

## ON THE IDEA OF POVERTY IN THE WESTERN MIDDLE AGES (12<sup>TH</sup> – 15<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES)

**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to provide some coordinates along which the Western historiographic and theological discourse relating to poverty in general and to the often unpleasant aspects it generated in society gained shape. Poverty has been transformed into a vital attribute of Christianity, but the society of those times was not always receptive to these issues, because the world often loved to hate what Jesus loved.

**Keywords:** poverty, charity, Western Middle Ages, divagantes, vagabundi, pauperes cum Petro, pauperes cum Lazaro.

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Research topics related to mentality, crime, social strata and their reaction to the various “calamities” they faced have also led, in our post-1989 historiography, to the emergence of studies pointing in this direction,<sup>2</sup> influenced particularly by the French historical school.

In this study I want to highlight just a few coordinates along which the Western historiographic discourse relating to poverty has gained shape and to the interrogations this issue generated particularly in Western Europe, a space that was characteristically confronted with this phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

The sociological approach in this case is extremely important, because certain individuals are described as being representative for the group; the term *pauper* is used as a category of scientific analysis.<sup>4</sup>

According to the opinions expressed by Aurel Răduțiu, in the agrarian type of societies that were dominant in the Middle Ages, the phenomenon of impoverishment occurred in the wake of natural disasters, such as prolonged drought, great flooding, long and frosty winters, wars, lootings and raids, agrarian crises, which could cause

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<sup>2</sup> Among the authors of recent studies, articles, monographs dedicated to these issues, mention should be made of Ligia Livadă-Cadeschi, Constanța Ghițulescu or Dan Horia Mazilu, who have introduced such approaches in the Romanian scientific circuit in recent years.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, the renowned Hungarian mediaevalist Pál Engel showed that, for various reasons, Hungary did not experience great periods of famine, which could have generated social problems, such as were common in the rest of Europe, in *Regatul Sfântului Ștefan. Istoria Ungariei medievale (895-1526)*, Cluj Napoca, Editura Mega, 2006, p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> Lucas Burkart, (Basel Univ.), “Poverty, the poor and welfare in medieval urban culture,” in *The Welfare State, Past, Present, Future. (IV). Clloh’s workshop II. Coordinated by Ann Katherine Isaacs*, Pisa, Edizioni Plus, 2002, p. 157.

the disaggregation of the social structures and enhanced social poverty.<sup>5</sup>

The same author emphasized the fact that the percentage of “stable poverty” of 5% within a society could reach the figure of 20-25% in cases of grave economic and social unrest.<sup>6</sup>

Among the causes that provoked agrarian crises as the effects of climate disturbances were the disasters caused by the invasions of insects and animals, epizooties that decimated the livestock.<sup>7</sup> Some of the most damaging insects for agriculture were locusts and May beetles, while among mammals the most nefarious were voles and field mice, which could produce genuine invasion after mild winters and the droughty years that followed them.<sup>8</sup>

Camil Mureșanu shows, in an article dedicated to these issues, that in the period 1310-1320, a large-scale famine occurred in Europe, while from 1325 to 1400 there were 30 years of epidemics.<sup>9</sup>

David Nirenberg also indicates that in 1315-1318 Western historiography has placed the “great famine” which affected, in particular, Northern Europe, a calamity determining the demise, in some regions, of more than 15% of the population [Essex in the Kingdom of England].<sup>10</sup>

For France in the 15th century, there appeared, for instance, to have been forged an implacable association between sickness and starvation, between wars, shortages of food and means of subsistence, while in the following years there was registered a considerable lack of agro-food products.<sup>11</sup>

For the period under consideration, even when the contemporaries referred to an image such as, for example, the large number of individuals without an occupation, the poor turned into mere parasites or beggars, we should nonetheless keep in mind the subjectivity of the person who wrote about these phenomena, his expectations or his cultural background, as well as the reason for which he wrote. Relevant in this respect appears to be the manner in which two travellers described London in the late 12th century and the population that animated the English capital. All that the monk Richard of Devizes found in London was as follows: “the number of parasites there is infinite. Actors, jesters, effeminate boys, sycophantic Moors, pederasts, ephebes, girls who sing and dance, charlatans, belly dancers, sorcerers, magicians, sleepwalkers, blackmailers, pantomimes, beggars: this is the world that fills the homes,”<sup>12</sup> while William Fitz

