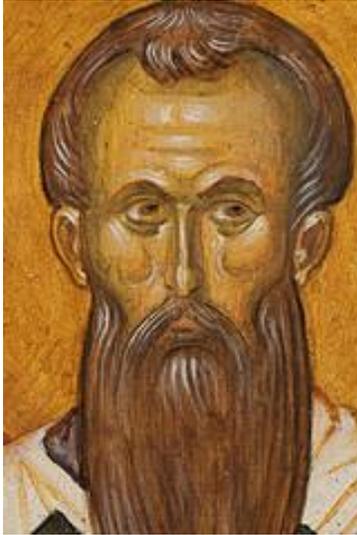


Building the New City: St. Basil's Social Vision

by Paul Schroeder



In St. Gregory the Theologian's funeral oration for St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory describes the legacy of St. Basil's philanthropic endeavors in this way: "Go forth a little way from the city, and behold the New City, the storehouse of piety, the common treasury of the wealthy ... where disease is regarded in a religious light, and disaster is thought a blessing, and sympathy is put to the test."

St. Gregory is referring to the *Basiliad*, the great philanthropic foundation established by St. Basil where the poor, the diseased, orphans and the aged could receive food, shelter, and medical care free of charge from monks and nuns who lived out their monastic vocation through a life of service, working with physicians and other lay people. The New City was in many ways the culmination of St. Basil's social vision, the fruit of a lifetime of effort to develop a more just and humane social order within the region of Caesarea, where he grew up and later served as a priest and a bishop.

The story of Basil's life centers around two profound shifts. The first, a spiritual awakening so decisive as to be called a conversion, occurred shortly after he completed his studies at the great university at Athens. As a result of this experience, Basil chose to be baptized, a decision that in his day was often postponed until late in life. He then sold his inheritance, distributed the funds to the poor, and embarked upon a journey to see the monastic communities that were flourishing throughout Palestine, Syria, and Egypt.

These communities were founded upon the principle of communal monasticism, a life in which everything - meals, goods, prayer - were shared in common. Basil returned to Caesarea and, in a remote area of the family estate, established a monastic community based upon the *cenobitic* model. The second great turning in his life took place six years later. Prompted by a deep sense of responsibility for the good order of the Church and of society, Basil elected to leave the monastery he had founded and to be ordained a priest and take up parish ministry in Caesarea.

These two turnings - Basil's decision to pursue a monastic vocation and his subsequent decision to leave the monastery and return to the world - may be said to comprise the polarity of Basil's vision, the axis upon which his worldview turns. Throughout his ministry, he remained committed to the ideal of a community of shared life and resources, as exemplified by *cenobitic* monasticism. But he was equally determined that

this ideal not be limited to the monasteries, but should rather be brought to bear upon the greater society. Basil envisioned an engaged monasticism, urban rather than rural, and dedicated to service to the poor as an essential aspect of monastic practice. His inspiration, as expressed in the New City, was to bring together the involuntary poor and the voluntary poor (monastics) in order to create a new kind of community.

Basil's vision is radical because it represents both a reform of monasticism, calling monks and nuns to return to the world and embrace its cares and sorrows as their own, and a reform of society, advocating the creation of a social order based upon simplicity and sharing rather than competition and private ownership.

Within a few years of Basil's ordination to the priesthood, a catastrophe struck Caesarea and the surrounding area. Rivers and springs dried up and crops failed, resulting in an acute food shortage – famine – throughout the region. It was in this context that Basil preached a series of sermons on the subjects of wealth and poverty, mercy and justice, including the homilies known as *To the Rich, I Will Tear Down my Barns*, and *In Time of Famine and Drought*. These homilies may be said to constitute the foundation of the New City, the fundamental basis of Basil's social vision.

In order to understand Basil's social vision and his approach to matters of wealth and poverty, it is instructive to begin by examining his interpretation of the account concerning the rich young ruler and comparing his interpretation with that of some other early Christian commentators. How to understand Christ's injunction to the young man, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me," was a subject of considerable discussion in the early Church.

