PART THREE

The Crisis of Traditional Charity
Until now the picture presented has been a static one. I have examined the charities of the Old Regime, and described the attitudes behind them. And I have tried to assess their effectiveness in relieving poverty, and their role in the lives of the poor. The picture I have presented holds true for the heyday of the traditional charity, from approximately 1680 to 1760. But after 1760 the situation changes. The years from 1760 to the outbreak of the Revolution in 1789 were years of crisis for the traditional charity. In this period both the realities of the problem of poverty, and popular perceptions of it and attitudes toward it, changed. Because of these changes, the traditional charity became increasingly repudiated by public opinion as the proper means of caring for the poor.

Behind these changes in the functioning of the charities lay the major economic and intellectual changes which were transforming Old Regime society on the eve of the Revolution. The economic and social changes—the growth of population, the increase in illegitimate births, the price rise, and the decline of Aix’s traditional industries—changed the dimensions of poverty in Aix, in a way which spelled increasing hardship for the poor. But just when the need for charity increased, the amount of aid available declined. For in these years the charities experienced grave financial problems, problems which brought them to the brink of bankruptcy. The cause of their financial woes lay mostly in the declining level of popular charitable donations. Underlying this change was a basic shift in mentalities, best characterized as a spread of deChristianization. People ceased to give to charities because they ceased to worry about the salvation of their souls. And, whatever the cause, the financial problems of the charities not only increased their ineffectiveness, but also increased public dissatisfaction with them. Thus it was a vicious circle: changing public opinion about charity caused the financial crisis, but the crisis itself also contributed to creating an adverse public opinion. These complex and interrelated phenomena form the subject of this chapter.
CHANGING DIMENSIONS OF POVERTY

There is no absolute statistical proof that the demand for charity increased greatly in Aix in the years after 1760. As I showed in Chapter IV, the records of numbers of people aided by charitable institutions did not fluctuate according to need. But all available economic and demographic indicators seem to suggest that poverty worsened in these years, both in the town itself and in the surrounding countryside. This meant both that there were more people who could be properly classified as poor, and that living conditions worsened, although when dealing with destitution it is hard to measure it by degrees.

A major factor behind the worsening condition of the poor in this period was the rise in population which Provence, in common with the rest of Europe, experienced after 1740. But the pattern of population growth in Provence differed slightly from that elsewhere in France. In Provence, unlike the rest of the country, the population reached its peak for the Old Regime in the last years of the seventeenth century. But this growth was cut off abruptly by the plague of 1720. Marseille lost half of its 100,000 people, and in Aix the population dropped from 29,000 to approximately 16,000. While recovery was quick in most areas, Aix’s population never returned to its pre-1720 level. But after 1740 the population started to grow; it was 25,000 in both 1765 and 1793. This stable figure suggests that the birth rate did not rise in Aix as it did elsewhere after 1740. But that is not true. The level of births did rise in Aix; the population figures remained stable because of the large number of people who left the city to try their luck in Marseille. That in itself is an indication of economic hardship among Aix’s menu peuple.

But there are also other indications that the changes in population patterns created a greater demand for charity in Aix. For one thing, the rising birth rate meant that a larger proportion of the population was under fifteen, and such young people, as we have seen, formed the bulk of the charities’ clientele. Further, the increasing rate of illegitimate children created a new problem for the charities, the enfant trouvé. As was mentioned in Chapter IV, the number of illegitimate children cared for in the hôtel-Dieu increased sharply after the 1770’s.

Yet another fact to bear in mind is that the growth in population after 1740 was greatest in the countryside. If in Aix itself the population remained stable in our period, in the city’s viguerie the population rose dramatically. Taking the population of 1716 as a base of 100, by 1765 it had increased proportionately to 153. And it continued to rise thereafter. This population growth deepened the already desperate rural poverty. There were now more men competing for the scarce resources: for land, for work, for bread. In the wake of this increased poverty, as more and more men were forced to leave their homes and families to look for work and food, the rural beggar became
increasingly common. When the ordinance of 1724 was in effect, an average of 151 beggars per year were arrested in Aix and its environs. But in 1773 the number of beggars arrested under the provisions of the royal declaration of August 3, 1764, stood at 2,631. Thus the population growth in rural Provence meant for Aix an increase in the number of beggars which flooded its churches and street corners. And beggary was a problem which the charities had never handled adequately.

