

**The Servant Parish Project:
Strengthening Our Ministry to the Poor and Suffering**

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**Chapter 3
The Poverty Sermons of the Cappadocian Fathers**

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1. *Overview of the Chapter*

In chapter 2, we attempted to provide a useful reflection on the witness which Scripture provides on compassionate outreach to the poor and suffering. As stated then, a full treatment of "what the Bible says" about correcting injustice is beyond the scope of this project. Our goal was to reflect on a small set of major themes, not for the sake of academic thoroughness, but for the sake of energizing ministry. To this end, the dual discussion of (1) Matthew 25 and (2) the "functions" of justice in Scripture were offered not so much as arguments for a point of view, but as potential resources for parishes seeking to replace the false ideal of "serving the parish" with the concept of "the parish as servant," as Father Alexander Schmemmann urges.

In chapter 3, our goal will be similar, but more modest still. If Scripture is deep beyond measure for those looking to understand the Christian call to justice and mercy, then the patristic witness concerning ministry to the poor and suffering is equally without bound. The writings of the Church fathers, the lives of the saints, and the history of the Church's missionary activity provide an endless supply of examples of how to "be doers of the word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22). So again, we will offer a reflection with only narrow scope. Rather than survey what the Church fathers say about wealth, poverty, and Christian charity, we will focus on just the Cappadocian fathers, Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, and Saint Gregory of Nyssa. And even within the wealth of writings that survive from them, we will limit our discussion to just seven sermons, known collectively as the "poverty sermons" of the Cappadocian Fathers. The poverty sermons themselves have direct connections to Saint Basil's project of providing relief to the poor in Caesarea in response to the widespread suffering caused by famine and grain hoarding in 369. The words and actions of Basil and his colleagues

are timeless examples to every parish dedicated to compassion and mercy. And so we will treat these sermons as shorter-form summaries of their thinking on justice, and we will treat the Cappadocian fathers' views more widely as representing a *consensus patrum*. These are substantial assumptions, but sound ones given how these saints figure centrally in the dogmatic, liturgical, canonical, and monastic traditions of the Church. And as with chapter 2, this present chapter is offered as a resource, not as an argument. We already know that any given father or mother among the saints will urge us to "be merciful as your Father is merciful,"¹ but by appreciating the work and words of just a few saints in greater detail, we have the opportunity to understand why this is such a critical commandment to follow.

After reviewing the work of Saint Basil and the poverty sermons of Basil and the two Gregories, we will return to the lessons they provide in chapter 6. There, we will focus on developing an Orthodox moral theology to help us understand the role that seeking justice plays in our Orthodox vision of salvation through Jesus Christ. Following this, we will further develop the practical guidelines introduced in chapter 1 as the "Five Cs of the Servant Parish."

2. The Beautiful Tension: Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church

The task of pursuing compassionate ministry for the sake of the poor would be an urgent and unambiguous charge for all Christians if Christ had simply said with perfect clarity that wealth was inherently evil, and that renouncing wealth to benefit the poor was a universally binding command on all Christians at all times. Such clarity, however, does not attach to the teachings of Christ. John McGuckin notes that "the seeds of ambiguity" concerning wealth are present even in the Gospel texts, and these seeds grow into a tradition of ambivalence towards wealth and possessions both in the patristic period and throughout each Christian age.² In the Apostolic age, the commandment given to the rich young ruler to "go and sell all you have"³ was most likely understood quite practically as advice to the missionary minded that to travel one must lay aside the local anchors of industry and possessions.⁴ And in the second and third centuries, as the church endured periods of persecution, the main meaning of radical renunciation was still a commonsense one: those who possess much have much to lose and, so, may choose apostasy more readily than those who have divested for the sake of fidelity to the gospel.⁵

¹ Luke 6:36.

² John A. McGuckin, "The Vine and the Elm Tree: the Patristic Interpretation of Jesus' Teaching on Wealth." In W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood, eds., *The Church and Wealth: Studies in Church History*, vol. 24. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 1-14.

³ Matthew 19:16-26.

⁴ McGuckin, 4.

⁵ McGuckin, 6.

But as the church enters an age of protection in the fourth century, the urgency of both mission and martyrdom fades, and so too does the more practical interpretation of the teachings concerning radical renunciation.⁶ One option in the age of imperial favor is to universalize the passages that command us to “go and sell,” making this sort of renunciation something that is binding on all Christians. The problem, as McGuckin points out, is that by definition this approach lacks context. In the Apostolic age, the Holy Spirit compelled apostles and missionaries to move with confidence into new and hostile regions. In the age of martyrdom, church persecution suggested a nearness to the apocalypse. In both cases, there was a wider framework, one that allowed the hearer to naturally understand the commandment to “go and sell” as a commonsense bit of instruction. In the fourth century, and onward, there was never an obvious choice for such a wider, meaning-giving framework. Urgent evangelism did not now make sense. Also, the return of Christ seemed less immediate, now that state aggression against the church was tamed. And so the church began to search for new forms of “metaphysical engagement” – ways of making the commandment to “go and sell” make sense to all Christians.⁷ McGuckin notes that no such single context emerged. All that emerged were competing ways to think about wealth. “I would suggest that it is this ambivalence of doctrine in the earliest period which accounts for a similar ambivalence in the Church’s attitude to wealth that abide throughout the patristic era and still affects Christian ideology today.”⁸

Nevertheless, the gospel texts concerning radical renunciation remain as plain as black and white on the biblical page. And the questions remain. What is the correct context for interpreting the counsel to “go and sell” all that one has, to give it to the poor, and to follow Christ? Is it meant literally? And for whom is it a binding commandment? Could it be a universal requirement?

From the earliest centuries there has been disagreement on how to interpret the teachings of Christ on wealth and possessions. Perhaps many find this longstanding disagreement on a basic moral principle to be a source of awkwardness or embarrassment—as if the perennial ambivalence toward wealth is actually the bad-faith symptom of a Church engaged in self-deception, a Church somehow compromised by, and ashamed of, its close association with Mammon. But the Church is not guilty of denial and double mindedness, and neither is the “tradition of ambivalence” aptly described by McGuckin particularly something untoward or scandalous. Against any easy and facile criticisms, I suggest that the absence of unity on the question of wealth has been a life-giving and fruitful experience for the Church, and one that our parishes today can appropriate and learn from.

Perhaps this oversimplifies the complex relationship between Christians and wealth, but it is useful to appreciate the beautiful tension in Church history between two competing approaches to the biblical texts concerning radical renunciation. On the one hand, there are

⁶ McGuckin, 6.

⁷ McGuckin, 7.

⁸ McGuckin, 7.

those who follow the second-century preaching of Clement of Alexandria and maintain that Christ's teachings should be interpreted in a spiritual way.⁹ Yes, the commandment to "go and sell" applies to all Christians, but the commandment should not be understood in a literal or strictly material sense. It is not wealth that is the source of sin and human misery, but rather our attachments to wealth. In fact, strong attachment to anything—power, prestige, ideology of any kind—is what keeps the rich man from entering the kingdom. Clement "widens the eye of the needle"¹⁰ to ensure that indeed the camel can pass through. The wealthy Christian can enter the kingdom so long as the Christian does not nurture selfish and sinful attachments to wealth.

The second approach is represented by the figure of Anthony the Great and more widely by the emergence of monasticism among desert dwellers around Alexandria in the third century. Anthony famously heard the story of Christ's encounter with the rich young man and applied the teaching to himself in the literal sense: he sold his inheritance and followed Christ into voluntary poverty, embracing a life of prayer and work for the gospel's sake.¹¹

The two approaches are in tension with one another. Clement represents a broader, more spiritualized interpretation of Christ's teachings. Anthony represents a more hardline, commonsense interpretation of the Lord's commandments. If Clement is correct, then wealth is not incompatible with discipleship. If Anthony is correct, then discipleship presupposes divestiture. This is a knotty problem. How should we think about wealth? Is it truly a bar to entering the kingdom? Is Clement's approach the correct one, or does the monastic vision represent the only way of keeping the commandment to "go and sell"? Does either Clement or Anthony miss something, or does either of them assume too much in their interpretation of Christ's encounter with the rich young man? The right angles created by these perpendicular approaches pinch and poke us, and they move us to look for solutions that are tidy and decisive. But after nearly twenty centuries, it is doubtful that the Church will ever side conclusively with one position or the other. Neither will holy tradition likely guide us toward a way of harmonizing the approaches represented by Clement and Anthony. The tension has always been there, and it always will.