One interpretive approach to the passage that proved highly influential in subsequent Christian thought was proposed in the early third century by Clement of Alexandria. In his oration *Who is the Rich Man that Will Be Saved?*, Clement focuses upon the young man's unhealthy attachment to worldly goods. According to Clement, Christ is not asking the young man to literally dispense with his possessions, but rather to become a free person by breaking his attachment to them, since the person who is concerned about acquiring or keeping wealth is not truly free. As Clement says, "Christ does not, as some conceive off-hand, bid him throw away the substance he possessed, and abandon his property; but rather bids him banish from his soul his notions about wealth, his excitement and morbid feeling about it, the anxieties, which are the thorns of existence, which choke the seed of life." Clement concludes that the Lord's command aims at "the stripping off of the passions from the soul itself and from the disposition, and the cutting up by the roots and casting out of what is alien to the mind."

In the latter third and early fourth centuries, another reading of the commandment came to great prominence in the Church with the rise of the monastic movement. In contrast with Clement's approach, monastic literature of this period tends to emphasize the need to make a decisive break with the world by fully renouncing and giving away

one's possessions. According to the *Life of St. Anthony*, written by St. Athanasios, this is precisely what Anthony did after hearing the story of the rich young ruler being read in the church: "Anthony, as though God had put him in mind of the Saints, and the passage had been read on his account, went out immediately from the church, and gave the possessions of his forefathers to the villagers, so that they should no longer be a burden upon himself and his sister."

The thrust of the monastic approach as exemplified by St. Anthony is not the aid that is rendered to the poor by gifting one's possessions to them, but rather the need to rid oneself of the burden of worldly possessions. In fact, "the poor" as they are referenced in the monastic writings of this period are nearly always the anonymous poor; that is, they remain nameless and faceless, little more than a cipher, a receptacle for discarded possessions.

The tension between these two interpretive constructs – the more figurative approach of Clement vs. the more literal approach of the monastic movement – was ultimately resolved within the Church by making a distinction between those who live out their Christian vocation "in the world" as opposed to those who live as monks and nuns. The former are enjoined not to become overly attached to their material possessions, while the latter fulfill the commandment in its literal sense, which is regarded as the way to perfection. This two-tiered approach to the commandment is eventually codified in the formal distinction between "precepts" and "evangelical counsels" found in Western scholastic theology, while in the East it is expressed through the notion of the "angelic life" in the context of "monastic perfection."

For all their differences, both approaches are united in addressing the spiritual condition of the young man in almost exclusively individual terms; both understand the root problem as residing in his relationship to wealth and worldly goods per se. When we turn to Basil's interpretation of this passage, therefore, it is significant to note that Basil understands the spiritual malady of the rich young ruler not as over-attachment to worldly things, but rather as a violation of the commandment "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In other words, Basil interprets this story in primarily social rather than individual terms. As he says with regard to the rich young ruler in his treatise *To the Rich*:

"It is evident that you are far from fulfilling the commandment and that you bear false witness within your own soul that you have loved your neighbor as yourself. For if what you say is true, that you have kept from your youth the commandment of love and have given to everyone the same as to yourself, then how did you come by this abundance of wealth? Care for the needy requires the expenditure of wealth: when all share alike, disbursing their possessions among themselves, they each receive a small portion for their individual needs. Thus, those who love their neighbor as themselves possess nothing more than their neighbor; yet surely, you seem to have great possessions! How else can this be, but that you have preferred your own enjoyment to



the consolation of the many? For the more you abound in wealth, the more you lack in love."

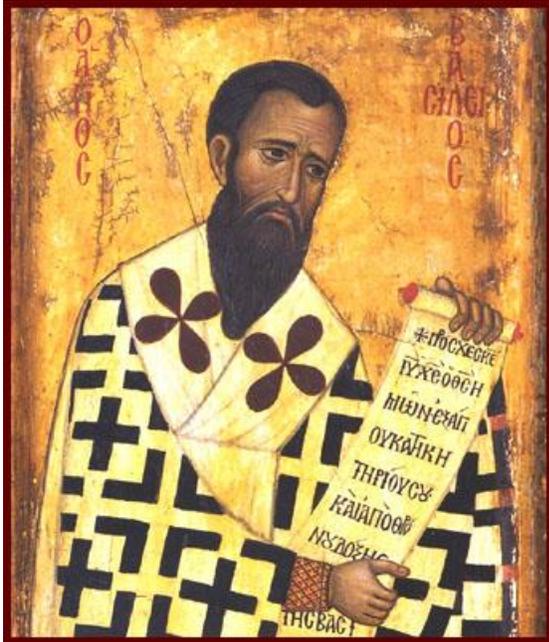
The commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" which Basil describes as "the mother of the commandments," is thus the basis for Basil's understanding of Christ's injunction to the rich young ruler. The focus is not on the individual's relationship to wealth and possessions, but rather on the fact that having great wealth while others lack daily necessities constitutes a violation of the law of love.

