Fall 10-1-2007

Catholic Philanthropy and Civil Society: The Lay Volunteers of Saint Vincent de Paul in Nineteenth-Century Mexico

Silvia Marina Arrom Ph.D.

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol27/iss1/1

This Articles is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact wsulliv6@depaul.edu, c.mcclure@depaul.edu.
Catholic Philanthropy and Civil Society: The Lay Volunteers of Saint Vincent de Paul in Nineteenth-Century Mexico

By

SILVIA MARINA ARROM, PH.D.

One of the persistent stereotypes about Latin America is that it has a weak "civic culture" (in Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's famous phrase) and, as a result, that the "haves" do very little to help the "have-nots." This idea, presented in many different forms over the past half century, has been accepted by contemporary social reformers who assert that civil society and philanthropy are new to Latin America. Certainly, it is true that both are now rebounding after the twentieth-century consolidation of central states weakened non-governmental organizations and discouraged private philanthropic initiatives. Yet it is equally true that Latin Americans have a long and rich tradition of joining civic associations, giving money and resources to aid the less fortunate, and volunteering their time to serve others beyond their family and social group. These efforts were often channeled through Catholic lay organizations that provide continuity from colonial times to the present, but which have barely begun to receive the attention they deserve.

The complete history of Latin American philanthropy has yet to be written. Besides the almsgiving which was central to traditional Catholic charity, historians of the colonial period have long recognized several forms of private poor relief. The Church ran hospitals, asylums, and soup kitchens. Members of lay organizations such as religious cofradías and secular guilds took care of their own, including the widows and orphaned children of their members. A few individual philanthropists, usually wealthy members of noble families, stood out for their generosity. It has been widely assumed, however, that these

3 For a recent review of this literature see Carlos A. Formen, Democracy in Latin America: Civic Selfhood and Public Life in Mexico and Peru (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), chap. 1. Formen likewise challenges the stereotype that 19th-century Latin America lacked a democratic tradition and civil society.
colonial traditions disappeared after independence when republican governments took over the responsibility of providing for public welfare.4

The contributions of Catholic philanthropists have particularly been downplayed in Mexico, where Church and State fought bitterly in both the nineteenth-century War of the Reforma (1857-1867) and the revolutionary-period Cristero Rebellion (1926-1929). National histories demonized the “evil” Church and their Conservative (or, in the twentieth century, “counterrevolutionary”) allies. They portrayed the nineteenth century as a period when liberalism and secularization prevailed over the dark forces of the past. Hospitals, orphanages, and asylums were transferred from Church to State jurisdiction. Monastic orders were expelled, including those that previously staffed establishments for the ailing poor. Artisan guilds and religious confraternities were abolished. Private giving was presumably deterred by the government’s confiscation of the assets of welfare institutions, many of which had originally been donated by pious individuals.5

The prevailing wisdom held that these developments were salutary. A typical, if unusually colorful, assessment came from the President of Mexico City’s municipal welfare office in 1935. Referring to the 1861 Reform Laws that nationalized welfare establishments and created a government agency to administer them, Rómulo Velasco Ceballos praised that “memorable February” day when “the vigorous hand of the Indian president, señor Juárez, swept away the decrepit, miserable and misguided old beneficence ... in the hands of the clergy ... and converted it into public assistance.” This shift “forever changed the fortunes of the needy who, instead of having to endure miserable

---


5 Even Moisés González Navarro, in La Pobreza en México (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1985), one of the few historians to recognize the persistence of private charitable groups after the Reforma, portrayed their efforts as inferior to public welfare. A revisionist work that recognizes the importance of private philanthropy in the late 19th century is Ann S. Blum, “Conspicuous Benevolence: Liberalism, Public Welfare, and Private Charity in Porfriian Mexico City, 1877-1910,” The Americas 58:4 (July 2001): 7-38.
charity accompanied by feigned piety and Latin stutterings, would receive aid as a matter of decorum and justice."

Yet this narrative of progressive secularization, accompanied by the marginalization of the Church and of individual philanthropists, tells only part of the story. Despite the triumph of the liberal Reforma, the second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a Catholic revival embodied in new lay organizations that proliferated throughout Mexico. My case study of two of these groups shows how devout Catholics joined together to work for their vision of the common good. The male Society of St. Vincent de Paul and the female Association of the Ladies of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul (not to be confused with the well-known order of nuns, the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul) were branches of French organizations devoted to assisting the poor. The Mexican chapters lasted continuously from their foundations in 1845 and 1863 until the present. They provided extensive educational and welfare services. Although some of their activities embodied centuries-old approaches to poor relief, others moved beyond traditional charity to address the root causes of social problems. In organizing to deliver aid to the indigent, the Vincentian volunteers created a national network of local cells, called "conferences," that formed the building blocks of a vibrant civil society. By the late nineteenth century the two groups together mobilized tens of thousands of volunteers and donors in dozens of cities throughout Mexico to serve hundreds of thousands of paupers. The depth and breadth of these organizations reveals a strong tradition of giving and volunteering among the middle as well as upper classes. It also shows how misleading it is to focus primarily on secular initiatives in writing the history of modern Latin American philanthropy.

---

8 See Société de St. Vincent de Paul, *Livre du Centenaire: L'oeuvre d'Ozanam a Travers le
The Male Sociedad de San Vicente de Paul

In May 1833 a group of university students came together in Paris to create the Conference de la Charité, dedicated to visiting needy families in their houses. In the wake of the secularism and anti-clericalism unleashed by the French Revolution, these devout young men sought to use Christian charity to strengthen the Catholic faith while helping the urban poor. After meeting weekly to pray and deliberate, conference members set off for the homes of ailing paupers to whom they took material as well as spiritual aid. As the small local cells proliferated throughout France, they became the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, named after the French priest who lived from 1581 to 1660 and was canonized in 1737 for his patronage of charitable works. Although the Society was an independent lay organization, it was affiliated with the missionary order founded by St. Vincent de Paul in 1625, the Congregation de la Mission (known as Lazaristes, Paüles, or, in Mexico, the Misioneros de San Vicente de Paul). This missionary order also oversaw St. Vincent’s two female organizations: the Confrérie des Dames de la Charité, the charity organization for lay women he founded in 1617, and the Filles de la Charité, the order of uncloistered nuns he founded in 1634 (known in Mexico as the Señoras de la Caridad and the Hermanas de la Caridad, respectively).8

The Society soon spread to other European countries and eventually established branches throughout the world. Its global expansion is sometimes viewed as an example of French religious imperialism, for it was one of many Catholic organizations exported from France to the rest of the world in the second half of the nineteenth century.9 It would be a mistake, however, to view the foundation of the Mexican Society as an external imposition. Mexico was home to the first branch of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in Latin America, established only twelve years after the organization was founded in Paris. Unlike many foreign chapters founded by priests, the Mexican branch came as a result of lay initiative. While studying medicine in Paris from May 1833 to June 1836, the Mexican Manuel Andrade (1809-1848) witnessed the birth of the Society. Upon returning home,

---


he worked to bring several Vincentian organizations to Mexico. As the director of the Hospital de Jesús, Dr. Andrade was particularly concerned with the delivery of health care. Impressed by the nursing services the Sisters of Charity provided in French hospitals, he helped found that religious order in Mexico. After the first nuns arrived in November 1844, he turned his attention to establishing the two male organizations. On 15 December 1844, fourteen pious men gathered to form the first Mexican conference of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. The group immediately petitioned the government to authorize the Congregación de la Misión. Mexican president José Joaquín Herrera approved the bases of the Sociedad de San Vicente de Paul on 8 February 1845. The French Society accepted the affiliation of the Mexican chapter on 15 September 1845 and extended to it the indulgences conceded to members of the Society by Pope Gregory XIV. The first missionary fathers also arrived that year.10

Table One shows that the Mexican lay organization grew quickly. For the first three years it remained in Mexico City, where ten additional conferences were founded by 1849. In that year it began expanding to the provinces, with the original Mexico City conference becoming a Council to govern the emerging national structure. By 1851 there were sixteen conferences in six cities: Mexico City, San Miguel de Allende, Puebla, Oaxaca, Toluca, and Guanajuato.11 The Society had 192 active members. In addition, it counted six "honorary" members: benefactors who regularly contributed money, food, clothes, or medicines to the Society's works, but did not participate in conference activities. And it had twelve "aspiring" members: youths aged twelve and over who were training to join the Society when they turned sixteen.12 By 1855 its membership had nearly tripled to reach 567 active members, with a solid core of 33 regular donors.

