

# ALMSGIVING IN THE LATIN CHURCH: THE LATE FOURTH AND EARLY FIFTH CENTURIES

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**I**NTEREST IN the social teachings of the Fathers of the Church has been growing apace over recent years. It has been discovered that many of the Fathers had a remarkable awareness of social problems and a fine pastoral sense. This, combined with their often dramatic literary style, makes them highly appealing today. Both studies and translations of patristic texts have been appearing with a certain slow regularity. Of the latter, two significant collections have come out in the last twenty years: Adalbert Hamman, *Riches et pauvres dans l'église ancienne* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1962) and Restituto Sierra Bravo, *Doctrina social y económica de los Padres de la Iglesia* (Madrid: C.O.M.P.I., 1967). One can hardly teach or write any longer in the realm of social justice from a Christian perspective without at least referring to the texts of Ambrose, Basil, Chrysostom, and others that are contained in these volumes. The essay of William J. Walsh and John P. Langan on "Patristic Social Consciousness—The Church and the Poor," in John C. Haughey, S.J., ed., *The Faith That Does Justice* (New York: Paulist, 1977) 114–51, is a good example of the successful incorporation of a patristic study into a book that deals with social justice under several aspects.

Despite this, however, there is no study that touches exclusively upon the theme of almsgiving in the Western Church in the age of its greatest Fathers. (And in general, apart from Ambrose, the Western Church has attracted rather less attention in this area than has the Oriental.) This represents a lacuna because this period was probably more decisive in forming the particular character of the Latin Church than any other, and hence its view of almsgiving—the deed of mercy vis-à-vis the poor—has colored our own perhaps more than we are aware. In this essay I want to explore that view in depth and offer a critical evaluation.

## IDENTIFICATION OF CHRIST AND THE POOR

By the end of the fourth century in the Western Church two significant motives had emerged for the giving of alms: (1) the identification of Christ and the poor and (2) atonement for sin. The first interests me at present. Its primary scriptural foundation was, as might be expected, Mt 25:31–46, the long passage that describes the separation of sheep from goats at the Last Judgment on the basis of generosity to Christ in the persons of the poor. This pericope was quoted in full for the first time in this precise context in Latin Christian literature by Cyprian in his treatise

*On Works and Almsgiving*, written in the middle of the third century.<sup>1</sup> In the period with which this essay is concerned the theme of the mysterious union between Christ and the poor appears continually.

"Minister to a poor person and you have served Christ," Ambrose says simply, recalling Mt 25:40.<sup>2</sup> "Do you see that we are going about among many images of Christ?" he asks elsewhere, and he continues by warning against ignoring the poor or treating them meanly.<sup>3</sup> In a Christmas sermon Gaudentius, early-fifth-century Bishop of Brescia, remarks that a person who says that he loves Christ but does not love him in the poor is a liar: Christ had affirmed that in them he is either taken care of or neglected.<sup>4</sup> "Whatever is given to the poor is given to him [Christ]," writes Pelagius, Augustine's great antagonist, in his commentary on the Pauline epistles.<sup>5</sup> The concept appears very frequently in Augustine, and a single example will suffice from among many. At the end of one of his sermons he speaks in particularly beautiful fashion of the relationship between Christ and the poor; it is his most detailed treatment of the matter.

Perhaps you tell yourself: How blessed are those who merited to receive Christ! O if only I had been there then! O if only I had been one of the twelve he met on the road! Go out to the road. Christ the stranger is not absent. Do you think that you aren't permitted to welcome Christ? How can this be? you ask. Once having risen from the dead, he manifested himself to his disciples, ascended into heaven, where he is seated at the Father's right hand. He will not come again until the end of time to judge the living and the dead: then he will come in splendor, not in weakness; he will bestow a kingdom, not seek lodging. When he bestows his kingdom, will his words then pertain to you: When you did it to one of these least of mine you did it to me? He who is rich is in need until the end of time. He is truly in need—not in his head but in his members. Where is he in need? He suffered in his members when he said: Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? Let us therefore be gracious to Christ. He is with us in his own, he is with us in us, and he did not say in vain: Behold, I am with you until the end of time. By doing this [almsgiving] we acknowledge Christ in good works, not in a bodily manner but with the heart, not with the eyes of flesh but with the eyes of faith.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *De opere et eleemosynis* 23 (CCSL 3A, 69–70). An earlier full citation in *Testim.* 3, 1 (ibid. 85–86) merely uses this text among others as a proof for the scriptural basis of almsgiving.

<sup>2</sup> *De viduis* 9, 54 (PL 16, 251). The translations throughout are my own.

<sup>3</sup> *Exp. in ps.* 119[118], 10, 26 (CSEL 62, 219).

<sup>4</sup> *Tract.* 13 (CSEL 68, 122).

<sup>5</sup> *In 2am ep. ad Cor.* 8:9–10 (PL Suppl. 1, 1257).

<sup>6</sup> *Serm.* 239, 6, 7 (PL 38, 1129–30); cf. *Sermones* 9, 21 (CCSL 41, 149–50); 18, 4 (ibid. 248–249); 25, 8 (ibid. 339); 38, 8 (ibid. 484); 39, 6 (ibid. 491–92); 41, 7 (ibid. 502); 42, 2 (ibid. 505); 85, 4, 4 (PL 38, 522); 95, 7 (ibid. 584); 123, 4, 4–5, 5 (ibid. 685–86); 206, 2 (ibid. 1042); 236, 3 (ibid. 1121); 259, 5 (ibid. 1200); *Mai* 13, 4 (PL Suppl. 2, 448); *Morin* 11, 6 (ibid. 681); *Enarr. in ps.* 147, 13 (CCSL 40, 2148); *Ep.* 157, 36 (CSEL 44, 483).

Augustine also refers, as does Ambrose,<sup>7</sup> to almsgiving as wiping the Lord's feet with one's hair.

Anoint the feet of Jesus. By living well, follow in the footsteps of the Lord. Dry them with your hair. If you have superfluity, give it to the poor and you have dried the feet of the Lord; for hair is understood to be the superfluity of the body. You have what you may do with your superfluities: they are more than you need, but they are necessary to the feet of the Lord. Perhaps on earth the Lord's feet are in need. For of whom will he speak at the end if not of his members: When you did it to one of these least of mine you did it to me? You bestowed your superfluities, but it was to my feet that you were gracious.<sup>8</sup>

According to Chromatius, Bishop of Aquileia between 387/388 and 407, the one who gives alms anoints the Lord's feet.<sup>9</sup> He anoints his head as well. For Chromatius, this is the deeper meaning of Mt 6:17: "But when you fast, anoint your head. . . ." "Hence to anoint the head of one's neighbor is to perform a work of mercy that, directed to the poor, is referred to the Lord who, in the words of the Apostle, is the head of the man. As the Lord himself says: When you did it to one of these least of mine you did it to me."<sup>10</sup> Peter Chrysologus, fifth-century Bishop of Ravenna, says picturesquely, in a phrase that epitomizes the theme, that "a beggar's hand is Christ's poor box, for whatever a poor person accepts Christ accepts."<sup>11</sup> And in direct reference to Mt 25:31-46, he emphasizes that Christ "did not say that the poor person was hungry and you gave *him* to eat, but that *I* was hungry and you gave *me* to eat. He says that what the poor received was given to him, and that he ate what the poor ate and drank what the poor drank."<sup>12</sup>

But undoubtedly the most familiar text in early Christian literature that touches upon the identification of Christ with the poor is to be found in Sulpicius Severus' *Life of Saint Martin*, where we read of Martin's nocturnal vision of Christ, clothed in the half of the soldier's mantle that Martin had given the previous day to a beggar: "Martin, still only a catechumen, has clothed me in this garment."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Ep.* 41, 13 (PL 16, 1117). In *De Tobia* 22, 86 (CSEL 32/2, 569) Ambrose speaks of being merciful to the poor as anointing the Lord's feet, for the poor are his feet. Is some class consciousness implicit here in referring to the poor as feet?

<sup>8</sup> *Tract. in Ioann.* 50, 7 (CCSL 36, 435). On hair as the image of superfluity, cf. also *idem*, *Serm.* 99, 13, 13 (PL 38, 602); *Enarr. in ps.* 52[51], 9 (CCSL 39, 629); *ibid.* 141[140], 8 (CCSL 40, 2031). Ambrose, *Exp. in ps.* 119[118], 16, 24 (CSEL 62, 365), speaks of shearing sheep as disposing of superfluity; cf. Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.* 11, 9 (CSEL 29, 68).

<sup>9</sup> *Serm.* 11, 5 (CCSL 9A, 51)

<sup>10</sup> *Tract. in Matt.* 29, 3, 1 (*ibid.* 339).

<sup>11</sup> *Serm.* 8, 4 (CCSL 24, 61).

<sup>12</sup> *Serm.* 14, 4 (*ibid.* 89).

<sup>13</sup> *Vita s. Martini* 3, 3 (SC 133, 258).

Only Jerome seems to restrict the identification of Christ and the poor in Mt 25:31–46. When he comes to 25:40 in his *Commentary on Matthew*, he writes that it goes without saying that in every poor person Christ is fed, given to drink, received as a guest, and so forth. But the verse in question—“When you did it to one of these least of my brethren you did it to me”—“does not seem to refer to the poor in general but only to those who are poor in spirit, to those to whom he [Christ] stretched out his hand and said: My brothers and my mother are those who do the will of my Father.”<sup>14</sup> This interpretation of Mt 25:40 can perhaps be explained by Jerome’s greater consciousness of imposture and laziness among the poor.

Another popular theme in this connection is that of almsgiving as a kind of “pious usury,” based on Prov 19:17: “The one who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his deed.” The notion appears to good effect in Ambrose’s treatise *On Tobit*, which is directed against usury. “Here is a good loan made of something wicked, here is a blameless lender, a praiseworthy usury,” he writes. “Do not imagine that I begrudge you your profits then. Do you think that I would snatch away a debtor, a human being, from you? I give you God, I substitute Christ, I provide you with one who will not be able to defraud you. Lend your money to the Lord, therefore, in the hand of the poor.”<sup>15</sup> Chromatius,<sup>16</sup> Paulinus of Nola,<sup>17</sup> Jerome,<sup>18</sup> Pelagius,<sup>19</sup> Augustine,<sup>20</sup> and Peter Chrysologus<sup>21</sup> all use the same imagery.

There is, finally, the idea of sharing one’s wealth with Christ in the poor by counting him among one’s inheritors—a concept that Jerome and Augustine employ.<sup>22</sup> “If a widow has children, especially if she is from a noble family,” writes Jerome to the wealthy Hedybia, “she should not leave her sons in need but treat them equally, and she should think first of her own soul as one of her sons, dividing her inheritance among her children rather than leaving everything to her [natural] sons; indeed, she should make Christ a coinheritor with her own children.”<sup>23</sup> Augustine expresses the same thought occasionally in answer to the excuse that a

<sup>14</sup> *Comm. in Matt.* 25:40 (CCSL 77, 244); cf. *In Esaiam* 58:6–7 (CCSL 73A, 666–67).

<sup>15</sup> *De Tobia* 16, 55 (CSEL 32/2, 551).

<sup>16</sup> *Tract. in Matt.* 30, 2, 2 (CCSL 9A, 342).

<sup>17</sup> *Epp.* 32, 19 (CSEL 29, 294); 34, 4–6 (ibid. 306–8); *Carm.* 16, 287–88 (CSEL 30, 81).

<sup>18</sup> *In ep. ad Eph.* 5:1 (PL 26, 517–18); *Ep.* 120, 1 (CSEL 55, 477).

<sup>19</sup> *Ep. ad Demetriadem* 22 (PL 30, 36).

<sup>20</sup> *Sermones* 38, 8 (CCSL 41, 484); 42, 2 (ibid. 505); 123, 5, 5 (PL 38, 686); 357, 5 (PL 39, 1586); *Lambot* 2 (PL Suppl. 2, 752–53); *Enarr. in ps.* 37[36], serm. 3, 6 (CCSL 38, 372).

<sup>21</sup> *Serm.* 25, 3 (CCSL 24, 147).