For this reason, Basil explicitly rejects any attempt to formulate a two-tiered approach to the commandment. In Basil's view, "sell your possessions and give to the poor" is an expression of the law of love, and is therefore equally applicable to all, both monastics and non-monastics. As he states in *To the Rich*,

Was the command found in the Gospel, "If you wish to be perfect, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor," not written for the married? After seeking the blessing of children from the Lord, and being found worthy to become parents, did you at once add the following, "Give me children, that I might disobey Your commandments; give me children, that I might not attain the Kingdom of Heaven"?

Moreover, in contrast with the "anonymous poor" found throughout much of the monastic literature, Basil's homilies are characterized by a deliberate attempt to humanize and personalize the plight of the poor. Basil brings his powerful gift of rhetoric to bear in order show us the face of our neighbor: the emaciated face of the starving person who has gone blind as a result of malnutrition, the agonized face of a parent forced to sell a child into slavery in order to save the rest of the family from starvation. Basil is determined that the faces of our suffering brothers and sisters should not be ignored or remain hidden from us.

If the commandment to sell one's possessions and give to the poor is an expression of the law of love and thus binding upon all, then the question may be asked, "How is this commandment to be lived out in practical terms?" We may answer by saying that the first characteristic of the New City, the new community envisioned by Basil, is what might be called the ethic of sustainability. In essence, this means that the law of love



requires us to adopt a way of life that is supportable across the entire population. Basil's social vision is characterized by a commitment to simplicity as a means to ensuring this sustainable way of life for everyone.

Basil states that the fair distribution of resources requires that each person take a "small portion" so that there might be enough for all. He emphasizes simplicity in food, dress, and housing as a way of being that allows for resources to be fairly distributed. With regard to housing, he emphasizes that "walls whether great or small serve the same purpose." With reference to interior furnishings he asks the rhetorical question, "*What better service do*

silver encrusted tables and chairs or ivory inlaid beds and couches provide than their simpler counterparts?" Concerning food and clothing, he says, "*Two lengths of cloth are sufficient for a coat, and a single garment fulfills every need with regard to clothing ... A single loaf of bread is enough to fill your stomach.*" He harshly criticizes the wealthy of his day for their excessive consumption -sumptuous meals, lavish dress, large and ornately decorated houses which he sees as directly linked to the plight of the poor.

As he says in *To the Rich*, "*You gorgeously array your walls, but do not clothe your fellow human being; you adorn horses, but turn away from the shameful plight of your brother or sister; you allow grain to rot in your barns, but do not feed those who are starving; you hide gold in the earth, but ignore the oppressed!*"

Like St. John Chrysostom and many other Fathers of the Church, Basil believes that God has provided enough food, land, and usable materials to satisfy the needs of all. These resources, however, are limited commodities, and must therefore be shared out equitably. When some people use or hoard excessive amounts of resources, there will necessarily be less for others to use. As he says in the homily, *I Will Tear Down my Barns*, "*If we all took only what was necessary to satisfy our own needs, giving the rest to those who lack, no one would be rich and no one would be poor.*"

The corollary to Basil's teaching with regard to the ethic of sustainability is what might be called the "distributive mandate." The content of the distributive mandate is that whatever one has that is "extra," over and above one's actual needs, should be given to those who have less. Basil describes this process with a beautiful Greek word, *epanision*, which literally means "to restore the balance." The distributive mandate is essentially a responsibility to observe the commandment of love by sharing with others. In one of his most often quoted passages, Basil says, "*The bread you are holding back is for the hungry, the clothes you keep put away are for the naked, the shoes that are*

rotting away with disuse are for those who have none, the silver you keep buried in the earth is for the needy."

