

THE IMAGE OF CHRIST IN THE POOR



by Rev. Dr. Emmanuel Clapsis

INTERNATIONAL ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CHARITIES



St. Sophia led an austere life as a mother to orphans and an aide to widows. She once sold her property to distribute the money among the poor and would regularly sacrifice her own needs before allowing a poor person to go empty-handed.

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The early Christians, because of their faith and experience of God's love, were able to perceive one another as brethren. In their view, those on the margins of society — the poor, the widows, the orphans, the strangers — were the scale by which the justice of the whole society was weighed. In the prophetic tradition, when these seemingly less important ones were exploited or forgotten, it was a definite sign that God was forgotten or not worshipped authentically. The prophets consistently maintained that breaking with Yahweh leads to the oppression of the poor and the needy, the orphans and widows, and the strangers and laborers. Israel received the mandate from God: "Therefore I command you, you shall open wide your hands to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land" (Deut. 15:11). And in Lev. 19:1-37, we find the heart of the covenant principle: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Why? Because, "I am the Lord" (Lev. 19:18).

In nothing do we draw
so close to God as in
doing good to man.

— St. John Chrysostom

Our faith calls for an active love towards the poor and the needy (James 2:15-17). The underlying assumption for this active concern is the belief that all people are created in the image of God. In fact, our faith implies that our salvation depends on whether we show love and compassion to those who are suffering. St. Gregory of Nazianzus unequivocally states:

For we are all one in the Lord, rich and poor, bond or free, sound or sick; and one is the Head of all, He from Whom are all things, namely Christ ... We should fix in our minds the thought that the salvation of our bodies and souls depends on this: that we should love and show humanity to these (the suffering poor).¹

¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, (*De Pauperum Amore*). English translation, M.F. Toal, *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1963), vol. 4, p. 56.

In His teaching ministry, Jesus Christ juxtaposed, as it can be found in Matthew 22:39 and Mark 12:31, the demand of loving God with all one's heart (Deut. 6:5) with the command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18). By connecting these two commands, Jesus asks us to understand each in light of the other. This is a consistent trend in the gospels and even St. Paul writes to the Galatians: "Through love be servants of one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'you shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Gal 5:13-14). The ways we love our neighbor reveal the authenticity of our faith in God, in the most concrete terms:

By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? (1 John 3:16-17).

Let us love not in word
or speech but in deed
and in truth.

— 1 John 3:18

The pastoral nature of the church did not allow poverty to be simply an issue of theological speculation, but encouraged the faithful to view it as a call to action. The Fathers exhorted Christians to be compassionate and use their resources as a manifestation of their faith in God. St. Basil asks: "What keeps you from giving now? ... The hungry are dying before your face. The naked are stiff with cold. The men in debt are held by the throat. And you, you put off your alms, till another day?"² With the same sense of urgency, St. Gregory of Nazianzus implored his audience: "Let nothing come between your will and the deed. This alone must suffer not delay: kindness to another person ... a kindness done promptly is a kindness twice done. A favor done in a sour spirit, and because you must, is unlovely and without grace. We should be cheerful, not grieving when we give mercy."³

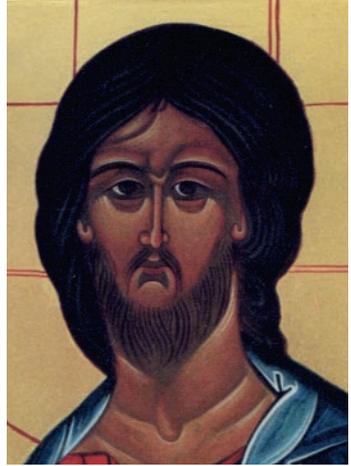
² Basil, *Homilia in illud: Destruam Horrea Mea*. English translation, M.F. Toal, *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1959), vol. 3, p. 331.

³ Gregory of Nazianus, (*De Pauperum Amore*). English translation, M.F. Toal, *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1963), vol. 4, p. 63.

