

On the ground: Realizing an 'altared' *philoptochia*

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“I hold before my eyes the dreadful vision of the return of the kingdom.” Thus Gregory of Nyssa begins his second sermon on the love of the poor, subtitled, “Whoever has done it to one of these has done it to me.”¹ Imaging this passage from Matthew 25, on which the title of our conference is based, Gregory trembles at the threat of condemnation as he envisions God judging humankind according to how each has treated those in need. To escape this threat, Gregory urges his audience to “throw ourselves with zeal into the path of God where we will live, blessed by the Lord who holds Himself bound to the attentions that we tender to the needy.” These attentions are to be direct and immediate for, Gregory adds, “the commandment is vital especially now, with so many in need of basic essentials for survival, and ... many whose bodies are utterly spent from suffering sickness.”² He then launches into a gut-wrenching description of the bodies of the local homeless outcasts whose limbs are being eaten away by disease even as they starve for basic attention and survival.

Gregory’s two sermons – as well as Basil of Caesarea’s sermons and letters about famine, poverty, and economic injustices – are best known for the way that they describe the needy poor of the fourth century in entirely human, cosmic, and environmental terms that appeal to the physical senses in an action-based call for equality, shared human ethnicity, and justice. This focus on humanity and the created world is

¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *De pauperibus amandis* (“On the love of the poor”) 2, transl. Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 199; the critical edition of Gregory’s two sermons on the love of the poor is that of Arie van Heck, ed., *Gregorii Nysseni Opera* (=GNO) 9.1, 93–108 (*Paup.* 1) and 9.1, 111–127 (*Paup.* 2); also available in Migne’s *Patrologia Graeca* at PG 46.453–470 (*Paup.* 1) and PG 46.471–490 (*Paup.* 2).

² Gregory of Nyssa, *Paup.* 2, trans. Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, 200.

only half of the patristic picture, however. Gregory of Nazianzus and several others from this period construct similar views of the needy and human body that is also and more explicitly identified with the divine nature and body of Christ. In a famous passage at the end of his well-known Oration 14, *Peri philoptochia*, or “Concerning the love of the destitute poor,” Nazianzen writes, “Let us take care of Christ while there is still time, let us feed Christ, let us clothe Christ, let us gather Christ in, let us show Christ honor ... through the needy, who are today cast down on the ground.”³ And John Chrysostom, a few years later, makes the same point using the explicit liturgical image of the altar. In his sermon 20 on Second Corinthians, Chrysostom calls the poor the “living altar of the body of Christ.”⁴ Using his location in view of the liturgical focal point of the church altar, John orders his audience to direct special reverence to this other altar, to “sacrifice the victim” on the flesh of the Lord himself. For the church altar, by nature something made out of stone, he says, becomes holy only because it *receives* Christ’s body. But the poor who lie in the lanes and marketplace are intrinsically holy for they are that body itself. They lie ready, as public altars, ready to receive sacrificial alms at any time.⁵

This image of an “altared” philoptochia – that is, a love for the needy poor that is identified with concepts that relate them to the liturgical altar – was found in Christian teaching at least as early as the third century. It is repeated several times, for example, in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. Describing care for the poor, the author of that work emphasizes “the orphans and widows shall be reckoned by you in the likeness of the altar;”⁶ and again: “Let a widow know that she is the altar of God⁷... the

³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 14.40, trans. Brian E. Daley, S.J., *Gregory of Nazianzus* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 97, modified slightly.

⁴ Trans. Rudolf Brändle, “This sweetest passage: Matthew 25:31–46 and Assistance to the Poor in the Homilies of John Chrysostom,” in Susan R. Holman, ed., *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History; Grand Rapids, Michigan: BakerAcademic in association with Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2008), 130.

⁵ Paraphrased from Talbot W. Chambers’s 1889 translation in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* [=NPNF] (repr. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), First Series, vol. 12, 374.

⁶ *Didascalia Apostolorum* chapter 9.2.26, trans. R. Hugh Connolly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929, repr. 1969), 88.

