

Embodying the New Society: The Byzantine Christian Instinct of Philanthropy

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Philanthropia in Classical Greek Thought

The Byzantines stand, in their usage of that key and plastic concept of *Philanthropia*, on the shoulders of a long and venerable tradition of the word's use and its ethical significance in classical antiquity. As with so much else in the foundations of Eastern Christian thought, what we rightly see as a distinctly new Byzantine use of the term *Philanthropy* to designate the appropriate Christian response to human need, the divinely inspired human movement to compassion, and the God-graced desire to establish justice, is actually a synthesis of classical thought on matters of civilized values. These values were forged in a creative interplay as these concepts were brought into a dynamic synthesis with the New Testament and early Patristic notions of the divine Kenosis of the merciful Christ; often with the crucible of the Divine Liturgy serving as both text and context for the interchange and fusion.¹ In the use and renovation of the concept of Philanthropy as a primary way of negotiating ideas about what we moderns would tend now (rather flatly perhaps) to call social ethics, Byzantine Christian society shows its creative élan in refashioning two older societal visions, that of the Hellenes, and that of the Hebrew Prophets, in a way that gives a newly universalized priority to the underlying rationale of why mercy ought to be shown to others.

In the first instance, the Hellenic vision of a civilized order where loyalty and respect ought to be shown to kin, and beneficent *agape*

¹ With one exception, the LXX use of *Philanthropia* shows no significant difference from the classical Greek concept of beneficent kindness of patron to client. See: 2 Macc. 6.22; 2 Macc. 9.27; 2 Macc. 14.9; 3 Macc. 3.15; 4 Macc. 5.12. The exception is a significant one—for the Wisdom tradition applies *Philanthropia* as a quintessential mark of Wisdom: a tradition that underlined the Christian Byzantine use of *Philanthropia* in the Christological tradition. See: LXX. Wis. 1.6; 7.23; 12.19.

to strangers² (*agape* being something we ought best to translate in this context as ‘kindly regard’) is upgraded by its elevation to *Philia* (the active kindness of a friend). This very simple question of why we ought to show philanthropia to another, and especially to one in need, is one that may seem self-evident in a social context formed by Christian values over so many centuries. It was not at all self-evident to classical society.

As may be still evident in some eastern civilizations today, ancient thought was dominated by the ubiquity and irreversibility of Fate. If there were indigent, underprivileged, and sick people around in society, this was not the fault of society. It was the will of the gods. Karma mattered, to put it in more recognizable terms to us. If one intervened by giving extraordinary charity to someone who was in the depth of misery and wretchedness (let us think of blind Oedipus for example), then one risked the strong possibility that a mere mortal intervened in the punishments of the gods. This was the widespread way in antiquity that suffering, sickness and poverty were cosmologically explained: It was the Fate that had fallen on this or that individual.

The very first example in the history of Greek rhetoric where a philosopher (consciously modelling himself on Demosthenes let us note) argued the case that the wretched and sick were icons of God that called out to all to assist them as a moral imperative (an aspect of true worship since the icon of God could not be allowed to corrupt) was Gregory the Theologian in his Oration 14, *On the Love of the Poor*. Here he makes the extraordinary claim (for ancient ears) that the Lepers of his time were not abandoned by God, but were objects of divine compassion and used as teaching aids for humans to learn the character of compassion from God. Nowhere else in ancient literature outside the scripture could we find such an extraordinary claim. And yet, after him, the Byzantine philosophy of Philanthropy develops, so as to bring the concept of compassion as an act of worship to central stage.³

²Downey (1965).

³See J A McGuckin. *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: An Intellectual Biography*. SVS Press. New York. 2001. pp. 147–155. (Oration 14: *On the Love of the Poor*) See also S Holman. *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops In Roman Cappadocia*. OUP. Oxford. 2001.

In the second place, if Hellenism is thus transfigured by synthesis, we can also note how the Hebraic concept of duty to the poor and stranger, which ought to characterize the elect community of the covenant, is also upgraded in the rooting of this notion henceforth in the basis of a universalized anthropology. We must observe, for example, that it is now *Phil-Anthropia*, the love of humanity itself that is the reason that undergirds social compassion. Kinship, on the one hand, and race or tribe on the other, as ways of organizing societal obligations have passed away as foundational reasons in a new synthesis of the Byzantine Gospel that saw, in the Kenosis of Christ, a model of alterity of an utterly new kind. There is no longer Greek or Hebrew; things are being made new in Christ, to paraphrase the Apostle (Col. 3.10–13).