11 The 50th-anniversary Reseña lists the foundation dates and locations of all conferences as well as national and provincial councils. Reseña del Quincuagenario de la Sociedad (Mexico City: Imp. y Lit. de Francisco Díaz de León, 1895), 25, 50-57.
12 For a definition of these terms see Société de Saint Vincent de Paul, 102.
Table One. Membership of the Mexican Sociedad de San Vicente de Paul, 1851-1896

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members</th>
<th>1851</th>
<th>1855</th>
<th>1858</th>
<th>1865</th>
<th>1868</th>
<th>1869</th>
<th>1870</th>
<th>1871</th>
<th>1875</th>
<th>1885</th>
<th>1894</th>
<th>1896</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>558</td>
<td>791</td>
<td>1,094</td>
<td>1,412</td>
<td>1,922</td>
<td>1,665</td>
<td>2,824</td>
<td>1,647</td>
<td>1,536</td>
<td>1,672</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honorary</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>341</td>
<td>507</td>
<td>666</td>
<td>763</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>633</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspiring</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>812</td>
<td>1,461</td>
<td>2,228</td>
<td>2,821</td>
<td>2,672</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the Reforma the Society suffered because of its close ties to the Church and to prominent Conservatives. By lying low and emphasizing that it was apolitical and independent from the Church, the organization avoided the kind of persecution endured by the St. Vincent de Paul Societies in France and Spain (which where outlawed in 1861 and 1868, respectively.) Still, at one point in 1861 its President Teófilo Marín and Vice president Manuel Díez de Bonilla were imprisoned by the Liberals for their role in the Conservative opposition. Unsure of their legal status in the wake of the 1859 law that abolished cofradías and hermandades, many conferences stopped meeting or did so clandestinely. The dramatic expansion of the first decade came to a halt. The few available statistics for the war years suggest that the Society's membership leveled off (see Table One) and no new conferences were founded in 1855, 1856, and 1863.

---

13 Sources: "Etat du Personnel et des œuvres..." (1851, 1857), SVP, CC113, Méxique; Boletín de la Sociedad de San Vicente de Paul, Nos. 7 (1859) and 11 (1860) [SVP, Méxique, Rapports nationaux], No. 7; Noticia sobre las Conferencias de la Sociedad de San Vicente de Paul... 1868/1869/1870/1871, [for 1869, 1870, 1871, 1872] (México: Imp. de la V. e Hijos de Murguía, 1869/70/71/72) [SVP, Méxique, Rapports nationaux]; for 1855, 1865, 1875, 1885, and 1894, Reseña, 47; and for 1896, De Dios, Historia de la familia, 2:629.

14 The French General Council was prohibited from meeting between 1861-70. Foucault, La Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul, 183-4, 204.

15 See Reseña, 39; letters to Paris of 23 Sept. 1860, 28 Oct. 1861, and 27 April 1861 (SVP, CC113, Méxique); Boletín (1860), 6; and "Las Conferencias de San Vicente de Paul, Dictamen del Sr. Castañeda," La Unión Católica (15 June 1861), 1-2.

16 The only other years when no conferences were founded were 1847 (during the Mexican-American War) and 1877. See Reseña, 50-57.
Yet the Society began to recover even before the end of Reforma. On 5 May 1861 Francisco Zarco, Liberal President Benito Juárez' Minister of Relaciones y Gobernación, clarified that the Vincentian “charitable Association” was exempt from the Reform laws. Offering it his protection, he encouraged the Society to “persevere in its good works.” Then, with the breathing space provided by the conservative restoration from 1863 to 1867, it resumed its growth. Within a month of ousting the Liberals, the new regime commissioned Society member Joaquín García Icazbalceta to report on the state of the capital’s welfare institutions, a sign of the close collaboration that would develop between the conferences and the government during the Second Empire. By 1865 the Society had 791 active members, and more regular contributors than ever before, with honorary members now comprising 30% of the total. New conferences proliferated. Although the Society was again placed on the defensive when the Liberals returned in 1867, it quickly bounced back from the

18 Although García Icazbalceta presented his report to Emperor Maximilian in July 1864, it was only published posthumously: Joaquín García Icazbalceta, Informe sobre los establecimientos de beneficencia y corrección de esta capital... (Mexico City: Moderna Librería Religiosa, 1907). Tomás Gardida, another Society member, served as alderman in charge of welfare institutions during those years. De Dios, Historia de la familia, 1:527; and Arrom, Containing the Poor, 229-33.
crisis years. Table One shows that, despite occasional harassment, the Society grew steadily after 1868. With 666 aspiring members by 1871, the Society was successfully recruiting a new generation. By 1875 active membership reached an all-time high of 2,824. Thus, despite the triumph of the liberal Reforma, the Society was stronger afterwards than it had been before.

Expanding its regional coverage, the Society branched out from its core in central Mexico into twenty-one Mexican states and from major cities into a few rural areas. Not all of the new conferences endured. Some of the provincial chapters folded soon after their foundation, especially in the countryside. In keeping with the geography of piety familiar to students of later Catholic movements such as the Cristero Rebellion, the Society flourished in the states of Mexico, Jalisco, Guanajuato, Michoacán, and Puebla. Beginning in the 1860s it also took root in Veracruz and Yucatán. With scattered conferences in other regions, it attained an impressive national presence, although mostly in urban areas. Indeed, it was one of the first private organizations to operate on a national scale in Mexico.

As the Society grew, the social background of its members became more heterogeneous. At first the lay men listed professions

---

19 De Dios, Historia de la familia, 1:525, 537-38, 553; and Reseña, 27, 30, 39.
20 See list of conferences in Reseña, 50-57.
21 See the "Etats du personnel et des œuvres," in SVP, CC113 and CC114, Mexique; Boletín (1859), 204; Noticia (1871), 15; and 7 March 1868, "Boletín de Agregación de la Conferencia del Santísimo Sacramento," SVP, CC114, Mexique. I am indebted to María Gayón for informing me that Juan Santelices, a founding member of the Society, is listed as a clockmaker in the 1848 census.
such as comerciante, abogado, médico, militar, and propietario – as well as one relojero in the founding conference. Leading families such as the Mier y Terán and Montes de Oca were represented. Well-known figures like the statesman Luis Gonzaga Cuevas and the writer Joaquín García Icazbalceta served as presidents of the Central Council (in 1849 and 1886-1894, respectively). Although the Society's members remained predominantly well-to-do, especially in the national and provincial Councils, by 1857 several conferences listed men who were empleados, dependientes, preceptores, and, occasionally, artesanos. In 1865 twenty master artisans created a Mexico City conference to instruct their apprentices and provide work for impoverished journeymen. In 1870 a group of panaderos formed a conference in Puebla. By 1874 the applications for aggregation of new conferences included agricultores, jornaleros, and labradores. In addition, the Society's reports list as honorary members doctors who provided their services free and pharmacists, bakers, and shopkeepers who contributed their goods. Despite excluding most of the rural population as well as the urban poor who were its clients, the Society's members and benefactors reached beyond a small elite to draw from the middle and lower-middle classes. It is therefore wrong to assume that nineteenth-century philanthropy was restricted to the wealthy few.

