

**The Principle of Detachment from Private Property in  
Basil of Caesarea's *Homily 6* and its Context**

Brian Matz

I have two sons. The older of my boys, now age four, enjoys building elaborate sets with his wooden train tracks. The younger of my boys, now age one, enjoys “playing” with his older brother by tearing apart the train set as it is being built. The four-year old is understandably upset, and some sort of physical behavior is displayed to retrieve the tracks from his younger brother. What is a parent to do in this situation? I suggest the problem is not simple. The older boy has applied his time, energy and talents into constructing something new from which he now draws some sense of personal dignity. He has put his labor to good use to fashion some sort of property, and he believes he has earned the right to enjoy what he has made. The younger boy believes that this new property should not be treated as private, but should be for all to share and to play. As a parent, I would like to find some middle ground between asking the older boy to share his property and trying to occupy the younger boy with some other activity. Yet, if pressed on the matter, ought I to lean towards protecting the right to private property or towards ensuring all property is made common? In addition, how much does the application of a child's own labor in the production of property figure into the calculation?

These types of questions have long been a part of Christian, ethical reflection on the merits of private property. This includes studies of the early Church's teachings with respect to private property. In fact, a debate over whether or not the early Church was proto-communist in its views of property dominated scholarly discussion from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, and continues even today in some quarters.<sup>1</sup> More recently, scholarship turned

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<sup>1</sup> The tendency within this body of literature is to conclude that they were, although it is understood that early Christians shared their goods voluntarily. L. William Countryman, *The Rich Christian in the Church of the Early*

its attention to the socio-cultural and economic backdrop of late antiquity in order to better understand the context to which the Fathers addressed their concerns about property.<sup>2</sup> Most

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*Empire: Contradictions and Accommodations*, Texts and Studies in Religion, vol. 7 (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1980) 1-18, rather capably summarized this body of literature up to the mid-1970s insisting, at the end, that contemporary political questions are ultimately unhelpful when approaching early Christian texts. Countryman suggested limiting the scope of any inquiry to the few Christian texts both which can be reliably dated and whose authorship is in little doubt. For his part, he focused on Clement of Alexandria's *Quis dives salvetur?* and related texts from Clement that shed light on his understanding of private property. For an earlier summary of the debate, cf. Franz Meffert, *Der "Kommunismus" Jesu und der Kirchenväter* (München-Gladbach: Volksvereinverlag, 1922).

The secondary literature affirming the voluntary nature of early Christian poverty and wealth sharing includes, among many others, Ephrem Baumgartner, "Der Kommunismus im Urchristentum", *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie* 33 (1909): 625-645; Etienne Chastel, *Études historiques sur l'influence de la charité durant les premiers siècles chrétiens, et considérations sur son rôle dans les sociétés modernes* (Paris: Capelle, 1853); ET of same: *The charity of the primitive churches: Historical studies upon the influence of Christian charity during the first centuries of our era, with some considerations touching its bearings upon modern society*, transl. George-Auguste Matile (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1857); F. X. Funk, "Über Reichtum und Handel im christlichen Altertum" *Historisch-politische Blätter* 130 (1902): 888-899; Stanislas Giet, "La doctrine de l'appropriation des biens chez quelques-uns des Pères" *Recherches de science religieuse* 35 (1948): 55-91; Edmond Le Blant, "La richesse et le christianisme à l'âge des persécutions" *Revue archéologique*, Series 2, vol. 39 (1880): 220-230; Shailer Matthews, *The Social Teachings of Jesus: An Essay in Christian Sociology* (New York: Macmillan, 1897); Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen, Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 1 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1912); ET of same: *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, two volumes, transl. Olive Wyon (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931), esp. 89-161; Gerhard Uhlhorn, *Die christliche Liebestätigkeit. Vol. 1: In der alten Kirche* (Stuttgart: Gundert, 1882).

Among those who find in the early Christian literature a less voluntary and more controlled system of property re-distribution include Lujo Brentano, "Die wirtschaftlichen Lehren des christlichen Altertums", in *Sitzungsberichte der philosophische-philologischen und der historischen Klasse der kgl. Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Munich: 1902) 141-193; W. Haller, "Die Eigentum im Glauben und Leben der nachapostolischen Kirche" *Theologische Studien und Kritiken* 64 (1891): 478-563; Karl Kautsky, *Der Ursprung des Christentums, eine historische Untersuchung* (Stuttgart: J. H. W. Dietz Nachf., 1908), of which there were many subsequent editions; Gérard Walter, *Les origines du communisme, judaïques, chrétiennes, grecques, latines* (Paris: Bibliothèque historique, 1931). More recent, a collection of texts and commentary by Charles Avila, *Ownership: Early Christian Teaching* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983) summarizes the views of four authors (Clement of Alexandria, Ambrose of Milan, John Chrysostom, and Augustine of Hippo). It concludes the Fathers largely condemned the prevailing view of their contemporaries that the holding of private property was an inviolate right and should be passed down from one generation to the next within one's family.

<sup>2</sup> Santiago Guíjarro, "The Family in First-Century Galilee", in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (London: Routledge, 1997), explores how the scarcity of goods created unstable family structures in the first through third centuries.

Evelyne Patlagean, *Pauvreté économique et pauvreté sociale à Byzance 4e – 7e siècles*, *Civilisations et Sociétés*, vol. 48 (Paris: Mouton, 1977) is a ground-breaking study of economic poverty in Byzantium between the fourth and seventh centuries. Patlagean made careful distinctions both between types of poverty and the impact of poverty on different communities of persons both within cities and rural areas. Patlagean laid the groundwork for later studies of the interchange between Christian teaching about social ethics and the real life impact on social policies and mentalities. Cf. also by Patlagean, "The Poor", in *The Byzantines*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 15-42, although only the first few pages overlap with the period of the Fathers considered here.

Blake Leyerle, "John Chrysostom on Almsgiving and the Use of Money", *The Harvard Theological Review* 87 (1994): 29-47, surveyed Chrysostom's homilies with respect to his teaching about the correct use of wealth by those otherwise prone to lavish displays of it in the marketplace. See also Roger Bagnall, "Monk and Property: Rhetoric, Law, and Patronage in the *Apophthegmata Patrum* and the Papyri" *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 42 (2001): 7-24; Andrew T. Crislip, *From monastery to hospital: Christian monasticism and the*

recently, questions about early Christian teaching on private property fall under a more broad category of *wealth* and of the response of the rich to the poor. Even the words “rich” and “poor” have become the objects of greater scrutiny; now we speak both of “poor” people and of “shallow poor” people (to which I would add also “shallow wealthy” people).<sup>3</sup>

Basil’s writings are among those that have received some of the greatest scrutiny, for he has addressed concerns about private property in several homilies, including *Homily 6*. In this paper I argue that in *Hom. 6* we discover both that Basil co-opted the Stoic teaching of ἀπαθειᾶ with respect to property and that, in the process of doing so, he taught his audience important, theological concepts that both transcend the issue of property and are distinctive of the Christian, rather than the Stoic, tradition.<sup>4</sup> Consideration of these theological arguments moves us rather

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*transformation of health care in late antiquity* (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan, 2005). Richard Finn, *Almsgiving in the Later Roman Empire: Christian Promotion and Practice, 313-450*, Oxford Classical Monographs (Oxford: OUP, 2006); Susan Holman, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*, Oxford Studies in Historical Theology (Oxford: OUP, 2001).

