identity as a place for abandoned girls. More to the point, it had walls, a roof, and beds.

Although Rubini and representatives of the Poveri Vergognosi and S. Giobbe all signed an agreement, enough dissatisfaction and loopholes remained to keep the nuns and the abbandonate fighting for years over who had rights to the building, the conservatory’s early legacies, and even its title of S. Marta. And enough uncertainty remained that both the original informal group of guardians and the successor confraternity of S. Maria della Castità—by all appearances a hastily cobbled-together brotherhood—soon faded from the scene, leaving the Poveri Vergognosi to pick up the pieces. It exercised its control in 1554 by writing the first set of statutes to govern the activities of the girls, of the nuns who supervised their day-to-day care, and of the lay men and women who oversaw the operation and integrated it into the Poveri Vergognosi’s expanding activities. Almost fifty years after those first girls, “forgetting themselves in hunger,” had hit Bologna’s streets, a clearly governed system for their care had emerged.
The home that became the Conservatory of S. Marta was many things to many people over its first five decades. Few of them would have known what a conservatory was or could be and, judging by the departure of thirty-two in 1526, not all would have thought that a lay-directed shelter that steered abandoned girls into marriage or work was even a good thing. Not all homes had so improvised and unsettled a start. Particularly as the century progressed, governments, laypeople, or clergy starting a home in cities like Bologna or Florence tried to lay the groundwork well in advance. They secured quarters, financing, and supporters before the doors even opened. Working directly or indirectly, they imposed overhauls and consolidations to streamline administration, focus care, and put these institutions under closer political oversight. Existing homes became ready models both for what to follow and for what to avoid. New homes adopted their statutes with modifications that reflected new circumstances or old lessons learned about fraud, incompetence, or exploitation. Those who ran established homes in both cities lent their experience and sometimes resurrected their hopes in the new places. Yet best-laid plans often went astray. No matter how well-planned, each home had to improvise in the face of the famines, plagues, political trials, and economic dislocation that reared up suddenly and pushed both plans and experience to the limit. Almost all homes had to revise their ambitions and their statutes within a matter of decades—or at least to write these if that hadn’t already been done.

This chapter reviews the opening months and years of the homes that emerge in Bologna and Florence from the early sixteenth through the early seventeenth centuries, focusing on how social and political circumstances shaped a network of institutional support for orphaned and abandoned boys and girls in each city. Individually and in their networks, they became templates for the homes established across the Continent in later decades. While gender was the most critical category distinguishing one home from the other, social class was not far behind. Class determined the size of homes, the quality of care offered in them, and even the likelihood that their wards would exit from them into adult lives as spouses, servants, artisans, or clergy. Where records allow, we will look more closely at a few homes in order to convey the experience from the point of view of both the organizers and the organized—that is, those adults who desperately sought to provide a home, and those children who sought, equally desperately, to survive in them.
Building a Network: Bologna

The deft coup of 1526 that saw the confraternity of S. Maria della Castità steal the home of S. Marta out from under its departing girls and their puzzled guardians was not an isolated act, but part of a larger shakeup of Bolognese ospedali driven by the series of famines and plagues that shook northern Italy from 1525 to 1527. There is no direct evidence that the older girls of S. Marta had to move in order to make space for the younger abbandonate thrown up by the new disaster, but certainly this famine and plague forced Bologna’s charitable ospedali to open their doors to more needy children than they had seen before. They also had to be prepared to give them more than simply meals and a bed for a few days; these children needed a home and a future. This would require more coordinated planning, and through the 1520s and 1530s, Bologna’s political and religious leadership responded by framing the first elements of a synchronized system of care specifically for abandoned children—or at least those from the more worthy ranks in society.

S. Marta had spaces for some three dozen girls, but this was nowhere near enough. The issue was less one of space than of class. Civic officials had opened the old monastery of S. Gregorio about a kilometer outside the Porta Maggiore gate at some point in the early years of the century, and a 1534 alms-gathering permit notes that over two hundred poor girls called it home. But this was a home for the daughters of laborers or small artisans; few considered S. Gregorio an appropriate shelter for girls whose fathers had been shopkeepers, guild members, or professionals. In order to meet this socially specific need, one of Bologna’s larger pilgrims’ hostels was pressed into service by the late 1520s. The hostel and shrine of S. Maria del Baraccano at the southeast corner of the city wall by the S. Stefano city gate were significant centers on the local civic religious map. Under Bentivoglio sponsorship in the fifteenth century, the latter’s miracles had acquired a particularly political cast, with the Virgin conveniently springing into extraordinary defensive action at times when the leading family was under threat. Julius II had supported the shrine and its elite confraternity after expelling the Bentivoglio in 1506 and 1512, and, thanks to subsequent formal visits by Leo X and Clement VII, it retained its high standing. Papal officials and half the city’s ruling senate were on its membership list. This group decided in 1528 to open the doors to abandoned and orphaned girls whose parents had been Bolognese citizens. Approximately eighty were admitted, their
care entrusted to a five-man blue-ribbon commission that included the papal legate and representatives drawn from Bologna’s foundling home, the Ospedale degli Esposti, and from other charitable ospedali. It was a far cry from either the ragtag group that had improvised S. Marta, or the open door that characterized S. Gregorio. Armed with a papal brief and the support of Bologna’s political bodies, the new commission won the right to order all of the city’s confraternities and ospedali to submit statements of their resources and income, which would be taxed to support the poor generally and the girls of S. Maria del Baraccano in particular. Two years later, the pope granted the legate the authority to tax monasteries and other luoghi pii (pious institutions) for the same purpose.

The scale of the problems generated by the famine and plague of the 1520s pushed Bologna’s governors to lay more obligations on the hitherto largely independent confraternally run ospedali. The pilgrims’ hostel of S. Francesco temporarily sheltered girls from 1530 until the worst of the problems subsided, but there was as yet no shelter for boys. This was addressed in the same year, when the gonfaloniere di giustizia Filippo Guastavillani ordered the men of the confraternity of S. Bartolomeo di Reno to admit orphaned and abandoned boys into their hostel by the Reno canal, just north of the city center. At first glance, the choice was an odd one, since the hostel was far smaller than either S. Maria del Baraccano or S. Francesco. Yet it was adjacent to the rapidly expanding silk district and was run largely by middling-ranked guild masters and artisans who could integrate the fatherless boys into the world of work; some may have already been doing this individually in their own shops. But demand was greater than they thought. The first boys admitted took the small number of beds in the hostel. As more and more arrived, picked up off the streets by zealous citizens, they occupied the confraternity’s equally small oratory and eventually every free space available. Crowding ever more tightly as the heat of summer bore down, many of the weakened boys fell ill and died. Confratelli realized that they would have to expand their quarters with a dormitory, refectory, and church. Construction on this complex began, largely at the confraternity’s own expense, in 1536.

As the brothers of S. Bartolomeo di Reno sought ways to build a larger home for their boys, civic, ecclesiastical, and confraternal officials turned their attention to the equally vexing problem of finding funds to build a future for abandoned girls. Levies on ospedali, monasteries, and confraternities could put food on the table, but a clearer sense was growing in the city that more permanent homes—whether domestic or cloistered—would have to be found for the girls. For that dowries would be necessary. In a remarkable public effort, civic and
guild officials in 1535 established a dowry fund under the auspices of the charitable pawn bank, the Monte di Pietà. Guilds, confraternities, and individuals had long subsidized dowries for the daughters of deceased members of their particular family, locality, or corporate body. This new effort was a public fund established in part by formal subscription and serving the needs of girls in particular homes.

There was a dual symbolism in the public subscription: the homes of S. Marta, S. Maria del Baraccano, and S. Gregorio each received funds from twelve donors and, apart from one guild, each of the twelve was a woman. The list provides a snapshot of the social constituency of each home: S. Marta and S. Gregorio had larger numbers of widows and guild families among their subscribers than did S. Maria del Baraccano. All drew dowries from a number of single women. Most dowries were for 100 lire—a standard dowry locally for artisanal girls—though the eight dowries of 50 lire pledged for S. Gregorio are a sign of the lower rank of that hostel’s girls.\textsuperscript{11} The Monte di Pietà banked the funds, and disbursements were the work of a three-man commission made up of the heads of the Bologna’s Dominican, Benedictine, and Observant Franciscan (male) religious houses; the commission could recall any dowries that it thought were spent in loose or luxurious living. With resources for only a small number of girls, and no guarantee of future income, this fund was a small step indeed. Yet it was the first clear sign that Bologna’s elite was looking beyond the models of either temporary shelter or ersatz convent, and was seeking ways of reintegrating its girls into Bolognese society as wives and mothers.

With these developments Bologna had, by the mid-1530s, a reasonably coherent network of homes for orphaned and abandoned children. About three hundred girls could find shelter in one of three homes that was now dedicated to their care. These were distinguished roughly according to social rank, supported by confraternities acting individually or in tandem, secured by papal authorization, and funded by public levies. They were clearly seen as a network: when Sylvio Guidotti, one of the architects of the 1528 relief plan and the 1535 dowry scheme, died in 1536, local chronicler Giacomo Rinieri eulogized him as “a devout man, and one of those who governed the hospitals, that is, the girls of Baraccano, and of S. Marta, and of S. Gregorio.”\textsuperscript{12} The experience of individuals like Guidotti ensured that the lessons of S. Marta’s early years would inform the newer homes and help at least some girls exit them as wives or nuns. The network expanded when S. Bartolomeo di Reno opened its doors to orphaned and abandoned boys, again by public decree and with some public subsidy. It is
hard to tell how many it sheltered at this point, though later in the century a hundred boys made their home in its newly built dormitory. Yet the fact that it existed at all was a clear sign that the Bolognese felt that not all abandoned boys would find shelter with relatives, and that these should not be left to make their homes in the street. The two shelters of S. Maria del Baraccano and S. Bartolomeo di Reno were at the heart of Bologna’s emerging network. Their frequent pairing in private wills and public documents demonstrates that many Bolognese saw them as complementary institutions that demonstrated the city’s charitable care for orphaned and abandoned children. Alongside these institutions, an indeterminate number of children of both sexes who had been abandoned as foundlings lived at the Ospedale degli Esposti. As was the case with the majority of contemporary foundling homes in Italy, most of these children were girls, and most were illegitimate. In short, by mid-century over four hundred children in this city of 55,000 made their home in one of the charitable ospedali scattered throughout the city.

