



PHILANTHROPY AND SOCIAL COMMITMENT IN THE CHURCH HISTORY AND DOCTRINE: PATRISTIC LANDMARKS AND MODERN EVOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Active social commitment has been a fundamental dimension of Christian ecclesiology even since the formation of the first communities. The foundation of this mission resides in the evangelical commandment of love. The Church has turned charity from a simple charitable act into a perennial spiritual value. The present study analyzes the evolution of the philanthropic institutions from the apostolic and patristic model to the challenges brought by modern social ethics, examining the conceptual crises generated by secularization and the impact of nihilistic ideologies on the feeling of compassion.

Keywords: Christianity; charity; philanthropy; social commitment; shepherding; Church;

INTRODUCTION

One of the very important aspects of life, to which the Church has felt deeply and solidly committed even since the beginnings of her existence and organization, is the social and charitable aspect. The commitment of the Church in this domain and her rich activity in this sense have relied on the evangelical commandment of love¹ for our fellow (John 13:35), expressed under its most concrete form – charity – of which the Saviour, the Holy Apostles and the Holy Fathers speak so beautifully. The Report of the Assembly of the World Council of Churches (Canberra, 1991) states that “The power of the Holy Spirit enables the Church to be a life-giving, healing and sustaining community where the wounded and the broken derive wholeness and renewal.”² Helping the poor,

¹ In the original Greek Manuscripts of the New Testament, the text was written entirely in capital letters. The expression “GOD IS LOVE” from 1 John 4:8 was originally translated with small letter, namely love and not Love, in The King James Bible (1611). Yet some modern theological writings capitalize it as *God is Love* as a stylistic choice to emphasize love as an essential attribute of God. The original Greek word for love in this context is AGAPE, which is the highest form of love in the New Testament. What makes this concept unique is that its core meaning is, firstly, unconditional love, namely a love given freely without expecting anything in return, secondly, it is a choice, not a feeling, namely it is driven by deliberate choice and commitment, not by changing emotions and, thirdly, it is self-sacrificing, in the sense that it prioritizes the well-being of others above oneself. In short, AGAPE is a selfless choice to give, while modern love is a feeling based on what you get. Modern love is an emotion, relies on chemistry and asks *What do I get?* AGAPE is a decision, relies on commitment and asks *What can I give?* The ultimate Bible example of *agape* is found in John 3:16.

² The 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC), held in Canberra, Australia, from 7-20 February 1991. The central theme of that assembly was “Come, Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation”. Cf. Ioan BRIA, *Tratat de teologie dogmatică și ecumenică*, România Creștină, București, 1999, vol. II, p. 74.



the sick and all the downtrodden is the work that has established the Church and teaching of Christ as a perennial value.

The fundament of this charitable action has its spring in the teaching of the Son of God. Love for the human being defines precisely the deep identity of the Church's presence in the world. This model has its origin in God. God created man in God's own image. The biblical revelation culminates in the Embodiment of the Son, a supreme act of restoration of the human dignity degraded by sin. Redemption becomes, therefore, the concrete expression of divine mercy. The Sacrifice on the Cross reconfigures our destinies in the perspective of eternity.

Our Saviour Christ has established mutual love as absolute criterion for the quality of disciple. This new commandment becomes the seal on the identity of God's new people. It is not just a simple moral imperative, but the *sine qua non* condition of our active presence inside the Mystical Body of the Church. Christian philanthropy transcends mere material assistance. Without profound Love, the charitable act loses its ontological weight in the light of the Gospel. True charitable giving does not rely on an attitude of condescension from the giver. Instead, it places the donor on the same level of human dignity as the one who suffers.

However, this act of giving requires spiritual discernment. Ancient writings urge us to let our alms sweat in our hands until we know to whom we are giving. Aid should be directed exclusively toward the helpless, the sick and the abandoned, who are unable to secure their own subsistence. Indeed, the purpose of the charitable act is to reduce real suffering. It must not, under any circumstances, encourage social parasitism, laziness, or the exploitation of begging as a comfortable vice. Its spiritual efficacy depends directly on responsibility.