<sup>22</sup> For discussion of this and references, cf. Eberhard F. Bruck, *Kirchenväter and soziales Erbrecht* (Berlin: Springer, 1956) 78–88.

<sup>23</sup> *Ep.* 120, 1 (CSEL 55, 477).

father cannot give to the poor because he is saving his property for his sons. If this is the case, Augustine says, then make Christ a member of your family. "Count up your sons and add one to them, your Lord. If you have one, let him be the second; if you have two, let him be the third; if you have three, let him be the fourth."<sup>24</sup>

All these efforts to link Christ with the poor in ways intended to seize the imagination of the hearer or the reader represent, of course, more than simply the necessary accouterments to eleemosynary exhortations. They are also, although perhaps mostly unconsciously, attempts to understand how Christ is present in the world and how he is to be grasped by the faithful. This latter aspect emerges quite clearly, for example, in some lines from a letter of Paulinus of Nola to Sulpicius Severus. He writes that if someone would ask him how he would be able to find Christ and see him, since he is invisible, he would reply that he is to be seen in every poor person, touched in every needy person, entertained in every traveler who is welcomed. "So now it is evident to us how you are to see the one who is invisible and lay hold of the one who is ungraspable."<sup>25</sup>

#### THE RECIPIENTS OF ALMS

To whom alms should be given was a question that exercised several of the Fathers. The Manicheans maintained—as we learn from a sermon which Lambot gives good reasons for believing is a work of Augustine—that sinners should not be the recipients of charity; they held that parts of the divinity were mixed in food and that consequently the divine essence itself was in danger of being polluted by the wicked who might eat it.<sup>26</sup> Augustine considers this opinion unworthy of refutation: it offends common sense, he says, if it is so much as mentioned. Others who were not Manicheans, however, felt that they would be acting against the intent of the Scriptures, as expressed in Sir 12:4–7 ("Be merciful, but do not help the sinner . . ."), if they gave alms in certain circumstances. "Not understanding how these words are to be taken, they are girt about with a horrid cruelty," Augustine remarks, and he proceeds to propose texts from both the Old and New Testaments that advocate nonexclusivity in the performance of good works: Gal 6:10, Mt 5:44, and Prov 25:21, the last of which Paul quotes in Rom 12:20. Yet he cannot simply ignore the passage from Sirach ("for that too is a divine precept") and so he distinguishes: alms are not to be given to a person as a sinner but as a

<sup>24</sup> *De disc. christ.* 8, 8 (CCSL 46, 215–16).

<sup>25</sup> *Ep.* 32, 20 (CSEL 29, 295).

<sup>26</sup> Augustine alludes to this custom and says that although they would not give food to beggars, not distinguishing between good and bad, they were willing to give money (*De moribus Manich.* 16, 53 [PL 32, 1367–68]); cf. *C. Adimantum* 17 (CSEL 25/1, 169); *C. Faustum* 12, 47 (ibid. 375–76); *Enarr. in ps.* 141[140], 12 (CCSL 40, 2034–35).

human being. The wicked must be punished, but human beings must receive mercy. "Let us not do good to sinners, then, because they are sinners, but let us treat them with human decency because they are human beings. Let us punish the evil that is in them and take pity on the condition that is common to all."<sup>27</sup>

Augustine deals with the same lines from Sirach in another of his sermons, where he distinguishes again between sinner and human being and says that alms should be given to a person on account of his humanity but not by reason of his sin. One should not hesitate to give to a sinner if he asks for alms, but to give to a person as sinner is to give to one who pleases you because of his sin. Such a one might be, he says, an actor or a character or a prostitute or a *venator*, a fighter of wild beasts in the arena. "When therefore someone gives to a *venator*, he does not give to the man but to the wicked occupation; for if he were only a man and not a *venator*, you would not have given: thus you honor not his nature but his vice."<sup>28</sup>

Chromatius, commenting on Mt 7:6 ("Do not give what is holy to dogs . . ."), says that this text applies to blasphemers, heretics, and hardened sinners. It is of them that Solomon is speaking in Sir 12:4-7, but he does not mean to say that even these should not be given alms, since they have been commanded to be distributed to everyone.<sup>29</sup> Ambrose replies to some rich who say that the poor have been cursed by God by denying that this is so. In any event, "mercy is accustomed not to judge on merits but to assist in situations of need, not to be on the lookout for righteousness but to help the one who is poor."<sup>30</sup> Jerome, inveighing against Vigilantius, who had said that alms should not be sent to Jerusalem for the support of the monks there, writes in passing that support should be given to all the poor, "even to Jews and Samaritans if there is sufficient means."<sup>31</sup> Finally, Augustine alludes in a sermon to the Church's custom of providing help to everyone; this even seemed to be something that non-Christians took for granted of the Church. "How many people there are nowadays who are not yet Christians who run to church and ask for

<sup>27</sup> *Serm. de generalitate elemosinarum*, in C. Lambot, "Sermon sur l'aumône à restituer à saint Augustin," in *Rev. bén.* 66 (1956) 149-58; text 156-58. Lambot gives a number of parallels in Augustine.

<sup>28</sup> *Enarr. in ps.* 103[102], 13 (CCSL 40, 1463-64). Sirach 12:4 is given as an example in *De doctrina christ.* 3, 16, 24 (CCSL 32, 92), where Augustine is in the course of explaining when Scripture is to be understood literally and when figuratively: "You should understand that 'sinner' stands figuratively for sin, so that you should not come to the aid of his [the sinner's] sin."

<sup>29</sup> *Tract. in Matt.* 33, 3 (CCSL 9A, 359-60).

<sup>30</sup> *De Nabuthae* 8, 40 (CSEL 32/2, 490).

<sup>31</sup> *C. Vigilantium* 14 (PL 23, 350).

the Church's assistance! They want temporal help for themselves, although as yet they don't want to reign with us in eternity."<sup>32</sup>

However, despite the general principle, stated by Jerome, that "to everyone who asks something should be given, and good should be done indiscriminately,"<sup>33</sup> there were some qualifications to the universality of almsgiving. Jerome himself tells us in a letter that widows and widowers who had remarried were excluded as "unworthy" from receiving alms from the Church.<sup>34</sup> And, writing on the righteous person who is described in Ezek 18:7 as giving his bread to the hungry, he remarks that food should not be handed out to those who have eaten enough and are already belching from satiety—presumably professional beggars—but to those suffering from real want.<sup>35</sup> A synod at Nimes in 396 went so far as to say that since some people were living very well indeed from church offerings received under false pretenses, "let the means of living not be given to all, but let everyone freely decide what he should give, without feeling forced."<sup>36</sup> A certain discernment is necessary in distributing alms, Jerome explains in commenting on his translation of Psalm 41:1: "Blessed is the one who understands concerning the needy and the poor." A person

<sup>32</sup> *Enarr. in ps. 47*[46], 5 (CCSL 38, 532). Within the Church the bishop was generally responsible for almsgiving, and he would in turn appoint someone else to function as an overseer of the poor. Cf. Ambrose, *De off. min.* 2, 15, 69 (PL 16, 121); Jerome, *Ep.* 52, 9 (CSEL 54, 431).

<sup>33</sup> *In Eccl.* 11, 1 (CCSL 72, 344).

<sup>34</sup> *Ep.* 123, 5 (CSEL 56, 79). Presumably also at the basis of this—besides "unworthiness"—was the understanding that someone who had remarried no longer required public support. The remarried would certainly not be denied private alms if they were in need, nor perhaps even the public alms of the Church if such was really the case. Widows were traditionally among the first charges of the Church, although hardly anything is said about them in detail in this regard during this period. In his treatise *On Widows* Ambrose makes no reference to them as the recipients of charity but rather as almsgivers themselves (*De viduis* 5, 27–32 [PL 16, 243–44]). The same is true of Augustine's treatise *De bono viduitatis* 21, 26 (CSEL 41, 337–38). In his work *On the Duties of the Clergy*, however, Ambrose does devote some space to how property entrusted to the Church by widows and orphans is to be specially safeguarded, "for good faith must be shown to everyone, but the cause of widows and orphans comes first" (*De off. min.* 2, 29, 144–51 [PL 16, 142–44]). Ambrosiaster has a passage that is interesting from a historical point of view. Commenting on 1 Tim 5:16—"If any believing man or woman has [relatives who are] widows, let that person assist them; let the Church not be burdened by providing for them, so that it may come to the aid of real widows"—he says that such widows are often deprived of their ordinary means of support (namely spinning) by their relatives and hence are obliged to throw themselves upon the resources of the Church. The result is that the Church is overburdened and cannot adequately aid those who have no means of support at all (*In 1am ep. ad Tim.* 5:16 [CSEL 81/3, 283–84]).

<sup>35</sup> *In Hiez.* 18:5–9 (CCSL 75, 238). On some of the methods used by beggars to extract contributions, cf. Paulinus of Nola, *Carmen* 24, 323–32 (CSEL 30, 217).

<sup>36</sup> Canon 5 (SC 241, 128).

who is needy and poor in this context is not one who is reduced to beggary and covered with filth and yet remains immersed in vice. The models for the needy and poor are rather those for whom Paul and Barnabas made their collections: those who had embraced poverty for the sake of Christ, who had suffered persecutions, who had abandoned father, mother, wife, and children for the sake of the kingdom. Such people were to enjoy preferential treatment, although Jews, pagans, and less-deserving Christians were not to be neglected either. These were "the household of faith" of whom Paul spoke in Gal 6:10. How much more freely ought one to give to them when one is admonished even to give to one's enemies, according to Rom 12:20!<sup>37</sup>

There were those, too, for whom one should reserve one's alms, whom one should seek out so as to do good to them, and there were those to whom a person had no obligation to give unless they themselves requested assistance. The former situation corresponded to the saying, cited as scriptural by Augustine, to "let your alms sweat in your hand until you find a just person to whom to give,"<sup>38</sup> the latter to the words of Lk 6:30: "Give to everyone who begs from you." For not everyone was in the same straits, and responsibility varied. "One poor person searches you out, another you must yourself search out."<sup>39</sup>

#### MODERATION IN ALMSGIVING

A person was by no means expected to be extravagant about almsgiving. Needless to say, no one should squander his resources—which is the burden of much of Augustine's reproachful letter to a certain Ecdicia, who had foolishly given away almost everything she owned to monks of questionable repute, thereby provoking her husband's justifiable anger.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, in dispersing one's possessions a person's first obligation was, within reason, to his own family.<sup>41</sup> Ambrose says, with respect to how much should be given to travelers, that it ought not to be an abundance but rather a sufficiency.<sup>42</sup> "Break your bread for the hungry," Isa 58:7

<sup>37</sup> *Ep.* 120, 1 (CSEL 55, 475–76); cf. *In Esaiam* 58:6–7 (CCSL 73A, 666–67); *In ep. ad Gal.* 2:10 (PL 26, 337). Ambrose seems to give some preference to those who once were rich and noble but had suffered calamity (*Exp. in ps.* 119[118], 17, 4 [CSEL 62, 379]).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. also *Enarr. in ps.* 103[102], 12 (CCSL 40, 1462); *ibid.* 104[103], *serm.* 3, 10 (*ibid.* 1509). The saying appears for the first time in Christian literature in *Didache* 1, 6 (LCL Apostolic Fathers 1, 310), where it is cited as scriptural. For an extensive commentary, cf. J.-P. Audet, *La Didachè: Instructions des apôtres* (Paris: Gabalda, 1958) 275–80.

<sup>39</sup> Augustine, *Enarr. in ps.* 147[146], 17 (CCSL 40, 2135).

<sup>40</sup> *Ep.* 262, *passim* (CSEL 57, 621–31).

<sup>41</sup> Ambrose, *De off. min.* 1, 30, 150 (PL 16, 67); *Exp. evang. sec. Luc.* 8, 79 (CCSL 14, 328–29); Jerome, *Ep.* 120, 1 (CSEL 55, 477); Augustine, *Ep.* 243, 12 (CSEL 57, 578–79). But cf. Jerome, *Ep.* 120, 1 (CSEL 55, 474).