Nevertheless, the Christian should not prematurely despair. The enduring tension between Clement and Anthony is not evidence that Christ's teachings are hopelessly beyond understanding. Neither does the tension entail that the Christian vision of holiness is hopelessly fuzzy and full of gaps. To the contrary, this is a beautiful tension, one worth living

⁹ Clement of Alexandria, "Who is the rich man who shall be saved?" <<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/clement-richman.html>>, August 1, 2019.

¹⁰ Van den Hoek, Annewies. "Widening the Eye of the Needle: Wealth and Poverty in the Works of Clement of Alexandria," 75. In Susan Holman, ed. *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, 67–75. Van den Hoek gives credit for this way of describing Clement's effort to the historian Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 173.

¹¹ Athanasius the Great, *Life of Antony*. <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2811.htm>>, August 1, 2019.

with. We should not be so quick to wish it away, nor to grasp at shoddy and passing solutions conditioned more by earthly ideologies than by a true desire to hear the word of the Lord and keep it.

The tension is beautiful because it forces us to return again and again to the Word whose words remain a puzzle for the Church. It is a good thing that the Church has never settled on a single-minded doctrine of wealth and possessions since holiness, in the end, is a mystery. Instead, the Church has nurtured a variety of positions, each determined to provide a connection between Christ and all Christians. The gospel is a gospel for the poor, for certain, but also for the wealthy and the classes in between. If the positions represented by Clement and Anthony both seem compelling, this should be received as a gift. The tension between them gives us a reason to make Christ the measure of all things—to seek guidance, in humility, from the *Logos* whose *logoi* open up multiple pathways to sanctity and Christian transformation.¹²

Returning to Christ, again and again, reminds us of course that holiness is not, in the first place, a reflection of our relationship to wealth. Attitudes toward possessions and poverty are important, for certain, but only derivatively. What matters most is our relationship to one another. Sanctity is not a function of our affection for something abstract. Sanctity arises from our affection for others. Neither radical renunciation nor angelic detachment is the first commandment. Love is. “If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.”¹³

Love is what makes the Christian church a truly revolutionary presence in the world. Anthony’s renunciation and Clement’s detachment are certainly admirable forms of Christian virtue, but as options, they are of course not unique to Christianity. Long before the life and death of Christ, for example, the Cynics outlined a system of virtue based on austerity and voluntary poverty. The Pythagoreans similarly emphasized asceticism as a way to bring proper balance to the relationship between part and whole in the human person. The Stoics proposed an alternative approach to human flourishing based not on renunciation but on self-control in all matters. Likewise, those who followed Epicurus singled out tranquility and freedom from painful emotions as the highest human virtue. The Hellenistic scene is saturated with pre-Christian examples of the disagreement between Clement and Anthony. And acknowledging this does not deflate the importance of the disagreement between their interpretations of the words of Christ. But what truly changes the social imagination of those living in the late Roman empire is not merely the Christian update of Hellenistic forerunners. Christianity does for certain “baptize” what is noble and choiceworthy in the wider pagan culture that incubates it. But what fundamentally changes the capacity of human beings in late antiquity to see themselves and their world is the Christian gospel, not merely a Christianized version of inherited human wisdom. The *experience of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as God, in the*

¹² McGuckin points out that Clement and Anthony, though they draw different conclusions about the meaning of Christ’s words concerning radical renunciation, in the end both put Christians on a path that, in time, leads to greater simplicity and voluntary poverty for the sake of caring for the poor. “The Vine and Elm Tree,” 12.

¹³ 1 Corinthians 13:3.

Christian Church, fundamentally changes the capacity of human beings in late antiquity to see themselves and their world.

Christianity, in the words of Peter Brown, “is a new departure.”¹⁴ And the critical century in the Christian revolution is the fourth century. For certain the conversion of Constantine and the privileging of Christianity in the early 300s are pivotal events in the history of the Church, but this is not the “new departure” introduced by the Christian gospel. Indeed, the Edict of Milan and the new imperial favoritism toward Christianity are, in themselves, accomplishments achieved *on behalf* of the faith. Christianity is but the passive beneficiary of these trends, not an active player changing the wider culture directly. But later, in the fourth century, the agency of the Church is felt in profound and radical ways. The Church in the late 300s is more than settled and stable. The Church has matured, especially as the Nicene Orthodoxy of Saint Athanasius the Great overcomes the Arian heresy that Jesus is created. The Church, as Nicene, is ready to unleash a new vision of human flourishing on the wider world, one that does not build on its Hellenistic predecessors, but supersedes them.

At the center of the historic push and pull in late antiquity is the activity of the Christian bishop.¹⁵ The bishops are the pioneers that move the Church into alien cultural territory, one that did not know the categories identified by Christ as the focus of his ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.¹⁶

In the fourth century, there were already within the empire well entrenched practices of patronage and civic support. “In the late Roman quite as much as in classical times, the Roman empire was held together by personal ties expressed and cemented through massive giving ... The rich and powerful followed the example of the emperors; they held their followers together by gifts.”¹⁷ Peter Brown for this reason writes that the Roman empire is not only justly called an “empire of honor,” but also an “empire of gifts.”¹⁸ Civic and political stability were

¹⁴ Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, NH: University of New England, 2002), 8.

¹⁵ “To put it bluntly: in a sense, it was the Christian bishops who invented the poor. They rose to leadership in late Roman society by bringing the poor into ever sharper focus. They presented their actions as a response to the needs of an entire category of persons (the poor) on whose behalf they claimed to speak. ... Step by step, they soaked significant areas of late antique society in the novel and distinctive dye of a notion of ‘love of the poor.’” Brown, 8–9.

¹⁶ Luke 4:18.

¹⁷ Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 58–59.

¹⁸ Brown, 58.

strengthened by a culture of top-down beneficence in which the wealthy gave generously and publicly to the citizenry. For certain there was the dole itself, the distribution of grain to all from the imperial holdings. But even the dole was less a program for granting relief to the poor and more an example of how material patronage functioned as a powerful tool for creating and sustaining a sense of identity. Citizens, not “the poor,” were entitled to the distribution of food.¹⁹ And so even the ubiquitous distribution of grain to the citizens of Roman cities was an example of the wider practice of *euergesia*, or the “doing of good deeds” by wealthy patrons for the benefit of the citizens under their ruling authority. Euergetism was prevalent and prominent. The wealthy were the ones who financed public works, religious feasts, civic festivals, games, and large celebrations for the support and entertainment of the civic body. But in all of this, the motivation was never charity or *philanthropia*. “The poor” was not a category to which the *euergetai* gave any thought. The practice of patronage was never done out of a concern to relieve the suffering of the many who struggled daily against grinding poverty. Those we might today identify as “the poor” in fact were rarely the beneficiaries of Roman *euergesia* since they were not holders of Roman citizenship. The scholar Paul Veyne corrects the wrong assumption that the ancient ideal of beneficence was rooted in a concern for the poor. He “argues that *euergetism* functioned within this [Roman] economy for three purposes: to display wealth, to express respect for the dead, and to exercise political responsibilities.”²⁰ Even in fourth-century Christendom, the virtue of compassion and the practice of granting relief was largely understood in terms of benefitting the citizenry, not ministering to the poor.

By the end of the fourth century, this all begins to change, thanks in large part to the work of Christian bishops. Brown and others have documented the important role played by the Christian bishop during late antiquity as the church moves from protected imperial cult to universal institution.²¹ One major source for change in this period is the work done by bishops to strip away the pre-Christian assumptions about community and “body” and to replace them with a more expansive understanding of human solidarity that aligns with the vision expressed through Jewish Scripture and the Christian Gospel. It is this work by the bishops in late antiquity that leads Brown to describe Christianity as a “new departure.” It is this work that creates the conditions that ultimately unite the wealthy and the poor, forming a single community defined by a shared identity. Christian bishops succeed in uniting the rich with others hitherto invisible to them, including the sick, the poor, the hungry, and the displaced. And by forging this wider alliance the bishops make possible truly novel and revolutionary institutions, including hospitals, poor houses, and associations for the protection of widows and orphans.²²

¹⁹ Holman, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 38–41. See also Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership*, 26–28.

