

ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN ORTHODOX DIAKONIA: CHRISTIAN ORTHODOX PHILANTHROPY IN CHURCH HISTORY

By Demetrios J. Constantelos

My paper is divided in three parts. First, I discuss the background and the origins of diakonia. Second, I relate the evidence of the practice of philanthropy in the early church and the Church of the Byzantine centuries. Third, I raise the question whether contemporary Orthodoxy is interested and involved with philanthropy in diakonia and I provide some evidence of the thought and practice of several autocephalous churches and church organizations today.

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For an understanding of the origins of Christian Orthodox diakonia and philanthropy in Church history, an examination of the theological and ecclesiastical bases, the study of biblical teachings, Christian doctrine and also cultural history are imperative.

The key terms before us are diakonia and philanthropia, both rooted in ancient Greek thought and practice. In the context of Christian Church history, we need to study theological, Christological, anthropological, soteriological and eschatological teachings and motives. Every one of these foundations needs to be studied in the framework of the religious, cultural and intellectual background of early Christianity. The study of philanthropy in Church history cannot be divorced from the study of the totality of history, vertically and horizontally speaking, because Christianity is a historical religion, conditioned and influenced by the religious, philosophical and cultural circumstances and

practices that surrounded its genesis and growth. Thus the need for a review of the origins, meaning and application of the terms under consideration.

Diakonia and philanthropy were adopted by the early Christian Community from the language, thought, and experience of ancient Hellenism. The term diakonia was used to mean philanthropic care and practice, attendance on a duty of ministration, as we see it in the writings of Thucydides, Plato, Demosthenes, Aischines and others.¹ Philanthropy, from the Greek philanthropia-that is philein ton anthropon, to love the human person began as a theocentric concept and it was first used by the tragedian Aeschylus,² as he describes altruistic, even sacrificial love for mankind, exemplified by the sacrifice offered by the demi-god Prometheus on behalf of man. Philanthropia became synonymous to agape, a term first used by Homer.

Agape, which received such a prominent place in Christian theology, derives from the verb agapao, and agapazo, and it was used by Homer to express love, to receive lovingly, to espouse the cause of a principle, to welcome someone affectionately.³ As we will point out later in our talk, agape and philanthropia are used like refrains in the original liturgical and prayer books of the Orthodox Church. As theological principles both served as springboards for the Church's philanthropic diakonia.

I am making these etymological observations because the Orthodox Christian conception of philanthropy in diakonia is closer to its cultural and intellectual background than to any other tradition. This should not surprise us. Christianity was born in Hellenistic Judaism but it was propagated, grew and blossomed in the Greek speaking and thinking world. For at least four hundred years the Christian movement was a Greek

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enterprise in both the Greek speaking East and the Latin speaking West of the Roman Empire. As in the patristic tradition, likewise in much of modern biblical scholarship, Christianity is perceived as “fulfillment” rather than as total replacement of the mind and experience of the ancient world. “Fulfillment” of Jewish messianic expectations and “fulfillment” of the Hellenic quest for the epiphany of the Logos, or the “unknown God.” The bibliography on the relations of early Christianity with Greek culture is immense,⁴ and is more and more acknowledged the close relationship between the two Biblical and early Christianity scholars such as Martin Hengel, S. Lieberman, E. M. Meyers, J. F. Strange, and J. N. Sevenster and several more.⁵ Christianity’s biblical ethical teachings and the formulation of its theology were enriched with the language, philosophical beliefs, religious experiences and moral practices of the ancient Greek thought-world. It is interesting to note that many of the biblical pericopes read in Orthodox Christian vespers are from books of the Old Testament written during the Hellenistic centuries, such as the books of Sophia of Solomon and Sophia Sirach. The New Testament books, too, are products of the same period.

Here are some illustrations of how the meaning of Greek rather than Hebrew terminology was adopted by the Church to explain and promote its philanthropic diakonia. As we observed above, while diakonia in Greek thought meant philanthropic care and service to any one in need, in the Hebrew Bible philanthropy simply means service to people of the same race and faith.⁶ Philanthropia in ancient Greek literature carries several meanings, but its original means sacrificial love rather than simply

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kindness, benevolence toward people of the same nation as we find it in later Hebrew literature. In the book of Deuteronomy God is called great, mighty and also jealous and terrible. God is also merciful and gracious and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, but only to his chosen people. In contrast, God in Greek literature {Aeschylus, Plato, Plutarch} is called philanthropos, eleemon, euergetes-philanthropos not only toward the Greeks but also toward any one.⁷ These epithets to address God are used extensively by the hymnology and prayer life of the Orthodox Church.⁸