Nor is it accurate to dismiss the Mexican Society as a pale imitation of the French organization. Although Dr. Andrade was inspired by what he saw in Paris, his plans for his home country responded to local needs and drew heavily on deeply-rooted charitable traditions. As explained in an 1846 letter thanking the French Society for approving the Mexican affiliation, "we have been forced to replace some of your customs with others that are more in harmony with our political institutions, our habits, the nature of our country and the education, needs, virtues, and vices of our poor."22 One of the main differences was that the early Mexican conferences gave a much lower priority to visiting the poor – the central mission of the French organization. Instead, they undertook activities that attempted to fill the gap left by the expulsion of the Hospitaller orders in 1821 and the decline and, finally, abolition of the cofradías in 1859.

Shunning publicity, the early French conferences quietly provided parish-level services, mostly hidden inside the houses of

---

22 Letter of 2 March 1846 to the Central Council in Paris, SVI, C113, Mexique.
their clients. In contrast, the Mexican Society took on highly visible projects, often at the behest of Mexican government or church officials who called upon it to provide public services. In 1845, during its first year of existence, the Archbishop of Mexico entrusted the Society with the Iglesia del Espíritu Santo and the municipal government placed it in charge of the Hospital del Divino Salvador for Demented Women. Both institutions had foundered since the expulsion of the priests who previously managed them. The Society raised money to support the ailing establishments. One of its members, Joaquín Velázquez de la Cadena, volunteered his services as director of the Hospital. Others formed a commission to supervise the institution and appointed a committee of ladies to work directly with the female inmates until the Sisters of Charity took over the nursing tasks a decade later.\(^{23}\)

A number of special city-wide works established during the Society’s first five years provide further evidence of the Mexican Society’s cooperation with the state in the 1840s, as well as of its discrepancies with the French parent organization. For example, in 1847 the Mexicans printed 12,000 copies of Father Ripalda’s catechism for free distribution as a reading primer in the city’s elementary schools. During the Mexican-American War (1846-48) the Society’s members assisted wounded soldiers from both armies and boasted of arranging for many U.S. soldiers to receive the last rites on their deathbeds. Vincentian volunteers cared for victims of the epidemic that came in the wake of the war, which in June 1848 claimed the life of the Society’s founder, Manuel Andrade. During the cholera epidemic of 1850, at the request of municipal authorities, sixteen Society members joined the Juntas coordinating relief efforts, with two of them serving in each of Mexico City’s eight wards.\(^{24}\) The devout gentlemen of the Mexican conferences were evidently respected for their welfare expertise.

Besides protecting welfare institutions, the early Mexican Society sent its members into public hospitals and prisons to care for the inmates. This institutional visiting continued services provided during the colonial period by the hospitaler orders and by a few confraternities that had taken meals to prisoners and patients.\(^{25}\) At first

\(^{23}\) See Reseña, 23-24; García Icazbalceta, Informe sobre los establecimientos, 63; and AHDF, Hospitales, vol. 2312, leg. 1, exp. 3.

\(^{24}\) Reseña, 17, 31; and De Dios, Historia de la familia, 1:522-24.

the prison ministries were secondary, with only 58 prisoners visited in 1851. In contrast, the Society reported tending to 9,204 sick and dying paupers that year by taking them food and clean bed linens, offering them solace, praying with them, and arranging for proper Catholic burials. In later years the balance shifted. By 1860, for example, the Vincentian volunteers assisted 2,460 prisoners, but only 647 hospital inmates.26

The hospital and prison ministries did not follow French precedents. Indeed, when the French Society became more bureaucratized in the 1850s and began furnishing preprinted report forms to its branches, it did not include the categories of sick and dying assisted, cadavers buried, or prisoners visited. The Mexicans had to add these categories by hand to the printed forms.27 As Albert Foucault explained in his centennial history of the international St. Vincent de Paul Society, “the visiting of prisons, so flourishing abroad, was only introduced to Paris in 1927.”28 Thus it cannot be said that the Mexican Society was a mere carbon copy of the parent organization.

The most striking departure from the French model was that the Mexicans did not at first visit the poor. A letter to Paris dated 2 March 1846 confirms that no home visits were conducted during the Society’s first year, a failing its President promised to rectify by organizing young men into new conferences where they could “begin practicing visits to poor families and thereby ignite their love of our impoverished brethren.”29

Home visiting apparently began soon thereafter. By 1851 conference members visited 213 families, and the numbers increased steadily to 520 families in 1860, 712 families in 1870, 851 in 1885, and 1,110 in 1894.30 The Society’s annual reports indicate that the gentlemen visited their adopted families regularly, usually going once a week in pairs to avoid any scandalous appearances that might arise from the contact of an unaccompanied man with the women in these families.31 The visitors provided for the material needs of their clients by giving

---

26 “Tableau Statistique...,” SVP, CC113, Mexique; Boletín (1860).
27 See Tableau Statistique..., SVP, CC113, Mexique.
28 Foucault, La Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul, 395.
29 Letter of 2 March 1846 to the Central Council in Paris, SVP, CC113, Mexique.
30 “Tableau Statistique...,” SVP, CC113, Mexique; Boletín (1860); Noticia (1871); Reseña, 47 for 1885 and 1894 figures.
31 Explained in footnote 5 to Reglamento de la Sociedad de San Vicente de Paul, 1835 (Mexico City, 1851), 8. [SVP, CC113, Méxique.]
them food, clothes, bed linens, cigarettes (at the time considered a necessity), and rent money. They arranged for doctors, medicines, and legal aid when needed. They helped place the children in school or the men in jobs, and occasionally bought tools so a breadwinner could work to support his family. By the end of the century they also placed women as servants. Moreover, the visitors tended to spiritual needs by making sure the family members knew Christian doctrine and the children were baptized and took first Communion. They offered advice and consolation, encouraged their clients to attend Mass and other religious functions, and when necessary attempted to dissuade them from their “vices.”

Yet home visiting did not come easily to the Mexican chapters. In 1856, when the Society was already a decade old, the volunteers visited many more inmates of welfare institutions (9,202) than families (213). Although the number of families had more than doubled by 1860 (to 520), they were few compared with the 3,107 inmates assisted. The problem persisted even as the number of client families increased at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1887 the Society’s president, Joaquín García Icazbalceta, complained that “conferences in the campos and pueblos, generally composed of poor people with little education … who do not understand the bylaws, fail to give home visits the capital importance they hold among us.” This failure was more widespread than he admitted, however. When the Mexican Society printed aggregation forms for new conferences it considered it necessary to explain (in a footnote to the section where each conference was to list its activities) that “The obra of visiting poor families in their domiciles, is the first one that should be listed because it is the fundamental and characteristic obra of the Society of San Vicente de Paul and the only truly essential one. The others, such as the rehabilitation of illicit unions, …the patronage of children and apprentices, the instruction of workers, soldiers, and prisoners, the visitation of hospitals, etc., are secondary.” Despite such admonitions, home visiting fell proportionally after 1851: whereas 192 active members visited 213 families in 1851 (1.1 families per member), each active member only visited .5 families in 1855 and 1865. As the membership soared in 1875, the rate dropped even further, to .25. Only in 1894, after years of tutelage under García Icazbalceta, did visiting rise to .72 families for each of the 1,536 active members.