²⁰ Holman, 11. Holman here cites Paul Veyne, *Bread and Circuses: Historical Sociology and Political Pluralism*, trans. Brian Pearce (London: Penguin Press, 1990), 116.

²¹ See, for example, the works by Brown and Holman already cited.

²² Brown, *Poverty and Leadership*, 33–34, 58–59.

How did the bishops bring about this change in the social imagination of the late Roman empire? Certainly the power of episcopal oratory contributed much. But more than skilled rhetoric was needed for an empire to experience conversion. What most likely shifted history was the particular Nicene vision on which the bishops founded their preaching and their ministries. The Christian revolution that begins to take place in the late fourth century is best described as *applied theology*. In particular, the victory in Christology won at the first ecumenical council in Nicaea in 325 has a profound impact in time on ecclesiology, on the way the Church understands itself as a community. Nicene Orthodoxy insists on the divinity and the humanity of Jesus Christ. As members of the body of Christ, baptized Christians share in this same dignity. All are elevated by inclusion. The poor in particular are moved out of the shadows and given a visibility previously withheld from them in the Hellenistic and late imperial periods. Perhaps the destitute were not members of the civic body, and so had no role in the economy of *euergetism*, but as members of the body of Christ they participate no less in the divine-human mysteries of the Church than the emperor himself. Arianism would have preserved the status quo, keeping the poor invisible. Arianism would have introduced no irritant capable of dislodging the pre-Christian assumptions about community built into the Roman culture of patronage. But Nicene Orthodoxy pours fire down the throat of paganism and reimagines the poor, giving them a share in the nobility of the Savior they worship.

Consequently, by the late fourth century, the church is capable of redirecting wealth away from the “good deeds” of civic and political consolidation and toward the saving deeds of compassionate love for one’s suffering brothers and sisters in the Church. And the bishop stands at the critical meeting point between Church and empire. It is his preaching and his negotiations that begin to replace the culture of *euergesia* with the vision of the Christian gospel, one that commends philanthropy because it is the *Philanthropos* who is worshipped.

We will soon turn to a brief exploration of one particular episode in the longer story of this emerging sea change—the words and work of the Cappadocian fathers Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa in response to the drought and food shortages of 369. But to end this section, it is useful to return to the “beautiful tension” described at the outset between the attitudes towards wealth represented by the figures of Clement and Anthony. We noted above that the conflict between the two approaches to Christ’s words to “go and sell” is a helpful one for Christians. If there is indeed a stalemate between competing interpretations of the Lord’s teachings about wealth, then it is critical that the Christian return again and again to the Word whose words are not so easily tamed. It is solidarity with Christ that, in the first place, opens to us the kingdom of heaven and allows us to travel there through grace and repentance.

And what we see when we return to Christ is enough to dissolve the stalemate between the more literal and more allegorical ways of understanding the renunciation of wealth. The perceived Maginot line between Clement and Anthony is something of an illusion, in other words. It is love for the other, not one’s relationship to wealth, that matters for the Christian. If there is a clear and coherent “Christian doctrine of wealth” then it will follow, not from a close consideration of select proof texts in Scripture, but rather from what Basil the Great will call the

“mother commandment” to love the neighbor.²³ Money is a form of love. We love by means of money no less than by means of spiritual and emotional support. As we see what love requires, then we see what we must do with money. And as we will learn in our brief study of Basil the Great, love does not push us toward simple answers to complicated question. “What should I do with my money?” neither has nor should have an easy, eternal answer. Love is a mystery that honors the complexities of human existence and presupposes a relationship with others. One can be both a monastic and a misanthrope, sadly. In such a case, neither Clement nor Anthony will do one much good. If one refuses to create and sustain relationships of love, then giving away one’s riches—or having the right attitude of detachment toward them—will not make a difference to one’s salvation. Giving away money to the faceless “poor” is not what Christ requires. He requires love, and love requires an experience of the human situation present in the lives of those around us.

3. *Caesarea, 369: “For terrible among us is the famine of love.”*

In the next section we will explore a few of the main themes in the “poverty sermons” of Basil, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. The catalyst for these sermons is a food shortage crisis in Caesarea in 369. Basil himself was ordained to the priesthood in 365 and served in Caesarea. He would later become bishop there in 370, in the aftermath of the famine and its devastation. His relief work in Caesarea is one of the great episodes in the early history of the Constantinian Church showcasing the power of a Christian bishop to leverage his position and influence in support of the poor.

Caesarea in Cappadocia was located at the center of the modern state of Turkey. It was near neither seaports nor sister cities of similar significance.²⁴ Instead, Caesarea was buried in the deep interior of a region that was largely dedicated to the breeding, training, and feeding of horses for use by the empire on its eastern side.²⁵ As a city, it largely stood alone, unconnected to other towns and urban areas in a way that was typical of other cities in the empire. These geographical and economic factors combined to create and sustain acute starvation in Caesarea.²⁶

A winter drought is what triggers the crisis, but the drought itself falls short of a full-blown famine. What turns the drought into a humanitarian emergency is the response on the part of the rich. Some, no doubt, feared that crop failure would be unavoidable in the

²³ Basil, *Homily 8*. C. Paul Schroeder, ed. and trans., *St Basil the Great: On Social Justice*, (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’ Seminary Press, 2009), 85.

²⁴ Philip Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley, 1994), 136. See also his extended description of the crisis of 369, pages 133–145.

²⁵ Brown, *Poverty and Leadership*, 39.

²⁶ See also Brown, 33–44, and Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, 68–71.

springtime. Others, however, are concerned to use the scarcity to their advantage economically. In either case, the rich largely close their storehouses in response to the drought of 369. The excess grain already possessed by the rich would have been enough to ensure the safety of the general region. This buffering effect was one of the virtues of storehouses, allowing a population to draw on past surpluses in years when harvests were weak. But storehouses were also important to the profiteer—they could be used to create and sustain scarcity at will, allowing the landowners to keep prices high if they so desire. The grain hoarding that occurs in 369, whether driven by fear or by greed, creates a widespread food shortage in Cappadocia. And since Caesarea is so isolated, it naturally becomes the place to which the rural poor now travel in search of relief. But conditions inside the city are no better than those on the imperial farmlands which support the military. The storehouses are closed, and no one has access to grain.

Basil's main response was two-fold. First, there was the preaching and public discourse through which "he challenged the rich to act as *evergetai* to the poor."²⁷ Just as the affluent in the pre-Christian empire were honored for their generosity to the civic body and its citizenry, the rich in fourth-century Caesarea were urged by Basil to see themselves as the honored caretakers of a Christian body with vastly more expansive boundaries—boundaries that include the poor and the suffering in addition to those who supported civic life and culture through their labor and taxes. Basil's appeal to the rich was direct: open the storehouses and let the available grain do its intended job, for the good of all. Human beings have caused the suffering in Caesarea. The natural world and its unpredictable patterns are not to blame. "For great among us is the famine of love," he writes to the governor in this period.²⁸

Basil's second response was practical. In addition to urging the rich to intervene and undo the hoarding, Basil led an effort to build a "new city" outside of Caesarea dedicated to the care and comfort of those in extreme need.²⁹

Basil built his hospice for the poor, an early form of what became known 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 travelers, 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 places. Basil called it a *ptōchotropheion*, literally a place to feed, nurture, and patronize (*trēpho*) the destitute poor (*ptōchos*).³⁰

²⁷ Brown, *Poverty and Leadership*, 9.

²⁸ Basil the Great, Epistle 91, as quoted by Susan Holman, *The Hungry and Dying*, 73.

²⁹ The term "new city" is not used by Basil, but by Gregory Nazianzus in Oration 43, his funeral oration in honor of Basil

³⁰ Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, 74.

