

SAINT BASIL THE GREAT, MASTER OF PHILANTHROPY

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ABSTRACT. The present study aims to highlight the concept of philanthropy in the writings of the Saint Basil the Great, the manner in which it was materialized during the lifetime of the Great Cappadocian Father and its relevance for the mission of the Orthodox Church in the contemporary society. Man as a social being and philanthropy as a result of the communion in love, following the Trinitarian model, are the main themes of Saint Basil's sermons. The study shows that the philanthropy-centered discourse of Saint Basil would not have any impact if it weren't reinforced by the personal example, when he shared to the poor all his wealth inherited from his parents and built a whole philanthropic complex on the outskirts of Caesarea. Regarding the importance of St. Basil's writings for the current life of the Church, the study points out that St. Basil was actively involved in the life of society and tried, with audacity and perseverance, to denounce and correct its inequalities. In so doing, he proved to be a leader of the Church whose spiritual, administrative, and moral authority was so great that it could no longer be ignored or challenged by the authority of the state.

Keywords: Saint Basil the Great, Christian philanthropy, social welfare, history of the Christian Church

Preparing an article on Saint Basil the Great as a master of the liturgical, monastic, family and philanthropic life is difficult: how to comprise in just a few pages, almost the entire life and work of the Great Father from Cappadocia? The eulogy by Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, presented on the death of Saint Basil the Great, which was published in the collection *Sources Chrétiennes*, contains 95 pages (the Greek version)¹. On the works and activity of Saint Basil the Great,

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¹ Grégoire de Nazianze, "Discours 43. Pour le Grand Basil. Oraison funèbre," in *Grégoire de Nazianze, Discours 42-43*. Introduction, texte critique, traduction et notes par Jean Bernardi (Paris : Les Editions du Cerf, 1992), 116-307. I also found an old Romanian version translated by Archimandrite Theoctist Scriban, which it is difficult to read because of its archaic language

this impressive personality of the Christian Church many articles, studies, books have been written both in Romania² and abroad³. Subsequently I was told that the theme I had to speak about was reduced to the *matter of philanthropy* and, even so, I found myself before a theme that was largely approached in numerous theological and historical treatises⁴.

and spelling: *Cuvânt funebru a Sfântului Grigorie Teologul, Arhiepiscopul Constantinoplei în lauda Sfântului Vasile cel Mare, Arhiepiscopul Cezareei Capadociei*, translated into Romanian and published by Archimandrite Theoctist Scriban (București: Tipografia Lucrătorilor Asociați Passagiului Român, 1869).

² Prof. dr. Teodor M. Popescu, "Caritatea creștină în Biserica veche" [Christian Charity in the early Church], *Biserica Ortodoxă Română* LXIII, no. 1-3 (1945): 20-66; The commemoration of 1600 years from the death of this Great Father of the Church, in 1979, generated a special emulation among the Romanian theologians, which found its expression in a honorary volume, *Sfântul Vasile cel Mare – Închinare la 1600 de ani de la săvârșirea sa* [Saint Basil the Great – Tribute on the Commemoration of 1600 Years of his Death], (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1980). See also the volume by Metropolitan Nestor Vornicescu, *Despre viața și opera Sfântului Vasile cel Mare. La 1600 de ani de la trecerea sa către Domnul* [On the Life and Works of Saint Basil the Great. Commemoration on 1600 Years from his passing to the eternal life], (Craiova: Editura Mitropoliei Olteniei, 1979), as well as the first issue of the magazine *Ortodoxia* from 1979, which was dedicated to Saint Basil the Great. During the year 2009, dedicated to Saint Basil the Great and other Cappadocian Fathers, the first three volumes of the Collection *Studia Basiliana* were published: *Sfântul Vasile cel Mare. Închinare la 1630 de ani* [Saint Basil the Great. Dedication on the commemoration of 1630 years]. Second edition revised and expanded by Emilian Popescu and Adrian Marinescu (București: Basilica, 2009) (cited as *Studia Basiliana 1*); *Sfântul Vasile cel Mare. Închinare la 1630 de ani/ Saint Basil the Great. Dedication on the commemoration of 1630 years*. Edition coordinated by Emilian Popescu and Adrian Marinescu, București: Editura Basilica a Patriarhiei Române, 2009 (cited as *Studia Basiliana 2*); *Sfântul Vasile cel Mare. Închinare la 1630 de ani* [Saint Basil the Great. Dedication on the commemoration of 1630 years. Documents of the Symposium of the Romanian Commission for Ecclesiastic History. București-Cernica, 2-3 October 2008]. Published by Emilian Popescu and Mihai-Ovidiu Cățoi, București: Editura Basilica a Patriarhiei Române, 2009 (cited as *Studia Basiliana 3*).

