

# Towards the roots of social welfare

## Joan Lluís Vivès's *De subventione pauperum*

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*As the Inquisition unfolded in Spain, the humanist Joan Lluís Vivès left Valencia for Paris, and probably settled in Bruges as early as 1512. He travelled Europe and frequented elite intellectual and political circles in France, England and Belgium. It was in Bruges that in 1525 he started writing his *De subventione pauperum*, to be published there in 1526. This would become the intellectual and ethical basis of European urban poverty relief policies of the 16th century and beyond. In many respects this publication contains the principles of the contemporary active welfare state although, in the 16th century, the Church was still dominant in poverty relief and no social policy could take effect without its passive or active approval.*

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**I**n the introductory letter to his tract *De subventione pauperum* (DSP, literally “the support of the poor”) the humanist Joan Lluís Vivès states that he feels for Bruges as for his native Valencia. Having lived for 14 years in Bruges, he considers it his new homeland; it is where he got married and where, each time he comes back, he feels he is coming home.<sup>1</sup>

This predilection for Bruges is in marked contrast to his feelings for other cities where he spent several years trying to making a living, such as Leuven or Oxford,<sup>2</sup> where he taught both privately and publicly at the Universities.

Vivès expressed his feelings freely in several of his personal letters to his close friend Francis Cranevelt, for several years (1515–1522) city attorney of Bruges, expressing an almost innate aversion for Leuven in particular. Thus writing just before the Bruges fair of 1521, he observed:

“I greatly miss the city of Bruges, and all of you. Since I came back here I seem to have moved from town to country, as everything here is so countrified in comparison with that city. And even though here the air is milder and purer, my health has not been as good as at Bruges. Clearly one flourishes in a place where one likes to be.”<sup>3</sup>

Less than a month later, Vivès reports that he has been ill all the time, and that boorish Louvain and its awful food are not to his taste. Here, he stresses, there is precious little room for Epicureanism, cheerfulness or joy:

“Stern censors in twos, threes or fours, with twisted lips and frowning brows, glare at you with fierce sideways looks and with grating voices or no voices at all . . . Compare all this with Bruges, where everything that comes along to strike one—whether sight or mind—is nothing but charm, delightfulness, merriment and loveliness pure and bright.”<sup>4</sup>

And in July 1522, Vivès complains about his life at Louvain, where everything remains squalid, disagreeable and unlovable: 'Clearly the mood of this city is profoundly out of tune with my disposition. I don't know how it is that the place has never pleased me. I never find myself more reluctantly anywhere than here'.<sup>5</sup>

But who was this Joan Lluís Vivès, who regarded himself as a citizen of Bruges (*DSP*, p. 3: "meque pro cive eius duco")?

He was born at Valencia on 6 March of the year 1492—according to the very detailed text of the epitaph originally in the Bruges Cathedral of St Donatian<sup>6</sup>—or 6 March of the year 1493, if the reports of the Spanish Inquisition are to be relied upon.

What had Vivès, the author of a remarkable profession of catholic faith, set out in no less than five books in his *De veritate fidei christianae*,<sup>7</sup> to do with the Inquisition, one may ask. In a not so remote past, Vivès was considered one of the luminaries of Spain and of Spanish catholicism, and until 40 or 50 years ago it was almost unthinkable that Vivès in fact had Jewish roots. Nowadays we know, thanks to a series of mainly Spanish publications,<sup>8</sup> that most members of Vivès's family, on both his mother's and father's side, had on several occasions been interrogated by the Spanish Inquisition, imprisoned, tried and even sentenced to death. His own mother, Blanquina March, had to appear before the Inquisition as a young girl, before her marriage, in 1487, and again in 1491. His father was imprisoned in 1522 and sentenced to be burnt at the stake in 1524. A few years later, in 1528, new proceedings started against the memory of his mother, who had died in 1508; her bones were exhumed and burnt in 1529, exactly as had been done in 1505 to the remains of Vivès's great-grandfather, who had died 50 years earlier.

