

## Renaissance Florence was a 'child-centered' society

by Nora Hamerman

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### **Charity and Children in Renaissance Florence: The Ospedale degli Innocenti, 1410-1536**

by Philip Gavitt

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Among certain circles it is commonly argued today that the Italian Renaissance marked a turning away from medieval Christian ideals of charity toward the suffering and poor. In this view, the revival of Greek classical culture which occurred in Florence and spread out from there over Europe in the second half of the 15th century, centered on a cult of beauty that looked upon the infirm and imperfect among God's children with disdain and revulsion, and this attitude would have fostered a decline in the hospitals and other institutions which had uniquely marked Christianity from its inception. This belief is cited oftentimes as a reason for rejecting *humanism*, the culturally optimistic world-outlook of the leaders of the Renaissance, which drew selectively upon pagan sources, especially the works of Plato and his followers. The misguided anti-humanists confuse true Christian humanism with the atheistic "secular humanism" promulgated by the likes of Lord Bertrand Russell.

Philip Gavitt's study of the Ospedale degli Innocenti, or Foundling Hospital, of Florence, provides much evidence to contradict this view. The portico of the Innocenti was the

first architectural masterpiece commissioned from Florence's legendary architect Filippo Brunelleschi, before he accomplished the technological feat of building the dome of the Cathedral of Florence, and as such it ranks among the roster of masterpieces of world architecture, as it was the first major building to introduce the typical features of "Renaissance" architectural style in Brunelleschi's typically rigorous way, with its beautiful semicircular arches, its classically designed columns built as metaphors of the human figure, and its base elevated by steps above the piazza.

The true hero of the Renaissance was characterized by a zeal for scientific and technological solutions to human problems, driven by a love for humanity which mirrors, however imperfectly, the love of God for man. Brunelleschi was, besides being an architect and sculptor, a prolific inventor of labor-saving machinery, and a leading civil and military engineer, involved in a project to build a new barge for transporting marble down the Arno River, and later, in a scheme for diverting the river's waters for military purposes, which became legendary for its boldness even though it failed at the time.

### **The purpose of civic beauty**

Gavitt's small volume, replete with tabular data and archival citations interspersed with commentaries on the family by humanistic writers, is a historical study in which Brunelleschi's genius in creating the facade of the Innocenti only plays a minor role. The author documents a number of important points, not the least of which is to debunk the much-cited (by feminists) sociological study of one Richard Trexler,

who claimed that the Innocenti “institutionalized” female infanticide by sending a greater proportion of female than male infants out to wet nurses who notoriously mistreated them. Although female children were less valued than males in that period, Gavitt shows that Trexler utterly failed to prove *intentional* female infanticide.

The Ospedale degli Innocenti took in children “*innocenti*,” who were abandoned by the parents either because of poverty, social pressures, illegitimacy, or other reasons, arranged wet-nurses for their infancy, and attempted to place them in adoptive homes or apprenticeships and eventually to find vocations for the boys, and provide small dowries for marriage or monachation for the girls. Although mortality rates for the foundlings taken in by the Innocenti were high by modern standards, they were quite low compared to those in orphanages of the 19th century. The death rates for infants and children even in normal families were so high in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, that as Gavitt beautifully puts it, “From their devastating experience of infant and child mortality, Florentines constructed a fortress not of indifference but of charity and compassion.”

In Chapter 4, “Hospital and Family,” he states that the mere fact of having a major architect, Brunelleschi, design the portico, or *loggia*, indicates that the Innocenti was to be elevated to great civic prominence. It was the great aristocratic families of Florence who had a *loggia* in front of their houses, which was for the common use of all the citizens, and also for the family to display its major occasions to the outside world. The design fit into a civic sense of beauty, proportion, and design. The vocabulary used in the documents of the Innocenti shows that it was considered as a “family” for the abandoned children, calling its expenses “house expenses,” and the husbands of successfully married foundlings, “our son-in-law.”

Basing himself upon the extensive notes taken by the doorkeepers who accepted the foundlings, 90% of whom were between 3 hours and 3 weeks old when they came to the Innocenti, Gavitt gives a full picture of the varied origins of the abandoned children and the poignancy of many parents’ feelings in abandoning them. To quote from his fifth chapter, “Omnes Sancti Innocentes”: “Emotions surrounding the mortality of children were far more complex than alleged lack of affection. As we have already seen, parents abandoned even the children of their servants and slaves reluctantly and with considerable ambivalence. Parents returned frequently to claim children within a few days, in some cases, or within a few years, in others. Even where girls were involved, the memory of the child a parent had abandoned often lingered. Parents followed their child’s progress not only through wet nurse, but even after adoption.

“Indeed, it is in the Innocenti’s adoption records that the affection of Florentines for children and their hopes even for abandoned children leave no room for doubt that fifteenth-century Florence was, in a profoundly religious way, a child-

centered culture. The Innocenti’s success in rescuing its surviving children from the margins of the community and restoring them to what one historian has called ‘the charismatic center’ had its practical expression for boys in combining adoption and apprenticeship and for girls in combining adoption and household service. In some cases girls, too, were apprenticed. In any case, the hospital went to considerable lengths to ensure that adoptive parents of female foundlings provided a dowry and arranged a suitable marriage, as the hospital itself provided for the girls who remained residents until they were of marriageable age.” Gavitt shows the Innocenti was careful to take the child’s wishes into consideration both in the choice of apprenticeship and adoptive parents. Girls who chose neither marriage nor the convent could remain as part of the Innocenti staff for the rest of their lives.

Elsewhere, he reports: “Most boys could expect, if they were adopted, to acquire basic literacy, mercantile skills, and proficiency at a trade or craft. A select few could aspire to the best humanistic education available to make them ‘gentlemen’ and ‘men of virtue,’ or even . . . ‘religious doctors.’ ”

In his last chapter, “Orate pro nobis,” Gavitt summarizes: “Renaissance Florentines perceived that charity, tenderness, and compassion toward children were crucial to personal immortality, the survival of families, and the salvation of the State. The foundling hospital of the Innocenti was without a doubt the vehicle of that appealing vision. The hospital’s founders and testators, as well as guild and communal officers, stressed that alms themselves were insufficient to secure God’s favor. Such alms, rather, had to result in direct benefit to their intended recipients. . . . Humanist pedagogy . . . took its models from antiquity: Children learn moral and political behavior by the force of love, reason, and example, and not by the application of coercion and physical force.” The humanists never lost their grasp of the notion that “the family and child-rearing were the private rehearsal for the public performance of civic obligation and political power.” As one theoretical writer on the family in that era put it, true defenders of the state must undertake “the defense of the oppressed, such as the poor, prisoners, strangers, widows, and orphans. . . . Children must be raised lovers of justice. . . .”

After the downfall of the Florentine Republic at the end of the 15th century, though, “political authority in Florence shifted its focus from infants, young children, and adolescents as saviors of the State, to the colonization of the energies of its young men.” Florence became a small imperial power, and the Innocenti lost influence as it became directly dependent on the autocratic Grand Dukes. Institutional care, rather than adoption, was emphasized. Although Gavitt does not specifically draw this conclusion, the loss of a “child-centered society” coincided precisely with the collapse of the Golden Renaissance in Italy, in the 1530s.