Another factor which made life more precarious for the poor after 1760 was the notorious price rise of the last decades of the Old Regime. C. E. Labrousse has shown that prices of clothing, shelter and above all, food—the necessities of life—rose 65 percent in this period, while wages rose only 22 percent. Surviving wage and price series for Aix show that the cost of living in the town followed Labrousse's general trend. For example, the price of the “dark” bread of the poor rose from 18 deniers per loaf in 1750 to 29 deniers in 1783. But the average daily wage of a carter rose only from 15 sous to 18 sous. This rising cost of living hit the salaried workers and agricultural laborers of Aix extremely hard—and these groups, which found it difficult enough to make ends meet in the best of times, had always been in the forefront of the recipients of charity.

Finally, Aix's artisans, another major group of the charities' clientele, also experienced increasing hardship in the last thirty years of the Old Regime. The city’s artisanal trades had always been overcrowded. From 1760 on, however, they entered a period of deepening crisis. The textile industry, Aix’s largest, was adversely affected by the changing fashion which encouraged milady to favor the lighter and more attractive cottons and muslins instead of the heavier cloths which Aix’s artisans had traditionally produced. And the city’s second largest industry, tanning, also declined during this period. Also trades like carting and hotel-keeping, which owed their prosperity to Aix’s role as a local regional market, suffered greatly in the last decades of the eighteenth century. For one of the major characteristics of the economy of Provence during this period was the eclipse of such local markets by the great commercial center of Marseille.

Thus all the available economic indicators seem to suggest that the condition of the poor gravely worsened in the last decades of the Old Regime. Yet it was precisely in this period, when the need for charity so greatly increased, that the charitable institutions in towns like Aix were least able to fulfill their functions. For during this period Aix’s charities were paralyzed by their financial problems.

THE DECLINE OF TRADITIONAL ALMSGIVING

In 1760 Aix’s two largest and most important charitable institutions, the hôtel-Dieu and the hospital-general, threatened to close their doors because of
financial problems. Both charities were on the verge of bankruptcy. And one major cause of their financial difficulties was the drying up of their most important financial resource, the charitable donation. For private donations to charitable institutions declined markedly in the course of the eighteenth century.

Fig. 6.1, which shows the receipts of the annual fundraising quête of the hospital-general, La Charité, from 1706 to 1794, illustrates this process. In the first decades of the century the charity could expect to take in between 4,000 and 5,000 livres a year. But by the 1730's the typical yearly yield was only around 2,500 livres, and by the 1750's the figure had dropped to between 1,000 and 2,000 livres. In the late seventies an even more abrupt drop occurred, and by the eighties the yield was a paltry few hundred livres. The hôtel-Dieu, the only other of Aix's charities for which full accounts remain, experienced a similar decline. 11

This suggests that fewer and fewer people made charitable donations as the century progressed. And there is other evidence to bear this out. A gift to the quête was not the only form a charitable donation might take: people

Figure 6.1. Donations, in Livres, Given in the Annual Quêtes of La Charité, 1706-90. Source: A.D. (Aix), XXI H, II E 204, Charité, "Livre des Quêtes des mois commencé le premier janvier 1706," and II E 205, "Quêtes . . . commencé 1736."
might also leave the institutions legacies in their wills. But the number of people eager to make such donations also declined markedly in the eighteenth century. In 1710, 80 percent of the wills registered in Aix included some sort of charitable donation; by 1770 the figure was 30 percent.12

Since charitable donations came from people in all walks of life, they are perhaps the most accurate barometer we have of truly "popular" public opinion about poverty and charity. They are at least more genuinely popular than the royal ordinances and writings of intellectuals which historians usually cite as evidence of "popular opinion" about poverty. Our evidence therefore suggests that gradually during the eighteenth century a major shift in popular attitudes toward poverty and charity occurred. What underlay this shift? Was it caused by popular dissatisfaction with some particular policies of these specific institutions? Or was it the result of something more general? Was it a reflection of a new and harsher climate of opinion toward the poor? Or was it simply a repudiation of the traditional conception of charity, with all its Christian connotations?