<sup>5</sup> Aurel Răduțiu, “Concepte și terminologie. Unele considerații privind majoritate, minoritate, elite și marginali de-a lungul istoriei,” in *Anuarul Institutului de Istorie*, Cluj Napoca, Editura Academiei Române, no. 32, 1993, pp. 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Cernovodeanu, Paul Binder, *Cavalerii Apocalipsului. Calamitățile naturale din trecutul României (până la 1800)*, București, Editura Silex, 1993, p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 24-26.

<sup>9</sup> Camil Mureșanu, “Europa Centrală și Răsăriteană în secolul al XIV-lea: o restructurare geo-politică,” in *Emlékkönyv Jakó Zsigmond Nyolkvanadik Születésnapjára*, Cluj Napoca, 1996, p. 409.

<sup>10</sup> David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Mollat, *Genèse médiévale de la France moderne (XIV-XVe siècles)*, Editura B. Arthaud, 1970, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> J. Le Goff (ed.), *Omniul medieval*, Iași, Polirom, 1999, p. 129.

Stephen, a contemporary of Monk Richard's, wrote: "London [...] Heaven has blessed it [...] the residents of London are famous everywhere for the elegance of their manners and garments [...] Whereas the other cities have citizens, London has barons."<sup>13</sup>

The definition of poverty in a narrow sense is the lack of the necessary goods for subsistence.<sup>14</sup> Thomas Aquinas described it thus: "Poor is the one who lives from what his work gives him."<sup>15</sup> The New Testament led to a new dimension of poverty: "Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven,"<sup>16</sup> which meant relinquishment for salvation, for achieving the religious ideal.<sup>17</sup>

As James William Brodman asserts, for some poverty was a curse, while for others it was a source for practising virtue.<sup>18</sup> Quoting the most famous researcher of poverty, Michel Mollat, James Brodman states that the term poverty was seen in the Middle Ages as an adjective, while its transformation into a collective and abstract noun, to designate a distinct group, occurred only in the 13th and 14th centuries.<sup>19</sup>

*Sancta Ecclesia Romana based its attitudes towards poverty in another quote: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matthew 25: 35-36). This has not changed its validity, but the attitude of the Church has undergone perception changes,<sup>20</sup> especially after the emergence of the Order of Friars Minor in Europe and the open conflict between the Pontiff and the Spiritual Franciscans as regards the poverty of Christ and the Apostles<sup>21</sup> (at least compared to clergy of the Roman Church). Brother Leo, the*

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> L. Burkart, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Matei, 19:21*.

<sup>17</sup> L. Burkart, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

<sup>18</sup> J. W. Brodman, *Charity and Welfare: Hospitals and the poor in medieval Catalonia*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> L. Burkart, *op. cit.*, p.158.

<sup>21</sup> *The Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. VI, Cambridge University Press, 1929, pp. 729-737, vol. VII, pp. 283-284. The Lyon Council II (1274) abolished the lower Mendicant Orders and the rumours that Pope Gregory X (1271-1276) was going to force the Orders to accept properties led to the Spirituals' revolt against the rest of the community; the provincial convent sentenced the recalcitrant to death, and in the subsequent years the Spirituals were persecuted, even though Nicholas III (1277-1280) gave a stricter definition of poverty in the decretal *Exiit qui seminat* (1279). But disobedience continued, for the Spirituals wanted to obey the Rules and Testament of Francis rather than the pontifical glosses. Celestine V (1294) authorized the Spirituals to organize themselves in a special order, but Boniface VIII (1294-1303) cancelled the former's decrees. *Exivi de Paradiso* (1312) issued by Pope Clement V (1305-1314) banned the ownership of property. Grievances continued and John XXII (1316-1334) ordered them to return to obedience, the recalcitrants being burned at the stake by the Holy Office. The Friars Minor jettisoned the Spirituals in 1318, but in 1322 the entire Order was involved in a conflict with the pontiff, who had passed two decrees in 1322-1323 withdrawing the Franciscans' right to own property on behalf of the Holy See and stipulating that the Franciscan doctrine of the poverty of Christ