⁷ *Didascalia Apostolorum* 15.3.5, trans. Connolly, 133.

holy altar of God, (even of) Jesus Christ.”⁸ The text emphasizes the place of widows and orphans in church order, noting that, “the bishops and the deacons [must] be constant ... in the ministry of the altar of Christ — we mean the widows and the orphans” in order that, when properly supported by these leaders, they “will offer a holy and acceptable ministry before Almighty God through His beloved Son and His holy spirit.”⁹

There is no question that widows and orphans were a stock image for the worthy poor in early church rhetoric. And certainly the patristic image of the poor as altar is catchy. As a metaphor, it invites poetic imagination; as an explicit Christian teaching, it invites theologically informed action. But as persons of faith who read the Cappadocians and seek, like Gregory of Nyssa, to focus on the most immediate needs around us, we may find this appeal to altared philoptochia insufficient for any contemporary realization of social justice and even compassion. We may find ourselves asking: what does it mean, really? And how do we get from these readings of fourth-century texts to realizing a creative shape for meeting “on the ground” needs of the modern twenty-first century? In this paper I will explore the challenges of bridging this cross-time, cross-cultural transition, and offer a few concepts that might help us shape practical guidelines for such applications.

The thoughts that I offer in this essay are explored in more depth in *God Knows There’s Need: Christian Responses to Poverty*,¹⁰ which considers the question of exegetical bridging across a broader historical landscape than is possible here. The exploration of these concepts here focuses specifically on a few examples from the Cappadocians and their neighbors in late antiquity. First, I will outline the question that drives this bridging exercise. Then I will consider some of the tools — and they are merely tools — that might aid the imagination as one

⁸ *Didascalia Apostolorum* 15.3.10, trans. Connolly, 143.

⁹ *Didascalia Apostolorum* 18.4.5, trans. Connolly, 156. For more on this image, see “The Widow as Altar: Metaphor and Ministry,” in Bonnie Thurston, *The Widows: A Women’s Ministry in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 106–113.

¹⁰ Susan R. Holman, *God Knows There’s Need: Christian Responses to Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

sets out in search of ways to lever informed and practical responses in the modern world. Both this essay and the book from which I draw these thoughts offer something of a personal narrative on a journey into shaping a deliberate interpretive exegesis.

Identifying the Exegetical “Gap”

The study that led me to write *God Knows There’s Need* began several years after I had finished *The Hungry are Dying*, which is a much more deliberately academic monograph. I was invited to join a group of scholars who, as part of a University of Virginia grant funded by the Lilly Endowment, were also writing about applied or “lived theology” as it pertained to one’s individual area of expertise. To be honest, I was sure at first that there was some mistake in my being invited to join the group; although my first reading of the Cappadocian poverty texts began while I was working in public health nutrition, I am neither a member of the clergy nor a social activist. As a natural introvert who especially thrives on solitude, I had deliberately shifted my career from clinical work to one that allowed substantial time in the focused stillness of research libraries and with the written text. But, indeed, this invitation to explore practical conceptual application was a logical step for any research about historical religious responses to poverty. Even when such texts focus on the distant past, they speak to an issue that cannot easily be locked into the academic ivory tower.

The challenge to connect the very different mindsets of poverty response in past and present might be illustrated by two images (Figures 1 and 2) and a brief discussion of the contrast between them. Figure 1 is a representation of the typical patristic Orthodox world view of liturgical relationships. In this icon — which is Russian and probably nineteenth century — we see a scene that embodies dominant personality images that patristic authors envisioned in care for the poor. Basil of Caesarea, on the left, was a church leader, administrator, and bishop who, his contemporaries tell us, sold his inheritance to buy grain for the starving poor, founded a hospital-poorhouse on family/church property, provided personal and trained care for the sick and destitute, and lobbied the political and old crony network of his day

in strident appeals for divestment and economic justice.¹¹ On the right we see a depiction of St. Alexis — also known as the “Syriac Man of God,” who was, according to legend, a rich young man who chose to live as a voluntary beggar and holy fool in fifth-century Edessa. He served the needy in his city by living anonymously as one of them, sharing the food he earned from begging, and spending his nights in cruciform prayer. His death, it is said, led Edessa’s bishop, Rabbula, into a radical, lifelong focus on church-supported care for the poor that virtually ignored all upkeep of the physical church buildings (more on the effects of this below).¹² Above these two in the icon we see the image of Christ in glory who, like Basil, has his right hand raised in blessing and his left holding a book, suggestive of the sheep-and-goat dichotomy of judgment in Matthew 25.¹³

