Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance

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Abandoned Children of the Italian Renaissance: Orphan Care in Florence and Bologna.
The Politics of Renaissance Orphanages

In the first half of the sixteenth century, Florence and Bologna both faced the challenge of sheltering increased numbers of orphaned and abandoned children. They decided to move beyond traditional *ospedale* shelters and ad hoc fostering arrangements, and experiment instead with institutional homes that would be dedicated solely to caring for these children. The scale and coordination of these experiments were unprecedented, and mark a historic step in the evolution of state-sponsored social welfare in Europe. Both cities developed networks of homes that were loosely connected to each other and that between themselves were able to shelter between three hundred and five hundred children by the end of the century. Other cities had shelters, but none could boast this kind of coordinated network. The charitable networks represented a radical shift in social policy based on the conviction that the whole community was responsible for taking care of the hundreds of children who were orphaned or abandoned through plague, famine, legal restrictions, or negligence.

More to the point, this responsibility was not simply one facet of the community’s care for the poor generally. It was to be exercised deliberately, on a large scale, with policy and coordination, and with the government itself involved.
either directly or indirectly as the prime mover. This was also unprecedented, and a radical transfer of responsibilities that had once been assumed by the Church or private groups like guilds. Yet these were not purely secular bureaucracies. Both urban governments worked together with lay charitable religious agencies like hospitals and confraternities in order to realize the new social goal, and much of their motivation came from movements of religious reform that emphasized the Christian duty to exercise charity to the poor and dispossessed. The resulting hybrid of lay religious groups and institutions working together with governments became the pattern for the evolution of welfare bureaucracies across Europe through the course of the ancien régime. Finally, the networks of orphanages and conservatories also represented a significant shift in European perceptions about children, and adolescents in particular. The homes demonstrated a broad recognition that adolescence was a particularly vulnerable but also a particularly promising phase of life, and their rapid multiplication across Europe shows how many people were willing to translate this conviction into political and social action.

The networks in Florence and Bologna evolved over decades, with new homes generated by plague or famine, until each city had more than seven. Florentine homes tended to be larger and more institutional, while the Bolognese were generally smaller, though not so small as to fully bear out the pious fiction that they were families in themselves. And there were other nodes in each city’s network. Both cities had a single large foundling home that sheltered hundreds of infants, children, and youths, most of them illegitimate and most abandoned anonymously. This was in sharp contrast to the orphanages and conservatories, which were more selective, where most of the children were legitimate, and where girls and boys were in separate buildings, not just in separate wards. Yet the greatest difference in the operation of the two urban networks lay outside of these homes altogether: Bologna opened a paupers’ shelter in 1563, and it was this shelter outside the city that allowed the Bolognese homes to be so much smaller, more selective, and arguably more successful. The truly desperate cases were sent to the Ospedale dei Mendicanti beyond the city walls, allowing the shelters within the city to offer a higher standard of care to a better class of child. Until its own Ospedale dei Mendicanti opened in 1620, Florence’s indigent and sick children were channeled into homes like the Pietà and S. Caterina, where populations shot up and where mortality rates quickly followed. Once Florence opened a paupers’ shelter, it rapidly adjusted the rest of its network further. Both
the Pietà and S. Caterina conservatories became convents, and the government opened a new institution for girls (the Ospedale delle Abbandonate) to run parallel to the long-standing Ospedale degli Abbandonati for boys, and under the care of the same state magistracy. Florence was following a certain bureaucratic logic here: one foundling home, one large orphanage for girls and one for boys, and one large paupers’ workhouse. Bologna followed this logic on its upper and lower tiers, but preferred many smaller homes for adolescents in between. This may have recognized adolescence as a state requiring more personal attention. It certainly recognized that social rank had to be accommodated institutionally.

The homes for boys—one in Florence and eventually three in Bologna—operated similarly in both cities. They worked actively to educate the boys, to train them in a craft, and to return them to society. Some of the boys’ work generated income for the homes themselves, but the emphasis was still on getting them out the door. Most did get out by late adolescence.

The ways girls were treated in Florence as compared to Bologna throws into sharper relief some otherwise hidden differences between the two cities’ charitable cultures and between their political systems and social environment.