A modern economist would argue the Fathers did not appreciate the value of entrepreneurship, which is what could develop out of excess land and possessions among the wealthy, in addition to the gainful employment such entrepreneurship would provide. Barry Gordon suggests the Empire was not set up to accommodate such entrepreneurship and thus it didn’t enter the Fathers’ minds. Cf. B. Gordon, “The Problem of Scarcity and the Christian Fathers: John Chrysostom and Some Contemporaries” *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989): 108-20; idem, *The Economic Problem in Biblical and Patristic Thought*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae, Texts and Studies of Early Christian Life and Language, vol. IX (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Christel Freu, *Les figures du pauvre dans les sources italiennes de l’antiquité tardive* (Paris: De Boccard, 2007), is a detailed study both of the different words used for the poor and the rich and of the differences in meaning even for the same word depending on literary genre in texts by several Latin Fathers of late antiquity. Cf. also cf. Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), 14-16. There he explains that we should no longer think of late antique societies as being comprised of “the poor” and “the rich”, but that there was a broad middle class – likely 80% or more of the total population – that forever lived in “shallow poverty”, meaning that any one bad economic year could thrust even skilled craftspeople or farmers into destitution. My own research suggests that we can not only speak about “shallow poverty” but also “shallow wealth”, for during the good economic years, those same groups of people were prone to take advantage of the destitute. Cf. Gregory of Nyssa’s homily *Against the Usurers* (GK: “Contra Usurarios”, in *Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. IX, ed. Ernest Gebhardt [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967], 195-207; ET: Casimir McCambley, “Against Those Who Practice Usury by Gregory of Nyssa” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 36 [1991]: 287-302), in which he does not address himself to “the rich” so much but to all who take advantage of the needy during times of want. It seems that “shallow wealth” could be a spiritual problem as much as shallow poverty was a social and economic problem.

<sup>4</sup> According to Michel Spanneut, *Le stoïcisme des pères de l’église, de Clément de Rome a Clément d’Alexandrie*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957), 72-77, a better way to understand the relationship between Stoicism and early Christianity is one of “influence” by the former on the latter. This means the early Christian homilists ended up being really neither properly Stoic nor properly Christian, if we take Christian to mean life in accordance with a literal reading of the Gospel teachings.

away from the Marxist political concerns of earlier studies. It builds on the socio-cultural and economic context studies and provides what may be a more helpful contribution to modern, Christian ethical reflection about private property. Indeed, although Basil's theological arguments are very much a product of his time, they nevertheless reconfigure well-trodden biblical texts and themes for an audience removed from the first century context. They open to us a Ricoeurian, "world in front of the text" that we may appreciate today. For this reason, contemporary Christian ethics owes a debt of gratitude to this forebearer of the Christian message.

Having said all of this, before we turn to Basil's text, it should be borne in mind that Basil was doubtless aware that the topic of private property concerned classical writers dating back at least to the fifth century B.C.E. Thus, the paper begins with a rehearsal of some of that history in classical and Christian authors up to the time of Basil. Towards the conclusion, the paper suggests some of the trajectory of these ideas in CST with an acknowledgment that detachment language has now been surpassed by a concern for the universal destination of the world's goods.

#### Private Property before Basil

Even a cursory review of the ideas about private property in the Greco-Roman and Christian milieu reveals the difficulty everyone felt about the topic. Private property was understood to be a social problem, but forcibly redistributing property had few, if any, supporters. With respect to the classical writers, some suggestions for how to solve the private property dilemma emerged. In the fourth century B.C.E. there were calls for the creation of a common stock of property from which every citizen could draw in order to satisfy his needs. The

playwright Aristophanes suggested women would be the best managers of such a common stock, which would include land, money and most goods.<sup>5</sup> Plato's teaching on the role of Guardians is strikingly similar to Aristophanes' promotion of women as better managers of civic affairs.<sup>6</sup> In the wrong hands, according to Plato, property undermines social unity.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, Guardians will oversee a common stock of property and, in so doing, preserve the good of the city.<sup>8</sup> Yet, neither Aristophanes nor Plato denounced the right of people to different levels of private property. Plato suggested the goal is not for everyone to be happy in the sense of possessing many things; everyone is to be happy with the goods appropriate to their position within the city (421b-d).<sup>9</sup> In another of Aristophanes' plays, *Ploutos* (388),<sup>10</sup> the character Chremylus sets off to heal the sight of Ploutos, the god of wealth, in order that wealth might begin to come only to those who are virtuous. Along the way, Chremylus meets Poverty, who informs Chremylus that he is embarking on an ill-concieved plan, for, once everyone becomes rich, no one will have anything. This is because no one will be willing to work long hours at

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<sup>5</sup> Aristophanes, *Ecclesiazousae*, The Comedies of Aristophanes, vol. 10 (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1998), esp. ll. 590-710. Aristophanes' play is set within the time of war in which the poor of Athens experienced continually degrading conditions. Praxagora, a woman, dresses up as a man to participate in a city council debate. She convinces the other council members that they delegate to women the task of managing a common stock of civic resources in order to alleviate suffering of all, including the poor.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Plato, "Republic" in *Plato: Complete Works*, transl. G. M. A. Grube, transl. rev. by C. D. C. Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), Books III and V. On the comparison between Plato's Guardians and Aristophanes' women, cf. Alan Sommerstein, ed. and transl., *Ecclesiazousae*, 13-18. Sommerstein dismisses as unlikely two other arguments put forward for this comparison, either that Plato surmised his ideas before Aristophanes wrote or that both Plato and Aristophanes relied on an earlier, common source. Both of these arguments are based on silence in the historical record and, what is worse, they seem to Sommerstein to be an attempt to protect Plato from being thought of as influenced by a comedic play.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, "Republic", 971-1223. In his *Republic* Plato explicated a vision for justice and for its preservation in the context of a Greek *polis*.

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Republic* Book III, argued Guardians must be housed and cared for at the expense of the city (416c-417b). This was to protect the integrity of the Guardians, insofar as this arrangement preserved as the source of the Guardians' happiness the good of the city rather than the acquisition of property, land or power for personal gain. In Book IV, a challenger to this argument puts forward the claim that Guardians will be disposed towards unhappiness in this arrangement since they can enjoy none of the goods that a city offers its citizens (419). Plato, through the voice of Socrates, rejoins that the goal

<sup>9</sup> Plato suggests both wealth and poverty can corrupt a person, for a wealthy craftsperson will no longer want to work at his craft, and a poor craftsperson will not have the resources to do so. The same is true for farmers and for Guardians. Wealth and poverty equally distract a person from the work to be done.

<sup>10</sup> Aristophanes, *Wealth*, The Comedies of Aristophanes, vol. 11, ed. and transl. by Alan H. Sommerstein (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 2001).

trades; there will be no bakers or harvesters. Everyone will want someone else to do it, and no one will agree to do it. Poverty, she argues, alone fosters a productive society. Some deprivation of wealth actually is good for the soul (ll. 507-589).<sup>11</sup>

A different approach to the problem of private property is that of Xenophon and, later, of Aristotle. They advocated a distinction between “use” and “ownership” of property, a distinction which meant that laws that protect private property ownership may continue to exist, but the better instincts of people should draw them to a sharing of property based on use. Xenophon (c. 429-c.357 B.C.E.), in his *Education of Cyrus*, writes of a particular episode of Cyrus’ schooling in which Cyrus was asked to judge between two boys of different heights who each owned coats that were better suited to the height of the other boy.<sup>12</sup> Cyrus judged that use, rather than ownership, of property was a better arbiter for the distribution of goods. Consequently, he ordered the boys to switch coats. Yet, for this he was severely reprimanded by his teachers. To keep the application of justice simple and fair, Cyrus’ teachers said, ownership is the more just means of deciding who should possess what. Aristotle seems to be in agreement with Cyrus’ first instincts, but he too comes down on the side of maintaining property rights based on current ownership.<sup>13</sup> To his mind, human depravity would never allow the life-long sharing of goods

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<sup>11</sup> Importantly, Aristophanes distinguishes between people who are poor (πτωχοι) and people who are destitute (πενης). The Church Fathers also seemed to accept some social stratification as a necessary part of a functioning society. Cf. Susan Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, 32; Mary Sheather, “Pronouncements of the Cappadocians on Issues of Poverty and Wealth”, in *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church*, vol. 1, eds. Pauline Allen, Raymond Canning and Lawrence Cross (Everton Park, Australia: Centre for Early Christian Studies 1998) 375-392, here 376.