This fundamental change of vision at the level of deepest *theoria* can be traced in the new semantic of the Byzantine use of the term *Philanthropia*. It was an intellectual reordering of major proportions that would, inevitably, produce an effect in the domain of *praxis* sooner or later. The actual record of early medieval Byzantine philanthropic foundations will be the concrete evidence for this. But it is the mental shift of perspective that precedes that reordering of society; and this is something that happens extensively almost from the moment that the Greek Christians commanded the imperial system sufficiently to ensure stable political associations.

That context was in place by the mid-fourth century. By the fifth, bishops had entered philanthropic work so fundamentally into the ecclesial substructure that they had earned the common-parlance title of *Philoptochos* (friend of the poor). By the sixth century the great philanthropic foundations of Leprosaria, hospitals, orphanages, geriatric homes, and food-relief centers⁴ had become common in the cities of the Byzantine world.

From there, such matters became a constitutive mark of the Church's presence throughout all its history and more or less across all

⁴The 'food liturgy', known even at ancient Athens and Rhodes, and organised for poor relief in exceptional circumstances.

its geographical extension. The work of Philanthropy can even be said to have emerged as a distinctive mark (if not a formal creedal one) of the Church's integral mission. We might not be amiss in adding (as a necessary ecclesiological descriptor) to the creedal definition of One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, this extra dimension of 'Philanthropic': the fifth authentic mark of the Church of Christ on earth.

Among the Orthodox, this immense work of ecclesial Philanthropy, and its concrete historical heritage has, of course, been subject to immense depredations from early modernity onward, because of various political vicissitudes in the domains of Eastern Christianity. However, never has the Church forgotten that heritage. Even now, with diminished resources in the shattered social structures of Eastern Europe, it is the newly liberated Church that is once again clearing the way for a societal return to principles of Philanthropy nurtured in the freedom and dignity of the person.

For the Byzantines, this fundamental commitment to the principles of *Philanthropia*, marked the very essence of what a civilized society meant. They had learned this from the ancient Philosophical tradition, although they were to take the ideas further. In the Poets,⁵ as well as in Plato, philanthropy signified the generic love that the deity had for humankind.⁶ It was a pacific, detached regard of beneficence, that undergirded the mission of various *daimones*, spiritual entities, who took charge of the governance of races and societies in order to allow justice to flourish among mortals and to cause a cessation of wars and hostilities. The spirit of philanthropy, which arose when hostility was laid aside, directly allowed civilization to flourish. Philanthropy was, therefore, a prime characteristic of the divine ethos for the pre-Christian Hellenes.

Philanthropy was the defining mark, and thus the separator, of the superior over and against the needy inferior. The deities offer to

⁵Aristophanes. *Peace*. 392f,

⁶Plato. *Laws*. 713d. 'God in so far as he is Philanthropos towards us, has set the Daimones to have governing-charge over our race...'

humankind, as patrons to their clients, all the benefits of a happy life, the fruits of the earth, and so on.⁷ Deriving from this divine character of beatitude, philanthropy also meant, in many Greek sources, the affective attitude of humans, which marked them as beneficent and civilized in their manners. Philanthropy as shown by human to human, for the Hellenes was the attitude of politeness, kindness, generosity, and the manifesting of deeds that supported one's city or state.⁸

Derived from the divine, *philanthropia* and its expression raised the human out of the ranks of the merely animal. Among animals savagery was understood as a constant backdrop of all inter-relation. Accordingly, savagery could not be accounted to them as a fault; but neither could that complex level of social interaction be expected of them that would ever merit the name civilization. Civilization demanded a divine ethos, a divine spur.

The Hellenes, before the Gospel, generally doubted strongly whether the *barbaroi* would ever rise to that status either. Yet, when humans rose to the level of philanthropy, in Greek thought, they became the fulfillment of their own higher destiny and acted beneficently to one another just as the gods acted. Thus, philanthropy is the very root and core of all that is meant by civilized values.

For this reason, throughout much of Greek literature it is presumed that the most godlike among human society, namely the kings, are characterized as royal precisely because of the philanthropy they show⁹ (far more than the power that they can command). The Spartan king Agesilaos (398–360 BC) is described by Xenophon as *Philanthropos* because of three distinguishing characteristics of his dominion: his compassionate policy toward prisoners of war, his care for destitute orphans, and his compassion for the aged who were without protectors.¹⁰

⁷ Xenophon. *Memorabilia*. 4. 3–7.