Such hospices for the poor were not unknown, but the scale of Basil's project—which became known as the 'Basileias' (bishop's palace)—provoked the worry among local officials that Basil would ask for an exemption from taxation, suggesting that the sum was a considerable one to the revenue collectors.³¹ And not just the scale, but the vision behind the scale suggested that the Christian hospice represented not just a baptism of pagan hospitality, but a genuinely "new departure," to use Peter Brown's term again. Brian Daley agrees:

What I would like to argue here, at any rate, is that that large and complex welfare institution on the outskirts of the Cappadocian metropolis that came to be known as the "Basileias" represented a new and increasingly intentional drive on the part of these highly cultivated bishops and some of their Christian contemporaries to reconstruct Greek culture and society along Christian lines, in a way that both absorbed its traditional shape and radically reoriented it.³²

Even Philip Rousseau in his rather more cool and cautious biography of Basil notes that Basil's ambition "heralded nothing less than a major social revolution, setting in place patterns of collaboration and of economic and political patronage that challenged directly the hypocrisy, corruption, and uncontrolled self-interest governing, in Basil's eyes, the society in which he had to operate."³³ Rousseau in particular points out that Basil looks beyond mere charity and hospitality when he establishes his new city. Basil describes the Basileias and its residents, both those who are well and those who are ill, as participating in "the way that is in accordance with Christ's polity."³⁴ The Basileias provided relief to the poor, but it also modeled "how we should live day to day," and so offered all Christians a pathway into a vision of life inspired by the gospels.³⁵ "All such references suggest that the 'new city' was seen as a centre of religious formation almost as much as a refuge for those in distress."³⁶

Was the Basileias a success in human terms? Did it last? Daley points out the following.

Gregory of Nazianzus portrays Basil's collection of hostels and monastic buildings ... as a "new city" erected outside the walls of old Caesarea. One of the ironies of history, perhaps, is that this later came to be true in a geographical sense, as well as a moral and cultural one: other buildings began to cluster around the Basileias in the century or so after its construction, and it became the nucleus of the city's later development, underlying the modern Turkish city of Kayseri; walls were erected around it in Justinian's time that served later as the foundation of Ottoman

³¹ Brown, *Poverty and Leadership*, 40.

³² Brian Daley, "Building a New City: The Cappadocian Fathers and the Rhetoric of Philanthropy," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999): 431-436, at 432.

³³ Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea*, 145.

³⁴ Basil, "Letter to Amphilochius," Epistle 150, as quoted by Rousseau, *Ibid.*, 144.

³⁵ Basil, *Ibid.*, 144.

³⁶ Rousseau, *Basil of Caesarea*, 144.

fortifications, and the old city—already crumbling, apparently, in Basil’s day—gradually became uninhabited.³⁷

When Justinian decided to protect Caesarea two centuries after Basil, he chose the “new city” that Basil built, not the old Caesarea that provoked widespread starvation in 369.³⁸

4. *The Poverty Sermons.*

Our focus here is an exploration of seven sermons, four by Basil the Great, two by Gregory of Nyssa, and one by Gregory Nazianzus. Below are abbreviations for the sermons, their associated titles in English, and the location of the sermons in *Patrologia Graeca*.

<i>Homily 6</i>	Basil, <i>I Will Tear Down My Barns</i> (PG 31.261-78).
<i>Homily 7</i>	Basil, <i>To the Rich</i> (PG 31.277-304).
<i>Homily 8</i>	Basil, <i>In the Time of Famine and Draught</i> (PG 31.303-28).
<i>Psalm 14</i>	Basil, <i>Against Those who Lend at Interest</i> (PG 29.264-80).
<i>On Love 1</i>	Nyssa, <i>On Love of the Poor 1: On Good Works</i> (PG 46.453-70).
<i>On Love 2</i>	Nyssa, <i>On Love of the Poor 2: On Saying ‘Whoever Has Done it to One of These Has Done it to Me’</i> (PG 46.471-90)
<i>Oration 14</i>	Nazianzus, <i>On the Love of the Poor</i> (PG 35.857-909).

The English translations I rely on are given below.³⁹

The dating of the sermons is mostly known, but there are some uncertainties. For instance, Basil’s *Homilies 6–8* were written in the spring and summer of 369 while still a presbyter.⁴⁰ Basil’s sermon against usury is dated to the period around 369, and is related to some of the main themes in *Homilies 6–8*.⁴¹ Nyssa’s two sermons have been dated by Jean

³⁷ Daley, “The New City,” 458–459.

³⁸ See also, Timothy Patitsas, “Saint Basil’s Philanthropic Program and Modern Microlending Strategies for Economic Self-Actualization.” In Holman, ed., *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, 270.

³⁹ *Homilies 6–8* and *Psalm 14* (Basil) are translated by C. Paul Schroeder in Schroeder, ed. and trans., *St Basil the Great: On Social Justice*, (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’ Seminary Press, 2009). *On Love 1 & 2* (Nyssa) are translated by Susan Holman in Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 193–206. *Oration 14* (Nazianzus) is translated by Brian Daley in Daley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, (London: Routledge, 2006), 75–97. Subsequent page references to the poverty sermons will be to these editions.

⁴⁰ Daley, “Building a New City,” 442.

⁴¹ Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, 114.

Daniélou to the 380s, but Brian Daley suggests that there is no evidence against assigning them to an earlier date, much closer to the famine of 369.

Although the dating and original setting of all three must remain conjectural, I want to suggest here that both Gregory of Nyssa's two homilies "on loving the poor" and Gregory of Nazianzus's Oration 14, on the same subject, can best be understood if we suppose they were originally delivered in Caesarea during the years that Basil was developing and carrying out his philanthropic program, and that both their content and their style were carefully crafted to lend persuasive force to what Basil himself had begun. They seem unquestionably to belong to the same project of "building a new city."⁴²

We will follow Daley and view the seven "poverty sermons" as connected to the larger project of creating and sustaining the new city of Basil in response to the famine of 369.

The sermons themselves each have a setting and a focus. Basil's *Homily 6* is a reflection on the parable of the rich man who desires to build bigger barns after an abundant harvest (Luke 12:16-21). Using the rich man as a cipher for all in Caesarea who hoard their surpluses, Basil condemns those who use these "treasuries of injustice"⁴³ for "trafficking in the needs of others"⁴⁴ thereby enhancing their own worth. *Homily 7* is a reflection on Christ's encounter with the rich young man in Matthew 19:16-22, the very passage which leads Anthony the Great to pursue the radical renunciation of his own wealth. As we will see below, Basil here develops a powerful alternative to the competing interpretations associated with Anthony and Clement of Alexandria. In addition, he explores the psychology of greed, and sketches the profile of those among his listeners who seek to justify their appetites and accumulation. *Homily 8* takes Amos 3:8 as its text. In it, Basil builds the case that love has cosmic repercussions beyond human beings and their relationships: "because love has dried up," writes Basil, "the fields are arid."⁴⁵ Failure to love causes a disruption in nature itself, leading to upheavals such as famine and plague. Repentance can restore balance to both nature and human relationships. And finally in *Psalm 14*, with its focus on verse 5, Basil attacks the practice of lending at interest both for the human suffering it necessarily creates, and for the false veneer of respectability that lending practices provide to those who wish to white-wash their addiction to greed.

The three sermons by the two Gregories reinforce the attack begun by Basil on the pre-Christian assumption that the poor are disenfranchised outsiders with no claim to full membership in the larger bodies that might otherwise provide them relief. In *On Love 1 & 2* Gregory of Nyssa offers two extended reflections on the parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25 taking seriously, as we did above in chapter 2, the power of compassion to make us divine by grace. Gregory of Nazianzus in *Oration 14* identifies love as the chief Christian virtue,

⁴² Daley, "Building a New City," 448-449, 450.

⁴³ Basil, *Homily 6*, 67.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

showing “human kindness ... to [be] the single way of salvation for both our souls and bodies”⁴⁶ and arguing with particular power for the claim that all bodies are worthy of compassion because of our unity in Christ as his mystical body.

What unifies the sermons, however, and what allows them to achieve a change in the wider social imagination of late antiquity, are the themes they share. These themes reflect the power of Nicene Orthodoxy as it moves from a mainly theological victory in the early 300s to a victory in the later 300s over pre-Christian social structures that excluded the poor and suffering. The poverty sermons do not single-handedly overthrow the pagan *ancien regime*, but they do epitomize the pressure which Nicene Orthodoxy is able to apply to the walls that once kept the citizenry and the suffering separate and unmixed. We will explore these shared themes in the remainder of this section.