<sup>12</sup> Xenophon, *The Education of Cyrus*, Agora Editions, transl. Wayne Amber (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), here 32-33. Xenophon’s *Education of Cyrus* is important to social ethicists for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is its significant contribution to Machiavelli’s understanding of the common good. Indeed, Xenophon’s text is the only classical source to which Machiavelli referred in *Prince* and it was the classical text most frequently cited in his *Discourses*. Cf. Christopher Nadon, “From Republic to Empire: Political Revolution and the Common Good in Xenophon’s *Education of Cyrus*”, *American Political Science Review* 90 (1996): 361-374, see esp. 373-374 on comparisons to Machiavelli.

<sup>13</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, transl. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), here 2.1263a-b.I on pp. 60-62. One must read all of Books I and II to appreciate the argument at stake, for in them is a long discussion of how it is inappropriate to look to the man successful either in business or in overseeing slaves or in managing a household for the care and administration of a city. The three realms of business, slave and household management do share

from a common stock, no matter how useful a particular piece of property was to a person at any given time.<sup>14</sup> Thus, despite their misgivings, Xenophon and Aristotle accepted the *status quo* as that which would cause the least amount of injustice. This basic understanding is behind Cicero's later insistence that the taking of the goods of another – whether by force of law or of banditry – is an injustice. In agreement with the Stoics, he argued that the goods of the earth belong to all and exist for the benefit of all persons.<sup>15</sup> Private property, then, is an aberration of Nature and so the ideal is for all things to be held in common. Yet, private property exists and so it is a matter of justice that humans respect existing private property rights. Justice in the present trumps a reordering of society in accordance with Nature for the future.<sup>16</sup>

Somewhat in contrast to Xenophon and Aristotle (also Cicero, though an anachronism) are the ideas articulated by their contemporary Menander in his play, *Dyskolos*.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, Menander agreed with their discontent that laws protect property rights based on ownership rather than use. On the other hand, he believed there was a solution: distinguish

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things in common with civic rule, but none fully prepare a person or persons for the just rule of free citizens. On that note, *Politics* is a training manual for just such an aspiring civic ruler or rulers, and one of the first questions tackled is that of how to administer property.

<sup>14</sup> To be clear, Aristotle distinguishes between the care of possessions and the use of them. Care of possessions ought to be private, but the use of possessions ought to be common. This distinction between care and use preserves a sense of dignity for each property owner insofar as both pleasure is derived from calling something one's own and greed is restrained. What is more, Aristotle asserts that the distinction between care and use instills two important virtues: moderation and liberality. With respect to the former, this distinction preserves an awareness that some goods are not properly shareable (e.g., wives, women); for the latter, it recognizes that sharing is only possible when goods are held privately (2.1263b).

<sup>15</sup> Cicero, *De officiis*, Loeb Classical Library, ed. and transl. Walter Miller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), here I.7, p. 21. Cicero writes, "There is, however, no such thing as private ownership established by nature, but property becomes private either through long occupancy (as in the case of those who long ago settled in unoccupied territory) or through conquest (is in the case of those who took it in war) or by due process of law, bargain, or purchase, or by allotment....Therefore, inasmuch as in each case some of those things which by nature had been common property became the property of individuals, each one should retain possession of that which has fallen to his lot; and if anyone appropriates to himself anything beyond that, he will be violating the laws of human society."

<sup>16</sup> Even so, Cicero, *De officiis* III.5, argued one should not take the goods of one's neighbor even if it means bringing upon oneself pain, poverty or even death! The taking of the goods of another is itself a violation of nature, an injustice. Cicero argues, "[H]e is mistaken in thinking that any ills affecting either his person or his property are more serious than those affecting his soul."

<sup>17</sup> Menander, *The Bad-Tempered Man (Dyskolos)*, transl. Stanley Ireland (Warminster, UK: Aris & Phillips, Ltd., 1995).

between needs and superfluities with respect to private property. Laws may then protect a person's right to own needed, or useful, property, but not property that is superfluous to needs. He based this distinction on the fact that property is temporary, and so people may safely detach themselves from it. If nothing else, the short span of human life will mark out the limits of one's ability to "own" property.<sup>18</sup> This detachment view of private property will later find an articulate proponent in Seneca who, a substantially wealthy court official himself, in the mid-first century C.E. composed the treatise *De vita beata*, in which it is argued that the man who possesses virtue possesses the only thing that is truly good.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the accumulation of goods, land, money and the frivolous spending subsequent to it are no adequate measure of pleasure.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, property and wealth are fleeting, so any virtue tied to things temporary will always put true happiness in jeopardy. Far better, in Seneca's view, to hold property and wealth at a distance. One may possess wealth and property, but their acquisition should be by just means.<sup>21</sup> In the end, *indifferentia* (equivalent to the Stoic ἀδιόφορα) is the goal (xxii.4), and thus riches may

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<sup>18</sup> Menander, *The Bad-Tempered Man*, 85. Sostratos, a character in Menander's play, asks his father for his blessing for Sostratos' planned wedding. Sostratos' father hesitates, for the family of the woman his son wants to marry is poor and he is afraid of becoming responsible for the care of a poorer family. Sostratos counters (cf. ll. 797-812) with two points that convert his father, and the wedding is able to proceed. The first point was that the money or property of a hoarder may very well end up in the hands of those thought to be undeserving by a hoarder at the hoarder's death. The second point was that it is okay to have wealth so long as it is shared liberally with those who have needs.

<sup>19</sup> Seneca, "De vita beata", in *Seneca: Moral Essays, Vol. II*, ed. and transl. John W. Basore, Loeb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965). As the tutor of the young Nero, Seneca's political and financial fortunes swung like a pendulum largely in sync with those of Nero's mother and, then, Nero himself. Seneca's position gave him ample opportunities not only to acquire substantial wealth but also to write, and much of his corpus is devoted to ethics and the promotion of a life of philosophy. For an appreciation of Seneca's views about private property and, more generally, wealth, one could turn either to his *Ep. 20* or *Ep. 90* or to one of his other ethical treatises, *De brevitate vitae*. The writing of *De vita beata* may date to 58, following the exile of Sullius, who had criticized Seneca for the seeming contradiction of his life: on the one hand great wealth and, on the other hand, claims to Stoic *indifferentia*. This would also coincide with the time during which Nero's own decisions were growing increasingly, ethically questionable. Cf. Paul Veyne, *Seneca: The Life of a Stoic*, transl. David Sullivan (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), esp. 20-22, 191.

<sup>20</sup> Here one may also look to Seneca's exposée on the pitiable life of the wealthy and politically powerful found in his *De brevitate vitae*. No sooner do they acquire wealth or power, they are looking to give it away because of the burdens such things bring upon them.

<sup>21</sup> Seneca, *De vita beata* xxiii.3 (ed. and transl. Basore, *Seneca: Moral Essays*, 158): Sapiens nullum denarium intra limen suum admittet male intransentem.

be despised whether one has them or not. It is the ideas of Menander and of Seneca that will acquire great currency in the later teachings of the Fathers, particularly those in Basil's milieu.

We may, at this point, turn our attention to the Christian context from which Basil's text emerged. Jesus, in Mark 10:21, taught the rich young ruler to "sell all that you have and give the proceeds to the poor." This suggests Jesus called for a lifestyle of renunciation, and, in the second century, some Christian writings taught as much with respect to private property. The *Epistle of Barnabas* 19, for example, exhorted its readers, "Treat as common all things with your neighbor, and do not say things are 'one's own', for if you are sharers in incorruptible things, how much more ought you to be sharers in corruptible things!"<sup>22</sup> The command not to call things "one's own" is also found in *Didache* 4.8, a late first- or second-century document, although it is less clear in *Didache* that the author held strictly to a renunciation view.<sup>23</sup> In any case, the dream of a community that continued the type of sharing of goods recorded in Acts 2 did not go away quickly.