³ See the following studies dedicated to Saint Basil the Great and some references in volumes of Patristics and History of the Church: L'Abbé Bayle, *Saint Basile. Archevêque de Césarée (329-379)*. Cours d'éloquence sacrée, Avignon, 1878; Otto Bardenhewer, *Les Pères de l'Eglise. Leur vie et leurs œuvres* (Paris: Bloud et Cie, 1905), 68-88; Joseph Tixeront, *Précis de Patrologie* (Paris: Librairie Victor Leconte, 1927), 222-226; Stanislas Giet, *Les idées et l'action sociale de Saint Basile le Grand* (Paris: Gabalda, 1941); Johannes Quasten, *Patrologia, vol. II Dal Concilio di Nicea a quello di Calcedonia* (Torino: Marietti, 1980): 206-238; "Βασίλειος ὁ Μέγας," in Στυλιάνου Παπαδόπουλου, *Πατρολογία. Τόμος Β'. Ο Τέταρτος αιώνας: Ανατολή και Δύση* (Αθήνα: ΓΡΗΓΟΡΗ, 1990), 355-407; Averil Cameron, Peter Garnsey (ed), *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. XIII: The Late Empire, AD 337-425 (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 252; Augustine Casiday and Frederick Norris (ed), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. II: Constantine to c. 600 (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 360-361.

⁴ Pr. Prof. dr. Theodor Bodogae, "Un apel fierbinte la solidaritate creștină: predica Sfântului Vasile la vreme de foamete și de secetă," *Glasul Bisericii*, no. 5-6 (1979): 479-488; Deacon Teodor

That is why, without claiming to say inedited things, I will try to summarize the ideas referring to the assistance of the neighbour, as they can be found in the writings and homilies of Saint Basil the Great, to present the manner in which they were put into practice and to emphasize their relevance for the mission of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the context of the contemporary society.

Man as a social being and philanthropy as a result of the communion in love in the thinking and homilies of Saint Basil the Great

In his writings, Saint Basil the Great insisted on the fact that *man is a social being and he has the vocation of living in community, no matter whether he is a layman or a monk*. This idea is expressed clearly when, referring to the duty of the monk to live within a community and not alone, he said: “when one is living in association with others, the grace privately bestowed on each individual becomes the common possession of his fellows. “To one, indeed, is given the word of wisdom; and to another, the word of knowledge; to another, faith, to another, prophecy, to another, the grace of healing” (1 Cor 12:8,9) and so on. He who receives any of these gifts does not possess it for his own sake but rather for the sake of others, so that, in the life passed in community, the operation of the Holy Spirit in the individual is at the same time necessarily transmitted to all. In case of several persons living together, each enjoys his own gift and enhances it by giving others a share, besides reaping benefit from the gifts of others as if they were his own”⁵. In other words, in living within a community each individual enjoys his gift and multiplies it by sharing it with the others.

Damşa, “Bogăția și sărăcia în lumina omiliilor Sfântului Vasile cel Mare,” *Mitropolia Banatului*, no. 4-6 (1979): 301-313, republished in *Studia Basiliana* 3, 345-361; Pr. Magistrand Mihai Georgescu, “Idei morale și sociale în Comentariul la Psalmii al Sf. Vasile cel Mare,” *Studii Teologice*, no. 7-8 (1958): 463-475; Liviu Petcu, “Sfântul Vasile cel Mare. Panegirist al milosteniei,” in *Studia Basiliana* 3, 159-180; Metrop. Antonie Plămădeală, “Idei sociale în Sfântul Vasile cel Mare” in *Închinare la 1600 de ani de la săvârșirea sa*, 284-311 (republished in *Studia Basiliana* 1, 387-658); Pr. Ioan Popa, “Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, predicator al milosteniei,” *Studii Teologice*, no. 3-4 (1971): 224-34 (republished in *Studia Basiliana* 3, 329-345); Dr. N. Vătămanu, “1600 de ani de la înființarea Vasiliadei-cel dintâi așezământ de asistență socială și sanitară,” *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, no. 3-4 (1969): 297-312; Ion Vicovan, “Sfântul Vasile cel Mare-teologul și modelul filantropiei,” in *Studia Basiliana* 3, 144-259.

