

“Bishop and his City in Late Antiquity: Bishop’s Charity towards his Christian flock”

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The bishop of a large city in the Later Roman Empire fulfilled a number of different roles: he was a preacher to his community; a teacher to the catechumens; administered baptism to neophytes; celebrated the Eucharist and other liturgical occasions; handled the administration of justice and administered the finances of his church; admonished, and if necessary, reprimanded Christians who had stumbled; acted as advocates, protectors, and intercessors with authorities on behalf of the rural population. He was responsible for the charitable works and in many cases for the administration of the charitable institutions of his congregation, the care of consecrated virgins, widows and orphans, the care and relief of prisoners, travelers, ex-prostitutes, and the poor. In addition, he was in charge of the discipline and proper discharge of the clergy under his authority, the priests, deacons and perhaps *chorepiscopoi*- and if he was metropolitan or patriarch- of the other bishops within his region. Once Christianity had gained a stronger foothold in society, beginning in the fourth century, bishops also gradually became involved on a hitherto unknown scale in the administration of their cities and in regional politics.

In the present paper we will deal with one of the most important duties of the church leader: the charitable works towards his Christian flock, and many times towards the pagan community. The Church, as the representative of Christ on earth, was the first to initiate philanthropic work in various fields. As early as the Apostolic Age the writings known as “The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles” advocate philanthropia in many domains of human life. Childless couples were urged to adopt orphans as their own children. Bishops were admonished to exhibit ‘to the orphans the care of parents; to the widows the care of husbands;[...] to the unable, commiseration; to the strangers, a house; to the hungry, food; to the thirsty, drink; to the naked, clothing; to the sick, visitation; to the prisoners, assistance [...]’ In the same source the orphans, those of old age, the sick, and those families with many children are mentioned as deserving special support.

This attitude was in accordance with the commandment of Christ Who said: “In so far as you did it to one of the humblest of these brothers of mine [the needy], you have done it to me”. The Church was commissioned not only to preach the gospel of salvation but also to feed the hungry; to quench the thirst of the thirsty; to give hospitality to the stranger; to clothe the needy; to look after the sick; to care for the orphans and the widows.

Before getting across our study, we ought to refer to two important prerequisites which one should follow if one wanted to practice charity: *agape* and *philanthropia*. *Agape* was one of the new conceptions that the Christian religion introduced in the world. Christ said to his disciples: “I give you a new commandment: Love one another [...] by this they will all know that you are my disciples – by your love for one another.” This love was not to be limited to ‘words or lips’ but was urged to be manifested in ‘deed and truth’. It was indeed a new principle. The world before Christ did not know love as it was proclaimed by Christ and practiced by the early Christians. While natural ethics and philosophy did advocate a kind for *philanthropia* for others, it was always limited to and was to be practiced under certain presuppositions. According to Fr. Demetrios Constantelos, “the concept of *philanthropia* that is found in the writings of Demosthenes, Aeschines, Aristotle, Isocrates and Plutarch was to be practiced over a limited field. The beneficent acts of the Greeks were directed towards the civilized Hellenes and not towards the barbarians”. According to a British scholar, “This “love of men” finds its actual outlet in application to relatives, friends, fellow citizens or allies”.

Philanthropia in the classical Greek period was used first of the love of the gods for men, then, later, of the love of men for each other. Under the Roman Empire, the revival of Stoicism, with its interest in ethics, and its purpose of the reformation of mankind, brought renewed prominence to the concept of *philanthropia*, and Stoicism in time proved to be one of the channels by means of which the term passed into Christian usage. The word had also become current in the Septuagint, where it was applied to the qualities of the king and of the just man; and σοφία is pictured as having a πνεῦμα φιλάνθρωπον.