At least two works in the second century signaled a definite shift away from renunciation: Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* IV.30.1-3 and *Shepherd of Hermas*, especially Parables (or,

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<sup>22</sup> *Epistle of Barnabas* 19.8a (ed. Bart Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers II*, LCL, 2 vols [Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ., 2003], II.78; translation mine): Κοινωνήσεις ἐν πάσιν τῷ πλησιζόν σου καὶ οὐκ ἔρεῖς ἰᾶδια εἰᾶνα· εἰ γὰρ ἐν τῷ ἀφθάρτῳ κοινωνοὶ ἐστε, πόσω μᾶλλον ἐν τοῖς φθαρτοῖς; Even so, it is possible the author of the epistle harbored some allowance for private property. At §10, the author reads Leviticus 17:11 and Deuteronomy 14:8 in a spiritual way – "don't eat the pig" means "don't cling to those who act like pigs". This is in support of the larger point by the author that labor, rather than thievery, is the way to acquire food. May we read into this the author's appreciation for the acquisition of some private property following the application of personal labor? I suspect so, but this is by no means conclusive.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Didache* 13 (ed. Bart Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers I*, LCL, 2 vols [Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2003] I.438) at which place the author asks that the firstfruits of one's food, money, clothing and everything else(!) be given to support the teaching ministry of a local prophet or pastor. In the absence of such a person, then the firstfruits are to be given to the poor. Presumably, what remains beyond the firstfruits belongs to each person. So, the command in §4.8 to claim nothing is one's own may suggest a life of detachment from goods; offering the firstfruits of one's goods to a prophet or to a poor person would serve as a regular reminder of this call to detachment. In this case, early readers of *Didache* would accept that its theological instruction cannot be separated from the practices of daily life.

Similitudes) 1-2.<sup>24</sup> Irenaeus accepted property's inherent, moral neutrality. Echoing Xenophon and Aristotle, property itself was not to blame; rather, one's use of property was to be the subject of any scrutiny. To Irenaeus, the possession of property was not a right following upon the expansion of one's own labor to acquire it. This is because all property is the result of someone else's earlier labor. Thus, property could never really be considered "private" because no one person could ever claim to have produced it.<sup>25</sup> For his part, Hermas framed the need for

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<sup>24</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus haereses* IV.30.1-2 (ed. Adelin Rousseau, *Contre les hérésies, Livre 4*, SC 100 [Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1965] 770-779; ed. Norbert Brox, *Adversus haereses*, Fontes Christianae 8, part 4 [Freiburg: Herder Press, 1997] 236-241; ET: Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, "Against Heresies," in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ANF 1 [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1867] 503). Hermas, *Shepherd Parables/Similitudes 1 and 2* (ed. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers II*, LCL, II.304-314; ET: Ehrman, LCL, II.305-315).

John A. McGuckin, "The Vine and the Elm Tree: The Patristic Interpretation of Jesus' Teaching on Wealth", in *The Church and Wealth: Papers Read at the 1986 Summer Meeting and the 1987 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, eds. W. J. Shiels and Diana Wood (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987) 1-14. McGuckin suggests this tension over renunciation versus detachment may be due not simply to shifting cultural forces in late antiquity but perhaps even more to a tension in how the *logia* of Jesus were brought together into the canonical gospels themselves. McGuckin argues, *contra* those who think passages like Mark 10:21 are apocalyptic teaching, that Jesus is concerned with the prophetic/missionary role his disciples must assume. By the time the *logia* of Jesus are incorporated into the canonical gospels the community had settled into an early pattern of doing church, and thus *logia* such as Mark 10:21 were recalled in order to encourage **some** in the Church to pursue a lifestyle of living lightly and traveling broadly for the sake of missions. Cf. also Howard Clark Kee, "Rich and Poor in the New Testament and Early Christianity", in *Through the Eye of a Needle: Judeo-Christian Roots of Social Welfare*, eds. Emly A. Hanawalt and Carter Lindberg (Kirksville, MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1994), 29-42.

For a different perspective on the question, one may turn to G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "Early Christian Attitudes to Property and Slavery", in *Church, Society and Politics: Papers Read at the Thirteenth Summer Meeting and the Fourteenth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, Studies in Church History, vol. 12 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975) 1-38. He argued the Church Fathers were interested more in man-to-man or man-to-God relationships and not in the men-to-men relationship (the latter of which would have concerned conflicts of class, social status, economic condition, political rights, etc.). This meant the Fathers were able to talk about the dangers of riches and property without demanding that Christians renounce all riches and property. So long as a person's use of his or her riches was honoring to God and to other people, the economic and social class realities could remain in place – they were no hindrance to personal relationships with God.

<sup>25</sup> Inherited wealth would be a particular evil in such a scheme, for not only did it require no labor from the beneficiary, but also its own origins likely are stained with injustice. The only way to redeem for God's glory such tainted goods would be to put them at the disposal of the poor. Cf. Irenaeus, *A.H.* IV.30.3. He compared the offering up to God of inherited property to the redeeming use of building the Temple with goods the Israelites took from the Egyptians. Two centuries later, Epiphanius, in his *Panarion* 61.3-4 (PG 41.1040; ET: Frank Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis, Books II and III*, Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies, vol. 36 [Leiden: Brill, 1994], 116) argued the true Church does not despise those who have inherited wealth if such individuals use that wealth to meet the needs both of their family and of others. Chrysostom would agree, for he wrote in *Homilies on Matthew* 77.5 that goods possessed either by inheritance or by honest labor all belong to the poor.

detachment in terms of a need for Christians to be aware that earth is not their home.<sup>26</sup> Yearning for earthly goods is an affront to God.

In the third century this detachment view was picked up by Clement of Alexandria in his *Quis dives salvetur?*. Clement applied a spiritual style of exegesis to his reading of Mark 10 that had gained some currency by that time. Clement argued Jesus could not have meant for every person to be without property, for such a situation would mean that no one would have anything to give to the poor.<sup>27</sup> From this starting point, Clement articulates a different vision for private property, one in which a person may freely possess what he or she needs or is useful to him or her, but all that is superfluous must be given to the poor or otherwise needy.<sup>28</sup> This recalls the necessities/superfluities distinction of Menander. Thus, with Clement, a more fruitful course of inquiry about private property has been opened: how much is *enough*?

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<sup>26</sup> Hermas, *Shepherd* Similitudes 2, suggested the rich aid the poor by their wealth in exchange for the poor aiding the rich by their prayer. This argument will surface many times in later centuries. Cf., e.g., Theodoret of Cyrus, *On Providence* 6.31, who says that the rich have been blessed by God with money and the poor have been blessed by God with skills in trades and crafts. In such a situation it is the rich, he argues, who are compelled to come begging at the door of the poor person. I find this to be an interesting point, and perhaps what Theodoret says was true regarding the mobility of goods in the economic context of Cyrus in the early fifth century. However, our modern economic context no longer limits the choices of to which poor the rich are obliged to beg. The global marketplace allows the rich regularly to move from one poor person to another until they find a satisfactorily low enough price for the crafts they desire. The poor are not in an advantageous position in such a market.

<sup>27</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Quis dives salvetur* 4-5 (eds. Otto Stählin, Ludwig Früchtel and Ursula Treu, *Stromata: Buch VII und VIII; Excerpta ex Theodoto; Eclogae propheticae; Quis dives salvetur; Fragmente*, GCS, vol. 17 [Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1970], 162-163; ET: G. W. Butterworth, *Clement of Alexandria. The Exhortation to the Greeks, The Rich Man's Salvation, and the fragment of an address entitled To the Newly Baptized*, LCL [Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1919, repr. 1982], 279-283). Clement made a similar point in another of his works, *Stromata* 4.13. There, he affirmed that goods and possessions are not, in themselves, bad lest they be not a creation of God.

<sup>28</sup> Clement, *Quis dives salvetur* 13 (eds. Stählin, Früchtel and Treu, *Quis dives salvetur*, GCS, vol. 17, 167-68. ET: Butterworth, *Clement of Alexandria*, LCL, 295-97). Cf. also Clement, *Paedagogus* 2.3 and *Stromata* 6.12. In these passages he argued we ought to acquire only such objects as are useful for completing more than one task. Clement even identifies the types of "superfluities" he has in mind, including makeup, jewelry, silver dishware and other such decorous goods. True adornment is the pursuit of Christ and spiritual life rather than the wearing of jewelry. Clement, *Quis dives salvetur* 3. Cf. also Clement, *Paedagogus* 2.12, 3.7.