While beautifully colorful, this icon is monochromatic in the gender and age of its subjects. Further, it evokes an ahistorical space where what seems to matter most is participation in the liturgical veneration and mindfulness of the two saintly exemplars. It offers a neat “snapshot” of two different models in the patristic dynamic of heaven-based philanthropy: on the one hand the civic/ecclesiastical leadership of Basil in philanthropic administration; on the other hand, the voluntary ascetic poverty of Alexis. The icon suggests nothing, however, about action that might result from viewer engagement in this visual meditative exchange. And the disenfranchised needy, whom both men served so famously, are nowhere to be seen.

¹¹ A useful translation of Basil’s key sermons on these issues is now available in C. Paul Schroeder, trans., *St Basil the Great: On Social Justice*, Popular Patristics Series (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009).

¹² For a translation of the earliest available texts on Alexis, see Robert Doran, trans, *Stewards of the Poor: The Man of God, Rabbula, and Hiba in Fifth-Century Edessa*, Cistercian Studies Series 208 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2006), esp. 3–38.

¹³ For a discussion of iconography of Christ as it relates to early Christian philanthropy, see Susan R. Holman, “God and the poor in early Christian thought,” in *God in Early Christian Thought: Essays in Memory of Lloyd G. Patterson*, ed. Andrew B. McGowan, Brian E. Daley, S.J., and Timothy J. Gaden, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009), 297–321, esp. 314–320, a discussion of the famous sixth-century Sinai icon of Christ.

Figure 2 offers a very different glimpse of divestment exchange, a photograph of philanthropy from a religious perspective familiar to our own time. Here we see two women in modern dress who appear to be tourists, giving alms to a woman begging on the plaza or atrium of the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.¹⁴ The cultural dissonance in this picture — between the donor in short sleeves, purse and wallet in hand, leaning over to give a coin, and the begging woman, whose subordinate position is emphasized by her position literally two steps down, and covered entirely by a burqa — is “bridged” here by the hand contact between the women in the act of the donation itself. The photographer, Bo Brunner, also includes in his frame a third woman, equally modern in short hair and sunglasses, who watches the alms exchange with an amused expression. And yet, despite its very contemporary feel, the context and background of this photograph, like the Russian icon, also contains a subtle appeal to divine space or “altared” philoptochia. For in the background we see the shrine of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, first built in the sixth century. The entire area is of course that very controversial location traditionally identified with the ancient Jewish Temple and with it that altar of altars in Jewish and Christian tradition: the Holy of Holies. And just a few yards away from the site of this photograph is the Western Wall plaza, where pious Jewish men and women of all ages converge to pray — and also to beg. Thus both this photograph and the Russian icon clearly represent views of philoptochia that are informed by religion, but within two very different worlds, one past and eternal, the other present in a specific moment.

The question that these images and their contrasts beg of us, as modern persons of faith who care about issues of poverty relief, human rights, and social justice, is this: what kind of conceptual bridge might

¹⁴ Online image available at http://www.flickr.com/photos/bo_brunner/2083647219, published under the Creative Commons license for noncommercial use only; license restrictions at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>. For an image of a very similar alms exchange taking place just a few yards away, in the plaza of the Western Wall of the ancient Jerusalem temple (for which I was not able to obtain permission to reprint here), see “Miracles and mirages: A strong economy built on weak fundamentals,” *The Economist*, April 3, 2008, available online at http://sweatshops-team4.wikispaces.com/file/view/Economist_Miracles+and+mirages.pdf, 2.