Identification of Christ with the Poor

Christians, based on Matthew 25:31-46, believe that Christ is sacramentally present in the poor and the needy. St. Gregory of Nyssa reminds the rich that they must recognize the true identity of the poor and acknowledge their special dignity and role in the Christian community:

Do not despise these men in their abjection; do not think them of no account. Reflect what they are and you will understand their dignity; they have taken upon them the person of our Savior. For He, the compassionate, has lent them His own person wherewith to abash the unmerciful and the haters of the poor ... The poor are the treasures of the good things that we look for; the keepers of the gates of the Kingdom, opening them to the merciful and shutting them on the harsh and uncharitable.⁴

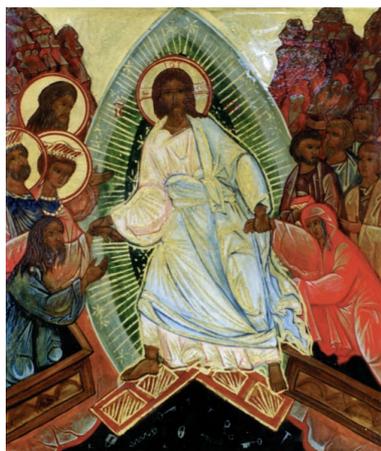


St. John Chrysostom draws a similar conclusion from the identification of Christ with the poor. He writes:

You eat in excess; Christ eats not even what He needs. You eat a variety of cakes; He eats not even a piece of dried bread. You drink fine Thracian wine; but on Him you have not bestowed so much as a cup of cold water. You lie on a soft and embroidered bed; but He is perishing in the cold ... You live in luxury on things that properly belong to Him ... At the moment, you have taken possession of the resources that belong to Christ and you consume them aimlessly. Don't you realize that you are going to be held accountable?⁵

⁴ *Love of the Poor*; Walter Shewring, *Rich and Poor in Christian Tradition* (London, 1948), p. 65.

⁵ *On Matthew: Homily 48:8*



For Chrysostom, the poor become the liturgical images of the most holy elements in all of Christian worship: the altar and the body of Christ. Based on this sacramental identification of Christ with the poor, St. John Chrysostom suggests specific ways to express the recognition that Christ lives and is actively present in the poor and needy people:

Do you really wish to pay homage to Christ's body? Then do not neglect Him when He is naked. At the same time that you honor Him here [in Church] with hangings made of silk, do not ignore Him outside when He perishes from cold and nakedness. For the One who said "This is my body" ... also said "When I was hungry you gave me nothing to eat" ... For is there any point in His table being laden with golden cups while He Himself is perishing from hunger? ... I'm saying all this not to forbid your gifts of munificence, but to admonish you to perform those other duties at the same time, or rather before, you do these. No one was ever condemned for neglecting to be munificent: for the neglect of others hell itself is threatened ... The conclusion is: Don't neglect your brother in his distress while you decorate His house. Your brother is more truly His temple than any Church building.⁶

By this we know love that he laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

— 1 John 3:16

⁶ On Matthew: Homily 50:4

So convinced is St. John of Christ's identity with the poor that he does not hesitate to put words in the mouth of Christ:

It is such a slight thing I beg ... nothing very expensive ... bread, a roof, words of comfort. [If the rewards I promised hold no appeal for you] then show at least a natural compassion when you see me naked, and remember the nakedness I endured for you on the cross ... I fasted for you then, and I suffer hunger for you now; I was thirsty when I hung on the cross, and I thirst still in the poor, in both ways to draw you to myself and to make you humane for your own salvation.⁷

Our unity and communion with God is primarily an act of faith realized by the work of God's Spirit. This communion is sustained, nourished, and actualized in history by three distinct but equally important and inseparable sacramental ways: hearing and proclaiming God's Word; the celebration of the Holy Eucharist; and a life of active compassion and care towards the poor and the needy. These three ways of being in communion with God shape the life of the Orthodox Christian Church. Whenever one of these constitutive aspects of the life of the Church is not adequately acknowledged and emphasized in its importance, the life and the witness of the Christian Church suffers.



During the Lenten season, God calls each of us to act with greater sensitivity to our suffering brethren. Through support of IOCC we can demonstrate, in a meaningful and active way, our concern for the needy thus fulfilling the biblical and patristic call to brotherhood.

⁷ Quoted by W. J. Burghardt, "The Body of Christ: Patristic Insights," in R. S. Pelton, ed., *The Church as the Body of Christ* (South Bend, Ind., 1963), p. 97.

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