

# De unione ecclesiarum

musings on Church and State

## St. Basil on stealing from the poor

October 8, 2009

Fr. John Santor posted a question yesterday to my translation of St. Basil's *Sermon to the Rich*, asking if I could direct him to the passage where Basil says something like the following, "You with a second coat in your closet, it does not belong to you. You have stolen it from the poor man who is shivering in the cold." I looked for this passage today, and I think I have found it, not word for word, but very much the same thought. I post the text here, since it seems to me it deserves to be read by as many people as possible.

**From St. Basil the Great, *Homilia in illud dictum evangelii secundum Lucam: «Destruam horrea mea, et majora ædificabo:» itemque de avaritia (Homily on the saying of the Gospel According to Luke, "I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones," and on greed), §7 (PG 31, 276B – 277A).***

Οὐχὶ γυμνὸς ἐξέπεσες τῆς γαστρὸς;  
οὐ γυμνὸς πάλιν εἰς τὴν γῆν  
ὑποστρέψεις; Τὰ δὲ παρόντα σοι  
πόθεν; Εἰ μὲν ἀπὸ ταυτομάτου  
λέγεις, ἄθεος εἶ, μὴ γνωρίζων τὸν  
κτίσαντα, μηδὲ χάριν ἔχων τῷ  
δεδωκότι· εἰ δὲ ὁμολογεῖς εἶναι παρὰ  
Θεοῦ, εἶπέ τὸν /276C/ λόγον ἡμῖν δι'  
ὃν ἔλαβες. Μὴ ἄδικος ὁ Θεός, ὁ  
ἀνίσως ἡμῖν διαιρῶν τὰ τοῦ βίου; Διὰ  
τί σὺ μὲν πλουτεῖς, ἐκεῖνος δὲ  
πένηται; Ἡ πάντως, ἵνα καὶ σὺ  
χρηστότητος καὶ πιστῆς οἰκονομίας  
μισθὸν ὑποδέξῃ, κακεῖνος τοῖς  
μεγάλοις ἄθλοισι τῆς ὑπομονῆς  
τιμηθῇ; Σὺ δέ, πάντα τοῖς

Naked did you not drop from the womb? Shall you not return again naked to the earth? Where have the things you now possess come from? If you say they just spontaneously appeared, then you are an atheist, not acknowledging the Creator, nor showing any gratitude towards the one who gave them. But if you say that they are from God, declare to us the reason why you received them. Is God unjust, who divided to us the things of this life unequally? Why are you wealthy while that other man is poor? Is it, perhaps, in order that you may receive wages for kindheartedness and faithful stewardship, and in order that he may be honored with great prizes for his endurance? But, as for you, when you hoard all

ἀπληρώτοις τῆς πλεονεξίας κόλποις περιλαβῶν, οὐδένα οἶει ἀδικεῖν τοσοῦτους ἀποστερωῶν; Τίς ἐστὶν ὁ πλεονέκτης; Ὁ μὴ ἐμμένων τῇ αὐταρκειᾷ. Τίς δὲ ἐστὶν ὁ ἀποστερητής; Ὁ ἀφαιρούμενος τὰ ἐκάστου. Σὺ δὲ οὐ πλεονέκτης; σὺ δὲ οὐκ ἀποστερητής; ἂ πρὸς οἰκονομίαν ἐδέξω, ταῦτα ἴδια σεαυτοῦ ποιούμενος; Ἡ ὁ μὲν /277A/ ἐνδεδυμένον ἀπογυμνῶν λωποδύτης ὀνομασθήσεται· ὁ δὲ τὸν γυμνὸν μὴ ἐνδύων, δυνάμενος τοῦτο ποιεῖν, ἄλλης τινὸς ἐστὶ προσηγορίας ἄξιος; Τοῦ πεινῶντός ἐστὶν ὁ ἄρτος, ὃν σὺ κατέχεις· τοῦ γυμνητεύοντος τὸ ἱμάτιον, ὃ σὺ φυλάσσεις ἐν ἀποθήκαις· τοῦ ἀνυποδέτου τὸ ὑπόδημα, ὃ παρὰ σοὶ κατασῆπεται· τοῦ χρήζοντος τὸ ἀργύριον, ὃ κατορύξας ἔχεις. Ὡστε τοσοῦτους ἀδικεῖς, ὅσοις παρέχειν ἐδύνασο.

these things in the insatiable bosom of greed, do you suppose you do no wrong in cheating so many people? Who is a man of greed? Someone who does not rest content with what is sufficient. Who is a cheater? Someone who takes away what belongs to others. And are you not a man of greed? are you not a cheater? taking those things which you received for the sake of stewardship, and making them your very own? Now, someone who takes a man who is clothed and renders him naked would be termed a robber; but when someone fails to clothe the naked, while he is able to do this, is such a man deserving of any other appellation? The bread which you hold back belongs to the hungry; the coat, which you guard in your locked storage-chests, belongs to the naked; the footwear mouldering in your closet belongs to those without shoes. The silver that you keep hidden in a safe place belongs to the one in need. Thus, however many are those whom you could have provided for, so many are those whom you wrong.