The Hebrew root ahab refers primarily to love between man and woman, but in its theological usage, it denotes God's love for the people of Israel and Israel's love for God and fellow Israelites. As an applied virtue, philanthropy is expected of every one of Israel's tribe, for whoever gives charity will be blessed by the Lord. In the Old Testament alms giving of a Jew to a fellow poor Jew was considered essential {Dt.15:7-10}. Notwithstanding occasional references to liberality toward the Gentiles, as in the Babylonian Talmud⁹, for many centuries in Jewish tradition the object of philanthropy was a fellow Jew. In the Pentateuch alms giving is recommended toward "the descendants of the seed of Abraham... of pure Israelite decent." "Hard-heartedness is only found among the gentiles," as it is said "they are cruel and have no compassion" in the words of Maimonides¹⁰ who cites several passages from the Hebrew Bible in support of his views, such as Deut. 14:1, Deut. 15:3, Deut. 15:11, Jer. 6:23. The behavior of the Israelite toward the Gentile is different because Israelites are "the children of the Lord". Thus Israelites must be generous to fellow Israelites.

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In ancient Greek society *agape*, *philanthropia*, *eleos*, and *philoxenia* were imperative social virtues manifested through benevolent deeds on behalf of those in need. In a variety of forms these ethical principles are present in the earliest Greek poetry, drama, and philosophy. Compassion for the afflicted and loving hospitality were greatly emphasized in Mycenaean and archaic Greek society (1400-700 BCE). The care of strangers and suppliants was an ethical imperative because such people had been placed under the direct aegis of the divinity. The chief divinity “*ypsistos theos*”, Zeus, became known as *Xenios*, “protector of strangers”. “Receive strangers regardless of who they may be”; “that man is sacred who welcomes a wayfaring stranger”, we read in the *Odyssey*.¹¹

It was believed in ancient Greek society that when a poor person was expelled from the table of the rich or even rudely handled, the wrath of the Furies would visit and punish the guilty person because “gods and Furies exist for suppliants”. To be merciful and to act out of love were common ethical admonitions. Hesiod (c. 700 BCE) was even more pronounced in his concern for the poor: though he lauded hard work and stressed moderation in the practice of charity, he still advocated philanthropy, righteous deeds, and reverence for the stranger and the poor. Hesiod writes in offering hospitality one should “be neither too lavish nor too parsimonious” and that one should not “ridicule anyone for his poverty, which eats out the heart of the poor.”¹² In the classical Greek city-states, whether Athens, Thebes, or remote Acragas, philanthropy in the sense of selfless love, almsgiving, pity, and concern for the orphan, the widow, and the elderly was widely and generously practiced.

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In later centuries, under the influence of the great philosophers Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Zeno and other Stoics, philanthropy was perceived as a duty toward all “broken and destitute humanity wherever found”. It was a normal and religious obligation, a social and economic need. The pre-Socratic philosophers had held that justice and equality were principles of divine origin, as Pythagoras had taught.¹³ He emphasized equality and harmony in social relationships. “All human laws are nourished by one, which is divine,” writes Heraclitos.¹⁴ There are no political or economic laws, only moral laws.

For the great thinkers of the fifth and the fourth century BC, doing good for the sake of goodness was the only moral ground for philanthropy. A cardinal principle of Greek religion and social thought was that the divinity is good and the cause of good. Plato writes that for “the cause of evil we must look in other things and not in God.”¹⁵ Neither God nor man can be really good without in some way communicating his goodness to others. Aristotle adds, “If all men vied with each other in moral nobility and strove to perform the noblest deeds, the common welfare would be fully realized, while individuals also could enjoy the greatest of goods, inasmuch as a virtue is the greatest good.” Thus “the conferring of a benefit where a return is not sought is morally acceptable, and the value of the gift is not to be judged by its intrinsic worth but by the spirit of the giver.” Aristotle insisted on the idea of “the cheerful giver.”¹⁶ Being good meant doing good.

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Poverty should not be tolerated, for it leads to the erosion of a democratic state and constitutes the basis of social revolts, Aristotle writes.¹⁷ Professional beggars were banned by Homeric society but also by Solon's and Plato's Athens as well as by Sparta. Nevertheless, poverty was accepted as a fact of life, and charity a means for its relief. The Greeks invoked curses upon men "who failed to provide water for the thirsty, fire for anyone in need of it, ... [hospitality, or] directions for a lost stranger."

It was in the light of this ethical and intellectual background of pre-Christian Hellenism that early Christian writers, apologists and Church Fathers, such as Justin the philosopher and martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Basil of Caesarea, Synesios of Cyrene, and Socrates Scholastikos, not only did not reject but adopted and encouraged the study of the ancient Greek ethical and intellectual principles as propaedeutic to Christianity. It is for this reason, that, before we study the social ethos of Christianity, we need to go back and study its historical evolution and go beyond hypothesis to assembled evidence. The political and ethical principles of ancient Hellenism are a common heritage. We must be reminded of this background, lest we, as Christians, consider philanthropy a monopoly of Christianity, and exclusively a product of biblical teachings. As we know, history is a continuum and in its evolutionary process it carries along much of what can be traced to remote antiquity. "The only thing new in history is the history we do not know" as President Harry S. Truman used to say.