Philanthropy is one of the most important aspects and features of the activity of the Christian Church in the world. Philanthropy has its source in God "Who is Love" (1 John 4:16), which God manifested: through the creation of man in God's image (Genesis 1:27), by investing him with the dignity of stewardship over the earth and of the surrounding nature, through Divine Providence and, especially, through the Embodiment of the Son of God for the salvation of man (John 3:16). The entire work of redemption of mankind from the bondage of sin is the expression of divine philanthropy or mercy. It takes its supreme form through the sacrifice of Christ the Saviour "for us and for our salvation". The Saviour taught His disciples, and, through them, all those who were going to believe in Him, the new commandment of love for our fellow, as foundation of His new teaching and proof of our partaking of Him: "Into this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Love for our fellow, as a divine commandment, is the seal and distinguishing mark of Christianity. At the same time, it is the sign and proof of belonging to the Church of Christ, founded upon the sacrifice born out of love for mankind. In this way, "philanthropy becomes the very condition of our existence within the Church"³.

However, Christian philanthropy relies not just on the material aspect, materialized in charitable giving, met also before the Saviour Christ, but especially on the love for our fellow: "In the Christian conception, without *agape*, philanthropy does not mean much... A philanthropy pursuing just charitable giving without love, would not be in the spirit of Christ's Evangel. It is not the actual charitable giving, therefore, that is important in principle, but the fact that the one who does it places himself on an equal footing with the person who receives it"⁴. Yet, the Church teaches us, at the same time, that charitable giving must be done carefully. In *The Teaching of the Twelve*

³ Arhim. Dr. Antonie PLĂMĂDEALĂ, "Biserica slujitoare în Sfânta Scriptură, în Sfânta Tradiție și în teologia contemporană", in *Studii Teologice*, year XXIV (1972), no. 5-8, p. 440.

⁴ Arhim. Dr. Antonie PLĂMĂDEALĂ, "Biserica slujitoare în Sfânta Scriptură, în Sfânta Tradiție...", p. 440.



Apostles, we find written: “But also about this it has been written: *Let your alms sweat in your hand until you know to whom you should give.*”⁵. Namely, almsgiving should be given to the person who really needs it: the helpless, the sick, the forsaken, the forgotten one, the one who, without charity, would suffer because he cannot provide for himself on his own. Charitable giving needs to prevent, or at least alleviate, suffering. Charitable giving should not encourage laziness, vice, indifference, a refusal to work or the complacency of begging. Charitable giving achieves its purpose only when it is not done at random.

1. THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL PHILANTHROPY: FROM THE APOSTOLIC AGE TO THE CONTEMPORARY REALITIES

The Apostolic Age is known and remains marked in the history of the Christian Church by a few specific forms of philanthropy. They are the direct consequence of the application of Christ the Saviour’s teaching. Of these, we shall recall: the community of goods in the early Church: “And all that believed were together and had all things common” (Acts 2:14). The first Christian communities were at first made up of poor and needy but also of rich people who “were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any man had need” (Acts 2:45, 35). It is what marks the passage from personal to community philanthropy. Then, another form of philanthropy, during the apostolic age, was to help the Churches in need. The Holy Apostles preached the word of God also outside Jerusalem, creating new Christian communities, and the mother Church of Jerusalem constantly manifested a special care for them. This connection materialized in material aid for those in need. The best-known typical form by which these Churches helped one another were Church collections⁶. As forms of philanthropy these have been and remain the expression of Christian love, practiced even today. Another special commitment was from the Christians of the apostolic period to the sick, the orphans and the widows, the Church needing to be a mother for orphans and a comfort for widows⁷. A form of philanthropy totally specific to the apostolic period were the agape feasts, or love feasts, practiced in close connection to the Holy Liturgy (the Eucharist). Being a sign of the love for one’s fellow, they were also “a symbol of peace, delight and brotherhood among men”⁸. To feed the poor and the needy, a part of the offerings⁹ brought by the believers to the altar were also used.