4A. *A new approach to Matthew 19:16–22.*

In *Homily 7*, Basil is suspicious of the rich young man who approaches Jesus and asks “Teacher, what good deed must I do to inherit eternal life.”⁴⁷ The man addresses Christ as ‘teacher’ but does not wish to follow what he learns. His intent is not truly good, notes Basil, since in the end he does what pleases the average person. “All this,” and more, “clearly demonstrates the discord of motives and his own internal disagreement.”⁴⁸ But Basil levels an even stronger charge when he claims that, in effect, the young man is lying when he claims to have honored all the commandments. Basil has in mind, in particular, the commandment that each person love his neighbor as he loves himself. Basil makes an inference from the man’s conspicuous wealth to the man’s lack of love. This is the climax of a distinctive interpretation of Matthew 19:16–21.

Here is Basil’s argument in full:

Look, the Lord’s offer shows just how distant you are from true love! For if what you say is true, that you have kept from your youth the commandment of love and have given to everyone the same as to yourself, then how did you come by this abundance of wealth? Care for the needy requires the expenditure of wealth: when all share alike, disbursing their possessions among themselves, they each receive a small portion for their individual needs. Thus, those who love their neighbor as themselves possess nothing more than their neighbor; yet surely you seem to have great possessions! How else can this be, but that you have preferred your own enjoyment to the consolation of many? For the more you abound in wealth, the more you lack in love.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, 80.

⁴⁷ Matthew 19:16.

⁴⁸ Basil, *Homily 7*, 42.

⁴⁹ Basil, *Homily 7*, 43.

According to Basil, Jesus knows that the rich young man is not telling the truth. Perhaps he has honored his father and mother. Perhaps he has not murdered or stolen or committed fraud, just as he claims. But when the young man says that he has loved his neighbor as himself, Basil pounces and concludes that Christ knows this is false. Basil's assumption here is that the commandment to love the neighbor as oneself is a "mother commandment" —it applies to everything, and all other commandments follow from it. If it applies to everything, then in particular it applies to money. Money is a form of love, and either one loves according to the commandment, or one fails to love as Christ commands. More than this, Basil applies the commandment to money quite literally. His suggestion in particular is that the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself means that one will not spend more money on oneself than one is willing to spend on those in need nearby.

In other words, we must set aside the traditional tithe. Basil reads "love your neighbor" in a way that requires each to give 50% of one's income to those in need. If I spend more on myself than I give to others in need, then I love myself more than my neighbor. According to Basil, when we take "love your neighbor as yourself" and apply it to money, this is what we get. And the basic assumption Basil brings to his interpretation of Matthew 19:16–22 is that the "mother commandment" of love does indeed apply to money, since it applies to everything according to Christ.⁵⁰

And so Christ knows that the rich young man is not telling the truth. Christ can clearly see that the young man is indeed rather rich, Basil notes. In plain sight, he is someone who has not loved others with his money as he loves himself. If he truly loved his neighbor as God commands, it would not be so obvious that he indeed is a man of wealth.

Basil's profound insight is that this passage about giving away all one's money is not, it turns out, a passage about giving away all one's money, at least not in the first place. Christ's hard teaching about wealth is only a teaching about wealth as a *consequence* of a more important consideration. The passage, in the first place, is about love. Basil approaches the encounter with the rich young man with an unbending criterion: nothing is outside the mother commandment to love. Christians should look at everything and see targets to which this mother commandment may apply. In this case, we should not forget that money is a form of love. As I give it to others in need, I am loving them. As I withhold it from them, I am failing to love. The young man does not have a wallet problem, he has a heart problem.⁵¹

Basil's approach to Matthew 19:16–22 gives us a new way of receiving the Lord's follow-up command to "go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in

⁵⁰ Playing with the math here will generate powerful material for those willing to use Basil's interpretation in sermons and other reflections on stewardship. For example, If I make six-figures and drive a BMW and give only \$1,000 to others each year, then I do not love others as I love myself. I love myself at least 100 times more, according to the math. Maybe I tithe, and I give 10% away. And that's good, we should tithe to our churches. But according to Basil, it means that I still love myself ten times more than I love my neighbor. I love myself ten times more than I love God.

⁵¹ We should stop calling this the story of the *Rich Young Man*. We should call it the story of the *Cold-Hearted So-and-So*.

heaven; and come, follow me." We have already explored the "beautiful tension" between the more rigorist interpretation associated with Anthony the Great and the more allegorical one associated with Clement of Alexandria. Anticipating the radical renunciation of monasticism, Anthony exemplifies a literal satisfaction of this teaching about wealth. Hoping to widen the eye of the needle and to allow room in heaven for the moneyed and the landed, Clement pushes the case for hearing this teaching about wealth as a teaching about one's attachments to wealth. But in both cases, both for the rigorist and the accommodationist, this is a teaching primarily about wealth. But Basil dismantles the hermeneutic framework that leads to this Anthony-Clement stalemate. This passage is not primarily about wealth, it is about love. To Basil, the sin of the rich young man is not the sin of failing to acquire the right attitude about money. Rather, the rich young man has failed to love. This is his sin, and it is a sin against the poor.

On Basil's approach, a new question emerges for the hearer. If convicted by the Lord's words to the rich young man, it is counterproductive to begin by asking in response "well, how should I give more?" One can give all one wants, but it is still possible to do so with a stone-cold heart. The better question in response is "well, how should I love more?"

This brings us back to the "beautiful tension" between the competing approaches of Anthony and Clement to matters concerning wealth. The tension is beautiful, we said, since it reminds us to return to the Word whose words we find so jarring. Holiness we noted was a mystery, and it is a resource rather than an embarrassment when we acknowledge the wide variety of options left open in tradition for the Christian of means. And in this way, Basil's interpretation ultimately reaches the same conclusion. If Basil's reading leads one to ask "how do I love more," then of course any answer to this question must also begin by looking to Jesus Christ as our model in all things. In love, Christ gives up everything to keep us close. He desires to be with us, to become a human being and to live with us. In fact, his love is so complete that he does not stop at giving 50% of what he has. Christ gives 100%. He gives his own life, both on the cross and at every eucharistic sacrifice we celebrate. In *Homily 7*, Basil begins to stage a social revolution by relocating the fundamental concern away from wealth itself and placing it squarely on the emulation of Christ-like love. It is not a person's relationship to wealth that brings eternal life, it is her relationship to other human beings. Basil assumes that where love leads, the wallet will follow.

4B. The Nicene inference

Basil's poverty sermons were most likely written while the famine itself was keenly felt by those in Caesarea. There is an immediacy to his tone, an urgency for change in the present moment. There is theological reflection in them for certain, but largely his sermons are argumentative and *ad hominem*, directed primarily to the affluent in his audience who might benefit the suffering in practical ways in the present moment. The two Gregories likely wrote their sermons in the aftermath of the famine, but not in its immediate aftermath. Nazianzus and Nyssa have had the chance to explore and reflect on the crisis in a way that Basil could not, given the sharpness of the suffering around him.

Nazianzus and Nyssa in particular use a strategy that I will call the “Nicene inference.” The inference itself is easy to describe: from the goodness of one body (namely, Jesus’s body), one can infer the goodness of all bodies. I call this the “Nicene” inference in particular because it builds in a practical way on the Nicene orthodoxy established in the early fourth century in response to the heresy of Arianism. Nazianzus and Nyssa can do what Arius cannot: they can make a *Christological* argument for serving the poor, an argument based on who Jesus is and what Jesus accomplishes.

For Nicene Christians, the Incarnation has profound implications. Implications that help to reshape the pre-Christian practice of public support to include the disenfranchised and non-citizens who suffer in such large numbers. This is the “new departure” described by Peter Brown. The Nicene inference enables Christianity to release love on the world and bring about unprecedented forms of compassion for the sick and suffering.