help us join the worlds of these two very different images in a way that can best use patristic texts in practical compassion today? That is, how might one go about joining the rhetoric of the past and the daily realities we face in the present? In his book on storytelling, Richard Kearney points out that “Stories alter our lives as we return from text to action;”¹⁵ yet “The act of *mimesis*, which enables us to pass from life to life story, introduces a ‘gap’ (however minimal) between living and recounting.”¹⁶ We might well experience this gap if we chose to spend our volunteer time at the local soup kitchen or homeless shelter by, for example, doing nothing beyond a public reading, while people munch on their soup and sandwiches, of some patristic text — Gregory of Nazianzus’s *Oration* 14 or Basil’s Homily 7, “Against the Rich.” Obviously the realization of justice for those in need calls for help with more practical issues, such as job counseling, equal access to food, legal services, and so forth. Patristic texts don’t instantly relate to the modern food pantry and soup kitchen, even in Christian settings. We need tools to bridge this gap between text and life.

Challenged in the writing of *God Knows There’s Need* to structure a lived theology, therefore, I found myself sorting through relevant early Christian texts in search of broad, general concepts that applied to both past and present responses to poverty. And because I have spent most of my adult life working in various academic medical settings, I found particularly helpful the concept of “translational medicine.” Translational medicine is a phrase that is used to define the deliberate role of doing academic laboratory research in such a way that it is also directly, and potentially immediately, useful for “on-the-ground” clinical settings and healing practices that can change lives. Doctors who do translational medicine seek to bridge a similar gap — between research and daily life — with a similar goal: to apply concepts and texts to the bodies of real people in situations that often relate to global health for resource-poor communities around the world. In medicine and public health, this process is highly collaborative. The researcher,

¹⁵ Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), 156.

¹⁶ Kearney, *On Stories*, 132.

that is, may not be the same person who clocks up frequent flier miles and applies medicine to the wounds. Yet each person involved in the collaboration shares some level of identification or empathy with the human issues that can help even scholars — and introverts like me — play some role in improving human life. Translational tools are by nature empowering: they can empower healing, political or community autonomy, and the fostering of human freedom, rights, and dignity; and each of these empowerment concepts can also be found at some level in the Cappadocian sermons on responding to the poor.

The result of my conceptual exploration was to develop an interplay of two sets of ideas: one on reading the past, the other on translating our readings into new vision for the present. And while this may all sound very theoretical, in fact basing our ideas on what we find in early Christian texts reminds us that others from similar faith communities have addressed these issues, and they offer us a supportive community of voices from the past who, while very different from ourselves, can serve as mentors and even friends in our shared commitment to live for justice and mercy.

Reading the past

The first set of ideas is about reading the past. Here I suggest four basic “filtering” principles that seemed particularly useful in constructive critical readings, defined in terms of personal action. This is where interpretive patristics gets personal, and so I phrase these four ideas using the first person.

Looking for trouble

First I must be open to those places where the story troubles me, where the ancient practice seems to go against my own views of respect, human dignity, and justice. I may find troubling points in opinions, in the way people are treated, or in a dissonant moral to what is often a very biased, prescriptive story. For example, is charity understood as simply a political tool? Is the human person belittled in the emphasis on Christ’s centrality? Does the act of relief advise or condone behavior I would not wish to perpetuate?

Seeing the frame

Second, I must understand the cultural framework that shaped how people helped one another in ancient Graeco-Roman society. For example, patronage ordered a particular hierarchy of obligations and exchanges of goods and services where handouts always had strings attached, and it was considered normal to create interdependency but never equality. Even where philanthropy was defined as a fair market exchange – give to the poor and God will ring it up to your heavenly bank account with interest – the exchange assumed a static society — including essentially static class issues — quite different from our own fluid, Western ideals.