Without sound historical study of language, philosophical perceptions and cultural phenomena Christian theology leads to a ghetto mentality, denominational and sectarian. Orthodox Catholic Christianity in particular cannot ignore its interrelationship with the ideals of Classical Hellenism. Every aspect of Orthodoxy's thought and life bears

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witness to its relationship with Hellenism. Orthodoxy has done well to take historical evolution and tradition seriously, for we know that without a knowledge of the postclassical evolution of Hellenic culture, the rise of Christianity as an ecumenical religion would have been impossible.¹⁸

Here are some illustrations of how early Christians viewed the importance of Hellenism as propaidea to Christianity. In his *First Apology*, addressed to the Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius and his adopted son, Marcus Aurelius, Justin the philosopher and Christian martyr (ca. 110-165) explained:

Christ is the Logos of whom every race of man were partakers and “those who lived with the Logos are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists, as among the Greeks, Socrates and HeraclettosHeraclettus, and men like them.”¹⁹

Justin was convinced of the divine origin and character of all truth and the righteousness of all people who loved and sought to live in agreement with it. He found the teachings of Plato, almost identical with the truth in the Bible. In his second *Apology*, ch. 13, Justin goes even further by saying:

I confess that I both boast and with all my strength I strive to be a Christian, not because the teachings of Plato differ from those of Christ, but because they are not in all respects similar... For each man spoke well in proportion to the share he had of spermatik Logos... Whatever has been well said among all men belongs to us Christians.²⁰

Justin calls philosophers “holy men” (*hosioi*) and philosophy a great possession.

He speaks as a Greek philosopher who at the same time loves to speak of his Christian faith. He implies that since all thinking and wise people of the pre-Christian era shared in the generative Logos (*spermatikos logos*), all possessed divine truths. But absolute truth

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was revealed by the Logos of God (John 1:1), who became human that the human might be elevated to Divinity.²¹

The importance of Greek philosophy as a *prodromos* (forerunner) to Christ was beautifully developed a few years later by Clement of Alexandria (153-217). He writes that before the coming of Christ “philosophy was necessary to the Greeks for righteousness,” and it was given to them by God, “for God is the cause of all good things.” He adds that “philosophy was given to the Greeks directly and primarily, until the Lord shall call the Greeks.” The “Hellenic mind” and “Hebrew law” became schoolmasters, paving the way for the believer “who is perfected in Christ.”²² In addition to Justin and Clement, Origen of Alexandria shared many beliefs with the Greek philosophers. For Origen, biblical teachings and philosophical speculations were not antithetical. He did not reject profane wisdom, because he viewed God as its source. Greek philosophy served the same purpose that prophecy had played in ancient Israel.²³ Both divine (revealed) and human (acquired through observation, questioning and speculation) truths are God’s gifts. There is a synergy between Divinity and humanity, two sources in cooperation for the propagation of truth. By the fourth century, Jesus the Christ had been received as the point of convergence between the Jewish Messiah and the Greek Logos.

The later Greek fathers responded to religious issues of the day but they also developed a theology which conceived of human history as destined for eternal communication with God, achieved through diverse ways and through the course of time. They sought God in all civilizations and in all things. Thus God’s self-revelation must be

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sought not only in the Biblical world but in all the “nations,” the *oecumene* as well. They realized that for Greek philosophy, human existence is fundamentally spiritual existence. The theology of the pre-Socratic philosophers, such as that of Thales, the spiritual anthropology of Socrates and the metaphysical philosophico-theological quest of Plato, the ethical imperatives of the Stoics and other relevant teachings of Greek philosophers, historians, and poets, offered possibilities for salvation outside of Old Testament claims.²⁴ In the writings of Greek apologists and Church Fathers we discern a fruitful tension between continuity and discontinuity through the passage of time, between natural revelation and biblical theology. Christian revelation was a reality for them, but equally real was their belief that the God of the Scriptures was a universal God, disclaiming the uniqueness of the revelation contained in the Hebrew Bible. Some major fathers contributed to a synthesis. In this sense the fathers were able to achieve a healthy syncretism between Christian faith and Greek thought. They were never seriously concerned with the relatively circumscribed issue of reconciling faith and reasoning and found no antinomy between Christian faith and classical culture. They viewed both as interrelated entities, each with its own spiritual and intellectual vision.²⁵

Influential Greek fathers and ecclesiastical writers, including hagiologists, had been nurtured in an intellectual climate that had respect for both Christian faith and Greek philosophy. Revealed truth in Scripture, and revealed truth through human *logos*, were perceived as two interrelated principles and God-given gifts to humankind. It is for this reason that they relied on Scriptural passages and Greek philosophical proof texts. St.

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Basil urged young students to study Homer because Homer's epics are full of ethical instructions that lead to the truth and virtue.