<sup>42</sup> *De off. min.* 2, 21, 111 (PL 16, 133).



has it, not your "breads," as Jerome points out—in fact, not even the whole loaf but only the part that you would have eaten had you not been fasting. In the same way, Christ does not say in Lk 3:11 that a person should divide his tunic if he only has one, but that he should not hold on to two in the face of another's need. Many do the former, he adds mysteriously, for the sake of popular acclaim.<sup>43</sup> We may well wonder whether this was not intended, for a reason unknown to us, as an oblique criticism of Martin of Tours, whose *Vita* by Jerome's Gallic contemporary Sulpicius Severus, which Jerome must almost certainly have read, contained the incident in which Martin divided his military cloak with his sword for a beggar.<sup>44</sup> When Jerome's beloved Paula is in the process of impoverishing herself by an openhandedness that never turns anyone away, he cites the same passage from Luke, urging her in vain to moderation. He used to argue with her, he writes, offering her Paul's words in 2 Cor 8:13-14: "Not that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of equality your abundance at the present time should supply their want, so that their abundance might supply your want."<sup>45</sup>

Augustine reminds his audience in a sermon that Paul had told those who had money that they should share with those who were in need; he did not tell them to give away everything they owned. The bishop probably realized that the rich in his congregation would make such a radical interpretation of the obligation to give alms an excuse for giving none at all. He suggests tithing, although the scribes and the Pharisees used to tithe, and "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." One should be ashamed to give only as much as or even less than they did; for some, indeed, hardly give the poor the thousandth part of their substance. Yet in the end a person must decide for himself what he is capable of. "Consider what you do and with how much you do it, what you give and how much you retain for yourself, what you bestow on mercy and how much you reserve for luxury."<sup>46</sup> A wealthy person might make the excuse that he is in the habit of eating the finest foods, whereas someone who is poor can get along on what is far inferior. No one expects, however, that

<sup>43</sup> *In Esaiam* 58:6-7 (CCSL 73A, 666).

<sup>44</sup> *Vita s. Martini* 3, 1-2 (SC 133, 256-58).

<sup>45</sup> *Ep.* 108, 15 (CSEL 55, 326-27). Jerome is frequently quite severe in his demands regarding poverty, although he always condemns ostentatious poverty. Can it be that in Paula he meets someone who is even more severe than he and who evokes his astonishment, or is what he says in his letter on her death merely for the sake of effect?

<sup>46</sup> *Serm.* 85, 4, 5 (PL 38, 522). On tithing cf. also *Serm.* 106, 2, 2-3 (*ibid.* 626); *Enarr. in ps.* 147[146], 17 (CCSL 40, 2135); *Ep.* 36, 7 (CSEL 34, 36); Jerome, *In Malachiam* 3:8-12 (CCSL 76A, 935).

the rich should share their expensive suppers with the poor. "Make use of your choice and precious foods, since you are accustomed to them and cannot do otherwise," Augustine addresses the wealthy in his congregation, "because if you should change your habits you would get sick. This has been conceded to you: use what is superfluous and give the poor the things that are necessary; use what is precious and give the poor the things that are inferior."<sup>47</sup> Never, at least among the orthodox, was an appeal made to do more than this.

#### UNIVERSAL OBLIGATION TO GIVE ALMS

The corollary of this teaching on moderation in almsgiving was that it was a virtue that could be practiced by everyone, rich and poor alike. Although some commandments pertain only to particular groups, Ambrose writes,

mercy is universal, and so it is a universal commandment, necessary to be observed by all in every position and at every age. Neither the tax collector nor the soldier is exempt, neither the farmer nor the city dweller; rich and poor, all are admonished in common that they should give to those in need and should not spare either their clothing or their food. For mercy is the fulness of the virtues and is therefore proposed to everyone as the form of perfect virtue.<sup>48</sup>

Rich and poor, each should give to the extent that he is able, Pelagius writes.<sup>49</sup> The example of the poor widow who put two copper coins into the temple treasury, recorded in Mk 12:41–44 and its parallels, is adduced as an incentive to the poor to give alms.<sup>50</sup> Both Jerome and Augustine make use of Mt 10:42—"And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water . . ."—to show that almsgiving is not confined to those who can afford to expend large sums of money; indeed, it is not

<sup>47</sup> *Serm.* 61, 11, 12 (PL 38, 414).

<sup>48</sup> *Exp. evang. sec. Luc.* 2, 77 (CCSL 14, 64). Mercy is the fulness of the virtues for Ambrose. Cf. *De excessu fratris* 1, 60 (CSEL 73, 240): "For this is the height of righteousness—to sell what you have and give it to the poor." Jerome calls justice the mother of all the virtues. "How is justice greater than the other virtues? The other virtues delight the one who possesses them; justice does not delight the one who possesses it but others. . . . What does my wisdom profit a poor person, or my fortitude, or my chastity? (*Tract. de ps.* 15[14], lines 58–83 [CCSL 78, 32–33]). For Augustine the greatest virtue is love, and its summit is laying down one's life for another person. But its beginning is mercy. "See where charity begins. If you are not yet able to die for your brother, be able then to give to your brother from your resources. . . . For if you cannot give your superfluities to your brother, how can you lay down your life for him?" (*In ep. Ioann.* 5, 12 [PL 35, 2018]).

<sup>49</sup> *In 2am ep. ad Cor.* 8:12 (PL Suppl. 1, 1257–58).

<sup>50</sup> Ambrose, *De viduis* 5, 27 (PL 16, 243) (Ambrose passes over the Lukan parallel in his commentary on Luke); Jerome, *Ep.* 14, 8 (CSEL 54, 55); Augustine, *Sermones* 259, 5 (PL 38, 1201); Mai 128, 4 (PL Suppl. 2, 516); *Enarr. in ps.* 50[49], 13 (CCSL 38, 586); *ibid.* 126[125], 11 (*ibid.* 40, 1853–54).

necessarily a question of money at all. Some people are accustomed, notes Jerome, to plead their own poverty when it comes to offering hospitality, saying that their narrow circumstances prevent them from so doing. Yet the Lord made it particularly easy to observe this word of his, for he said not "hot water" but "cold water," lest a poor person should complain that he had no wood with which to heat the water.<sup>51</sup> Ambrose confronts much the same spirit of resistance: "You insist that you are poor. [However,] your guest does not expect extravagance from you but courtesy, not a splendidly decked-out table but food ready to hand."<sup>52</sup> "If perhaps you say that you have nothing, then be of a giving spirit," Peter Chrysologus tells his congregation in a sermon, "and the means for giving will not be wanting. Put a stool out for your visitor, set your table, light the lamp. Provide graciously from what you have received."<sup>53</sup>

Even those who had embraced voluntary poverty were not exempt from almsgiving. Jerome says, speaking to his monks, that the perfect do not give alms because they have nothing to give, but then he goes on to explain that almsdeeds are not restricted to the dispensing of money.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>51</sup> *Comm. in Matt.* 10:42 (CCSL 77, 76); cf. Augustine, *Sermones* Lambot 4 (PL Suppl. 2, 767); Lambot 5 (ibid. 776). In *De doctrina christ.* 4, 18, 37 (CCSL 32, 143–44) Augustine uses Mt 10:42 as an example of a scriptural passage that might possibly be treated as trivial or unimportant by a preacher but which, if suitably approached, could move even cold hearts to deeds of mercy.

<sup>52</sup> *De Abraham* 1, 5, 35 (CSEL 32/1, 529).

<sup>53</sup> *Serm.* 26, 7 (CCSL 24, 152).

<sup>54</sup> *Tract. de ps.* 112[111], lines 67–81 (CCSL 78, 233). Indeed, according to some, it is better for a monk not to have money to distribute. Thus, at least, a section from the biography of the monk Hilarion, written by Jerome, which the author intends perhaps as paradigmatic, wherein Hilarion refuses an offering from a wealthy benefactor that is destined for the poor: "You are better able to distribute what belongs to you, you who go through the city and know the poor. I who have abandoned my possessions, why should I desire what belongs to others?" (*Vita s. Hilarionis* 18 [PL 23, 36]). There is something similar in one of Paulinus of Nola's poems in honor of his patron Felix of Nola. Felix had lost extensive property during the persecutions and refused to take it back when peace was restored. In so doing he rejected the advice of a wealthy admirer who urged him to claim what was rightfully his and distribute the high interest from it to the poor. It was better to be poor oneself, however, than to have money to give to the poor. Yet in fact Felix evidently did not feel himself dispensed from the obligation to give to the poor: he would give alms of his vegetables and his clothing (*Carmen* 16, 255–96 [CSEL 30, 79–81]). Cassian notes that among some monks avarice is practiced under the pretext of having money to give to those in need, because it is considered more blessed to give than to receive (*De coen. inst.* 7, 16 [CSEL 17, 139–40]). In his biography of Melania the Younger, however, Gerontius relates that an Egyptian monk to whom Melania offered some gold for him to pass on to the poor refused it not because he ought not to have had it to distribute but because no one in the desert was needy (*Vita Melaniae* 38 [SC 90, 198]). In his long letter to Nepotian on the proper mode of life for monks and clerics, Jerome, although not speaking against their being distributors of alms, does mention some of the dangers to which those who give alms are liable, and the implication is that they would be better off if they were removed from such things. One may be, he writes, too cautious or too timid; one may be tempted to

Augustine knows of almsgiving by monastic communities, for he writes (probably quite idealistically) that the monks expend more effort in distributing to the poor than they do in procuring what is necessary for themselves. "They act in such a manner that whatever is superfluous might not remain among themselves—to the degree that they send ships heavy laden to those places where the needy live."<sup>55</sup> Cassian offers the Egyptian monks as models to his readers, telling how they come to the aid not only of their own brethren in the monastic life but also of ordinary laypeople suffering from famine, as well as prisoners.<sup>56</sup>

For almsgiving was not something that could be lightly neglected: it was due in justice. This idea, not always made explicit, is nonetheless certainly at the foundation of virtually every patristic exhortation to good works. Referring to almsgiving as "mercy," as is frequently the case, Ambrose calls it "a part of justice, so that if you should wish to give to the poor this mercy is justice, according to what is written: He has distributed, he has given to the poor; his justice endures forever. Hence it is unjust if the one who shares your nature is not aided by his fellow." This is in turn connected with a notion of community of goods.

For the Lord our God especially wished this earth to be the common possession of all, and its fruits to be at the disposal of all, but avarice divided the rights of possession. Consequently it is just that if you claim anything as your personal property, which has been given to the human race and to all souls in common, you should at least give part of it to the poor. Since you owe them a share in your own rights, do not deny them their subsistence.<sup>57</sup>

The same sentiment is repeated in varying forms by others. Zeno, Bishop of Verona from ca. 362 to ca. 375, quotes Acts 4:32, with its description

subvert funds intended for the poor; one may be, finally, unable to make a right judgment about the worthiness of the recipient (*Ep.* 52, 16 [CSEL 54, 439–40]). But Cassian remarks in one of his *Conferences* that monks, as those who live under grace rather than under the law, are not subject to the temptations inherent in the giving of alms. It is hard for one who has money not to fall into sin, even when he distributes it willingly and faithfully. A monk, on the other hand, gives money away cheerfully because he has already offered everything he has once and for all to God, and whatever he may have is no longer his. As one who is completely cared for by God (and his community), he does not hesitate to see to the needs of the poor, since he knows that his own needs will always be met (*Conlat.* 21, 33 [CSEL 13, 609–10]). There is, then, a certain ambivalence with respect to almsgiving by monks, but it stems from a recognition of the dangers attached to a monk's possession of the money requisite for alms. What is clear from all the relevant texts is that monks, of course, are still obliged to do good and that, whatever type of good they do, it may be considered an almsgiving. The latter is true of the ordinary Christian also. So almsgiving is simply the generic name for any kind of good action.

<sup>55</sup> *De mor. cath. eccl.* 31, 67 (PL 32, 1339).

<sup>56</sup> *De coen. inst.* 10, 22 (CSEL 17, 192).