Reading gender

Third, I must be sensitive to what the text says — or more often does not say — about women’s issues or rights related to gender equality. Women have always been more likely than men to live with the challenges of poverty, and their dependent children (both boys and girls) suffer in ways that often cripple their own potential for growth, health, and maturity. Patristic texts do tell some stories about care for poor women. Basil’s sister, Macrina, for example, housed starving women during the Cappadocian famine of the late 360s,¹⁷ and the bishop Rabbula built hospitals for women in Edessa, putting women in charge of patient care.¹⁸ John the Almsgiver even prescribed that poor women beggars should receive a portion double that of male beggars.¹⁹ But in general, the texts often perpetuate rather than correct what we would consider shocking gender inequities.

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita S. Macrinae*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, “The Life of Saint Macrina,” in *Saint Gregory of Nyssa, Ascetical Works*, Fathers of the Church 58 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), esp. 172, 183.

¹⁸ “The Heroic Deeds of Mar Rabbula, bishop of Edessa, the Blessed City,” trans. Robert Doran, in *idem, Stewards of the Poor*, 65–105, esp. 100–101.

¹⁹ “The Life of our Holy Father, John the Almsgiver,” Supplement by Leontius, Chapter 7, in *Three Byzantine Saints: Contemporary Biographies Translated from the Greek*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Dawes and Norman H. Baynes (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1977), 214.

Recognizing diversity

Fourth, true patristic tradition does not require a monolithic view on every single point and ideal. The ancient authors often differed even among themselves when it came to issues like social equality, determining who is a worthy beggar, and how best to ensure effective welfare and relief activities. As I recognize such patristic diversity, this opens the door to a modern religious dialogue that freely grants — and even welcomes — a range of options for the discussion of faith-based views on philanthropy and social compassion.

These four critical filters may aid, then, in thinking how the Cappadocian texts might or might not be helpful in conversations and actions that address modern social issues. Undoubtedly other exegetical markers might be added to this list.

In suggesting such carefully critical reading, however, let me emphasize that I am not saying we can only benefit from these texts if we first strap on some moral, text-critical goggles. Early Christian social history and its narratives about human need are often simply fun to read. Let us not deprive ourselves of such pleasure and perhaps even inspiration. The critical filters that I suggest are intended as tools to apply lightly, and ideally to apply even before we put the advice of the text into action. They may help us distinguish — insofar as it is possible — the intent of the text from our own personal viewpoints, biases, and reactions to the text and what it describes.

Three translational paradigms to inform action

Once we have read these texts critically and hopefully also enjoyed them, how then do we carry them with us into the conversations and ideas that inspire and shape social justice and relief activities in our own day? Here my search for common ground in past and present identified three particular paradigms into which most of the rhetoric, recommendations, vision, and stories about patristic philanthropy might fit. These are (1) sensing need, (2) sharing the world, and (3) embodying sacred kingdom. Each of the three may be useful in informing any faith-based effort at wise compassion. In light of the

limits of this paper, I offer here only a brief definition of the first two, followed by a closer look at the third. For it is embodying sacred kingdom that is most relevant to any construction of an altar-centered philoptochia.

Sensing need

Sensing need is the first step in any social welfare response. It is what happens at the level of personal perception. One cannot respond to issues of justice or need until they affect our nerves or senses to create in us a basic awareness. Sensing need is that process by which persons or issues outside of ourselves somehow touch our literal sensations, although our sensory responses to this encounter may vary widely.

Early Christian sermons on the poor are packed with sensory images. As noted above, Gregory of Nyssa began his homily with an appeal to the vision and dread of what might happen at the last judgment – what – Carlos Eire in his book on eternity calls “scaring the hell out of people, literally.”²⁰ In describing the destitute poor Gregory of Nazianzus writes, “There stands before our eyes a terrible, pitiable sight.”²¹ John Chrysostom’s sermons are especially rich in such language.²² And of course we encounter similar appeals daily in the media, photojournalism, word descriptions in books on social justice, and an endless river of charitable junk mail.