Following the example of Basil and other Cappadocians, Greek Christianity of the Byzantine and post-Byzantine centuries never subscribed to the notion that whatever is Greek in Christianity is a corruption of pure revealed biblical truth. They saw a wider preparation for the invasion of history by God's incarnate Logos than the preparation through the prophets of ancient Israel. Biblical and patristic instruction and ancient Greek thought were integrated into a system of belief, ethos, and customs which determined its continuum throughout the Byzantine millennium. They spoke the language of Plato and cited Greek poets and philosophers and were at home among Greek ideas, rhetoric, and ethics; it was their belief that Greek philosophy was the instrument of God for an ecumenical appeal of Christianity. The ancient Church adopted classical culture as a new spiritual force uniting the Greek and Roman world with the religious impulse of the Hebrew world. As a Ukrainian-American leading Byzantine scholar has put it: "Hellenism vanquished by Christianity conquered its victor in turn."²⁶

In summary, let me turn to the views of Fr. John Meyendorff who writes:

"...it is the adoption of the Greek language and the use of cultural and philosophical features borrowed from Hellenism which really witnessed to a 'Catholic' understanding of the church...the Christian Gospel had to be proclaimed in a world which spoke and thought in Greek. To do so was not a betrayal of the scripture... but a direct missionary task which was begun by the first generations of Christians and fulfilled by those whom we call 'the fathers'."²⁷

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Let me emphasize that the Greek in Christianity is not ethnic; it only reflects the fundamental link between Hellenism and Christianity. In the last analysis Greek is to Christianity what Hebrew is to Judaism and Arabic to Islam.

What I have said thus far is meant to make us cautious and help us avoid the claims that the ancient world did not know or practice love. But while we cannot deny that philanthropic diakonia was not absent from the ancient Hellenic and the non-Christian world, when the fathers of the Church speak about Diakonia and Philanthropy they usually turn to the writings of the Scriptures and the early Christian literature.

In the language of the New Testament, philanthropia was introduced as a theocentric concept, synonymous with the meaning of agape. “The goodness and philanthropia of God our Savior became manifest” in the incarnation of the Logos writes St. Paul (Tit 3:4-7). Why? Because “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jo. 3:16)

Philanthropia in diakonia, love in practice, became a mark of distinction for the early Christian community. In contrast to the non-Christian world, Christianity removed boundaries and broke down racial and ethnic fences, proclaiming that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” but all are one in Christ Jesus (*Gal.* 3:38). In its practical application, philanthropy went beyond Jews, Greeks and Romans. It stressed that “love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love” (1 *Jn.* 4:7-8). God’s love requires that men love one another (1 *Jn.* 4:11). There is no better account of the nature and the fruits of Christian charity than the thirteenth chapter of

Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*. Agape is defined as the love of God expressed through the God-made-man event in Christ and as man's love of neighbor, the solvent of hatred of the enemy.

The philanthropic diakonia of the Church in history was greatly influenced by the sacrificial love of Christ (Jo. 3:16) but also his teaching as we read it in Matthew 25:31-46:

Come, o blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you received me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you visited me"... Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me"

I do not know a better definition of philanthropia in early Christian literature than the one that appears in the Pseudo-Clementine homilies, whose authorship is attributed to the third century of our era. We read there:

"The greatness of philanthropia lies in the fact that it means love (storgé) toward any one, whatever one may be as a person, including physical appearance...philanthropia loves and benefits every person because every person is a human being (anthropos) apart from its personal beliefs...the philanthropic person does good even to one's enemies...every person is neighbor to every person and not merely to this or that person. For the good and the bad, the friend and the enemy, are alike human beings. It behooves therefore, the person who practices philanthropy to be an imitator of God, doing good to the righteous and the un-righteous, as God Himself graciously gives His sun and His heavens to all in the present world."²⁸

This passage will find an echo in John Chrysostom's homily on the resurrection of Lazarus and on wealth. John writes:

"I have no contempt for any person because every person as a creature of God is worthy of attention, even though one may be a slave or worthless. I am not looking for a social standing but for virtue. I do not face a master or a slave but a

28

human person...It is for every human being that the heavens are open, the sun shines, the moon rises, the air fills every thing, the springs provide water , the seas are open up in vastness, it is for the human being that the Son of God became human. My Lord offered His life for the human being, who am I to have contempt for any human person? How can I be forgiven?"²⁹

On the basis of this and other biblical teachings, the Christian Church developed a moral theology which guided it in her philanthropic diakonia throughout the Byzantine and post-Byzantine centuries. During the first three centuries the philanthropic diakonia of the Church was limited to distribution of goods to the poor, and care for the orphan, the widows and the elderly. Alms giving was an expected duty of every believer.