Small wonder, then, that it seemed safer for the young Joan Lluís to leave his native Valencia and never to return there or, indeed, to Spain. He set out for Paris, where he studied scholastic philosophy with the Aragonese Gaspar Lax, with the French Nicolas

Bérault, and with the Flemish Jan Dullaert, from Ghent. It is not at all clear why Vivès left Paris, where he taught privately for several years, even though without obtaining an academic degree. If we may believe his preface to the *DSP*, he had settled in Bruges already in 1512.<sup>9</sup>

It is an attractive hypothesis that it was in the company of his professor Jan Dullaert that he travelled in that year for the first time to the Low Countries and to Bruges, which could account for his connections with some Ghent humanists such as Eligius Eucharius (= Houckaert). For several years Vivès enjoyed the hospitality of the Valencian merchant family Valldaura, distant relatives of his mother's; he privately taught their small children and eventually married Bernard Valldaura's daughter Margaret, in May 1524.

Vivès admits he did not stay continuously at Bruges. In fact he continued his teaching in Paris for a few more years, also seeing through the press there his first publications, the last being a new edition of *Hyginus* (31 March 1515). Vivès's whereabouts until 1517 are not very well known: he spent some time at the Brussels Court, before going to teach privately at Leuven and, in late 1516 or early 1517, entering the service of the young William of Croy (1498–1521), who was appointed Bishop of Cambrai on 15 August 1516, created Cardinal on 2 April 1517 and archbishop of Toledo later that year.

Vivès—through this distinguished pupil—played an important role in the admission by the University of the newly established *Collegium Trilingue*, and as a welcome result he was granted, in March 1520, formal permission to teach at the University, even without registering or having a master's degree.

But only a few months later, after the sudden death of his pupil and patron, in January 1521, Vivès's prospects became much less promising. He had to return to Leuven and go on with his teaching to earn a living. Fortunately, the year before—probably during the meeting of Charles V and Henry VIII

at Calais on 11–14 July 1520—Vivès had become personally acquainted with Thomas More, who was accompanying his king to the meeting at the Field of the Cloth of Gold near Calais, and almost at once became a close friend. More, who was by then almost at the peak of his career and a member of the King's Council, proved to be a real friend: he not only sympathized with and gave moral support to Vivès, but personally saw to it that he was given a small pension by the Queen, Catherine of Aragon. With Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, Vivès's countrywoman, clearly interested in humanistic studies, England seemed to offer new opportunities. To Henry Vivès dedicated his edition of St Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, which he finished in August 1522. His next work, his remarkable *De institutione feminae christianae* in three volumes, was completed in less than a year: the dedicatory letter to Queen Catherine is dated 9 April 1523. A month later Vivès crossed the Channel. Pretty soon he was appointed Reader by Cardinal Wolsey at Cardinal College (which later became Christ Church), Oxford, and he actually taught at Corpus Christi College. But he obviously wanted to be attached to the Court rather than to go on teaching. The King, as he told his Bruges friend John Fevyn, loved all scholars, and amongst them thought particularly highly of Erasmus and More; the Queen was extremely pious and the entire nobility was well disposed to men of learning generally. At the request of Catherine, Vivès composed his first educational treatise, namely a plan of studies for her six-year-old daughter Mary Tudor (*De ratione studii puerilis*) and he personally offered it to her during her visit to Oxford in October 1523. It was probably during one of his visits to the Court that he met Louis of Flanders, Lord of Praet (1488–1555), who was the imperial ambassador. Having been born himself at Bruges and being actively interested in literature, Praet prompted Vivès to write the treatise that will be discussed here in some detail, the *De subventionem pauperum*. Almost immediately afterwards

both men returned to Bruges, in May 1525, and Vivès started to work on this project.

### *De subventionem pauperum*

At the end of his letter of 20 June 1525 to Francis Cranevelt, Vivès reported that he had started on some work of such weight and importance that he did not dare to reveal more, for fear that Cranevelt might consider him mad. Of course, Cranevelt asked for more details, but Vivès left his best friend in the dark for months (letters of 2 and 17 September, 25 October and 10 December 1525). He did not dare to commit titles or general ideas to letters, fearing that they might fall into the wrong hands and that he would be considered off his head (25 October 1525).