⁵ “On the necessity of living in the company of those who are striving for the same objective that of pleasing God and the difficulty and hazards of living as a solitary” in Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Scrieri. Partea a doua. Asceticele* (București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1980), 231-233. On the monasteries founded by Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus said that they were close to “his cenobitic communities and, instead of distinguishing and separating the one from the other, as if by some intervening wall, he brought them together and united them, in order that the contemplative spirit might not be cut off from

And the foundation of the cenobitic life is love, which has as model and origin the Trinitarian love: “Nothing, indeed, is so compatible with our nature as living in society and in dependence upon one another and as loving our own kind”⁶. The communion in love stands at the basis of family life, because, within the family there is an increased responsibility of one for the other and in the exercise of this responsibility man becomes truly a person, a factor of great efficiency in the life of the other and of the society⁷. Also, the prayers read by the priest during the Liturgy of Saint Basil the Great render clearly the idea of the brotherly relation that exists between the Christians from all the ages and from all the places and the necessity of philanthropy⁸. They have a communitarian role through that they determine a Christian to be aware of the fact that man does not achieve salvation all alone, but only in communion with his brothers, through the bond of love⁹. Even in his canons, the Great Cappadocian Father insists on the fact that healing must be decided not depending on time, but depending on the

society, nor the active life be uninfluenced by the contemplative, but that, like sea and land, by an interchange of their several gifts, they might unite in promoting the one object, the glory of God,” (Grégoire de Nazianze, “Discours 43. Pour le Grand Basil. Oraison funèbre,” 261). See also Archdeacon Prof. dr. Ioan Floca, “Sfântul Vasile cel Mare- reorganizator al vieții monastice” in *Sfântul Vasile cel Mare – Închinare la 1600 de ani de la săvârșirea sa*, 331-354.

- ⁶ Sfântul Vasile cel Mare, *Scrieri. Partea a doua. Asceticele*, 225; Rev. Magistrand Mihai Georgescu, “Idei morale și sociale în Comentariul la Psalmi al Sf. Vasile cel Mare,” *Studii Teologice*, no. 7-8 (1958): 463-475 also refers to the duty of loving our neighbor (φιλάλληλον) in the commentaries of Saint Basil the Great.
- ⁷ In his *Homily on Psalm 1*, Saint Basil the Great shows that when Prophet David blesses “the man who walks not in the council of the ungodly,” “he does not exclude women from this blessing. For as the creation of both man and woman enjoyed and equal honor, so is the reward given for both in the same honor.” See Saint Basil the Great, *Scrieri. Partea întâia. Omilii la Hexaeron. Omilii la Psalmi. Omilii la cuvântări* (București; Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1986), 186.
- ⁸ *Liturghierul*, published with the approval of the Holy Synod and with the blessing of Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe, 2008), 242-244. To this respect, the prayer after the Anaphora is very suggestive: “Remember, Lord, those who bear fruit and do good works in Your holy churches, and those who remember the poor. Reward them with Your rich and heavenly gifts. Grant them in return for earthly things, heavenly gifts; for temporal, eternal; for corruptible, incorruptible.”
- ⁹ Rev. Mircea Nișcovescu, “Teologia Sfântului Vasile cel Mare în rugăciunea euharistică,” *Studii Teologice*, no. 5-6 (1967): 290-301 (republished in *Studia Basiliana* 1, 642-658); On the communitarian aspect of the Holy Liturgy in general, see Rev. Prof. dr. Ioan Bria, “Aspectul comunitar al dumnezeieștii Euharistiei,” *Studii Teologice*, no. 7-8 (1959): 417-428; Rev. Prof. dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Spiritualitate și comuniune în Liturghia Ortodoxă* (București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2004), 8: “No one can achieve perfection and a profound faith without the help of the others and without showing his progression in perfecting the relationships with the others. The Orthodox Liturgy answers to this belief in a special and pronounced manner, nurturing the spiritual communion between Christians with the unspeakable content and rich depth of the Christian faith.”

“manner of repentance”, and these are a proof of the love which aimed to reintegrate the fallen individual into communion with the Church¹⁰.

The communion in love is the one that stands at the basis of philanthropy. In his Homily on Psalm 14, referring to the words of Christ: “Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away”, Saint Basil fundamentals the duty of helping the neighbor on this social nature of man: “*these words urge to social action, to mutual love, to what is characteristic to our nature. Man is a social and sociable being.* In our social living, in the relationships we have with the others it is necessary to offer to help the poor”¹¹. Saint Basil exhorts the Christian not to use only for their own needs the goods given by God, and thus to prove worse than the animals that use in common the natural fruits of the earth: “Flocks of sheep graze together on the hillside. Herds of horses feed upon the same plain. And all living creatures permit each other to satisfy their need for food, but we hoard what is common and keep for ourselves what belongs to many others”¹². In another sermon, referring to bats he said: “what natural love bats have for each other! How they interlace like a chain and hang the one upon the other! A very rare spectacle among men, who for the greater part prefer individual and private life to the union of common life”¹³.