What evidence there is suggests that the latter is the answer. The shift in popular attitudes toward charity was tied to a major shift in what the French would call "mentalities"—specifically, the gradual spread of deChristianization in eighteenth-century France. Michel Vovelle has in Piété baroque et déchristianisation en Provence au XVIIIe siècle traced this process in Provence with intricate and imaginative statistics. Vovelle argues that the form which deChristianization most often took was a changing attitude toward death. In the eighteenth century death lost its terror for the average Provençal. The intense concern with the fate of the soul after death, the obsession with the perils of Purgatory and the torments of Hell characteristic of earlier religious beliefs, faded from popular consciousness. Vovelle has traced this shift through a statistical analysis of the provisions of wills through the eighteenth century. The early testaments specified elaborate funeral processions and rites; they contained careful formulations of invocation to heavenly intercessors, and careful provision for the saying of masses for the repose of the soul. But in wills from the later years of the century, especially after 1760, all this was absent. The elaborate funeral procession had almost disappeared; fewer and fewer wills invoked heavenly intercessors or asked for requiem masses. Vovelle argues that this is evidence of a major shift in popular religious mentality.

But what caused this shift Vovelle never really says. He does suggest that it was probably not due to the spread of the Enlightenment. The timing of the shift, which began, Vovelle suggests, in the years from 1710 to 1740, as well as the generally low level of literacy in Provence, argue against the influence of the Enlightenment. Vovelle implies that more likely causes can be found in the economic and social changes of the century: the economic
growth and internal peace, the increased life expectancy and mobility of society. Such factors gave an increased confidence in the possibilities of life on earth.

Whatever its causes, this basic shift in popular mentalities did occur. And it is important to note that it was indeed a shift in popular mentalities, which affected not just an educated elite but rather all levels of society. Vovelle found the same pattern in peasant villages as in big cities, and among artisans and salaried workers as well as nobles. Indeed, nobles apparently clung to the old traditions longest; bourgeois merchants and urban artisans were the first to abandon them.

The connection between this shift in popular mentalities and the decline in charitable almshousing should be obvious. For the major motivation for charitable giving had always been the notion that a donation to a charity could purchase salvation for the donor. With decline in popular concern over the fate of the soul after death, the charities lost their major selling point. Other factors also doubtless played a role in the popular repudiation of the charities. The financial crises of the charities probably did not endear the institutions to the townspeople of Aix, many of whom had invested their savings in charity rentes. And the worsening of the problem of poverty no doubt made the shortcomings of the traditional charities painfully obvious. But the major factor remains, I think, this change in popular religious attitudes. Whatever its cause, the decline in traditional almshousing was financially disastrous for Aix’s charities.

THE CRISIS AND ITS AFTERMATH

Important as it was, the decline in almshousing was not the only factor which brought the charities to the brink of financial disaster after 1760. Financial mismanagement, especially an overextension of borrowing, also played a role. When the return from the annual legacies and quêtes began declining in the early years of the eighteenth century, the charities made up the deficit by borrowing funds through the selling of rentes (see Chapter III). And as the deficits continued to grow, larger and larger sums were borrowed. But this borrowing only made the financial situation of the charities worse, for they were now liable for increasing amounts of interest on their loans. In 1722 the yearly interest on their rentes sold cost the Charité 11,955 livres. By 1755 the amount had risen to 32,439 livres, an increase of 171 percent. Further, the capital of some rentes had to be reimbursed by the Charité when it could not meet the interest payments. The Charité’s outlay for these, too, showed a substantial increase over the years, from 5,864 livres in 1723 to 38,298 livres in 1754, a 550-percent rise. Thus the charities were caught in a vicious
circle: they had to keep borrowing ever-increasing sums to pay off the interest, and principal, on money they had already borrowed.

It was thus this pyramiding of loans which led the charities to financial disaster. The rectors were not unaware of the folly of this unlimited borrowing. As long ago as 1751 there had been talk of calling a bureau-général which might legislate against the contracting of new debts. But this was not done. The constant borrowing continued unchecked until finally, in 1760, the institution could no longer meet its obligations, that is, pay the interest due on its rentes. At this point the indebtedness of the institution totalled some 824,118 livres, with an interest of 40,118 livres due each year. On January 24, 1760, the long-delayed meeting of the bureau-général was at last called to consider ways to deal with the crisis. Unless the charity could raise over 50,000 livres, it was faced with the prospect of having to declare bankruptcy, default on its debts, and turn its inmates out to starve.