Although the work did not initially proceed as fast as he wanted—he likened the process to an elephant's pregnancy (“nec tamen citius pariam quam elephantus”)—it all worked out quite well in the end: the first edition came out on 17 March 1526. Vivès, who had returned to England in the second half of February 1526, obviously had not been able to correct the galley proofs, and he was troubled to see that this first edition was marred by a whole lot of printing errors (“bene mendosum”). But an excuse was readily found: “nempe Brugis excusum”: it was printed at Bruges, and it was the very first attempt of the printer Hubertus Crocus—Hubert De Croock.

From the moment the book was off the press, Vivès was of course interested in its reception and he invited his friend Cranevelt, and others, to send him their critical comments. And if there was something in it to appeal to a common interest, he wanted Cranevelt to promote it and discuss it with the people who could give it practical implementation.

To Vivès disappointment, however, Cranevelt's remarks were almost exclusively limited to a few suggestions for grammatical and stylistic improvement. Vivès acknowledged

and discussed these, but at the end of his letter he repeated his request for Cranevelt's personal opinion of the main lines of his recommendations for the treatment of the poor, indicating that he was far more concerned about that than about trifles. From other people Vivès received many congratulations and ample eulogies were bestowed upon him.<sup>10</sup>

However, the contents of his treatise elicited some harsh criticism. What Vivès probably most feared was the accusation of heresy. Back in 1520 Erasmus himself had already been fiercely attacked by Nicolas de Bureau, a Franciscan friar and suffragan bishop of Tournai, who afterwards had to confess to Cranevelt that in fact he had not read any of the books he had been fulminating against. And now this same Nicolas de Bureau condemned Vivès's *DSP* as heretical and a product of Lutheran inspiration. He even threatened to denounce the author and his work to the authorities. It was not by mere coincidence, or only because of his deeply rooted aversion to these new humanists and their ideas in general, that the friar again raised his voice, for even if Vivès had been prudent enough not to link the general situation of the beggars to the mendicant orders, there were of course implications in his tract that threatened the very existence of those orders. But a few weeks later he seemed to have calmed down, undoubtedly because not even so ill-disposed a man could discover the slightest shortcomings in this treatise as regards the tenets of the the Catholic faith.<sup>11</sup>

It cannot be denied, however, that Vivès's *DSP* contains many new and even revolutionary ideas, which went further than those of Erasmus' short but entertaining colloquy entitled *Ptwcologiva (The Art of Begging, 1524)*<sup>12</sup> and even, in some respects, those of the bestseller by his English friend Thomas More, the *Utopia*. Vivès was of course familiar with these works, and one can even discern some formal similarities with the *Utopia*, which also is divided into two books.

But Vivès's goal was different. He designed it as a practical manual, which dealt with the causes of social injustice and offered remedies for it. In the first book, which is more than one and a half times longer than the second one, Vivès sets out the general principles of social welfare on which should be based the practical measures dealt with in the second book.

These principles can be summarized as follows:

- 1 Vivès's starting point is that nobody is completely self-sufficient, that need and the limitations of the human race are at the very basis of human society in general and of the origin of cities and states in particular: every single person needs help, in one way or another, be it in the material or spiritual sense;<sup>13</sup>
- 2 deriving from Original Sin, evil in different forms has come upon earth, wars both civil and external being the worst evil of all;
- 3 in order to remedy these evils, Vivès develops the idea of Christian love and charity as a principle of life, that should be practised by everyone;
- 4 and finally, Vivès defines the categories of people needing our help and the ways in which beneficence has to be put into effect.

After setting out these general principles, Vivès proceeds to their concrete implementation. For him the community and its head are like body and soul, and the head cannot afford to look after only the richer part of society. It is not at all wise to neglect the poor, who are forced to steal or resort to prostitution. And it is deplorable, he goes on, that even in church one has to pay for everything and that no bishop considers the poor souls as belonging to his flock. An important point is that Vivès does not write these people off as necessarily criminal. Measures to prevent them from falling into crime should be taken, and they should be looked after properly, so that they can be turned into good citizens, rather than pun-



Figure 1 Joan Lluís Vivès.

ished. And here Vivès idealizes Greek and Roman society (p. 56), where nobody had to beg and where the old laws even forbade vagrancy; a similar law was already extant in the Old Testament, so vagrancy was really something to be ashamed of in a Christian society.