It was not enough. If the plagues of the 1520s triggered the opening of homes and the roughly coordinated system of care for children that brought together ecclesiastical, civic, confraternal, and private efforts, the famines of the 1540s and 1550s pushed demand up to a new level. Chronicler Giacomo Rinieri recorded the city’s efforts to placate God, open local purses, and stretch meager resources. Already in 1535, the races normally held on the feast days of S. Rafelo, S. Pietro, S. Petronio, and S. Martino were canceled and the prize moneys donated to the cash-strapped and overrun Ospedale degli Esposti. In 1539 the city government threatened to throw the poor out of the city, following the kind of assessment of needs proposed thirteen years earlier by Juan Luis Vives to the magistrates of Bruges. In April and May officials began a parish-by-parish census of those poor men and women who had lived in the city for less than ten years. These were the “foreign” poor whose eviction would free up food and alms for the “genuine” Bolognese. Many suspected that they were also frauds—young, fit, and shiftless. Yet when the standard-bearer of justice Giorgio Manzoli and the city’s twelve elders (anziani) went out with their banners and robes of office in November to begin the expulsion from just two parishes, they were confronted with families—men, women, and babes in arms, all wailing for mercy. The officials lost heart and canceled the expulsion.

Drought continued pushing the price of bread beyond the means of many, until by April 1540, Bologna’s bulk measure of grain, the corbe, cost 13 lire, almost three times its price only a year before when the famine began. At this
point, a form of typhus began cutting through the hungry city. Locals called it the “male de la pelara,” or the “scalding sickness”: fevers, lesions, and death took both high and low, and among the names in Rinieri’s long list of notable victims we find Carlo Poeta, another of the architects of the 1528 relief system. Authorities now mandated processions every Sunday to gather alms, but one after another of these failed to generate more than handful of change, even as they escalated to a grand gathering of all the confraternities, guilds, and regular and secular clergy on 17 May.\(^\text{14}\)

As confratelli, artisans, and priests took off their processional robes and emptied their rattling alms boxes, they began thinking of the more direct actions that would be necessary when famine and plague hit again. The result over the next fifteen years was a series of changes that brought new coherence and order to the still relatively loose collection of charitable institutions serving the poor children who were the first victims of these crises. Existing homes merged, new institutions opened, and administrative statutes were written and revised. Through all these changes we can get a clearer sense of which children the Bolognese thought deserved help, and what kind of help they needed. Provisions for children were part of the city’s broader efforts to try and come to grips with ever-escalating poverty. In 1548 the senate and legate revisited the failed effort to expel beggars made a decade earlier. They endorsed a comprehensive plan for relief that would systematically weed out fraudulent, vagrant, “unworthy,” and foreign (now more generously defined as those resident less than a year) beggars. A bureaucracy of visitors, censuses, and punishments would rationalize the city’s charitable resources and distribute these through more tightly controlled neighborhood distribution centers in the main mendicant churches. A large residential hostel for the poor would avoid the tear-filled chaos of the aborted expulsion of 1539. After some revisions, the city began implementing the sweeping plan in 1550.\(^\text{15}\)

The beggars’ hostel was the keystone of this system, and after a number of false starts it opened in 1563, occupying the same monastery of S. Gregorio outside the Porta Maggiore gate that had been used earlier as a conservatory for girls of the lower social orders. Where had these girls gone? They may well have gone out the back door and returned in the front in some strange echo of the events at S. Marta some decades before. In 1547, S. Maria del Baraccano had assumed administration of the S. Gregorio conservatory. Formal union with its down-market counterpart came in 1553, over the objections of one-third of the elite confraternity’s members. While S. Maria del Baraccano then increased its
intake by about twenty-five girls, this represented little more than 12 percent of the girls who called S. Gregorio home. Indeed, as the union was taking effect, the Baraccano confratelli rewrote their administrative statutes to establish more clearly the restrictions of class, citizenship, and honor for entry to their conservatory. Girls falling outside these restrictions presumably remained in the S. Gregorio shelter, and within a decade they received new administrators over them and new poor at their side in the dormitories, refectory, and workshop. On 18 April 1563, Bologna’s worthy, local, but homeless poor were herded into the cathedral courtyard to begin their formal procession to S. Gregorio, newly styled the Ospedale dei Mendicanti. Over eight hundred poor marched in this inaugural procession, more than two-thirds of them women and children, and some of these no doubt girls and young women already living there who had not been deemed fit for entry into S. Maria del Baraccano. Bologna’s Ospedale dei Mendicanti marked the first time an Italian city experimented with putting the poor behind bars. Although not an orphanage or conservatory per se, it shaped the subsequent development of the city’s network of surrogate homes by absorbing much of the demand for shelter by lower-class and indigent poor. This freed the other homes to be far more selective, far smaller, and far more generous in their treatment of their children. As we will see, the situation was very different in Florence.

The best index of the system’s success was an apparent reduction in demand for new shelters. In spite of continuing dearth and S. Maria del Baraccano’s reduction in spaces, only one new home opened in mid-century. Brothers of the Confraternity of S. Maria Maddalena, who had begun meeting in 1512 and had moved around periodically since then, had finally gained their own quarters in 1532. The derelict hostel of S. Onofrio in via Mascarella, just east of the cattle market, still bore traces of the elaborate frescoes painted by Cristoforo da Bologna when it had opened almost two hundred years earlier to serve members of a Spanish religious order as they passed through Bologna on their way to and from Rome. The confraternity immediately undertook badly needed repairs. Confratelli patrolled the streets by night, offering food and some rudimentary education in guild crafts (arti) to the homeless children there, and soon began bringing the boys back to the underutilized hostel for shelter. By 1557, they had received permission to turn S. Onofrio into an orphanage, provided some beds were still available for traveling Spanish clerics. Adapting the new statutes of S. Bartolomeo di Reno and the more selective methods of S. Marta, they began sheltering a dozen or so boys of somewhat higher rank than S. Bartolomeo and
utilizing them in public—and profitable—funerary rituals. Renovations to the dormitory began immediately.\textsuperscript{17}

As Bologna's civic system of poor relief was taking shape through the 1550s, orphanages and conservatories had to decide more explicitly what part they were to play in it. Scraping by on good will and improvisation gave way to a flurry of consolidations, administrative overhauls, and the first efforts to write statutes for the homes. S. Bartolomeo di Reno began this with statutes drafted in 1550, shortly before it absorbed, through union, the properties of an ospedale outside the city walls and assumed, through aggregation, the spiritual benefits of Rome's orphanage of S. Maria della Visitazione. All these actions consolidated its identity as Bologna's main orphanage for boys, a status that citizens recognized with a spike of donations and legacies through the decade.\textsuperscript{18} S. Maria del Baraccano wrote statutes in 1553, and the Compagnia dei Poveri Vergognosi did the same in 1554, shortly after they had absorbed S. Gregorio and S. Marta, respectively.\textsuperscript{19} S. Onofrio wrote its statutes within three years of opening, though its six-man drafting committee cribbed heavily from S. Bartolomeo.\textsuperscript{20} Carefully worded sections on administration, fiscal responsibility, and the duties of resident staff hint at sad experiences with fraud, abuse, and mismanagement; resident wardens were not above inviting friends and family members in to feed at the orphans' tables. Equally careful sections lay out complicated processes for nominating, reviewing, interviewing, and voting on children who sought entrance to the home (or whose parents sought it). These suggest that zealous confratelli and wardens had hitherto enrolled children on a more haphazard basis. Boys and girls had won space through the intervention of pushy confratelli, the bribing of a cooperative warden, or the luck of appearing at the door when an older teen was leaving for good.

Because the homes had moved beyond being simple temporary shelters, the promise of education, work, and a dowry made entrance to them that much more attractive, and more confratelli and civic officials wanted to share in the opportunities and challenges of patronage. Statute clauses underlined the civic nature of the homes, which drew their volunteer officers from among the ranks of the politically active and the economically influential. Each confraternal charity aimed to recruit its highest official, the rector, from Bologna's senate, giving the city's chief legislative body a clear supervisory and coordinating role while leaving the confraternities with responsibility for financing and administration. With senators cycling through various homes as rectors, and members of other leading families joining the confraternities that ran the homes, the patricians could
coordinate a wide range of charitable institutions in the backrooms of the Palazzo Communale and in the drawing rooms of Bologna’s palaces, without any single governing body setting the rules or picking up the tab. They worked together to restrict access to the conservatories and orphanages to the children of local citizens. All the statutes lay out complicated processes of nomination and review to prevent entry by children who were sick, morally suspect, or socially dispensable. These rules were frequently pushed aside by sheer demand and by the politics of patronage, but their appearance in all the statutes shows that the homes shared in that desire to distinguish worthy and unworthy, local and vagrant, responsible and dispensable poor that we find in all charitable reform of the period. Moreover, although the homes remained independent of each other, there was the clear sense of a local cooperative network under local political control. When it came time to launch the Opera dei Mendicanti itself, Pope Pius IV’s brief neatly indicated the broader scale and cohesive organization of that network by specifically ordering that the Mendicanti’s administration be patterned on those of the foundling home of the Esposti, the Opera dei Poveri Vergognosi, the orphanages of S. Bartolomeo di Reno and S. Maria del Baraccano, and the syphilitics’ hostel of S. Giobbe. All were under the control of ennobled confraternities, all were recently outfitted with new statutes, and all were participants in the semi-official network of confraternal institutions that comprised Bologna’s civic welfare system.