The crucial role of the bishop as a patron of the poor and needy and of widows and orphans can hardly be overestimated and has been the subject of important studies, such as the study of the late French Historian and Byzantinist Evelyn Patlagean, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance, 4e-7e siècles*. The Christian obligation to look after those community members who were in need has its roots in the Jewish tradition. But while the Jewish communities looked after their own, Christian teaching made it a religious duty to extend charity to all, even if they were not of the same religion. Care for those in need, the poor and the sick, had always been a major concern of the Christian communities, which distinguished them from their pagan surroundings and brought them many converts. A bishop’s administration of charity became a measure of his proper discharge of office. One of the most frequent, and most effective criticisms that could be launched against an Episcopal adversary was his misguided use for selfish or frivolous purposes of time, energy, and money that was earmarked for charity. The bishop who failed in his charitable works was a failure as a bishop.

The poor and needy were a central object of bishops' concern and special institutions were built and as indicated called *ptocheia* or *ptochotropheia* or *ptochokomeia*, that is almshouses. The role of the bishop as protector of the poor made him the natural leader of a large proportion of the urban population, and therefore a figure of political consequence. The close association with the Church may be seen in the fact that the term *ptocheia* designated both the goods of the *ptocheion* and of the churches in general. That is, the property of the Church was that of the poor. Many times the Church Fathers praised in their sermons the need of helping the poor and many of them played a leading part in the erection and administration of poor-houses. E.g. among the more tangible long-term effects of Basil's work, it seems, was his construction of the "Basileias," or *ptochotropheion*. Basil built his hospice for the poor, an early form of what became known in some places as the "bishop's palace", on the family's country estate after the famine and after his official consecration as bishop. This edifice included a complex of apartments for the bishop, his guests, needy travellers, and the poor. Here the sick received medical and hospice care from physicians, nurses, cooks, and servants. The poor who could work were employed or trained in various trades. Basil called it a *ptochotropheion*, literally, a place to feed, nurture, and patronize (*trepho*) the destitute poor (*ptochos*). Two were the most important poor-houses during the Byzantine period: the *Basileias* and the *Sampson*. [...]

Another important duty of bishops was the care of widows and orphans. A scholar has estimated that as many as one in three adult women in the towns were widows, often with young families. In the big cities only a very small percentage of these women could have been the recipients of church aid. Within the Christian community there existed an "order of widows" in which elderly women could be enrolled by the bishop and which allotted them a distinctive place in the church's public devotions. The age of 60 has been set as the minimum age for such widows, although this age requirement was not universally observed. Widows in Cappadocia might be enrolled before the age of 60. With Christian influence, philanthropia towards orphans was organized to the effect that children's asylums and orphanages were established very early in the Christian world. According to the *Apostolic Constitutions*, the bishops were to care for both male and female orphans. With regard to the girls, bishops were to find them suitable husbands who were Christians. For the boys, bishops were to ensure adequate training in a trade so that these male orphans would eventually be able to support themselves and no longer the resources of the churches. Christian humanists as Ephraem the Syrian, Basil of Caesarea, John Chrysostom and others not only advocated protection for orphans, abandoned and destitute children, but actually built a number of *brephotrophia* and *orphanotrophia*. An *orphanotrophos* was in charge of each orphanage and the Zoticos seems to have been the first significant one. In Justinian's

times philanthropic work for orphans was well advanced. Not only the Church with its monastic institutions and the bishopric's special care, but the state as well was obliged to provide special shelter, food and clothing for the orphans.

One other important aspect of Christian charity that became the responsibility of bishops was care for prisoners. The ransoming of prisoners had long been an established ecclesiastical custom. Christian communities had always given support to their imprisoned members awaiting execution and martyrdom, visiting them, providing them with food and other necessities, often bribing the prison guards to ameliorate their living conditions. It is perhaps because of this association with martyrdom that concern for prisoners continued to be one of the main charitable activities after the peace of the Church. Lasting and tangible support for prisoners was provided in a unique way by bishop Paul of Gerasa. He constructed a prison especially for those awaiting trial, so that they could remain separated from convicted criminals. According to Professor Claudia Rapp, 'the clergy's care for prisoners is not reflected in imperial law until the early fifth century, when an obliquely phrased law indicated that the Christian clergy had taken it upon itself to provide food for people in prison and made it possible for the prisoners to go on the baths once a week'. Priests or bishops were not only allowed to enter prisons and administer charity, but they were also encouraged to talk to prisoners so that they could make appeals in the case of those who were unjustly imprisoned. A law of Emperor Justinian of 529 demanded that bishops visit the prisoners once a week, on Wednesday or Friday, to find out the reasons for their incarceration and to report any "carelessness" to the authorities. The literary sources confirm that bishops sometimes intervened with the authorities on behalf of those who were imprisoned without reason and who had no relatives to support them.