<sup>57</sup> *Exp. in ps.* 119[118], 8, 22 (CSEL 62, 163–64).

of the primitive Christian community, and then remarks that the sharing of possessions is divinely ordained because God bestows certain things equally on everyone inasmuch as all share human nature: everyone experiences day and night, sun and rain, birth and death. "Inasmuch as this is so, a person who keeps to himself what can be of use to many is not at all unlike a tyrant."<sup>58</sup> In the otherwise anonymous late-fourth-century writer known as Ambrosiaster we read that all things are God's and that they exist for the use of all; because they are His, He insists that they be shared with those in need. This is justice, then, that a person give to the poor from what God has given him.<sup>59</sup> According to Paulinus, the *littérateur* Bishop of Nola in our period, God gave the portion of the poor to the rich so that they in turn might distribute it as need be.<sup>60</sup> We give not what is our own but what is Christ's, in Jerome's words, and we ought not to give as if to a beggar but as to a brother.<sup>61</sup> "If you were giving of something that was your own," Augustine says, "it would be pure largesse, but since you give of what is His [God's], you are repaying a debt."<sup>62</sup> To give alms, writes Pelagius, is to pay a debt.<sup>63</sup>

It was also, so to speak, to pay the debt incurred by one's own humanity. For the necessity of giving alms, of caring for the poor, was one of the signs of the human condition here below, according to Augustine; in the life to come there would be no such thing. Indeed, as life on earth could be defined to some extent by the miseries that held sway in human existence and by the need to alleviate them, so life in heaven could be defined by the fact that there there would be no misery to alleviate.

Here the hungry Christ is fed, the one who is thirsty is given to drink, the naked clothed, the stranger welcomed, the sick visited. The necessity of a journey predominates. It is thus that one is to live on this pilgrimage, where Christ is in want. He is in want in his own, but in himself he is full. Yet he who is in want in his own and full in himself draws those in want to himself. There shall be no hunger, no thirst, no nakedness, no sickness, no wandering, no labor, no sorrow. I know that these things will not be there, and I do not know what will be there. . . .<sup>64</sup>

And again: "After the resurrection of the dead in the kingdom of God, no one will tell you to break your bread for the hungry, because there you will find no one who is hungry. No one will tell you to clothe the naked

<sup>58</sup> *Tract.* 2, 1, 6, 18–19 (CCSL 22, 149).

<sup>59</sup> *In 2am ep. ad Cor.* 9:9 (CSEL 81/2, 269).

<sup>60</sup> *Ep.* 34, 6 (CSEL 29, 308).

<sup>61</sup> *Tract. de ps.* 134[133], lines 159–61 (CCSL 78, 288).

<sup>62</sup> *Enarr. in ps.* 96[95], 15 (CCSL 39, 1353); cf. *Serm.* 103, 4, 5 (PL 38, 615).

<sup>63</sup> *In ep. ad Rom.* 13:7 (PL Suppl. 1, 1168).

<sup>64</sup> *Serm.* 236, 3 (PL 38, 1121).

where everyone will be clothed in the garment of immortality. . . ."<sup>65</sup> To give alms was thus, at least implicitly, to recognize temporality in the human condition.

Besides that it was to recognize a more radical need and incompleteness, not only of the recipient but of the almsgiver himself. Elsewhere Augustine, speaking to his congregation on Mt 7:7-12 ("Ask, and it will be given to you. . ."), tells them that God has created us to be His beggars. "We ask for what we might possess in eternity; there, when we have been filled, we shall no longer be in want. But, so that we might be filled, we hunger and thirst, and in our hunger and thirst we ask, we seek, we knock." Since this is so, he continues, we cannot turn away those who ask of us.

For we are God's beggars. In order for Him to acknowledge His beggars, we must also acknowledge those who beg of us. But here let us be aware, when something is asked of us, who they are who ask, from whom they ask it, what they ask for. Who are they who ask? Human beings. From whom do they ask? From human beings. Who are they who ask? Mortals. From whom do they ask? From mortals. Who are they who ask? Those who are frail. From whom do they ask? From those who are frail. Who are they who ask? Wretches. From whom do they ask? From wretches. With the exception of wealth, those from whom something is asked are the same as those who ask. What impudence you have to ask of your Lord, you who do not recognize your equal! I am not so, he says. God forbid that I should be so! Puffed up and wrapped in silk, he speaks thus of someone clothed in rags. But I address you as if you were naked. I do not ask you, dressed up, what sort of people you might be but what sort of people you were born—each one of you naked, each one weak, each one beginning a miserable life, each one screaming.<sup>66</sup>

For those endowed with riches, the giving of alms was the single most important justification—one might even say the only one—for the possession of wealth. Otherwise wealth was dangerous. This was the understanding in nearly every patristic interpretation of the narrative of the rich man and Lazarus in Lk 16:19-31—that it was not for his wealth that the rich man was condemned but for his failure to share it. There is no crime in being rich, Ambrose writes, striking a common theme, but rather in not employing what one has in proper fashion.<sup>67</sup> In his treatise *On Riches* Pelagius (or his disciple), who ordinarily inveighs vehemently against it, concedes that a person may possess wealth without any trace

<sup>65</sup> *Serm.* 11, 1 (CCSL 41, 161); cf. *Sermones* 37, 30 (ibid. 472-73); 103, 5, 6 (PL 38, 615); 104, 2, 3 (ibid. 617); 169, 14, 17 (ibid. 925); 179, 4, 4 and 6, 6 (ibid. 968-69); 217, 2 (ibid. 1083); 255, 2 (ibid. 1186); Denis 13, 7 (Morin, *S. Aug. sermones post Maurinos reperti* 61-62); *Enarr. in ps.* 87[86], 9 (CCSL 39, 1206); ibid. 148, 8 (ibid. 40, 2170).

<sup>66</sup> *Serm.* 61, 6, 7-7, 8 (PL 38, 411-12).

<sup>67</sup> *Exp. evang. sec. Luc.* 8, 85 (CCSL 14, 330).

of sin only if he uses it for almsdeeds.<sup>68</sup> "Wealth is good," Augustine says in a sermon, "gold is good, silver is good, servants are good, possessions are good, all these things are good—but so that you might do good with them, not so that they might make you good."<sup>69</sup> Even more strongly he tells his congregation in another sermon that gold and silver only truly belong to those who know how to use them—and by proper use almsgiving is understood—"for what a person uses unjustly does not by right belong to him."<sup>70</sup> Whoever does not do almsdeeds with his resources is like the rich fool of Lk 12:16-21 who collected his grain in barns and wanted to build new ones but who died during the night. Such a person only stores up perishable fruits for himself. What will he do on the day of judgment when he hears: "I was hungry, and you gave me no food. . . ." Wealth not dispersed is useless.<sup>71</sup> To illustrate this, Ambrose gives the example of a well, which, he says, becomes bitter if no one draws water from it; if it is used, however, it remains sweet to the taste and is beautiful to look at. So it is with wealth.<sup>72</sup>

#### OTHER FORMS OF ALMSGIVING

But material goods were not the only means with which to perform almsdeeds. One who was materially poor could often even provide for one who was wealthy, since in some ways poverty and wealth were relative terms. A rich man "comes to such and such a river, and since he is rich he has a delicate constitution," Augustine supposes for his audience by way of example in a sermon. "He is unable to cross over. If he were to cross naked, he would catch cold, get sick, and die. A poor man who is more robust comes along. He carries the rich man and performs an almsdeed for him. So do not think that people are poor just because they have no money."<sup>73</sup> Recalling Cicero, Ambrose writes that "money is easily used up, but good advice cannot be exhausted,"<sup>74</sup> and Jerome and Augustine too speak of offering counsel or consolation as a form of almsgiving for those who can do nothing else.<sup>75</sup> There are those who themselves depend upon alms, Jerome says in commenting on Ps 112:5: "Happy the one who is generous and lends. . . ." Is a person in such a position, who has nothing to give to anyone else, to be numbered among

<sup>68</sup> *De divitiis* 19, 4 (PL Suppl. 1, 1414).

<sup>69</sup> *Serm.* 48, 8 (CCSL 41, 610); cf. *Serm.* 61, 3, 3 (PL 38, 410).

<sup>70</sup> *Serm.* 50, 4 (CCSL 41, 626); cf. *Ep.* 153, 26 (CSEL 44, 426).

<sup>71</sup> *Idem, Serm.* 36, 9 (CCSL 41, 441).

<sup>72</sup> *De Nabuthae* 12, 52 (CSEL 32/2, 497-98).

<sup>73</sup> *Enarr. in ps.* 126[125], 13 (CCSL 40, 1854).

<sup>74</sup> *De off. min.* 2, 15, 75 (PL 16, 122).

<sup>75</sup> Jerome, *In Eccl.* 7:20-21 (CCSL 72, 309-10); Augustine, *Serm.* 91, 7, 9 (PL 38, 571); *Enarr. in ps.* 37[36], serm. 2, 13 (CCSL 38, 355-56); *ibid.* 126[125], 13 (*ibid.* 40, 1854).

the unjust? But the failure to give alms is a sin on the part of one who has something to give, while one who has nothing to give is blameless so long as he has the desire to give. Nonetheless the saints who have no material possessions do in fact have the means of performing almsdeeds: "This is mercy, that a holy person should teach others who are not holy."<sup>76</sup>

Augustine sees the forgiveness of sins as a particularly exalted mode of almsgiving. In the *Enchiridion* he provides a comprehensive list of almsdeeds: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, sheltering the fugitive, visiting the sick and shut-in, ransoming the captive, carrying the crippled, leading the blind, comforting the sorrowful, healing the sick, directing the lost, counseling the perplexed, and providing for the poor. To these may be added pardoning the sinner or anything associated with that, such as issuing a rebuke or even administering corporal punishment, so long as it is done with love.<sup>77</sup> And in another place he writes that almsgiving could simply be benevolence, for there are many who "do almsdeeds by means of a good will, even if they do not have money or anything else to give to the needy."<sup>78</sup>

#### RECOMPENSE OF ALMSGIVING: ATONEMENT FOR SIN

Augustine's words in the *Enchiridion* on exercising forgiveness as an almsdeed occur in the course of a rather lengthy discussion of sin. Speaking of the possibility of a sort of purgatorial fire after death to atone for sins, he remarks that this would not apply to those who have committed serious sins unless they had made suitable satisfaction for them, and by satisfaction he says that he intends the giving of alms. "Sacred Scripture has attributed so much to these [alms] that the Lord announces beforehand that the fruit of these alone will be imputed [as meritorious] to those on his right hand and the absence of these alone will be held [as damnable] against those on his left."<sup>79</sup>

Almsgiving was a classic means of atoning for sin, and the appeal to give alms for this reason is a commonplace in patristic literature of every period. As a motive for works of charity it ranks (as has been suggested) with the idea of giving to Christ in the persons of the poor. There are

<sup>76</sup> *Tract. de ps. 112*[111], lines 59–81 (CCSL 78, 233).

<sup>77</sup> *Enchiridion* 19, 72 (CCSL 46, 88). On forgiveness of sin as almsgiving, cf. also Ambrose, *Exp. in ps. 119*[118], 8, 23 (CSEL 62, 164); Augustine, *Sermones* 56, 7, 11 (PL 38, 381–82); 58, 9, 10 (ibid. 398); 206, 2 (ibid. 1041–42); 208, 2 (ibid. 1045–46); 210, 10, 12 (ibid. 1053–54); 259, 4 (ibid. 1199–1200); 261, 10, 10 (ibid. 1207). For other lists of almsdeeds in Augustine, cf. *Sermones* 50, 7 (CCSL 41, 628); 91, 7, 9 (PL 38, 571).

<sup>78</sup> *De serm. dom. in monte* 2, 2, 9 (CCSL 35, 99); *De trinitate* 15, 18, 32 (CCSL 50A, 507).

<sup>79</sup> *Enchiridion* 18, 69 (CCSL 46, 87); cf. *Serm.* 60, 10, 10 (PL 38, 407).



many testimonies of divine eloquence that show how valuable alms are for destroying sin, Augustine says, citing three in a sermon.<sup>80</sup> Among the ones that appear most frequently, quoted often in conflated or modified form, are Prov 13:8 (“The ransom of a person’s life is his wealth”), Sir 3:30 (“Water extinguishes a blazing fire; so almsgiving atones for sin”), and Lk 11:41 (“Give alms for those things that are within, and behold, everything is clean for you”).