***“Lord’s sheep,” the faithful friend and Secretary of St. Francis, was considered until his death in 1271 as the embodiment of the Spiritual Franciscans’ ideal and as a symbol of “strict observance.”***<sup>22</sup>

In fact, the ideals of “strict observance” were carried further in the mid-13th century by Giovanni Borelli [Giovanni di Parma], elected as Minister General of the Order in 1248.<sup>23</sup> The dismissal of the Franciscan General in 1257, at the general Chapter of Araceli and the imposition of a new Minister [Bonaventura]<sup>24</sup> indicated that the Conventuals had managed to prevail over the Spirituals.

Through the bull *Exiit que seminat* [1279], Pope Nicholas III attempted to reconcile the disputes inside the Order of Friars Minor, stating that renouncing worldly goods, not only individually, but also jointly, represented a mysterious and holy deed, which had been practised by Jesus and the Apostles.<sup>25</sup> The pontifical ruse managed only to separate the intransigent Spirituals from the rest of the Order and, on the basis of their ideas about absolute poverty, to get them closer to the Joachimists, Sarabites and *circumcelliones*.<sup>26</sup>

At the end of 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century, these factions separated from the Franciscan body went so far in their discourse as to demand the replacement of the worldly Church (*ecclesia carnalis*) with a poor, but purified Church,<sup>27</sup> which would no longer be the harlot of Babylon.

Jaroslav Pelikan wrote about these conflicts that had cast a rather unfavourable light upon the Church: “One avenue of this inquiry was the controversy over the definition of apostolic poverty. Much of the controversy within the Franciscan order—for example, about the distinction between use and ownership in the attitude toward property [...]. But it did become a doctrinal controversy when it took up the identification of apostolic poverty as true Christian perfection and therefore as the most pertinent index to the holiness of the church, as embodied in ‘conformity’ to the exemplary and absolute poverty of Christ [...],” while John XXII defended the position of the Church by stating that: “Christ and the apostles had not practiced the absolute poverty inculcated by the Franciscans, and that they had not intended to make poverty permanently binding on the church.”<sup>28</sup>

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and the Apostles was a heresy. Basically it was stated that the theoretical foundations of the Franciscans’ ideal were heretical (the *Cum inter nonnullos* constitution of 12 November 1323: did Jesus and the Apostles practise poverty without owning property jointly or individually?). The Inquisition took action against those practitioners of absolute poverty.

<sup>22</sup> John Moorman, *A history of the Franciscan order from its origin to the year 1517*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968, pp. 109-110.

<sup>23</sup> Henry Charles Lea, *A history of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages*, vol. III, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1901, pp. 8-9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> J. Le Goff, J. C. Schmitt (eds.), *Dicționar tematic al Evului Mediu Occidental*, București, Polirom, 2002, p. 241, but also pp. 242-246.

<sup>28</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition. A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. IV, Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700), Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2006, pp. 87-88.

By contrast, towards the poor who were not regimented theologically, the Church maintained its charitable attitude that had marked its historical evolution since its establishment (at the level of discourse and action).<sup>29</sup> Thus, it took upon itself the task of protecting those *miserabiles persone*, in particular widows, orphans, the blind, the crippled, the maimed or the seriously ill and of providing them, starting in the 13th century, with aid from the Church patrimony.<sup>30</sup>

The metaphorical nature of the message encapsulated in the New Testament had, without difficulty, however, to take account of the new situations and to integrate ideologically the new phenomena, creating scales of values and social programmes formulated and substantiated in accordance with the Scriptures.<sup>31</sup>

These problems were derived from primary Christianity, which had designated itself as the religion of the poor and, with this message, had imposed its ambitions of dissemination, for Patristic literature, especially the Greek, saw it as a voluntary renunciation; this message was subsequently taken over by the West.<sup>32</sup>

