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# Historical and Canonical Reflections on the Church's Philanthropic Work

## Abstract

In this article the author examines the scriptural and apostolic basis for the Church's philanthropic mission. Social work is seen to have been an integral part of the activity of the Early Church, and the Holy Canons make specific provisions for the care of disadvantaged categories, such as orphans, widows, and the poor in general. Such provisions were also later codified in Byzantine law and enacted through the charitable institutions of the Church. Throughout the history of the Christian era, philanthropy, or social work, has been essentially a religious act, and only in recent times has it become institutionalised and professionnalised. Ultimately, man's salvation is bound up with philanthropy, his love of his fellowman, which is itself an expression of God's love for man, embodied in His creation

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of man in His own image and His Son's sacrifice on the Cross.

Keywords

Philanthropy, Social Work, Early Church, Holy Canons

## 1   Introduction

Philanthropy has been part of the Church's work and mission in the world ever since its foundation. Christ the Saviour Himself exemplifies His teaching in parables that some scholars have rightly named parables of divine compassion.[1] In the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:30) the Saviour sets the clearest possible example. A traveller is beaten, robbed and left to die in the road. The first people who pass by, a priest and a Levite, are unmoved, as Christ remarks, without condemning them, in order to emphasise the charity of the Samaritan: he takes mercy on the traveller, binds his wounds, anoints them with oil and wine – used for medicinal purposes at that time – and takes him to an inn, where he gives the innkeeper money to tend to him until he is fully healed. Finally, Christ says: "Go and do thou likewise" (Lk. 10:37). This parable provides a complete picture of social work.

This explains the Church's philanthropic and charitable work over the centuries. Hospitals have frequently been named after the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan therefore symbolises Christ's love and the Church's charity and philanthropy, but not only the Church as an institution, but also each member of the Church, each individual Christian. One's neighbour is therefore any person who helps his fellow man, but also any person in need of the help of his fellowman, regardless of race, social

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[1]    N. M. Dinu, *Iisus Hristos Mântuitorul în lumina Sfintelor Evanghelii*, (Bucuresti: Ed. Bizantină 2004), p. 444.

status, occupation or age. Consequently, every person can become the merciful image of the Good Samaritan, of the mercy of Jesus Christ the Saviour, just as through every person Christ the Lord can reveal His love in the world, if the heart of every person becomes merciful. Thus, the Good Samaritan is any person who helps a fellow man in need. The Saviour said of Himself: "I am among you as he that serveth" (Lk. 22:27).

From the very beginning, the Holy Apostles were faced with problems of a social nature: they took care that none should be in need. The rule according to which they acted is described as follows:

> "Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need" (Acts 4:34-35).

Such examples show that the Christian Social Doctrine has a genuine biblical basis:

> "It's deeper fabric is directly linked to the mystery of Jesus Christ, understood as the figure who gathers together and interprets human achievements in history, and Whom Christian social doctrine takes as its deeper hermeneutic perspective in its discourse on the world."[2]

## 2   Social Welfare in Early Christian Writings

In the oldest Christian text after the New Testament, the *Teaching (Didache) of the Twelve Apostles*, the following apothegm occurs:

> "Be not one who stretches out his hands to receive, but shuts them when it comes to giving (Deut. 15:7; Eccl. 4:31). Of

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2    M. Bănică, *'Locul celuilalt' – Ortodoxia în modernitate,* (Bucuresti: Editura Paideia, 2007), p. 121.

whatsoever thou hast gained by thy hands thou shalt give a ransom for thy sins" (emphasis added).[3]

Even if the passage seems to focus on the charity towards others that is the duty of every Christian, we cannot but include the sick within this pastoral mission. All charity is viewed expiation for sin. Therefore, any sin may be vanquished through love of one's neighbor.

We should note that the vanquishing of sin is not the same thing as the forgiveness of sin, which can only be gained through the Sacrament of Confession. Likewise, the anonymous author of this Christian document of incalculable value warns us not to cavil when we perform acts of charity, since God will reward us when the time comes.

Caring for the sick is often arduous and a positive outcome requires great patience and great hope in God. We believe that the main problem confronting not only those in the health system, but also those who endeavour to help the sick using their own means (money, food, provision of care, etc.) is impatience. The illness seems interminable, the patient is often demanding, irritable, anxious, and patience seems to be wholly lacking on the carer's part.

This situation arises when we invest all our hope in ourselves alone and in our financial, mental and physical potential to solve the problem. But if we knew how little we are really able to do and how much God achieves in our stead, then not only would we have more patience, but also the patient would gain greater strength to recover.