The sheer size of the Ospedale dei Mendicanti—it expanded in 1567 to allow separation of men from the women and children, and over the next few decades regularly housed between 1,000 and 1,700 poor—meant that the system of supports for abandoned children established in the 1550s was adequate until once again a combination of famine and plague ratcheted demand up to a new level in the late 1580s and 1590s. One new home emerged in the intervening period, but it was an anomaly in being the work of a pious individual with a particular group of children in mind. In time, it too was co-opted and adapted to the demands of the broader welfare system. Yet it deserves attention here as an example of the tortuous—and sometimes litigious—route from private charity to semipublic institution.

Bonifacio dalle Balle was the youngest of three sons born into a merchant family with deep roots in Bologna. He later wrote of having a “badly spent” (mal spesa) youth: no cares, no morals, no wife, and a daughter Anna born to a
servant and later put in a convent. Shaken by a deep conversion experience in his early 30s, dalle Balle adopted a path tried by many Catholics in those decades of unrest and reform. We could call it a personal lay vocation: not attracted to the religious orders, he nonetheless framed a life along the lines of the regulars, never marrying, voluntarily leaving his business, studying intently, and devoting his life to charitable work and teaching, particularly with girls and women. Although no Protestant, he was one of those reformed and reforming early modern Catholics, both men and women, who fell between the stools, and whose actions and writings display scant regard for the intermediary role of saints, hierarchy, and clerics generally. Instead, he penned sermons and tracts, copied spiritual works, and wrote a few sometimes contradictory autobiographical fragments that cast his life and work as a morality tale. Dalle Balle professed a determination to “work in the world for the greater glory of God and to establish a current of love between the creation and the Creator.” His intensely Christocentric piety may be one reason why his shelter, alone of all those established in Bologna, was not dedicated to either the Virgin Mary or one of the saints, but pointed to the crucified Christ.

What became the conservatory of S. Croce began around 1583. Dalle Balle later penned a few dramatic autobiographical accounts of these years, and while they are not entirely consistent, they show what moved him. In one account, dalle Balle is walking down a street at night behind a young prostitute and her client, and hears her sigh, “Who will deliver me from this life?” In another, he encounters a 12-year-old girl holding off a gang of boys with a stick, tracks down her mother, and, after numerous visits, gets her consent to put the girl with a good woman named Anna. In yet another, he simply picks a little abandoned girl Dorotea off the street and pays a widow Lucrezia Seghandina 7 lire a month to take care of her. Dalle Balle kept in touch with Dorotea and could note two decades later that she had married and was still living. Soon he brought another girl, Lodovica, to live with Mona Seghandina, and then another, and another, until Seghandina ran out of space in her house. Dalle Balle transferred them all to a larger house by the city wall by 1583 or 1584, and then across town to another place on Via della Lame a couple of years later. There were dozen girls in Seghandina’s care by this time, but it is not clear what they might have done, if anything. Like the early girls at S. Marta, this group seems to have spent considerable time in spiritual training: Seghandina accompanied the girls to church, and dalle Balle may have preached to them some of the sermons that appear in
his hand in the conservatory’s archives. Although not enclosed as such, Seghandina was forbidden to tell outsiders anything of the work, and if asked about the girls’ sponsor, was to lie and say that it was a foreigner.  

Why the secrecy, the dissimulation, and the spiritual training? The girls were the daughters of prostitutes, and secrecy was perhaps the best means of avoiding the questions of honor and dishonor that would swirl around the unmarried dalle Balle’s close, albeit arm’s length, association with their daughters. Word got out all the same, however, since dalle Balle’s efforts to spread the financial liability led him to seek the help of his brothers; of Alfonso Paleotti, nephew and eventual successor of Archbishop Gabrielle Paleotti; and of the local Capuchins and Franciscan tertiaries. The brothers amicably divided the family property, Paleotti promised and occasionally paid a subsidy of 50 scudi (or 200 lire bolognese), and the Capuchins offered spiritual association. The Franciscan tertiaries, whom dalle Balle joined in 1585, became both his salvation and his downfall. In 1592, the tertiaries agreed to dalle Balle’s proposal that they turn over to the use of his girls a defunct hostel and some revenue-bearing properties, in return for a share in the governance of what would become a more formal conservatory: four tertiaries would join with dalle Balle in running the place, though there were as yet no statutes to tell them how. Some Franciscan tertiary sisters in the hostel would become the girls’ resident guardians in place of the overwhelmed Mona Seghandina.  

The five moved quickly. Within half a year, they had sold all the property in order to buy more suitable quarters on Via S. Mamolo near the city gate of the same name at the south end of the city. Although approved by the ecclesiastical authorities, some of the tertiary sisters resisted the sale and refused to leave. Local police eventually chased them out, but the sale was then challenged by the conventual Franciscans, who claimed that they were the rightful overseers of the tertiaries and that, since they hadn’t been consulted on the sale, it was invalid. The problem was resolved in 1598 by leaving control of the new properties with the tertiaries, and granting use to S. Croce. By this point, some forty girls were sheltered in S. Croce. Or barely so. A report by the abbot of S. Giovanni in Monte claimed that they had no bread, no wood, and little wine; their most notable possession was a debt of 3,000 lire. Even the baker took them to court for unpaid bills.  

Dalle Balle had sunk his life and fortune into the conservatory, and was determined to retain control, but with troubles escalating more powerful parties moved into play, adopting techniques that had proven useful in charitable confraternities over the previous century. These rivals joined the body of tertiaries
in 1605, shortly before Archbishop Paleotti ordered that statutes finally be written for S. Croce. A whisper campaign to discredit dalle Balle now swung into high gear, helped in part by the fact that he lived in a separate apartment within the conservatory, an irregular arrangement which even his supporters found awkward. He survived charges of immorality and poor administration leveled in the archiepiscopal curia in 1607, but missed a critical meeting in January 1609 when the statutes he had written were up for approval. These reflected his vision for the home as a safe shelter for the spiritual refashioning of girls from the margins of society, and had already been approved by Archbishop Paleotti. In his absence, the meeting quickly became a review of dalle Balle himself, with officials claiming that he was contrary, scornful of his colleagues and superiors, and a bad example for others. The group voted unanimously to throw him out and then set about writing a second set of statutes animated by a very different vision. These cast S. Croce unambiguously as a workhouse and school, removing the emphasis on shelter for the vulnerable daughters of prostitutes, and putting it under the kind of politically connected administration found in Bologna’s other orphanages and conservatories. Paleotti obligingly signed these statutes as well. Although dalle Balle was eventually restored to the home and remained active in S. Croce until his death three years later, it soon became a conservatory remarkably different from the one he had envisioned but very similar to the Bolognese model.

Dalle Balle’s difficulties in keeping S. Croce going in its early years were due in part to the escalating cycles of famine in 1588–89, 1590, and 1593–94, which cut Bologna’s population from 72,000 in 1587 to 59,000 by 1595. At the same time, protective legislation against the import of silk in 1589 had hindered an industry that built a significant part of its profits on finishing imported raw materials. Employment collapsed as weavers left the city. These two developments forced almost 1,700 Bolognese to seek help at the Ospedale dei Mendicanti, but it too had seen the collapse of revenues and was threatening to turn the poor out and close its doors. As crisis threatened the institutional network that had been laid out in the 1520s and expanded in the 1550s, civic and ecclesiastical officials reached desperately to expand it. They approached the confraternity of S. Giacomo with the request that it shelter boys in its hostel next to the Church of S. Giacomo, once a center of Bentivoglio patronage. Some fiscal and legal privileges sweetened the deal, and the confraternity took in thirty boys temporarily in 1590, deciding the next year to make the arrangement permanent. Apart from their lessons, the boys spent time and earned money participating in funerals, of which there was no shortage in that decade. Their confraternal sponsors estab-
lished a subgroup to run the orphanage and this soon became the base from which more recently recruited patrician members gained control of the operation and integrated it into the established network of Bolognese homes.  

The final home established in this period was a hybrid of these types. It reflected the pious charity of a group of gentlewomen, the influence of Catholic Reformation currents in the form of a Jesuit promoter and facilitator, and integration into the local network through the inevitable entry of Bolognese patrician men into its governing council. Known variously as S. Giuseppe or S. Giuseppe, it opened in 1606 as the only conservatory established and run by women. They clearly wanted to serve needs that existing homes failed to meet and, to some extent, exacerbated. Navigating the complicated nomination, scrutiny, and approval processes for the homes of S. Maria del Baraccano, S. Marta, and even the lower-ranked S. Croce could take months. Some confraternities carefully weeded through the fraudulent applications of and for girls who weren’t in desperate straits, but who were attracted by the conservatory dowry funds. Other homes exchanged their own entrance procedures for the financial and political support of high-born patrons by allowing them to nominate girls. The net result was the same: prompt help for truly needy abandoned girls was harder and harder to come by.

In order to regain this much-needed assistance, the women establishing S. Giuseppe set five critical departures from local practice: quick review and prompt acceptance, short-term stays, a preference for older girls, no dowries, and guarantors who would take the girls after a stipulated period of time. This last provision was the key that would make the others work, and what made it all the more radical was that the women themselves served as the guarantors. The system favored those families in temporary difficulty that required only short-term accommodation for their daughters or nieces. It decidedly did not help those from the lowest ranks of society, since the doors were shut to any girls who had either begged or spent time in the Ospedale dei Mendicanti.

Twelve women began the home, working with the Jesuit Giorgio Giustiniani and supported by the archbishop. They initially rented quarters until with the help of supporters they were able to buy some houses of their own just inside the Porta Castiglione at the southern city wall. The women initially ran the home very differently from those found elsewhere in Bologna, but after men joined the administration in 1631, S. Giuseppe came to operate more like its companion institutions in the city, with perhaps a greater emphasis on taking in paying
As such, it eventually looked more like a boarding school and less like the prompt short-term shelter that its original promoters had envisioned.