While most discussion of religious response to need begin with external action, recognizing this first perception may help prevent kneejerk responses and enable actions that can be properly participatory, especially when they also include recognizing the personal baggage of background and bias that may shape our own responses. While this initial breathing space often gets lost in social activism, beginning with prayerful mindfulness might help us “re-member” the social structures

²⁰ Carlos Eire, *A Very Brief History of Eternity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 160.

²¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 14.10, trans. Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 80.

²² His visual and theatrical imagery is discussed at length in Francine Cardman, “Poverty and wealth as theater: John Chrysostom’s homilies on Lazarus and the rich man,” in Holman (ed.), *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, 159–175.

that are of concern. In this way we may also come closer to developing a more nuanced concern for the human person. Considering the needs of others is inevitably intertwined — sometimes unconsciously — with how we view and respond to our own history of need, poverty, and economic and social choices. Sensing also prepares us to listen to the other. It opens the door to “hearing” creative narrative that may encourage further dialogue and understanding, and lead to thoughtful practice of the second paradigm, that of “sharing the world.”

Sharing the world

Sharing the world is where the text hits the ground, so to speak. This is the external action in relationships that logically follows the initial sensory encounter. Sharing the world is incarnational giving, broadly defined. I emphasize the word sharing rather than giving because justice, relief, and cosmic healing are not understood in Christian tradition as one-way activities. Rather, they are engagements in reciprocity and relating to one another equally at the level of creation. Most charity and justice projects operate exclusively in terms of this second paradigm.

Embodying sacred kingdom

The third paradigm, that of “embodying sacred kingdom,” is an ideal that often goes unstated or quietly assumed in aid and relief activities. We find it, for example, in an ideological commitment to global or environmental wholeness, a belief in eschatological unity, the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, “healing the world;” and the Christian idea of redemptive almsgiving as a necessary exchange in realizing the kingdom of heaven. Restorative restructuring of the world as an ideal is present in many aspects of modern traditions about justice; these include Catholic liberation theology, secular human rights ideologies, the Jewish teachings on *tzedakah* (charitable righteousness) and the Arabic cognate “*sedaqa*” — almsgiving — that is one of the five foundational tenets of Islam.²³ The parable of final judgment based on

²³ For more on the relationship of these Hebrew and Arabic concepts to early Christian philanthropy, see Susan R. Holman, “Healing the world with righteousness? The language of social justice in early Christian homilies,” in *Charity and Giving in Monotheistic Religions*, ed. Miriam Frenkel and Yaacov Lev, *Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients* 22 (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 89–110.

deeds that we find in Matthew 25:31– 46 is perhaps the quintessential image of this idea in Christian tradition. It is on this level that the poor are understood as the altered embodiment of Christ.

While it is fairly easy to bring to any social action a mindfulness of the first two paradigms, the third paradigm poses a particular challenge, since ancient and modern views on sacred kingdom may differ. Even the phrase “sacred kingdom” may trouble those who hear in it that long history of colonialism, oppression of minorities, infantilizing paternalism, and the violation of human dignity. The Matthew 25 image with its theme of hell and an afterlife also runs counter to our culture’s affirmation for universal salvation. Its economic balance sheet of good works does not go down well with Protestant views on salvation by faith. Perhaps the Orthodox emphasis on the liturgical present – liturgy as participating in eternity in the here and now – may be particularly useful for philanthropic vision today.

But embodying sacred kingdom is more than just external liturgy. Rather, all of life is engagement in the sacred realm, though daily awareness may be easily distracted by encounters with other human beings who stink, beg, behave in disturbing ways, or otherwise cause us grief. This meditative engagement with social response is also similar to another value in modern society, that which Charles Mathewes has called “charitable citizenship.” As Mathewes puts it,

“The basic challenge of political life is...the proper ordering of our loves into harmonious polyphony – albeit a polyphonic harmony only eschatologically attained...[W]e must insist on this complexity...and on the possibility that good can come out of our being political in this way, however difficult the path may be.”²⁴

²⁴ Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 306–307.