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In 367-368, when the provinces of Asia Minor, among which Caesarea Cappadocia were struck by famine and drought, Saint Basil the Great, as priest, evoked in numerous sermons the sufferance of people and animals. Saint Gregory of Nazianzus tells us that Saint Basil could not make bread fall from the sky, but, through his penetrating word, he opened the granaries of the rich and satiated the poor, fed in famine the hungry, filled the humble with every good thing, as the Scripture says¹⁴.

¹⁰ See, for example, the second canon, referring to women who abort deliberately or the forth canon referring to polygamy (Dr. Dr. Nicodim Milaș, *Canoanele Bisericii Ortodoxe. Însoțite de Comentarii*, Arad, 1936, 50-53). Archdeacon Prof. dr. Iorgu Ivan, “Opera canonică a Sfântului Vasile cel Mare și importanța ei pentru unitatea Bisericii,” in *Sfântul Vasile cel Mare - Închinare la 1600 de ani de la săvârșirea sa*, 355-377.

¹¹ *Homily on Psalm 14, Scrieri. Partea întâia*, p. 212.

¹² “Omilia VIII: În vreme de foamete și secetă” [Homily VIII: In Time of Famine and Drought], in Saint Basil the Great *Scrieri. Partea întâia. Omilii la Hexameron. Omilii la Psalmi. Omilii la cuvântări*, 432.

¹³ “Omilia a VIII-a la Hexameron/Homily VIII on Hexameron, in Saint Basil the Great *Scrieri. Partea întâia. Omilii la Hexameron. Omilii la Psalmi. Omilii la cuvântări*, 166.

¹⁴ Grégoire de Nazianze, “Discours 43. Pour le Grand Basil. Oraison funèbre,” 203. On the famine from 367-368, “the most severe one ever recorded,” see *ibid.*, 201-207, where Saint Gregory names Saint Basil “second Joseph.”

The sermons were addressed first and foremost to the rich, whom he tried to sensitize using various methods. Sometimes, he described very vividly and realistically the sufferance of the poor, in danger to die because of famine: “Starvation, the distress of the famished, is the supreme human calamity, a more miserable end than all other deaths ... Famine is a slow evil, always approaching, always holding off like a beast in its den”¹⁵. Other times he reminded them that life passes rapidly and we will all come before the Righteous Judge: “What answer shall you make to the Judge, you who dress walls, but will not clothe a man; who spruce up horses, and overlook an unfashionable brother; who leave grain to rot, but will not feed the starving; who burry your money and despise the oppressed?”¹⁶, or he described in bright colors the joy that the merciful will have on Judgment Day: “God will welcome thee, angels will laud thee, mankind from the very beginning will call thee blessed. For the stewardship of these corruptible things thy reward shall be glory everlasting, a crown of righteousness, the heavenly kingdom”¹⁷.

The urges to be merciful also addressed to those who were not very rich, but still had the possibility to offer something: “And if you have only one remaining loaf of bread, and someone comes knocking at your door, bring forth the one loaf from your store, hold it heavenward, and say this prayer, which is not only generous on your part, but also calls for the Lord’s pity: «Lord, you see this one loaf, and you know the threat of starvation is imminent, but I place your commandment before my own well-being, and from the little I have I give to this famished brother. Give then, in return to me your servant, since I am also in danger of starvation. I know your goodness, and am emboldened by your power. You do not delay your grace indefinitely, but distribute your gifts when you will». And when you have thus spoken and acted, the bread you have given from your straitened circumstances will become seed for sowing the bears a rich harvest, a promise of food, an envoy of mercy”¹⁸.

Saint Basil shows that if someone does an act of mercy he offers himself, together with the act, offers something from within, or renounces to at least a part of his selfishness: “When wealth is dispersed, in the way the Lord advises,

¹⁵ “Omilia VIII: În vreme de foamete și secetă” [Homily VIII: In Time of Famine and Drought], in Saint Basil the Great, *Scrieri. Partea întâia. Omilii la Hexaeron. Omilii la Psalmi. Omilii la cuvântări*, 430.

¹⁶ “Omilia VII: Către bogăți” [Homily VII: To the reach], in Saint Basil the Great *Scrieri. Partea întâia. Omilii la Hexaeron. Omilii la Psalmi. Omilii la cuvântări*, 413.

¹⁷ “Omilia VI: La cuvintele Evangheliei după Luca” [Homily VI: To the Gospel of Luke], in Saint Basil the Great, *Scrieri. Partea întâia. Omilii la Hexaeron. Omilii la Psalmi. Omilii la cuvântări*, 402.