Another outlet for the bishop's charitable activities was his assistance in times of food shortage. None of the normative sources, neither church canons nor imperial laws, make any reference to direct Episcopal involvement in the purchase or distribution of grain. Yet there is anecdotal evidence in the written sources that bishops actively engaged in the provisioning of their cities in times of shortage and famine. This aspect of Episcopal activity should therefore be regarded simply as an ad hoc measure that bishops took upon themselves as the need arose. In fact, not only bishops but also prominent citizens and holy men intervened during food shortages, according to the means available to them. In times of dire need, bishops even turned the precious fittings of their churches into coin to feed the hungry. This proved to be the undoing of Cyril of Jerusalem. When the poor appealed to him to help them in their need, he responded by selling the altar ornaments and other church decorations in order to purchase grain. An office in the service of the grain supply was that of *sitones* or *curator frumenti comparandi*, which is

attested in the late Roman Empire into the sixth century, especially in Asia Minor, Italy, and Sicily. The nominating committee for the *sitones* consisted of the bishop along with the most prominent landowners of the city. The sources for the office of *sitones* are so patchy that scholars are not in agreement on the question of whether the *sitonia* was an annual office for the regularization of the grain supply, or whether a *sitones* was appointed only as an emergency measure in a time of famine.

The erection of buildings was the most common and most popular form of bishop's *euergetism* (good deeds). Inscriptions from all parts of the empire abound recording contributions to construction of all kinds: walls, aqueducts, public baths, porticoes, theatres, and of course temples. Bishops often directed their energies toward the construction of religious buildings. The funds for these projects occasionally came from imperial donations, sometimes out of the bishops' own pockets, and often were a result of successful fund-raising within the community, as the multiple donor inscriptions in the mosaic floors of churches attest. The new churches proclaimed the power of the bishop who was able to get a large and beautiful building project off the ground. Episcopal interest in building was not limited only to church-related structures. Especially from the fifth century onward, bishops also collaborated and participated in public building. In the 430s, Theodoret of Cyrrihus boasted in a letter to the *patricius* and high functionary Anatolius that he had spent significant amounts of ecclesiastical revenue for the construction of porticoes, baths, bridges, and other structures of general use.

Another area where bishops practised charity was in dealing with the fight against prostitution. Poverty, human nature, social conditions, and other factors contributed to the existence of moral and legal outcasts in society. Dealing with this topic we have to refer to the Byzantine society where special concern was taking by the Byzantine state and the bishops, not remaining apathetic towards this phenomenon. Unlike other social and religious systems, Byzantine Christian society adopted a rather charitable attitude towards the persons of prostitutes, although the law was very severe against prostitution as such. The various policies of Emperor Justinian indicate that he took special interest in the condition of young women who had fallen astray. Theodora having had experience herself of this ill-famed profession exercised her authority for a more human attitude of the Byzantine State toward prostitutes and she was responsible for the erection of a special institution for them. She converted a palace on the Bosphorus across Constantinople, into a convent called *Metanoia* (Repentance) for this purpose. In this convent several hundred prostitutes were placed in the hope of moral reformation. There they were kindly treated by priests responsible for this purpose and given every opportunity to reform. All records indicate that attempts were made by State and Church to punish brothel-

keepers, to enforce laws against procuring and exploitation, and to reform inmates of ill-famed houses. Justinian's legislation was especially severe against procurers and whoremongers. In fact, while asylum was granted to many criminals who would resort to churches in order to avoid arrest, exception was made in the case of adulterers, rapists, and whoremongers.