The devotion of the early post-apostolic Church to philanthropic diakonia is attested by several sources, Christian and non-Christian alike. The principles of philanthropy and social work were highly emphasized by the Didache or the Instruction of the Twelve Apostles where we read:

“Since we have the Lord Jesus Christ as our teacher, we ought to follow his teachings. He rejected comfort, wealth, power, glory, and out of obedience to the Father and his philanthopia for us, he suffered persecution, ridicule and ultimately crucifixion on our behalf.”³⁰

Thus care for orphans and widows, shelter for the strangers and travelers, bread for the hungry and drink for the thirsty, cloths for the naked and visits to the sick, help to prisoners and daily alms giving were highly recommended not only by the Didache, but also by Clement of Rome, Ignatios of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna, Tertullian of Carthage and others who took seriously the admonitions of Christ as cited above.³¹

It was after the fourth century, when the persecution under Diocletian ceased and the Roman Empire adjusted to the realities of Christianity's popularity but also the

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Church's adjustment to the secular world, that Christian philanthropy was organized. It was after Constantine's reign that philanthropy became institutionalized. The Church either built or was charged with the supervision of hospitals, orphanages, gerokomeia, ptocheia, xenotapheia, reformatory institutions and other social welfare services.

Philanthropic diakonia was no longer alms-giving from person to person, but also services through philanthropic establishments. Patristic sources indicate that Christians were not concerned with what non-Christians thought of them. "What counts is not the power of persuasion to attract non-believers but the inherent greatness of Christianity, which cannot fail to make an impression on others."³² They believed that Christianity wins more adherents by the philanthropic life of the faithful than by a discussion of its merits. It was the philanthropic activity of the Church that attracted many to its ranks. It impressed even its enemies, such as Lucian, Galen and Emperor Julian. In his efforts to revive ancient beliefs and practices, Julian wrote letters to pagan priests urging them to imitate Christian priests in the practice of philanthropy. "The virtue they practice was ours but it has been taken away and put into practice by the impious Galeleans," Julian wrote to Arsakios, the chief priest of the pagan religion.³³

My purpose here is not to recount what I have written in two books on philanthropy and philanthropic institutions in the Byzantine Empire.³⁴ But to emphasize that one of the best aspects of Byzantine civilization was the philanthropic diakonia of the Church, the imperial court, wealthy individuals, but also monastic communities.

Orthodox theology did not divorce faith and spiritual life from involvement with social

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issues and problems. Basil the Great, the son of a wealthy family, excellently trained in the Greek classics, became a monk and then an archbishop. His ministry was marked by philanthropy, setting the example as the founder of a complex of social welfare institutions – a hospital, a leprosarium, an orphanage.

Basil, his friend Gregory the theologian and others believed that “nothing makes man liken himself to God more than “to efpioen” – in doing good; a principle that echoes the ancient Greek admonition which emphasized that “to give aid to all in need...through your own generosity, is to achieve immortality.”³⁵

In the course of time, the Church developed a theology of philanthropy on the basis of its ecclesiology, Christology and eschatology. The ecclesiological basis for philanthropy in diakonia was the belief that the Church was the Christ perpetuated unto the ages; that it is a community whose task is to rebuild society on new foundations. The liturgies and sacramental services, patristic writings and hagiology expressed the belief that Christians are members of a “holy nation”, “a kingdom of God” on earth. It was necessary for the “holy nation” to adopt, consecrate, get involved and administer the public services.

Perhaps no better person exemplified in theory and in practice the philanthropic spirit of the Church than Saint Basil of Caesarea. In a profound and moving prayer, incorporated in the liturgy that bears his name, Basil called upon God to remember all officials and authorities; to nurture the infants and educate the youth; to support the elderly and comfort the fainthearted;

...liberate those who are troubled by illnesses; sail with those at sea; accompany the wayfarers; plead for the widow; defend the orphans, free the captives; heal the afflicted. O God, look after those who are on trial, or condemned to the mines, or

35

to exile and bitter slavery, or in any way hard pressed, in want, in extremity and all who plead for your boundless compassion. Remember O Lord those who love us as well as those who hate us ... for you, O Lord, are the help of the helpless, the hope of the hopeless, rescuer of the tempest-tossed, safe haven for sailors, healer of the sick. Be all things to all people, for you know each of us and what we would ask, our homes, our needs.³⁶

The Church, in the Byzantine era, including its monastic communities often provided the essentials of social security for a large segment of the population of the Empire throughout its existence. As already indicated, it took under its aegis orphans, widows, the old and the disabled, the stranger and the unemployed; it saw to the release of prisoners of war and of those unjustly detained. In time of pestilences, earthquakes and other natural catastrophes the Church played a major role looking after the needs of all. In addition to Basil, the father of institutionalized philanthropy, Gregory the Theologian, John Chrysostom, Attikos of Constantinople, John the Eleemosynary of Alexandria, Theolyptos of Philadelphia, Athanasios of Constantinople are brilliant examples of the Church's social teachings and service.

