



## Patristic Christian Views on Poverty and Hunger

Susan R Holman

[1] The poor are "living images of God," wrote Martin Luther in 1522, an opinion shared by Ulrich Zwingli, who argued that God "turned all visible cults from himself to the poor."<sup>1</sup> Both reformers knew Johannes Oecolampadius (a co-signatory at Marburg in 1529), whose treatises on poor relief began with his 1519 translation of Gregory of Nazianzus's fourth-century sermon (*Oration 14*), "On the love of the poor."<sup>2</sup> John Calvin similarly drew on early Christian writers, particularly John Chrysostom, the late fourth-century bishop of Antioch and Constantinople, for his views on social welfare.<sup>3</sup> These reformers profoundly shaped Thomas Cranmer, who influenced the development of Elizabethan poor laws. What was it about the early church that spoke so powerfully to Christians seeking to change social systems? What do early Christian responses to poverty and hunger offer to us in the twenty-first century? This article provides a brief overview of examples from the "patristic" period, that is, early Christian writings between the second and the sixth centuries.



Detail from *Belisarius Begging for Alms* by Jacques-Louis David

[2] Care for the poor and hungry was part of Christian "liturgy" (meaning both worship and service) from the beginning. According to Justin Martyr (*Apology* 1.67), Sunday services in second-century Rome included a collection for the poor, funds used to care for orphans, widows, the sick, prisoners, strangers, and "all in need." The *Didache* (13.4–5) also mentions regular food collections for both the clergy and the poor as part of worship. 1 Clement (55.2) famously claims that some sold themselves into slavery in order to feed others.<sup>4</sup>

[3] Assistance was not limited to fellow believers. Even before Christianity became legal in the early fourth century, Christians were recognized for their open-handed generosity beyond religious boundaries. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (martyred in 258) practiced a "liberality of overflowing works to all, not to those only who are of the household of faith."<sup>5</sup> Pachomius, a pagan teenage soldier imprisoned as a conscript around 300, was so impressed by the Christians who brought food to the prisoners that he converted, founding the earliest model of "coenobitic" or community monasticism. Christian responses to a famine in Cappadocia (central Turkey) in the 360s, discussed further below, emphasized similar ecumenism. And by the year 400, John Chrysostom told his congregation, "If you see anyone in affliction, do not be curious to enquire further... [the needy person] is God's, whether he is a heathen or a Jew; since even if he is an unbeliever, still he needs help." (*Homily on Hebrews* 10.4).<sup>6</sup> Even the emperor, Julian "the Apostate," in his letter to Arsacius, high priest of Galatia, regarded Christian generosity as a model. A few writers do seem to limit alms to fellow Christians; two examples are Clement of Alexandria and Leo, the fifth-century bishop of Rome. But even they focus more on generosity than on imposing limits.

[4] The more common distinction was between "worthy" and "undeserving" beggars. In third-century Syria, widows and orphans were "worthy" of church support and were expected to pray for their benefactors. Donors, too, needed to be "worthy"; the *Didascalia Apostolorum* condemned donations that had been earned by immoral means lest they taint the praying widow when God failed to honor her prayers but instead avenged the donor for his (or her) sinfulness.<sup>7</sup> Yet even gifts from sinners were accepted. Sometimes this was because their intent and desired relationship with God represented proper repentance. In other cases, Christians eager to channel riches into relief activities were not above tricking unrighteous misers into anticipating "profit" from an investment without quite making it clear that only in heaven would they see their gains.<sup>8</sup> Early Christian texts consistently tried to literally "scare the hell out of" people by citing the threat of Matthew 25:31–46, the parable of the sheep and the goats, that God will justly reward (or condemn) those who do (or do not) give to Christ in the bodies of the poor here and now. The Reformers' understanding of this "Christ-poor," quoted above, reflects a similar literalism unrelated to any positions on the doctrine of salvation by faith. Regardless of one's grounds for salvation, that is, Christ was to be recognized — and touched — in the bodies of those in need.

[5] Early Christians were divided on many details about divestment. Some, like St. Anthony, took literally the Gospel teaching to give everything away and choose voluntary poverty. Others, like Clement of Alexandria, taught that what mattered most was detachment: there was nothing wrong with retaining the wealth and social status that allowed one to maintain one's own household and dependents as long as one's focus and true attachments were centered in Christ and the hope of gaining "true" spiritual wealth.<sup>9</sup> By the fifth century, even monastics usually worked at various tasks to support themselves, often sharing sacrificially with others, including wandering non-monastic beggars. Basil, bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, described below, advanced what was for many a "moderate" patristic advice: that ordinary Christians ought to keep their personal possessions to a bare minimum, always ready to share, but they might also retain power over property and goods in a manner that treated equally the needs of the body and the needs of the soul.