Persian and various other barbarian invasions kept the Eastern Roman Empire practically in a state of continuous war. Despite the various victories of the generals during the reign of Justinian, the Empire suffered losses. Among them were those who were killed in the battlefield and those taken prisoners by the enemies. Did the Church with the State's aid do anything for them? Evidence indicates that prisoners of war always attracted the sympathy of the Church and that special measures were taken to redeem and save them. During the reign of Anastasios enemies attacked the Eastern Empire and advanced as far as Cappadocia. They destroyed a number of cities and pillaged many properties, taking numerous prisoners with them. The Emperor and the Church contributed much to all prisoners who eventually were set free by the Huns. Financial assistance was also given to the cities which suffered from them. In addition, Fr. Constantelos states that he built walls around the big cities of the attacked region, and revoked all taxes from the populations that suffered by the barbarian invasions for three years. The Church did not fall behind in this domain either. The customary responsibility for the ransoming of captives is reflected in a canon law at a relatively late date, and according to Professor Claudia Rapp, only in the West. The Council of Orléans in 511 mentions the ransoming of captives along with care of the poor, upkeep of the clergy, and maintenance of churches as one of the legitimate expenditures for which the donations of the king to the church may be used. At the beginning of his episcopate, Ambrose's hagiographer reports, his care for captives was such as that he gave all the gold and silver that he could have kept to the church and to the poor. In 455, a stream of captives arrived in Carthage after the sack of Rome by the Vandals. Bishop Deogratias melted down church vessels to pay for their ransom, then set up emergency shelter in two churches, and provided them with food.

Though Christianity had proclaimed that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free [...]", slavery was still practiced in Christian societies. Voices of protest against slavery were heard from many Church Fathers, such as Gregory Nazianzen, John Chrysostom and others. In the age of Justinian special laws were issued advocating freedom for all slaves who were eunuchs. The bishops and the Ecumenical Patriarch were charged to see that all slaves be treated well and freed [...]. Closely related to this class were those people who were oppressed either because they owed money or because they had no protection, having been previously slaves or eunuchs. These people used to find asylum in Churches or to invoke the

protection of the Church or the State. In the sixth century special laws were issued by Justinian for their protection. The Churches were unviolated asylums, for which Justinian wrote “that the asylums were for those who were persecuted unjustly, not for those who commit injustice”. Apparently, criminals and violators of the criminal law were not protected.

Until now we presented some of the main aspects of bishops’ charity during Late Antiquity and the Byzantine Empire. Now we will attempt to present the various philanthropic institutions, established both by the State and the Church. In the age of the Emperor Justinian special mention is made of *evagous oikous* or *evage idrymata*, which include *Nosokomia*, *Xenodochia*, *Gerontocomia* or *gerocomia*, *Tates Metanoias*, *Lobotrophia* and *Orphanotrophia*, i.e., Hospitals, Houses for the poor strangers, Homes for aged persons, Reformatory institutions, hospitals for those suffer from leprosy and Orphanages. There were also other philanthropic institutions in Byzantium, *ptochotrophia*, *pandochia*, *cherotrophia* (homes for widows), and *brephotrophia* (homes for infants). Nevertheless, some of these institutions were not really new. The homes for strangers were also homes for the sick and poor and vice-versa. A *xenodochion* was synonymous with a *pandochion*. It is difficult to determine what a writer of the sixth century means when he speaks of *xenones*, *ptochotrophia*, *ptocheia*. As Koukoules states, a *xenon* was a house for the poor and travellers, but a hospital as well, and vice-versa.

To conclude, the church is indeed “not of this world”, but it has nevertheless an obvious and important mission “in this world” precisely because it lies “in the evil.” It was commonly believed for centuries that the main Christian vocation was precisely an administration of charity and justice. According to Fr. George Florovsky, the Church was, both in East and in the West, a supreme teacher of all ethical issues. Again, the church is a society which claims the whole man for God’s service and offers cure and healing to the whole man, and not only to his “soul”. The bishops in Late Antiquity – with the State’s aid – tried to carry out an important program of social welfare towards their communities, bearing in their mind the principal command of Christ: “Most assuredly I tell you, inasmuch as you did it to me of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”