But then again, how should we cope with that immense crowd of the poor, if Christian charity was not treated as the effective rule in society—that charity which makes all property common and which makes everyone look upon the needs of others as if they were his own?

For Vivès there were several classes of indigent people that had to be dealt with in specific ways. There was a first group, consisting of orphans, the elderly, sick and handicapped people, who had to be looked after by the authorities, through establishing proper homes and shelters for them, and administering them properly.

A second group consisted of poor people living at home. Here Vivès evidently had in mind people who were working all day at home, but whose work did not bring sufficient recompense to meet the bare necessities of life. These people also were entitled to some help by the city council, but first they must undergo a thorough investigation. A complete list of these people and their children should be drawn up by two city officials, who would establish what kind of people these were, how they fell into poverty, how they lived and what their morals were like. And finally there was a third group just wandering around without a fixed residence: this crowd (“ingluvies”) would be obliged to state their names to the city council, along with the reason why they were begging. They needed to be watched very closely, and even put into jail if necessary, but they were nevertheless entitled to medical help.

Poverty could be solved by putting almost everybody to work. Nobody should starve to death, but anyone who wasted his money on luxuries and shameful things should receive just enough food to survive while being obliged to do the most difficult and distasteful jobs, so they would set a good example for others, repent their past lives, and not relapse into bad ways.

Nobody capable of doing work should be allowed to wander around doing nothing: “homines nihil agendo discunt male agere: idle hands make work for the devil”. Sick and elderly people should be given lighter occupations, but not even the blind were exempt from work. If some people falsely pretended to be ill, they should be punished after a doctor’s examination. Beggars from abroad should be provided with travelling expenses and sent back to their own country, except if their country was stricken by war. Natives would be asked what trade they were able to exercise. If they did not have one, they would be taught the trade they seemed to prefer. If they were not able to support themselves as self-employed persons, they should be assigned to a workshop. These workshops, and also the ones to which the magistrate

sent apprentices for their training, should be given public contracts. Vivès hoped that the ecclesiastical authorities would of their own free will adopt a similar attitude, but—for safety's sake no doubt—he did not expand upon this topic.

A special problem were children abandoned by their parent(s). Here again Vivès put forward some ideas that were revolutionary and constituted a very powerful preventative measure in the struggle against poverty. Until the age of six these children were to be looked after by foster-mothers in an orphanage; after that they would become resident pupils in a publicly funded school, where they would receive a proper education from good teachers paid by the magistrate. The brightest students could become teachers and priests, the others could go to the workshops, according to their own inclination. Quite remarkable in this context are also Vivès's ideas concerning the education of women, which he had already extensively set out in his pioneering work *De institutione feminae christiana*.<sup>14</sup>

In Vivès's opinion young girls also should receive an elementary education; if some were really bright, they should even be allowed to continue beyond that stage, provided this education enhanced their religious and moral qualities. These girls of course also had to learn to spin, to weave, to do needlework and to perform kitchen and other domestic tasks, but their first goal must always be to protect their chastity, a unique treasure where women were concerned: "unicum foeminarum bonum".

A most important point, which could not be ignored, was the solution of the financial implications of his reform. Vivès again started by referring to the primitive Christian Church, where the first Christians made all their worldly goods available to the Apostles, who divided them according to everybody's needs. But in the course of time this Christian spirit and fervour decreased; ecclesiastical authorities began to rival the secular world in their way of acting and living; their wealth increased, but they did not spend it in

the interests of the poor. In fact, in Vivès's opinion, if that could be brought about, the problem of the poor would largely be resolved.

Here Vivès clearly avoided taking the obvious next step: if indeed ecclesiastical possessions were almost sufficient in themselves to solve the problem and if the civil authorities were responsible for public welfare, the latter should indeed be entitled to have access to those possessions in one way or another. However, he restricted himself to the recommendation that, if Church prelates were unwilling to put their riches at the disposal of the poor, the latter should not undertake violent protest over this: Christ would eventually pass judgement on the prelates' lack of charity.