Bologna’s conservatories worked deliberately and directly to ensure the passage of their wards out of the homes and into marriages. To this end, they recruited private dowries, offered institutional dowries (funded in part out of girls’ own piecework), and arranged marriages directly using this combination of dotal funds. Conservatories were part of an active demographic strategy that was aimed at expanding the local population, and girls passed steadily through them on their way back to family life. In its first conservatory of S. Marta, Bologna experimented briefly with the idea of a lay convent, but it rejected this in favor of an aggressive marriage strategy. Florence’s conservatories worked far more indirectly, and far less successfully, at getting their girls into marriages, to the point where one could legitimately question whether the demographic strategy at work was aimed at limiting rather than expanding the population. Few marriages were arranged, and few dowries were offered. Most marriage negotiations were devolved to families or employers. We can assume that families took this seriously, but the records we have suggest that many employers barely had a chance to get to know their girls, let alone marry them off, before the girls quit, fled, or were dismissed and returned to the conservatory. Those girls who did not marry or leave to sweep floors in a shop or home remained working, sleeping, and eating in the conservatory until they died. And many died.

Bolognese homes worked actively to pass their girls back into society, and this
mirrored the active and highly selective way in which they admitted girls. Likewise, the passivity with which Florentine homes approached their girls’ fates was a mirror of the passivity with which they opened the doors and let girls in. Part of what lay behind this was the presence or absence of people to do the work. Bologna’s homes, some of them sheltering only a few dozen children, had a multitude of volunteer administrators working alongside hired staff, even through those periods when they complained of too few hands or too little money. Florentine homes, in spite of having larger numbers of children to shelter, had but a handful of administrators. This difference grew out of local charitable traditions, and particularly the nature of the confraternities that organized and ran the homes. Bologna’s network framed the work of caring for orphaned and abandoned children as a charitable activity that was undertaken by large numbers of confraternity members whose brotherhoods were organized on a collegiate system to better balance spiritual and charitable concerns. This fostered more immediate personal links between children and the adults who had volunteered to care for them, sometimes out of religious conviction, sometimes out of political opportunity, and most often out of an indistinguishable mix of the two. Florence’s system of purely managerial confraternities with a limited spiritual life turned care of these same children into a problem of welfare administration that was undertaken on government commission; there were few personal links between the children and the adults who oversaw their care. The exceptions were those homes run by women, and their quick suppression proves the rule.

Florence’s system of congregational confraternities was just one part of its charitable tradition. The other was its closer ties to the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and the willingness of many Florentines to let clerics take the lead in charity. Priests and friars were among the prime movers in the Compagnia di S. Maria Vergine that figured in the operation of all its conservatories. They were directly involved in the start and operation of a number of homes, from the Carità home that arose out of the vision, resources, and connections of the priest Vittorio dell’Ancisa, to the magistracy of the Bigallo whose president was always a bishop. No Bolognese home had this level of clerical involvement, with the possible exception of S. Giuseppe. Bologna’s traditionally more testy relations with the papacy had fostered a civic religion that was far more firmly in lay hands. Nowhere was this more clearly seen than in its charitable institutions, all of which were controlled by lay confraternities that aggressively countered clerical efforts to exercise influence.

These brotherhoods supervised some of the major shrines of the local cult,
and incorporated their wards into the processions that were a regular part of its public ritual. Florence had a healthy civic religious life, but it had always shaped that life in a closer alliance with regular and secular clergy. The Savonarolan vision of Florence as a holy and charitable republic led by friars and laity together was but one key instance of this long tradition, but the fact that it resonated so broadly and so long testifies to the tradition’s enduring popularity. Moreover, a good part of Florentine banking wealth, artistic patrimony, and political importance had been generated out of alliances between its leading families and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. These are critical factors for explaining both the passive acceptance in Florentine conservatories of a culture of enclosure that simply took girls in and housed them as though they were nuns until they died, and also the uncontroversial metamorphosis of three conservatories into convents. Either development would be unthinkable in Bologna.