[6] During famine and drought in the 360s, Basil was eager to take advantage of the church's newly acquired political power to show that church-supported care for strangers was good for the city. He established the best-known early Christian poorhouse/hospital (Greek: *ptochotropheion*), spending his wealth to buy up local grain from rich landowners and distribute it to the starving poor.<sup>10</sup> He built an institutional complex at the edge of town that offered medical care, housing, job training, and transportation to the sick and destitute crowding into the region. The poorhouse was so successful that Gregory of Nazianzus called it the "new city." Basil's entire family took part in relief efforts. His siblings Macrina and Peter also distributed grain, and Macrina sought out homeless women to share her ascetic household. Another brother lived in the woods, providing food for some elderly persons. Basil's sermons and letters from this period call for economic justice, fair distribution of goods, and condemn the luxurious greed of the rich. While Basil focused on those we would call the "working poor," Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus offer vivid descriptions of sick and homeless street people, ostracized "lepers" who subsisted in dehumanizing conditions at the edge of civic boundaries.

[7] Most social welfare, by the Cappadocians and others, was in the form of charitable gifts rather than educational opportunity or capacity-building empowerment. Graeco-Roman culture was static, lacking a concept of democratic equity beyond one's fixed social class. Patronage ruled all relationships, including charitable exchange with the poor and hungry. In a world without refrigeration, electricity, antibiotics, or vitamins, food security depended on wealth, position, and relationships, and illness was a constant risk for all. Maternal and child mortality rates were high, and women had to depend on family and patronage structures (including the patronage of bishops, monks, and magistrates) to protect their possessions and their interests. Gift exchange that generated perpetual interdependencies was a logical means of social welfare in such a world. "In addition, Christian alms (Greek *eleemosyne*) was also understood by many as part of mercy (Greek *eleos*)."<sup>11</sup> Fueled by emotive "pity" and "charity," such mercy, then as now, likely often perpetuated patronage at the expense of human dignity for the poor. While early Christian texts often place the poor and needy much closer to God than their rich and snooty philanthropists, the "Christ-poor" still had little power to change their lot in this life beyond practicing what generosity they could with their own limited resources.

[8] Despite the emphasis on patronage, language about justice, equity, and human rights was central to many fourth and fifth-century Christian social welfare texts. This strong focus on fairness rather than feelings is important for the modern reader who wishes to learn from such texts today. The Cappadocians, for example, emphasized the common humanity and equal "rights" (or entitlements) of both poor and rich. Gregory of Nazianzus (*Oration* 14.24–26) exhorts his audience

to imitate God in treating all persons with equity, or equality of rights (*isonomia*). The poor are identified as having equal worth, due the same honor as everyone else. Basil called sharply for debt-forgiveness and an end to the cancer-like growth of usury.

[9] This focus on justice is explicit in early Christian texts in Syriac, where the word for alms is identical to the word for justice. Syriac writers like Aphrahat (fourth century), Rabbula, bishop of Edessa (fifth century), and Jacob of Sarug (sixth century) all appeal to justice (Syriac *zedqto*) as the basis for relieving poverty. This root word has the same parallel meaning in Hebrew and Arabic; in modern Jewish philanthropy, *tzedakah* means both charity/alms and righteousness; and in Arabic *sadaqa*, usually translated almsgiving, is one of the five pillars of Islam. Jacob of Sarug and the Cappadocians went so far as to argue that failure to "do justice" to the poor had global and even environmental consequences that could destroy the earth itself.<sup>12</sup>

[10] Then as now, individual lives were helped one person at a time, but the larger problem of poverty was perpetual. By the sixth century, much social welfare was institutionalized by Christian emperors in addition to individual examples mentioned in passing in monastic and hagiographic texts. We hear, for example, about state- or monastery-sponsored institutions that housed specific types of poor persons: abandoned infants, orphans, the sick, "lepers," monks who had gone insane, and the destitute elderly. Many of these institutions (particularly orphanages) continued in the Greek east up to the Crusaders. Social structures were less stable in those regions affected by the Gothic, Persian, and Islamic invasions of the fifth through seventh centuries, and initiatives often depended on particular bishops or the presence of monastic foundations and private donors. Hospitals continued to be run by monks and bishops and focused medical care on those too poor for private doctors at home.<sup>13</sup> Not all of these models inspire: We know from Gregory the Great's *Epistle* 9.24, for example, that this bishop purchased pagan slaves in 599 for the church at Rome so they could do the dirty work of caring for the church-supported poor.