¹⁸ “Omilia VIII: În vreme de foamete și secetă” [Homily VIII: In Time of Famine and Drought], in Saint Basil the Great, *Scrieri. Partea întâia. Omilii la Hexaeron. Omilii la Psalmi. Omilii la cuvântări*, 429.

it naturally stays put; but when held back it is transferred to another. If you hoard it, you won't keep it; if you scatter, you won't lose"¹⁹.

We can also learn from Saint Basil the Great that the true mercy must be accompanied by a correct judgment. In Letter 150, Saint Basil addresses to Amphilochius, future bishop of Iconium, to whom he says that he must differentiate between the individual that is truly needy and the one that begs for greed: "For whoever gives to the afflicted gives to the Lord, and from the Lord shall have his reward; but He who gives to every vagabond casts to a dog, a nuisance indeed from his importunity, but deserving no pity on the ground of want"²⁰.

In general, the Holy Fathers recommend *acumen* when they refer to giving to the poor, because not all to ask for mercy are on the bread line. Most often, to ease our conscience that we have not passed ignorantly by someone who begs, we give money to an individual that could work to support his existence and thus we encourage beggary and sloth. Saint Basil urges us to calm with a little money the "barking" of those who shout, but to direct all our attention towards those who do not tout their pain and suffer patiently torments and troubles. "God wants you, in the simplicity of your heart to be merciful to the one who begs from you; however, use your reason to distinguish the needs of those who beg... Such as the sick often need wine, but one must find the appropriate time, the quantity and quality, and the doctor is needed to administrate the wine, so is the case of the poor, whose practice does not benefit all... Undoubtedly the mercy of this service is not useful to those who turn their invalidities and wounds into a means of profit. Helping such people becomes a source of evil. One must silence their barking with a little money; but we must show mercy and love to those who learned to suffer their pains with patience"²¹.

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In his sermons, Saint Basil the Great used some rough words against the rich, who did not help those in sufferance. Before 1989, some theologians stated that the Great Cappadocian Father condemned private property and even supported the common possession of goods²². It is true that Saint Basil refers

¹⁹ "Omilia VII: Către bogăți" [Homily VII: To the reach], in Saint Basil the Great, *Scrieri. Partea întâia. Omilii la Hexameron. Omilii la Psalmi. Omilii la cuvântări*, 411

²⁰ Philip Schaf, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, volume 8 (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 603 (Letter CL: *To Amphilochius in the name of Heraclidas*).

²¹ Saint Basil the Great, *Scrieri. Partea întâia*, 429-430.

²² For example, in an article by Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală, it is indicated the fact that Saint Basil the Great, even though he accepts private property, he accepts it on condition that all have equal properties, and this "would be the equivalent of the common possessions." See Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală, "Idei sociale în Sfântul Vasile cel Mare," in *Închinare la 1600 de ani de la săvârșirea sa* (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române,

several times to the situation of early Christians. For example in *Homily VIII In Time of Famine and Drought*, Saint Basil reminds his parishioners of the first Christian centuries, when all the goods were used in common (Acts 2:44): “Emulate the first constitution of the Christians, how they had all things in common: life, soul, concord, common table, undivided brotherhood, love without dissimulation, many working to one end, many souls agreeing in harmony”²³. In fact, *Saint Basil the Great, as other Holy Fathers of the Church, never condemned private property, never condemned wealth in general, but its wrongful use*²⁴. Otherwise, the letters addressed to several officials of the local administration, in which he asked for protection for some friends’ properties as if they were his own, would be senseless²⁵.

Wealth is ephemeral and a true Christian will use it as a tool: “The nature of richness is a state of flux. They run past their possessors more swiftly than the torrent; they are at one time to pass by one, and again, another. As a river, swept down from a height, approaches those standing on the bank, it at the same time reaches and immediately withdraws, so also the satisfaction from riches has a very swift and slippery presence... Do not be further affected in your soul, but accept the use of them, not as if loving exceedingly and admiring some good thing, but as if choosing its service as something practical”²⁶.

He reinforced the idea that *man is nothing but an administrator of the earthly goods*. In Homily VI on Luke, On Selfish Wealth and Greed he said: “You

1980), 284-311 (footnote 11). Against the tendency to transform Saint Basil the Great into “a socialist against his will” see: *Saint Basile. Archevêque de Césarée (329-379). Cours d'éloquence sacrée*, Avignon, 1878, par l'Abbé A. Bayle, 255 (See the entire subchapter XIV, titled “La charité de Saint Basile,” 250-267).