From that point, it seems that the Greek Fathers were in agreement with a detachment, as opposed to a renunciation, view of property.<sup>29</sup> This is not to say the renunciation view had disappeared,<sup>30</sup> for Epiphanius, in the mid-fourth century still found adherents to a renunciation view deserving of condemnation in his *Panarion*<sup>31</sup> and a fifth-century text (in the West) by an adherent to Pelagius' views argued for renunciation as well.<sup>32</sup> The Pelagian text insisted that only renunciation of property and wealth would ensure elimination of poverty for others. Yet, the detachment view was articulated by more and more of the ecclesiastical elite. One of Clement's early successors in the Alexandrian see, Peter, also preached on the need for detachment from property in his sermon *On Riches*.<sup>33</sup> Peter argued God makes a separation between the rich person and the *merciless* rich person (§14-15). The former gives little thought to his wealth and

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<sup>29</sup> Wolf-Dieter von Hauschild, "Christentum und Eigentum: Zum Problem eines altkirchlichen 'Sozialismus'" *Zeitschrift für Evangelische Ethik* 16 (1972): 34-49, argues that, while Jesus' teachings and the second-century Christians had laid the groundwork for a socialist, or proto-communist, trajectory, the views of Clement of Alexandria were so quickly accepted and disseminated that the earlier momentum was derailed. The teachings of Basil and John Chrysostom served to cement Clement's view for the late fourth and into the fifth centuries.

<sup>30</sup> Rainer Kampling, "'Have We Not Then Made a Heaven of Earth?' Rich and Poor in the Early Church" *Concilium* 22 (1986): 51-62, here 58-59.

<sup>31</sup> Epiphanius, *Panarion* 80.4 (PG 42.761, 764; ET: Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius*, 631-632). A sign that Clement's arguments held sway well into the late fourth century, Epiphanius at *Panarion* 60.1 (Her. 64), suggested that, were it not for the serpent's infusion of envy into human desires (cf. Gen 3), humans would be able to keep their material desires in check in accordance with their need. Furthermore, Epiphanius, at *Panarion* 61.3-4 (op. cit.) argued the acquisition of property through labor or other honest means is appropriate in so far as such behavior makes possible fulfilling the command of Christ to feed and care for the needy.

<sup>32</sup> The Pelagian tract is entitled, *On Wealth* (ed. Andreas Kessler, *Reichtumskritik und Pelagianismus: die pelagianische Diatribe de divitiis: Situierung, Lesetext, Übersetzung, Kommentar*, Paradosis, vol. 43 [Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1999]; ET: B. R. Rees, *The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* [Suffolk, U.K.: Boydell Press, 1991], 171-211). However, Richard Newhauser, *The Early History of Greed: The Sin of Avarice in Early Medieval Thought and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 89-90, suggests that the text is not so much about renunciation as about sufficiency of property, that readers since Augustine have been too influenced by his exaggerated reaction in his correspondence with Hilary of Syracuse. Perhaps Newhauser is right and the critique of avarice masks an acceptance of owning sufficient property, but one would be hardpressed to find in this Pelagian treatise a particular passage that supports this view. The author yields no ground to those who would support some ownership of private property.

The renunciation view was not only that of some divisive Christians, but may already be found in Philo. In one of the collected essays by Valentin Nikiprowetzky, included in his *Études Philoniennes, Patrimoines Judaïsme* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1996), 243-291, it is argued that Philo was like the Essenes insofar as he believed riches were useless and were very often the fruit of injustice. Philo believed the scriptural ideal is poverty and opulence is an affront to one's claims of love for men and love for the Torah.

<sup>33</sup> Birger Pearson and Tim Vivian, eds., *Two Coptic Homilies Attributed to Saint Peter of Alexandria: On Riches, On the Epiphany* (Rome: C.I.M., 1993). On the original "core homily" and its author, Peter, see 26-31. See also Tim Vivian, *St. Peter of Alexandria: Bishop and Martyr*, Studies in Antiquity and Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

shares it liberally with the poor; the latter is consumed with thoughts of wealth and despises the needs of the poor. Gregory Nazianzen preached a homily encouraging love for the poor, particularly those with serious health problems. He observed in this homily that disordered affection for property was responsible for the strife between persons and between nations.<sup>34</sup> Love for the poor begins, in part, with a recognition that property truly belongs only to God.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, Asterius of Amasea, in his homily *The Unjust Steward*, balanced a concern for the temporariness of property with each person's responsibility towards God for his or her use of property.<sup>36</sup> Everyone will be obliged one day to give an account of his or her use of property before God.<sup>37</sup>

At this point we may step back and paint in broader strokes the depiction of private property across these texts from both the classical writers and the Fathers in the Greek milieu to the time of Basil. First, there is a general unease about the existence of private property. Yet, none of the writers – with the possible exception of Menander, although he was not addressing the legal context – propose changes to the legal situation that protected property rights, for, in the near term, they surmised such changes would create more problems than they would solve. A second, equally important point, is the gradual shift, beginning with Seneca and continuing with the Christian writers, away from arguments about re-ordering property rights and towards re-ordering the interior disposition of the rich and poor. Property is temporary and so can never bring more than temporary pleasure. True happiness comes with the cultivation of virtue or, more Christianly, with the cultivation of a proper orientation of one's life towards God. In

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<sup>34</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 14.25. This argument is found in other Greek Fathers, including Clement of Alexandria, *Quis dives salvetur* 15; Asterius of Amasea, *The Unjust Steward*; Chrysostom, *Homilies on John* 19.3; Basil of Caesarea, *Hom.* 8.2 and 4, especially the former on account of the fact that Basil suggests God has brought the drought on the land in order to punish the people for their hoarding of goods.

<sup>35</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration* 14.29. Cf. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on I Corinthians* 10.3-4.

<sup>36</sup> Asterius of Amasea, *Hom.* 2 (*"The Unjust Steward"*).

<sup>37</sup> Asterius, *Hom.* 2.

concrete terms, this begins with a detachment from property. In any case, the church increasingly found itself responsible during the fourth century for the care and financial maintenance of a greater percentage of the population. One way both of managing the expectations of the “shallow poor” and of playing to the self-interest of the “rich” was to promote a vision for detachment from private property.

### Basil of Caesarea’s Homily 6

Our consideration of this text by Basil reveals how this detachment view of private property functioned within the context of a homily, for the call to be detached from property is precisely this homily’s purpose.<sup>38</sup> Specifically, we shall consider what was the *hermeneutical function* of this principle of detachment. For example, how did the principle apply to concrete situations, and, once applied, what applications for Christian living did it suggest? The

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<sup>38</sup> Basil of Caesarea, *Hom. 6 (On the Saying “I will tear down my barns...”)*. The critical edition is Basil of Caesarea, *Homélie sur la richesse*, ed. Yves Courtonne, Collection d’études anciennes (Paris: Firm-Didot, 1935) 15-37. ET: Hieroschemamonk Janis (Berzins), “Homily on the Words of St. Luke’s Gospel: ‘I will pull down my barns and build larger ones’ and on Avarice,” *Orthodox Life* 42 (1992): 10-17; M. F. Toal, *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, vol. 3 (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1959) 325-332; Walter Shewring, *Rich and Poor in Christian Tradition* (London: Burns and Oats, 1948) 51-62. Cf. especially 6.5, “Let the example of the condemned rich man be before you continually: how he guards what he has and strives for what he hopes to gain, not knowing whether he will live until tomorrow, today already sinning for tomorrow.” Πανταχοῦ σοι τὸ ὑπόδειγμα τοῦ κατηγορουμένου πλουσίου προσαπαντάτω· ὅς, τὰ μὲν ἤδη παρόντα φυλάσσων, περὶ δὲ τῶν ἐλπιζομένων ἀγωνιῶν, καὶ ἄδηλον ἔχων εἰ βιώσεται τὴν αὔριον, τὸ αὔριον σήμερον προημάρτανεν.