Building a Network: Florence

Florence’s extensive network of ospedali was initially far more effective in keeping good children off of bad streets. Founded by families, guilds, and confraternities from the eleventh century, and thereafter periodically merged, closed, consolidated, subsidized, or looted by communal governments, these ospedali ranged from rooms with a couple of beds scattered through the city’s neighborhoods, to major institutions like S. Maria Nuova a few blocks north of the cathedral in the city’s center, one of the largest, wealthiest, and, by some measures, most progressive institutions in Italy if not Europe. Though communal and ducal governments frequently interfered to nominate officials, merge institutions, or audit accounts, these were largely proprietorial institutions, in that control rested at least in part in the hands of the family or corporation that had founded it. For all its size and civic importance, S. Maria Nuova continued to have as rector a descendant of Folco Portinari, who had founded it in 1288. Family friends, clients, or servants, or the surviving kin of dead guild or confraternity members found shelter in these ospedali. Uncoordinated and vulnerable to institutional and familial fraud, this informal network nonetheless carried Florence through the worst of those famines and plagues of the mid-1520s that stretched and broke similar networks elsewhere in Europe. Its local success in that rough decade is all the more remarkable in that the desperate measures of Florence’s last republic from 1527 to 1530 included a systematic looting of ospedale coffers and the demolition of any suburban investment properties that could shelter the guns or troops of the besieging Spanish armies. Ironically, the network gained its cohesion through those difficult years thanks to the dedication of those followers of Savonarola whose dream of a charitable Christian republic was in some measure responsible for bringing the Spanish troops to besiege the city.

Florentines fit their conservatories and orphanages into existing ospedali, but didn’t follow Bologna’s example and draft or compel an existing confraternity to devote its quarters, staff, membership, and resources to running the charity. The new institutions for children moved around various derelict former convents, ospedale buildings, and rented houses, but these buildings were essentially empty and unstaffed. All these shelters eventually developed administrative confrater-
nities or congregations that elected officials, collected money, and found jobs and husbands for their adolescent charges, but only after the fact. Most originated as the work of a few individuals who were driven by charitable conviction, clerical prodding, or political mandate. An early effort by Cosimo I to devise a rational, state-supervised poor relief system for the whole territory had child care as its foundation and a beggars’ hostel as its keystone, but was effectively abandoned by the duke when he saw the broader political ambitions of its promoters. As a result, the informal network of homes found in Bologna—distinguished by class and gender and coordinated through senatorial rectories, cross-memberships by patrician families in administrative Larga confraternities, and the discrete conversations of gentlemen and gentlewomen in the city’s palaces—evolved differently in Florence. The government—in this instance, Duke Cosimo I (1537–74) and his sons and successors Francesco I (1574–87) and Ferdinando I (1587–1609)—was more involved in ordering shelters opened or closed and in assigning quarters, but less involved in the ongoing task of running or coordinating the homes. A class hierarchy emerged all the same, together with some coordination of efforts. In the case of boys, this was a moot point. They all entered a single state-sponsored institution called the Ospedale degli Abbandonati. For girls, coordination took the far looser form of a somewhat shadowy confraternity, the Compagnia di S. Maria Vergine, whose members were involved in some way or other in the start of all but one of the six conservatories established in Florence by the end of the century.

Florence’s traditional network of care weathered the plagues and population collapse of 1522–23 and 1526–28, and even the siege that ended the republic of 1527–30. Yet it frayed in the serious famine of 1539–40 and began coming apart in the even more critical decade of the 1550s. Famine hit in 1551 and then annually from 1554 through 1557. A 1552 census recorded 59,000 inhabitants in the city, a far cry from the 80,000 who had lived there in 1520, and the effects of these deaths on families were critical. From 1530 to 1540, the foundling home of the Innocenti took in 5,400 children, with 1,000 of these in 1539 alone; this was equivalent to 38.9 percent of all babies baptized in the city in that troubled year, double the percentage reached earlier in the decade. Moreover, in 1554 Cosimo I launched the war against Siena that absorbed Florentine finances until 1559, costing 2 million scudi before it was done. This was money drained from the pockets of citizens, the hands of the poor, and the patrimony of charitable institutions. As the demographic and subsistence crises deepened through these
decades, Florence launched an institutional response that was similar to Bologna’s. Within two years of the 1539–40 famine, two complementary shelters—one for girls and one for boys—had opened under a combination of private philanthropy and government fiat. Pressure built for a broader reform of civic welfare, involving a consolidation of charitable resources, surveys of the poor, and discipline of able-bodied beggars similar to that seen in Bologna’s Ospedale dei Mendicanti. After a few bold moves, Duke Cosimo I backtracked, and Florentines responded to immediate needs by opening a further three conservatories through the 1550s, each serving a different social group.

The complementary pair of institutions that opened in the immediate aftermath of the famine of 1539–40 emerged under radically different circumstances, but combined their efforts until Cosimo I curbed their cooperation. Lionarda Barducci Ginori led a group of Florentine gentlewomen in establishing the first distinct conservatory in 1541, a shelter that Florentines came to call the Ospedale delle Povere Fanciulle Abbandonate. Ginori was from a family that had been associated with the Savonarolan movement from the beginning, and she recruited like-minded volunteers to help her in running the home. Sharon Strocchia notes that religious reformers had been aiming to eliminate convent guardianship of lay girls for decades, and Ginori’s new shelter offered an alternative as the opportunities for servanze dried up. With her volunteers, she found girls on the streets or by referral, and brought them to the old pilgrims’ ospedale of S. Niccolò dei Fantoni at Piazza S. Felice opposite the modern-day Pitti Palace, where they came under the care of a trio of women headed by the resident warden, Mona Nanina. S. Niccolò was run by the Compagnia di S. Maria del Bigallo under the terms of a legacy given by Lapo Fantoni almost two hundred years earlier. Typical of such donors, Fantoni was as prescriptive as he was generous. Only female pilgrims could share spaces in one of the ten beds he had funded, and for no more than three days at that; if they had any male companions, these presumably slept in the Osteria della Buca next door. With its reputation as a safe shelter for women only, the S. Niccolò hostel was a natural place to bring vulnerable girls; Ginori, moreover, may have secured it through a family connection on the Compagnia del Bigallo. It is not clear if her abandoned girls took all of the space meant for pilgrims or if some of these continued coming, as happened in a few other hostel-cum-conservatories opened later in the century. With few extant records, it is difficult to determine how many girls were helped, from what class, for how long, or on what models. What is clear is that
Ginori made it her vocation, drawing her daughters Caterina and Maria into the work over the next decade, and leaving a small farm to the conservatory on her death in 1549.

Less than a year after Ginori’s Ospedale delle Abbandonate began taking in vulnerable adolescent girls, the Ospedale degli Poveri Fanciulli Abbandonati opened as Florence’s first distinct orphanage for young boys. It was the first step of a broader review and consolidation of poor relief that Cosimo I formally launched two weeks later on 17 March 1542. The Ospedale degli Abbandonati was the main charge and beneficiary of a new magistracy, the Buonomini Sopra i Poveri Mendicanti, whose five members (twelve by August) were to inventory the possessions, reform the administrations, and appropriate the excess revenues of over two hundred charitable ospedali in the dominion, funneling these into shelters for beggar children and adults in the capital. Cosimo I moved in the next half year to underwrite this social work by suppressing the Compagnia di S. Maria del Bigallo, and transferring its assets, testamentary responsibilities, and name over to the magistracy.

The Compagnia del Bigallo was one of Florence’s oldest (est. 1244) and wealthiest confraternities. Centuries of legators had endowed it with a host of small shelters and hostels like S. Niccolò dei Fantoni just noted above. Some of these took in abandoned children, and Bigallo’s reputation in this area had expanded after 1425, when the communal government forced it to merge with another old and wealthy confraternity, the Compagnia della Misericordia. The Misericordia had built prominent quarters at the corner of Piazza S. Giovanni opposite the cathedral, complete with a corner loggia where Florentines had abandoned their children before the ospedali of S. Maria della Scala, S. Gallo, and particularly the Innocenti took in foundlings in the fifteenth century. On the outside of the building, a large fourteenth-century fresco depicted the Misericordia captains entrusting young children to mothers, some of whom may have been adopting, others possibly reclaiming children whom they had abandoned temporarily out of necessity. While the union of the Misericordia and Bigallo was reversed by 1489, the Bigallo retained the building and inherited the reputation—the Misericordia shifted its efforts toward care for the sick and dying. Apart from its considerable assets, Cosimo I clearly wanted to transfer the Misericordia-Bigallo’s reputation for child care over to his new magistracy-orphanage.

Florentines continued abandoning children under the loggia, to the dismay of the Bigallo magistrates, who for decades kept a woman lodged in the apartment above the loggia to take these children in before they died of hunger or exposure.
These *abbandonati* didn’t stay in the residence appended to the impressive quarters on Piazza S. Giovanni, but a few blocks north in the old Ospedale Broccardi. The Broccardi had a similar high-profile location on Via S. Gallo, Florence’s main street leading north from the city center to the Porta S. Gallo (modern-day Piazza della Libertà) and, beyond that, over the Appenines as the Via Bolognese. Such thoroughfares usually had a cluster of pilgrims’ hostels and infirmaries serving travelers, some of them adapted over time to other purposes.

When searching for a home for its syphilis’ infirmary, Florence had settled on S. Maria della Trinità just down the street. Pilgrims had also stayed at the Ospedale Broccardi, established by Pietro Broccardi in a legacy to the Arte di Calimala in 1402, and meant by him to complement the large infirmary called the Ospedale Bonifazio located next door. At Cosimo I’s behest, the guild consuls ceded the Broccardi to the orphans, but they seem to have stripped it bare of all but a few beds and tables before leaving. Apart from the quantities of bread, wine, and oil that had to be bought to get the kitchen going, the resident warden Sandro Cechi had to buy a big kettle, some small pots, bowls, knives, cups, other utensils, and tablecloths.