However, as this was a sensible ground, attempts were made for a clear definition of poverty, distinguishing it from the lack of possibilities and the unwillingness to work (= laziness, loitering), which was stigmatized by the Church Fathers and the medieval theologians and canonists. In particular, an attempt was

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<sup>29</sup> For example, take Chapters 4 and 5 adopted by the Synod of Buda (1279): “(prelates) should not wear on any apparel of theirs any necklace or buttons, also known as brooches, made of gold or silver. The fact is that if they have done anything against this, such clothes must be removed by the Bishop and given **for the use of the poor**, or they must be returned for other devout purposes [...]. We forbid all clerics to wear rings, unless they are prelates who are allowed to do so by the very nature of their job, or based on the privilege of the Apostolic See [...] The fact is that if any cleric is caught wearing a ring, it shall be ripped off his finger by his Bishop and not given back; the cleric in question, who has violated the ‘prohibition,’ shall even be compelled **to give the poor** things of the same value as his ring,” in Ș. Turcuș, *Sinodul general de la Buda(1279)*, Cluj Napoca, PUC, 2001, p. 216. Another example concerns the charity actions of the monastic Orders or of the Orders of monk-knights (Hospitallers, Templars, Teutons): “any religious order had to **give alms to the poor on any occasion**, but especially during the great feasts of the liturgical calendar. The Rule of the Temple obliged them to feed a poor man for fourteen days following the death of a brother and it called, under the same circumstance, for leaving a tenth of the bread for the poor. Hospitallers did the same; however, the case of the house of Shibek (Lincolnshire) in England was exceptional: twenty paupers were maintained there permanently, and another forty were fed daily. But while the Templars - like the Calatravans, in fact - exercised their **mercy by religious obligation**, the Hospitallers, the Teutons and the Santiagists exerted it the proper **mission of their Order**. Especially the Hospitallers, who received in their hospitals, throughout the year, **hundreds and even thousands of paupers**,” in Alain Demurger, *Cavalerii lui Christos. Ordinele religios-militare în Evul Mediu (secolele al XI-lea – al XIV-lea)*, București, Cartier, 2003, p. 191.

<sup>30</sup> J. W. Brodman, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>31</sup> Bronisław Geremek, *La pietà e la forza. Storia della miseria e della carità in Europa*, Bari, Economica Laterza, 1995, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5. Moreover, the author states: “Gli studi sulla posizione dei poveri negli scritti di Gregorio di Tours hanno dimostrato che la società merovingiana trattava **il povero con ostilità e disprezzo**. Soltanto nel corso dei secoli XI e XII si formò – sulle messaggio dei Padri della Chiesa greci e delle esperienze del monachismo orientale – il concetto del valore interiore della povertà, mentre le trasformazioni delle strutture sociali ponevano gli uomini di quei tempi di fronte alla crescente dimensione della povertà come fenomeno sociale e alla necessità di giustificazione della ricchezza monetaria.”

made to reduce vagrancy and its consequences and to genuinely help the destitute through charitable actions.<sup>33</sup>

Beginning from the 11th and 13th centuries and against the background of rising mercantilism, Christic poverty - the Evangelical ideal - was seen as a way to revolt against the system of capital accumulation,<sup>34</sup> especially in urban centres, giving rise to movements and orders that preached absolute poverty and the renunciation of the world. In addition to this, the accounting books of the period show how under the impetus of the times, the rich donated large sums to charity or for the building of charitable institutions.<sup>35</sup>

At Jerusalem, in *Outremere*, the orders of monk-knights attempted to ensure, by any means, a loaf of white bread for the sick and the poor who resorted to these institutions.<sup>36</sup> The Order of the St. John's Hospital decided, under its statutes of 1181-1182, that in the Holy City daily meals should not be given only to the sick, but also to the orphans and the poor.<sup>37</sup> The proper functioning of the Hierosolymitan Hospital was also predicated on the obligation or priories from France, St. Giles, Italy, Pisa, Venice, Constantinople, Antioch, Mont Pelerin near Tripoli or Tiberias to send annually to it raw materials, objects, especially clothing and sugar.<sup>38</sup> There was no lack of sheets, slippers, cribs or shrouds.<sup>39</sup> Up until after 1206 there was even a responsible officer [*almoner*] within the Joannite Order who was in charge of giving alms: the old vestments of the Order or repaired old shoes were distributed to the poor and the needy.<sup>40</sup>