When they realized the seriousness of their plight, the rectors' first thought was to call for aid from these people and institutions which traditionally had "watching briefs" over the care of the poor: the royal government, the municipal government, and the archbishop. Since the fifteenth century the state and Church had duelled over who should have ultimate control over charity (see Chapter II). Although in theory the state won, the Church never surrendered its pretensions in this area. Depending on their zeal, the local archbishops could exercise a great deal of leverage over the charities. For one thing, they were important donors—for example, Archbishop Cardinal Grimaldi left at his death, in 1684, 30,000 livres to seven different charities. And they could also, with a timely suggestion, influence rich laymen to favor the charities in their wills. Thus, in 1762, the Charité received a bequest of well over 40,000 livres from Dlle. Catherine Chambon, younger daughter and heir of Sieur Randalph Chambon, seigneur of Velaux. It is recorded that Catherine made the Charité her heir "under the direction of Mgr. the Archbishop." The archbishop could also influence the charities through a judicious use of his privilege of selecting priests for the institutions, and his position as arbiter in their many disputes over quêtes.

The royal government, too, had many means of exercising influence over the charities. Like the archbishop, the king was an important donor. The king was "the father of the poor"; it was his duty to protect and succor his least powerful subjects. Further, it was the duty of the king to present to his subjects an example of Christian virtues—and the greatest of these was, of course, charity. Aix's hospitals benefitted from this royal largesse. Anne of Austria was "founder and chief benefactress" of the hospital La Charité of Aix. In 1643 the institution received a royal gift of ten émines or minots of salt, weighing 170 pounds each, from the greniers à sel of Marseille or
Berre. Anne's generosity to the Charité was continued by her son: in 1660, when Louis XIV visited Aix to quell a rebellion against his rule, he donated to the hospital-general the proceeds from a new tax of fifteen deniers on each pack of playing cards and dice, two sous six deniers on tarot cards, and twenty sous on each pound of tobacco sold in Provence.

Apart from his position as an important donor, the king could also exercise control over the charities through his right to issue letters patent, which gave the charities legal existence, and therefore the all-important right to inherit property. And the royal government had other legal means to influence the charities through the "king's men" of the Parlement. The Parlement had the right to register the rules, or Règlements, of the charities which regulated the admission of inmates, the hours of work, and all the other details of the functioning of the institutions. The Parlement was also the court of the first instance for cases involving the charities. In judging such cases the Parlement invariably invoked the "droit des pauvres," a doctrine, surviving from the customary law of Provence, that the charities had an interest which overrode that of private individuals.

One other outside body also had pretensions to influence over the charities. This was the municipality. Members of the municipal council were considered recteurs nés of the charities; they sat by right on the grands bureaux which supervised the institutions' finances. The municipality was also a source of financial support; for example, it gave the Charité wheat during the plague of 1720, and similarly during a shortage in 1749. It also allotted to the charities the amendes de police, small fines collected for the infraction of various town ordinances.

Thus three outside agencies, the archbishop, the royal government, and the municipality, had a tradition of interest in and support for the charities. It is therefore not surprising that when the extent of the financial crisis became known, the first step of the rectors was to lay bare the situation before the royal intendant, Gaulois de la Tour, and to ask that he put pressure on the royal government to pay promptly the 4,000-livre pension due from the Cinq Grosses Fermes, the tax farm, now two years in arrears. The Charité's previous pleas to the government had been unavailing. But a series of letters from de la Tour to Trudaine, the controller-general, explaining the situation and threatening that, if the Charité went bankrupt, its inmates would be turned out to starve and to terrorize the province, elicited at least partial payment.

