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The Art of Managing Proximity: Loving thy Migrant Neighbour within Christian Charity Work in Florence, Italy

This paper explores the charity performed by volunteers at an American church in Florence, Italy, towards socially marginalized migrant groups. Volunteers regularly deployed Christian ideas about 'loving thy neighbour' to justify their actions, and in this context such a principle foregrounded the complexities of enacting urban spatial relations: how does one practice proper Christian values towards 'others' with whom one lives in close proximity? When performing charity action volunteers thus discussed how to best manage their intimacy with and distance from the diverse mix of peoples inhabiting the city of Florence, their Church and their neighbourhoods. They debated how much time they should spend with homeless men, or how much they should find out about the lives and struggles of food bank recipients. They discussed how they should best manage and limit the movement and 'unruly behaviour' of charity recipients on church grounds, and how they should best interact with the Roma beggars or North African street sellers with whom they crossed paths everyday. Being a compassionate Christian in such ethnographic scenarios was a fraught process that required vigilance and openness, trust and suspicion, and love and detachment, and was primarily a pragmatic concern with managing social and physical proximity that both challenged and entrenched class and ethnic differences.

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