In another important but likewise anonymous document, *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*, we find the following exhortation:

"For we must help those who are sick, those in peril, and those who backslide, and as far as possible through the

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[3]    *The Apostolic Fathers*, vol. 1, trans. K. Lake, (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1959), p. 317.

exhortation of the word make them whole and deliver them from death (Mt. 9:12)."[4]

Thus, the sick are placed in the same category as those in peril and those who are heading towards the abyss of sin. The pastoral mission of the Church therefore includes not only those who have sinned, but also those who are sick and need the assistance of their fellow man. Here, as in the previously mentioned document, no distinction is made between laity and clergy when it comes to tending to the sick. The mission of assisting the sick is incumbent not only on priests and deacons, but also on us Christian believers. But as we shall see below, the Church hierarchy alone is responsible for distributing donations to meet the needs of certain categories of believers (orphans, widows, the sick).

The same document also gives the following directions:

"For what if some are neither widows nor widowers, but stand in need of assistance, either through poverty or some disease, or the maintenance of a great number of children? It is thy duty to oversee all people, and to take care of them all (1 Pet. 4:10)."[5]

The passage thus makes it clear that there are certain gifts that are given in church for the benefit of widows in particular.

The anonymous author advises the local bishop to manage these gifts wisely and distribute them also to the sick and the poor. And this is where the importance of the bishop's ministry comes in. Even if the document does not state that the bishop is to visit the sick, this may be understood. Likewise, we may note here the administrative importance that the office of bishop had begun to have from the very first centuries of the Christian era.

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[4]   *Didahia celor Doisprezece Apostoli, III, 5-8,* in: *Canonul Ortodoxiei,* vol. 1, trans. I. I. Ică Jr. (Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2008), p. 613.

[5]   *The Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ed. by A. Roberts, vol. 17, *The Clementine Homilies. The Apostolical Constitutions*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1870), pp. 94-95.

But not only was the distribution of gifts regarded as important, but also remembrance of the distributors:

> "For God knows the giver, though thou distributes it to those in want when he is absent. And he has the reward of well-doing, but thou the blessedness of having dispensed it with a good conscience. But do thou tell them who was the giver, that they may pray for him by name."[6]

The sick are encouraged to pray for their benefactors, and this is the benefactors' reward. This beautiful custom has been preserved to the present day. It is not known who in fact gives the most in this situation, whether it is the giver who donates a part of his income or sits at the patient's bedside listening to his complaints, or whether it be the patient, who by his prayers to God can bring a far richer spiritual or material gift for the benefactor.

## 3    The first Forms of Social Welfare in the Church

It should be noted that the first structures whereby the Church gave succour to the needy were church communities with communal property, church communities in the form of colleges, corporations or legal associations, and church communities without communal property, which had networks of social welfare societies and institutions. Of course, individual assistance, outside organisations for that purpose, has also existed throughout the Church's history. Social welfare institutions came into being around the year 300, during the reign of Constantine the Great.

According to the extant sources, the main social welfare institutions of the Early Church were the Brephotropia (nurseries for foundlings), Parthenocomia (shelters for spinsters), Gerocomia (homes for widows), and Orphanotropia (orphanage). The Orphanotropia was an outstanding

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6    Ibidem.

achievement of the Early Church in the field of social welfare, which manifested Christian love of one's neighbour. As early as the fourth and fifth centuries, the Church founded special establishments for orphans (both Christian and non-Christian), whose care was entrusted to the clergy under the guidance of a bishop, as attested by the archive documents. The earliest orphanage seems to have been the St. Zoticus Orphanage, from the time of Constantine the Great, Roman Emperor between 306 and 337, famous for his edict granting tolerance of the Christian faith.[7]

In the fourth century, St Sava, in chapter 48 of his *Typikon*, expressly lays out the duties of the abbot:

> "It is fitting that the abbot should take care of healing the sick, be they those who dwell in the monastery, be they those who seek him out (…) Then let the abbot examine the patient and restore his health, and if he pay him no heed, then he is in great danger. And let it be binding upon him".[8]

These rules for monasteries, which had an organised framework, were a practical extension of the situation that had existed during the time of the Church's persecution. Given that they were unable to organise themselves within a well-defined framework, the Christians of the first three centuries ended up in the strange situation of endangering their lives in order to help the sick. Thus, Ss. Cosma and Damian, St. Pantelimon, St Ermolaos, Ss. Cyrus and John, and St. Thalasius are known as wonderworking unmercenaries, great healers of the sick. The work of these martyrs was continued after the period of persecution by private persons, outstanding among whom was St. Melanie the Roman, whose donations to the poor and asylums are reckoned to have been enormous.