⁸ Lorenz (1914); Martin (1961) 164–175.

⁹ Isocrates *Oration*. 9. 43.

¹⁰ Xenophon. *Agesilaos*. 1. 21–23.

The Philosopher-Orator Isocrates set out for Philip of Macedon his ideal of what a true Greek king would be: an iconic representation of the divine Heracles, who spent his life on the defense and establishment of justice on earth, working tirelessly for the benefit of humankind, and advocating high moral standards.¹¹ Works of philanthropy thus defined the civilized city-state and were used by the Hellenes to demonstrate their great distance from barbarian societies, which lacked both the *theoria* of that term and its *praxis*.

The care of the orphan and the aged were particularly elevated as marks of true philanthropy among the ancient Greeks.¹² Many of the ancient city-states had established works of public assistance for orphans and the aged;¹³ and the redemption of captives was always held to be one of the highest demonstrations of true philanthropy. In like manner hospitality was often taken in Greek writing to be a quintessential mark of philanthropy. The kindly regard for the stranger (the *Xenos*) and assistance to the indigent are among the notable marks of the morally good person as Homer describes him in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. It is his equivalent of the concept of *philanthropia*, without him actually employing that term as yet. The epitome of evil and shame, conversely, is manifested by the abusers of hospitality. The symbols of Circe and the Suitors at the house of Penelope spring to mind readily. For Demosthenes it was the exercise of *philanthropia* among citizens that defined the state, guaranteed its character as civilized, whereas toward enemies the state had to adopt a protective attitude of enmity and hostility.¹⁴ Most of these efforts, however, were a reflection of the city organization: generally the work of the élite leaders of the city-state.

After the age of the city-state had passed into the age of the strings of imperial cities, each with their vast hinterland of rural support systems feeding into the urban environments of the Late Antique

¹¹ Isocrates, *To Philip*. 48–49.

¹² Gulick (1912) pp. 38, 41,

¹³ Lallemand (1902, vol. 1) pp.55–100.

¹⁴ Demosthenes. *On the Chersonese*. 2. 70–71.

age, this responsibility for the works of *philanthropia* was continued chiefly by town Curias, and by vastly wealthy plutocrats, who often used philanthropy as a replacement of the old system of the *Leitourgia*, or civic work program, and thereby advanced themselves politically as well as emerging as a new model of philanthropy from on high. The notion of claiming back the philanthropic process as a common enterprise, a more democratically balanced affair, is not seen again among the Hellenes until the early Christian era, when it is then presided over by the bishops who stood in as ‘friends of the poor.’ Even so, the rootedness of the Hellenic conception of Philanthropy as a mimesis of the gods makes the concept of patronage a fundamental aspect of all ancient philanthropic thought. We have to add to this theoretical judgment, of course, the economic observation that in this form of society more than 90 percent of all disposable wealth was held by less than five percent of the landowning aristocracy. There is a chasm existing here between the wealthy and the poor, with no middle class in between (the kind of environment assumed in Jesus’ parable of Dives and Lazarus where he explicitly applies the word ‘chasm’).¹⁵ We may think that this has shifted today, but the New York Times this very week of our conference, reports for our edification the statistic that the collective wealth of the richest 1 percent in modern America is greater than the combined wealth of the bottom 90 percent combined.¹⁶

After an extensive review of the evidence, however, Ferguson characterizes the essence of this pre-Christian Greek theory of *philanthropia* as fundamentally related to immediate kinship structures.¹⁷ In short here Charity begins (and ends) at home. And Constantelos, following Monnier, also sums up the whole of the Hellenic effort as having high spots of symbolic value, but very limited range of applicability:¹⁸ ‘As a rule,’ he notes, ‘No underlying and widespread

¹⁵ Lk. 16. 19–31. ‘Between us and you a great chasm has been fixed.’ Lk. 16.26.

¹⁶ New York Times. Sat. Nov. 28th 2009. Op-Ed Article ‘Stacking the Deck Against Kids.’ by Bob Herbert. p. A19.

¹⁷ ‘The “love of man for man” found its actual outlet in application to relatives, friends, fellow citizens, or allies.’ Ferguson (1958) pp.107–108.