Paying special attention to Basil’s *Hom.6* may surprise some, for he has another homily entitled “On Detachment from Wealth” (*Hom. 21*; cf. PG 31.625-648; ET: *Saint Basil: Ascetical Works*, transl. M. Monica Wagner, FOTC 9 [Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1950], 487-506). *Hom. 21* situates detachment in the wider context of one’s need for a light burden while traveling the road known as the Christian life. (Basil connects this notion of the spiritual life as a road or way to Psalm 118:1, yet one perhaps also ought to have in mind the “two ways” teaching of the Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas, Irenaeus *A.H.* V.28.1 and other Christian literature). Basil also gave careful thought to private property in his *Hom. 8* (“In the Time of Famine and Drought”). In *Hom. 8.2* Basil suggested what is enough is often far less than people presume; for example, he said that, at any one time, it is enough to possess only one tunic and to have in the kitchen only one loaf of bread. Incidentally, an echo of this point may be found in Cyril of Alexandria, *Paschal Homilies* 11.3. Cf. also Basil’s *Shorter Rules* Q. 92, in which text Basil affirmed that property cannot in itself be bad lest it be not a creation of God. Although restricting this study to *Hom. 6* removes from our study some of this larger perspective about property, one gains instead the ability to perceive the hermeneutical function of detachment both in regards to Basil’s reading of a particular, biblical text and in his reading of a concrete, social problem (here, famine) that he constructs for his audience.

objectification of the hermeneutical function of the principle of detachment may very well open a space for dialogue between the world of the Fathers and that of Catholic social thought.

The context for Basil's *Hom. 6* is unclear. The latter half of the homily confronts problems resulting from a famine, so it may be that the homily was delivered at Caesarea following the particularly devastating famine that began in Cappadocia in 368.<sup>39</sup> It was during this time that Basil made plans for a hospice and pilgrimage center to be constructed just outside the city's walls. The homily was clearly directed towards those with some financial means in the midst of this time of famine for, in view of its consideration of rewards and punishments in the afterlife, Basil preaches here a redemptive understanding of almsgiving. In this sense, the detachment view of property functions as a pastoral tool for helping the congregation apply redemptive almsgiving in their own lives.

The content of the homily centers around a consideration of Jesus' parable about the rich man who, upon discovering an unusually bountiful harvest among his crops, decided to build bigger barns to store the harvest for himself (cf. Lk 12:16-18). Basil accepted that Jesus left little doubt his own wish was that the rich man distribute the excess harvest to the poor rather than storing it up for himself. Thus, the homily challenged the appropriateness of superfluous property, and this was not an unimportant matter to Basil. As bishop of Caesarea, he oversaw a wealthy, if not particularly prominent, ecclesiastical see during a time in which imperial legislation compelled his office to distribute this wealth to the poor. It is understandable that he would preach what he was practicing, and the sermon is a remarkably versatile tool in the hands

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<sup>39</sup> I find no speculation as to an exact date for this homily among any of several scholars who have evaluated it. Susan Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, seems to assume that it is post-368, but without explicitly saying so (cf. pp. 107-109). The editor of the homily, Yves Courtonne, nowhere speculates on a possible date, but only accepts as likely the suggestion of A. Puech, *Histoire de la littérature grecque chrétienne*, 3 vols (Paris: Société d'édition "Les belles lettres," 1928-1930), III.266, in Courtonne on p. 7, that it seems to agree with the famine situation that is explicitly the subject of Basil's *Hom. 8*.

of Basil. In this case, the biblical passage itself makes a compelling case for social action, but Basil added to the biblical text the experience of his own relief work on behalf of the poor and sick in Caesarea. He also painted word-pictures that critique the character flaws he saw in his own congregants. In short, Basil was forming the moral imagination of his audience. His congregants could enter briefly into worlds of the poor or of the rich that they might not otherwise know. Even reading the homily today, one can feel, taste and see the problems of the world as Basil wanted us to see them, inasmuch as one can feel, taste and see the joys of heaven that await those who detach themselves from property.<sup>40</sup>

Turning now to a more detailed consideration of the principle of detachment in this homily, one discovers no less than four hermeneutical functions for the principle, four ways in which the principle of detachment interprets either human life or the Christian life or the surrounding culture or some combination of the three. To begin with, and perhaps most important, the principle reveals that avarice, not property, is the rich person's problem. In the homily's opening paragraph, Basil lets the biblical text do most of the speaking, but he situates our reading of the parable in terms of the testing of souls. Some souls are tested by poverty, he suggests, but others are tested with respect to their propensity towards arrogance. The story of Job in the Hebrew bible is the story of one who was tested by poverty – and passed; Jesus' parable of the rich man with a bountiful harvest is the latter test, and he failed. Thus, Basil wants his hearers to read Jesus' parable with the story of Job in the back of their minds. Basil writes of the rich man, "His greed would not allow him to part with what he already possessed, but he was

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<sup>40</sup> My acquaintance with Basil's text made me rather alert to an NPR news story I encountered in late December 2006. It surveyed current research by neuro scientists on how mechanisms within the brain cause us to feel as though we've participated in something just by thinking about it (e.g., I can experience the taste of salsa in my mouth just by thinking about salsa or seeing it set before me on a table). It will be interesting to find out where this research goes.

unable to put away anything new because of space.”<sup>41</sup> The rich man had what we oxymoronically refer to today as “a good problem”. Yet, to solve this good problem, the rich man made all the wrong decisions. To Basil, the man’s inability to to detach himself from property revealed an arrogant, avaricious spirit. Attachment to property, then, is merely a symptom of a more damning problem. Thus, the detachment principle is a tool that cuts to the heart of a person’s character.

Second, the principle of detachment deepens one’s awareness of God’s providence. In *Hom.* 6.2, Basil writes, “Think, O man, of who it is that has given to you. Remember yourself, who you are, what your duty is, from whom you have received it, why you have been preferred to others. You have become an agent of the good God, a steward for your fellow servants.”<sup>42</sup> The person attached to property does not want to believe that anyone but himself or herself is responsible for his or her acquisition of property. Consequently, such a person could not imagine that his or her ownership of property comes with a responsibility to others. Yet, to Basil, for whatever reason God has seen fit to distribute goods to all via the labor of a few. The result is a new way of thinking about one’s place in the world. Basil invites his hearers to “imitate the earth”; much as the earth brings forth fruit for the enjoyment of others, so too the rich person ought to imitate the earth by laboring for the enjoyment of the needy. This is God’s providential care for the world. People with financial means and the ability to labor are to transfer their wealth, i.e., the property that comes as a result of their labor, to those who are unemployed or

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<sup>41</sup> Basil, *Hom.* 6.1 (ed. Y. Courtonne, *Homélie sur la richesse*, 15; ET: H. Janis, “Homily on the Words of St. Luke’s Gospel,” *Orthodox Life* 42 [1992], 10): ὑποχωρεῖν μὲν τοῖς παλαιοῖς διὰ τὴν πλεονεξίαν μὴ συγχωρῶν, ὑποδέχασθαι δὲ τὰ νέα διὰ τὸ πλῆθος μὴ ἐξαρκῶν.

<sup>42</sup> Basil, *Hom.* 6.2 (ed. Y. Courtonne, *Homélie sur la richesse*, 19; ET: H. Janis, “Homily on the Words of St. Luke’s Gospel,” *Orthodox Life* 42 [1992], 11): Σύνες, ἄνθρωπε, τοῦ δεδωκότος. Μνήσθητι σεαυτοῦ, τίς εἶ, τί οἰκονομεῖς, παρὰ τίνος ἔλαβες, διὰ τί τῶν πολλῶν προεκρίθεις. Ἄγαθοῦ Θεοῦ γέγονας ὑπηρετής, οἰκονόμος τῶν ὁμοδούλων.

underemployed. To be detached from property, then, is to be attached to a particular view about God, about God's providence.