“You have money,” writes Ambrose in blunt fashion, “redeem your sin. The Lord is not venal, but you are venal. You have been sold in sin; redeem yourself with your works, redeem yourself with your money. Money is base, but mercy is precious.” And he quotes appropriate places in the Scriptures.<sup>81</sup> “Give to the poor, raise up the infirm, redeem captives, and you have broken your chains,” he says elsewhere; “for almsgiving redeems from sin.”<sup>82</sup> Appropriately, the sin that almsgiving most effectively countered, according to Chromatius, was avarice. He remarks in a sermon: “If anyone is burdened by the evil desire of avarice, which is more oppressive than any other disease of the soul (for the love of money is the root of all evils, as the Apostle says), the precept concerning good works is necessary for him, so that he might know that he cannot be healed unless from avariciousness he turns to mercy, and from greediness to generosity.”<sup>83</sup>

Maximus, early-fifth-century Bishop of Turin, who emphasizes the cleansing effect of almsgiving each time he speaks of it in the context of forgiveness of sin,<sup>84</sup> compares it very closely to baptism in one significant passage.

Almsgiving is another kind of washing of souls, so that if perchance anyone has sinned through human frailty after baptism, there is still the possibility of being cleansed by almsgiving, as the Lord says: Give alms, and behold, everything is clean for you. But (with due regard to the faith) I would say that almsgiving is more indulgent than baptism. For baptism is given once and bestows pardon once, whereas as many times as alms are bestowed pardon is granted. These are the two fountains of mercy, which give life and forgive sins. Whoever holds to both shall be endowed with the honor of the heavenly kingdom, but whoever, having sinned after baptism, has betaken himself to the rivers of mercy shall himself obtain mercy.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>80</sup> *Serm.* 60, 10, 10 (PL 38, 407).

<sup>81</sup> *De Helia et ieiunio* 20, 76 (CSEL 32/2, 458).

<sup>82</sup> *Exp. in ps.* 119[118], 8, 41 (CSEL 62, 176).

<sup>83</sup> *Serm.* 12, 7 (CCSL 9A, 56).

<sup>84</sup> *Sermones* 22, 1 (CCSL 23, 83); 22A, 3–4 (ibid. 88–89); 61, 1–2 (ibid. 244–45); 61A, 3 (ibid. 250–51).

<sup>85</sup> *Serm.* 22A, 4 (ibid. 89).

Maximus had quoted Sir 3:30 previous to making this comparison, and Jerome cites the same text, with its water imagery, when he likens baptism and almsgiving: "Almsgiving extinguishes the sins that we are not able to wash away otherwise. For what is written? As water extinguishes a fire, so almsgiving extinguishes sins. Almsgiving does the very thing that baptism does."<sup>86</sup> Pelagius is familiar with the comparison, but he seems to hesitate to draw it as tautly as do Maximus and Jerome. Almsgiving is not so freely characterized as a washing. "You cannot be washed anew," he writes in a letter to someone who has sinned gravely, quoting Jn 13:10 ("He who has bathed once does not need to wash again"), ". . .but if you wish to be cleansed once more give alms, and behold, all that you have is clean."<sup>87</sup>

In reading the passage from Maximus one cannot but be struck by the fact that here almsgiving appears to have succeeded to a certain extent to the place once occupied by martyrdom, such as is found for the first time in Tertullian's treatise *On Baptism*.<sup>88</sup> Almsgiving is not only placed on a par with baptism; it is said to be "more indulgent" than baptism is. We should not try to exaggerate the significance of what Maximus says, especially since it occurs as an exhortation at the end of a sermon and is liable to be colored by the rhetorical needs of the moment. That he should have felt free, however, to make such a strong comparison at all gives us some idea of the power that almsgiving was believed to have had for the forgiveness of sin.

Nonetheless one could not assert with absolute assurance that almsdeeds would remit every kind of sin. There were some, Augustine mentions in his treatise *On Faith and Works*, who held that the three sins considered particularly serious in Christian antiquity—unchastity, idolatry, and murder—could only be atoned for by excommunication and a more severe penance. He himself does not know whether this opinion is to be corrected or approved as it stands, but he certainly does not reject it out of hand.<sup>89</sup> In any event, one could not take advantage of almsgiving to commit sin with impunity.

Augustine tells us in *The City of God* that some people were quite sure that either the practice of almsgiving or the daily recitation of the Lord's Prayer was sufficient to provide a benign judgment at the end of the world, no matter how profligate a person had been in this life. These people based their opinion on Jas 2:13—"For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. . ."—and on the fact that in Mt 25:31-46

<sup>86</sup> *Tract. de ps.* 134[133], lines 197-200 (CCSL 78, 289).

<sup>87</sup> *Ep.* "Ad te surgo hominem" 1 (PL 30, 242).

<sup>88</sup> *De bapt.* 16 (CCSL 1, 290-91).

<sup>89</sup> *De fide et operibus* 19, 34 (CSEL 41, 79-80).

the Lord seems to make the performance of works of mercy the sole criterion for entrance into heaven, while the words on forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer answered to Christ's saying about the correspondence between human and divine forgiveness in Mt 6:14-15: "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. . . ." <sup>90</sup> Augustine does not deny the salutary effects of either almsgiving or the daily recitation of the Lord's Prayer and, to the extent that these people agreed that almsgiving should be somehow proportionate to the gravity of the sin involved, they expressed a truth; otherwise a wealthy person could purchase absolution from heinous sins committed daily with a small daily alms. Yet one who gives alms should begin with himself, for it is unreasonable that a person exercise charity toward another and not do so toward himself. How then is a person who does not give alms to his own soul able to give alms proportionate to the gravity of his sins? Unless alms are given, therefore, with the intent of reform, they are given in vain. The scene in Mt 25:31-46, where the Lord makes salvation depend on almsdeeds, shows how effective they are for the remission of past sin but does not mean that sin may simply be committed with impunity. <sup>91</sup>

Frequently linked with almsgiving for the remission of sin are prayer, as we have seen to some degree with the Our Father, and fasting. "If worldly delights find a way into your soul," Augustine says in a sermon, "exercise yourselves in mercy, exercise yourselves in almsgiving, in fasting, and in prayer. For by these are purged the daily sins that cannot help but creep into the soul because of human frailty." <sup>92</sup> The practice of these three, Augustine observes elsewhere, is our righteousness in this pilgrimage. They represent the whole of Christian morality, for fasting stands for the subjugation of the body, almsgiving for good will and good deeds of every sort, and prayer for the rules of holy desire. <sup>93</sup> All these bring a person close to God and remove him from the grasp of his enemies, Maximus remarks in the closing words of a sermon; "for God is Himself merciful, not dependent on food (*ieiunus*), and He is holy. And therefore the one who wishes to draw near to God ought to imitate what God is." <sup>94</sup> Often almsgiving is spoken of as redemptive with only one of the other two, but they themselves are rather rarely mentioned without it. Thus in Ambrose's treatise on fasting, when he comes to the question

<sup>90</sup> *De civ. Dei* 21, 22 (CCSL 48, 786-87).

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.* 21, 27 (*ibid.* 800-802); cf. *Enchiridion* 19, 70 (CCSL 46, 87); *ibid.* 20, 75-77 (*ibid.* 89-92); *Serm.* 9, 18 (CCSL 41, 142-43).

<sup>92</sup> *Serm.* 9, 17 (CCSL 41, 141).

<sup>93</sup> *De perf. iustitiae hominis* 8, 18 (CSEL 42, 15-16); cf. *Enarr. in ps.* 43[42], 8 (CCSL 38, 481).

<sup>94</sup> *Serm.* 81, 3 (CCSL 23, 333).

of its value with regard to sin, he naturally brings up almsgiving.<sup>95</sup> Its importance vis-à-vis its counterparts appears already in the middle of the second century in the so-called *Second Letter of Clement*, where we read that fasting is better than prayer as penance for sin, but almsgiving is better than both.<sup>96</sup>

That a certain pre-eminence continued to be given to almsgiving in the period that concerns us is particularly evident in a sermon of Peter Chrysologus that praises both fasting and almsgiving and that insists on the indispensability of the latter with respect to the former. Here and in other places the specifically penitential aspect of these practices is not always rendered explicit, but it was surely not far removed in intention, given the strong tradition.

Almsgiving . . . is to fasting what the sun is to the day. As the radiance of the sun brings increasing brightness to the day and dispels the darkness of the clouds, so almsgiving sanctifies the sanctity of a fast and with its light casts out all the night of wicked desire. And lest someone should be unaware, generosity is to fasting what the soul is to the body.

Peter goes on to speak of the virtues of fasting and then says:

But fasting flourishes in these virtues, conquers, triumphs, when it fights under the leadership of mercy. Mercy and piety are its wings, by which it is carried and brought to heaven, without which it falls and tumbles onto the earth. Fasting without mercy is not truth but a phantom, but where there is mercy there is truth. . . . Fasting without mercy is not virtuous but hypocritical. . . .

And he advises his hearers, as is common practice, to give what they have not eaten in fasting to the poor, lest they be fasting for the sake of their own desires and not for Christ.<sup>97</sup> "Abstinence is a person's first medicine," he says in another sermon, "but a complete cure requires the expenditure of mercy. . . . Without the anointing of mercy, without the outpouring of piety, without the giving of alms it [fasting] does not restore perfect health to the mind."<sup>98</sup> In still another sermon he says the same thing, his store of imagery not yet exhausted: "Fasting does not bear fruit if it is not watered with mercy; fasting grows arid when mercy dries up. Mercy is to fasting what dew is to the ground."<sup>99</sup> In this regard Augustine speaks practically to his congregation.

You have heard the words from Isaiah: Break your bread for the hungry. Don't think that it is enough to fast. Fasting is chastisement for you but not refreshment

<sup>95</sup> *De Helia et ieiunio* 4, 9 (CSEL 32/2, 418).

<sup>96</sup> *2 Clem.* 16, 4 (LCL Apostolic Fathers 1, 154).

<sup>97</sup> *Serm.* 8, 2-3 (CCSL 24, 60-61).

<sup>98</sup> *Serm.* 41, 3 (ibid. 233).

<sup>99</sup> *Serm.* 43, 5 (ibid. 245).

for others. Your hardships will be fruitful if you bring comfort to someone else. See, you have denied yourself: to whom will you give what you have taken away from yourself, where will you put what you have held from yourself? How many poor can be filled by the breakfast that we have today omitted! Fast in such a way that you may rejoice to have breakfasted while someone else eats, that your prayers may be heard.<sup>100</sup>

Almsgiving somehow completes prayer, just as it does fasting. Indeed, there are those who cannot fast because of their stomach, Chromatius remarks in a sermon, but that is not an excuse for refraining from giving alms. "Give alms and redeem your fast. Be persistent in prayer, purify your mind, and that will take the place of a fast for you." He continues by commenting on the angel's words to Cornelius in Acts 10:4: "Your prayers have been heard and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God. . . . Therefore if we wish our prayers to be heard by the Lord, we ought to commend them with good works and alms, just as the holy Cornelius did, who merited to be heard by the Lord."<sup>101</sup> And during Lent Augustine tells his congregation: "So that our prayers might be assisted by appropriate helps, since in these days we ought to be more fervent in them, let us dispense alms more fervently."<sup>102</sup>

Finally, in addition to being useful for the remission of the sins of the giver, almsdeeds were also of benefit to the dead. The Roman nobleman Pammachius' great agape in the Basilica of Saint Peter, for instance, which Paulinus of Nola describes in a letter to the noble ascetic himself, was prompted by the death of Pammachius' wife, Paulina. "Let me come now to the proclamation of your deeds, and I shall pass to the pious acts that the sanctity of your tears has produced. For you paid the debt for each part of your wife, pouring out tears for her body and alms for her soul."<sup>103</sup> "One may not doubt that the dead are aided by the prayers of holy Church, the saving sacrifice and the alms that are distributed on behalf of their spirits, and because of these God acts more mercifully than their sins have deserved." This, Augustine says, is a venerable tradition that the whole Church accepts. Who could hesitate to believe that they are assisted by almsdeeds when it is certain that God hears the prayers that are offered for their sake? But these things are only of value to those

<sup>100</sup> *Enarr. in ps.* 43[42], 8 (CCSL 38, 480).