[11] Early Christian texts on poverty and hunger are well worth reading today, and many are available in English. They offer us voices of our spiritual "kin" from a different time and place who faced many of the same problems that we do. Their responses may be useful as we pray, contemplate need, share with the poor, and "do" the liturgy of service, especially if we draw on such texts with due caution in order to avoid perpetuating their mistakes. We must recognize, for example, the limitations of their framework (patronage, slavery), their failure to empower social change, and their all-male blindness to the effects of poverty as it was (and is) suffered disproportionately by women. We must also avoid treating such sources as if they are a canonical "fix-all" ideal. Like us, their authors argued among themselves, struggled with limited resources, and differed about who was "worthy," how much to give, and what responses worked best. Indeed the variety of their voices can encourage us in our own contemporary efforts at global inter-faith dialogue as it relates to treating the bodies of the poor and needy as global and sacred space.<sup>14</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lee Palmer Wandel, *Always among us: Images of the poor in Zwingli's Zurich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 40 (n.17) [Luther] and 62 [Zwingli].

<sup>2</sup> Oecolampadius, *Always among us*, p. 41. For an English translation of Gregory's *Oration* 14, see Brian E. Daley, SJ, *Gregory of Nazianzus* (NY: Routledge, 2006) 76–97.

<sup>3</sup> Elsie Anne McKee, *John Calvin on the diaconate and liturgical almsgiving* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> All examples are discussed in more detail in Susan R. Holman, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2001), and idem, *God Knows There's Need: Christian Responses to Poverty* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Pontius, "The life and passion of Cyprian, bishop and martyr," trans. Ernest Wallis, *AnteNicene Fathers* series, volume 5, 270–271.

<sup>6</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homily on Hebrews* 10.4 (PG 53.88), trans. Rudolf Brändle, "'This sweetest passage:' Matthew 25:31–46 and assistance to the poor in the homilies of John Chrysostom," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, ed. Susan R. Holman (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2008) 130.

7. Didascalia Apostolorum: The Syriac Version Translated and Accompanied by the Verona Latin Fragments, trans. R. Hugh Connolly (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929) esp.130–141.

8. For example, in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*, the apostle Thomas, ministering in India, promises to build a king a magnificent "mansion" but in fact spends the king's money on perpetual donations to the needy. Enraged when he discovers Thomas's duplicity, the king is prepared to kill him until the king's brother has a near-death experience in which he sees the heavenly mansion for himself.

9. Clement of Alexandria, "The Rich Man's Salvation," trans. G. W. Butterworth (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919); see also Annewies van den Hoek, "Widening the eye of the needle: Wealth and poverty in the works of Clement of Alexandria," in *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society*, pp. 67–75.

10. The most complete primary source for the story of Basil's *ptochotropheion* is Gregory of Nazianzus's *Oration 43*, his funeral oration on Basil, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. 7, 395–422, and in Leo P. McCauley, trans., *Funeral Orations by St. Gregory Nazianzen and St. Ambrose* (Fathers of the Church 22; NY: Fathers of the Church, 1953) 27–99.

11. For an excellent study on the early Christian language of compassion, see Paul M. Blowers, "Pity, empathy, and the tragic spectacle of human suffering: Exploring the emotional culture of compassion in late antique Christianity" [2009 NAPS Presidential Address], *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18/1 (2010) 1–27.

12. The linguistic focus on justice is discussed briefly in *God Knows There's Need* (see esp. 87–90) and more extensively in Susan R. Holman, "Healing the world with righteousness? The language of social justice in early Christian homilies," in *Charity and Giving in Monotheistic Religions*, ed. Miriam Frenkel and Yaacov Lev (Studien zur Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients 22; Berlin and NY: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 89–110.

13. See esp. Robert Doran, trans., *Stewards of the poor: The Man of God, Rabbula, and Hiba in Fifth-Century Edessa* (Cistercian Studies Series; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Studies, 2006).

14. For more on this, see Susan R. Holman, "God and the poor in early Christian thought," in *God in Early Christian Thought: Essays in Memory of Lloyd G. Patterson*, ed. Andrew B. McGowan, Brian E. Daley, SJ, and Timothy J. Gaden (Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae*; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), pp. 297–321.

© June 2010

*Journal of Lutheran Ethics (JLE)*

Volume 10, Issue 6

Susan R. Holman is author of *The Hungry are Dying* (2001) and *God Knows There's Need* (2009), both from Oxford University Press, and editor of *Wealth and Poverty in Early Church and Society* (BakerAcademic, 2008). She currently serves as an academic writer/editor at the François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard School of Public Health in Boston.

This article is available online at: <http://www.elca.biz/What-We-Believe/Social-Issues/Journal-of-Lutheran-Ethics/Issues/June-2010/Patristic-Christian-Views-on-Poverty-and-Hunger.aspx>