Nowhere in the poverty sermons do we find an explicit description of the Nicene inference. But we can see the logic at work in several places. In both *On Love 1* and *On Love 2*, Nyssa is struggling to come to terms with the Church’s vision of the last judgment, and of the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 in particular. As we know, Christ reveals in the parable that his own identity coincides with the identity of the poor and the suffering. “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”⁵² This actually is not a shock unless one, at the same time, holds fast to the teaching that Jesus eternally retains a divine nature as well. If, like Arius, one only believes that Jesus has a human nature, then Jesus’ words do not add any value to the discussion. If an Arian does not already believe that it is important to serve the poor, then finding out that Jesus is also among the poor will not move the Arian to change his mind. After all, Jesus is just a human being. His poverty will not raise the dignity of others who are poor. His solidarity with them is, at best, the solidarity of one suffering human being with others who similarly suffer. But a good apple added to a bad barrel will in time give way to rot as well.

But if that new apple brings something else to the barrel, some needed antidote for the rot, then the one good apple will indeed bring healing to the rest. This is exactly what Nicene Christians are capable of seeing in Christ. What Christ adds, of course, is his divine nature. Nicene Orthodoxy maintains that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. And so when Jesus reveals in Matthew 25 that he identifies with the poor and the sick, he also reveals that a new dignity is now conferred on suffering human beings. The goodness of his divinity touches a human body in the Incarnation, and now all who unite themselves to Christ also unite themselves to a divine-human being who chooses in love to be found among “the least of these my brethren.” As a Nicene Christian, one cannot with reason distinguish between the value of the human body assumed by Jesus and the value of the human bodies into whose suffering he willingly enters. The value must be high in both cases. Jesus’ body is valued because Jesus is also God. The bodies of the poor are valued because Jesus, as God, chooses to share his divine-human life with them.

Nyssa has this Nicene inference in mind when he writes the following.

⁵² Matthew 25:40.

Do not despise those who are stretched out on the ground as if they merit no respect. Consider who they are and you will discover their worth. They bear the countenance of our Savior. The Lord in His goodness has given them His own countenance in order that it might cause the hard-hearted, those who hate the poor, to blush with shame, just as those being robbed thrust before their attackers the images of their king to shame the enemy with the appearance of the ruler.⁵³

By uniting his divine nature to the human nature we all share, Christ gives us a reason to revalue the world, to see the world differently. For certain this produces the beautiful theology of theosis, of deification by grace. But the consequences are very much practical and this-worldly as well. As you would treat the human body of the divine Christ, so treat all human bodies, especially those for whom he expresses particular affection.

Nyssa uses the Nicene inference above in a positive manner, to encourage all to “discover their worth.” But he also uses the same strategy in a negative manner, to dissuade and condemn prejudice against poor as contrary to reason.

The Lord of angels, the king of celestial bliss, became man for you and put on this stinking and unclean flesh, with the soul thus enclosed, in order to effect a total cure of your ills by his touch. But to you, you who share the nature of this brokenness, you flee your own race. No, my brothers, let not this odious judgment flatter you! Remember who you are and on whom you contemplate: a human person like yourself, whose basic nature is not different from your own. Don't count too heavily on the future. In condemning the sickness that preys upon the body of this man, you fail to consider whether you might be, in the process condemning yourself and all nature. For you yourself belong to the common nature of all. Treat all therefore as one common reality.⁵⁴

Here Nyssa reminds the hearer that the Incarnation destroys the myth that there are natural divisions of rank among human beings. In the mystery of becoming one human being, the divinity of the eternal Son of God elevates the worth of all human beings.

And finally, Nyssa emphasizes that the Incarnation allows us all to be agents of healing, to do the work which Christ does. Each person is needed, either to heal or to be healed.

Do you flee, tell me, from the one who is sick? What repels you? That he has a weakness characterized by oozing of the rotten humors and blood infected by pus, followed by a flow of bile? For this is the medical explanation. Is it the sick person's fault if the frail fabric of his sickly nature exposes itself in these unfortunate ways? Don't you see the healthy person suffering with a boil, a pimple, or other irritations of this sort, of similar purulent inflammations that overheat and redden the skin? What then? Does the rest of the body energetically destroy itself? Just the opposite: all the healthy parts act together to resorb the place of infection. This kind of suffering

⁵³ Nyssa, *On Love 1*, 195.

⁵⁴ Nyssa, *On Love 2*, 201.

is not nauseating. Our healthy skin does not interfere with the healing of the abscess. So why send these unfortunates away from us?⁵⁵

The healthy are not idle members of the mystical body of Christ. They are needed as well. Just as a healthy human body isolates and attacks infection through natural immune responses, so also will healthy Christians aid and abet the Lord as he ministers directly to the poor and the sick. Universal compassion is the natural immune response within the Church to the presence of suffering.

Like Basil and Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzus also uses the Nicene inference to reach the conclusion that the bodies of the poor cannot be ignored by Christians.

And we must, each of us, care no less for our neighbors' bodies than our own, the bodies both of those who are healthy and of those who are consumed by disease. 'For we are all one in the Lord, whether rich or poor, whether slave or free,' whether in good health of body or bad; and there is one head of all, from whom all things proceed: Christ. And what the limbs are to each other, each of us is to everyone else, and all to all.⁵⁶

Here, Nazianzus moves from the premise that "we are one in the Lord" to the conclusions that "each of us is to everyone else ... [as] the limbs are to each other." This argument only makes sense if Jesus *adds* something to those united to him. If Jesus is merely human, he adds nothing. But if he also adds the dignity of his own divine nature, then all of humanity is elevated, and it no longer becomes possible to sort human beings into the familiar categories of *citizen* and *non-citizen*, or *worthy* and *unworthy*. The divinity-humanity of Christ allows for the inference from the importance of my body to the importance of all bodies, united in Christ. This inference is only open to those committed to Nicene Christology.

Using the Nicene inference, Nazianzus also points out that evil is suffered by the sick in more ways than we realize. Using leprosy as his example, Nazianzus writes that poverty is the first evil suffered by the leper. Second, there is the evil of the sickness itself. But there is a third evil:

the fact that no one will approach them, that most will not look at them, that all run away from them, find them disgusting, try to keep them at a distance. So that for them something still more burdensome than the disease is to perceive that they are hated because of their misfortune.⁵⁷

Illness brings the evil of separation. This is an evil, however, only if one already believes that the sick possess a dignity that entitles them to full membership in the community at all times, despite their unpleasant symptoms. But as a Nicene Christian, one already *does* believe in this dignity, for all people and therefore for the sick as well. It is the dignity conferred on all human

⁵⁵ Nyssa, *Ibid.*, 203–204.

⁵⁶ Nazianzus, *Oration 14*, 79.

⁵⁷ Nazianzus, *Ibid.*, 80.

beings by the union of two natures in the one person, Jesus Christ. God himself confirms the elevated value of all human beings, now united to his own divinity by the incarnation of his son, so we must also accept the responsibility to care for that which God cares for: "God is not ashamed to be called our Father, though he is our God and Lord; shall we, then, deny our own human family?"⁵⁸ Indeed, the division of human beings into classes and castes is itself a corruption, by human power and by law, of God's desire at creation to bring forth a single human family, one that enjoys solidarity from the start.

...the human family has been shattered into a variety of names, and greed has destroyed the noble beginnings of our nature, making an ally even of law, the surrogate of political power. Yet think, I beg you, of humanity's original equality, not of its later diversity; think not of the conqueror's law, but of the creator's! As far as you can, support nature, honor primeval liberty, show reverence for yourself and cover the shame of your race, help to resist sickness, offer relief to human need.⁵⁹

We were all created to participate in God's life. The Incarnation, understood as it is by Nicene Orthodoxy, makes this possible once again for all human beings. And as a practical consequence, we now have no excuse for honoring the artificial and corrupt ideologies that glorify some and debase others.