---

33 See Boletines de Agregación, 1865-74, SVP, CC114, Mexique.
If by the end of the nineteenth century the activities of the Mexican Society were closer to those of the French organization, they were still not identical. After the Reforma the Society severed most of its ties with municipal institutions. In July 1867, after ousting the imperial regime, returning Liberals took control of the Hospital for Demented Women, which the Society had managed for twenty-two years. Society members were no longer openly called upon to help public institutions. Indeed, municipal authorities occasionally prohibited the Vincentian volunteers from visiting hospitals and prisons. Yet they continued their prison ministry. In 1871, the last post-Reforma year for which such figures are available, they visited 1,467 prisoners. By then hospital visiting had been largely abandoned, though it may have resumed later in the century. In fact, when the Mexican Society began printing its own report forms after 1868 it did not include the category sick visited (or the French category of soldiers instructed). Reflecting local practices, however, the Mexican forms included dying assisted and cadavers buried (a minor activity, with only 143 and 119 aided in 1871), as well as the all-important prisoners instructed.

The post-Reforma Mexican Society increasingly devoted itself to creating its own network of welfare institutions, as well as to visiting the poor. It had already begun establishing schools, soup kitchens, and lending libraries by 1858. The 1859 Boletín reported that, instead of just paying the school tuition and food costs for individuals in their adopted families, a few conferences founded their own establishments to serve a wider public. In Mexico City, for example, with the help of a generous member who spent 913 pesos from his own pocket, the conference of Nuestra Señora de los Dolores on 1 November 1858 opened a cocina económica serving hot meals to 200 paupers a day. In 1859 two other conferences planned to open similar cafeterias. In 1858 the Society also opened a library in the capital to lend religious as well as morally-uplifting works to its members and client families. By 1859 the Morelia, Michoacán conferences had established two

---

34 Reseña, 31.
35 The Reseña does not give dates for these bans, 42.
36 Visiting the sick was adopted as a special obra by the provincial council of Orizaba, founded in 1884. Reseña, 34.
37 See statistics in: Noticia (1869, 1871); and Memoria de las Obras de las Conferencias de la Sociedad de San Vicente de Paul ... durante el año de 1871 (Mexico City: Imp. de la V. e Hijos de Murguía, 1872). [SVP, Méxique, Rapports nationaux.]
talleres (workshops) to give young artisans religious instruction as well as train them to become carpenters and shoemakers. As time passed the Society created primary schools, night schools for adults, homeless shelters, clinics, and – by the 1880s – cajas de ahorro (credit unions) to help their clients save money. The most numerous of these foundations were the elementary schools. The Society’s statistics show that the numbers of niños patrocinados/jovenes instruidos grew from some 300 in 1856-58 to over a thousand in 1868-1871. Society-run schools apparently increased in subsequent decades. In the city of Mérida, Yucatán, for example, local conferences operated eight primary schools and four catechisms that educated 627 students by 1894.38

Although the conference members occasionally volunteered in these institutions, they turned most of the work over to hired employees. The gentlemen personally served meals at the opening of the first cocina económica, and sometimes taught a catechism class or awarded prizes to the best students in their schools. But they quickly arranged to hire nurses for their hospitals, teachers for their schools, cooks for their soup kitchens, and laundresses to provide clean bed linens for the sick.39 The eight primary schools in Mérida employed 23 teachers by 1894, for example. The Society rarely used nuns to staff its institutions, in part because of the suppression of conventual orders in 1861 (though the Sisters of Charity received a reprieve until 1874), and in part because, even before that, there were relatively few nuns in Mexico compared with Europe. The Vincentian institutions therefore provided steady work for lay people, usually women struggling to make ends meet.

In the process, the conferences made important contributions to the development of the Mexican welfare system. Although their system of home relief and institutional visiting remained the province of amateur volunteers, they were beginning to professionalize the delivery of many of their services. The visitors used the Vincentian system of vouchers which, much like modern food stamps, their clients used to obtain food, clothes, and shoes directly from local...

38 See Boletín (1859), 194-95, 204-5; De Dios, Historia de la familia, 1:518, 526-7, 539; and Reseña, 31-46.
39 See, for example, letter to Paris of 4 January 1853, SVP, CC113, Mexique.
shops.\textsuperscript{40} Since the volunteers did not have to deliver all the goods themselves, they maximized their impact with the assistance of participating shopkeepers. In addition, the visitors who went into poor people's homes foreshadowed the role of social workers because they investigated each family before "adopting" it, and then determined what the family required to survive a crisis and get on its feet again, arranged for medical and legal services, and provided job placement, education, and training.

As the Society expanded its services, it apparently did not encounter opposition from the State. Although the regime of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1910) left the anti-clerical Reform Laws on the books, it mended fences with the Mexican Church.\textsuperscript{41} And it welcomed the contributions of private philanthropists. Indeed, the Society was only one of several private groups founding hospitals, asylums, and schools during the Porfiriato.\textsuperscript{42} Although the official version of

\textsuperscript{40} Reglamento de la Sociedad (1851), 8; Reglamento de la Asociación de las Señoras de la Caridad instituida por San Vicente de Paul en beneficio de los pobres enfermos, y establecida en varios lugares por los Padres de la Congregación de la Misión licencia de los ordinarios (Mexico City: Imp. De Andrade y Escalante, 1863), 22. [Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City (hereinafter INAH), Fondo Reservado.]

\textsuperscript{41} See Mariano Cuevas, Historia de la Iglesia en México, Vol. 5 (El Paso, TX: Ed. 'Revista Católica,' 1928), vol. 5, chap. 6; and Hanson, "The Day of Ideals," 52-67.

Mexican history claims that the government took over the provision of public education and social assistance after the Reforma, it in fact allowed non-governmental – including Catholic – organizations to supplement its meager resources. As a result, private philanthropy was thriving in the late nineteenth century.

Yet the Society itself stagnated. By 1895 membership had declined 45% since 1875, from 2,824 to 1,536 active members. Nonetheless the Society was larger and more active than in the middle of the century. It counted 120 chapters throughout Mexico. With 432 honorary members, it enjoyed the support of many more benefactors than in the early years – evidence that it had developed a network of businessmen donating goods, doctors donating services, and individuals donating money to help the Vincentian projects. The growth of its expenditures, from 20,084 pesos in 1855 to 39,116 in 1885 and 54,170 in 1894 (not including in-kind donations), suggests that its welfare programs were healthy. And membership recovered slightly in the next two years, returning to the level of the 1880s (see Table One). Between the “outdoor relief” offered to paupers in their houses and the “indoor relief” delivered in both its own and public institutions, the Society was helping at least 10,000 people a year.

If membership in the Society declined, it was not because giving and volunteering had failed to take root in Mexico. Instead, participation in Vincentian organizations had become highly gendered, with women more likely to provide personal service and men more likely to donate money and goods. A sexual division of labor had also developed in the visiting of public institutions, with the men specializing in the rougher prison ministry and relinquishing most of the hospital ministry to the ladies (both the Sisters of Charity and the lay volunteers). Consequently, the leveling off of the male Society at the end of the nineteenth century is not a good indicator of the state of private Catholic philanthropy. The Society’s increased spending suggests that the men were delegating much of the work to the employees in their welfare institutions, as well as leaving it to their loosely-affiliated sister organization whose members were often their wives and daughters.

---

43 Reséñia, 47.
The Female Asociación de las Señoras de la Caridad

Far less information is available on the Ladies of Charity than on the male Society of St. Vincent de Paul. The picture that emerges from scattered documentation is nevertheless remarkable. Although the Asociación de las Señoras de la Caridad was founded in Mexico nearly two decades later than the men's Society, it quickly outstripped them with more members, more supporters, more chapters, and far more paupers assisted each year.

