

Adrian Ignat

## The Poor are the Treasure of the Church

### Abstract

The poverty is a complex problem on the national and international level. Unfortunately, until now at social and political level, no viable solution can be found on the global scale. Eradicating poverty and hunger are the main problems everywhere in the world. Fighting against poverty and helping poor people is the responsibility of all countries and Churches.

In this paper I will try to underline some understandings of two notions – poor and poverty. It will be a Christian point of view, with a special emphasis on the Orthodox view.

### Keywords

poverty, poor, mercy, philanthropy, economical crisis



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## 1 Introduction

Since ancient times, poverty and poor are understood as two realities of every society. Today, when the economical crisis is visible to every level, the poverty is becoming a social phenomenon with powerful implications.

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## 2 Wealth and Poverty – two Realities of the Human History

The word *πτωχός* - “poor” comes from the verb *πτωσσω* - “to snuggle”. As the etymology shows, the poor man is one who is unable to meet his needs. As ever the human being has many unmet needs, as ever he is poorest. By contrary, as ever the human being has fewer unmet needs, as ever the richer is.

The provision of food, shelter, and medical care, as well as psychological support, should never depend on the recipient's state of soul. For centuries, Christians have served the needy in these various respects<sup>1</sup>. Unconditional love views all human beings as worthy of protection from harms and of provision of goods, since they are created and valued as children of God. There is no person who lacks this basic value, for it is bestowed by the creator independent of any inherent capacities or talents.

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<sup>1</sup> W. E. H. Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne*, (New York: George Braziller Press, 1955).

Human life is sacred because it is derived ultimately from the creativity of a loving God<sup>2</sup>.

Love for all humanity as such, including the stranger, can be property-based if grounded in some universal aspect of persons, e.g., the Stoic notion of reason. It can also be interpreted as a love of bestowal, especially when human capacities dim. Beginning with the Hellenistic age, Greek antiquity developed the norm of philanthropia, referring to a generous hospitality even to the stranger. One Hippocratic precept is: “Where there is love of humanity there is love of medical science.” Influenced by the demands of Stoic ethics, the physician is to assist “even aliens who lack resources.”<sup>3</sup> The ideal of love for humanity is found among the Stoics, Cynics, Pythagoreans, Hellenized Jews, and early Christian theologians, where philanthropia was often used in exchangeable with agape, the New Testament Greek word for love of humanity<sup>4</sup>.

It is not clear whether the commandment in Leviticus, “Love your neighbor as yourself”, originally applied to Jews only or to non-Jews as well (Lv. 19, 18). However, in medieval Judaism it was applied to the non-Jew, as is clear in the writings of the rabbi-physician Moses Maimonides. In Christianity, building on Judaism, the practice of medicine was profoundly influenced by the story of the Good Samaritan, who assisted a wounded stranger by the roadside. After three centuries of persecution, Christians opened hospitals and made care of the sick an expression of love. They were unusually heroic in the leprosaria. It is argued that Christianity gave rise to a decisive

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<sup>2</sup> See P. Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago reprint, 1978), chapter 7.

<sup>3</sup> O. Temkin, *Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> P. Chirilă, M. Valică, C. G. Popescu, A. Băndoiu, *Teologie socială*, (Bucharest: Christiana Press, 2007), pp. 47-48; H. Sigerist, *Civilization and Disease*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1943).

change in attitude toward the sick, who now assumed even a preferential position<sup>5</sup>.

### 3     **The Poor in the Early Church**

The Early Church underscored the importance of the material world to God's purposes and human well-being by giving enormous attention to the relationships of rich and poor. The possession of wealth is generally portrayed as spiritually and morally dangerous. Poverty is a plight to which faithful Christians, especially those with wealth, must respond. The spiritual danger of wealth is partly in its temptation toward idolatry, thus substituting worship of material things for worship of God. So Polycarp emphasizes that "if anyone does not refrain from the love of money he will be defiled by idolatry and so be judged as if he were one of the heathen, who are ignorant of the judgment of the Lord"<sup>6</sup>.

The spiritual peril of wealth is also in the barrier it can so easily create between rich and poor. Rich people tend to neglect their need to love poor people, and failure to love is a deeply spiritual issue. Love itself is grounded in recognition that rich and poor are sisters and brothers. One of the earliest of the church's surviving manuals of instruction, the *Didache*<sup>7</sup>, commands Christians to "share everything with your brother and call nothing your own. For if you have what is eternal in common, how much more should you have what is transient!"<sup>8</sup> Clement

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<sup>5</sup> E. Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism*, (Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> \*\*\*, *Letter of Polycarp*, in "Early Christian Fathers", ed. Cyril C. Richardson, published by Simon&Schuster, (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 1.2, p. 153.