Meanwhile the rectors also turned to that other traditional "father of the poor," the archbishop of Aix. When informed of the problem, the prelate, "whose attentions and gifts knew no bounds," offered to donate the sum of two hundred louis d'or (4,800 livres) to help the Charité meet its current expenses. This gift also stimulated further largesse. For not to be outdone by
its traditional clerical rival for control of charitable relief, the municipal
council voted to match the archbishop’s gift, and to add a donation of 90
charges of wheat besides. 26 But these and other gifts, totalling some 16,000
livres, were sufficient only to cover operating expenses and thus allow the
stricken institution to keep its doors open. The Charité still had no money to
make the 40,118-livre payment due on its rentes. Only by selling some of its
assets could the Charité raise that much ready money. The institution there­
fore began to cash in some of its own rentes. In theory and law such a course
was impossible; once a rente was purchased the capital was permanently lost
to the buyer. This was especially true of the best-known “blue chip” rentes,
those on the Hôtel de Ville of Paris and the Clergé de France, for example.
Nevertheless, exceptions might be made even by these august institutions
when the need of the rente-holder was truly great. But redeeming a rente was
far from an ideal solution to the crisis. Legally a rente could be redeemed
only for less than its face value. 27 Further, once a rente was reimbursed, it
was lost to the institution as a source of income for the future. In the long
run such a policy could bring only disaster. But in the short run such actions
allowed the rectors to offer to pay at least a part of their obligations: in 1760
they paid about 18,000 of the 40,000 livres due. 28

This course did not satisfy all the Charité’s creditors. Most feared that
further alienations of capital by the Charité would destroy any prospect of
future income. Therefore many banded together and consulted two promi­
nent avocats, who obtained from the Parlement in November 1760 an acte
interpellatif, or injunction, against any more such actions. The lawyers based
their argument on the fact that under French law a bankrupt could not sell or
in any way alienate his assets, since in reality they no longer belonged to him,
but rather to his creditors. Since the Charité was known to be bankrupt, its
rectors were forbidden to cash in any more rentes. 29

The Charité’s creditors also demanded that a delegation of 12 of their
number be allowed to examine the institution’s books and records. This
examination took place on November 24, 1760. The examiners found many
irregularities. Some were relatively minor; for example, failure of the recteur
semainière and the secretary to sign the minutes of the bureau, and omission
of the annual inventory of linen belonging to the institution. The other
charges, however, were more serious. The rectors were accused of making
themselves perpetual, in direct violation of the Règlements, which limited
their service to three years. Further, it was alleged that some rectors may have
profited from the purchases of wheat and other supplies, receiving kickbacks
from suppliers. The rectors were also charged with deliberately bypassing the
bureau-général, supposedly the watchdog of the institution’s financial affairs.
The creditors noted that bureaux-généraux had been held only three times in
the last 40 years, although the Charité’s regulations stipulated annual meet-
ings. Finally, the creditors complained of the alienations of rentes, which, again according to the regulations, could be undertaken only with the permission of the bureau-général. Such flagrant violations of the Règlements, the creditors argued, constituted mismanagement; they stated the rectors could be held personally liable. The creditors admitted that the Règlements exempted the rectors from personal liability for the debts of the institution, but argued that the failure of the rectors to fulfill their duties properly cancelled such immunity. The rectors, they added, were the “tutors of the poor and were, like the tutors of minors, responsible to the law for the manner in which they administered the property of their charges.”

In their arguments the creditors revealed a thoroughly hardheaded approach. For them a charity rente was an investment like any other. They expected the charities to conduct their financial affairs according to the same rules and with the same standard of efficiency as other businesses. As they noted, if a private merchant had acted as they had done, he would have been considered not only “bankrupt” but “fraudulent.” If laws governing bankruptcy could not be bent for the “merchants, for whom life is a continual round of vicissitudes,” still less could they give way for institutions such as charities. The creditors were completely unsympathetic to arguments that the charities were a special case, in which leniency was necessary because of hardships which might be created for the poor. “It is certain,” they stated, “that it has never been permitted that the directors of the hôpital de la Charité nourish the poor at the expense of the creditors.”

The poor must live off of the donations of the faithful, and these donations must be voluntary. The father of the poor, the Almighty, rejects involuntary sacrifice. Justice (and not charity) is the first of all virtues.