²³ “Omilia VIII: În vreme de foamete și secetă” [Homily VIII: In Time of Famine and Drought], in Saint Basil the Great *Scrieri. Partea întâia. Omilii la Hexaeron. Omilii la Psalmi. Omilii la cuvântări*, 432.

²⁴ In the same Homily, he accuses the unmerciful rich: “Because of you God sentenced this calamity: having, you did not give; rushing past the hungry, you did not turn to those who were wailing; to those lying prostrate, you had no mercy. Evil afflicts a whole land on account of only a few; a land is destroyed by the wickedness of some.” (ibid., 429).

²⁵ Philip Schaf, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 512 (Letter 83 addressed to a magistrate to protect a friend’s property): “I have a property at Chamanene, and I beg you to look after its interests as though they were your own.” In Homily VI to Luke (*On selfish wealth and greed*) Saint Basil said that “we are tempted in two ways in this life: either through the troubles that torment our hearts ore most often through wealth... For it is as hard to keep your soul fearless when in troubles as is not to take pride, humiliating others, when you are rich and have everything you need.” “Omilia VI: La cuvintele Evangheliei după Luca” [Homily VI: To the Gospel of Luke], in Saint Basil the Great, *Scrieri. Partea întâia. Omilii la Hexaeron. Omilii la Psalmi. Omilii la cuvântări*, 399.

²⁶ “Omilia la Psalmul LXI.” [Homily to Psalm LXI], in Saint Basil the Great, *Scrieri. Partea întâia. Omilii la Hexaeron. Omilii la Psalmi. Omilii la cuvântări*, 337.

who have wealth, recognize who has given you the gifts you have received. Consider yourself, who you are, what has been committed to your charge, from whom you have received it, why you have been preferred to most other people. You're the servant of the good God, a steward on behalf of your fellow servants." And in the same homily he asked rhetorically: "Where does your wealth come from then? If you say it's the result of hazard, then you prove yourself unfaithful, for you do not know your Creator and you do not thank the One who gave you wealth. If you confess you have it from God, tell me then why did you receive it? Is God unjust for making an unequal distribution of the gifts? For you are rich and the other is poor? Without a doubt, it is for you to receive the reward for your kindness and righteous administration of wealth, and for the other to be honored with the great rewards of patience"²⁷.

Saint Basil's sermon would surely not have had any impact if it weren't reinforced by the *personal example* and this is a theme on which we, the priests today, should meditate more often. Right after his baptism, young Basil gave everything he had to the poor. Later, when he was bishop of the Church from Cappadocia, during famine and drought, Saint Basil was not content only to give a couple of sermons to urge the rich to share their possessions, but he himself gave for a second time all his wealth to the poor, feeding them, without discrimination, either Christians or Jews. During the same crisis, Saint Basil used the wealth he inherited from his father to help the poor. His family was rich and had extended properties in three regions, and a large part of the profit was used for philanthropy²⁸.

Institutionalized philanthropy – creation of Saint Basil the Great

Saint Basil also showed us that the help of our neighbor must not be restricted to fixed actions that are only a momentary solution for those who are poor, or ill, and here I refer to the practice of giving something to charity from time to time. *It is necessary for the impulse of mutual help to take an institutionalized continuous form*, in order to have results on the long term. After he was ordained as Bishop in 370, he added to the inheritance left by his mother's family, several important donations from friends and rich acquaintances, and even from his former enemy, Emperor Valens, to found a complex of philanthropic institutions, *where he even established his residence*²⁹. This complex included a hospital, an orphanage, a hospice, a home for poor travelers and visitants, a hospital for infectious diseases and a poorhouse. All the institutions founded by Saint Basil and

²⁷ Homily VI, in *Scrieri. Partea întâia*, 401, 407.

²⁸ Liviu Petcu, "Sfântul Vasile cel Mare-panegirist al milosteniei," in *Studia Basiliana* 3, 159-179.

²⁹ Demetrios Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare* (New York, 1991, 50-52.

known under the generic name Basiliad, were situated at the periphery of Caesarea and the staff was formed of laics and clergymen³⁰.

In this institution a whole ensemble of social preoccupations and actions materialized, and they were meant to improve the situation of the poor and needy of the time, that nobody cared for. In addition, what we have already said, we would like to mention poorhouses, shelters for pilgrims and strangers, schools for the education of the sinner girls, workshops for various handicrafts, houses for the medical staff, all these formed this philanthropic institution. Saint Basil the Great took care of everything that was necessary for the existence of this institution. Since the situation of the lepers was truly difficult at that time, Saint Basil also included a leper house in the Basiliad founded by him and then asked the rich to contribute to its construction and funding. Saint Basil advised the monks that worked in that house to care for the patients as if they were Christ's brothers³¹.