Posted by bekkos

Filed in [Economics](#), [Fathers](#)

[9 Comments »](#)

## 9 Responses to “St. Basil on stealing from the poor”

[\*Joseph\*](#) Says:

[October 8, 2009 at 4:56 pm](#)

And here's John Chrysostom on a similar topic.

<http://byztex.blogspot.com/2009/08/timely-quote-from-st-john-chrysostom.html>

*bedwere* Says:

October 8, 2009 at 8:14 pm

Does St. Basil advocate in any way a forceful redistribution of richness through violence (presumably from the State), like in the case of theft or robbery? Or is it just a forceful appeal to the conscience of the rich, who will be judged by God as thieves and robbers if they fail to give back, but whose goods are not to be expropriated?

*bekkos* Says:

October 9, 2009 at 1:26 pm

Bedwere:

My guess is that the latter of your two alternatives is closer to the thought of St. Basil. Perhaps he would have agreed with St. John Chrysostom, in the passage cited at "Byzantine, Texas," that a redistribution of wealth, mandated by government, is of no moral value; it improves the souls neither of those who are forced to relinquish what they would prefer to keep, nor of those who receive without gratitude. On the other hand, neither St. Basil nor St. John Chrysostom lived in a democratic state, in which everyday citizens have some responsibility, both civic and moral, to influence the policies taken by their own governments. While I do not think one can infer, from the present quotation, that St. Basil was a socialist who equated private property with theft, I also do not think one can infer, from the quotation at Byzantine, Texas, that the fathers were laissez-faire capitalists who equated faith in God with trust in the unfettered workings of the free market. In any case, the attempt to interpret what St. Basil is saying here primarily in political terms seems to me a kind of subterfuge, a way of avoiding the force of what is, on the face of it, a very uncomfortable word from this saint, uncomfortable not only to the "rich," but to anyone who, like myself, happens to have shoes in his closet that he doesn't use or money stored away in a bank.

Peter

*bedwere* Says:

October 9, 2009 at 2:23 pm

Thank you, Peter! As a libertarian (but Roman Catholic first), I prefer option 2, of course :-). I was wondering if those liberation theologians in South America had used this. I think we have to be careful when we drag the Fathers (or even the Gospel) into the political/economical scene. This or that policy can be judged immoral in the light of the Gospel and Tradition, but the hierarchy should not "bless" a particular political or economical solution. Our bishops sometimes do that. Do you know Thomas Woods? He wrote a very critical article on Caritas in Veritate, the latest encyclical of Pope Benedict:

[http://www.takimag.com/blogs/article/truth\\_charity/](http://www.takimag.com/blogs/article/truth_charity/)

By the way, thank you also for putting these parallel text columns with the Patrologia Graeca coordinates: I'm trying to improve my Greek through reading in the original language, if I can.

*Stealing from the Poor* « *Gershom's Journal* Says:

October 21, 2009 at 10:21 am

[...] §7 (PG 31, 276B – 277A) Thanks to De unione ecclesiarum [...]

*St. Basil the Great on Stealing from the Poor* « *Orthocath's Blog* Says:

March 11, 2010 at 10:53 pm

[...] St. Basil the Great on Stealing from the Poor By orthocath H/T De unione ecclesiarum [...]

*Ongaku* Says:

September 1, 2012 at 5:12 pm

It appears that neither St. Basil nor St. John Chrysostom makes libertarians uncomfortable enough to part with their ideology.

*bekkos* Says:

September 1, 2012 at 6:17 pm

Fr. James Martin, S.J., on what a libertarian Christ might look like:

[http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?blog\\_id=2&entry\\_id=5312](http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?blog_id=2&entry_id=5312)

*jasdye* Says:

November 4, 2012 at 8:55 am

Thank you, bekkos. I referenced your text on my facebook page Commie Pinkos Wrote My Bible. Do you also have the translation of his Sermon to the Rich in this blog as well?

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