Let me illustrate what I am saying with reference to the attitude of less known churchmen. When Byzantine emperors placed the courts under the supervision of bishops, it was because many bishops had proved themselves as men of genuine integrity with the ability to administer justice to Christians and non-Christians alike. The model bishop personified love, justice and was generous in charities, forgiving, with compassion toward all, able to change the morals of his flock and to civilize its members. Bishop Timotheos, assigned to the diocese of Proikonnesos, many of whose people were engaged

36

in piracy, and where there was only a modicum of civilization, through love and persistence succeeded in changing the ways of his people.³⁷

More prominent than Timotheos but less well known than Basil and Chrysostom was the fifth-century patriarch Attikos. Under his leadership the Church of the capital extended its philanthropic programs to the poor of other ecclesiastical jurisdictions. The Church historian Socrates relates that Attikos “was so liberal that he not only provided for the poor of his own parishes, but transmitted contributions to supply the needs and promote the comfort of the indigent in the neighboring cities also.” On one occasion he sent to Kalliopios, a presbyter of the church in Nicaea, three hundred pieces of gold (nomismata) in order to assist him in his work among the poor.

The following letter is an interesting source of information about the poor in Nicaea and the Church’s response to poverty. Attikos wrote to Kalliopios:

I have been informed that there are in your city ten thousand needy persons whose condition demands the compassion of the pious. And I say ten thousand, designating their multitude rather than using the number precisely. Since I have received a sum of money from God who with a bountiful hand is eager to supply faithful stewards, take, my friend, these three hundred pieces of gold and dispose of them as you may think fit. It will be your care, I doubt not, to distribute to those who are ashamed to beg, and not to those who through life have sought to feed themselves at the expenses of others. In bestowing these alms make no distinction on religious grounds, but feed the hungry whether they agree with us in sentiment, or not.³⁸

As the example of Attikos indicates, Churchmen were careful not to support professional beggars and those who refused to work. A second example is the deaconess Olympias, a very generous woman but also careless in her generosity. John Chrysostom wrote a letter advising her to use more discrimination in her contributions:

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I applaud your intentions; but would have you know that those who aspire to the perfection of virtue according to God, ought to distribute their wealth with economy.... You ought, therefore, to regard your wealth as belonging to your Master, and to remember that you have to account for its distribution. If you will be persuaded by me, you will in the future regulate your donations according to the wants of those who solicit relief. You will thus be enabled to extend the sphere of your benevolence.³⁹

Nikarete, another of Chrysostom's disciples, offered both money and personal services to the sick and the poor. She came from a noble family but preferred to live by serving her fellow human beings. Her contemporary historian Sozomenos relates that Nikarete "contrived to supply all the wants of her household and to contribute largely to others. Since she possessed a humane spirit, she also prepared a variety of remedies for the needs of the sick poor, and she frequently succeeded in curing patients who had delivered no benefit from the skill of the customary physicians."⁴⁰

Concern for the poor was expected of all clergymen and was viewed as a prerequisite for ordination. When there was an Episcopal vacancy, laymen searched for candidates renowned for their philanthropies. For example, after the death of Patriarch Attikos there was a question as to his successor over three qualified presbyters—Philip, Proklos, and Sisinnios. The historian Socrates relates that "all of the laity were warmly attached to Sisinnios because he was famous for his piety and especially because he was diligent in the care of the poor even beyond his power." Sisinnios was elected patriarch and even though he died in office only two years later, "for his temperance, integrity of life, and concern for the poor, he was deservedly eminent."⁴¹

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Another example is Theodoretos born in a family of rank and affluence. When his parents died they left him in possession of a large inheritance, which he distributed to philanthropic causes. He turned his estates over to churches and other institutions, giving up his social rank and his honors. For several years he lived like a monk, until he was almost forced to accept ordination and eventually became the bishop of Cyrrhus. During his tenure this small city became renowned as a center of spirituality, beauty and prosperity. He beautified the city, built an aqueduct and a canal to supply the town with water, repaired the baths, erected public galleries, and built two bridges. When Theodoretos assumed his Episcopal duties, Cyrrhus was an insignificant town, isolated, ugly, and torn by sects, disturbances, and strange forms of Christianity. It was reputed to be a nest of robbers. Thus few professional men were found there. Theodoretos induced men of various skills and arts, such as architects, masons, carpenters, engineers, etc, and skillful physicians to take residence there. One physician, ordained presbyter, was “distinguished not only by his priestly rank, but also by his wise practice in medicine.” Physician-priests who exercised both the priestly vocation and the medical profession continued the work of the class of “silverless” martyrs, that is, physicians like Kosmas and Damianos who took no fees for their medical services, on condition that their non-Christian patients would turn to Christ. Theodoretos described himself as a person engaged “in the hurry of a thousand occupations, both in the city and in the country, both military and civil, both ecclesiastical and secular.”⁴²

To be sure the persons mentioned above were not ordinary people but they set an example and we learn much of that was valued by contemporaries from the actions attributed to those people.