1.1. The institutionalization of charity in the Post-Constantinian Age: ecclesial types and structures

Philanthropy acquires new forms of manifestation after the religious freedom granted by Saint Constantine the Great. During this age, social care institutions come to life and are organized¹⁰.

⁵ *Învățătura celor doisprezece Apostoli*, I, 6, in col. “Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești” (P.S.B.), vol. 1 (*Scrierile Părinților Apostolici*), translated by Fr. D. Fecioru, EIBMBOR, București, 1979, p. 26.

⁶ Diac. Gheorghe SOARE, *Biserica și asistența socială: doctrina și organizarea ei în primele șase secole*, București, 1948, pp. 12-13, 27.

⁷ Arhim. Dr. Antonie PLĂMĂDEALĂ, “Biserica slujitoare în Sfânta Scriptură, în Sfânta Tradiție...”, p. 440.

⁸ Fr. de CHAMPAGNY, *La charité chrétienne dans les premiers siècles de l’Église*, Paris, 1854, p. 74.

⁹ Pr. Dr. Nectarie COTLARCIUC, *Ocrotirea socială și Biserica*, Cernăuți, 1921, pp. 67-71. Here the author analyzes in detail the way the cultic elements (the offerings brought for the Holy Sacrifice) had a double destination in the Apostolic Church: a liturgical one and a social-philanthropic one.

¹⁰ Pr. Prof. Dr. Liviu STAN, “Instituțiile de asistență socială în Biserica Veche”, in *Ortodoxia*, an IX (1957), nr. 1, pp. 94-118 și nr. 2, pp. 259-278.



They were but forms, organized on the Church level and supported by the State¹¹, of the philanthropy of the previous, apostolic and postapostolic ages. In a simple form, they developed in the shadow of the religious societies or in the framework of some of them, as was the case of the social care institutions for widows, for virgins and for deaconesses¹².

They were the creation of the Church and her glorious genius. They emerged out of the practical need to structure the merciful, evangelical love. The first settlements functioned under the form of cherocomeia (*chērokomia*) or homes destined exclusively for unprotected widows. To protect vulnerable young ladies, parthenocomeia (*parthenokomia*), true homes for virgins, were created¹³. The abandonment of infants was prevented by the organization of brephotropheia (*brephotrophia*). They functioned as secure orphanages for abandoned infants or infants found on the streets. For older children, orphanotrophia (*orphanotrophia*) were created, offering them religious education and food.

Pilgrims and travelers found free shelter in the famous *xenodochia* (*xenodochia*). These guesthouses for strangers received them without demanding any material reward¹⁴. For those in dire poverty, ptotchotropheia (*ptōchia*) or poorhouses were opened. The frail elderly spent their final days in gerontocomeia (*gerontokomia*). There they received dignified care. The medical dimension was addressed through nosocomeia (*nosokomia*) or hospitals, where the sick were treated free of charge by Christian physicians. The sheltering and the treatment of the suffering took an organized form from the very first Christian centuries. This philanthropic network has been preserved to this day, undergoing adaptations required by the epoch¹⁵.

1.2. Major patristic models: from the hierarchic initiative and the synodal dimension of charitable work

In the 4th century, these settlements were organized everywhere in the East, in the great imperial centres. The universal and best-known model the Basiliad (Vasiliada)¹⁶, founded by Saint Basil the Great in Caesarea in Cappadocia. This complex of great proportions unified for the first time under one administration all the branches of medical and social assistance. The city of charity included hospitals, isolation buildings for lepers, schools of crafts and pilgrim guesthouses¹⁷.

The Cappadocian hierarch himself was taking care of the sick, offering a personal example of sacrifice and evangelical offering. His network revolutionized public care.