In Christian tradition, of course, Christ is at the center of both the needs themselves and that embodied kingdom. Salvian of Lérins wrote that “Christ alone feels hunger with the hungry, and He alone feels thirst with the thirsty. And therefore, insofar as it pertains to His compassion, He is in need more than others.”²⁵

Altared bodies in tension

Yet this connection between sacred flesh and sacred stone altar as liturgical locus was not without certain tensions, even in antiquity. One of the tensions that the early church faced in the call to embody sacred kingdom in the poor was the perpetual challenge to choose between liturgical splendor and material divestment. While the Cappadocians built and supported both church buildings and relief activities, we recall that bishops and monastics such as Rabbula and others were famous for diverting donations from ecclesiastical construction and investing them in relief activities. Gold and silver communion vessels and richly embroidered altar cloths were sold or melted down — often amidst much controversy — to redeem captive slaves or feed and clothe local beggars. Bishops who were condemned for their lack of mercy to the poor were often defined by the pomp and glitter of their liturgical trappings, just as Basil condemns the luxury of those who enjoy secular wealth, in his homily 7 directed at the wealthy in his congregation.²⁶ The story of Ibas — or Hiba — of Edessa offers one such example of this narrative tension.

Rabbula’s successor at Edessa, Ibas quickly got into trouble for his radically different use of wealth. He reversed Rabbula’s charitable spending so drastically that just two years after Rabbula died “a great silver altar weighing seven hundred twenty pounds was presented to the Cathedral Church in Edessa.”²⁷ As scholars have shown, costly donations to adorn the church were mostly tolerated²⁸ unless, as in

²⁵ Salvian, “The Four Books of Timothy to the Church” (*Ad Ecclesiam*) 4.4, in *The Writings of Salvian, The Presbyter*, trans. Jeremiah F. O’Sullivan (New York: CIMA, 1947), 361.

²⁶ For translation of Basil’s *Hom. 7*, see Schroeder, *St Basil the Great on Social Justice*, 41–58.

²⁷ Doran, *Stewards of the Poor*, 116.

²⁸ See e.g., A. Edward Sicienski, “Gilding the Lily: A patristic defense of liturgical splendor,” in Hol-

Ibas's case, expenditures were tainted with charges of theft and heresy. In the accusations against Ibas, we find in fact a curious conflation of the church and the poor as equal and comparable victims of the bishop's greed: "Holy vessels were melted down," the texts tell us, "which were collected from the yield of widows and orphans and women who raised it by themselves" — with which Ibas promised to ransom captives — but in fact kept mostly for himself.²⁹

At the Second Council of Ephesus, Ibas was accused of Nestorianism. Although the text does not make the connection, it is curious that his so-called "wrong" doctrine concerns ideas about Christ's humanity at the same time as Ibas is cheating the poor who were viewed as the altar of Christ's body. One who fails to admit the full humanity of Christ might be hardly expected to endorse the physically undesirable needy poor as embodying that very flesh and thus equal to the altar. Whether or not Ibas actually held these "heretical" views, he did shock his critics by dressing up in church — wearing fine linen³⁰ — in direct contrast to Rabbula's model of deliberate poverty. The council's report of the charge against Ibas suggests that his enemies were quite excited in their expressions of outrage:

Hiba has ravaged the church! ... His party seized the riches of the church! Let what belongs to the church be returned to the church! Let what belongs to the poor be returned to the poor! ... Holy Rabbula, petition with us! ... Hiba has ravaged Osrhoene! ... Selling the riches of the church! Hiba has left nothing in Sarug! Let Hiba go to the mines!"³¹

At his synodical judgment, one bishop states that Ibas is "required [to restore] whatever he dared to plunder from the sanctuary," while another bishop makes the same statement in a way that unites concerns of both liturgical altar and community poor by stating that "He is bound

man, ed., *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, 211–220; and also Dominic Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge/New York; Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁹ Doran, *Stewards of the Poor*, 180, quoting from the Acts of the Second Council at Ephesus.

³⁰ Doran, *Stewards of the Poor*, 150.

