

The Disconnected Cross: Philanthropy and Almsgiving

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Almsgiving plays an indispensable role in the spiritual growth of the individual Christian and the local and diocesan Church. Not fully heeding the call to care for the “least of our brethren” can help explain the spiritual stagnation and dis-integration Orthodox Christians sometimes feel, as they do all the “right things”—pray, fast, worship, etc.—without experiencing the change of heart they desire. A fuller understanding of almsgiving can reshape and renew both the believer and the corporate Church.

The contemporary clamor for systemic change, for “social justice,” has often been undermined by anger and even violence, to the great dismay of many Orthodox. Orthodoxy provides a unique and soothing tonic to the efforts for structural change that advocates espouse. It does so by actualizing the potential for systemic change in a way that is both personal, focusing on each person (which is Trinitarian in nature), and communal, as the Church (which is also Trinitarian in nature). It does this by focusing less on a justice that comes from “rights” and more on a justice that is based in love. In doing so, the Church, in her humility, takes on the cross, developing not a vainly sought-after utopia, but a justice based in the faith in and hope of an ever-compassionate God.



In the face of human pain and suffering, the call to action that Orthodox Christians hear is the echo of the lament, “My soul yearns after God and I seek Him in tears.”¹ We are called to love our fellow man only because God has first loved us, and, through His example on the cross, taught us how to love. The Orthodox spiritual tradition often uses the cross as a visual metaphor to illustrate the interdependence between our love for God (vertical love) and our love for neighbor (horizontal love). When we separate (usually unintentionally) our love for God and love for our fellow man, our good works can leave us feeling empty. The volunteer who worships on Sundays and works at a soup kitchen on Tuesdays without deliberately connecting these two events knows firsthand the spiritual malnutrition of this fractured worldview. The cross pulls us toward God vertically and toward our fellow man horizontally. In almsgiving the two loves are joined together and cannot be separated.

PHILANTHROPY AND ALMSGIVING²

For many the word *philanthropy* has come to mean “financial assistance to those less fortunate.” Giving aid to the needy is honorable but is not itself the fullness of philanthropy. Philanthropy is more than action but an illumined state of being (1 John 2:10) where we feel complete love for our fellow man. Almsgiving consists of actions that we do for the benefit of someone else, but as Orthodox Christians our almsgiving should always be done *with* philanthropy—with authentic love for the ones being served.

Because man is both spiritual and physical, our almsgiving should be targeted to help both spiritual and physical needs. In the Gospel of Matthew, Christ tells us that those who minister to the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned will be called blessed of the Father and become inheritors of the Kingdom (Matthew 25:34). All of these epithets apply to both our body and our soul: The prison chaplain ministers to those physically imprisoned who may also feel spiritually confined (Psalm 141:8). The soup kitchen provides sustenance to persons who might also be spiritually hungry. Those who are insufficiently clothed need protection from the elements and to feel the warmth of Christian love.

Jesus Christ teaches us to invest in celestial treasures (Matthew 6:20). By offering physical alms we make a sound investment for eternity. Performing acts of mercy that have physical *and* spiritual benefit doubles that investment making us even more profitable spiritual economists.

In Holy Scripture almsgiving is linked with eternal life. It is clear, almost uncomfortably so, that in order to be worthy

inheritors of the Kingdom, we must provide for the physical and spiritual needs of our brothers and sisters.

THE OIL OF MERCY

There is a common Orthodox pun made between the Greek words mercy (τό ἔλεος) and oil (ὁ ἔλαιος). St. Symeon of Thessaloniki succinctly explains that “oil is the type of divine compassion and mercy.”³ The “oil of mercy” is an extremely effective tool for our personal spiritual growth. Holy oil is used as a part of our repentance, and almsgiving can be a useful tool for cleansing ourselves of sin. Holy Chrism is used to protect us against assaults of the enemy and to sanctify us. Similarly the “oil of mercy” or almsgiving when combined with fragrant, Christ-like love, becomes protective and sanctifying.

ALMSGIVING FOR PURIFICATION

In the Old Testament, Daniel instructs the wayward Nebuchadnezzar to atone for his “sins with alms” and his “wrongdoings with compassion for the poor” (Daniel 4:27). The Archangel Raphael teaches Tobit and his son Tobias that almsgiving “washes away every sin” (Tobit 12:9). In the New Testament, Christ rebukes the Pharisees because the “inward part is full of greed and wickedness” (Luke 11:39). As a method of cleansing Christ tells them to “give alms of such things as you have” (Luke 11:41). In Matthew 6:1–18, Christ links together a “trinity” of almsgiving, prayer and fasting, and He instructs us how to do each of the three correctly. We know from listening to the often-read Sunday Gospel that through prayer and fasting, demons are cast out (Matthew 17:21), but we sometimes forget that almsgiving also offers an opportunity for greater purification.

ALMSGIVING AS A DEFENSE AGAINST THE DEVIL

The sage Sirach teaches us that “More than a mighty shield and better than a strong spear, almsgiving will fight for you against your enemy” (Wisdom of Sirach 29:13). As the stadium of the virtues opens, the hymnographer instructs us as spiritual warriors to take up “mercy as a helmet.”⁴ Surely we would not engage in battle without our shield, spear and helmet—almsgiving. With a spear we keep our attacker far away, with a shield our hearts are guarded from his arrows, and with a helmet our minds are protected. Experience teaches that almsgiving with true love for our neighbor is a powerful defense against temptations.