In any case, the hospitals and shelter homes should be largely self-sufficient, provided that only the really poor and needy were admitted to them, and if they were all put to work according to their capacities. Furthermore, there are a few other measures that could help meet the rest of the expenses arising: the richer hospitals should share their resources with the poorer ones; everyone—according to his wealth—should set something aside to be distributed to the poor after his death. If all that was not sufficient, occasional collection boxes should be placed in the main churches of the city and an explicit appeal made to wealthy people to offer additional resources, before the city itself, in the last resort, stepped in with finance held in reserve for all kinds of public expenses.

## Conclusion

This treatise by Vivès has to be seen against the background of the increasing poverty and vagrancy to be found in early capitalist Europe. In several cities, such as Nuremberg (1522), Strasbourg (1523), Mons (1525) and Ypres (1525), measures had recently been taken to deal with these problems. Vivès's ideas were thus not

entirely new. He certainly did not aim at the abolition of ecclesiastical charity, and he seems quite reluctant to give civil authorities the entire responsibility for public welfare. But, in my opinion, the innovative character of his treatise consists mainly in his positive attitude to the problem of begging by vagrants. Instead of severe repression, Vivès offered an overall solution based, on the one hand, on his radical employment programme. On the other, he strongly argued in favour of publicly funded schools to be established by the city authorities, where a proper education for all should be provided.

Vivès was indeed a man of vision. The immediate influence of his tract is perhaps not always demonstrable, but it seems quite significant that the magistrates of Ypres had a Dutch translation printed in 1533, in order to support the social reforms they had carried through, thus offering to their citizens a general theoretical framework. A German translation was also published in 1533; French and Italian versions followed somewhat later, whilst the Latin text went through the press over and over again.

It is a fact that it took until the beginning of the last century before here in Western Europe compulsory school attendance was introduced. And in this modern world the problem of poverty still remains largely unsolved.

In his time Vivès's tract was by far the most fully thought-out plea for the relief of the poor in an urban context. And it is probably thanks to his extreme caution and circumspection that his tract was not immediately rejected as heretical or totally utopian, but in fact strongly influenced the spirit and thinking of people and rulers in its own and later times.

### Acknowledgement

I wish to thank my colleague and friend, Dr R.W. Truman, for his careful reading and correcting of this contribution.

### Notes

- 1 Vivès, L. (1973) 'Introduzione, testo e appendice a cura di Armando Saitta', in *De subventione pauperum*. Florence, p. 3: "nec aliter hanc [= civitatem Brugensem] nomino quam patriam, cuius iam quattuordecim annis sum incola, etsi non continenter; semper tamen huc sum solitus redire tamquam ad domum".
- 2 For complaints about Oxford, see de Vocht, H. (ed.) (1928) *Litterae virorum eruditorum ad Franciscum Craneveldium 1522-1528. A Collection of Original Letters Edited from the Manuscripts and Illustrated with Notes and Commentaries*, Humanistica Lovaniensia 1. Louvain, *epp.* 80 and 90; and the letter Vivès sent to Hector Decamius: Majansius, G. (ed.) (1782-1790) *Joannis Lodovici Vivis Valentini Opera Omnia*, 8 vols. Valencia, Vol. VII, p. 207.
- 3 IJsewijn, J. and Tournoy, G. (1993) 'Litterae ad Craneveldium Balduiniana. A preliminary edition. 2. Letters 31-55', *Humanistica Lovaniensia* 42, pp. 50-51, *ep.* 55: "Me magnum desyderium tenet vestri oppidi et vestri omnium. Rus mihi videor migrasse ex urbe, postquam huc veni. Usqueadeo sunt hic omnia rustica prae istis, nec valetudo fuit tam bona [[ quam Br. . .]] hic, etiam in celo clementiore et puriore, quam Brugis. Plane ibi bene vales, ubi libenter es".
- 4 *Ibid.*, *ep.* 61 (dated 22 May 1521), p. 25: "Rus hoc Lovaniense et rustici in eo cibi parum ad stomachum meum faciunt. Et tu me putas ridere, quum haec dico, cavillarisque de libris et cultissimis Musis. Libros omnes omnesque Musas volo bene valere, quoad ipse bene valeam. Tunc negocium ab illis mihi [[exibe]] exhiberi sane gaudeam. Hoc tempore taceant loquaces et obstreperae Musae; facessat omnis Stoicitas, abeat Peripatum; causa Epicuri non tam magnificis saepe verbis quam suavibus factis omnis mihi sit res. Me miserum, quod hoc me cruciat Lovanii, idest in rustica Stoa, parum esse[[e]] Epicuritati loci. Si enim paulum exhilararis vultum et reconditum esse tantisper in scriniis supercilium triste iusseris, [[occurrerit]] occurrant tibi protinus patru per compita singula bini, plerumque terni quaternique vultuosi, prominentibus ac contortis labris, obducto supercilio, tota facie nubibus nebulisque [[obducta]] operta, torvo intuitu et limo, voce vel nulla vel rauca. Quis locus laetitiae in tanta severitate? In maerore tam maestio? Confer nunc haec nostra cum istis Brugen<sibus>, ubi quitquid occurrat sive oculis sive animo, dispeream nisi merae sint gratiae, lepores, festivitates, veneres ipsae purae putae".
- 5 de Vocht, *Litterae*, *ep.* 8, p. 19: "Peregrinatio mea non tam mihi moesta fuit quam Lovaniensis mansio, ubi semper omnia videntur mihi sui similia, hoc est: sordida et insuavia et prorsus inamabilia; indubie genius huius urbis genio meo est inimicissimus.