Table Two. Membership of the Mexican Señoras
de la Caridad de San Vicente de Paul, 1864-1910

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members</th>
<th>1864</th>
<th>1865</th>
<th>1868</th>
<th>1872</th>
<th>1878</th>
<th>1888</th>
<th>1892</th>
<th>1895</th>
<th>1896</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1909</th>
<th>1910</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>566</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5,003</td>
<td>7,344</td>
<td>13,371</td>
<td>9,875</td>
<td>11,264</td>
<td>14,933</td>
<td>18,034</td>
<td>20,188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honorary</td>
<td>839</td>
<td>1,863</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5,709</td>
<td>10,601</td>
<td>25,120</td>
<td>12,777</td>
<td>18,550</td>
<td>21,047</td>
<td>24,338</td>
<td>23,018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,405</td>
<td>2,860</td>
<td>12,274</td>
<td>20,212</td>
<td>8,712</td>
<td>17,944</td>
<td>38,491</td>
<td>22,652</td>
<td>29,814</td>
<td>35,980</td>
<td>42,372</td>
<td>43,206</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Statistics cover the fiscal year which ran from 1 July of the previous year to 30 June.41

The two organizations were not identical. One of St. Vincent de Paul's original foundations, the Association de Dames de la Charité was already centuries old in Europe when the men's Society was created. Yet the ladies' organization blossomed during the nineteenth century, began to expand internationally at about the same time as the male conferences, and had such similar purposes and structure that the Dames even applied for membership in the men's Society, which

---

rejected the petition on the grounds that its bylaws only authorized it to admit men. Altho\nough the Dames continued to function under their old rule, which emphasized home visitation of the sick, in practice they performed a broad array of charitable activities similar to those of the men's conferences and drew their support from the same social classes. The major difference between the two groups (aside from the sex of their members) was that the Ladies were directly controlled by the Vincentian order of the Congregation de la Mission, and they maintained a very close relation with the Church.

The Asociación de las Señoras de la Caridad was established in Mexico City on 2 August 1863 by Father Muñoz de la Cruz, a Vincentian missionary priest. Under the relative safety of the Second Empire, the Association took off like wild fire. In July 1864, after only one year of operation, the Señoras held a national assembly and published a Memoria of their activities. They reported 566 active members and 839 benefactors in 22 conferences, 12 of them in Mexico City and 10 in the states of Mexico, Puebla, Guanajuato, and Guadalajara. They had already established a Superior Council to govern the local chapters. They had also created a shelter for young women, the Asilo de la Caridad de Nuestra Señora de la Luz, soon to be followed by several primary schools and orphanages. Thus, the Señoras quickly caught up with the older men's Society.

Thereafter the Ladies' Association grew so dramatically that it dwarfed its brother organization (see Table Three).

---

45 Reglamento de la Sociedad, fn. 2, 6; Foucault, La Société de Saint-Vincent de Paul, 218; and Memoria (1867).
46 See: Reglamento (1863); and Reglamento de la Asociación de las Señoras de la Caridad . . . formado según el original de Paris y mandado observar por el Director General de la República (Mexico City: Iglesia de la Inmaculada Concepción, 1911). [INAH, Fondo Reservado.], esp. 47. Because of the suppression of conventual orders, the Mexican Señoras at times reported directly to the Archbishop.
47 Earlier attempts to establish the ladies' conferences in Mexico, beginning in Puebla in 1848, did not succeed, De Dios, Historia de la familia, 1:544-49. The organization later recognized 1863 as its foundation date, Memoria sobre la obra de las Señoras de la Caridad de San Vicente de Paul en México, Año de 1921 (Mexico City: Imp. 'La Moderna,' 1922), 5. [INAH, Fondo Reservado.]
48 De Dios, Historia de la familia, 1:544-49; Memoria (1865).
Table Three. Comparison of Male and Female Societies, 1865-1895

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Active Members</th>
<th>Families Visited</th>
<th>Expenditures (pesos)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1865</td>
<td>791</td>
<td>997</td>
<td>374</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1875</td>
<td>2,824</td>
<td>3,003</td>
<td>714</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>1,536</td>
<td>9,875</td>
<td>1,110</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* First dates are for the male conferences, second dates are for the female.49

By 1866 there were 87 female conferences, including 6 composed of niñas training to become full-fledged members when they turned 18.50

By 1868 the Señoras counted 12,274 active and honorary members, compared with only 1,461 of their male counterparts. In just five years they were thus mobilizing eight times more volunteers and donors than the men. These discrepancies persisted for the rest of the century. By 1894 there were only 1,536 men active in 120 conferences, compared with 9,875 women active in some 400 conferences by 1895. With branches in nineteen states, the ladies were broadly distributed across Mexico, although they were strongest in Jalisco, home to nearly half their members.51 They were backed by an impressive 12,777 benefactors, compared with only 432 supporting the men's conferences. The 96,206 pesos they spent on good works (not including the value of in-kind donations) was almost twice what the gentlemen disbursed. The ladies reported aiding 21,428 sick people and visiting 70,537 families, compared with only 1,100 families visited by the men. Each lady thus visited an average of 7.1 families regularly, compared with the .7 families visited by each man.

The Señoras' growth continued without interruption until the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution. A report of the international association listed 19,000 niñas in 1895, an indication that the ladies

---

49 Information on male Society in Reseña, 47; information on female Association in Memoria (1865, 1879), and Rapport (1896).
50 Memoria (1867).
51 All statistics for 1895 come from Rapport (1896), tableau no. 7. In 1895 the Ladies of Charity had branches in the following states, in decreasing order of membership: Jalisco, Michoacán, Yucatán, San Luis Potosí, Mexico, Guanajuato, Sinaloa, Veracruz, Nuevo León, Zacatecas, Coahuila, Querétaro, Puebla, Chihuahua, Guerrero, Tabasco, Aguascalientes, Oaxaca, and Durango.
were training a sizeable new generation of members. In 1901 there were 14,933 volunteers and another 21,047 regular contributors. In 1910, on the eve of the tumult, active membership had risen to a historic high of 20,188. The volunteers visited 135,344 families and 32,000 hospital patients. They distributed 1,779,849 meals, 132,481 prescriptions, and 27,000 articles of clothing, which they often sewed themselves. In addition, they managed a large national network of elementary schools, asylums, cafeterias, clinics, and pharmacies to provide low-cost medicines to the poor. In 1909 these included 32 hospitals, 20 schools, and 17 orphanages throughout Mexico, with a large number concentrated in the Guadalajara region. The schools alone reached 25,000 children that year. By comparison, the male Society languished.

It is tempting to argue that the success of the female organization reflects the feminization of piety in the nineteenth century. But there is a more complicated explanation for the disparity between the male and female conferences. Male piety flourished in other organizations. Catholic laymen in the late nineteenth century published Catholic periodicals and founded numerous devotional and mutual aid associations. In the early twentieth century they

---

52 The Rapport (1896), 83, explains that the Mexican girls' groups, the Enfants de Marie, were "puissantes auxiliaires des Dames, et ... les premieres dignitaires de l'Oeuvre." However, De Dios, Historia de la familia, 1:563-66, suggests that the Hijas de María were an autonomous organization which concentrated more on strengthening the faith of its members than on training to become Ladies of Charity.

53 González Navarro, El Porfiriato, 505-9; and La Pobreza, 62. The Memoria (1879) also lists high numbers of raciones ordinarias (385,110), raciones extraordinarias (60,273), recetas (50,662), and piezas de ropa (8,664) distributed the PREVIOUS YEAR.