<sup>101</sup> *Serm.* 3, 2 (CCSL 9A, 13). According to Augustine, fasting is the most dispensable of the triad. Contrasting Christian with Epicurean morality, he tells his congregation: "Let Christians therefore say: Let us fast and pray and give, for tomorrow we die. Or, if they want to mention two things, I wish they would say: Let us give and pray, rather than: Let us fast and not give" (*Serm.* 150, 6, 7 [PL 38, 812]).

<sup>102</sup> *Serm.* 209, 2 (PL 38, 1046-47); cf. *Serm.* 9, 17 (CCSL 41, 142).

<sup>103</sup> *Ep.* 13, 11 (CSEL 29, 92-93).

who have lived in such a way that they have merited to be aided by them.<sup>104</sup>

A brief word should be said about almsgiving in relation to the practice of penance in a sacramental sense. Did the dispensing of alms customarily play some role in that practice? We may assume that almsgiving as a form of public penance followed upon what was originally a private usage, but more than that we do not know. In his treatise *On Faith and Works*, cited earlier, Augustine merely hints at almsgiving as one option (another being excommunication, certainly an institutional act and a severer penance) in the institutional exercise of penance.

#### RECOMPENSE OF ALMSGIVING: PURCHASE OF HEAVEN AND PRAYERS OF POOR

Besides remitting sins, almsgiving prepared a place in heaven for the almsgiver. This image occurs from time to time. Commenting on Eccl 3:22 ("So I saw that there is nothing better than that a person should enjoy his work. . ."), Jerome writes that "nothing is good in this life except that a person should rejoice in his work, doing almsdeeds and preparing treasures to come for himself in the kingdom of heaven."<sup>105</sup> In Augustine the idea is associated, typically, with the fundamental poverty of the human condition and the futility of earthly possessions. Almsgiving made possible an exchange of temporal for eternal goods.

How do people become rich? By giving away here what they have received from God in time and accepting there what God shall afterward return to them in eternity. Here, my brethren, the rich are also poor. It is good for the rich person to realize that he is poor, for if he thinks that he is full he is simply puffed up, not full. Let him recognize that he is empty so that he may be filled. What does he have? Gold. What does he not yet have? Eternal life. Let him attend to what he has and see to what he does not have. Brethren, let him give from what he has so that he might receive what he does not have. With what he has let him purchase what he does not have.<sup>106</sup>

Generosity to the poor was a shrewd investment. Those who have never been poor in this life, says Maximus of Turin in a sermon, need not be poor in the next either, "but by a kind of lucrative exchange they may receive great things in place of small, heavenly in place of earthly, eternal in place of temporal."<sup>107</sup> Almsgiving was, in a word, a *negotiatio*, a

<sup>104</sup> *Serm.* 172, 2, 2 (ibid. 936–37); cf. *De cura pro mortuis* 18, 22 (CSEL 41, 658); *Enchiridion* 29, 110 (CCSL 46, 108–9).

<sup>105</sup> *In Eccl.* 3:22 (CCSL 72, 283).

<sup>106</sup> *Enarr. in ps.* 122[121], 11 (CCSL 40, 1812).

<sup>107</sup> Maximus, *Serm.* 96 (CCSL 23, 383).

business.<sup>108</sup> By almsgiving one sent one's wealth on before, where thieves could not enter or moths destroy. "Give to the poor and you shall have treasure in heaven. You shall not be without treasure, but what you are worried about on earth you shall possess secure in heaven. Send it on ahead then."<sup>109</sup> Augustine refers to the poor as the *laturarii*, the porters, of those who give alms. If someone wants to transfer the wealth that he has accumulated from one place to another so that it will be out of harm's way, he tells his congregation, he often has trouble in doing so. And if it is difficult to move oneself and all one's goods from the West to the East, how can a person be expected to move from earth to heaven, which is what the Lord tells us to do lest we perish? "If I was unable to find beasts of burden and ships to go from West to East, how shall I find ladders to go from earth to heaven?" And he proceeds in the same homely fashion.

Don't worry, says God, don't worry. I who made you rich have made the poor your porters. If, for example, you chanced upon someone poor from across the sea, or from the place where you wished to go—if you chanced upon someone in need from that place, you would say to yourself: Here is a citizen of the place where I want to go. He is in need. I'll give him my goods to return to me there. Well, here is someone poor. He is a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. Why do you hesitate to make the passage?<sup>110</sup>

The giver of alms had the benefit, too, of the prayers of the poor, to say nothing of their gratitude, all of which Paulinus of Nola describes in rather extravagant language at the end of a sermon on almsgiving—language that cannot help but betray something of his own aristocratic manner with respect to the poor.

It is one thing when you pray for yourself and another when the multitude trembles on your behalf before God. You are silent, and when you are silent they cry out for you. They see you and smile at you. They seek you out and salute you. Unmindful of [their own] need and infirmity, their bodies are refreshed by your health and their souls are enlivened by gazing upon you. You are indeed their fertile field, their fruitful farm, and they are for you wealth and a precious possession. They place you above their own children, and each of them is more concerned about you than he is about himself, praying for you when he prays—or even before he prays—for his own salvation. . . . In all the churches they pray for you, in all the public places they acclaim you.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>108</sup> Idem, *Serm.* 27, 1 (ibid. 105); cf. Paulinus of Nola, *Ep.* 32, 19 and 21 (CSEL 29, 294 and 296).

<sup>109</sup> Augustine, *Serm.* 60, 7, 7 (PL 38, 405).

<sup>110</sup> *Serm.* 38, 9 (CCSL 41, 484–85). On the image of the poor as *laturarii*, or porters (a word used only by Augustine in this period), cf. also *Sermones* 18, 4 (ibid. 249); 25A, 4 (ibid. 345); 60, 8, 8 (PL 38, 406); Frang. 9, 4 (Morin, *S. Aug. sermones post Maurinos reperti* 235); Morin 11, 6 (PL Suppl. 2, 681); Morin 12, 4 (ibid. 689); Lambot 5 (ibid. 772); Lambot 19/Maurini 60 (ibid. 812).

<sup>111</sup> *Ep.* 34, 10 (CSEL 29, 311). Although classified as a letter, this is almost certainly a sermon. Cf. also Augustine, *Enarr. in ps.* 37[36], serm. 3, 6 (CCSL 38, 372).

And on the day of judgment it is the poor who will be profitable to the almsgiver, not his friends or his children, to whom he has also been generous; the poor will plead his cause, while the others will not even be able to speak in their own defense.<sup>112</sup>

## ALMSGIVING WITHOUT RECOMPENSE

Yet, of course, not all those who gave alms could gain from their action. One could not do almsdeeds and expect to benefit from them if one had sinned with impunity, as Augustine remarks. Pelagius denies the benefit of almsgiving to those who remain in their sin.<sup>113</sup> Jerome,<sup>114</sup> Augustine,<sup>115</sup> and Peter Chrysologus<sup>116</sup> say that almsgiving is of no value to heretics, and Augustine also asserts that almsdeeds are performed in vain by the unbaptized, just as the Lord's Prayer is said in vain by them.<sup>117</sup> Neither do the ignorant (*idiotae*) profit from almsgiving, for they are unaware of its deeper meaning.<sup>118</sup> The Fourth Council of Carthage, held in 398, determined that the alms of the disobedient were unacceptable and should be rejected.<sup>119</sup> As for hypocrites, they had already received their reward. Among these were the monks and clerics that Jerome knew so well, who were adept at giving alms in such a way that their apparent generosity would earn them more in return from sympathetic onlookers. "There are those who bestow a small sum on the poor," he writes in a letter, "so that they might get back more, and under the pretext of almsgiving they look for riches; this is rather like hunting than almsgiving. It is the way four-footed creatures, birds, and fish are caught. A little piece of bait is put on a hook so that matrons are relieved of their purses."<sup>120</sup> To give alms without sin, one's left hand had to be unaware of what one's right hand was doing. That is to say—as Augustine interprets the Lord's words in Mt 6:3–4—that the determination to carry out the divine precepts, symbolized by the right hand, should be divorced from any craving for self-aggrandizement, symbolized by the left.<sup>121</sup> It was

<sup>112</sup> Maximus, *Serm.* 27, 1 (CCSL 23, 105).

<sup>113</sup> *In ep. ad Phil.* 4:18 (PL Suppl. 1, 1320).

<sup>114</sup> *In Osee* 6:6–7 (CCSL 76, 67); *ibid.* 8:11–13 (*ibid.* 89); *In Amos* 5:21–22 (*ibid.* 294).

<sup>115</sup> *In ep. Ioann.* 6, 2 (PL 35, 2050); *Serm.* 37, 27–28 (CCSL 41, 469–71); *Enarr. in ps.* 84[83], 7 (CCSL 39, 1151–52); *De trinitate* 12, 7, 11 (CCSL 50, 366).

<sup>116</sup> *Serm.* 119 (PL 52, 525).

<sup>117</sup> *De nupt. et concup.* 1, 33, 38 (CSEL 42, 250).

<sup>118</sup> Augustine, *Conf.* 13, 27, 42 (CCSL 27, 267).

<sup>119</sup> Canon 93 (Hardouin 1, 984).

<sup>120</sup> *Ep.* 52, 9 (CSEL 54, 430–31).

<sup>121</sup> *De serm. dom. in monte* 2, 2, 8 (CCSL 35, 99); cf. *Serm.* 149, 14, 15 (PL 38, 805–6); Peter Chrysologus, *Serm.* 9, 5 (CCSL 24, 67). For other meanings in this regard for the right and left hands, cf. Augustine, *De serm. dom. in monte* 2, 2, 6–7 (CCSL 35, 96–98). On the hand as associated with almsgiving, cf. Maximus of Turin, *Serm.* 43, 4 (CCSL 23, 176); Peter Chrysologus, *Serm.* 32, 4 (CCSL 24, 184); Jerome, *Tract. in ps.* 134[133], lines 103–204 (CCSL 78, 286–90); *In Esaiam* 13:2 (CCSL 73, 225).



quite possible for the pride that Augustine saw as the worst of the vices to mimic charity so that externally the two were indistinguishable. "Charity feeds the hungry and so does pride. Charity does this that God might be praised, pride that it itself might be praised. Charity clothes the naked and pride does too. Charity fasts and pride does too. Charity buries the dead and pride does too. All the good works that charity wishes to do pride does as well."<sup>122</sup>

Unless a person's motives were deeply Christian, unless one gave alms for the sake of Christ, he risked vitiating an act that had the appearance of kindness. There are many pagans, Jerome notes, who give an alms if they see someone with his hand cut off or suffering with an infected limb. Such people say to themselves: "Suppose I were like that. Miserable person, what would I do? This could very well happen to me. Who will give to me? And so I ought to give this fellow something so that somebody will give me something if I should end up like him." People whose minds operate in this way are being merciful not to the beggar to whom they give a piece of bread but to themselves; they are moved by self-pity rather than by Christian mercy.<sup>123</sup>

Likewise, those who dispensed alms out of money unjustly gotten—by usury or extortion, for instance—gained no merit for themselves in so doing. Some people merely oppressed or stole from one group in order to give to another, and all for the sake of hearing their names called out in

<sup>122</sup> *In ep. Ioann.* 8, 9 (PL 35, 2040).