As the boys began coming in through the spring months, Cechi busied himself refitting the Ospedale degli Abbandonati, storing up wood, bringing in barrels of wine and large flasks of oil, purchasing notebooks in which to keep the accounts, paying a trio of boys 12 soldi to move a couple of beds in, and then spending 5 lire for sheets. Carpenters built four small lockable alms boxes for pairs of boys to bring around in their collection drives through Florentine streets and churches, and Cechi matched this with a couple of heavy canvas bags for collecting bread and vegetables. A brass plaque went up on the outside of the building, and locks went into its doors. Some of the boys coming in to the Ospedale degli Abbandonati may have had their own sets of clothing, but Cechi also bought large quantities of cloth, sending some to the tailor Ambrogio Baldesi for shirts, and the rest to another tailor Schalabrino to turn into vests that would mark all the boys as recipients of Florentine charity; later the orphanage would dress its wards in uniform brown tunics. Cechi purchased straw hats for the boys, presumably to shelter them as they went through the city looking for alms. These would later be replaced with brown cloth caps matching the tunic. Few poor boys had shoes, so the orphanage adopted a traditional charitable practice of providing these for their incoming wards.

But that was in the future. After working hard for a few months to open the orphanage, the Buonomini sopra i Poveri Mendicanti threw a party on the eve
of the feast day of S. Giovanni Battista (24 June). Almost a hundred poor diners, possibly the boys, the staff, and the workmen and artisans who had helped transform the old Broccardi hostel, sat down to eat their *piatanzine*, the traditional pauper’s allowance of meat and drink, at long tables decked with cloths; their overseers dined separately on cuttlefish. The day was rich with symbolism. With the support of the Medici, who aimed to associate themselves more closely with the cult of the patron saint, Florentines had been expanding their S. Giovanni Battista feast day celebrations over the course of the sixteenth century. So many parades, races, games, and displays of wealth had to be fit in that activities sometimes began three or four days before the feast itself. The meal at the Ospedale degli Abbandonati was but one part of a celebration that was almost certainly marked by a public procession in the evening in which the boys with their magistrate-sponsors issued out of the *ospedale* and down Via S. Gallo to Piazza S. Giovanni and the Duomo. They carried *secodelle* (small faggots of kindling) to help light the bonfires that burned across the city in celebration that night, a legacy of the festival’s origin as the Roman solstice festival of Fors Fortuna. Processions on the evening before S. Giovanni Battista had traditionally been colorful, vibrant, and noisy affairs featuring guilds, representatives of the *gonfaloni* (Florence’s sixteen administrative districts), and confraternities. Yet through the later fifteenth century, Lorenzo il Magnifico had steadily tightened the screws on all of these competing centers of craft, neighborhood, or religious identity and authority, to the point where, if they processed at all it was only in their immediate localities. The Medici dukes followed his example, and aimed to ensure that bigger processions across different neighborhoods served them more particularly.

The sight of the berobed Buonomini with perhaps a hundred young uniformed *abbandonati* passing through the streets advertised Cosimo I’s direct paternal care for the city’s helpless children. Or at least some of them. While a foundling home like the Innocenti was bursting at the seams with all the infants dropped anonymously at its door, the new Ospedale degli Abbandonati was deliberately selective. Innocenti wards, whether children, youths, or adult women, were predominantly illegitimate and often of no clear rank. With their uniform shirts and vests and, more particularly the hats and shoes that were critical markers of status, the Abbandonati boys were clearly not destitute *sottoposti* (day laborers), but the heirs of artisans, merchants, and others of middling rank who had fallen on hard times. As they marched, some of the boys carried alms boxes, others bore the fifty signs depicting *caritas* that the painter Giovan Battista del
Verrochio had been commissioned to produce for them, and yet others the twenty-five newly purchased ciotole, special dishes used by the poor to beg for drinks.54

Cosimo I gained his propaganda points at remarkably modest cost to himself. Almost half of the money raised for this work over its first few months had come from the magistracy and its individual members. The balance came from alms boxes that the boys carried around to the cathedral and to the churches of S. Maria Novella, S. Croce, and especially the Annunziata, where newly married couples or women experiencing difficulty in conception came to say prayers and give offerings. This was the first place that the boys went with their alms boxes, and they made sure to be there on the feast of the Annunciation, scarcely three weeks after the orphanage opened, when the church would be full of people eager to give the coins that would secure them the prayers of these well-scrubbed uniformed orphans.55 With their tunics and hats, their paintings, and their alms boxes, the Abbandonati boys became familiar sights on the streets and in the markets of Florence. As they raised more of the orphanage’s income in the years that followed, individual donations trailed off. Cosimo I finally coughed up 300 lire early the next year, but did more for the Abbandonati financially in November 1542, when he used his authority to grant it the holdings, resources, and name of the Compagnia del Bigallo, and when he added a rider to this legislation granting it one-third of the fines generated by a recent law against blasphemy.56

Lionarda Ginori’s Ospedale delle Abbandonate was never formally part of the Buonomini’s mandate, but in those early years the ambitious magistrates (now styled the capitani del Bigallo) sought to extend their authority as broadly as possible over all classes of the poor. Immediately after the celebrations on the feast of S. Giovanni Battista, the magistracy’s president, Angelo Marzi de’Medici, bishop of Assisi, sent some flour and money to Ginori, the first of a string of gifts ranging from wine and flour to mattresses, cloth, and alms for dowries. The Bigallo captains subsequently wrote the care of abandoned girls into their draft statutes, and gave periodic subsidies to the conservatory. When Cosimo expropriated and ceded Bigallo holdings to the magistracy, it became the landlord of Ginori’s conservatory. Though never large enough to keep the Abbandonate running, these gifts and links helped cement relations between the two homes.57 Yet the gifts were always entered in the Abbandonate’s account book as gifts to Ginori or to individual girls rather than to her home, and when she died in 1550, Cosimo I ordered that the conservatory be closed.58

It’s doubtful that it was. It would have been an odd choice at a critical time:
over 20 percent of baptized infants were being abandoned annually by the end of this decade, with almost nine hundred children pushed through the Innocenti’s open door in 1551 alone. Mona Nanina, the Abbandonate’s resident warden, appealed to the grand duke for use of a small farm that Ginori had left for the work or, failing that, for one of the Bigallo’s houses. While she framed this as a request for a form of pension after ten years of honorable service, she also requested funds to keep the girls’ shelter going. Ginori’s daughters Catherina (herself now a widow) and Maria also wrote to the duke, asking that individual vulnerable girls be sheltered with Mona Nanina in the home that their mother had founded. In 1549 they wrote of encountering on the streets two teenage girls who had fled home to escape being abused by their father. Later it was a 15-year-old girl, Agnola, who needed someplace to shelter temporarily until her father could care for her. Still later it was the case of Agnoletta who, with her 7- and 9-year-old daughters, had lived with her father Lorenzo “il Candela” after being abandoned by her own husband six years before. The family had scraped by for a few years, but now Lorenzo was too old and sick to carry on with his work as a carpenter, while Agnola, nursing a broken arm, could not care for him or for her daughters. Catherina Ginori Tedaldi pleaded with Cosimo that these girls needed someplace to guard their safety and salvage what honor they could, and asked that they be accepted “nel monasterio di detta M.Leonarda” their mother. The duke’s secretary Lelio Torelli passed all these requests on to the Bigallo magistrates, who clearly were continuing to provide some kind of shelter to abandoned and vulnerable girls under the care of Mona Nanina.

While it’s doubtful that Ginori’s Ospedale delle Abbandonate really closed, documentary lacunae make it difficult to trace the transition to an institution that inherited its name, its work, and a site in its neighborhood. On 1 March 1552, Cosimo I gave a license to the new “Hospedale povere Fanciulle Abbandonate,” operating under the title and protection of S. Maria Vergine. Five girls had entered its rented quarters in the old Ospedale de Bini by S. Felice in Piazza the day before, and a sixth arrived on the day of Cosimo’s license. Two days later, with Cosimo’s approval firmly in hand, the group behind the home formally adopted its statutes and, like the home, soon came to be known as the Compagnia di S. Maria Vergine. These notaries, doctors, priests, and gentlemen had already been hard at work for months lining up the donors who would keep the girls fed and clothed until they could begin earning their own keep through piecework for textile merchants. Francesco Rosati provided 12 staia of grain, 6 barrels of wine, and 42 lire, Michele di Lorenzo Dilnica gave 30 lire and
promised to send mattresses and bedding, while Francesco di Mattio Ughetti offered the use of a house in Borgo S. Niccolò and promised to leave it as a legacy. Valuable as these one-time donations were, the new Ospedale di Fanciulle Abbandonate di S. Maria Vergine relied more on pledges. These ranged from generous donors like Donato Canbini, who promised and delivered 12 staia of grain and 4 barrels of wine annually, to the more modest cloth shearer Lorinzo di Tommaso, who faithfully gave 3 lire annually over the next few years. The first set of donations, totaling lire 1,019.10 together with 24 staia of wheat, 10 barrels of wine, and the use of a house, had been registered two months before the home opened, suggesting that its backers had been at work long before that.63

Donations and pledges undoubtedly helped convince the perennially cost-conscious Cosimo I to support the conservatory, but more immediate pressure played on the duke in the form of his wife, Eleonora of Toledo, who was concerned with the fate of worthy girls made vulnerable by their parents’ poverty or death. The duchess gave alms periodically to the new Casa di S. Maria Vergine, bought a farm that had been donated to it, and eventually included a 200 scudo legacy in her will. But it was more closely and publicly in her eye and under her care. Had she wanted to, she could walk across the street to the conservatory from the house she had just bought from the Pitti family, and which her husband was remodeling into the ducal palace. Eleonora channeled her involvement in S. Maria Vergine indirectly through her courtiers, most notably Francesco d’Astudiglio, a Spanish priest and doctor who was one of the founders of the Compagnia and Casa of S. Maria Vergine. Don Francesco was a generous donor in his own right and on behalf of the duchess, and one of the witnesses to her will.64

The Casa di S. Maria Vergine was not for the poor. Its sponsors anticipated gathering only about eighteen girls at a time, but in its first four years eighty-eight girls called it home for some period of time. The girls no doubt benefited from living across the street from the new ducal palace, but space was tight all the same, and in 1557 they transferred to larger quarters in the old S. Marco monastery just outside the S. Gallo gate. This put them much closer to the Ospedale degli Abbandonati, but living outside the city walls on the opposite side of town put a serious dent in the girls’ abilities to go around shops, markets, homes, and churches gathering alms. Eight months later they returned to the cramped rooms, but generous neighbors around the Bini Ospedale began looking for another option. It came soon enough in the form of the convent of the Ceppo, located along the Arno just east of the church of S. Croce. The girls moved there
in 1564, and over time their conservatory came to be known colloquially as the Ceppo.