However, the documents mention only a few details referring to the organization and functioning of this philanthropic institution. In a letter that Saint Basil addresses to the governor of the province Caesarea from Cappadocia, he asked rhetorically: "But to whom do we do any harm by building a place of entertainment for strangers, both for those who are on a journey and for those who require medical treatment on account of sickness, and so establishing a means of giving these men the comfort they want, physicians, doctors, means of conveyance and escort? All these men must learn such occupations as are necessary to life and have been found essential to a respectable career; they must also have buildings suitable for their employments, all of which are an honor to the place"³².

Also, in his *Funeral Oration*, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus praises this multi-functional institution as a new city, a chamber of mercy, the treasure of the rich: "Go forth a little way from the city, and behold the new city, the storehouse of piety, the common treasury of the wealthy, in which the superfluities of their wealth, aye, and even their necessities, are stored, in consequence of his exhortations, freed from the power of the moth, no longer

³⁰ Historian Sozomenos wrote in his *Church History* about the Basiliad that it was the most famous hospital dedicated to the poor. Translated into Romanian by Iosif Gheorghian, Primate Metropolitan of Romania (București, 1897), 262; On the location of the Basiliad, W. Ramsay, *Historical Geography of Asia Minor* (London, 1890; repr. Amsterdam, 1962), 446; Liviu Petcu, *art. cit.*, 164-168.

³¹ Saint Basil the Great, *Scrieri. Partea a doua. Asceticele*, 382. For the social ideas and the activity of Saint Basil the Great, see the extended study by S. Giet, *Les Idées et l'Action sociales de Saint Basile* Paris, 1941, especially 400-423; also, Demetrios Constantelos, *op.cit.*, 75-76, 119-120.

³² Philip Schaf, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 527 (Letter 94 addressed to To Elias, Governor of the Province).

gladdening the eyes of the thief, and escaping both the emulation of envy, and the corruption of time: where disease is regarded in a religious light, and disaster is thought a blessing, and sympathy is put to the test”³³. The church historians observed that the “New City” transformed into a center through which “the irresistible influence of the Church permeated the whole district, as, centuries before, the cities founded by the Greek kings had been slowly penetrated the country round”³⁴. The example set by Saint Basil was followed by the Byzantine Church for many centuries. Today, Saint Basil is honored by the Orthodox world not only as father of the Christian philanthropy.

The actuality of the philanthropic conception and work of Saint Basil the Great

Some might say that the solutions adopted by Saint Basil for solving the social problems were appropriate for the society of his time, but can only find a partial applicability in the contemporary society. Indeed, in the early ages of Christianity, slavery was widely spread and usury was one of the methods used for a quick enrichment. For this reason, when I started to prepare for this conference I was initially tempted to put aside any reference to slavery or usury in the writings of the Great Father of Cappadocia.

However, I realized that these two realities which had a dehumanizing role in the ancient world, can also be found, in other forms, in the contemporary society. What other words can we use to describe the situation of the Romanians that work abroad to help their families and sometimes end up being exploited by ruthless men, with their identity cards confiscated or working and living in unhealthy conditions for others to get rich quick? What other words can we use to describe the situation of millions of people from Romania that work hard for the minimum salary for the profit of greedy employers or for the state? Usury is also present and I do not refer here to isolated cases when certain individuals take advantage of the people in need to get rich, but to its institutionalized form, banks. It is well known the fact that many people who took a loan to buy a house or for other needs and could not pay their loan rates which increased with every month (some of them because they lost their jobs), lost all their possessions and even committed suicide³⁵. I would not wish for you

³³ Grégoire de Nazianze, “Discours 43. Pour le Grand Basil. Oraison funèbre,” 262-263.

³⁴ William Mitchell Ramsay, *The Church in the Roman Empire AD 170* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1904), 461.

³⁵ Omilia II la Psalmul XIV [Homily II to Psalm XIV], in Saint Basil the Great *Scieri. Partea întâia. Omilii la Hexameron. Omilii la Psalmi. Omilii la cuvântări*, 215: “Making such pretenses, and fawning upon and enticing the wretched man with such words, he binds him with contracts;

to understand from my words that we are against market economy, but we are against its savage forms of manifestation, which transform people into objects, into helpless slaves in front of the globalist roller.