Third, the principle of detachment reveals a Christian anthropology in which the commonness of humanity serves as the basis for detachment. At the mid-point of the homily Basil departs from the biblical parable and tells a parable of his own.<sup>43</sup> He describes a poor father who has finally reached the point at which he is completely out of resources. The family has no more grain, and so the father has gone to the market in search of a vendor willing to give to him some for free (incidentally, Basil's use of grain ties his own parable to the biblical one). Finding no such vendor, the father must now decide which of his sons he must sell in order to buy more grain for the family. Basil's audience is then treated to a delightful word picture. Basil describes the groans of the father, the fear of his children, the tension in the family, the pangs of hunger. Then from out of the picture's background emerges the sinister rich man with grain to spare but who will neither share it with the poor man nor sell it at a discount to him. Basil writes, "With a myriad of tears he [i.e., the poor father] goes to sell his dearest child, but his suffering does not move you [i.e., the rich man], you take no account of nature...His tears do not arouse your pity, his groans do not soften your heart."<sup>44</sup> The experience of the father in this parable is quite similar to what nutritionists understand today to be the third and final stage of the human experience of famine: exhaustion, which "is marked by the collapse of all cooperative effort, including maintenance of the family unit."<sup>45</sup> Basil has taken his audience through a roller-coaster of emotions with this parable. First, the audience groaned with the poor father. Then, it seethed with

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<sup>43</sup> Although this is probably not a story of an actual event witnessed by Basil, in his *Homily on Psalm 14* 4, he relates a similar event and says explicitly it was something he had seen. Cf. Agnes C. Way, *Saint Basil: Exegetic Homilies*, FOTC, vol. 146 (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 189.

<sup>44</sup> Basil, *Hom.* 6.4 (ed. Y. Courtonne, *Homélie sur la richesse*, 25; ET: H. Janis, "Homily on the Words of St. Luke's Gospel," *Orthodox Life* 42 [1992], 13): Καὶ ὁ μὲν μετὰ μυρίων δακρύων τὸν φίλτατον τῶν παίδων ἀπεμπολήσων ἔρχεται· σὲ δὲ οὐ κάμπτει τὸ πάθος, οὐ λογισμὸν λαμβάνεις τῆς φύσεως...Οὐ δάκρυν σοι ἔλειπνόν, οὐ στεναγμὸς καρδίαν μαλάσσει.

<sup>45</sup> Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, 91-92.

anger at the vendor. Finally, it joined Basil in jeering the vendor for his avarice. The consequence of all this is that detachment from private property breeds a certain amount of solidarity with the poor, but this is a double-edged sword. From a pastoral perspective, if one person can do it (i.e., be detached from property), so everyone else ought to do it as well, and those that do not rightly deserve criticism. Yet, this perspective actually obscures the poor, as such.<sup>46</sup> Although Basil's audience will, after hearing this homily, incline towards the poor rather than the rich, the poor father here is little more than a tool to move the sympathies of those with property towards an attitude of detachment. The poor are not Basil's ultimate concern here; for that matter, and perhaps as one explanation for Basil's own treatment, the poor were not mentioned at all in the biblical parable.

Fourth, the principle of detachment elucidates an alternative economic system used by God to measure wealth and poverty. Much as in the world's economy a single currency – wealth, or at least one's access to wealth – is the measure of each person, so in God's alternative system is there a single currency: treasure in heaven, or at least one's pursuit of that treasure. On this score, Jesus' words in Matthew 25, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom..." are particularly poignant. Basil recalls these words of Jesus to explain that God pays with heavenly currency for the clothing, food and shelter needs of the poor.<sup>47</sup> The possessor of private property, then, must both appreciate the value of heavenly currency and be willing to sell his or her goods to God in exchange for it. For this reason, the principle of detachment defines what happens to each person in the next age, in the life to come. There is a Judgment Day, a day in the future at which God will settle his account with every person. Those who are detached from property

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<sup>46</sup> For a different reason – from the perspective of redemptive almsgiving – Holman, *The Hungry are Dying*, 54-55, 103, 107-109, seems to agree that the poor, as such, are not the main concern of Basil here.

<sup>47</sup> On the matter of divine compensation for rejecting earthly goods, cf. Cyprian of Carthage, *On the Lapsed* 12.

neither worry about that day nor when it will come. They are prepared to enter the next age at every moment. There is no “tomorrow” to such a person; tomorrow is always today.<sup>48</sup>

What all of this leads to, in fact and rather surprisingly, is a denouncement of *private* property in favor of *common* property. Near the end of the homily Basil writes that the rich, “[Grab] what is common property, they make it their own on account of their priority. If only each were to take enough to meet his own requirements and the rest leave to those in need, no one would be rich, no one poor, no one needy.” (*Hom.* 6.7). This is an echo of Aristophanes and Plato, but I do not think we should confuse Basil’s understanding of *common* with *communistic*. Basil is very much in the line of Clement of Alexandria in arguing for sufficiency in private property, for in the very same part of the homily he writes, “What is a miser? One who does not keep within the bounds of sufficiency.”<sup>49</sup> To Basil, everyone should possess what he or she *needs*, which is not necessarily the same as what he or she *wants*. Thus, it seems that Basil is wrestling with two emotions at the same time, and this would not be out of character for a good pastor. On the one hand, he recognizes there is an ideal of common property. On the other hand, as a pastor, he will be happy if his congregants agree at least to detachment.

To summarize, the hermeneutical function of the principle of detachment reveals that the principle is as much a multi-faceted tool in Basil’s workshop as the homily itself in terms of forming the moral imagination of his congregants. The principle correctly interprets the character of a person with superfluous property. It corrects misunderstandings of God’s providence. It evaluates the extent to which we are in solidarity with the needy. Finally, it pulls back the curtain on how the divine economy works and defends the wealth in that economy over and against the wealth in the earthly economies. The hermeneutical function of the principle is another pastoral

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<sup>48</sup> Basil, *Hom.* 6.6. Basil invites his hearers to recall the words of Solomon in Proverbs 3:28 (“Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it’”) and Proverbs 27:1 (“Do not boast about tomorrow”).

<sup>49</sup> Basil, *Hom.* 6.7.

tool. In Basil's hands, it is used to proclaim the ideal of common property while accepting detachment as a sufficient enough change in behavior.

### Private Property in Catholic Social Teaching

We pass over some fifteen centuries now to consider the teachings of the modern Catholic Church on private property. In doing so, we may ask to what extent it may be a dialogue partner with the patristic world. In 2004, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace published an "authoritative synthesis" of CST.<sup>50</sup> It brought together the major themes and particular teachings of the Catholic Church on social ethics since *Rerum novarum* (1891). Private property is taken up in the compendium's fourth chapter. Though tempting simply to take up our review of CST with this text, it would be a disservice to the *Compendium* if we did not first understand some of the instructional trajectory regarding private property teaching it summarized.<sup>51</sup>

*Rerum novarum* identified private property as a natural right, and, at the time, this was an important claim in support of workers with few avenues for improving their situation.<sup>52</sup> The

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<sup>50</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004). English and Italian editions were prepared first; subsequent translations were prepared from the Italian. This was not the first such compendium from the PCJP; indeed, they had in 2000 approved a work prepared by the staff of the Acton Institute based in the United States. Robert A. Sirico and Maciej Zieba, eds. *The Social Agenda: A Collection of Magisterial Texts* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000). The 2004 compendium, however, is substantially more broad; in the preface to the 2000 book, the president of the PCJP, François-Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan, mentioned that the later book was then in development and that it would be the "authoritative synthesis of the social teaching of the Church" (vii).

<sup>51</sup> For lengthier studies of this topic, cf. I. G. Gabriel, "Eigentum im Dienste des Menschen. Die Lehre zum Eigentum in den päpstlichen Enzykliken von Rerum novarum bis Centesimus annus und die Entwicklung in Oesterreich im Ueberblick," in *Der Mensch ist der Weg der Kirche. Festschrift für Johannes Schasching*, eds. H. Schambeck and R. Weiler (Berlin: Dunker and Humblot, 1992), 17-33; Johan Verstraeten, "Eigendomsrecht herdacht. Het recht van de mens op een rechtmatig deel van de goederen," *Communio* 23 (1998): 1, 29-47.