The philanthropic work of the Church has often been presented as being the exclusive product of certain Holy Fathers and Church hierarchs. Here we shall remind of Saint Basil the Great, Saint

¹¹ For details on the general emergence and classification of these institutions under imperial and Church patronage, see: Pr. Prof. Dr. Liviu STAN, "Instituțiile de asistență socială în Biserica Veche (I)", in *Ortodoxia*, year IX (1957), nr. 1, p. 95.

¹² Liviu Stan, "Societățile religioase în Biserica Veche", in *Studii Teologice*, year VIII (1956), no. 1-2, pp. 109-134.

Liviu STAN, "Instituțiile de asistență socială în Biserica Veche (I)", in *Ortodoxia*, year IX (1957), no. 1, p. 102.

¹⁴ Liviu STAN, "Instituțiile de asistență socială în Biserica Veche (II)", in *Ortodoxia*, year IX (1957), no. 2, p. 261.

¹⁵ Liviu STAN, "Instituțiile de asistență socială în Biserica Veche (II)", in *Ortodoxia*, year IX (1957), no. 2, pp. 267-273. This great canonist makes the etymological, canonic and historical analysis of each of these settlements. See, for more details: Pr. Prof. Dr. Liviu STAN, "Instituțiile de asistență socială în Biserica Veche (I)", in *Ortodoxia*, an IX (1957), no. 1, pp. 94-118, with specific details on p. 102 (for the homes for the elderly, *cherocomeia*) and the subsequent; respectively Part II in *Ortodoxia*, nr. 2 (1957), pp. 259-279.

¹⁶ Diac. Gheorghe SOARE, *Biserica și asistența socială: doctrina și organizarea ei în primele șase secole*, București, 1948, pp. 112-117.

¹⁷ Sfântul GRIGORIE de Nazianz, *Discursul XLIII (Panegiricul la Sfântul Vasile cel Mare)*, 63, in col. "Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești" (P.S.B.), vol. 14, EIBMBOR, București, 2014, pp. 192-195.



John Chrysostom or Saint John the Merciful. In Constantinople, John Chrysostom reorganized the Church finances to feed thousands of poor people and widows on a daily basis¹⁸. In the Alexandria of Egypt, John the Merciful emptied the treasury of the Patriarchate to alleviate the effects of hunger and of the social crises¹⁹. Nevertheless, this immense work should not be reduced to the isolated initiatives of some providential personalities. It truly belongs to the entire Church body, being a structural component of its divine mission in the world. Philanthropy has not been a facultative activity of the clergy, but the direct expression of the faith of the entire people of God. The people supported these structures materially by gifts brought to the altar. The ecumenical and local councils canonically regulated their obligatory functioning under the direct supervision of the Episcopate²⁰. So, the patristic caritative institutions demonstrated the indissoluble link between liturgical living and social responsibility.

1.3. The philanthropic value of Cappadocian monasticism and the organization of the monastic settlements

Although the monasteries were not created with the explicit aim to have the role of philanthropic settlements, they rapidly became the most adequate spaces to practice charity. Ascetic isolation did not mean an isolation from the suffering of the world, but a profound commitment regarding it by prayer and direct material assistance. Early monasticism massively contributed to alleviating social pain and sweetening the hard realities of provincial poverty.

Saint Basil the Great imperatively recommends to the monks unconditional hospitality to the poor, the travelers and the needy. This care would also go out so far as to include freed slaves, who received shelter and food until they could find a new purpose for themselves in society. For the sick, the great Cappadocian hierarch prescribes sure ascetic rules, in which medical care is regarded as an extension of the Christian duty²¹. At the same time, monasteries functioned as safe havens and moral education providers for children, often taking on the role of informal orphanages²². To all these activities one can add the fact that the monastic settlements gradually took over the structure of the social care institutions initially created in cities. Thus, the monasteries provided the most favorable environment for the development of shelters for widows, homes for the virgins, guesthouses for strangers or asylums for the elderly. By the integration of these structures in the daily liturgical rhythm, the monasteries undertook an ample work of social protection and a rich philanthropic activity with perennial value.