Such an almoner was also found in the Templar Order, and he was responsible for giving bread to the poor. The Templars who violated the rules of the Order had to do penance under obedience to this "brother of the poor." Furthermore, on Holy Thursday, the Templar almoner elected thirteen poor whose feet were washed ritualistically.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>33</sup> The Constitution *Quia contingit* in the Council of Vienne (1311); *Ibidem*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>35</sup> The number of hospitals grew in the 13th and 14th centuries, especially in the Paris area, in 1175-1300, *ibid*, pp. 12-13; see also A. Demurger, *Cavalerii lui Christos. Ordinele religios-militare în Evul Mediu (secolele al XI-lea – al XIV-lea)*, Chişinău, 2003: "The (Order) Santiago deliberately specialized certain of its houses, turning them into **monastery-hospitals**," p. 192. Ş. Turcuş în *Sinodul general de la Buda (1279)*, Cluj Napoca, 2001, published the letter of Ladislaus IV the Cuman, 1280, in which he promised a hundred marks for the **founding of a hospital for the poor**, "Ladislaus [...] Since it is known that the foremost things among Catholic princes and those devoted to God and any other preachers of the Catholic faith is to admit their mistakes and to build churches and other pious places for the benefit of **the poor and the destitute and the sick unto Christ, let it be known to all that** [...] we hereby give as eternal alms, offering the same lord worthy of worship bound to us, who will receive, in the name and in the stead of **the destitute and the poor and the sick unto Christ**, one hundred silver marks every year [...] ' to use them' to found a hospital for caring for the said poor, destitute and even the sick," pp. 150-151.

<sup>36</sup> Jochen Burgdorf, *The Central Convent of Hospitallers and Templars. History, organization and personnel [1099/1120-1311]*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2008, series *History of Warfare*, editor: Kelly de Vries, vol. 50, p. 321.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 328.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*.

We may assume, without fail, that such almoners and activities were to be found in the commandries of the Templars and of the Knights Hospitaller across the Europe of *Christianitas*, including in the commandries from the province of Hungary.

Unlike the hospitals managed by the military-monastic orders, where the monk-knights also cared for the sick, in cities [only in the largest cities], hospitals were only for the elderly and the infirm, were spent there, in a relatively peaceful manner, the last days of their lives.<sup>42</sup>

It is obvious that many of these belonged to the category of the poor without any possibility of material maintenance, which required that they should be taken care of by the urban community.

From the 12th century onwards, the doctrine of Christian charity reached, in the wake of theological reflections, a very clear separation between two types of paupers: those of the Church and those of the laity.<sup>43</sup> The opinion that a distinction should be drawn between those who deserve help and those who do not need it is not, according to B. Geremek, an invention of modern social assistance, as it was first stipulated in the *Decretum Gratiani*<sup>44</sup> [Brian Tierney's demonstration] and in the writings of the decretists in the 12th century.<sup>45</sup>

In addition, there were also voices that criticized charitable donors: the preachers of the period often attacked, at the level of discourse, those who "sold" their alms to the poor in order to be acclaimed in public for their benefactions.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Norman Pounds, *The Medieval City*, Westport, Connecticut – London, Greenwood Press, 2005, p. 140.

<sup>43</sup> The vision of the canonist Cerhoch of Reichersberg, the representative of 12th-century theological thought: the poor with Peter (*pauperes cum Petro*) and the poor with Lazarus (*pauperes cum Lazaro*), that is the clergy among whom poverty should be a distinctive feature, voluntary poverty within the ecclesiastical frames that maintained contact with God and those represented by the figure of Lazarus, the poor man of the Gospel, referring to the poverty of the laity, to material deprivation (*pauperitas quae est in penuria*), operating practically a clear **difference between poverty as an ideal in life and poverty as a status**, in *Ibidem*, p. 14. The basic text of the canonistic interpretation is found in the Gospel of Luke, 16: 19-31: "There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day:/ And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores,/ And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores./ And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried:/ And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom."