54 De Dios, Historia de la familia, 2:644-46.

55 De Dios, Historia de la familia, 2:630, quotes an editorial from the 1910 Boletín as lamenting the low membership of the Society, but does not provide figures.

joined Catholic trade unions and attended Catholic conferences.57 These men were not afraid to display their religious fervor openly, yet few of them joined the Vincentian organization.

The phenomenal growth of the Asociación de Señorías de la Caridad is partially due to the organizing efforts of Vincentian priests. Unlike the foundation of the male conferences, the ladies' groups apparently owed little to lay initiative. Indeed, the 1865 Memoria attributed the success of the Ladies of Charity during the first two years entirely to the “zeal” of the missionaries, and did not name a single woman as having contributed to the process.58 The Church began encouraging the formation of lay organizations after the cofradías were outlawed in 1859, and increased its pace after 1874, when the expulsion of the Sisters of Charity left a glaring gap in ecclesiastical welfare services. A Pastoral Instruction of 1875 explicitly called on “Catholic ladies” to join the conferences of St. Vincent de Paul to continue the work of the Sisters of Charity in providing for “the instruction of destitute children, the needs of ailing paupers in hospitals, and the relief of all sorts of misery.”59 According to the 1894 Rapport of the international Dames de la Charité, the Mexican chapter was the largest in “the world” (although perhaps this only meant outside of France) because the Mexican poor were “deprived ... of the succor provided by the hospitalier communities.”60 Thus the unusually difficult Mexican Church-State relations provided the impetus for priests to promote the Ladies of Charity.

Still, if priests promoted the organization, it was lay women who enthusiastically joined. As women’s education improved in the nineteenth century and the ideal of feminine seclusion declined, many

57 Adame Goddard, El pensamiento político; Ceballos Ramírez, El catolicismo and Las organizaciones laborales; De Dios, Historia de la familia, 2:627–28; Hanson “The Day of Ideals,” 83-130; and Erika Pani, “Democracia y representación política: la visión de dos periódicos católicos de fin de siglo, 1880-1910” in Modernidad, tradición y alteridad: la ciudad de México en el cambio de siglo (XIX-XX), eds. Claudia Agostoni and Elisa Speckman (Mexico City: UNAM, 2001), 143-60.
58 Memoria (1865), 8.
60 Rapport (1894), 45.
ladies sought outlets where they could apply their talents. Since upper and middle-class women rarely worked outside the home, the conferences gave them a socially-acceptable way to serve larger society beyond their families. The growth of the conferences reflects the larger trend of the feminization of charity in nineteenth-century Mexico, also visible in women’s membership on the boards of public welfare institutions, as well as in their increased role in managing them.\footnote{For a fuller discussion of these trends, see Silvia Marina Arrom, \textit{The Women of Mexico City, 1790-1857} (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1985), esp. chap. 1; and Arrom, \textit{Containing the Poor}, 180, 228, 244-47, 260-61, and 267-68.} But these provided opportunities for very few women. The
suppression of conventual orders in 1874 left Mexican women with few service organizations they could join. In 1869 laywomen flocked to the new Sociedad Católica de Señoras y Señoritas, but its demise in 1878 left them without that avenue for philanthropic activities. Filling a void, the Ladies of Charity gave tens of thousands of Mexican women a structure for contributing to the common good.

The Vincentian conferences also provided a community, source of prestige, and arena where women could become leaders, acquire new skills, and interact with people they might not otherwise meet. In addition to their charitable activities, the Señoras met in their local conferences weekly, made speeches, and prepared reports. Whereas Mexican women were barred from voting and holding public office until the mid-twentieth century, they could do both as Señoras de Caridad. Each conference elected a president, secretary, and treasurer as did the central and provincial councils that governed the local chapters. They voted to approve the entrance of new members. After a six-month trial the aspirantes who proved their capacity to perform the demanding work of serving the poor were inducted, in annual assemblies whose ceremonies included the granting of a diploma to each new socia (as the active members were called). In providing welfare services, the ladies also managed large sums of money and developed organizational skills.

Although the conferences held their weekly sessions in the protected precinct of the parish church, the volunteers ventured from there into public spaces. Working in pairs, the ladies were not alone while visiting the dingy rooms of their “adopted” families or the filthy wards of public hospitals and prisons, but they were not sheltered, either. In carrying out their good works they might be subjected to shocking sights and rude insults. For example, the triumphal story of one lady, who endured a dying patient’s vulgar screams and after several tries convinced him to accept the last rites, was narrated in the 1865 Memoria as an inspiration to others. Even when serving as teachers or supervisors in their own supposedly spotless schools, orphanages, shelters, and clinics, the ladies were

---

62 Cuevas, Historia de la Iglesia, 5:383-84, claims that in 1873 the female branch of the Sociedad Católica de Mexico had 20,000 members. See also Adame Goddard, El pensamiento político, 19-27. A few religious orders were reintroduced to Mexico at the end of the nineteenth century, but they apparently did not flourish as they had in the past.

63 Memoria (1865), 7.
operating in the public arena. And it was not an exclusively female sphere they entered. The volunteers offered services to men as well as women. They maintained close contact, not only with the priests who helped each conference, but also with the doctors and pharmacists who assisted them. Indeed, the statistical reports for each conference recorded the number of associated priests, doctors, and pharmacists – usually numbering about one dozen – immediately after listing the number of active members and benefactors. The ladies’ fundraising efforts entailed not only attending charity balls and raffling off donated items among their friends, but also collecting alms in public plazas and approaching the leading men in the community, including the director of a circus, Señor Chiarini, who in 1865 donated the 910 peso earnings of one performance to the Association. Thus, without overtly challenging social norms, the work of the Ladies of Charity expanded women’s roles and allowed them to venture into new spheres.

Men had less need for these outlets, for they had alternate sources of prestige and sociability, as well as alternate avenues for serving others, defending their faith, and reforming the modern world. They could do so through work, government service, or – for the most devout – the priesthood, options closed to women of the upper and middle classes. They could also join the mutual aid societies, clubs, masonic lodges, and political parties that were closed to their mothers, sisters, and daughters. Moreover, many gentlemen were deterred from joining the conferences because of the kind of commitment they required.

In the highly gendered world of nineteenth-century Mexico, the Vincentian demands for regular face-to-face contact with the poor, and for hands-on caregiving, were considered more suited to women than to men. The Pastoral Instruction of 1875 that called on women to join the conferences noted the special feminine disposition for serving the poor and sick. So did the 1863 Mexican edition of the Reglamento of the Señoras de la Caridad, which noted that, in addition to having “greater compassion for the sufferings of others,” women were already “accustomed to carrying out certain chores in their houses.” The Reglamento added that the “principal ladies of each town” were ideal members of the Association because “they are always at home and less distracted than the men, who are ordinarily

64 Ibid., 6.
occupied with their business and frequently out of the house and even the city." Many men were thus simply too busy to engage in Vincentian philanthropy.

The Reglamento recognized that this female advantage was restricted to the higher social classes where women "had no need to work for their subsistence like the women of an inferior class." Yet it bears emphasizing that the members of the female conferences were not all wealthy. For example, in 1865 the conference of San Antonio de las Huertas in Mexico City consisted entirely of seamstresses, and few well-known last names appeared in the membership lists of the other conferences that year. Nonetheless it is likely that few of the middle-class socías held jobs and that most had servants to care for their homes and children, thereby freeing the ladies to devote themselves to charitable activities while their male relations were at work.