The Compagnia di S. Maria Vergine focused its efforts on keeping its own house in order, but as Rosalia Manno Tolu has demonstrated, some of its members were involved in establishing and running the two other conservatories opened in Florence in the 1550s and, for that matter, in every other home established later in the century.⁶⁵ Lacking the Bigallo’s formal mandate in care for poor children (and with no apparent links to that magistracy), its thirty members (forty from 1584) nonetheless helped secure a dramatic increase in the number of spaces for vulnerable girls in a set of institutions that were distinguished, as in Bologna, by size and class. And as in Bologna, this confraternity achieved a discrete behind-the-scenes coordination and creative cross-fertilization of administrators, clerics, and confratelli between institutions that gave Florence a more synchronized network of care than may appear to be the case at first sight. Some members, like Carlo di Francesco Portinari, brought the benefit of their experience with other Florentine ospedali, while others, like the priest Antonio Cattani da Milano, actually served in a number of the conservatories at different times.

The largest of the new Florentine conservatories was the Casa della Pietà, opened in late 1554 or early 1555 as the work of a group of pious women headed by Margherita di Carlo Borromei and Marietta Gondi and assisted by Antonio Cattani da Milano. Don Antonio Cattani was both a member of the Compagnia di S. Maria Vergine and the first chaplain and confessor of the girls in its Casa. He later became the Pietà’s first chaplain and confessor and, by some accounts, had earlier helped Lionora Ginori run her conservatory.⁶⁶ The Bigallo magistrates may have lent the benefit of their experience if not of their resources; Borromei, Gondi, and Don Antonio rented the Ospedale di S. Maria dell’Umiltà in Borgo Ognissanti from the Bigallo, and soon complained to Cosimo I about the high rents they had to pay for what was really just a couple of houses.⁶⁷ The founders followed the example of the Compagnia di S. Maria Vergine and made up for the lack of an endowment by securing numerous gifts and annual pledges in advance from supporters drawn from all classes of Florentine society. Necessity drove this form of funding, but it was also a canny way of keeping Medici hands out of the home’s purse, a problem that was becoming ever more acute for Florentine charities like the Innocenti and the Monte di Pietà as the ducal family dipped into their endowments and income in order to fund everything from paintings to dowries to the war against Siena.⁶⁸
Male professionals, gentlemen, clerics, and guild masters had paid for the few and relatively exclusive beds of S. Maria Vergine, but it was a gathering number of women—widows, married and unmarried women of better families, and even female domestics—who pledged to maintain the large number of beds in the Pietà. From September 1554 Borromei and Gondi went around Florence collecting pledges from all they knew. They intensified their efforts by the end of December and formally opened the Pietà a couple of days before Christmas, perhaps in an effort to stir up a greater sense of urgency, since the first girls weren’t registered in the home until a month later. It worked. Almost every day thereafter, two or three or five more women enrolled in the Compagnia della Pietà, until there were 149 members ready to support the conservatory when the first girls are recorded as coming in at the end of January. Recruitment never let up: a year later the number of sponsors had risen to 270, and by the end of 1558, 320 supporters—almost entirely women—were giving donations to keep the conservatory going. These were not wealthy women. While S. Maria Vergine’s patrons reckoned their pledges in bushels of grain, barrels of wine, and healthy sums of lire, most Pietà pledges were less than a scudo or a florin. Only eighteen of the first year’s 270 donors gave more than a scudo, and the frequency of standard amounts like lire 1.5 or 2.10 suggests that Borromei, Gondi, and other fundraisers proposed small set amounts that were within the means of large numbers of Florentine women. They approached women of every rank: one of Gondi’s servants, Lucrezia da Signa, pledged lire 3.10 annually, and consistently gave about twice that amount. This support was critical. While the Pietà girls would soon enough have to earn their keep through textile piecework, donations put food on the table in the critical first year. The Pietà governors spent over 4,800 lire—almost 80 percent of total expenses—through 1555 for bread, wine, and oil, and it was alms and pledges that paid these bakers and merchants.

As we will see in chapter 5, many Savonarolan families supported the Pietà, and the women’s way of running the home had all the hallmarks of the Savonarolan approach to charity, though Rosalia Monno Tolu argues that they put their anti-Medici politics aside in order to meet the acute needs of the moment. Did they feel betrayed or disappointed by the small size and selective procedures of the Medici-supported Casa di S. Maria Vergine, or by their exclusion from its confraternity and administration? Certainly the Pietà was notable among all of Florence’s conservatories for having the most open administration and admission procedures; in this it was comparable to Bologna’s S. Giuseppe, which was also the work of a group of women. Unlike S. Giuseppe, however, the Pietà
opened its doors in the midst of a plague that swept in and took some girls almost as soon as they arrived.

Scribes began entering the girls’ names in the Pietà’s Libro Segreto on 25 January 1555. Fifty-two names are entered for that day. While some of these may actually have entered a few days or weeks earlier, the atmosphere was one of desperate chaos nonetheless. The old pilgrims’ hostel rented from the Bigallo had about eighteen beds, and even if a few more could be fit into rooms and corridors, the girls were sleeping three or more to a bed.72 This was a common enough practice, but some of those crowding in were already clearly very sick, and in such close quarters illness spread rapidly. Five died within a month, and another seven a month later; one 10-year-old girl was turned around and sent on to S. Maria Nuova, where she died almost immediately. Of the 147 girls enrolled through December 1555, twenty-nine died before year’s end, with those under 12 being particularly vulnerable. It never let up; seventy-four of that first year’s wards had died by the end of 1559, more than left the home through marriage, a return to family, or flight.73

Adding to the confusion, Margherita Borromei died on the eve of the Pietà’s opening. Marietta Gondi quickly stepped in as the mother prioress, and ended up overseeing admissions, directing administration, and recruiting patrons for the next twenty-five years. She worked together with a resident prioress, and with Andrea di Benedetto Biliotti, 66 years old and a member of the Compagnia di S. Maria Vergine, who kept the accounts for alms and piecework and oversaw expenses. In August they hired a widow, Mona Betta, to teach the girls weaving. Betta came to live in the Pietà with her 7-year-old daughter, but the arrangement collapsed six months later when Betta fell ill and had to leave. A group of priests came in to teach Christian Doctrine, but these soon gave way to a confraternity (whose members also collected alms for the home), and eventually to the Carmelite sisters of S. Maria Angeli, who were also in the Savonarolan camp. Don Antonio Cattani had become the Carmelite’s resident confessor by August 1555, and by 1557, the Pietà girls were regularly crossing the Arno to get to the Carmelite convent in Borgo S. Frediano on the other side, where they learned the Office and singing (canto ecclesiastico). When Don Antonio died, the Carmelites turned to Fra Alessandro Capocchi, a Dominican friar of S. Maria Novella who was one of the key figures keeping the memory and legacy of Savonarola alive through those years. Before long Capocchi was also visiting the conservatory’s quarters in Borgo Ogni Santi and seeing for himself how cramped these were.74 Ambitious, active, and well-connected, Capocchi worked to change
the home’s focus and organization before the women of the Compagnia della Pietà soured on him and fired him.\textsuperscript{75}

The third home that Florentines established in the 1550s was S. Niccolò, which opened in 1556 after Cosimo I urged the magistracy of the Otto di Guardia e Balìa to offer some shelter to those girls who, without parents and guardians, were being assaulted in Florence’s streets, shops, and stalls. The Otto prosecuted criminal cases, and had taken over investigating and trying sexual assault against women and children in 1542. It punished rapes on a sliding scale linked to the victim’s class: violating a virgin, married woman, or honorable widow merited a 500 lire fine, a servant girl 25 lire, and a prostitute nothing.\textsuperscript{76} The new home sheltered mainly girls from families new to Florence, and eventually even took in a few daughters of prostitutes. The Otto appointed Francesco Rosati, a commissioner of the Stinche prison, to implement Cosimo’s charge. At the Stinche, Rosati made sure that prisoners had mattresses, meals, and spiritual counselors. More significantly for this assignment, he was also a founding member of the Compagnia di S. Maria Vergine.\textsuperscript{77} He located a shelter for the girls in Borgo S. Niccolò in the Oltrarno, perhaps at least temporarily in the home that his confratello, Francesco di Mattio Ughetti, had given to S. Maria Vergine a few years before. Rosati soon found the girls a more permanent location in the former Ospedale di S. Lorenzo by the S. Niccolò gate. About eighty girls sheltered in the home at any one time. Many came from towns outside of Florence, and some stayed only temporarily before being sent out on domestic service contracts to homes and shops in the city. S. Niccolò had resident staff, but the Otto di Guardia had apparently not found colleagues who could help Rosati in overseeing accounts, entrances, exits, jobs, and other work necessary to provide for the girls. He clearly found it onerous, appealing at least twice to Cosimo to give him some assistance since he was old, infirm, and couldn’t carry on by himself. In 1564, the duke finally consented and ordered the Compagnia di S. Maria Vergine to take S. Niccolò under its wing. The confraternity complied by annually electing five of its members to a subcommittee overseeing S. Niccolò, but otherwise kept the two conservatories separate until 1620, when it moved S. Niccolò’s girls across the river into its own quarters in the Ceppo.\textsuperscript{78}