<sup>123</sup> *Tract. in ps.* 134[133], lines 164–74 (CCSL 78, 288). In his treatise *On the Morals of the Catholic Church*, written very shortly after his conversion, Augustine remarks that a wise person is called merciful even though wisdom is unmoved by sorrow, while mercy (*miserericordia*) connotes that the heart is struck with sympathy for another's suffering; a wise person acts from the duty of goodness. A fool, on the other hand, is not sufficiently moved to mercy by a sense of duty but requires a perturbation of the soul as well; otherwise his heart is hardened to suffering (*De mor. cath. eccl.* 27, 53–54 [PL 32, 1333]). In his *Retractions*, however, Augustine makes it clear that he did not mean to say that such a wise person, moved only by a sense of duty, actually exists somewhere in the world (*Retract.* 1, 6, 4 [CSEL 36, 31]). Augustine, like Jerome, it would seem, is concerned lest compassion be exclusively an emotional response, since the emotions are unreliable. But Jerome's approach to the issue is more specifically Christian, while Augustine is Stoic, at least in this early period following his conversion. Later he takes a far more human approach to the motivations for compassion and explicitly criticizes the Stoic point of view (*De civ. Dei* 9, 5 [CCSL 47, 254]). Jerome himself, however, is not absolutely consistent, or perhaps one might say that he is capable of stressing different things as the occasion demands. In a letter to Oceanus on the death of Fabiola he writes that Fabiola would tend to the sick and dying with her own hands, regardless of how repugnant the proximity to disease might have been to her. He continues by drawing a moral: "The person whom we despise, whom we are unable to look at, the sight of whom causes us to vomit, is like us; he is made of the same clay that we are, formed of the same elements. Whatever he suffers we are also capable of suffering. Let us consider his wounds as our own and all our hardness of heart towards another person will be transformed into a merciful regard for ourselves" (*Ep.* 77, 6 [CSEL 55, 43]).

church by the deacon to the admiration of the congregation: "So-and-so offers this amount, so-and-so has promised that amount. . . ." <sup>124</sup> Others presumably had higher motivation. Such were those, for example, who Robin Hood fashion stole from the wealthy so as to give to the poor, who tampered with wills so that money would not come to people they considered unworthy but would be used for doing good. <sup>125</sup> These persons would occasionally justify their action by citing Luke 16:9: "Make friends for yourselves from the mammon of iniquity." "For they say that to steal property that is not theirs is the mammon of iniquity. To dispense it, particularly to the saints who are in want, is to make friends of the mammon of iniquity." To these Augustine replies that alms are to be given from one's own just labors. <sup>126</sup> As one feeds Christ when one feeds a Christian, so one steals from Christ when one steals from a Christian. There are some who would seek to avoid this accusation by seizing only the property of pagans to bestow on their fellow Christians, but a pagan is hindered from embracing Christianity when he is so treated. And to those who say that they would take what belongs to a pagan precisely in order to make a Christian out of him Augustine remarks sceptically, falling back on his experience of human nature: "I'll believe that when I see you giving a Christian what you have taken from a pagan." <sup>127</sup> At issue here is the basic rule that no good can justify an evil. <sup>128</sup> "Mercy is good, but it must not go against justice." <sup>129</sup> Indeed, if a person has stolen something, he should make restitution not by giving alms to the poor but by restoring what he has unjustly taken to its rightful owner. <sup>130</sup>

#### A CRITICAL EVALUATION

It is often repeated that alms are due to the poor in justice, that the earth was created for all, and that the superfluity of the rich is the property of the poor. But what we can deduce from the data that have

<sup>124</sup> Jerome, *In Hiez.* 18:5-9 (CCSL 75, 238); cf. *In Hier.* 11:15-16 (CCSL 74, 116).

<sup>125</sup> Augustine, *C. mendacium* 7, 18 (CSEL 41, 489-91); cf. *Enchiridion* 7, 22 (CCSL 46, 62).

<sup>126</sup> *Idem*, *Serm.* 113, 2, 2 (PL 38, 648-49).

<sup>127</sup> *Serm.* 178, 4, 4-5, 5 (*ibid.* 962-63).

<sup>128</sup> *Idem*, *C. mendacium* 7, 18 (SEL 41, 490).

<sup>129</sup> *Idem*, *Quaest. in Hept.* 2, 88 (CCSL 33, 113). On this cf. also Pelagius, *De vita christ.* 12 (PL 40, 1042).

<sup>130</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 153, 24 (CSEL 44, 424). Apropos of almsgiving from questionable sources, there is an interesting incident that Jerome records in his letter to Eustochium. A certain monk of the Nitrian desert, "stingy rather than avaricious," left behind one hundred gold coins at his death, which he had earned by weaving linen. When the money was discovered, there was considerable discussion as to what should be done with it: some suggested that it be given to the poor, others to the Church, still others to his parents. But the elders decided that it should be buried with him, saying in the words of Acts 8:20: "Your money go to perdition with you." Such gold was ill fit for almsgiving (*Ep.* 22, 33 [CSEL 54, 195-96]).

come down to us is that, by and large, almsgiving in the time and place that we are studying it is characterized less as a work whose motivation is the alleviation of social ills than as a profoundly spiritual exercise. So it is that its thrust is rather heavily donor-centered: it confers benefits on the giver in the form of the remission of sin; it places him in a mysterious relationship to Christ, makes Christ his debtor, opens heaven to him, and earns him the prayers of the poor. Regularly the value to the giver is emphasized. Ambrose is typical of this when he writes that "if you clothe the naked you cover yourself with righteousness. If you bring the wayfarer into your home or come to the aid of the needy, he acquires for you the friendship of the saints and everlasting dwellings. This is not an insignificant grace. You sow corporeal things and reap spiritual in return."<sup>131</sup>

Rarely, it seems, do the poor themselves take on a personality in the writings of this period. They exist—so it is frequently stated in one way or another—for the sake of the rich, to offer them opportunities for beneficence or to test them. Hurry to feed the poor, Paulinus of Nola says in a sermon, "lest they should have to fast longer and He who made them poor for your profit be aroused by the harm that they are suffering. . . . He made the poor person that He might look to the merciful, and the needy that He might test the wealthy."<sup>132</sup> Augustine tells his own congregation that Christ is in need here on earth, but for our sake.

All the poor whom we see—Christ is able to care for them just as he cared for Elijah by means of the raven. Yet he withdrew the raven even from Elijah. He showed to the widow, not to Elijah, that he should be taken care of by a widow. Thus, when God makes the poor—because it is He Himself who does not wish them to possess anything—He puts the wealthy to the test. . . . [He makes] the rich to come to the aid of the poor, and the poor to test the rich.<sup>133</sup>

He refers to it as a scriptural truth that "God makes needy many of His servants, whom He is able to care for, so that He might find out who those are who do good."<sup>134</sup> "God makes His holy ones to want," he says elsewhere, "so that we might realize how much He desires us to perform works of mercy."<sup>135</sup> In Optatus, late-fourth-century Bishop of Milevis, we read at least as strikingly that God, who made both rich and poor, could have given sufficient to both, but had He done so "the sinner would not have been able to discover the means to succor himself."<sup>136</sup> Finally, in Peter Chrysologus' sermons on Luke 16:19–31 he speaks of how both

<sup>131</sup> *De off. min.* 1, 11, 39 (PL 16, 34).

<sup>132</sup> *Ep.* 34, 6 (CSEL 29, 307–8).

<sup>133</sup> *Serm.* 39, 6 (CCSL 41, 491–92); cf. *Sermones* 11, 2 (ibid. 161–62); 85, 7 (PL 38, 523); *Enarr. in ps.* 125[124], 2 (CCSL 40, 1836–37).

<sup>134</sup> *Serm.* 239, 4, 4 (PL 38, 1128).

<sup>135</sup> *Serm.* 11, 1 (CCSL 41, 161).

<sup>136</sup> *De schismate Donatist.* 3, 3 (CSEL 26, 74–75).

Lazarus and the rich man could have been of assistance to one another, for "the poor man was sick in his body and the rich man in his soul." But Lazarus' poverty was intended, it seems, primarily as a didactic experience for the rich man, and his suffering was even prolonged on his account. "This is why the cure of the poor man was put off, so that the rich man might draw healing from his wounds, compunction from his plights, repentance from his tears, might take example from his patience, learn mercy from his hunger and compassion from his thirst."<sup>137</sup> More than this, God increases Lazarus' hunger so that he can no longer be silent, so that he must cry out and let the rich man know of his presence and his need. To open the rich man's heart, He covers Lazarus' body with sores and then He sends dogs to lick the sores. "A human being is reduced to beggary so that inhuman cupidity might be manifested."<sup>138</sup>

All this represents an attitude that a later age will find somewhat unpalatable. Thus almsgiving—the care of the poor in general—at this time is not so much outer-directed as inner-directed, and it is unusual indeed when Ambrose says in his treatise *On the Duties of the Clergy* that the highest incentive to mercy is compassion for others in their distress.<sup>139</sup> There are very few sympathetic depictions of the underprivileged, portraying them as human beings with particular needs and desires of their own, as persons in their own right; even the impassioned works of Ambrose, *On Naboth* and *On Tobit*, are marred to a certain extent by rhetoric and stereotyping.

One might suggest that the very concept of the identification of Christ and the poor, at least as some of the Fathers develop it, tended to work against the poor by swallowing them up in him. One recalls how, in Peter Chrysologus, cited near the beginning of this article, the poor are virtually effaced as Christ receives the alms that is given them. In one of his sermons Augustine seems to go even further in this direction. Speaking on Mt 19:16–30, he remarks that the rich young man might have been saddened because Jesus had asked him to give to the poor; had he been asked to give to Jesus himself, however, to the good master who would preserve what he had been given in heaven for the sake of his benefactor, he might have done so. To this suggestion Augustine replies by saying that no one should fear to bestow alms on the poor since it is not in fact they who accept them but Christ: "Let no one think that the one whose hand is seen is the one who accepts; he accepts who ordered you to give."<sup>140</sup> Is this anything other than a denial of the very existence of the poor, however unintended? The identification of Christ and the poor is

<sup>137</sup> *Serm.* 124 (PL 52, 541).

<sup>138</sup> *Serm.* 121 (ibid. 532).

<sup>139</sup> *De off. min.* 2, 28, 136 (PL 16, 139).

<sup>140</sup> *Serm.* 86, 2, 2–3, 3 (PL 38, 524).

perhaps what in fact makes Christian almsgiving specifically "Christian." There is no doubt that this identification, along with the general biblical predisposition to favor the poor and disfavor the rich, served to ennoble the position of the underprivileged considerably. But in the Church in the West at this time (what may have been the view of the Eastern Church and that of such Fathers as Basil and Chrysostom is outside the scope of this article) we are faced with a kind of social monophysitism that failed to give due recognition to the individual nature of the poor over against Christ. Here we may possibly see Neoplatonic modes of thought at play, which leaned toward diminishing the reality of the individual and overemphasizing the significance of the universal, with Christ as the universal and the beggar with outstretched hand as the individual.<sup>141</sup> It was, in any event, not a balanced view.

So it was that the poor became a means to sanctification for others in a way that could be dangerously self-centered.<sup>142</sup> Augustine evidently recognized the tendency himself when he observed in a sermon devoted to almsgiving: "It is better, my brethren, that no one should be impoverished than that you should perform a work of mercy. For a person who wishes others to be miserable so that he can be merciful is possessed of a cruel mercy, just as a doctor who would wish others to be sick so that he might practice his art would be a cruel healer."<sup>143</sup>

Coupled with the emphasis on the donor-centered aspect of almsgiving was a strong sense of the inevitability of poverty. Jerome writes in a letter to a certain Julian that although he had given away much of his property and many have had reason to rejoice in his generosity, "nonetheless there are many more by far to whom you have given nothing. Not even the wealth of Darius or the riches of Croesus can satisfy the needs of the poor of the world." Consequently one gives alms without any sense of being able to achieve a good that is widespread or enduring. One does what one does for the sake of Christ and one's relationship with him, and so it is natural that Jerome should follow this remark immediately with the advice to Julian to give himself over to the Lord, to achieve the

<sup>141</sup> I owe this observation to Norman Fenton, O.P.

<sup>142</sup> John Burnaby (*Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938] 132-34) is particularly critical of Augustine for this kind of attitude. He accuses Augustine of finding the primary, indeed the sole, justifiable motive for works of charity "in the securing of ultimate benefit for ourselves." Burnaby also remarks that the notion of the presence of Christ in the poor is what makes almsgiving meritorious as far as Augustine is concerned. This results in "making not only the love of neighbor but the love of God a 'means' to our own advantage: we are attempting to 'use' not our neighbor only, but God Himself." Cf. also *ibid.* 237 and 255.