1.4. The historical withdrawal of the Romanian philanthropy: from the trauma of secularization to the contemporary revivification

Unfortunately, certain historical periods drastically reduced the forms by which the Church exerted its caritative work. Unpropitious circumstances obliged the ecclesial institution to diminish

¹⁸ Pr. Prof. Dr. Liviu STAN, "Instituțiile de asistență socială în Biserica Veche (I)", in *Ortodoxia*, year IX (1957), no. 1, pp. 112–115.

¹⁹ LEONTIE de Neapolis, *Viața Sfântului Ioan cel Milostiv*, translated by Pr. Prof. Dumitru Fecioru, Editura Sophia, București, 2002, pp. 45–52.

²⁰ For the ecclesiological and synodal substantiation of charity, showing how the canons obliged each episcopate to hold settlements for strangers and for the sick, we have, for example, Canon 70 of the Council in Laodicea or Canon 8 of the 4th Ecumenical Council.

²¹ Sfântul VASILE cel Mare, *Regulile mari*, Întrebarea LV, in *PSB*, vol. 18, E.I.B.M.B.O.R., București, 1989, p. 445; P.G., t. XXXI, col. 1041–1094.

²² Sfântul VASILE cel Mare, *Regulile mari*, Întrebarea XV, in *PSB*, vol. 18, pp. 245–249; J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* (P.G.), t. XXXI, col. 952–1000.



her presence on the level of public care. She has been forced to abandon numerous traditional settlements.

The Romanian Orthodox Church received a first heavy blow by the secularization of monastic goods in the year 1863. This political act substantially reduced the material resources meant to support the ones in pain²³. Later, the pressure increased. After the year 1948, the totalitarian communist regime reduced the social activity of the Church up to its almost complete abolishment²⁴. The legislative framework of those times explicitly banned any philanthropic manifestation outside the strictly cultic space.

After the 1989 events, the Church found the necessary means to reactivate her old caritative settlements²⁵. The Romanian Patriarchate worked hard to reorganize the philanthropic network on the institutional level, as expression of (practical) ecclesiology. This rebirth springs from a profound dogmatic conscience. Outside the Mystery of the Holy Eucharist, Christ is present the most intensely in the image of our fellow in need. The manifestation of mercy and concrete love for man represents a fundamental ecclesial duty. It remains the capital criterion of the present and future divine judgement.

2.THE MODERN CONCEPTION ON PHILANTHROPY AND THE RECENT ANTHROPOLOGICAL CHRISIS

2.1. Shift of paradigm: from spiritual charity to social ethics mechanics

In the modern epoch one can note, increasingly more, that this problem is no longer approached from a spiritual perspective, but from the perspective of social ethics. Rightly, it can be noticed that modern social ethics tries to solve such problems not in terms of philanthropy or transfer of material goods, but in terms of change of structures able to create new justice and new human relationships²⁶. Mercy and philanthropy have moved on a secondary level, if they have not disappeared completely. The principal reasons that led to the marginalization of mercy and philanthropy need to be searched both in the European philosophy and in the Christian theology. One of the philosophers who invoked the feeling of mercy and love for one's neighbor or fellow as argument against Christianity was the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). He went so far as to dare accuse Christianity of being a religion good for slaves, because it preaches mercy and love for one's fellow. For him, the ideal of man consists in the will for power and dominion, not in mercy and forgiveness. And since mercy on our fellow relies on the love for God, Fr. Nietzsche preached God's death. If one no longer needs mercy and love, one no longer needs God anymore²⁷. Unfortunately, nevertheless, these Nietzschean theories have not remained without practical results. However incredible, his "Übermensch" ("superman") theory led to the radical totalitarian ideologies which, far from mercy and love, tried to change the world by hate, terror and violence, causing suffering, horrors and genocides hard to imagine²⁸. The extermination camps from Auschwitz, the Gulags or the Canal constitute true hecatombs on the altar of certain ideologies and systems which tried to transform the world by race hatred or class hatred. The man that Fr. Nietzsche imagined, in the 19th century, is not the "superman", but the dehumanized man who no longer wanted to know about mercy, forgiveness and love.