<sup>44</sup> H. Zimmermann, *Papalitatea în Evul Mediu. O istorie a pontifilor romani din perspectiva istoriografiei*, Iași, Polirom, 2004, p. 151. Gratian, a Camaldolese monk who passed away in 1150, compiled the canonical corpus of the Roman Church, which subsequently entered into use and was known as *Decretum Gratiani*; through additions and glossaries, it came to be what is known as *Corpus Iuris Canonici*; see also Ș. Turcuș, *Sfântul Scaun și românii în secolul al XIII-lea*, București, 2001, pp. 36-40: "The decree was a carefully rationed *mixtum compositum* and attempts were made to establish a consistent logic for the antimonies accumulated in the first Christian millennium. Gratian's Decree was the first stage in the establishment of the canonical corpus of the Latin Church."

<sup>45</sup> B. Geremek, *La pietà...*, p. 15. The writings of St. John Chrysostom and Ambrose of Milan were construed and interpreted: in these texts, the authors emphasized the necessity of distinguishing between honest and dishonest beggars (also the idea of Rufino da Bologna), who did not want to work but preferred to steal.

<sup>46</sup> Miri Rubin, *Charity and community in Medieval Cambridge*, Cambridge – London – New York – New Rochelle – Melbourne – Sydney, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 1.

Trying to answer the question who was the poor, many teams of historians have analysed the terminology used in coeval texts, reaching some interesting conclusions. It has been shown, primarily, as indicated above, that in the Middle Ages the concept of poverty was the field of religious discourse and spiritual realities,<sup>47</sup> in which only voluntary poverty was seen as a virtue in itself, a heroic way of living, while accidental poverty could bring forth only compassion and pity. In fact, the true paupers of the cities or the villages, those who had no means of subsistence, those who work for a piece of bread in medieval society were not seen even with compassion, but often “ma a volte paura, disprezzo o disgust.”<sup>48</sup>

Here's what impression the Parisian theologian doctor and preacher Jean Chaulier (†1429), nicknamed Gerson, had about those “poor in the flesh,” in his Treatise *Il mendicante o il dialogo segreto dell'uomo contemplativo con la sua anima sulla povertà e mendicità spirituale*: “Parliamo dapprima dei poveri che non sono chiusi da qualche parte ma girano per le chiese e per le case dei ricchi, di uscio in uscio, e apprendiamo diligentemente da essi come mai per quanto siano deboli e malridotti per la vecchiaia o per le malattie o per qualche altro accidente, si sostengono come persone sane o aiutandosi vicendevolmente o trascinandosi sulla terra con le loro mani. E sopportano caldo e freddo, vento e pioggia tali che se fossero sani, subito si ammalerebbero coll'assoggettarsi alla fatica e alla privazioni sostenute andando o sedendosi, a volte dal mattino alla sera, sulla terra nuda, nel freddo, nella fame, nella sete. E pertanto sopportano questo male nella speranza e nel desiderio di avere qualche elemosina, e spesso non sanno quale e a volte non ottengono nulla. E se per caso li si informa di qualche distribuzione gratuita, guarda come vi corrono in fretta.”<sup>49</sup>

B. Geremek believes, however, that beyond the didactic allegory, the detail remains truthful.<sup>50</sup>

Other authors of the period only saw these beggars as a cause for ridicule and hatred, and so did the Parisian Chapter authorities, who delimited the place where they were supposed to stay because one could no longer hear the Divine Liturgy because of them,<sup>51</sup> or the monarchy, which issued instructions against them.