Nazianzus continues, extracting real-world responsibilities from the Nicene theology of the Incarnation: "Do not overlook your brother, do not pass by your sister, do not turn them away as something polluting or unclean, as some alien things, to be avoided and cursed. This is part of your body, even though it is bowed down by misfortune."⁶⁰ And with a thunderous exclamation point, Nazianzus concludes his sermon this way:

...let us take care of Christ while there is still time; let us minister to Christ's needs, let us give Christ nourishment, let us clothe Christ, let us gather Christ in, let us show Christ honor—not just at our table, as some do, nor just with ointment, like Mary, nor just with a tomb, like Joseph of Arimathea, nor just with the things needed for burial, like that half-hearted lover of Christ, Nicodemus, nor just with gold and frankincense and myrrh, like the Magi who came to him before all the rest. But since the Lord of all things 'desires mercy and not sacrifice,' and since 'a compassionate heart is worth more than tens of thousands of fat rams,' let us give this gift to him through the needy, who today are cast down to the ground, so that when we are all released from this place, they may receive us into the eternal tabernacle, in Christ himself, who is our Lord, to whom be glory for all the ages. Amen.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Nazianzus, *Ibid.*, 89.

⁵⁹ Nazianzus, *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶⁰ Nazianzus, *Ibid.*, 91.

⁶¹ Nazianzus, *Ibid.*, 97.

Appealing to the mystical union of Christ and all disciples, Nazianzus concludes that through our gifts to the needy, it is Christ himself we care for. Ministry to the poor and suffering is no longer just a good deed for those inclined to voluntarily exceed the expected benevolence associated with the pre-Christian economy of civil euergetism. Ministry to the poor and suffering is revealed by Nazianzus, along with Basil and Nyssa, to be a practical and non-negotiable consequence of our Nicene faith in Jesus Christ.

4C. *A new condition: no anonymous poor.*

It is often easy to speak and preach about the poor, and yet keep them at a distance. “The poor” can be turned into an abstract category, and it is entirely plausible to love “the poor” without actually loving any poor people in particular. Similarly, one can love the idea of “one body” without actually loving any particular limb, digit, organ, or appendage of that body. The Cappadocian fathers are aware of this easy yet insufficient way of honoring the mother commandment to love one’s neighbor. More than that, they understand that a personal connection to the suffering is an essential condition for true change. So long as the poor remain faceless and nameless, it is all too easy to let their condition fade into the background of all the many social problems we face.

For this reason the Cappadocian fathers emphasize what we might call the “no anonymous poor” condition. What love requires is not simply throwing money at a problem. What love requires is compassion in the most literal meaning of that term. Love requires that we “suffer with” those who suffer. This is what Christ does, both actually in the Gospels and mystically in his identification with “the least of these my brethren.” This is what we must do. We are commanded to love people, not simply to regret their suffering, and love requires a personal connection.

Nowhere in their poverty sermons do Basil and the two Gregories actually state this “no anonymous poor” condition, but with great power they model this very condition using the rhetorical device of ekphrasis. Using explicit and vivid depictions of suffering, the Cappadocian fathers make sure that talk of sickness and suffering is not left at an abstract level. Through ekphrasis they place the reality and harshness of human misery directly before their listeners. Through words, they present people. They force their listeners to meet the ones they are called to love.⁶²

The poverty sermons include many moving passages that depict the appalling misery endured by the poor and the sick. Basil himself uses ekphrasis to describe the horrors of starvation brought on by the famine of 369.

⁶² A particularly insightful and thorough exploration of how the poverty sermons deal with the bodies of the poor, and not with just the collective and abstract “body of the poor,” is found in chapter 2 of Susan Holman’s *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*. She notes there that “what is less examined in the story of Basil’s appeal to the rich and his establishment of a hospital complex is his construction of the bodies of the poor themselves” (66).

The disease of those who are starving, namely hunger, is a terrible form of suffering. Hunger is the most severe of human maladies, the very worst kind of death. The other hazards to human life do not involve extended torment: whether in the case of death by the sword, which brings about a swift end, or roaring flame, which swiftly extinguish life, or wild beasts, that tear one limb from limb with their teeth, the interval of suffering is relatively brief. But starvation prolongs the pain and draws out the agony, so that sickness is ensconced and lurks within the body, while death is ever present yet ever delayed. The body becomes dehydrated, its temperature drops, its bulk dwindles, its strength wastes away. Skin clings to bone like a spider's web. The flesh loses its natural coloration: its ruddiness fades as the flow of blood decreases, while the alabaster of the skin turns discolored and dark. The blood takes on a mottled hue, with yellow and black patches mingling in a manner terrible to see. The knees can no longer support the weight of the body, but are forced to drag along behind. The voice grows weak and feeble. The eyes become diseased and are rendered useless, sunken in their sockets like fruits that shrivel up in their skins. The belly is empty, shrunken to nothing, possessing neither girth nor the natural tone of the bowels, so that the bones of the spine are visible from the front ... In certain circumstances, the torments of hunger have even compelled people to transgress the boundaries of nature, causing one human being to devour the body of another, even a mother that of her own child, so that in a horrible manner she receives back into her own body that which she bore.⁶³

Basil follows his ekphrasis here with exhortation: "the times are calling you to return to the mother of the commandments"⁶⁴—the commandment to love one's neighbor.

In *Homily 6*, where he reflects on the parable of the rich man who desires bigger barns, Basil issues a stern warning to his audience: "Do not enhance your own worth by trafficking in the needs of others."⁶⁵ He then describes the horrors of poverty.

Yes, while the glitter of gold so allures you, you fail to notice how great are the groans of the needy that follow you wherever you go. How can I bring the sufferings of the poverty-stricken to your attention? When they look around inside their own hovels, they do not spy any gold among their things, nor shall they ever. They find only clothes and furnishings so miserable that, if all their belongings were reckoned together, they would be worth only a few cents. What then? They turn their gaze to their own children, thinking that perhaps by taking them to the slave-market they might find some respite from death. Consider now the violent struggle that takes place between the desperation arising from famine and a parent's fundamental instincts. Starvation on the one side threatens a horrible death, while nature resists, convincing the parents rather to die with their children.⁶⁶

⁶³ Basil, *Homily 8*, 84-85.

⁶⁴ Basil, *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶⁵ Basil, *Homily 6*, 63.

⁶⁶ Basil, *Ibid.*, 64.

But Basil notes that “time and again they vacillate, but in the end they succumb.”⁶⁷ They sell their children so that starvation may be delayed at least a little. Basil then enters the mind of the tormented parent. Basil gives the parent a voice.

And what does a parent think at such times? “Which one should I sell first? Which one will earn the greatest favor with the grain merchant? Should I choose the eldest? But I cannot bear to do so, since he is the firstborn. The youngest? But I take pity on his youth, as yet untouched by tragedy. This one looks just like his mother, that one shows aptitude in his lessons. Curse this hopelessness! What am I to do? Which of my children shall I strike? What kind of beast shall I become? How can I forget the bond of nature? If I hold onto all of them, I must watch them all perish with hunger. If I send one of them away, how will I be able to look the others in the eye ever again? ... How can I ever sit down at the table, which now has plenty of food as a result of such a decision?”⁶⁸

Basil then moves from ekphrasis to rebuke, condemning his addressees. “And while the parent comes with tears streaming down their faces to sell the dearest of their children, you are not swayed by their sufferings.”⁶⁹ He accuses the rich of “feigning ignorance of their plight, and thus prolong[ing] the agony.”⁷⁰ But Basil will not let them get away with the fakery. By his words he places before them the persons, voices, and stories of the poor. “They come offering their very heart in exchange for food. And yet ... you haggle for even more ... increasing the tragedy on every side for these wretches.”⁷¹ Greed has replaced the natural bond of human kindness and compassion: “Tears do not move you, groans do not soften your heart, but you remain adamant and unbending.”⁷²

In *On Love 1*, Gregory of Nyssa uses ekphrasis to personalize the ordeal of those who suffer in particular from leprosy. It is especially easy to ignore the leper since lepers were often required to live quite literally out of sight. Nyssa attacks the “gourmand” and all those who indulge in “sumptuous dwellings” and “superfluous ornaments” with such excess that even Herod and Herodias would blush.

While this is going on in the house, a myriad of Lazaruses sit at the gate, some dragging themselves along painfully, some with their eyes gouged out, others with amputated feet, some

⁶⁷ Basil, *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶⁸ Basil, *Ibid.*, 64–65.

⁶⁹ Basil, *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷⁰ Basil, *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷¹ Basil, *Ibid.*, 65.