Yet the apparent simplicity of the distributive mandate is complicated by the human tendency to adjust the definition of "need" to fit one's current level of income. Those who have more tend to use more. Basil treats this subject in *I Will Tear Down my Barns*, which takes as its point of departure the parable of Christ regarding the foolish rich man who said to himself that he would tear down his barns and build larger ones to store his goods. In Basil's treatment of the passage, "tearing down one's barns" becomes a metaphor for describing an expanding baseline of need. For Basil, the "barn" represents our definition of need, what we think we need to live. Thus, "tearing down one's barns" means redefining our needs based upon a change in our circumstances.

In effect Basil says that if we never have any extra to share, this is due to the fact that whenever we find ourselves in possession of a surplus, we immediately adjust our definition of need to fit the new situation. While the foolish rich man in the parable only thought to tear down his barns one time, we are constantly tearing down our mental barns in order to build larger ones, only to tear these down and build them up again:

(You say) "I will pull down my barns and build larger ones." But if you fill these larger ones, what do you intend to do next? Will you tear them down yet again only to build them up once more? What could be more ridiculous than this incessant toil, laboring to build and then laboring to tear down again?

Basil shares with St. John Chrysostom and other Fathers of the Church the notion that those who possess great resources but refuse to help others are guilty of a kind of theft. "Is not the person who strips another of clothing called a thief?" Basil asks. "And those who do not clothe the naked when they have the power to do so, should they not be called the same?"

Basil goes even further than this. According to him, those who refuse to share with others in time of urgent need, when starvation and disease pose an imminent threat to human life, may be accounted guilty not only of theft, but even of murder. As he writes in the homily, *In Time of Famine and Drought*, "Whoever has the ability to remedy the suffering of others, but chooses rather to withhold aid out of selfish motives, may properly be judged the equivalent of a murderer." The distributive mandate may thus be summarized in these words from *I Will Tear Down my Barns*: "You are guilty of injustice towards as many as you might have aided, and did not."



Throughout Basil's homilies on social themes, one of the most commonly repeated words is the Greek adjective κοινός, meaning "shared" or "common." Basil uses this word repeatedly to underscore what is for him a basic premise: that the world was created for the common benefit of all, and given by God to humanity for their shared use. He especially delights in using nature images to illustrate this point; for example, in his homily *In Time of Famine and Drought*, Basil says:

The animals use in common the plants that grow naturally from the earth. Flocks of sheep graze together upon one and the same 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 that which is common, and keep for ourselves what belongs to many others.

As may be noted from this passage, Basil regards the selfishness of human behavior as a kind of anomaly within creation. Although competition within and among species is a normal part of the natural order, only humans compete in such a way as to take more than they actually need or can possibly use, while depriving others of what is necessary for their survival. The world was created by God in order to be shared; for this reason, Basil says that private ownership of resources meant to be held in common distorts our relationships to each other and to the world.

As he says in *I Will Tear Down my Barns*, responding to an imaginary interlocutor who has just asked why it is unjust to keep what is "one's own": *"Tell me, what is your own? What did you bring into this life? From where did you receive it? It is as if someone were to take the first seat in the theater, then bar everyone else from attending, so that one person alone enjoys what is offered for the benefit of all in common – this is what the rich do. They seize common goods before others have the opportunity, then claim them as their own by right of preemption."*

Basil describes those who live by the rule of competition and private ownership as ἀκοινωνητοί, meaning "unsocial" or "unsociable." Basil says of the foolish rich man who tore down his barns that God was "inviting his soul to a more social and civilized demeanor." According to Basil, God is calling every person to become a social human being, one who understands his or her social obligations and lives in proper relation to his or her neighbor. Sociability is not seen as merely a virtuous quality, but rather as a conversion to a new way of being in the world and thus being made fit to live in the New City.

* * *

*Paul Schroeder is the translator of **St. Basil the Great: On Social Justice** (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2009). This essay is an abridged section of a paper delivered at the Clergy-Laity Congress of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America that met in Nashville, Tennessee in July 2006.*