<sup>143</sup> *Enarr. in ps.* 126[125], 14 (CCSL 40, 1855); cf. *In ep. Ioann.* 8, 5 (PL 35, 2038); *Conf.* 3, 2, 3 (CCSL 27, 28).

summit of apostolic virtue, to follow the Savior.<sup>144</sup> Poverty was simply a constant that had to be accepted, and there were no great schemes to deal with it in any comprehensive way (certainly the dole provided by the Roman state was not such a scheme), much less to eradicate it: those are completely modern ideas. Perhaps it could not have been otherwise, anyhow, with a world view that presupposed the necessity of poor and rich for each other, and with a world in which poverty, often extreme poverty, was everywhere and constituted one of the facts of life.

#### A CORRECTIVE

Yet these somewhat negative considerations must receive an important qualification. Augustine sounds the theme: "Although one gives and another receives," he tells his congregation, "the one who ministers and the one for whom the ministry is performed are joined."<sup>145</sup> The Fathers understood that by almsgiving, however imperfect may have been their conception of it, a certain balance was restored between the two classes. There was a danger, though, that almsgiving could bespeak satisfaction with the inequality that existed. Augustine acknowledges the possibility of this in one of his sermons, where he points out what may be the attitude of many an almsgiver: a desire to inflate himself by means of the poor, to keep the poor subject to himself. "He was in need and you [being rich] shared. You seem to be greater, because you have proffered a service, than the one whom you have served." The rich should wish, instead, that the poor be equal to them "so that both of you might be under the one for whom no service can be performed." One must never forget that the aim of almsgiving is to eliminate misery, not to perpetuate it. Indeed, the love of equals that will result when there are no more miseries to alleviate will be superior to the love of the wealthy for the poor such as is presently practiced.<sup>146</sup>

In the treatise *On Riches* Pelagius recounts the argument of some of the wealthy regarding their relationship to the poor and uses it as a springboard for an attack on the very foundations of wealth. If everyone gave away all that they owned, they ask, and kept nothing for themselves, how would they be able to do works of mercy? Such people are merely defending the status quo, Pelagius responds, which is the need of the poor and the superfluity of the rich. The fact is that if there were no rich there would be no poor. Moreover, to wish to be rich for the sake of giving to the poor is to bestow priority on something that is not commanded—almsgiving—at the expense of something that is—the taking on of poverty

<sup>144</sup> *Ep.* 118, 5 (CSEL 55, 442).

<sup>145</sup> *Serm.* 259, 5 (PL 38, 1200).

<sup>146</sup> *In ep. Ioann.* 8, 5 (PL 35, 2038-39).

as a prelude to entrance into the kingdom of heaven.<sup>147</sup> Despite the flaws in what he says, Pelagius' grasp of the veiled self-interest of some of the rich, which was involved in almsgiving, is quite apropos.

Still almsgiving was the point of juncture where the equality between rich and poor was re-established, for the early Church in fact recognized that the poor were not merely restricted to receiving charity but had something to offer as well. Granted an attitude that tended toward a certain depersonalization of the poor, they nonetheless possessed a power that the men and women of the ancient world could appreciate. In return for alms the poor made effective intercession for their benefactors. This idea, which has already been mentioned, must be elaborated.

"We give carnal things," Jerome says, "he [the poor person] gives spiritual. The poor person gives more than he receives. We give bread, which is eaten up on the same day. For that bread he gives us the kingdom of heaven in return."<sup>148</sup> Paulinus of Nola provides a classic statement about this interrelationship in a letter to Sulpicius Severus.

The human race is regulated by a kind of alternation of wealth and poverty, as the Gospel story about the rich man in hell and the poor man in heaven makes clear. Thus we are to understand the design of the Creator of both, who established the rich for the sake of the poor and the poor for the sake of the rich, so that the one who abounds might provide for the one who is needy, while the poor person might be a means of righteousness for the rich. Thus, as the Apostle says, there may be an equality, and the eternal wealth that is to compensate the poor in the next life for their present want may flow back to meet our need, if here in our abundance we shall have assisted them in their poverty. Let us therefore sow what is carnal for them so that we might reap what is spiritual from them. Let our hands now be occupied with earthly toil so that then our souls might be refreshed with heavenly joys. Let present hope establish a possession for the future. Let us construct dwellings here that will receive us there. Let the poor person be fed here, while I am rich and he is needy, so that he might feed me there, where he shall be filled and I shall be needy.<sup>149</sup>

This thought lies at the bottom of any number of texts where almsgiving is spoken of as having the power to remit sins. It was not simply the charitable deed of itself that won forgiveness of sins for the generous person; the prayers and "the redemptive tears" of the poor, as Ambrose calls them,<sup>150</sup> also had a role to play. The office of advocacy that the poor were able to fulfil for their richer brethren gave them a real dignity and made them, in principle, more the equals of the rich than simply objects of their kindness or pity.

<sup>147</sup> *De divitiis* 12, 1-6 (PL Suppl. 1, 1400-1402). Pelagius regards Mt 19:21 as a precept.

<sup>148</sup> *Tract. de ps.* 134[133], lines 161-64 (CCSL 78, 288).

<sup>149</sup> *Ep.* 32, 21 (CSEL 29, 296).

<sup>150</sup> *De excessu fratris* 1, 5 (CSEL 73, 212).

In this context something else must be noted. The fact that almsgiving was a universal obligation from which not even the most desolate were exempt, the fact that almsgiving was so broadly understood that the poor themselves could contribute not only to the well-being of those on their own social level but to that of the rich as well, this too made the poor at least in theory the equals of the rich and rendered each class dependent on the other.

In one of his sermons Augustine takes up the issue of the interdependence of rich and poor. He treats it in a somewhat different way: here it is not a question so much of two goods being exchanged—almsgiving and prayer—but of a mutuality in sharing the burden of humanity that exists in one way among the poor and in another among the rich.

Turn now to that precept to bear one another's burdens. For you carry Christ's burden so that you may carry your own load along with that of another person. Someone else is poor, you are rich: his burden is poverty, but yours is not like that. Take heed lest perhaps if a poor person approaches you you should say to him: Everyone shall carry his own burden. Listen now to this other precept: Bear one another's burdens. Poverty is not my burden, but it is my brother's. See if riches are not a greater burden for you, for you do not have the burden of poverty but that of wealth. If you look at it properly it is a burden. Somebody else has one burden, you have another. Bear it with him and let him bear yours with you, so that together you might bear your burdens. What is the burden of poverty? Not to have. And what is the burden of wealth? To have more than is necessary. He and you alike are burdened. Bear with him who does not have and he will bear with you who have a superfluity, and thus your burdens shall be equal. For if you give to the poor you lessen the burden of one who does not have—which was not having. If you give to him he begins to have. His burden, which is called not having, is lightened, and your burden, which is called having too much, is also lightened. The two of you tread the godly way in the pilgrimage of this world. You had great superfluous wealth, but he had none. He has attached himself to you, wishing to be your companion: do not neglect him, do not disdain him, do not abandon him. Don't you see how much you are bearing? Give something, then, to one who bears nothing and has nothing, and you will help a companion and relieve yourself.<sup>151</sup>

The rich had to be reminded of the condition they shared with the poor. After speaking of the vanity of what the rich person possesses, Ambrose turns to the rich person himself.

Are not you yourself ashes? Look into a sepulchre and see whether anything remains except ashes and bones. . . . Separate the needy and the powerful. We are all born naked, all of us die naked. There is no difference among corpses—except perhaps that the bodies of the rich stink more, bloated as they are from luxurious

<sup>151</sup> *Serm.* 164, 7, 9 (PL 38, 899); cf. *Serm.* 25A, 4 (CCSL 41, 344); *De disc. christ.* 8, 8 (CCSL 46, 215–16).



living. . . . Attend to yourself, then, rich man, for you bear about mortal flesh as well as the poor.<sup>152</sup>

Augustine echoes this in a sermon.

When children are born, let parents, servants, retainers depart, let the obsequious depart, and see if you can recognize the rich children as they cry. Let a rich and a poor woman give birth, let a rich woman and a poor woman give birth at the same time. Let nobody attend the ones giving birth, let them stand back a little, then let them return and see whether they recognize [a difference]. Behold, rich man, you have brought nothing into this world, nor are you able to bring anything hence. What I said of those who have been brought to birth I say also of those who have died. When for some reason or other old sepulchres are broken up, see if you can distinguish the bones of the rich. Listen, then, rich man, to the Apostle: We have brought nothing into the world. Acknowledge this: it is true. And we are unable to take anything hence: this is also true.<sup>153</sup>

If the mortal condition of both rich and poor was wretched—and the stress on that perception of reality represents the peculiar genius of the Latin Church—nonetheless the end in which each was to share was glorious. This end was already foreshadowed in this age in the Church. That is how Jerome understands Isa 11:6–9: “The wolf shall lie down with the kid. . . .” “We can see this every day in the Church, rich and poor, powerful and humble, kings and commoners abiding together on an equal basis, and being ruled by little children, whom we understand to be the apostles or apostolic men, inexpert in speech but not in knowledge.”<sup>154</sup> The Church was the locus in which all met.

All are called to the Church so that all might be redeemed by Christ. The one who is sick finds a physician, the one who is healthy acquires wisdom, the captive has a liberator, the one who is free a rewarder. Sacred Scripture edifies everyone. Each person finds in it the wherewithal either to heal his wounds or to confirm him in the good. And likewise the calling of rich and poor into one provokes us to a certain humility and equality, so that neither does the rich disdain the needy nor the poor grow envious of the rich, but one grace joins both to itself. For the Lord became poor, although he was rich, that he might be the savior of both poor and rich.<sup>155</sup>

And so God could be equally possessed by both; for the divine light, as Augustine says, is equally seen by all eyes.

No rich person has laid exclusive claim to it by prior possession so that he [alone] might see; he has not excluded the eyes of the poor or hampered them. The poor

<sup>152</sup> *Exameron* 6, 8, 51 (CSEL 32/1, 243).

<sup>153</sup> *Serm.* 61, 8, 9 (PL 38, 412); cf. *Enarr. in ps.* 73[72], 13 (CCSL 39, 993–94).

<sup>154</sup> *In Esaiam* 11:6–9 (CCSL 73, 152); cf. Augustine, *Serm.* 51, 3, 4 (PL 38, 335–36).

<sup>155</sup> *Exp. in ps.* 49[48], 5 (CSEL 64, 364).

person shall say: My God! The rich person shall say: My God! The one has less, the other has more—but of money, not of God. So that he might come to God, the rich Zacchaeus gave away half of his patrimony. So that Peter might come, he abandoned nets and boat. So that the widow might come, she gave two small coins. So that one still poorer might come, he offered a cup of cold water. So that one very poor and needy might come, he gave good will alone. They gave different things, but they came to one, for they did not love different things.<sup>156</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

The patristic concept of almsgiving that this essay has pursued manifests a certain imbalance in its overemphasis on the one hand on the almsgiver and on the other on the Christocentric theme. Both are, in fact, linked: because the poor person is identified with Christ, it is advantageous to show him compassion. Yet the Latin Fathers themselves sought to nuance their common teaching by stressing as well the interdependence of rich and poor and their sharing of the human condition.

If what the Fathers say is not completely satisfactory, if the nuance in question is not sufficient, we might imagine what their alternatives could have been. Something less donor-oriented and more altruistic? To be sure, but in what form? The Fathers may have been crass to a certain extent in speaking as they did of spiritual rewards, but they also understood human nature and were ultimately only translating scriptural data into more graspable terms. Could they have drawn back somewhat in their identification of Christ and the poor? Perhaps, but the ramifications that are apparent to us were evidently not apparent to them. For them the identification with Christ was the very glory of the poor, as well as a motive for almsgiving. What else, for that matter, constituted the identity of any Christian, to say nothing of the poor? And when the Fathers exaggerated the Christological theme, their intention was, after all, not theoretical so much as practical: to provide for the feeding and clothing of the poor. Consideration of these alternatives may help us to appreciate more the somewhat imperfect understanding of almsgiving that the Latin Fathers seized upon and that we have, in part at least, inherited.

<sup>156</sup> *Serm.* 47, 30 (CCSL 41, 603).