¹⁸ Monnier (1866).

spirit of *philanthropia* prevailed....The limitations of ancient Greek *philanthropia* were defined by their ideas of responsibility for one's fellow man. Their philanthropy was practiced in a limited field and was directed mostly toward the civilized Hellenes.¹⁹ Constantelos, in an excellent and field-turning study, went on to excavate Byzantine philanthropic establishments, developing the thesis that here at last was a genuinely outreaching altruistic philosophy, which built institutions to exemplify its *theoria*, and can be legitimately contrasted with Hellenic values and social welfare institutions. I certainly do not wish to contradict that overall thesis, but its needs more qualification than he tended to offer, for some of the evidence he presents tends to be somewhat de- contextualized; and it is an area of research that could be fruitfully re-engaged. It is significant to note, for example, that the Byzantine Orphanages cannot simply be elevated as signs of how the Byzantine legal system had kindly regard for orphans as such. Orphans in the legal literature are wealthy minors devoid of fiscal protectors, since their mothers were non-persons for long stretches of time under Roman law, and could not as widows straightforwardly assume the running of the household (*Oikos*) after the death of their husband. Thus, there were often people lining up in the streets to become the guardians of these, and assume the administration of their estates; which is why the state intervened.

What is not said in this regard is just as significant as what is said: for children abandoned on the country roads or in the market places of Byzantium, ordinary poor children whose parents had died, or just did not want them, were not regarded as 'orphaned' simply as abandoned. Their lot, and it must have been the lot of the large majority of invisible ordinary cases, was to be picked up eventually for service as country serfs, prostitutes, or household workers.

Similarly the available beds in the Byzantine hospitals at Constantinople, could have been able to hold, I would estimate, no

¹⁹ Constantelos (1968) p. 11.

more than one in a thousand *per capita*. It is not a negligible thing by any means (given that standard medical care in Byzantium was presumed to be home-based not institution-based); but neither is it the ideal *panacea* we might wish it to be.

The Greek notion of Philanthropia was so infused with the concept of the earthly magnate mimicking divine benefactions among society, as *Philanthropos Soter* that the early Church held it at first in deep suspicion, as part and parcel of the pagan cult of the divine ruler. It was therefore with some audacity that the idea was subverted when applied to Christ, and claimed as the title of the Lord Jesus who in his humble kenosis, his incarnation, brought it to a culmination in laying down his life for his friends. The Johannine passage,²⁰ which describes the kenotic self-sacrifice of Christ, is the basis for the theological connection in the Church of *Philanthropia* with that mutuality of love, which must henceforth describe the Church.

We note that the Hellenic spirit of patronal superiority over another in need, is set aside in the manner in which the Lord-as-Servant elevates his disciples to the status of ‘friends’ (*philoï*) who are able to put into effect what the Father has revealed to the Son, and which in turn has been passed on and understood, so that the disciples can go out and ‘bear fruit that will endure.’ It is thus a different kind of *mimesis*, which is set in place here: a radical turning aside of the spirit of Hellenic Philanthropia acting from privilege, toward a mutuality of communion. Stripped of its aristocratic ideology, therefore, the notion of Philanthropia soon assumed a powerful status in early Christian thought to indicate the act of supreme compassion of God for the world: the stooping down of the Logos to the world in the Incarnation. A key description of this can be found in Titus 3:4–8:

But when the goodness (*chrestotes*) and philanthropy of God our Savior appeared, he

²⁰ Jn 10.15; Jn. 15.13–17.

saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. The saying is sure. I desire you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to apply themselves to good deeds; these are excellent and profitable things for all.

The connection here between the recognition of the kenotic and liberative Philanthropy of God in Christ and the response of the Church's own philanthropy is a strong one. The Philanthropic work is a mimesis of God's action on earth, just as it was throughout most Hellenic thought, but now the motive is different, profoundly related to the ethical imperative in a way that no writer in the Hellenic philosophical tradition ever connected it. For nowhere in the long vocabulary of pre-Christian Greek Philanthropia did the philosophers attach it strongly to ethics, or develop it as a major branch of ethical theory. It was left in the Greek tradition simply as part of the popular folk tradition of good behavior²¹ and did not enter the vocabulary of the philosophers as such until well into the Middle Platonic period, slightly after the New Testament itself. Justin Martyr,²² and the Thomas traditions²³ are influenced by the combination found in Titus of Philanthropy and merciful kindness (*Chrestótes*). And both reflect on the abundant mercy of the Lord who showed compassion so richly towards humanity in the selfless love of the Christ. Philanthropy, thus, for Christians became exemplary of the perfection of love as manifested in the cosmos; something more public and social than *agape*, (which reflected chiefly the mutuality of charity among members of the Church), and something closely allied to the

²¹ What Luck calls a tradition where only the rhetoricians (not the philosophers) were 'following polite popular ethics when they lauded the virtue of philanthropia: e.g. Demosthenes Orat. 20.165.' Kit-tel-Friedrich (edd). *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. vol. 9. pp. 108–109.