42

In the two books I mentioned before, we have identified nearly one hundred philanthropic institutions in major cities of the Empire from 330 to 1453 sponsored either churchmen like Theodoretos, or by emperors and lay people. In addition to institutional evidence we provide their theological explanations including eschatological motives.⁴³

Even in the most critical period in the history of the Church in the Greek middle ages, the Church stood by its principles. Poverty, civil wars, constant attacks from the Ottoman Turks, confusion as a result of the council in Florence made life in Constantinople, in Thessaloniki and other Greek cities and towns precarious and uncertain. Nevertheless, there were churchmen who stood by the needs of the common folk. In a beautiful admonition to students and young people Gennadios Scholarios urged them to seek what is best in life, “to do without hatred and to think of education as therapeutic. Think of education as more important than money. Offer hospitality to strangers in order that you may not become a stranger to God. Give gladly bread to those who are hungry,” and so on.⁴⁴

The philanthropic diakonia of the Orthodox Church during the Byzantine era became a prototype for the western Church and influenced the Islamic world after the seventh century.⁴⁵ More to the point, however, is that philanthropy of the Orthodox Church of Byzantium became a subject of inspiration for the development of a social consciousness and philanthropic diakonia of the nations converted to Christianity by its missionaries.

The Russian Primary Chronicle relates that the first thing that Vladimir, the prince of the Rus, did when he converted to Christianity was not only a personal reform but also

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the founding of philanthropic institutions for his people. The poor and the weak, the sick and people of whatever need received distributions and protection.⁴⁶ These benevolent acts are attributed to Vladimir personally rather than to the Church. As in the case of Vladimir, whose life and policies after his baptism reminds us of Constantine and his reign, the early Russian Church and the Church in the Slavic nations used the Church of Constantinople as the prototype in terms of theology, polity and practice.

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The question remains whether the Orthodox Churches are involved today in philanthropic diakonia. Do they possess a social consciousness that makes them go beyond daily alms-giving and holiday offerings?

Notwithstanding the skepticism of some and the accusations of others misunderstandings of the past that the Orthodox are interested only in mysticism and the hereafter, which survive even today statistics, facts and events in several countries and provinces of the world indicate that there is an awakening of the social obligations of the Orthodox to the needs of the world. In addition to “the diakonia of logos” as St. Paul would say, the Church continues the “diakonia of praxis,” of philanthropy. The examples are many and encouraging, but here we will limit our observations on the basis of the life of several Orthodox Churches around the world. Following the collapse of Communism, which had restricted the life of the Church to liturgical services, the churches of Eastern Europe are responding in various ways to social needs and issues of today’s world.

The revival of the Orthodox in Albania is no less than a miracle. Following the collapse of communism and the years of martyrdom of Christians there, the Church today

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has rebuilt houses of worship, or built new ones; a Seminary has been founded, younger and better educated priests have taken over and many more parishes have been organized. More to the point of philanthropy, following the economic crises of 1997 which wiped out the savings of many families, it was the Church that stepped in and offered financial aid to more than 25,000 people. In 1999, during the attacks on Yugoslavia, the Church worked to assist some 32,000 refugees who entered Albania regardless of their religious background. Seminary students stopped classes temporarily in order to offer their services to the needy.⁴⁷

Since 1997 the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria has displayed a new vigor and has focused on new possibilities. It has undertaken to develop its diakonia in various areas of public life, including chaplaincies in prisons and hospitals. Its large program of social action is in its infancy. I have no statistics to support general statements with specific illustrations.⁴⁸

The beautiful and most informative book “He Martyria tēs agapes” (The Witness of Love) published in Athens in 2001 includes text and illustrations about the philanthropic and social work of the Orthodox Church of Greece. It opens with a message by Archbishop Christodoulos, who sets the tone of both the theory and practice of philanthropy. He answered the question why the poor and needy, the sick and lonely, the unemployed and homeless is our brother.⁴⁹

The Church of Greece supports several philanthropic establishments, including hospitals, hospices, boarding homes for poor students, psychiatric clinics etc. But its philanthropic diakonia goes beyond the borders of Greece. Much help had been sent to

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other nations for the help of victims of famine, earthquakes, floods, and civil wars. With all due respect to every one of the Orthodox Churches, because of its history, experience and economic means, the philanthropic diakonia of the Church in Greece can serve as a model for others to follow.⁵⁰

From the Arab raids in the seventh through the ninth centuries to the Turkish invasion in 1974, the Orthodox Church of Cyprus has suffered persecutions, trials and tribulations. Whether under Arab, Frankish, Venetian, Ottoman Turkish, or British occupation the Church faced oppression, restrictive laws which prevented the Church from conducting freely its social functions. Nevertheless, under the difficult political circumstances that the island found itself in, it was the Church that stood by to aid the psychological and material needs of the poor, the sick and the weak.