The creditors cited the case of the hospital for enfants trouvés in Paris, which was forced to close in 1709 for lack of funds. The infants cared for in the institution were put out on the street to die. Such action was unfortunate, but it was also necessary: “it is never permitted to increase the number of the poor (by robbing the creditors of their due), in order to ease the misery of those already in such a state.” Such hardheadedness, such “businesslike” attitudes, seem to show a great change from the days when profitmaking was scorned as sordid and unChristian. This new hardheadedness, when accompanied by the acceptance of mercantile values and, further, the sympathetic portrayal of the problems of the merchant which the memorandum of the Charité’s creditors shows, seems to indicate a triumph of values which might be termed “bourgeois.” This is in one sense a misnomer, for those who held these attitudes, the rentiers of the Charité, were not primarily people whom we would today classify as bourgeois, that is, businessmen and professional people. They were not even in a majority those who were bourgeois by their
own, eighteenth-century definition. Rather they came from all social classes, from the noble to the servant, and most were from the menu peuple (see Chapter III). Does this indicate a diffusion of “bourgeois” values throughout much of society? Perhaps what the mémoire of the creditors indicates is less a diffusion of bourgeois values than simply a changing attitude toward charity, a loss of sympathy for the poor, part and parcel with the decline in charitable donations. With this mémoire we are obviously far from the days of the late seventeenth century, when all the people of Aix rallied to aid the grand enfermement (see Chapter II).

In any event, the creditors’ threatened suit aroused the rectors to take positive steps to settle the crisis. In a meeting of the bureau-général on December 14, 1760, the policy of alienation of rentes was abandoned. Instead a comprehensive program designed to put the finances of the institution back on an even keel was adopted. In its final version the program was given a royal patent in May 1762. Under this program, the first step was the splitting of the Charité’s reserves into two separate parts, the caisse des créanciers and the caisse des pauvres. It was hoped that the poor could “live off their own.” Only the donations of the pious, and the proceeds from the labor of the inmates, went into the caisse des pauvres, from which the internal administrative expenses of the charity were paid. The receipts from the rentes held by the institution, as well as the funds from royal donations, went straight into the caisse des créanciers, and were to be used solely to pay off the Charité’s creditors. Thus money to cover the Charité’s debts was guaranteed. Those creditors holding rentes viagères were to be paid, but at reduced rates of interest. Rentes with interest at ten percent were reduced to seven percent; those at nine to six and one-half. When a holder of a rente viagère died the principal from his rente was to be divided among the remaining rente-holders, at the rate of one sou for every livre. The rentes perpetuelles (and most of the Charité’s rentes took this form) were, by contrast, to be paid their full interest. If, however, the holder wished his capital refunded, he would receive only two-thirds of its original value. This plan was formulated with the help of the royal government, which was prepared to donate 30,000 livres a year in each of the next three years, 1762, 1763, and 1764.33

It was doubtless too much to hope that such unprecedented royal largesse would come with no strings attached. And in that era of royal initiative in the field of public assistance the price the royal government exacted for its aid was increased control over the administration of the Charité. Its instrument for the accomplishment of this end was the Commission Générale des Hôpitaux, created by royal letters patent in September 1761, to oversee the functioning of all hospitals and œuvres de charité in Provence. This commission was composed of the intendant, two présidents and six conseillers of the Parlement, plus the former avocat-général and present
procureur-général. Its duty was to oversee the financial administration of the charities, to prevent recurrence of those financial expedients which had brought the charities to their present crises. A charity had to have the approval of this commission before it could alienate any of its property worth over 500 livres. The commission also had to approve any borrowing undertaken by a charity, and a limit of 30,000 livres per year was set for such financial initiatives. The commission also was required to inspect the charities' accounts each year, and it had a veto over any settlement between the charities and their creditors. Thus agents of the royal government could exercise almost complete control over the finances of the charities.

Such an increase in royal power in the field of charitable endeavor did not go unchallenged by others with similar pretensions. The archbishop, especially, was incensed by the creation of the commission, since by tradition he had the right to oversee the financial affairs of the hospitals within his diocese. In April 1765, we find the mayor and consuls of Aix informing the royal government that the archbishop had recently given an ultimatum: either the commission be abolished or he would stop his yearly gift of 4,800 livres, which formed an important financial resource for the Charité. The intendant, De La Tour, joined the municipal government in pleading that the commission be abolished, arguing that "utilité publique" should take precedence over a concern for royal prerogative. But the royal government was reluctant to surrender its initiative. It proposed a compromise solution, by which the commission would continue as before, but with the Charité no longer subject to its control. Apparently it was not necessary to put this into effect, for the archbishop was somehow persuaded to back down. At any rate, the records of the Charité reveal that the commission continued to oversee its financial affairs throughout the 1760's and 1770's.