²² *Dialogue With Trypho* 47.5

²³ *Acts of Thomas* 123; 156; and 170, the latter designating Jesus as the Messiah Philanthropos.

Church's duty to reflect in the world the impact of the philanthropy of God experienced within it that released it from bondage toward a new sense of compassion and love.

The Alexandrian theologians, Clement²⁴ and Origen²⁵ are the ones who pass these insights on to the Byzantine Church, and set the terms for the way in which Philanthropy is consistently referred to thereafter. It regularly now comes with its paired cognates *Agape* and *Chrestótes*; love and loving kindness, but always connoting a stronger sense of action: love as made manifest to the other in the form of help. The Christocentric context is fixed as basic in the Alexandrian tradition. Christ is the perfect summation of the love and mercy of God to humanity, and his Philanthropy encompasses the entire cosmos in its scope. The philanthropic love that God stirs up in the hearts of the believers is a spiritual force that manifests the gift of salvation, which has been accomplished in the Logos' illumination of his chosen elect. For this reason the works of love within the Church compose an essential part of its manifest charism of closeness to its indwelling Lord. Once again we can conclude that, to all intents and purposes, the sense is urged that Philanthropy is the fifth mark, or note, of the Church's identity: One, holy, catholic, apostolic and philanthropic. In the Church's Philanthropy within the cosmos, the world can recognize the authentic features of the Christ made present to it again in mercy.

The work of the Fathers, is, from the outset (as can be seen in the Cappadocians establishing monastic establishments at Caesarea, which serve a medical function, or Chrysostom's relief work at Constantinople, or the deep traditions of hospitality and medical care for travelers in

²⁴ In *Stromateis* 2.9. Clement defines Philanthropia as God's creative action towards mankind (*Protreptikos* 10; *Quod Dives Salvetur*.3) and as the church's charism of a 'spiritual love of the brotherhood', and a fellow-feeling towards those of the same communion who have been brought together by the Spirit of God. It is for him principally an ecclesial virtue. Its root is in the prior outreach of God to humanity in and through the kenotic incarnation of the Logos. (*Pedagogus* 1.8; *Stromateis* 7.2). St. Athanasius will classicize this approach in his *De Incarnatione*. 1.3; 4.2;

²⁵ Origen *Com Jn.* 2.26. (on *Jn* 1.5) and *Ibid* 1.20. (on *Jn* 1.1.). In the *Contra Celsum* 1.67, Origen describes how the very name of Jesus creates Philanthropy and Kindliness (*chrestotes*) in those upon whom it is manifested. In the *Com in Mt.* 10.1. He describes the supreme Philanthropy of the divine Logos making his way, by incarnation into time and space, to bereft creatures who had utterly lost the capacity to make their way to him

the Egyptian and Palestinian monasteries) a theory that is grounded in the practicalities of applying the Church's 'Treasure-Chest' for social ends. Each one of the varied Byzantine establishments, often imperially endowed and supported, in the form of *Gerocomeia* (old age homes) *Ptochia* (houses for the indigent), *Xenones* (hospices for travelers and sick foreigners) *Orphanotropheia* and *Brephotropheia* (homes for orphaned children and abandoned infants) and *Typhlocomia* (homes for the blind), merits further and deeper study. Constantelos' pioneering work has been partly continued, but there remains more work to be done in cataloguing and describing the regularity with which monastic establishments, the patriarchal administration, and the imperial and aristocratic families, collaborated to constitute a nexus of philanthropic welfare systems in the eastern empire. Here, in the terms of this present study, I wish only to make symbolic reference to a few incidences of how the Byzantines elevated philanthropy as a major term of theological reference; two in particular: how they referred to it in the liturgy, and also how they tried to exemplify it in some of the medical establishments they created.