<sup>52</sup> It made this claim by balancing seemingly incompatible approaches to defending a person's right to private property. In an important article on this topic, Ernest Fortin, "'Sacred and Inviolable': *Rerum Novarum* and Natural Rights" *Theological Studies* 53 (1992): 203-233, critiqued *Rerum novarum* (mostly, *Quadragesimo anno* and later CST more briefly) for its claim to being Thomistic but adopting the language of Locke and doing justice to neither in the process. Fortin pointed out that *Rerum novarum* enshrined a person's right to private property both in civil law (i.e., it is a matter of law that man is able to hold private property, à la Aquinas, in RN 22) and in natural law (i.e., property is a *sacred* and *inviolable* right, à la Locke and, later, Adam Smith, in RN 9 and 46) at the same time. Such a synthesis, according to Fortin, fostered a rights-oriented culture within and without the Church. Moreover, it

encyclical challenged employers to pay workers a just wage, which was expected to facilitate their acquisition of land and property for personal use. Property was deemed a constitutive expression of human dignity. In 1931, Pope Pius XI issued *Quadragesimo anno*. Although the encyclical explicitly affirmed the teaching of *Rerum novarum*, its teaching on private property moved decisely away from legal and natural law arguments. Instead, it emphasized the communal responsibility each person has toward the use of his or her private property. It further claimed that superfluous income and property was *not* at the discretion of the owner; rather, what is superfluous belongs to the needy.<sup>53</sup> This introduced into CST discourse a concept that Pius XI would himself recall in later documents (e.g., *Sertum Laetitiae*), that of the universal destination of the world's goods.

Three decades later, Pope John XXIII issued *Mater et magistra* (1961). In the balance of communitarian versus individual rights to private property, the balance in this encyclical continued to tip slightly towards the former, for John XXIII emphasized the universal destination of the earth's goods, paying particular attention to the needs of poor, rural farmers oppressed by ever-decreasing prices in the face of increasing, global competition. Only with *Gaudium et spes* (1965) was a link drawn between the right of all to the earth's goods and the right of poor people to take from wealthy people what they need for survival (cf. *GS* 69). Then, in 1981, the various threads of private property teaching are drawn together when Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Laborem exercens*, returned to an earlier theme that the right to private property is to be subordinated to common use. Work is the source of property, this encyclical argued, and property is to be used to serve the furthering needs of labor. Thus, corporations that pursue capital (i.e., possessions, property) in order to diminish labor transgress the nature of capital and

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continues to make it difficult for the Church to support actions by civil authorities who might wish to restrict property rights when presented with injustice.

<sup>53</sup> QA 50-52. This teaching would continue in *Gaudium et spes* (1965) and *Populorum progressio* (1967).

so deny the common use of goods. John Paul II extended this argument even further in his encyclical *Centesimus annus* (1991). In it, he argued the ethical criterion for owning the means of production (in the agrarian as well as in the business sector, including the ownership of corporate stocks) is the creation of meaningful work (cf. §43). Thus, governments, corporations, and trans-national institutions are obliged to ensure human persons have access to meaningful work through the common use of property, a means of production.

Though brief, this survey provides some sense of the history the 2004 *Compendium* sought to capture. At least three elements of the Church's understanding of private property are summarized within it. First, the compendium reminds its readers that CST has situated private property's origin in the teaching of Genesis 1:28 that humans multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. "By means of work and making use of the gift of intelligence, people... 'make part of the earth [their] own'".<sup>54</sup> Consequently, the acquisition of private property is not, from the beginning, an expression of sin but an expression of human freedom to fulfill the command of God. As discussed earlier, this was not the teaching of the Fathers, for they were unequivocal in their understanding that private property had its origins in avarice, and avarice began with the sin of Adam and Eve. However, a second point made in the compendium counter-balances its seeming praise for private property. The compendium teaches that the opportunity to acquire private property ought to be made accessible to all, for only in such an environment may authentic "social and democratic economic policy"<sup>55</sup> thrive. Thus, private property is not an absolute right in CST. Rather, "the right to private property is subordinated to the right to common use".<sup>56</sup> In

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<sup>54</sup> Pontifical Council, *Compendium*, 99, drawing, as the compendium does, on a citation from John Paul II's encyclical *Centesimus annus* 6.

<sup>55</sup> Pontifical Council, *Compendium*, 99.

<sup>56</sup> Pontifical Council, *Compendium*, 99. This goes back to Thomas Aquinas, according to whom only the *usus communis rerum* is natural law. Private property is subordinate to the *usus communitarium*. Private property, then, is only a "good idea" to Aquinas, which he has taken over from Aristotle et al. (cf. Aquinas, *S.T.* II.2.Q.66., Art. 1 and 2; Aristotle, *Politics*, Book II, v, 1263a).

other words, corresponding to a celebration of private property is a celebration that the earth's goods were created by God for the enjoyment of all. Every person must be willing to distribute his or her private property to others in accordance with the need(s) of others. The third component to private property in CST, which corresponds to the second, is its social function. Whereas the second component emphasized each person's responsibility to share what he or she has with others, this third component considers the responsibility had by private property's owner to consider what might be the social effects associated with possessing that property. According to the compendium, the owners of private property must always bear in mind the common good. "From this there arises the duty on the part of owners not to let the goods in their possession go idle and to channel them to productive activity, even entrusting them to others who are desirous and capable of putting them to use in production."<sup>57</sup> Moreover, this is not to be limited to the agrarian sphere of developing nations but also to include the knowledge economy of more developed nations. Indeed, CST is clear that it is incumbent upon those who possess knowledge and technical skills to share such "property" with the poor in order that the poor may have access to the same benefits as are obtainable in the more developed economies.<sup>58</sup>

These things having been said, it is clear that CST has grown in its appreciation for the difficulties of private property. Certainly, one is able to appreciate the influence of historical context on the particular arguments of each CST document. Oppression of workers in the late 1800s was as much an influence on *RN* as, for example, was globalization of trade and agriculture on *Mater et Magistra* and was the burgeoning "knowledge economy" on *Laborem exercens*. By 2004, it is clear that CST has recognized the "problem" with private property can only be solved with an appeal to the common good. It argued private property is, by nature,

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<sup>57</sup> Pontifical Council, *Compendium*, 100.

<sup>58</sup> Pontifical Council, *Compendium*, 101-02.

good, but that every person must subordinate his or her demand to own property to the needs of others. This, of course, will require that every person make some determination about the real needs of others, and this decision is either helped or hurt by one's ability to accurately apply the somewhat elusive criteria of the "common good".

### Conclusion

Early Christian teaching on detachment from private property took its cues from the classical and philosophical context that preceded it, in which it was shown there existed a tension between the ideal of common property and the judicial reality of protecting private property rights. The Church Fathers, including Basil, could not avoid holding in tension the same things. Yet, the Fathers paid greater attention than did the classical authors to the injustices created by unmitigated accumulation of wealth and property. They advocated for a "sufficiency" test; to pass the test, a person needed to detach himself or herself from private property. Basil's use of the detachment principle revealed that attitudes towards property are a barometer of one's Christian faith. This is why the principle could function hermeneutically in so many ways – economically, anthropologically, theologically and eschatologically. It was an extremely versatile, pastoral tool.

Towards the beginning of this paper I suggested that Basil's homily is helpful for purposes of constructing a dialogue between patristic and modern Catholic social thought because its theological ideas in relation to detachment open up for us a Ricoeurian, "world in front of the text". Catholic social thought today nowhere advocates for detachment from private property in the sense that we have seen from Basil and other Fathers. Its liberationist periphery aims at a reversal of property fortunes rather than a change in attitude, and official church

documents uphold private property as a constitutive expression of human dignity and freedom. The patristic world's wide concern with detachment has been lost. A recovery of the world in front of Basil's homily for Catholic social thought today may include, among other things, a repudiation of specific manifestations of avarice, a renewal of teaching about God's providential care of the world (that may not include material prosperity), and a re-engagement with eschatology in the biblical texts. Catholic social thought today likes to think of itself as concerned with charity rather than justice, for only the former is within the scope of its expertise; yet, putting a human face on avarice and on destitution – which Basil does in his homily – may open further doors of justice via charity.