³¹ Doran, *Stewards of the Poor*, 142–143, and 144, selections.

to restore to the poor of the church the gold that he plundered.”³² Here the distinctions are muddy enough to suggest that the Christ-poor and the liturgical altar were perceived in an integrated synergy that was not easily separated into clearly distinct responses.

Ibas’s crime is apparently not that he endorses liturgical splendor, but rather that he denies both the human and divine body of Christ by snubbing his nose at both sacrificial donors in the poor and the sacred glory of the sanctuary itself.

While many different aspects of Ibas’s story might be discussed in light of the interpretive guidelines outlined above, here let us focus instead on one small detail in this scandal: The charge that Ibas’s actions robbed the church at nearby Sarug. To conclude, let us turn to a text we have from Sarug, written by its bishop, Jacob, nearly a century later. With poetic style that earned him the title, “Flute of the Holy Spirit,” Jacob of Sarug’s metrical homily “On the love of the poor,” here translated by Sebastian Brock, is one of the most vivid images extant on the Christ-poor as embodying sacred kingdom in an explicit “on-the-ground” context of altared philoptochia. Jacob writes,

For your sake He was made a beggar in the streets,
The Creator, to whom the entire creation belongs ...
He is hidden and exalted high above all the ranks of heavenly
beings, but when a poor person stands at your door, you see
Him! He who has constructed the house of (both) worlds for
the races to live in...
He with whom the Creation is full, and cannot contain Him, is
knocking to enter your house in the person of the despised and
the insignificant...
He whom the cherubim convey on their backs with trembling
lies smitten on the bed of sickness, along with the sick.
Wherever you want to see Him, you will find Him...
Brought low, wretched, buffeted and afflicted, He has come to

³²Doran, *Stewards of the Poor*, 188.

you; sit Him down at ease, while you get up and serve Him, rejoicing as you do so...

For the poor person who has stood at your door is God Himself...

In a lowly and despised guise He has come to visit you, so that when you fill His belly, you will find the Bread of Life.³³

Jacob's imagery contains all three paradigms. It contains an appeal to "see" the Christ poor. It provides specific instructions about sharing worldly goods. And it radiates throughout with eschatological imagery – the heavenly hosts, the cherubim, and the final call to that ultimate liturgical experience, the Bread of Life. This "inversion" — that, by feeding Christ we are fed by Christ — brings us back to that initial image of the body as living altar and location for personal and community transformation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, patristic texts on issues of social welfare have much to offer modern practical applications. However, their use is challenged by conceptual "gaps" that invite us to shape constructive bridging of past and present ideas. I have offered here a few suggestions for creating such shaping that might lay the groundwork to realize a philoptochia centered on the image of christ-poor as altar. These suggestions, tools, and paradigms obviously do not in themselves feed or clothe the needy nor do they automatically empower dignity, justice, and human rights. Nonetheless, such ideas for crossing the gap between text and action in order to embody sacred kingdom, as a basic part of applying social compassion in Christian tradition, are more than an exercise in passive escapism from problems here and now. Rather, meditations on icons, images, and texts, responses that begin with self-reflection and recognize bias and cultural concerns, may help alter who we are and our effectiveness at charitable citizenship. Patristic stories and sermons address issues that are timeless and easily understood in perhaps almost

³³ Jacob of Sarug, "On the Love of the Poor"; the Syriac text is *Homiliae Selectae Mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, Vol. 2, ed. Paul Bedjan (Paris: Lipsiae, Otto Harrassowitz, 1906), 816–836, selections. The translation here is by Sebastian Brock, used with permission.

any if not all cultures. Sensing and remembering such bodies in ancient texts — and letting them speak to the action of our own choices — is in itself a form of living on sacred ground.



Figure 1. Russian icon of saints Basil and Alexis (photo by the author)



Figure 2. Almsgiver and a beggar outside the Al Aqsa Mosque (IL 5396), © copyright Bo Brunner, 2007 under the Creative Commons license, image available for noncommercial use only (http://www.flickr.com/photos/bo_brunner/2083647219). License restriction details are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>.