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[7]   F. Manoiu, V. Epureanu, *Asistenţa Socială în România*, (Bucuresti: Ed. All, 1992), p. 9.

[8]   G. Brătescu,  *De la bolniţa mânăstirească  la spitalul civil*, in: Mitropolia Olteniei, nr. 9-10, sept.-oct. 1969, p. 90.

Very early on, the monasteries became a force in the social life of the Byzantine State, and philanthropy was an everyday practice in the life of many monasteries. The surplus produced by the monasteries was often distributed to the poor, and the rôle of the monks in helping the needy became very important during the major calamities that disrupted social life, such as famines and plagues. Regardless of the practical and economic extent of monastic philanthropy, which is in any case difficult to gauge, we should not lose sight of the fact that it essentially remained a form of prayer.

Monastic charity was not an end in itself, but rather a spiritual exercise. The shelter for travellers, pilgrims and the sick was often located outside the monastery precincts, and food, clothing and alms for the poor were distributed at the monastery gates.

By the fourth and fifth centuries we find a corps of Christians who tended to the sick in particular. These Parabolani were recruited from among the poor and humble and were skilled in caring for the sick and also had medical knowledge. It was the bishops who appointed the Parabolani. From the extant sources it appears that in the Early Church the Parabolani were a corps of Christians ready to sacrifice themselves for their neighbour and serve the common good, and were permanently exposed to the danger of being infected by those they treated.[9]

Every religious society engaged in social and charitable work as a means of consolidating and spreading Christianity in the ancient world. Thus, in the beginning, the residualist model was dominant in the beginning as short-term assistance, through the founding of orphanages, asylums, hospitals, and so on. But this kind of traditional charity work could not cope with the difficulties of the needy during times of war or in the post-war period in particular.

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[9]    O. Moşin, A. Ciurac, *Implicarea Bisericii Ortodoxe în depăşirea problemelor sociale,* (Chişinău, 2009), p. 9.

The missionary activity combined with what we today name
"care" engaged in by saints of the Christian Church, such as
Parascheva, is well known. In mediaeval Europe there were
numerous attempts, including by means of legislation, to
regulate the problems of persons in need. One of the most
important such pieces of legislation were passed in England:
the Elizabethan Poor Law.

This rests at the foundation of modern social welfare legislation
in Western Europe and the United States. For the first time, the
law defined the categories of person entitled to receive welfare:
all those unable to work. The sources of the funds came from
charitable donations and taxes levied on the local nobility.

It was the first time that the law made the government
responsible for persons in need. Around 1800, the first private
social welfare institutions appeared, in parallel with the public
institutions. The activity of these institutions was based on
volunteer work, and the funds came from charitable donations.
In Britain in the 1880s an institutional form of organised social
welfare volunteer work came into being. The volunteers carried
out surveys and helped the needy in the home. Also in Britain,
and shortly thereafter in the United States, social protection
institutions called settlement houses appeared. The social
workers of this period were solely volunteers, from the
wealthier levels of society, and they engaged in social assistance
in the community.

In order to be materially and psychically independent and in
order to make best use of his own resources, a person must
attain a certain degree of maturity and have a developed
personality and faculty of judgement. In Christianity, there is
also the advantage of divine intervention. In fact, the
development of the personality means the path towards
likeness with God, the replacement of the old man with the new,
who dwells in Christ. The role of social work is to make the
recipient aware of the need to change and to assist him in the
process of solving the problem.

In the early twentieth century professional social workers emerged.[10] It was in this period that a different view of social work came to the fore, based on theories of institutional intervention. Charitable social work does not vanish, but it gives way to its professional counterpart, which is greater in its extent.[11]

## 4   Philanthropy and Missionary Work in the Holy Canons

Canon 13 of the First Ecumenical Council mentions the ministering of Holy Communion to the dying.[12] This is an old practice of the Church, in which the dying (those on their deathbed or in other circumstances), after prior examination of the situation by the bishop, receive the Eucharist in order to strengthen them spiritually and prepare them for the moment when they go to the Lord. This is also mentioned in Canon 9 of St. Nicephorus the Confessor: "it is fitting to give Holy Communion to the sick when in danger of death, even after they have tasted food."[13] We must note the essential condition of the situation, however, namely the "danger of death".

For the sick at death's door it is appropriate to give them the Holy Eucharist even if, due to their infirmity, they have partaken of food. This practice of giving communion to the sick is found even today in the Orthodox Church. In hospitals, asylums or at home, the Christians in suffering receive from the priests the Holy Eucharist, whereby Christ enters their being to give them healing and consecrate their lives.