The Divine Liturgy

Let us begin with the Divine Liturgy as I would certainly posit this as the most extensive spiritual formative force for the ordinary Byzantine, intellectual or non-intellectual, rich or poor, male or female: a theological force of *paideia* repeated throughout centuries of Byzantine Christian civilization. Over innumerable times in the course of each person's civic and ecclesial life the words and phrases of the liturgy were spoken and sung over them, so that they entered into the fabric of the heart and consciousness of each individual in a way that is hardly imaginable for a modern.

St. John Chrysostom shows the classic Byzantine approach to the theology of compassion when he begins with the divine initiative and contrasts the compassion and generosity of God with the immeasurably smaller compass of the human heart's openness to others. The divine mercy, he says, always challenges the paucity of its earthly reflection: the philanthropy of God is like the fathomless waves of the sea, a

profundity of loving outreach in the divine nature that cannot be encompassed by human speech.²⁶ The liturgy that bears his name, represents the divine philanthropy quintessentially in the Prayer of the Trisagion²⁷ that recounts God's prevenient and abundant gifts to humankind. The same sentiment is expressed in the Preface to the Anaphora.²⁸

The Priestly prayer concluding the Litany of the Lord's Prayer entrusts the entire life of the faithful to the Christ Philanthropos:

'To you O Master and Lover of Mankind we commend our entire life and our hope, and we pray, entreat and implore you to count us worthy to share in your heavenly and awesome mysteries.' The prayer immediately after this continues the same sentiment:

'We thank you invisible King, who through your boundless power created all things, and in the abundance of your compassion brought them into being from out of nothing. Master look down on those who have bowed their heads before you... and make smooth the path for our good in what lies before us, according to our several needs: sail with those who sail, journey with those who journey, heal the sick, since you are the Physician of our souls and bodies. Grant this through the grace and compassion and Philanthropy of your Only Begotten Son, with whom you are blessed together with your all Holy Spirit, now and ever and to the ages of ages.'

The Thanksgiving prayer after the reception of the mysteries continues the selfsame theme: 'We thank you Lord Philanthropos

²⁶ Chrysostom. *Hom Mt.* 18.23.

²⁷ 'O Holy God at rest in the holy place...'

²⁸ It is fitting and right to hymn you, for you brought us from non existence into being and when we had fallen raised us up again and left nothing undone until you had brought us up to heaven...'

benefactor of our souls, that you have counted us worthy this day of your heavenly and immortal mysteries. Make straight our way, make firm our steps, watch over our life, and establish us all.’ The prayer of thanksgiving immediately after the Liturgy concludes describes Philanthropy in these terms:

‘Master and Philanthropos who died for our sake and rose again, and gave us these awe-inspiring Mysteries for the well-being and sanctification of our souls and bodies: grant that these gifts may also bring me healing of soul and body, the repelling of all adversaries, enlightenment in the eyes of my heart, peace in my spiritual powers, faith unashamed, love without pretense, fullness in wisdom, the guarding of your commandments, the increase of your divine grace, and the gaining of your kingdom....that I may no longer live as for myself, but instead for you our Master and benefactor.’

There could be countless other examples brought forward. The common titles of Christ in the Liturgical texts are: *Philanthropos Theos*; *Philoptochos*, *Philanthropos Evergetis*; *Kyrios Philanthropos*, *Eleimon Theos*, and *Philopsychos*. But let it suffice for the present, to sum up this vastly extended liturgical *paideia* about God’s Philanthropy, by noting that it is used as a dense synoptic motif in the ever-recurring Byzantine doxology:²⁹ ‘For you are a Merciful God, and Philanthropos, and to you we ascribe glory: to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, Now and ever and to the ages of ages.’

The divine liturgy and the prayers of the hours repeated so extensively, so civically, in the life of Byzantium, spread, as it were, a tapestry of a spirituality of *Philanthropia* over the members of the Church, a woven garment that constantly reiterated fundamental

²⁹ As taken for example from the Rite of Anointing and so many other places.

truths about this biblical and patristic doctrine: namely that God's abundant philanthropy was endlessly renewed over creation, that it restored the weak and the failing, and that it called out to the one who was lifted up, to lift up others in mimesis of the selfless love of God. Such was the quintessential synopsis of the Christian religion that the liturgy celebrated as the: 'Awesome Mysteries of Christ.' The healing it envisaged was not a spiritually disembodied one; but a one of body and soul; not an isolated individual phenomenon, but a matter of compassion for all who sail, or journey, or labour, or are sick. The liturgy teaches that it is in the communion of the philanthropic mercy of Christ, first and foremost experienced in powerlessness, that the believer truly experiences the authentic presence of the God who wishes beneficence on all; and who sets this example of philanthropy as the gold standard of discipleship. It was no wonder that the Byzantine Christian immersed in such a *paideia* was suffused with this notion, and grew up with it inculcated as the primary aspect of God: so much so that by the Paleologan period it was standard to inscribe the Christ icons with the title: *Christos Philanthropos*; and the Crosses with the superscription: *Philanthropos Theos*.