By the end of the 1550s, Florence had a network of homes that hadn’t existed two decades before to shelter its orphaned and abandoned children. About a hundred boys lived in the Ospedale degli Abbandonati under the care of the magistracy of the Bigallo, whose members were appointed by Cosimo I and whose actions were referred to, if not always closely scrutinized by, the duke.
Possibly twenty girls drawn from worthy families lived in the Casa di S. Maria Vergine, a further eighty of somewhat lower rank in the S. Niccolò, and possibly 160 of yet lower status in the Conservatorio della Pietà. The network to some extent augmented the work of the Ospedale degli Innocenti, but with possibly a thousand residents, that overcrowded foundling home far overshadowed these more selective shelters. While S. Maria Vergine and the Pietà had their own governing confraternities, and S. Niccolò’s administration was apparently left in the hands of a few overworked individuals, all three homes shared a connection to the Compagnia di S. Maria Vergine and, through it, to the duchess Eleonora of Toledo. Articulated in distinct institutions that preserved differences of social rank, relying on semiautonomous confraternities for fundraising and administration, linked indirectly to the ruling family, and operating on a makeshift basis in the absence of any clearly stated overarching policy, the Florentine network at mid-century had all the hallmarks of the early modern social welfare bureaucracy.

This network survived unchanged through the following three decades, in spite of recurring famines. The Bigallo magistrates periodically asked the Medici dukes for expansions of their powers to include greater control over conservatories and over the poor generally, and held up Bologna’s Opera dei Mendicanti as a model, getting a handwritten draft of the latter’s first statute revisions in 1573, and going so far in one instance as to print up an example of the kind of beggar’s permit that they had in mind. Cosimo and his sons stonewalled, and changes on the scale of those found in Bologna did not come until 1619–20 and the opening of Florence’s Ospedale dei Mendicanti. The lack of a beggars’ workhouse to absorb vulnerable girls of lower status put particular strains on the Pietà conservatory.

As in Bologna, the next two additions to the network came through the initiative of an individual activist Catholic in the 1580s and government responses to the famine of 1590–91. In 1558, Vittorio dell’Ancisa, son of a minor civic official, joined the youth confraternity of the Archangel Raphael, where he came under the influence of its Savonarolan padre spirituale Fra Santi di Cino Cini of S. Marco. After a decade of worshipping with and filling various elected posts in the confraternity, he joined Fra Cini’s Congregazione di Carità, a group dedicated to charity and prayer in the traditions of Archbishop Antoninus and Savonarola. A year later, dell’Ancisa took minor orders. A priest by 1571, he served as confessor of the girls of the Casa di S. Maria Vergine from 1573 to 75.
before heading off to Rome to work with Philip Neri. Dell’Ancisa returned to Florence in 1584 after the death of his brother, and used his inheritance to establish an Ospedale della Carità that would take some poor men and women off the streets. The shelter opened in 1588, when Grand Duke Ferdinand I granted dell’Ancisa the former Ospedale del Porcellana in Via della Scala west of Piazza S. Maria Novella. Following Fra Cini’s example, dell’Ancisa drew friends and followers into a Congregazione della Carità to help in running—and paying for—the paupers’ hostel. As famine worsened through the coming year, some members of the Buonomini di S. Martino, the equivalent in Florence of Bologna’s Opera dei Poveri Vergognosi, approached dell’Ancisa with a request to help an 18-year-old girl from a worthy family whom they feared would turn to prostitution if she wasn’t taken into a secure shelter. He cooperated, and the Buonomini returned the next day with three more girls.

The paupers’ hostel was at a turning point, and not all those involved in it wanted to make the turn. For a few years it continued to shelter paupers, but these were increasingly out of place. The girls brought by the Buonomini di S. Martino were from the ranks of the “shamefaced poor,” with a few having high-born and even noble connections although some were illegitimate. Over the years following, the Buonomini gave monthly subsidies of flour, Grand Duke Ferdinand and Duchess Cristina gave alms periodically, and other high-born families offered dowries or paid monthly fees to keep particular girls in place. The Ospedale della Carità was coming to be seen as an appropriate place where well-born families could lodge their orphaned adolescent nieces and cousins before marriages or convents could be arranged for them. These were the girls who had traditionally found shelter in convents in the past, under the arrangement known as serbanza. The resident female wardens who had cared for the paupers were soon deemed not fit to take care of these better girls and, after some disagreements, were replaced by a widow and some of her female relations. The poor men who still had to come to get meals at the ospedale were also deemed to be inappropriate visitors, and were moved out in 1595, as was the male Congregazione della Carità that had fed them. A female Congregation was to assume its duties, but it is not clear whether or how long this group functioned. As we will see in chapter 5, the women resisted dell’Ancisa’s directions in anything but purely spiritual matters, and seem to have had different ideas for the shelter. The situation became tense, but it was a battle the women could not win. The modern historian of the home discretely notes that the controversies
became so violent in this period that dell’Ancisa had to take shelter in a convent for a few days to avoid being beaten up, and Archbishop Alessandro de’Medici had to intervene directly to bring contrary voices into line.\textsuperscript{83}

As with Bologna’s S. Croce conservatory, the intense controversy over control and direction of the home may have made it impossible to put formal statutes in place. Dell’Ancisa made some moves to write them, but all that remained on his desk when he died in 1598 were a few rough notes. They confirm that he wanted the conservatory to be for well-born and well-educated girls. While some well-born men and women would oversee it, final control would lay with dell’Ancisa who, for all his qualities, was not quite so well-born. Was dell’Ancisa trying to promote these changes or, like Bonifacio dalle Balle in Bologna, was he trying to prevent other more powerful individuals from completely hijacking the Casa della Carità? It is hard to tell. The Carità had clearly become his life’s work and, like dalle Balle, dell’Ancisa penned numerous sermons and spiritual texts for the girls. His own passing made a moot point out of the question of control, and turned his fragmentary statutes into something of a dead letter. The aims of groups now involved gave the home a direction and momentum that would be hard to alter. As we will see, dell’Ancisa’s successors steered the Ospedale della Carità through a series of changes until by 1627 it was a convent under the archbishop’s authority.\textsuperscript{84}

The first moves to turn the Ospedale della Carità from a paupers’ hostel into a conservatory had been forced by the dearth of the late 1580s. As shortages deepened into the famine of 1590–91, Florence’s sixth conservatory, S. Caterina, opened as one part of a desperate effort to head off disaster. Grand Duke Ferdinand followed many other Italian rulers in scouting out grain supplies across Europe, subsidizing large imports from the Baltic, and distributing these through the magistracy of the Abbondanza to communities around Tuscany. Prices were still so high that these communities had to borrow from the pawn bank of the Monte di Pietà in order to buy the grain. Starving poor flocked to the capital to beg, borrow, or steal a meal. Ferdinand bowed to pressure and allowed Florence to expel most “foreign” beggars—even though most were also his subjects. Once outside the city gates, they didn’t have far to go. Those fit for it were put to work building the Belvedere Fortress that crowned the hill above the ducal palace, and others were sheltered in a couple of old ospedali in Florence’s suburbs. Males went to the old monastery of S. Marcho Vecchio outside the Porta S. Gallo, the kind of catch-all institutional building outside many cities’ walls (Bologna’s S. Gregorio was a similar place) that officials resorted to
in times of need. The girls of the Casa di S. Maria Vergine had sheltered at S. Marco briefly in 1557, and it had more recently been used as a quarantine house where goods suspected of being infused with pestilential vapors could be aired out and fumigated before being brought into the city. Women and children were put in the Ospedale di S. Onofrio, run by the Company of Dyers, immediately west of the Fortezza del Basso. Sheltered at night, these poor women and children roamed around by day scraping together what they could for survival by begging, petty theft, and prostitution.

This was Florence’s first experiment with a beggars’ hostel, but characteristically Grand Duke Ferdinand refused to entrust the work to the magistracy of the Bigallo, which had been clamoring for the responsibility for almost fifty years and which had sent him a long memo on the matter in May 1588. Instead, he entrusted both shelters to a gentleman, Giovanni Battista Botti, whose brother Matteo was a familiar figure in a series of important state magistracies. Botti soon recognized that a shelter in the shadow of a barracks was no place to protect beggar girls from prostitution. Sharing his concerns with Archbishop Alessandro de’ Medici, he enlisted the help of two other well-connected gentlemen who were members of powerful and wealthy military-religious orders. Girolamo di Antonino Michelozzi was a cavalier of the Order of S. Stefano, established by Cosimo I in 1562, and friar Giulio Zanchini was a member of the Knights of Malta. Michelozzi provided, among other things, the critical personal connection to the Compagnia di S. Maria Vergine. The trio initially thought only of following Grand Duke Ferdinand’s cautious mandate and sheltering the girls until the worst of the famine had passed; three years ought to be sufficient, they thought. They rented three houses at Porta alla Croce at the eastern city wall by the current Piazza Beccaria and, on the inspiration of an image found on the walls there, gave it the name S. Caterina. This account of the origin of the name, given in its first statutes, seems more pious trope (i.e., the saint finding her followers rather than vice versa) than reality. Daniella Lombardi notes that the cult of S. Catherine framed particularly as the patron saint of adolescent girls expanded in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when the pressures and family strategies related to dowry and marriage were forcing many girls into convents and conservatories, many of which took on the saint’s name in a sad and ironic twist. On St. Bartholomew’s Day (24 August) 1591, Botti, Michelozzi, and Zanchini staged a procession of girls from the S. Onofrio ospedale east through the city to this new home, which workmen were already busy transforming into a secure conservatory. Bars were fitted into the windows and new locks into the doors,
some walls were rebuilt, a mattress maker delivered bedding, and firewood was
brought in to prepare for the winter. And food. Aware that the already inflated
bread prices would only rise through winter and spring, the trio immediately
began stockpiling large quantities of grain. It was a costly business, and Botti
himself gave 600 florins necessary to cover the first two months’ expenses, the
bulk of it going into grain purchases.\textsuperscript{88}