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[10]   C. Pătuleanu (ed.), *Asistența social-filantropică și medicală organizată în Biserica Ortodoxă Română în trecut și astăzi,* (Bucuresti: Editura Basilica, 2012), p. 222.

[11]   Ibidem, pp. 9-10.

[12]   I. N. Floca, *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe note și comentarii*, (Bucuresti: Editura Sophia 2005), p. 64.

[13]   ftp://ftp.logos.md/Biblioteca/ Colectie_RO/Canoanele_Bisericii_Ortodo xe/4-Parinti/Canoane_Nichifor_Marturisitorul.pdf.

Another reality described in the text of the Canons relates to the ministration of the Holy Sacrament of Baptism for the sick and dying. Canon 12 of the Local Synod of New Caesarea mentions the baptism of the sick, as "baptism in the event of necessity".[14]

The same state is also met in Canon 47 of the Council of Laodicea, where it is stated that "they who are baptised in sickness and afterwards recover must learn the Creed by heart and know that the Divine gifts have been vouchsafed them".[15]

Canon 45 of the Council of Carthage mentions the presence of godparents in cases where the sick are unable to confess their faith and personal conviction.[16] The presence of the godparents as the spiritual parents of those baptised was a guarantee of the fact that the neophyte, once he recovered, would be faithful to the Church.

Canons 26 and 38 of St. Nicephorus the Confessor mention the baptism of those on their deathbed.[17] The first canon refers to baptism and taking the tonsure on one's deathbed. The second refers to baptism of infants in danger of death, when baptism is allowed even three or five days after birth.

The ministration of the Sacrament of Baptism to those in sickness (whether they be infants or whether they be adults not previously baptised) becomes imperative in the conditions described in the above canons, all the more so if the person in question demands it. We find the same practice in the Orthodox Church today. The sick and those at death's door are "joined with Christ" and subsequently receive the Body and Blood of Christ. Old Romanian law, which indisputably descends from Byzantine law, imposes the same obligations on churchmen in

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14   http://comptepv.typepad.fr/canonice/2009/07/canoanele-sinoadelor-locale.html.
15   http://comptepv.typepad.fr/canonice/2009/07/canoanele-sinoadelor-locale.html.
16   Ibidem.
17   ftp://ftp.logos.md/Biblioteca/_Colectie_RO/Canoanele_Bisericii_Ortodoxe/4-Parinti/Canoane_Nichifor_Marturisitorul.pdf.

relation to those disinherited by fate. They appear as such in the legal codices of the seventeenth century: "Let the bishop love strangers and the poor" and the bishop "shall take genuine care (…) of church things and not give away any of them to his relatives, but only to the poor."[18]

## 5   Conclusions

According to Christian doctrine, love of one's fellow man (philanthropy) has its roots in God, Whom the Scriptures define as love (1 Jn 4:16). God's love towards man found material form in His creation of man "in his own image" (Gen. 1:27), in the *pronoia* shared with man (Mt. 6:31-32) culminating in the Incarnation of the Son of God for the redemption of man (Jn 3:16). We find the supreme form of divine philanthropy in Christ's sacrifice on the Cross "for us men and our salvation" (the Creed).

The Saviour also showed His love towards man through material acts: the turning of water into wine at the wedding in Cana (Jn 2:1-11), the feeding of the five thousand (Mt. 14:16-21), and the various miracles of healing.

In Christianity, philanthropy finds concrete form in charity, and acts of charity are included by the Saviour in the Beatitudes (Mt. 5:7) and constitute the sine qua non for entry into the Kingdom of God.

In conclusion, we may say that Christian philanthropy has its source in the Father, its exemplar in the Saviour, and its motive in God's love towards mankind and man's love towards God through the Holy Ghost.

The authentic Christian is supremely philanthropic, inasmuch as he sees in his fellow man the image of God, with which he

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18   G. V. Alexandru, *Bizanțul și instituțiile românești pînă la   mijlocul secolului al XVIII -lea*, (Bucuresti: Editura Academiei, 1980), p. 98.

was endowed through God's creation, he bears the same body as Christ took on through the Incarnation, he possesses the body that St Paul the Apostle saw as the temple of the Holy Ghost (1 Cor. 3:16), he is a limb of the 'mystic body' of Christ that is the Church, also according to Pauline theology (Eph. 5), and his own salvation can only be brought about in communion with the other. The Christian is not saved in solitude, but only by helping the other to be saved.