Newer or older ecclesiastical literature has its different opinions on poverty and

<sup>47</sup> B. Geremek, *Mendicanti e miserabili nell'Europa Moderna 1350-1600*, Roma - Bari, 1999, p. 93.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 93. According to the author, they are “specie condannata al lavoro manuale, a lungo disprezzato; quando non sono più validi fisicamente e sono incapaci di lavorare, ritrovano la loro utilità sociale, un posto particolare nella divisione sociale del lavoro, **offrendo ai ricchi la possibilità di dare corpo ai loro sentimenti caritativi e di guadagnarsi così la salvezza**. Nonostante ciò restano disprezzabili, indegni e privi di qualsiasi prestigio”.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 95.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>51</sup> For instance, Eustache Morel (1346-1407) or the Registrar of the Chapter of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris (5 January 1427). Eustache complained that they stole the money from the charity box, “thieves robbing God”: I'm afraid to go into Church anymore / Because of the thieves who steal from Christ / Beggars and Caymans who can / Get good supplies, one of those who say / Give to the poor who are in great pain / Suffering from the evil of St. Fiacre [haemorrhoids] / The evil of St. Mor [gout] and of St. Mahieu [ulcer] / of St. Aquaire [madness] and St. Flour [deafness] / But are all thieves who steal from God, in *Ibidem*, pp. 97-98.



mendicancy. The Benedictine Raterio of Verona, an expert theologian in Patristic literature, dedicated a chapter of his *Preloquia* to the mendicants, in which the basic idea is that poverty associated with begging is, in fact, not a value in itself, nor does it guarantee Salvation.<sup>52</sup>

His point of view was exceptional for that era, through its sheer harshness, and the following centuries were to bring changes in these points of view [especially in the 13th and 14th centuries], dealing with stark poverty.<sup>53</sup> Still, we believe, every era had different points of view, and when we look at writings from those periods, we should see the subjectivity of their authors, their penchants for certain aspects. For while canonists like Eustace saw them solely as criminals, Gerson had a slightly more nuanced point of view; while Raterio saw the pauper as a sinner who could or could not reach salvation, Cerhoch of Reichersberg or Gratian tried to make some distinctions between the clergy who were poor through Rules and the poor of the laity, or, even more attentively, between those who deserved the Church's charity and those who deserved to be punished as mere vagabonds.

St. Francis offered his own vision on poverty in the 13th century, when he demanded that the poor should be pitied and appreciated, highlighting both valences of poverty: its implicit misery and its power to purify and elevate the human spirit.<sup>54</sup>

According to the mentality of the Middle Ages, the concept of poverty received meanings that ranged from the macro-group to the micro-group.<sup>55</sup> The dimensions of this process, according to Bronisław Geremek, derive from the economic and social circumstances: poverty can be regarded as the symptom and the effect of a relative overpopulation, and the existence of a process of material and social degradation affecting the groups or the individuals is clearly discernible.<sup>56</sup>

Mention is made of collectives [or individuals] which, in effect, permanently struggle for survival and lead a life at the limit, in conditions of "extreme precariousness."<sup>57</sup> For example, in medieval Cambridge, very many workers received not very much over 1 denarius/day, a sum accounting for the smallest monetary

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<sup>52</sup> B. Geremek, *La pietà...*, p. 17. A 10th-century theologian who also postulated that if the poor man was a sinner he would go into Gehenna; he gave numerous examples from the Holy Scripture.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>54</sup> Miri Rubin, *Charity and community in Medieval Cambridge*, p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> "inizialmente, poveri sembrano essere considerati tutti coloro che non appartengono alle élites privilegiate della società feudale; in seguito, il loro ambito si restringe fino a indicare coloro la cui esistenza è fondata sull'elemosina e sull'assistenza sociale. Nei periodi in cui il concetto di povertà ebbe un significato molto vasto, il suo contenuto non era comunque riferibile solo ai ceti o alle categorie inferiori della gerarchia sociale; esso, infatti, non esprimeva soltanto la dicotomia *potens/pauper*: nel periodo carolingio, la nozione *pauperes* indicava le persone libere, contrapposte a quelle asservite. Nell'evoluzione di questa terminologia si nota il passaggio a un significato di **declassamento sociale; il povero è colui che non è più in grado di assicurare a sé stesso e alla propria famiglia la continuità di vita allo stesso modo di prima oppure al livello richiesto dalla sua posizione sociale.**" in B. Geremek, *La pietà...*, p. 45.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 46.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*.