<sup>7</sup> A product of the second century, the *Didache* has important parallels in other surviving writings and may represent traditions of teaching somewhat older than the document as we know it.

<sup>8</sup> \*\*\*, *Didache*, in *Early Christian Fathers*, 2.8.

of Rome writes of the responsibility of neighbor love, with each bound to the needs of the other in proportion to each's special gifts: "The rich must provide for the poor; the poor must thank God for giving him someone to meet his needs"<sup>9</sup>. Ignatius sharply criticizes those "who have wrong notions about the grace of Jesus Christ". Such people "care nothing about love: they have no concern for widows or orphans, for the oppressed, for those in prison or released, for the hungry or the thirsty".<sup>10</sup> Such ideas are not expressed with systematic clarity in most of the writings of the early church; certainly they are not expounded with economic sophistication. The church's economic ethic was more distribution than production oriented. Even the distributional side of economics was seen more in terms of the moral responsibility for acts of charity than as a problem for systemic reform - although, as we shall see, there appear to have been some efforts toward systematic sharing of wealth within the churches themselves. The moral urgency of acts of charity was often grounded in direct appeals to earlier apostolic traditions, including the teachings of Jesus and what were to become the New Testament epistles. Thus Polycarp makes direct reference to 1 Timothy and 2 Corinthians in a brief passage condemning materialism:

"But 'the love of money is the beginning of all evils'. Knowing, therefore, that 'we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out', let us arm ourselves 'with the weapons of righteousness'".<sup>11</sup>

In the modern church, charitable giving is termed an act of stewardship, grounded on Jesus' parable of the talents (Matt. 25:14-28; Luke 19:11-27). The idea is that we give what God has first given to us. This idea is implicit in many of the teachings on the sharing of wealth in the early church. Occasionally, as in the *Shepherd of Hermas*, it is made explicit.

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<sup>9</sup> \*\*\* , *Clement*, in *Early Christian Fathers*, 38.2.

<sup>10</sup> Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, in: *Early Christian Fathers*, 6.2.

<sup>11</sup> \*\*\* , *Letter of Polycarp*, in *Early Christian Fathers*, 4.1.

According to that mid-second-century writing, it is God who gives us the reward for our labors. And God wishes these gifts “to be shared among all (...). They who receive, will render an account to God why and for what they have received”<sup>12</sup>. Not surprisingly, this writing seems to have been addressed more directly to the few Christians possessing wealth<sup>13</sup>.

#### **4 Christ - the eternal Neighbor in need**

On the Orthodox Church we have many examples of brilliant full dedication for those who are poor. The fourth-century Cappadocians – Saint Basil of Caesarea, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, and Saint Gregory of Nyssa – all made significant contributions to Christian moral teaching, especially, on issues touching on economics<sup>14</sup>. All three emphasize sharing with the poor. Wealth is spiritually dangerous if hoarded or spent selfishly<sup>15</sup>. Money given to the poor is an investment in eternal treasure; it is faithful stewardship of what actually belongs to God. Saint Basil elaborated the traditional rejection of usury, reminding his readers that „in many passages of the Scripture, lending with interest is condemned as sinful” and arguing that „it is extremely inhuman that one has to beg for the most basic necessities to support his life while another is not satisfied with

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<sup>12</sup> \*\*\*, *Shepherd of Hermas*, in: *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II, A. Roberts, J. Donaldson (eds.), (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977), p. 20.

<sup>13</sup> J. L. Gonzalez, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*, (San Francisco: Harper&Row, 1990), p. 97.

<sup>14</sup> See C. Vasiliu, *Atitudinea Sfinților Trei Ierarhi față de societatea vremii lor*, in: *Revue „theological Studies”*, XXXII (1980), nr.1-2.

<sup>15</sup> J. Ph. Wogaman, *Christian Ethics. A historical introduction*, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 24.

the capital he has, but excogitates ways of increasing his opulence at the expense of the poor in distress”<sup>16</sup>.

Saint Basil grounded his moral teaching both on theological teaching (“our Lord invites us to adopt the spirit of sharing, mutual love”), and a conception of human nature (“Man, indeed, is a political and social animal. Now, in social relations and in common life, a certain disposition to share one’s goods is necessary in order to assist the needy”)<sup>17</sup>. As bishop, Saint Basil put his economic views into practice with the development of an impressive set of institutions designed to aid the ill and disabled, travelers, and the unemployed<sup>18</sup>.