Moreover, after anti-clerical Liberals won the War of the Reforma, men may have realized that their career advancement would be hindered by membership in a Catholic organization that had close ties to the defeated Conservatives – especially if they had ambitions to serve in public life. Indeed, although several members of the early Mexican Society held political office, this was not the case in later years. The importance of the political variable is confirmed by two recent studies of the St. Vincent de Paul Society in other Latin American countries, Chile and Colombia, which had far less conflictive relations between Church and State, the male conferences continued growing at the end of the nineteenth century, and there appears to have been less of a disparity between male and female Catholic lay organizations. These structural factors, and not necessarily women's stronger devotion, help explain why the conferences of St. Vincent de Paul attracted more Mexican women than men.

---

65 Reglamento (1863), 4.
66 Memoria (1865).
Contributing to Social Change

With their multiplicity of functions, the Vincentian lay associations combined both traditional and modern approaches to alleviating poverty.⁶⁸ The rhetoric in the bylaws and reports recalled the centuries old discourse of St. Vincent de Paul with its emphasis on imitating Christ, loving the poor, and showing humility and abnegation. The conference members practiced charity not only out of a desire to help others but also to gain their own salvation, aided by the indulgences granted to those who joined the organizations. The Ladies of Charity even engaged in such customary Catholic practices as inviting twelve paupers to dine on Maundy Thursday and having the conference members wash and kiss their feet.⁶⁹ Both societies maintained paternalistic relations with “their” adopted families.

Moreover, a large part of the members’ efforts went to providing the Seven Acts of Mercy: feeding the hungry, housing the wayfarer, dressing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty, visiting the sick, caring for orphans, and burying the dead. These older types of assistance characterized the work with hospital patients and prisoners that was so important to both the male and female conferences. Although, much of the thrust of home visiting offered only temporary remedies to destitution.

Yet the works of the Vincentian lay societies should not be dismissed as mere throwbacks to traditional Catholic charity. Instead of accepting poverty as a normal condition and merely relieving its symptoms, they often tried to treat its causes. The emphasis on providing elementary schooling, adult education, vocational training for youths – and in one case music lessons so that a blind man could support his family as a musician⁷⁰ – aimed to prevent their clients’ future destitution. The curriculum in their schools not only included Christian doctrine but also history, science, music, calculus, and line drawing that prepared their graduates for employment.⁷¹ The credit unions that encouraged savings were designed to help their clients achieve financial independence. The job placements, and provision of tools, likewise went beyond palliative measures.

⁶⁸ For a discussion of shifting notions of poor relief in Mexico, see Arron, Containing the Poor, esp. 7-8, 32-33, 38-39, 59-62, and 72-74.
⁶⁹ Memoria (1867), 10.
⁷⁰ Boletín de la Sociedad (1859), 200.
⁷¹ Reseña, 11.
Unlike traditional almshouses, Vincentian volunteers did not hand out aid indiscriminately. The societies shared the liberal critique of almsgiving as encouraging idleness. Thus Mexico's numerous beggars were rarely among their clients except, according to the Society's 50th anniversary review, "when there is some hope that we can convert them into useful members of society." Instead, these Catholic activists used philanthropy as part of a broader strategy to achieve social change.

The volunteers coupled their assistance with religious and moral instruction because they wanted to transform their clients, not just save their souls, but to serve their project of Catholic renewal. The Vincentians taught doctrine to the children in their schools, the orphans and homeless in their asylums, and the prisoners, patients, and apprentices they aided. The Boletines, Memorias, and Noticias boasted of cases where the volunteers brought a recalcitrant prisoner or hospital patient back to the Church after many decades of having strayed, converted a Protestant, or convinced an unmarried couple to enter the sacrament of marriage. They proudly reported the number of children taken to baptism or prepared for the first Communion, the dying given the viaticum, and the paupers brought to confession. Unafraid of being intrusive, the visitors also tried to "moralize" their clients by pressuring them to end illicit relationships, conciliating divided families, persuading the debauched to give up drunkenness, and even providing separate beds for boys and girls. Putting a high priority on instilling work ethic, they insisted that the youths they patronized were gainfully employed so they would not turn to prostitution or crime. Far from exalting the poor, then, the societies tried to change popular values and customs.

The Vincentian ladies and gentlemen were convinced that their philanthropy helped combat the major ills of the nineteenth century. They blamed the French Revolution, that "horrible" movement that separated the Church from public life, for unleashing the secularizing forces that caused the loss of faith and led to the immorality, materialism, individualism, alienation, and class conflict of modern times. They were also increasingly on the defensive against

---

72 Reseña, 12.

73 This philosophy, expressed in the Society's by-laws and reports, is elaborated on in the book by conference member, and 1849 Central Council president, Luis Gonzaga Cuevas, Porvenir de México, o juicio sobre su estado político en 1821 y 1851 (Mexico City: Imp. de Ignacio Cumplido, 1851).
the incursions of Protestantism. Their solution was to propagate the Catholic religion and Catholic values, and to do it in such a way as to restore social harmony. It was therefore essential for Vincentian volunteers to establish a personal relationship with the people they aided. These intimate—though clientelist—bonds helped further the desired reconciliation between the rich and poor. Indeed, in 1894 the President of the Society's Central Council proclaimed his organization's type of philanthropy far superior to public welfare, which "is haughty ... and leaves the poor in the isolation, indifference, and oblivion that offend him more than his material deprivations." Fundamental civic concerns, then, were clothed in religious rhetoric.

Although the Vincentian project was profoundly anti-Liberal, it responded to contemporary problems and represented some modern approaches to social problems. To be sure, the conferences resembled the colonial cofradías in many ways. Conference members worshipped together just as the cofrades had, and practiced special devotions such as attending spiritual retreats and celebrating the feast day of St. Vincent de Paul on 19 July. Their annual assemblies included a sermon, and closed with a prayer. Like the confraternities, the societies' basic cell was a small group that in theory should not exceed thirty-three members (the age of Christ when he died). Although it was not part of the French bylaws, the male conferences also functioned like confraternities by praying for sick and deceased socios and even, when Dr. Andrade died in 1848, carrying his body on their shoulders from the center of Mexico City to the distant cemetery of Santa Paula. Thus, the Vincentian associations provided continuity from the colonial period.

Yet they represented a departure as well. Unlike most cofradías, the conferences did not exist primarily to protect a particular church or religious image, or to care for their own members in times of need. Instead, their principal activity was to assist total strangers. If Catholicism was customary in Mexico, this brand of Catholic activism was not. In particular, the practice of home visiting had to be

---

74 Agustín Rodriguez, quoted in Reseña, 71.
75 De Dios, Historia de la familia, 1:513.
76 See Reglamento de la Sociedad (1851), 8, fns. 4 and 6; and De Dios, Historia de la familia, 1:73, fn. 2.
77 See De Dios, Historia de la familia, 1:513-17; and Belanger, "Cofradías."
learned and disseminated. It was far easier (especially for elite men) to give money to the poor rather than to donate time and personal service. For most ladies, active participation in the public sphere and administration of welfare organizations were not customary practices either.

