

Early Christian Care for the Sick Poor

Select Readings

1. Fabiola's Hospital Foundation in Rome

“...First of all she founded an infirmary (νοσοκομείον) and gathered into it sufferers from the streets, giving their poor bodies worn with sickness and hunger all a nurse's care. Need I describe here the diverse troubles from which human beings suffer, the maimed noses, the lost eyes, the scorched feet, the leprous arms, the swollen bellies, the shrunken thighs, the dropsical legs, and the diseased flesh alive with hungry worms? How often did she carry on her own shoulders poor filthy wretches tortured by epilepsy! How often did she wash away the purulent matter from wounds which others could not even endure to look upon! She gave food with her own hand, and even when a man was but a breathing corpse, she would moisten his lips with drops of water...

... Rome was not large enough for her compassionate kindness. She went from island to island, and travelled round the Etruscan Sea, and through the Volscian province, with its lonely curving bays, where bands of monks have taken up their home, bestowing her bounty either in person or by the agency of holy men of the faith.”

Jerome, *Letter 77.6*, trans. F. A. Wright, *Jerome: Select Letters* (Loeb Classical Library 262; Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1933), 322-325, selections.

2. Basil, on his poor-house (the *Basileias*) in Cappadocia:

“Whom do we wrong when we build hospices for strangers, for those who visit us while on a journey, for those who require some care because of sickness, and when we extend to the latter the necessary comforts, such as nurses, physicians, beasts for travelling and attendants? There must also be occupations to go with these men, both those that are necessary for gaining a livelihood and also such as have been discovered for a decorous manner of living...”

Basil of Caesarea, Ep. 94, trans. Deferrari, *Basil: The Letters*, vol. 2, LCL 215, p. 151

3. Gregory of Nazianzus, on Basil's care for the hungry and sick poor during famine

“There was a famine, the most severe within the memory of man. The city was in distress....Basil ... assembled in one place those afflicted by the famine, including some who had recovered a little from it, men and women, children, old men, the distressed of every age. He collected through contributions all kinds of food helpful for relieving famine. He set before them caldrons of pea soup and our salted meats, the sustenance of the poor. Then, imitating the ministry of Christ...and employing his own servants or, rather, his fellow slaves and co-workers in this labor, he ministered to the bodies and the souls of the needy, combining marks of respect with the necessary refreshment, thus affording them relief in two ways.”

Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 43.34, 35, selections, trans. Leo P. McCauley, *Funeral Orations by Saint Gregory Nazianzen and Saint Ambrose* (Fathers of the Church; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1953, 57-59.

4. Gregory of Nazianzus, on Basil's episcopal poorhouse for the disabled and deformed sick:

“Go forth a little from this city and behold the new city, the storehouse of piety, the common treasury of the wealthy, where superfluous riches, sometimes even necessities, thanks to the exhortations of Basil, are laid up, unexposed to the moths and no source of joy to the thief, escaping the assaults of envy and the corruption of time. ... We no longer have before our eyes the terrible and pitiable spectacle of men who are living corpses, dead in most of their limbs, driven away from their cities and homes, public places, fountains, even from their dearest ones, and more easily recognized by their names than by their bodily features. They no longer appear at our public assemblies or social gatherings as objects, not of pity for their disease, but of loathing, expert in singing piteous songs, if any voice is still left in them. ...

[Basil] did not disdain to honor disease with his lips, that noble man of noble family and dazzling renown, but he greeted the sick like brothers, but not, as one might think, from vainglory....But he set us an example by his own Christian spirit of approaching them and caring for their bodies, a mute but eloquent exhortation. ...[H]e proposed, as a common object of emulation for all leaders of the people, charity and generosity toward the sick. Others had their cooks and rich tables and enchanting refinements of cuisine, and elegant carriages, and soft flowing garments. Basil had his sick, and the dressing of their wounds, and the imitation of Christ, cleansing leprosy not by word but in deed.... he who embraced lepers and descended to such humiliation...”

Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 43.63, 64, selections, trans. Leo P. McCauley, *Funeral Orations by Saint Gregory Nazianzen and Saint Ambrose* (Fathers of the Church; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1953, 80-82).

5. Hospital care under Rabbula, 5th century bishop of Edessa

“Because of the love of the poor which he had in his soul, he worked an excellent change in the hospital of his city. What before had been nominally but not really [a hospital] he deemed truly worthy to be [supported] for the glory of God, and to serve appropriately to honor God. He set apart for the hospital certain estates from the wealth of his church so that, from their harvests, what the hospital expended in order to exist might be provided. An opportunity was provided to many to leave riches and property to the hospital in their wills, so that, from them, a thousand denarii might be the total income for the hospital in one year. Thus, there was relief for the weak and benefits for the healthy through the provision of his word. Who was there from those whose conscience was foul who did not earnestly desire to feed from the variety of meals for the sick provided through the diligence of his decree? It was impossible for someone to have known through [any signs of] negligence that the sick and those smitten with sores had been placed there, because of the care and the cleanliness upon them by his decree. For their beds were pleasant with soft bedding placed upon them; no dirty or vile linen was there, or ever seen upon them. Trustworthy and truly caring deacons were put in charge by him for the relief their ministrations brought and for the provision of what was needed. Along with them were sober brethren full of love who did nothing different for them than what the deacons did.

“He acted in the same manner in the hospital for women, which had not even existed at all. By his decree, one had been quickly constructed out of stones from four temples of idols in his city which had been with authority destroyed at his command. He wisely appointed a trustworthy deaconess with women who were daughters of the covenant, so that they might fulfill modestly and readily their ministry of comfort.

“From the love of God, which blazed and burnt like a fire compassionately for his fellow human beings, he especially manifested his great care upon the poor lepers who dwelt in isolation outside the city, hated and despised. He put in charge of them a steadfast deacon, who dwelt beside them, with trustworthy brethren appointed to minister to them. ...”

“The Heroic Deeds of Mar Rabbula,” trans. Robert Doran, in Doran, *Stewards of the Poor: The Man of God, Rabbula, and Hiba in Fifth-Century Edessa* (Cistercian Studies Series 208; Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2006), pp. 100-101.

6. Why draw on the past for social action in the present?

“Interpreting ancient texts is rather...like conceiving new life, that is, composing new texts in which the interpreter plays the role of an author. Interpretation is part of the movement from generation to generation, part of the process of transmitting tradition from age to age. The element of continuity in this movement is the dream of God for an inclusive community mediated by the Holy Spirit. The struggle to understand texts of the past is a commitment to the realization of the promise, hope, and continuing discovery of what it means to be human.”

Reimund Beiringer, “Texts that Create a Future: The Function of Ancient Texts for Theology Today,” in Johan Leemans, Brian J. Matz, and Johan Verstraeten, eds., *Reading Patristic Texts on Social Ethics: Issues and Challenges for the Twenty-First Century Christian Social Thought* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 29.