What priest can learn from Saint Basil the Great is that this important Father of the Church was very receptive to everything that happened around him, he was preoccupied with the social life, which he observed with a critical eye, he involved himself in it and tried to repair as many things as possible³⁶. Although he was a monk, he never isolated himself from the world, he did not think it is better to keep to himself, or to hide himself into helplessness and indifference. Besides the financial help, Saint Basil the Great preached and fulfilled abundantly spiritual help. Of his 366 letter, 66 are recommendations and intervention epistles, most of them to help those that were unable to pay their taxes. His intervention did not restrict only to “make an intercession” for someone, as we would say today, but he also intended to increase the responsibility of that clerk in doing his job: “But since God has called you to an occupation which gives you opportunity of showing kindness, and in the exercise of which it lies in your power to bring about the restoration of my own city, now level with the ground, it is, I think, only my duty to remind your excellency that in the hope of the requital God will give, you should show yourself of such a character as to win a memory that cannot die, and be made an inheritor of everlasting rest, in consequence of your making the afflictions of the distressed hard to bear”³⁷.

When speaking about Saint Basil’s philanthropy towards his parishioners and towards Church in general, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus mentions firstly his boldness towards the governors and secondly the fact that the solutions he proposed became laws immediately, and only after that he mentions the other acts of the physical or spiritual mercy: the care for those in need, distributing food to the poor, entertaining strangers etc.³⁸. In other words, Saint Basil’s philanthropy was supported by a related ecclesial administration that knew how to manage the relations with laic authority and with its own faithful. The Prefect Modestos, the prime-minister of the Arian Emperor Valens, who had

then, after having imposed on the man the loss of his liberty in addition to his oppressing poverty, he departs. As the borrower has made himself responsible for the interest, of whose full payment he has no idea, he accepts a voluntary servitude for life... But many, he says, grow rich from loans. But more, I think, fasten themselves to halts. You see those who have become rich, but you do not count those who have been strangled, who, not enduring the shame incurred by their begging, preferred death through strangling to a shameful life.”

³⁶ Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală, “Idei sociale în opera Sfântului Vasile cel Mare,” in *Închinare la 1600 de ani de la săvârșirea sa*, 299.

³⁷ Philip Schaf, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 512 (Letter 83 addressed to a magistrate to protect a friend’s property).

³⁸ Grégoire de Nazianze, “Discours 43. Pour le Grand Basil. Oraison funèbre,” 219.

accompanied him in Caesarea in 370 and had threatened Saint Basil the Great with exile, was eventually impressed by Saint Basil's courage. Not only had he become one of Saint Basil's admirers, but also a faithful collaborator in philanthropic acts, as we can see from a series of letters³⁹.

Many times we cultivate relations with a distinguished representative of the laic authority and the Church benefits from the indulgences that we may obtain from him so long as he is in that position. Saint Basil the Great showed us a different face of the spiritual mercy, namely the intervention for persons that fell into imperial disfavor, such as the case of Maximus, a former governor of the province, who was accused of treachery, his possessions were confiscated and he was thrown into prison. Saint Basil made an intercession for him and addresses to Trajan, one of the most influential generals on the court, because he was convinced that "*even the ability to bewail their own calamities brings much comfort to the distressed*"⁴⁰.

Conclusions

Saint Basil the Great was the preacher par excellence of mercy, who also acted upon it, through the fact that he spoke realistically about mercy and practiced it himself and then gave it an institutionalized form, meaning efficiency and disposition towards the future. Thus, by taking care both of the souls and bodies of his parishioners, *Saint Basil honored human dignity, human person, body and soul*. Saint Gregory of Nazianzus showed that Saint Basil the Great was not concerned only to provide food and water to the people, but also to provide them with the Word, with what is truly nurturing and life-giving⁴¹. Saint Basil the Great was a leader whose spiritual, moral and administrative authority lifted the institution of the Church to such a level that it could no longer be ignored or, on the contrary, contested and questioned by the state authority and was able to offer its own solutions, inspired by the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ for the social problems of the time.

³⁹ Philip Schaf, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Letters 104, 106, 110, 279, 280, 281. As prime-minister of Arian Emperor Valens and his attendant in Caesarea in 370, Modestos threatened Saint Basil the Great to be exiled. The courage with which Saint Basil answered transformed Modestos from enemy into admirer. On the dialogue between Modestos and Saint Basil see also Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, *Funeral Oration*, 227-237. Saint Gregory of Nazianzus states that this is the moment when the Emperor changed his attitude and became more human towards the Orthodox Christians (περί ἡμας φιλανθρωπίας ἀρχή).

⁴⁰ Philip Schaf, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 599 (Letter 148 to Trajan).

⁴¹ Grégoire de Nazianze, "Discours 43. Pour le Grand Basil. Oraison funèbre," 207.

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