Similar things could be said concerning Saint John Chrysostom, whose many homilies strongly condemn unshared wealth, while affirming the legitimacy of government<sup>19</sup>. Saint Catherine, Saint Parascheva, and so on, have done also a useful work for the benefit of Church and poor. It is true that when we hear saying that we have found today people who have left themselves without feeding, to give food to the poor, and were stripped from their clothes to clothe the naked, and gave their property to be divided for the use of poor, suffered on prisons and even death for their faith, we think that some of these stories are not true. But all our saints were done an important work for poor and for those who are in need.

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<sup>16</sup> St. Basil the Great, *Homily on Psalm XV*, I, in: P. C. Phan (ed.), *Message of the Fathers of the Church: Social Thought*, (Wilmington, Del: Michael Glazier, 1984), p. 110.

<sup>17</sup> Idem, *Homily on Psalm XIV*, I, in: P. C. Phan (ed.), *Message of the Fathers of the Church: Social Thought*, p. 110.

<sup>18</sup> J. L. Gonzales, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*, pp. 182-183.

<sup>19</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homily XXIII on the Letter to the Romans*, in: P. C. Phan (ed.), *Message of the Fathers of the Church: Social Thought*, p. 151.

Mother Teresa, awarded with the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1979, has devoted her exemplary life to love for the homeless and sick strangers on the streets of Calcutta<sup>20</sup>.

A purely unconditional expression of love suggests a God who desires no reciprocity whatsoever, no movement of give-and-take with the beloved - a God for whose well-being no response would be necessary. Hence, while no Christian would doubt the high value of unconditional love in meeting psychophysical needs, it is of limited value with respect to the “*God-relation*” for both God and the human being<sup>21</sup>.

## 5     **The Christian and Communist understandings of Common Ownership**

Common ownership originally appeared as spontaneous social event on the Christian Church of Jerusalem, but until now it was kept alive by the monastic community<sup>22</sup>. Christian common ownership differs greatly from that of communism. The axiom of Christianity is “*whatever is mine is yours*”, while the communist axiom is “*whatever is yours is mine*”. Common ownership of Christianity is based on free and spontaneous consent (Acts 5, 4), while the external imposition of communism on coercion. Moreover, Christianity recognizes that the common ownership of real property is God, when communist common ownership is granted to the humans<sup>23</sup>.

Poor and rich are two different categories of people mainly from the religious point of view. All who are poor do not have enough economic assets and put their hopes in God, being on

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<sup>20</sup> R. Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> S. G. Post, *Spheres of love. Toward a new ethics of the family*, (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1994), p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> See P. Evdokimov, *Vârstele vieții spirituale*, translation by I. Buga, (Bucharest: Christiana Press, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> G. Mantzaridis, *Morală creștină*, translation by C. C. Coman, (Bucharest: Bizantina Press, 2006), p. 358.



direct dependence on Him. On the contrary, the rich are those who have plenty of economic goods and rely on them, looking for God. The poor remain in the boundaries of human being and seek the fullness of human nature beyond the proximity of the world. The wealthy have a false sense of self-sufficiency; in fact they are prisoners and slaves of this world. Therefore Christ gives happiness to the poor, as heirs of the kingdom of God, and he deplores the rich (Lk. 6, 20-24).

## **6 Globalization and Poverty**

Globalization of the economy is connected with the monetary economy, seeking not only to globalize the economy, but to globalize money and exploitation of the weak. In this way it promotes a deeper impoverishment of the poor and accelerated accumulation of wealth by the richest. Finally, all of these are accompanied by the degradation level of spiritual and moral life of society<sup>24</sup>.

Based on this perspective we can see the human tendency for seeking easy gains in any form. This search does not become real, of course, as a simple economic process, but it outlines the broader spirit of the time and expresses itself through serious violations of social, moral and spiritual order. Thus, disregarding moral criteria and the gradual disappearance of moral apprehension (of scruples), especially for our time, conduct to injustice, deception, violence, murder, complicity, immorality and any other unlawful forms of economic gains<sup>25</sup>.

Helping all who are in need, especially a poor one, the Church shows itself as a loving and carrying mother for its sons and daughters, no matters the social and material position. More than that, the poor are a true treasure for the Church of Christ, and also for its members, because helping them the Church receives a treasure more important: the wealth on Jesus Christ.

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 371.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.