

La Misericordia di Lucca, from then to now

The Venerable Brotherhood of the Misericordia of Lucca (*Venerabile Confraternità di Misericordia di Lucca*), founded on the model of the Misericordia in Florence, which operated in the 13th century, is the oldest voluntary association in the city of Lucca. In the past, the confraternities were associations of the faithful established for carrying out works of piety and charity, with their own internal organization and constituted by a decree of the religious authority.

Before the creation of the Misericordia of Lucca, there were two confraternities. The oldest, dating back to 1664, came to be known as *della Carità Cristiana*, the *Compagnia del Santissimo Crocifisso*. It was initiated by a group of young people who met to pray in Via S. Andrea where it intersects with Via Altogradi, at the shrine of a small crucifix. Even today this shrine is venerated by Misericordia members. The confraternity also performed many charitable deeds. In particular, they buried deceased poor people at Via Galli Tassi's San Luca hospice. In 1819 this company, after having gone from one oratory to another, found its definitive location in the Church of San Salvatore and extended its activities to aiding and curing the sick and infirm, even helping them in their own homes.

The two companies were the only Lucchese religious associations that, thanks to their irreplaceable works of charity, survived the anti-clerical confiscations and edicts of Napoleon and the Baciocchi, until, with the decree of 20 January 1860, the Tuscan provisional government instituted the *Arciconfraternità di Misericordia di Lucca*, changing its name to *Compagnia della Carità Cristiana* and annexing to this the *Compagnia del SS. Nome di Gesù*. During difficult times, when tires and gasoline



were lacking, hand stretchers came back into use. In those years, Co-Rector Don Fortunato Orsetti was the town's tireless craftsman of many health and funeral services.

The importance of the Misericordia to the city continued to grow. In 1898, Proposto Cesare Sardi initiated a path of growth that led the Arciconfraternità to assume a role of great prestige not only for Lucca, but for all of Tuscany. A few years later, Cesare Sardi extended assistance services beyond the city walls, seeking and obtaining help from parish teams in the surrounding territory, which then became sections of the Lucca Misericordia. Over time, coffins and stretchers towed by hand were replaced by stretchers and handcarts carried by cyclists or pulled by horses.

The Misericordia services towards the needy, the dead, and the sick were carried out by volunteers who wore the traditional "*buffa nera*," a long black garment that entirely covered the brother from head to foot, leaving only the eyes exposed. In this way the members appeared equal, with no distinctions among the various social levels. The person being assisted was not to know who was helping them, out of respect for the evangelical principle that still today guides the Misericordia movement. *The left hand should not know what the right hand is doing*. Nowadays the ancient vestments are worn by the volunteers only for historical celebrations.

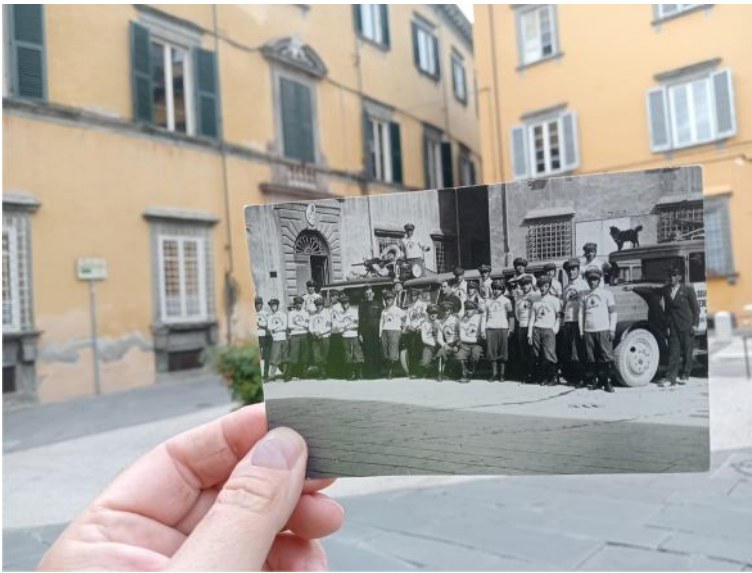
During the two World Wars and also during major epidemics that strongly marked the life of the city, the Misericordia distinguished itself in offering help to citizens and soldiers. "Federal squads" were created; these were groups of volunteers ready for more serious interventions, within a wider context. The work of charity and assistance has continued to be carried out in an imperturbable way by all the volunteers who have taken part in the life of the Misericordia up to the present. Over the past half century, the number of volunteers wanting to participate in the Arciconfraternità's activities has increased substantially and repeatedly.

After a hundred years of history, the historical *Arciconfraternità di Misericordia di Lucca* recently moved its headquarters to just outside the walls, to the area facing the city doorway known as Porta Sant'Anna, where the rescue work on behalf of the populace continues, using the most modern health technologies and still following the principles of volunteerism passed down over the years by the volunteers who have written its long and precious history.

– by Gabriele Muratori



An Event at the Misericordia, 22 February 2025



How often, when we were little, did we see the ambulances with their sirens blaring, dashing through traffic on their way to rescue someone who was not well?

Very often! And perhaps, at least once, we dreamed of driving one and becoming heroes for just a day. This dream, for many of the volunteers of the Misericordia di Lucca, has become a reality, and continues to come true almost every day.

What does it mean to be a volunteer? It means offering one's own availability to help and support people in difficulty, without looking for anything in return, except the satisfaction of having helped another person.

On Saturday, 22 February 2025, three health vehicles were inaugurated at the new operative site in Sant Anna: two for the social services and an ambulance for medical rescue. These will be used to improve the services provided by the citizens towards their community. So the pool of vehicles has increased,

which also increases the amount of services provided, and the demands of the public, which in turn increase the request for volunteers, and the call to volunteerism.

What do you need to do to become a volunteer? The first step is simple. Call 0583 494902. The steps that follow will be even simpler.

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