The Hospital as Symbol of the Church

How far did this mystical doctrine of Christ's proximity to his Church in philanthropy carry over into a program of actual philanthropic work in Byzantine daily life? I want to end here with a very short review of some of the principles evoked in the establishment of houses of philanthropy in the capital. These few symbolic remarks simply point up the need for a full-scale ethical study that can combine the Byzantine social evidence with the religious premises that underlay it.

In one sense we can take for granted the operation of charity from the basis of the monastic houses, which regularly offered forms of support for the indigent of the various localities. The offering of hospitality and poor relief is so fundamentally structured into the monastic *Typika* that it can often be taken for granted. But the large extent of monastic establishments in the capital at Constantinople made it a unique center of urban asceticism, and thus provided within this Queen of Cities

at least, a considerable ring of institutions where the indigent were looked after with some stability. The hospital attached to the Stoudios monastery was renowned in the city for the quality of its care.

In Justinian's time the Xenodochion, or hospital, of Sampson, located between the Hagia Sophia cathedral and the Church of Saint Irene, which had been functioning for some time, was burned down in the Nika revolt.³⁰ Justinian rebuilt it on a grander scale and endowed it with an annual income so that it could extend its range of services to the sick of the capital. From this time onward Byzantine hospitals began to function proactively as centers where doctors assembled together professionally to practice healing arts on sick who were brought to the hospital. It proved to be a major stimulus to the medical capacity and skill of the profession. In Byzantine hospitals, unlike many of their medieval western counterparts, the treatment of the inmate was undertaken with concerted action.

As his own foundation, and that of Theodora, Justinian also established the two Xenones, hospices, of The House of Isidore, and the House of Arcadios.³¹ It is recorded that he also constructed large hospitals at Antioch³² and at Jerusalem. In the latter case he responded favorably to the petition of the ascetic St. Saba, which the pilgrimages to Jerusalem left many arriving visitors sick and exhausted and in need of special care. In this instance we know that Justinian supervised the building of a centre that contained two hundred beds and was endowed with an imperial gift of annual income of 1850 gold solidi for its maintenance (a very large sum of money).

Justinian's successor Justin II (565–578) established the Zoticon hospital for Lepers (Leprocomion) in the peripheral suburb of Irion across the Bosphorus; probably on the hill where Pera began in the Galata region. It was headed by the Imperial Protovestiaris Zotikos,

³⁰ Procopios. *Buildings*. 1.2.15.

³¹ Procopios. *Buildings*. 1.2. 17

³² Procopios. *Buildings*. 2.10. 80.

who had served Justinian and then retired, and from him it took its name ultimately. The first foundation was burned by Slav raiders in the early seventh century, rebuilt in wood by Heraclios soon after in 624,³³ restored and expanded in the tenth century by Constantine Porphyrogennitos³⁴ (913–959) and rebuilt and expanded again by John Tzimisce (969–976) who left half his personal property to it in his will.³⁵ We hear of it again in the eleventh century when an earthquake destroyed the buildings and caused emperor Romanos Argyros to rebuild it in 1032.

Other hospitals are known to have been established by Constantine Monomachos IX, next to the ‘Church of St. George.’³⁶ In each case we are, doubtless, dealing with what we today would regard as the partial re-distribution of imperial largesse gained from an economy of a massively repressive type. In this respect it is important not to allow the rhetorical excesses of the sources to carry us away with their praises of the beneficence of the rulers.

One such example of fulsome rhetoric along these lines is the panegyric of Anna Comnena for her father emperor Alexios in the eleventh century who built and endowed hospitals in the by now classical imperial manner. What is interesting, however, above and beyond the state propaganda, is the rhetoric that constantly associates the Emperor’s philanthropy as an earthly *mimesis* of that of Christ himself. The *Basileus*, therefore, becomes the God-Beloved, *Theophilestatos*, precisely to the extent that he iconizes the mercy of Christ to the people.