allowance for the survival of a poor man.<sup>58</sup> The sum of 1 denarius [daily wage] was distributed, under urban regulations, on the occasion of funerals or for assisting the poor in charitable institutions.<sup>59</sup>

Incidentally, Eric Hobsbawm has shown that poverty refers to those categories of persons who are not able to maintain themselves at a necessary level without any help from outside.<sup>60</sup> These categories received various denominations indicating their “sector of activity.” Bronislaw Geremek, who wrote some of the best studies related to the issue of the “wretched,” mentions the one called *gueux* or the one known as *pitocco*.<sup>61</sup>

In Hungary, for instance, in 1370, on the lists of outlaws from the Banatian counties of Caraş and Cuvin, there appeared the denominations *divagantes* (road wanderers), *vagabundis* (tramps), *latitans* (lurkers),<sup>62</sup> more broadly classified by Ştefan Pascu as *drifters*, but also vagrants.<sup>63</sup>

Poverty, as a social phenomenon, was widespread in that period and however it was regarded, whether with compassion and understanding, or with hatred and disgust, it stood in relation to the dreams of the underprivileged categories simply because it was from among these “wretched” that recruitments were made, most of the times, for members of various groups that put at risk the urban and the rural population of the monarchies in Western Europe or within the Holy Empire.

For those individuals, living in the city meant a rudimentary dwelling built of wood or clay<sup>64</sup> where several families thronged together. These dwellings formed specific neighbourhoods, with trends of segregation that became ever more accentuated from the 15th century onwards.<sup>65</sup>

For example, as regards Seville at the beginning of the 16th century, scholars speak about the survival of this urban subculture, which quickly assimilated abandoned orphans or young women that interfered with this society through prostitution.<sup>66</sup>

The same Michel Mollat was the creator of a sequential division of the discourse on poverty starting from the 5th century and ending in the year 1500,<sup>67</sup> a discourse that comprises four periods: of these, the third period, which starts from the Great Plague, witnessed attempts that were made to reform the system of providing

<sup>58</sup> Miri Rubin, *Charity and community in Medieval Cambridge*, p. 40.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>60</sup> E. Hobsbawm *apud* B. Geremek, *La pietà...*, p. 46.

<sup>61</sup> *Gueux* appears in 15th-century French and is probably of Dutch origin; it may designate either the poor or the beggar, but has a strong pejorative character and marks one's belonging to a dangerous social class; *pitocco* is a typical beggar who asks for alms and sees charity as something he is entitled to, in B. Geremek, *Mendicanti e miserabili...*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>62</sup> Maria Holban, *Din cronica relațiilor româno-ungare în secolele XIII-XIV*, București, 1981, p. 199. *Documenta Romaniae Historica, seria C, Transilvania*, vol. XIII, Cluj Napoca, 1994, doc. 511, pp. 770-774.

<sup>63</sup> Ştefan Pascu, *Voievodatul Transilvaniei*, vol. III, Cluj Napoca, 1986, notes 62-63, pp. 280-281.

<sup>64</sup> Ph. Aries, G. Duby (ed.), *Istoria vieții private*, București, Meridiane, 1995, vol. III, p. 212.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 213.

<sup>66</sup> Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Crime and society in Early Modern Seville*, UP of New England, 1980, p. 235.

<sup>67</sup> J. W. Brodman, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

aid to these individuals. It was a period in which the Church considered understanding their plight. By contrast, during the last phase, there was growing irritation and disgust towards these paupers [in around 1500].<sup>68</sup>

The leadership structures rejected thus the papers who were not integrated either in the developing city, or in the rural universe, and these people without a status became available for all the dreams, all the violence or all the prophetic revenges.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>69</sup> Jean Delumeau, *Frica în Occident (secolele XIV-XVIII)*, vol. I-II, București, Meridiane, 1986, vol. I, p. 79. The author states that those disemplaced beings, who had nothing to lose, wanted a social status that would prevent them from being mere marginals and the millenarian ideology that often animated these groups was a radical response to the fear of the people who, rejected by society, sought refuge in the imaginary, pp. 258-262.