ALMSGIVING AS A MEANS TO ACHIEVE HOLINESS

Tradition holds that the righteous ancestors of God, Joachim and Anna, who because of their holy lifestyle became the parents of the Panagia, gave one-third of their livelihood to the poor. In Acts of the Apostles, the centurion Cornelius gave alms and was in continual prayer, and because of his alms and godly way of life, it was afforded to him to see an angel (Acts 10:2–4). The life of St. Silouan the Athonite moves us because of his abounding love for God and his brethren, which he manifested through service. As a result of these loves it was given to him “to know mysteries and foresee things to come.”²⁵ Through almsgiving with integrated love, prayer and fasting, people have been given such holiness: to bear the Mother of God, to see angels, and to know the mysteries of God.



PRAXIS: THEOLOGY IN ACTION

Practicing almsgiving also renews the local church. Seven years ago San Francisco’s Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church had less-than-robust Sunday attendance, a substantial debt that seemed at times hopeless, and an outflow of cash and participating members. While many might have looked at this situation and expected almsgiving to be the last priority for the parish, it was in fact near the top of the list. As Holy Trinity reshaped her mission, vision and values, an investment in philanthropy became a top priority. Today the parish is blessed with financial stability and steady growth. Here are some of the activities in which this church is engaged:

As a suburban parish Holy Trinity is geographically separated from the city’s poor. Consequently, Holy Trinity has focused on bringing alms to the homeless in downtown San Francisco through the Street Outreach program. Parishioners are able to convey their love when they personally deliver food and bags of personal necessities to the homeless.

Holy Trinity participates in Help Portrait, a compassionate movement that validates the personhood of society’s marginalized populations. This outreach brings together volunteer photographers, photo editors, cosmetologists and cooks (hospitality is always extended) to provide persons of limited means with studio-quality individual or family portraits. Again, because of the parish’s geography, arrangements are made with social service agencies and urban ministries to bring those being served to the church.

Internationally, Holy Trinity supports communities of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in the Philippines through Philippines Connection and annually sends a sizeable group of youth and young adults to Project Mexico. Both of these efforts resonate locally because of the large Filipino and Latino communities found in and around San Francisco. The parish also sponsors both short- and long-term missionaries, including the parish’s proistamenos, who will lead an OCMC team to Moldova this year.

Almsgiving is shaping the future of the Metropolis of San Francisco. With the blessing and leadership of His Eminence Metropolitan Gerasimos, the Metropolis has undertaken the challenge to develop and implement a strategic plan. Expanding philanthropic outreach at the parish level is one of its chief objectives.

The Metropolis of San Francisco Philoptochos Society and many local Philoptochos chapters have a long and well-established tradition of service. In cooperation with the



Philoptochos, the Strategic Plan is working to support existing ministries and foster the creation of new parish philanthropic activities. An information exchange is encouraging persons engaged in philanthropic outreach to share ideas, successes and lessons learned with other faithful from throughout the Metropolis.

Another goal of the Strategic Plan's philanthropic outreach is the development of an Orthodox Christian service learning curriculum. A spin-off of a well-established trend in secular education, Orthodox service learning encourages groups to formulate and implement ministries that help their neighbor, and it places those activities within the context of the parish's religious education program. For example, service participants can do a guided study of the lives of missionary saints and then organize a benefit for OCMC. Other parishioners could read about the life of St. Luke the Surgeon and then volunteer at a local health clinic. Metropolis service learning workshops equip clergy and lay leaders to integrate existing philanthropic and educational ministries, identify needs that the parish could address, and begin designing ministries to meet those needs.

CONNECTING THE CROSS

Almsgiving and charity are not optional activities for Orthodox Christians. We should constantly seek opportunities to minister to others physically and spiritually. Most importantly, our charitable acts must flow from a sense of authentic Christian philanthropy, because without love, almsgiving is like "a flower

lacking beauty and fragrance."⁶ The loves typified in the connected cross cannot be separated. Our goal as Orthodox Christians should not be to advance secular values through cold social justice but rather to become sources of light fueled by divine compassion. When parishes or metropolises create philanthropic outreach opportunities based in a love for God and an authentic love for humankind, the Lord's commandment is fulfilled, the faithful are spiritually strengthened, communities are improved, and the warmth of Orthodoxy spreads.

1 Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov, "Yearning for God" in *St. Silouan the Athonite* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 269.

2 To perform acts of mercy (ἡ ἐλεημοσύνη, from τὸ ἔλεος, meaning mercy or pity).

3 St. Symeon Archbishop of Thessaloniki, "Section 2: Chapter 25" in *TA ALLANTA* (Thessaloniki: Basileios Rigopoupoulou Publishing), 81.

4 2nd Sticheron Idiomelon from the *Praises*. Orthros. Sunday of Forgiveness.

5 1st Kathisma. Orthros. St. Silouan the Athonite.

6 Archimandrite Ephraim (Moraitis) of Philotheou, "Love: The National Anthem of Paradise" in *The Art of Salvation* (Roscoe, NY: St. Nektarios Monastery Publications, 2014), 255.