Bolognese religious and charitable traditions emphasized the role of confraternity brothers and sisters as surrogate parents to needy citizen girls and boys. With girls, the preference for marriage over convent was not an abstract statement of policy: confraternity members found spouses, subsidized dowries, negotiated terms, attended and even paid for weddings, and accompanied their “daughters” to the homes where they would become wives and mothers. They pushed the girl’s blood relatives to the side in these ceremonies even when their own kin relationship was both symbolic and collective. Depending on the terms of office, one prior or prioress might oversee the dowry-signing ceremony, another the exchange of vows, and yet another the disbursement of dowry funds. Girls who had been expelled or restored to the care of brothers, aunts, or grandparents could still return to claim a dowry and be married as other Baraccano girls were, with confraternity officers in attendance. Surrogate kinship that was at once so determined and yet potentially so detached underlines powerfully the extent to which Bologna’s governing class saw its institutional charitable work as an exercise of parental authority over the city’s poor. It closely guarded this authority against the papal governors, the religious orders, and a series of ambitious Tridentine bishops. Extending—and limiting—charity to citizens was fundamental to the republican ethos, and broad-based paternalistic control was fundamental to republican political practice.

Florentine conservatory and orphanage statute books employed some of the same paternalistic rhetoric, but in a grand duchy it was inevitably the grand dukes who were the real political fathers. They threw the doors open to needy children from across the duchy to highlight this symbolic and charitable kin-
ship. The strategy was more generous than Bologna’s tight focus on helping only local citizen children, but with more needy children and fewer adult volunteers in Florentine homes, it further watered down the possibility of any personal links between them. There was no room politically or culturally for Florence’s home administrators to become active surrogate parents on the scale of their Bolognese counterparts. The women of the Pietà played the role for a generation, and quite deliberately adopted the rhetoric of being mothers to the girls. Yet they could not organize marriages. More critically, they were challenged and eventually outmaneuvered by Florence’s Dominicans, who wrote the home’s chronicle in order to assert just as deliberately that they were the genuine spiritual fathers to the girls, going so far as to insert a scene where the agitated girls cried for the protection of their holy fathers against the meddling of their lay mothers. The language of kinship was not empty rhetoric, but powerful, contested, and an inducement to action. The result, in the most basic terms, was that an orphaned or abandoned Bolognese girl could look on the conservatory as a temporary way station or portal to a new life, and count on her guardians to arrange a marriage for her. Her Florentine counterpart had to resign herself to the fact that the conservatory might become a permanent home unless her own kin, and possibly an employer, found her a way out.

Conservatories and orphanages multiplied rapidly across Italy and Europe in the sixteenth century. Brescia opened a conservatory in 1512 to shelter girls rendered homeless as a result of the Italian wars and particularly the sack of the city in that same year. Perugia’s confraternity of S. Tommaso d’Aquino opened the Pia Casa delle Derelitte in 1539, and its confraternity of S. Girolamo opened the Pia Casa della Carità in 1563, thanks in part to civic authorization. Confratelli in both institutions reviewed applicants and raised alms for dowries. Rome’s confraternity of S. Maria della Visitazione degli Orfani opened a hospice for legitimate girls ages 7 to 10 in 1542, and a year later the Compagnia delle Vergini Miserabili di S. Caterina opened its shelter for the daughters of prostitutes and other endangered girls; additional institutions followed through the next century. Ferrara’s confraternity of S. Agnese opened a conservatory in 1554. Many of these homes targeted particular social groups, and they became ever more specialized through the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as individual donors, confraternities, and civic governments responded to general concerns—chiefly the drive to prevent prostitutes’ daughters from following in their mothers’ footsteps—or particular local challenges. In 1578, Milan opened
the Collegio delle Vergini Spagnole for the young girls fathered by Spanish soldiers, and four years later it followed with a companion institution, the Collegio di S. Giacomo for young boys.²