In this sense the Byzantine religious system reined in its reliance on the archaic Hellenic sense of the superior patron dispensing largesse and retained its New Testament heritage concerning the duty of all humanity to serve the other in mercy. In other words the Church

³³ George Cedrenos. *Historiarum Compendium*. 1. 698–699.

³⁴ Theophanes Continuatus. *Chronographia*. 449. 4.

³⁵ Leo the Deacon. *History*. 6.5.

³⁶ R. Janin Geogr. *Eccles* p. 78.

allowed the emperor to iconize Christ's Philanthropy, but only on a more spectacularly larger scale than all other Christians were expected to iconize that mercy. He was not elevated above others in his capacity for philanthropy, merely expected to demonstrate that philanthropy was a fundamental religious duty to his people.

It may seem a small difference in the massively unbalanced economic systems of the ancient world, but I think it is a significant one: and points to the way eastern Christianity, although availing itself regularly of imperial and aristocratic donations, never reduced philanthropy to the status of merely charitable patronage; but held to the archetype of philanthropic exercises as an icon of kenosis, expected as a response in duty to suffering humanity whom God elevated as particular occasions of his concern.

The twelfth-century hospital of the Pantocrator was one of the most prestigious of the hospitals of the capital.³⁷ It was founded in 1136 by John Comnenos II.³⁸ Its *Typikon* survives, as do extensive buildings, recently restored from dilapidation and closed as a mosque to reopen as a museum. There were five clinics operating at the Pantocrator: three of them for special treatments (a ward of ten beds for surgery; a ward of eight beds for ophthalmic and intestinal illness; a ward of twelve beds for gynecological problems, which was staffed by women medics), and two larger clinics for general illnesses with twenty seven beds in each. It is clear from the extensive and detailed instructions in the Pantocrator *Typikon* that treatment of the diseases was actively pursued, and cures expected. The staff are constantly urged by the terms of the establishment to treat the sick as if they were entertaining Christ himself. It is an extraordinary testimony to a civic sense of philanthropy developed beyond anything else comparable in medieval society. This testimony is even beyond modernity in some respects as a philanthropy incarnated and concretized in particular instantiations.

Of course, a phenomenon like the imperial relief houses at

³⁷ See Constantelos fn 105 p. 171

³⁸ See Constantelos p. 171.

Constantinople relied on an economic system that could hardly be sustained over the long term and one which fell back progressively as the loss of territories in the hinterland reduced the realities of Byzantine taxation to a small circle around Constantinople itself. The legacy it left, however, is a challenge for the eastern Church, which for the first time in half a millennium (excepting the case of Russia) finds itself in a position to do more than feed itself, more than hold on to survival in a hostile environment: a Church that has once more, even unexpectedly, come into freedom and the beginnings of an affluent society—the new imperium of the West.

The Byzantine legacy offers us paradigms not simply to reproduce but to emulate in new conditions and with new understandings. Henceforth superior patronage will not be enough. The Church will never again, perhaps, be entrusted by the wider society with the sole care of its philanthropic missions. But the Church did propose to society in times past, and can do so again, that the starting point of all philanthropic action is an anthropology of love; a divine anthropology; an iconic philosophy that values all men and women as symbolic and transcendent images of God incarnate. The Church was able with that new vision of the dignity of humankind, to steer away from charity as merely a patronizing emergency relief to token cases of an underclass no one really wanted to liberate.

So much of philanthropy in our modern world has returned to the pre-Christian Hellenic model. It is motivated by concomitant patterns of guilt, accompanied by loathing and neglect for the marginalized (a state of affairs so brilliantly satirized by Kafka's image of Gregor the cockroach in his tale *The Metamorphosis*). Can there be in this archaeology of Byzantine Christian Philanthropy the basis for a return to a much more encompassing vision of energetic rebuilding of social structures on the basis of remaking a sense of the mystical dignity of the person? This task is deeply theological. It is equally a pressing social demand. The two things are not incompatible but have not yet been sufficiently considered in modern Orthodox thought. Our task today is one of extensive reconstruction.

The task is not a lost Byzantium that we need to rebuild. We need a sense of how to restore to an Orthodoxy, which has been in servitude for centuries, the sense that philanthropy is not an added extra. Philanthropy is as significant an aspect of ecclesial identity as the other four, more commonly recognized marks of the Church. To its oneness, its holiness, its catholicity, and its apostolicity, we need to learn that there can be no true Orthodox Church without its ever-manifested philanthropy.

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