Following the Turkish invasion of 1974, thousands of refugees found support and protection from the Church. In times of crises, it was the Church that stood as a mother by the side of her children. I have no specific statistics indicating the philanthropic diakonia in terms of daily distribution of goods or through the services of philanthropic institutions, but I can repeat that in time of crisis, the Church of Cyprus has served as a haven for the needy, the sick and the refugees.⁵¹

For several years the Orthodox Church in Romania suffered martyrdom and remained submissive to a dictatorial regime of the state. Several members of the clergy suffered persecution because they spoke out against the regime, which had demolished several houses of worship and interfered in church affairs. One of the encouraging developments in the Orthodox Church in Romania is the contribution of its theologians

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toward a better understanding of the Church as servant. The work of Bishop Antonie Plamadeala has contributed to the rediscovery of the Church's moral and social theology and to more philanthropic activities of the Romanian Orthodox Church. In his book The Servant Church bishop Antonie develops systematically the theme that the Church needs to imitate her master who became human "not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).⁵²

It was not too long ago when Russian scholars, theologians and historians alike, put the blame on Byzantium for the social evils in pre-Revolutionary Russia. The lack of a social consciousness of the Russian Orthodox Church was attributed to the social ethos it inherited from the Greek Church.⁵³ Times have changed. Today we know much more about the practical aspects of the Byzantine Church but also the attitude of the Russian Orthodox Church toward society and its problems.

The criticism of the Orthodox Church in Russia by prominent intellectuals such as Vladimir Solovyev and Nicholas Berdyaev, who emphasized the failures of the Church and the need for a movement of social Christianity, found support from Alexis Khomyakov. In the words of Father Georges Florovsky: Khomyakov's "main emphasis" was that "the Church is a fellowship knit together by faith and charity... that spiritual fellowship must be inevitably extended to the whole field of social relations. Society itself should be rebuilt as a fellowship."⁵⁴

After years of persecution and isolationism under the Communist regime, the Orthodox Church in Russia emerged with a new vitality and encouraging prospects.

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Among other departments, she maintains a Department for Charity and social service. It runs several medical programs which provide medical check-ups and treatments to the needy free of charge. In case of emergencies and conflict areas, the Church is in a position to deliver humanitarian aid. Brotherhoods and sisterhoods in Dioceses and parishes involve parishioners in works of religious education and philanthropy.⁵⁵

The document “The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church,” which was issued not too long ago, is intended as a guide for the Church’s institutions. Among other elements of importance, this document reveals a vigorous mind of the Russian Orthodox Church on theology and philanthropic diakonia.⁵⁶

The Orthodox Church in Serbia, badly and unjustly criticized and abused by the secular and non-Orthodox media in the last ten years, maintains a special department by the name: Philanthropy, the Humanitarian Organization of the Serbian Orthodox Church. It was organized in 1992 as the Church’s response to the growing needs of the Country. It receives donations from various sources and distributes assistance on the basis of need to people regardless of race, gender, national or ethnic background or religious affiliation. In addition to distribution of goods, this department provides counseling and other forms of philanthropy.

No less important was the Church’s appeals to dictators of Yugoslavia to resign and its admonitions to the Serbian people for peaceful responses in time of conflicts, for peace and Christian behavior.⁵⁷

One of the most promising and highly encouraging pan-Orthodox efforts at diakonia and philanthropia is the work of the International Orthodox Christian Charities

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Organization with headquarters in Baltimore Maryland, U.S.A. It is the official philanthropic agency of Orthodox Christians endorsed by the Standing Conference of Orthodox Bishops in the Americas (SCOBA). Its mission is “to help people in times of natural or man-made disasters and their aftermath; empower communities to overcome the effects of war, poverty, disease and famine; and marshal the resources of the Orthodox Church to create a more just and peaceful world.” The IOCC organization has offered its philanthropies to people in every corner of the earth. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, Romania, Lebanon, the Republic of Georgia, Iraq, Argentina and more. A major achievement of this agency is that it has strengthened Orthodox social philanthropic activities in the United States.⁵⁸

All in all, notwithstanding the critical years for all Orthodox Churches during the 20th Century, of two world wars, civil wars, occupations by the Nazis, the Fascists and Communists, Orthodoxy has emerged renewed and hopeful for better days for its faithful and all humanity. More and more we realize that, though there are many humans, there is only one humanity, and every poor, sick, homeless, slave, prisoner, persecuted and destitute is our brother or sister.

EPILOGUE

We all know that Orthodoxy is one, but there are several Orthodox Churches. Orthodoxy has never been monolithic and uniform. It is characterized by unity in faith but diversity in other areas of church life. There are differences too in the understanding and practice of philanthropy.

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To be sure, there are bright pages in the history of Orthodoxy and there are dark ones as well. Because of peculiar historical experiences – one might speak of vicissitudes – the Orthodox have often failed to respond to social problems such as racism, peace and war, social justice, and political oppression in a systematic manner. Nevertheless, today the Orthodox are very much concerned with the here and now, the social improvement and the betterment of our physical life. If some Orthodox fail to raise voices of protest against racism, injustice, and oppression, they betray the ethos of their Church. But when they concern themselves with contemporary social problems, they act in full agreement with the nature and character of their Church in history.