Botti and his colleagues drew others into the work as soon as possible. The
Dominican friars of S. Marco provided a priest to hear confessions and say Mass
as they did for the girls of the Pietà. A widow, Alexandra Dragonari, came to live
in the home as the prioress. Two businessmen joined as \textit{provveditori} to handle
purchases and accounts, and report to the trio’s weekly Thursday meetings. A
year later, Botti followed his convictions into the Theatine Order, but he con-
tinued to be active on S. Caterina’s behalf, most notably a few years later when
he approached Grand Duke Ferdinand appealing for new quarters. The homes
at Porta alla Croce were fine when scouted out and renovated in the summer and
fall of 1591, but had proven damp and unhealthy for the girls in the winters that
followed. The grand duke offered the conservatory use of the Ospedale Broc-
cardi in Via S. Gallo north of the city center, home until then of the abandoned
boys under the Bigallo’s care, and big enough to take in S. Caterina’s eighty \textit{abban-
donate}. About 180 boys had lived there in conditions so cramped and difficult,
that when the plague and famine hit in 1591, many of them—reputedly half—
had died in a mere six months. The surviving boys moved a few blocks west
to a former convent, also called S. Caterina, bought by the Bigallo captains.\textsuperscript{89}

S. Caterina’s girls reversed their procession of a few years before and moved into
a neighborhood that was already well known for its enclosed women: seven con-
vents lined Via S. Gallo, others dotted the sidestreets, and the Pietà conserva-
tory was just a few blocks away.\textsuperscript{90}

Their move was the clearest sign that the original calculation of a three-year
temporary shelter had been set aside by the trio and the grand duke alike. But
what was the S. Caterina conservatory to become? It was much like the Conserva-
torio della Pietà, roughly the same size and sheltering girls who were far be-
low the status of those enrolled in the S. Maria Vergine and Carità conserva-
tories and even below those of S. Niccolò in the Oltrarno. Both were places of
last resort, where girls who had little chance of marriage or convent, and who
couldn’t seem to last long even on domestic service contracts, went to live out
their lives working at various kinds of textile piecework. S. Caterina had few
sponsors to underwrite its monthly food bill and few funds to help its girls estab-
lish themselves in society. Girolamo Michelozzi had left a small legacy to fund an annual dowry when he died in 1594, but it generated only 100 lire annually, barely enough to help even one of the eighty *abbandonate* find a future in marriage or the convent. Even the foundling home of the Innocenti offered its wards dowries of 300 lire by this point.  

Finally, in 1615 the confraternity-magistracy of the Bigallo won its long argument with the dukes and gained permission to build the Convento per le Povere Fanciulle Derelitte to house forty girls, complementing its Ospedale degli Abbandonati. As if to underscore the point, it built the new conservatory adjacent to the orphanage. It drew on the Pietà for models and practical help, recruiting as its resident prioresses two women who had entered the Pietà conservatory as children and had lived there for decades. Thus the Bigallo gained by the end of our period the clear responsibility for abandoned children of both sexes that it had sought from the beginning—even though this did not extend to authority over Florence’s other conservatories. The Bigallo magistrates seem to have assumed that it was only a matter of time, and their confidence, or at least their lobbying, went beyond letters to the grand dukes and incorporated even the artwork they commissioned for their offices on Piazza S. Giovanni.

Around 1570, Carlo Portelli produced two paintings for the Bigallo. The smaller one, a pendant (Figure 1.1), shows Charity in the guise of a young woman embracing one infant while nursing another at her breast, as a third at her feet contemplates an urn; all these infants are males. From the shadows at her back, a young boy in the Ospedale degli Abbandonati’s rough brown uniform and cloth hat looks out; his eyes and those of the nursing infant are the only ones that engage the viewer. Portelli’s larger painting of *Madonna in Heaven with Angels Adored by Two Children* (Figure 1.2) depicts Mary in the center of the canvas with two children kneeling in prayer at her feet. A barefoot boy dressed in the same brown uniform turns his back to the viewer in order to face the Virgin. Yet Mary’s gaze is not directed to him, but turns to fix on a girl at her left, dressed in an equivalent uniform and with a white head covering and a Rosary. No Florentine girls wore that uniform in 1570. The girl’s eyes turn to the distant heavens in the conventional attitude of prayer, but her folded hands may well be directed to the grand duke, a plea that those like her may come under the protective care of the Bigallo magistrates. Mary’s appreciative gaze validates this secular prayer, but the sons of Cosimo and Eleonora were no more likely to put girls under the Bigallo’s care than their parents had been. Francesco I quite explicitly ruled this out a few years after the painting was completed. It took
the next generation to accept that shift, by which point broader circumstances made it more trouble than the Bigallo magistrates had anticipated. Poor harvests from 1617 to 1621, typhoid outbreaks in 1619–20 and again in 1630, together with the onset of a serious depression in the textile industry meant that the Bigallo’s Fanciulle Derelitte conservatory was overwhelmed almost from the
Figure 1.2. Carlo Portelli, *Madonna in Heaven with Angels Adored by Two Children*, ca. 1570 (Museo del Bigallo, Florence)
time it opened. As Lombardi notes, even though it had promoted silk spinning, the Fanciulle Derelitte's financial difficulties forced it to restrict and sometimes suspend admissions.\textsuperscript{96}

Over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, both Bologna and Florence devised ambitious networks of institutional care for orphaned and abandoned girls and boys. Florence had opened a specialized foundling home in 1445, and Bologna had followed suit five decades later. Now Bologna began with specialized orphanages and conservatories in the 1510s and 1520s, and Florence followed its example in the 1540s. In both cases, they were pioneering with specialized shelters that would soon be imitated across Italy and Europe. By the end of the 1610s, both cities could care for approximately 1,800 to 2,000 children in a series of shelters ranging from foundling homes and workhouses to more selective orphanages and conservatories. Gender and class shaped the size and quality of care in each particular home, while local charitable traditions and significant political changes shaped the home-by-home articulation of city's evolving network and helped determine just how selective the orphanages and conservatories could be. Each city's network grew out of some combination of private charitable initiative, government fiat, and clerical encouragement, and each came in time to be coordinated—sometimes loosely—by confraternities and government bodies working together.

But this was background. In the foreground, recurring crises of plague and famine were the catalysts that had brought new homes into being and disrupted the careful arrangements in existing ones. Three bouts had been particularly critical, triggering three stages in the development of each city's network of orphanages. The first for Bologna was that of the mid-1520s into the early 1530s, while for Florence it was the early 1540s. Both shared in the devastation of the 1550s and that of the late 1580s and early 1590s. In the first stage, each city framed a provisional network with complementary homes for boys and for girls. Each expanded and refined this network with new homes, administrative consolidations, and the prospect of more comprehensive systems of poor relief in the second stage. Each made minor expansions (but no fundamental reforms) in the third.

By the end of the 1610s, these networks had combinations of large and small institutions serving different social groups. As Figures 1.3 and 1.4 show, they were distributed across the two cities. Bologna's network centered on the companion institutions of S. Maria del Baraccano and S. Bartolomeo di Reno, each
serving roughly 75 to 100 children from solid artisanal families, with S. Giacomo (30–40) and S. Onofrio (15–25) serving boys of somewhat higher status, and S. Marta (30–40) and S. Giuseppe (15–25) serving girls of higher status. S. Croce (30–40) was for girls of lower status. At this system’s base were the 2 institutions that, while not orphanages or conservatories, absorbed enough poor children to allow the others to be so selective: the Ospedale dei Mendicanti, with 1,000 and sometimes up to 1,500 very poor and infirm, and the foundling home of the Esposti, with perhaps 400 children of all ages. Florence’s network similarly centered on 2 companion institutions serving artisanal families, though these were themselves unions of 2 distinct homes. The Ceppo, which combined S. Maria Vergine and S. Niccolò, gathered about 75 girls, while the Bigallo’s Ospedale degli Abbandonati sheltered 100 to 150 boys and its Ospedale delle Fanciulle Derelitte housed 40 girls. The Ospedale della Carità served Florentine girls of a higher status, while the Pietà and S. Caterina (150 each) assisted those at the bottom of the social scale; these latter institutions gathered the poorer and more
infim children who otherwise would have gone to an Ospedale dei Mendicanti. At the base of Florence’s network was the institution whose larger size and reputation overshadowed the rest: the Ospedale degli Innocenti where, if we extrapolate from a 1579 report, many were no longer even children. Of 1,220 staff and children resident that year, 968 were females; 733 of these were of marriageable age, and 223 were over age 40.\textsuperscript{97}

For all its informality, each city’s network assumed a local charitable culture that all individual homes had to fit into. This culture was defined less by any formal policy than by the conversations and connections, and the convictions and ambitions of those who populated the network as administrators, confessors, and donors. Both Bonifacio dale Balle in Bologna and Vittorio dell’Ancisa in Florence found out how difficult it was to maintain a home that was distinct from the local type. Each struggled to run a home that reflected a distinct and individual vision, and in neither case did that vision last long beyond the founder’s death. The women behind Florence’s Pietà and Bologna’s S. Giuseppe found much the same thing when men moved in and subtly reshaped the institutions that they had founded into something more conventional. While in Bologna this culture moved from a quasi-conventual model into something that was more distinctly lay, in Florence it seems to have gone the other way, with homes like the Pietà, the Carità, and eventually even S. Caterina all becoming convents in time.

On a certain level this was all abstraction. We have seen what it was like for administrators and politicians to open a home. What was it like for a child to enter one?