

Work, begging and the obligation of the able-bodied

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The prohibition of begging raised a question that the ordinance of 1525 answered only by implication: what was to become of those who could work but did not? The Reformation strengthened the answer that late medieval policy had already begun to give. The HLS identifies three forces behind the transformation of welfare policy in the early modern period: demographic growth without corresponding economic development, structural underemployment, and the Reformation's elevation of work to a moral value, which contradicted the medieval esteem for the contemplative life.¹ Zwingli's own writings consistently present honest labour as the normal form of Christian life. In the tract of December 1524 already cited, he contrasts the idle and the covetous with those who live by their work. His critique of the monasteries and of the mendicant friars rests on the charge that they lived from the labour of others under the appearance of poverty.²

The Wittenberg theologians had formulated the principle in its Pauline form—whoever will not work shall not eat—while acknowledging the community's responsibility for those truly unable to support themselves. Isenmann shows how the ordinances of Nuremberg, Zurich, Strasbourg and Wittenberg built on this principle an inquiry into the capacity of each applicant for work and created the category of the “strong beggar”, who deserved no alms at all.³ The mendicant orders, whose members had begged as a matter of religious vocation, disappeared from Zurich with the dissolution of the friaries in 1524, taking with them the most prestigious model of legitimate begging. Since no one in a Reformed city begged for the love of God any longer, the beggar who remained in the street was, by definition, either a person whom the public fund had not reached or one who refused its conditions.

For the able-bodied who refused, the ordinance and its successors offered sanctions: the withholding of alms, expulsion for foreigners, and

punishment by the beggar-bailiff. For the able-bodied who could not find work, the sixteenth century offered little beyond occasional public works and emergency distributions in years of dearth. The systematic combination of relief and forced labour, in the form of the workhouse and the *Zuchthaus*, arrived later. The former Dominican nunnery of Oetenbach in Zurich housed an orphanage and a house of correction between 1637 and 1700. The sequence shows how the buildings of the dissolved convents continued to serve as the physical infrastructure of social discipline for more than a century after the Reformation.⁴ The Confederation as a whole moved in the same direction. The HLS records that the “bad” poor, those deemed idle or fraudulent, were subjected to discipline in workhouses, while the “true” or “good” poor received assistance by reason of involuntary misfortune, disability, age or family circumstances.⁵

A decisive step towards the territorial organisation of poor relief came in 1551, when the Federal Diet decided that each commune or parish should henceforth care for its own poor. The rule was intended to limit the mobility of the poor while placing responsibility where the need was known.⁶ For Zurich, which had already organised relief around residence in 1525, the decision of 1551 generalised to the Confederation what the city had practised for a quarter of a century. It also laid the foundation of the Swiss *Heimatprinzip*, under which responsibility for a poor person lay with his or her commune of origin, a principle that survived into the twentieth century. In the canton of Zurich, the responsibility for relief passed from the commune of origin to the commune of residence only in 1927.⁷

The ordinance’s treatment of foreigners, pilgrims and itinerants must be read in this light. The exclusion of those without a right of residence was the reverse side of the entitlement of those with one. A public fund with limited resources could only guarantee support to a defined population, which it could only define by excluding others. The supplementary ordinance of 1533, with its fines for citizens who sheltered foreigners without permission, shows that exclusion required the cooperation of the resident population and that the council was prepared to enforce it.⁸ There is an uncomfortable continuity here with a feature of the modern Swiss welfare and tax state, in which residence status governs entitlement and obligation with a precision that is itself a kind of administered boundary. The same city that would receive Protestant refugees from Locarno in 1555 (see Chapter B.V) and Huguenots later had, in 1525 and 1533, drawn a sharp line around the circle of those whom its alms would feed.

1 Notes

1. HLS, “Fürsorge”, section on the Ancien Régime, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/025809/>. ↩
2. Institut für Schweizerische Reformationsgeschichte, Huldrych Zwingli Werke, Werk 42, <https://www.irg.uzh.ch/static/zwingli-werke/index.php?n=Werk.42>. ↩
3. Isenmann, “Individuelle Caritas und kommunale Armenfürsorge” (2023), chapter abstract, https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-662-66840-5_2. ↩
4. Wikipedia (German), “Kirchen und Klöster in der Stadt Zürich im Mittelalter”, section on Oetenbach, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirchen_und_Kl%C3%B6ster_in_der_Stadt_Z%C3%BCrich_im_Mittelalter. ↩
5. HLS, “Fürsorge”, section on the Ancien Régime, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/025809/>. ↩
6. HLS, “Fürsorge”, section on the Ancien Régime, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/025809/>; the HLS adds that by the seventeenth century relatives were made liable for support, sometimes up to the fourth degree of kinship. ↩
7. Höngger, “«... und schon zweimal unehelich geboren ...»”, <https://hoengger.ch/geschichte-armut-in-hoengg/>. ↩
8. Huonker, “Bemerkungen zur Reformation in Zürich”, pp. 16–17, <https://www.thata.ch/bemerkungenzurreformationinzuerich.pdf>. ↩

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