Under the supervision of the commission, the Charité slowly but steadily climbed from the depths of near bankruptcy. Careful supervision of the caisse des pauvres, the budget for internal administration, gradually lessened the threat that the institution would be forced to turn its inmates out on the streets to die. The budget was balanced, however, only by the most stringent economies, which often entailed very real hardships for the poor. Given the propensity of the rectors for "good and holy economy" in internal administration, there was little slack which could be taken up in this area (see Chapter III). Some of the economies were relatively harmless. For example, the profitability of the various fabriques was investigated carefully, and those not sufficiently lucrative, the wool-spinning and wool-carding, were dismantled. But the main burden of the economy drive was borne by the poor. When resources seemed insufficient, the Charité simply suspended admissions. On July 4, 1767, the Charité deliberated that:
since the hard times has caused daily increasing numbers of the poor to present themselves for reception in this hospital, and since the excessive cost of supplies causes expenses to increase, . . . it does not seem possible to furnish subsistence even for the poor who are actually in the institution, let alone those who have presented themselves. . . . Therefore it is agreed to suspend all reception until the beginning of next winter, with the exception of children deprived of both parents.\textsuperscript{40}

Thus just when “hard times” struck and conditions were most difficult for the poor, their one resource, the Charité, was taken from them. Further suspensions of admissions were noted in November 1767, May 1768, June 1769, May 1770, June 1771, May 1779, and October and November 1779.\textsuperscript{41} This meant that new admissions, which had averaged 50 per year in the ten years before the financial crisis, fell to approximately 20.\textsuperscript{42} And the total number of poor cared for in the institution, which had run as high as 800 in the last years of the seventeenth century, dwindled from an average of 350 in the 1740's and 1750's, to a low, after the financial crisis, of 106, in 1780.\textsuperscript{43} The Charité was not alone in limiting admission; most other institutions of public assistance, similarly suffering from financial difficulties, did likewise. This grave setback in the amount of aid available occurred, it should be remembered, in a period of rising bread prices, and must have caused untold hardships for the poor.

Such economy measures enabled the Charité to hold the line on internal expenditures. The institution was for the most part similarly successful in meeting its obligations to its creditors. Problems, of course, occasionally arose. The royal government was, as usual, slow in paying its promised 90,000 livres.\textsuperscript{44} Occasionally the creditors’ demands for reimbursement of their capital outran the resources available.\textsuperscript{45} But by and large the process of liquidating the gigantic load of debt went steadily onwards. By 1766 the Charité reported that it had reimbursed a total of 172,357 livres, 13 sous, 4 deniers worth of rentes, saving the institution some 2,596 livres in interest payments each year. A further 4,806 livres of rentes viageres were extinguished when their owners died.\textsuperscript{46} In 1765 the yearly payments made by the caisse des créanciers totalled 56,206 livres; with the policy of extinction of rentes by 1777 this figure was reduced to 13,038 livres.\textsuperscript{47} In their policy of debt liquidation, the rectors of the Charité were apparently concerned to keep the sufferings of their creditors to a minimum. As has been noted, a majority of those who owned rentes on the Charité were of the class of menu people, who invested in the rentes their life savings, and could ill afford any loss or delay in payment. Such people had the first call on the Charité’s resources, and creditors like Catherine Sauvanne, widow of Jean Tornon, a domestique, who had “grave need” of her 400-livre rente, and the garçon
cordonnier and his wife who needed a capital sum for the dowry of their daughter, were reimbursed before all other creditors.48

During the 1770's the Charité's plan for the gradual liquidation of its debts seemed to be working well. By 1778 the rectors were reporting a surplus in the caisse des créanciers of over 4,000 livres.49 But as long as any debt remained, a sudden heavy call for reimbursement could upset the budget's still delicate balance. Further, as the gifts and alms of the faithful steadily decreased, it was becoming increasingly difficult to cover internal expenses with the resources available to the caisse des pauvres. For these reasons the rectors of the Charité thought it advisable to seek a final settlement of their debt. In 1780 they proposed to the royal government a plan whereby all their remaining rentes would be liquidated at 50 percent of their face value. Payment to the creditors would be made either in cash or in the Charité's own rentes on the Clergé de France and other institutions. After some hesitation on the part of the government, due to Necker's concern at this point for the rights of creditors, the plan was finally adopted in July 1780.50 Thus ended the 20 years of financial crisis at the Charité.