Moreover, the Vincentian conferences helped build a democratic culture and shape republican citizenry. Adhesion to the conferences was voluntary, with membership based on ideological affinities. The socios were not even required to pay mandatory dues. Both organizations governed themselves democratically with a written constitution, elected officers, and members voting as equals. Indeed, the bylaws of the Ladies of Charity dictated that elections be held by secret ballot. These organizations consistently defended freedom of speech and assembly. In calling for Mexicans to join the Catholic conferences, for example, the 1875 Pastoral emphasized that "the Constitution of the Republic formally and expressly recognizes the right of all Mexicans to associate for any honest and licit end." Ironically, it was the Liberals who tried to restrict the conferences' rights of association in 1861 and 1868, and who as late as 1889 limited their right to publish by insisting that the societies' publications could only be distributed to their own members. Therefore, it is misleading to label the societies as simply "conservative," for they shared in many modernizing tendencies. In some respects these lay associations presaged the progressive Catholic social movements that emerged in the wake of the papal encyclical Rerum Novarum in 1891. Like later groups, they represented an organized effort to challenge secularization through "an orthodox adherence to Catholic dogma and a progressive critique

78 Home visiting did not come easily to the Chilean or Colombian conferences either, which likewise failed to practice it in the early years. Castro, "Charity and Poor Relief," 198; Ponce de León Atria, "La Sociedad de San Vicente de Paul," 1.
79 Reglamento (1863), 7.
80 Quoted in Olímón Nolasco, "Proyecto de reforma," 289.
81 Boletín (1889).
From today's perspective, we might denigrate the societies' aid as paternalistic and controlling, since self-righteous visitors tried to impose their values on those they assisted and aimed to "help" rather than empower their clients to demand equality. Yet the conference members did not merely reinforce the status quo. Instead, they viewed themselves as social reformers combatting poverty, hunger, sickness, illiteracy, homelessness, class conflict, moral degeneration, and alienation. Besides proselytizing and practicing individual acts of charity, they also created institutions like elementary schools, night schools for adults, and credit unions to achieve a greater measure of social justice. They tried to give needy families the resources to become independent. Although they did not organize Catholic trade unions -- the hallmark of twentieth-century Social Catholicism -- they established "patronages" for workers and apprentices that offered vocational training and mutual aid along with religious instruction. And they worked tirelessly to shape public opinion both by catechizing their clients and by distributing Catholic almanacs, missals, and edifying works designed "to combat the pernicious influence of the novel and the newspaper."

It is difficult to know what the recipients thought of this mix of material assistance and moral regulation. In his brief, critical discussion of the Vincentian associations, Moisés González Navarro ridiculed them for "exacting communions in exchange for a loaf of bread." Yet there was no shortage of paupers willing to tolerate the presence of intrusive visitors, even agreeing to pray with them and accompany them to church in return for assistance. The families that petitioned the conferences for help evidently incorporated the societies' services into their survival strategies. Those who cooperated not only received aid and protection during their lifetimes but also avoided the dishonor of a pauper's funeral. The stories of grateful clients in the Boletines and Memorias may not have been pure fiction. In a country where rich and poor shared a Catholic culture, some of the societies' clients may even have appreciated the opportunity to strengthen their

---

84 Reseña, 13.
85 González Navarro, El Porfiriato, 496.
faith. In any case, given the paucity of public relief in Mexico, the destitute had few other places to turn to in times of need, especially if rather than entering into demeaning public institutions they preferred to continue living with dignity in their homes.

In the process of constructing an extensive network of local organizations to assist the poor, Catholic activists from the upper and middle classes also created the building blocks of a vigorous civil society. The conference members met together in their local chapters week after week, year after year – for some forty years in the case of García Icazbalceta and long-time Society secretary Jesús Urquiaga – forming social networks that have been overlooked by social historians. Forging personal bonds with less fortunate members of society, the volunteers constructed a community that united members of different social classes. The neighborhood-level cells were tied into a complex national and international structure that was independent from the Mexican State. By only tracing the formation of civil society in secular organizations, recent literature has missed an important locus of associational life. The size and longevity of these associations challenges the view so widespread in the older social science literature that, unlike the Americans observed by Alexis de Tocqueville, Latin Americans were not “joiners.” Historians have simply ignored some of the kinds of groups they joined.

Although in Mexico in the early twentieth century these Catholic groups were weakened by the twin attacks of the Revolution and the defeat of the Church during the Cristero Rebellion, their strength in the second half of the nineteenth century shows that participation in civil society, democratic practices, and volunteering to help others are not emerging today for the first time, as is so often affirmed. Neither is highly-organized philanthropy. The Vincentian societies had written bylaws, officers, central and regional governing bodies, annual meetings, published reports, and correspondence with the parent offices in Paris. They also had formal programs to recruit, train, and deploy volunteers in an extensive network of relief organizations. Moreover, their services – as well as their critique of secular liberalism and vision of Catholic renewal – reached a large clientele. We should beware of exaggerating the Vincentian
accomplishments. Their assistance only reached a minority of the Mexican poor. Largely confined to cities and towns, it barely touched the deeply-ingrained rural and indigenous poverty. Yet this record should not be scoffed at as it compares favorably with what the Mexican government offered at the time.

**Conclusion.**

Mexico was not unusual in having a dynamic tradition of Catholic philanthropy. Indeed, Catholic activism may have been stronger during the early twentieth century in other Latin American countries which did not experience a fiercely anti-clerical Revolution. If in 1844 Mexican laymen pioneered the new Vincentian approach to social reform, by the end of the nineteenth century the St. Vincent de Paul Society was established in eighteen Latin American countries.

**Table Four. Foundation Dates American Branches of the St. Vincent de Paul Society**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>19th Century</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1845</strong></td>
<td><strong>1866</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico*</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1847</strong></td>
<td><strong>1872</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada*</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1854</strong></td>
<td><strong>1878</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>Haiti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1857</strong></td>
<td><strong>1881</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia</td>
<td>El Salvador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trinidad and Tobago</td>
<td><strong>1883</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Panama</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1858</td>
<td>1885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay*</td>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guyana</td>
<td>Guatemala*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>1894</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>Paraguay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>Nicaragua</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* There are some discrepancies in various sources about these dates. For Mexico and the U.S. I have used the foundation dates of 1845 accepted by both national organizations. 

A recent study of Colombia shows that the male conferences thrived there until the 1920s, when they were increasingly supplanted by Acción Católica and the Círculos de Obreros Católicos whose political activism and syndicalism appealed to a new generation. The Mexican Association of the Ladies of Charity may have been the largest outside of Europe in 1894, but by 1892 the French central office listed branches in Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Martinique, and Peru. Vincentian ladies conferences were also active in late nineteenth-century Argentina, although they apparently voted against affiliating with the international body in order to avoid paying dues. And the Ladies of Charity continued spreading to other countries, such as Colombia, in the early twentieth century.

---


87 Castro, "Charity and Poor Relief," esp. chap. 4. See also Foucault, *La Société de Saint-Vincent*, 270-331; and Société de St. Vincent de Paul, 281-303.

88 *Rapport* (1893). The Mexican Ladies of Charity was also one of the earliest, if not the first, in Latin America. The *Memoria* (1865) listed only one other Latin American branch by the end of 1864, in Peru (final chart).

89 Mead, "Gender, Welfare and the Catholic Church," esp. 100.

90 Castro, "Charity and Poor Relief," 209, 227-28, gives a foundation date of 1925 for the national organization, although some local conferences had already been founded by then.
These were not the only groups dedicated to helping the poor. As historians become disillusioned with the achievements of public welfare, they are increasingly turning their attention to the private sector. Numerous benevolent societies, both secular and religious, are coming to light in nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Latin American cities. My interviews with elderly Cubans suggest that not so long ago visiting the poor under the auspices of other Catholic groups, such as the Damas Isabelinas, was an important activity for many middle and upper-class women. Businesses and individuals regularly donated goods and money to assist the less fortunate. Medical doctors sometimes set aside one day a week or a month to treat the destitute without charge. These practices merit further study. Although private initiative was eclipsed in the second half of the twentieth century, when government agencies took over the provision of health, education, housing, and welfare services, it did not disappear. Understanding Latin America's charitable traditions in a time when citizens did not rely on the State is fundamental to strengthening philanthropy and civil society in that region today.

---