Similar developments occurred north of the Alps. In Paris, the confraternity of Saint Esprit had founded a hospice in 1363, which later came to shelter and educate orphans, deliberately excluding foundlings and just as deliberately focusing on legitimate local children. From the early sixteenth century it required relatives to swear to the fact that these were children born both locally and legitimately before they would be accepted. Paris’s Hotel-Dieu hospital raised the children who were orphaned when the adults in its care died, and this developed in 1536 into a separate institution that, like Saint Esprit, took only local and legitimate children. In 1545, the Parlement of Paris ordered the long-standing pilgrims’ hostel of the Trinité to turn to sheltering young male orphans. The keystone was Paris’s Aumône générale, also authorized by the Parlement of Paris in 1544, and bringing lay and clerical leaders together to arrange the care and fostering of orphans as part of a general brief to oversee the city’s poor relief.³ London’s Christ’s Hospital opened in 1552 to shelter “fatherless children” and provide the kind of care and education that would let these orphans break the cycle of poverty that had claimed their parents’ lives.⁴ In 1572, the city fathers of Augsburg responded to economic collapse by opening an orphanage for local children abandoned when their parents fled the city; this was the first such home in Germany, and it gathered all legitimate children of both Catholic and Protestant families until 1649, when two confessionally specific homes succeeded it.⁵ Amsterdam opened its first residence for a handful of burgher orphans in 1520, though the Burgerweeshuis remained a fairly small operation until 1578, when the city’s adoption of the Reformation and consequent appropriation of Catholic institutions gave the home’s regents both the capital assembled by their Catholic predecessors and a large convent in which to house their charges. Outrelief for poorer orphans would wait until 1613, and the Aalmoezeniersweeshuis orphanage would not open to shelter this class until 1664.⁶

Did Protestant and Catholic governments care differently for their orphaned and abandoned children? Some have argued that foundling homes (and municipal brothels, for that matter) point to a Catholic willingness to accommodate lesser evils in order to avoid greater ones. Better that an illegitimate infant should be abandoned and baptized rather than aborted or killed, even if the foundling home’s presence might seem to condone and even encourage the generation of more illegitimates.⁷ Yet once we move to the question of caring for older chil-
dren, the dynamics shift and broad confessional differences wane. The cities just listed and many more besides shared many fundamental values regardless of religious confession. Care should be distinguished by gender and also by class. It should be protective and redemptive. The children should be educated, and that education should prepare them to return to society. They should work, and that work should support their own homes while also serving the needs of the local economy. The children admitted to the home should be legitimate or, if they were not, the home should be a means for them to recover social honor that their parents had lost. These were the obligations of parents to their children, and where blood parents had failed, social fathers and mothers must step in for the good of the children and of society itself.

Yet there were still differences that were as much cultural and political as religious. Catholic institutions were frequently started and administered by groups like confraternities that deliberately structured themselves around the model of symbolic kinship and in which many confratelli shared the work of administration—as much to share in the spiritual rewards as to divide up labor. Where confratelli remained active in this way, care was generally better. The language of kinship certainly resonated through homes in Protestant countries, directed there too at the administrators, the staff, and the civic rulers who stood behind the enterprise, but in practice these homes were more often run by the kinds of smaller administrations that we have seen in Florence. If they had more success than Florence did in passing girls back into public life, it was because they did not have to worry about providing dowries and because convents had disappeared from the cultural horizon.

Comparing the Florentine and Bolognese models demonstrates that differences are rooted less in one or another religious confession than in the local culture and traditions through which religious impulses are channeled, and in the political purposes that charity served. The results disrupt conventional paradigms. Bologna’s mix of republican and papal government and its lay civic religion shaped a network of homes that preserved the forms of civil society and accountability of the medieval commune. Hundreds of citizens engaged in the task of sheltering orphaned and abandoned children and launching them back into society as young adults. But, apart from those who slipped through loopholes, they cared only for citizen children. Florence’s absolutist ducal government and more ecclesiastically oriented civic creed generated a network that was more authoritarian in its methods and more economical in its use of volunteer and state resources. Yet its institutions were concerned only that children come
from the Florentine state, and not necessarily from the citizen class. Bologna’s
network served the political needs of its oligarchy, while Florence’s served the
dynastic and territorial needs of its grand dukes. Bologna’s administrators drew
more frequently on religious language, observances, and groups to animate their
own efforts and lend them popular legitimacy. Their Florentine counterparts
left religion to the clerics and operated as secular administrators.

There can be little doubt that children were better cared for in Bologna’s
orphanages and conservatories. But there can equally be no doubt that Florence’s
institutions—larger, more efficient, and run by small and rational bureaucracies
accountable chiefly to the head of state—provided the template for other Euro-
pean charities in the centuries that followed. Where Bologna held to a welfare
bureaucracy rooted in the whole civic community but offering benefits only to
citizens, Florence pioneered the rational bureaucracy of absolutism and extended
care to the more broadly defined group of subjects. This resulted in very differ-
ent approaches to care and very different outcomes for orphaned and abandoned
children.