The story of these years of crisis at the Charité is important for the historian, less perhaps for its own sake than as an example of what was happening in countless other hospitals throughout France. For the financial difficulties of the Charité were not unique. In these same years three other charities in Aix alone, the hôtel-Dieu, the Miséricorde, and the Insensés, are known to have experienced similar problems.51 It is probable that other of the town's charities felt the pinch as well, although lack of their records makes it impossible to state this with any certainty. Nor were such financial difficulties peculiar to the charities of Aix. By 1764 the hôtel-Dieu of Marseille was running an annual deficit of 240,049 livres. And innumerable charities in the smaller towns of Provence, like Brignolles, Apt, and Draguignan, were faced with the threat of bankruptcy. The Charité of Lyon had to borrow two million livres in the money market of Genoa to pay off its debts. And financial problems troubled hospitals in Burgundy, Normandy, Brittany, in fact throughout France.52 The years from approximately 1760 to 1789 were a period of crisis for all the traditional municipal charities of the kingdom.

These years of crises destroyed the traditional charities of France. Not literally, of course, at least in most cases; the vast majority of institutions were, like the Charité of Aix, able to avoid outright bankruptcy and lingered on in a crippled state until they were dealt their final death blow by the Revolution. But these years saw the destruction of the traditional municipal charity as a viable institution. The spreading religious indifference had cost them both their public support and their raison d'être. After 1760 a new spirit reigned in the institutions. Rectors from the old robe families which
had long dominated the charities left their administrative boards (see Chapter III); the new men who came in were, if the tone of the minutes of their meetings is any indication, more interested in the financial state of the institution than the welfare of the poor. But this change in spirit of their ruling boards did not really matter, for after 1760 the charities, for all practical purposes, ceased to exist as independent institutions. Most charities survived their financial crisis only by calling on outside institutions—the local bishop or archbishop, the municipality, even the royal government—for help. And these agencies took advantage of the weakness of the charities to reassert their traditional pretensions to control over public assistance.

What happened at the Charité of Aix illustrates this process. The institution stayed afloat only by means of subventions from these three agencies: the yearly 4,800-livre gift from both the archbishop and the municipality, and the generous if tardy 90,000-livre grant from the state. But the charities gained these gifts only at the cost of losing their traditional autonomy. After 1760 both the archbishop and the municipality constantly interfered in the internal administration of the Charité. In November 1762, for example, we find the rectors of the Charité accepting, on the suggestion of the archbishop, two children of an epileptic. In the next month, when an experienced rector wanted to quit his post, the archbishop was the one called in to talk him out of this. And the next year, when it was decided to do away with the fabrique de Cadiz, a special deputation was sent to the archbishop to explain the move. Similarly, in May 1768, the Charité accepted two children sent to them by the municipality, although ordinarily they would not have been admitted since their mother was still alive. The incident which perhaps best epitomizes the charities' loss of autonomy occurred in 1783, when the Miséricorde turned to the municipality for help in its hour of crisis. The town government made its help conditional upon the surrender of the charity's books. The Miséricorde, mindful of protecting the identities of those it aided, refused, but only at the cost of forfeiting possible aid.

In the contest for control over the charities which arose in the aftermath of the financial crises, the real victor was not the municipality or the archbishop, however, but the royal government. Through the instrument of its Commission Générale des Pauvres, the central government gained almost complete control of the financial administration of the charities. This provided support for the government's contention, which gained currency in these years, that the property owned by the charities was in reality a "patrimony of the nation" to be administered by the government in a way to best provide for the public good. The creation of the Commission Générale was thus a foreshadowing of the nationalization of hospital properties first attempted under Necker in 1780 and finally brought to completion during the Revolution.
This assertion of control by the royal government was a significant straw in the wind. Traditional, religiously motivated charity had in the years after 1760 been revealed as both ineffective and intellectually bankrupt. What should take its place? Enlightened public opinion turned increasingly toward the notion of a national, secular, state-supported system of public assistance.