Nescio qui fit ut numquam mihi arriserit: nusquam sum illibentius”.

- 6 “Vixit Ioannes annis XLVIII, mensibus II. Mortuus Brugis pridie Nonas Maii MDXL” (Joan lived 48 years and 2 months. He died at Bruges on 6 May 1540).
- 7 Published posthumously by F. Cranevelt at Basel in 1543.
- 8 Starting with de la Pinta Llorente, M. and de Palacio, J.M. (1964) *Procesos Inquisitoriales contra la Familia Judía de Luis Vivès*. Madrid and Barcelona: CSIC. See further García, A. (1987) *Els Vivès: una Família de Jueus Valencians*. Valencia: Tresy Quatre; García Cárcel, R. (1992) ‘La familia de Luis Vivès y la Inquisición’, in A. Mestre (ed.) *Ioannis Lodovici Vivès Valentini Opera Omnia, I. Volumen Introductorio*, pp. 489–519. Valencia; González González, E. (1998) ‘Vivès: un Humanista Judeoconverso en el Exilio de Flandes’, in L. Dequeker and W. Verbeke (eds) *The Expulsion of the Jews and their Emigration to the Southern Low Countries (15th–16th C.)*, *Mediaevalia Lovaniensia*, I. 26, pp. 35–81. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- 9 Vivès, 1973, p. 3: “Patriam, cuius iam quattuordecim annis sum incola, *etsi non continenter*” (my italics). See also de Vocht, *Litterae*, p. 274: “meam in hac domo [= domo Bernardi Valdaurae] duodecim annorum consuetudinem.”
- 10 de Vocht, *Litterae*, No. 193, p. 508: “Multae a multis mihi scribuntur laudes . . . Velim ex te cognoscere quales videntur tibi leges illae de subveniendis pauperibus; nam hoc magis curo quam syllabas aut voculas”.
- 11 de Vocht, *Litterae*, Nos 246 and 248, pp. 631–639.
- 12 Erasmus, *Colloquia*: Halkin, L.-E., Bierlaire, F. and Hoven, R. (eds) (1972) *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami, I.3*, pp. 433–437. Amsterdam. For the influence of Chaucer on this dialogue, see de Vocht, H. (1910) ‘Chaucer and Erasmus’, *Englische Studien* 41, pp. 385–392.
- 13 Vivès, 1973, p. 7: “Nullus tam est vel corpore validus, vel acer ingenio, qui si humano more ac modo victurus sit, sibi unus sufficiat”.
- 14 J.L. Vivès, *De institutione feminae christianae*: Fantazzi, C. and Mattheussen, C. (eds) (1996–1998) *Selected Works of J.L. Vivès*, 2 vols, trans. C. Fantazzi. Leiden: Brill.

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