²³ Pr. Dr. Nectarie COTLARCIUC, *Ocotirea socială și Biserica*, Cernăuți, 1921, pp. 142–147.

²⁴ Ioan BRIA, *Liturghia după Liturghie: Misiune apostolică și mărturie socială astăzi*, București, 1996, pp. 88–93.

²⁵ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru POPESCU, *Ortodoxie și contemporaneitate*, Editura Diogene, București, 1996, pp. 185–190.

²⁶ Pr. Prof. Dr. Ioan BRIA, *Liturghia după Liturghie...*, pp. 112–117.

²⁷ Irvin D. YALOM, *Plânsul lui Nietzsche*, Humanitas, București, 2010, pp. 145–152.

²⁸ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru POPESCU, *Ortodoxie și contemporaneitate*, Diogene, București, 1996, pp. 181–184.



2.2. Western theological distortions and the Palamite answer of the Orthodoxy

Yet also the Christian theology, in its great majority, contributed one way or another to the marginalization of mercy and philanthropy. This is due to the fact that it advanced a conception about God that proved to be totally different from the biblical image of the Divinity. Different from the biblical vision portraying God, especially in the New Testament, as a God of mercy and grace, a significant part of the Christian theology conceived God as being totally separated from the world and enclosed in a splendid inaccessible transcendence²⁹. Moreover, we could say that by virtue of this deistic conception about God, which distances God from the world, for God to become superior and almighty to men, in the image of the medieval Lords, many Christians have begun placing themselves on a superior position in relation to the disinherited of fortune, no longer manifesting mercy to them, but contempt. From an Orthodox perspective, God is not to be confounded with the world, because while God's essence is uncreated, the world's essence or the cosmos' essence is created. God is the Creator of the world. Yet God does not separate Himself from the world, to remain hidden in an inaccessible transcendence, but is always present in the life of the cosmos and of the people through His uncreated energies³⁰. From the Father, by the Son, in the Holy Spirit, God descends in the intimate depths of the human being, to attract everyone and all into the communion above nature of the Holy Trinity (John 17:20).

It is this very descent of God to man, through the uncreated energies, for man to ascend to God, that highlights the fact that God is not distant, but full of mercy and grace to His creation, developing in the believers' souls the feeling of compassion to those in suffering, feeling from which springs all truly philanthropic work. This is the only way by which "the God of the philosophers" can become Christian God, a God of mercy, grace and philanthropy: "For God so loved the world that He gave His Only Begotten Son for everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). Only to the extent to which the believer experiences God's grace, which descends in his being by the brightness of the uncreated energies, do these words also acquire their true value and significance. If one does not consider the aspect of our Lord Christ's Sacrifice turned towards man, one cannot discover the expression of the divine mercy encompassed in it.

CONCLUSION

All the religions speak about God, yet only Christianity can speak about a God Who so loved the world that He sacrificed Himself for it. The Saviour's entire life and activity prove an ineffable mercy to the disinherited of fortune. Existing also before Christianity, in one form or another, imposed by the natural feeling of mercy on the suffering, the charitable and social care work has been embraced by the Church and considered one of her most important preoccupations.

Philanthropy has its foundation both in God, as loving Parent of all, but also in men's identity of nature. A social care lacking the affective bedrock of love can cover, for a moment, certain material deprivations, whose solution is urgent, yet it does not favor social harmony, namely the ideal of any act with social character. Practicing philanthropy and mercy contributes both to the spiritual and moral progress of every man, namely to his humanization, but also to avoiding certain social tensions or conflicts. True mercy, namely maximal love of a human being for another, is the highest peak of self-improvement, is the adamant stone of the perfect human personality.

²⁹ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru POPESCU, *Ortodoxie și contemporaneitate*, pp. 189-193.

³⁰ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, EIBMBOR., București, 1996, pp. 272-279.



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