⁷² Basil, *Ibid.*, 65.

quite literally creep, mutilated in all their members. They cry and are not heard over the flutes' whistling, loud songs, and the cackling of bawling laughter.⁷³

If the poor cry out more urgently, "the porter of a barbarous master bounds out like a brute and drives them away with strokes of a stick, setting the dogs on them and lashing their ulcers with whipcord."⁷⁴ Nyssa reminds us that these are "the beloved of Christ" who "embody the essential commandment" issued by Christ in the parable of the last judgment. And yet "they retreat ... without having gained one mouthful of bread or meat, but satiated with insults and blows."⁷⁵ Meanwhile, "in the den of Mammon, some vomit up their meal like an overflowing vessel."⁷⁶ Nyssa concludes that "twofold is the sin that reigns in this house of shame: one is the excess of the drunkards, the other the hunger of the poor who have been driven away."⁷⁷

In *On Love 2*, Nyssa continues to depict the leper and his suffering so that his audience cannot further feign ignorance of their misery.

You see these people, whose frightful malady has turned them into beasts. In place of fingernails, the disease has caused them to bear pieces of wood on hands and feet. Strange impressions are left on our paths! Who recognizes there a human foot? These people who yesterday stood upright and looked at the sky are here, today, bending to the earth, walking on four feet, practically changed into animals. Listen to the rasping wheeze that comes from their chest. Thus it is that they breathe.⁷⁸

Nyssa condemns the hard hearts of his hearers. "Why aren't you moved by any of the diseases you perceive happening to other people?"⁷⁹ He reminds them of the natural dignity given to the sick and suffering. "And do you not know who it is that lives in this condition? Man born in the image of God, entrusted with the governance of the earth and the rule over all creatures, here so alienated by sickness that one hesitates to recognize him."⁸⁰

⁷³ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Love 1*, 198.

⁷⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Ibid.*, 198.

⁷⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Ibid.*, 198.

⁷⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Ibid.*, 198.

⁷⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Ibid.*, 198.

⁷⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Love 2*, 201.

⁷⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Ibid.*, 201.

⁸⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Ibid.*, 201.

Like Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus also explores the suffering endured by those with leprosy. Through ekphrasis, Nazianzus provides a particularly moving account of the psychological and social pain which accompanies the disease.

Their stands before our eyes a terrible, pitiable sight, unbelievable to anyone who did not know it was true; human beings both dead and alive, mutilated in most parts of their body, scarcely recognizable for who they are or where they come from; they are, rather, wretched remnants of once-human beings. ... They are truncated human beings, deprived of possessions, family, friends, and their very bodies. ... They are uncertain whether to lament for the parts of their bodies that no longer exist, or for those that remain—those which the disease has consumed, or those left for the disease to work on. The former have been consumed most wretchedly, the latter are still more wretchedly preserved; the former have disappeared before their bodies are buried, the latter have no one who will give them a burial.⁸¹

In a particularly wrenching passage, Nazianzus explores the pain endured by the healthy who are forced to send their loved ones into a lonely and painful exile. Leprosy shatters families, not just persons. “Who could be more upright than a father?” begins Nazianzus, “Who more sympathetic than a mother? But nature’s operation is shut off even for them.”⁸²

The father looks at his own child, whom he begot and raised, whom alone he considered the light of his life, for whom he prayed often and long to God, and now both grieves over that child and drives him away—the first willingly, the second under compulsion. The mother recalls the pangs of childbirth and her heart is torn apart: she calls his name wretchedly, and when he stands before her she laments for her living child as if he were dead: “Unfortunate child of a miserable mother, bitter disease has come to share you with me! Wretched child, unrecognizable child, child whom I have raised only for the cliffs and mountaintops and desert places. You will dwell with wild beasts, and rocks will be your roof; only the holiest of people will look on you.”⁸³

Nazianzus allows the mother to speak, as Job once did.

“Why were you formed in the womb of your mother? Why did you not come from her belly and immediately perish, so that death and birth might have been simultaneous? Why did you not depart prematurely, before tasting the evils of this life? Why did these knees receive you? Why were you allowed to suck at these breasts, since you were going to live so wretchedly, a life more difficult than death?” So she speaks, and lets loose a flood of tears; the unfortunate woman wishes to embrace her child, but fears his flesh as if it were the enemy.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 14*, 80.

⁸² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ibid.*, 81.

And Nazianzus concludes by registering his disgust with the reality that lepers are treated worse than known criminals and reprobates. When we stand to gain some benefit, we would rather let a murderer stay in our own homes than send him away and lose the profit. But not so with the leper. For him, exile is the only option. The disease becomes a sentencing, and the sentence is never commuted.

From all the neighbors come loud shouts and gestures, driving him away—cries not directed against criminals, but against the wretched. ... But in this person's case suffering, rather than any injury, is handed down as a criminal charge. So crime has become more profitable than sickness, and we accept inhumanity as fit behavior for a free society, while we look down on compassion as something to be ashamed of.⁸⁵

The social and psychological pain is just as acute as the physical. So much so that “the kindest person, for them, is not someone who supplies their needs, but someone who does not send them off with a sharp word.”⁸⁶

4D. *Compassion and theosis.*

A final theme to explore in the poverty sermons is the connection made by Basil and the two Gregories between compassion and deification. They explain that compassion is more than commonsense virtue. Compassion transfigures the Christian, making her more and more like the Christ she worships and serves. Brian Daley also recognizes this movement in a new direction: “Yet for all these continuities between the Cappadocians’ philosophical rhetoric and that of Cicero or Julian, the heart of their civic message was new: a vision of Christ as the true emperor and the full realization of godlike humanity.”⁸⁷ The Cappadocians do not simply baptize the virtues of a pre-Christian era. They add something genuinely new to the discussion, elevating compassion and mercy from virtues that we ought to possess to ways of life that we must possess, so long as we desire to take our baptismal calling seriously.

Basil himself does not explicitly use the language of theosis or deification, but in *Homily 8* he concludes with an exhortation that sees a cause-and-effect relationship between compassion and our readiness to be received by Christ as Bridegroom on the last day.

Consider yourself to have two daughters: the enjoyment of this life, and the life to come in the heavens. ... Do not enrich the present life while leaving the other naked and clothed in rags. Rather, when the time comes for you to stand before Christ and appear in the presence of the Judge, let the life of virtue have her bridal raiment and invitation ready. Do not present the bride unkempt and shabbily attired, lest when he beholds her the Bridegroom should turn his face

⁸⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ibid.*, 82.

⁸⁷ Daley, “Building a New City,” 459.

away with loathing at the sight and cancel the engagement. Rather, preserve the splendor of the appointed day by sending her dressed in appropriate adornment, so that she may light her lamp with the prudent virgins, having the inexhaustible light of knowledge, and not lacking the oil of righteous deeds. Then the God-inspired prophecy will be confirmed through actions, and the word that was spoken will aptly befit your own soul: "The queen stood at your right hand clothed in a garment woven of gold and beautifully arrayed. Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear: forget your people and your father's house, and the King will desire your beauty."⁸⁸

Ministry to the poor and suffering is not for the already-holy. It is the activity through which our holiness grows. Compassion makes us desirable to the Bridegroom. Obeying the mother commandment of love makes us ready for union, for all eternity, with the one who desires to share with us all that he has and all that he is.

Gregory of Nyssa is less poetic and more direct: "Mercy and good deeds are works God loves; they divinize those who practice them and impress them into the likeness of goodness, that they may become the image of the Primordial Being, pure, who surpasses all intelligence."⁸⁹ Nazianzus also links compassion and theosis.

Recognize the source of your being, your breath, your power of thought, and (greatest of all), your power to know God and to hope for the Kingdom of Heaven, for equality with the angels, for the vision of glory ... for the chance to become a child of God, a fellow-heir with Christ, even (I make bold to say) to become yourself divine.⁹⁰

God is the source of all good things, and the proper response on our part is to love as God loves. Nazianzus urges his hearers to "become a god to the unfortunate, by imitating the mercy of God. ... For a human being has no more godlike ability than that of doing good."⁹¹

⁸⁸ Basil, *Homily 8*, 87. The biblical quotation is Psalm 44:9–11 (LXX).

⁸⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Love 1*, 197.

⁹⁰ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 14*, 88.

⁹¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ibid.*, 90.