

## UNIT 3C: MINISTRIES AND MISSION

### 88: Politics and Social Justice

#### The City of God and the City of Man

In 410 AD Alaric I, leader of the Visigoths and an Arian heretic, sacked Rome. Rome in the West had barely one century of Christian peace before it was destabilised by Germanic peoples from the North, entering a period of long decline until the Carolingian Renaissance renewed its fortunes in the late 8th century. During this intervening period the political power and Christian leadership of the Empire flowered in the East, not the West. 20 years after Alaric sacked Rome, the Vandals led by Genseric, also Arians, subjugated North Africa and besieged Hippo, even as its great bishop, St. Augustine, lay dying. During the two previous decades, he had witnessed the gradual enfeeblement of Old Rome; and now he saw, in turn, that her sphere of influence in North Africa was being broken by opportunist barbarians, themselves promoting a heresy that the Church had only recently, so it thought, finally vanquished.

In 410 or thereabouts St. Augustine had penned a great long rambling opus entitled *De Civitate Dei*, “The City of God.” In this work he sought to rebut the accusation that Rome’s woes had been occasioned by its abandonment of the pagan gods for the Christ of Orthodox Catholic Christianity. His writing also underscored his belief that, notwithstanding the undoubted benefits of the symphony of Church and State in the Pax Romana, Christians belonged essentially to an entirely different Kingdom and City to that of men—namely, the City of God and the Kingdom of Heaven. Doubtless, these thoughts consoled him as he lay dying and witnessed the heartless, ruthless dismemberment of everything (in an exterior sense) that he had worked for in his diocese and pastorate. He was not the last bishop, of course, to experience such sobering disillusionments in the midst of his holiness and idealism.

Over a thousand years later in 1453, Sultan Mehmet Fatih subdued Constantinople and subjugated the Eastern Roman Empire. Just three days after the fall of the great city, Gennadios the Scholar, was installed by the Sultan as the first Ecumenical Patriarch of the Ottoman jurisdiction; so in appointing Gennadios, Mehmet thereby replaced exactly the role of the former Christian Emperors. Perhaps Gennadios shared St. Augustine's melancholic yet hopeful realism as he witnessed the final dismantlement of the Eastern Christian polis (city). However, it suited Mehmet to be relatively kind to his Christian subjects, provided that they remained resistant to their dangerous Latin brothers, from whom they had been alienated for 400 years. In later centuries the Ottoman relationship was often more sour and unsatisfactory.

It has been very different in the modern era. In 1917 the Bolsheviks had no such scruples: Orthodox Christianity had to be extirpated. No one would be allowed to take the place of the Christian Tsar and thereby confer any political legitimacy on the Church. Where the Soviets ultimately failed, however, Western secularists arguably triumphed, if only for now. In the West, it now seems unlikely that Christians are ever going to be able to recover the idea and reality of a Christian Empire or indeed any kind of sacred constitutional settlement anytime soon. The great Enlightenment project that sought to banish religion from the temple of science has now also succeeded in banishing religion from just about every public institution and aspect of culture. Although not actively persecuted in any meaningful sense in Western liberal democracies, aggressive secularism has pushed the churches back to a time before the Constantinian settlement, but with a declining rather than ascending Christian impact on the culture. Even some Christians now argue that Christianity and politics not only do not mix but also should not be allowed to mix. This position has coloured everything from the diminishing stature of Constantine and his legacy to the privatisation of Christianity itself—some forms becoming almost gnostic in their interiority. Some Christians (mainly radical Catholics and liberal Protestants) have continued to flirt with the hard Left, but the so-called liberation theologies of the 1960's and 1970's seem, in

retrospect, to have been issue driven and theologically marginal to Church life. In Russian Orthodoxy, Christianity has tried to recover its privileged position in the Russian State, but this has often been at the cost of embracing a myopic nationalism that continues to drive phyletistic divisions more generally across the Orthodox Church, to the great impoverishment of its common life and mission.

With this evidence to hand, we might conclude that the cleavage between St. Augustine's City of God and City of Man now seems absolute; but is this state of affairs either desirable or inevitable? Is there no such thing as a theology of the "polis" ... the city, a political theology? Can or should Christianity simply concern itself with "saving souls" or are some souls only to be saved when politics and social justice are appropriated once more as truly Christian concerns? Even if the latter is true and to be accepted, what chance has and what means does the Orthodox Church have, particularly in the West, to achieve this objective once more, without becoming ensnared in worldliness and the lust for power? If any of these crucial questions are to be addressed from an Orthodox Christian perspective then Orthodoxy needs to regain and reconstruct its vision of a Christian social order and a Christian social good, both from the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church. It is to this purpose that we now turn.

First, we should consult the Bible of the first Christians—the Old Testament. From Lecture 36<sup>1</sup> we read this defence of a Godly social order reflecting a faithful covenant relationship with God:

... with prosperity and political power come the dangers of corruption, injustice and syncretistic disloyalty to Yahweh. Indeed in the estimation of Hosea and Amos, idolatry and injustice are intimately connected in a deadly embrace. Apostasy means disloyalty to the Mosaic covenant. Disloyalty to the covenant means an abandonment of God's just laws, oppression of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Prophets in the North*, Fr. Gregory Hallam, E-Quip 36 (p. 7-8)

poor and all manners of injustice. The accumulation of wealth is condemned in that it both ignores the plight of the needy and exploits the underprivileged (Amos 4:1; 5:11-13; 6:1-8, 12; 8:4-6; Hosea 4:2). The target is not merely the disregard of the value of human life *per se* but rather a violation of the social and ethical implications of the covenant. Israel's apostasy is likened unto the breaking of a marriage bond (Hosea 1-3) and the joining of Israel to a harlot, jeopardising the very covenant itself (Hosea. 1:8 ... but cf. 2:23; so Amos 8:2). The implication of Israel's election is therefore both a privilege and a responsibility, neglect of which leads to God's judgment (Amos 3:2), and for Amos, leads to the unconditional end of the covenant with His people.

Social justice *and* personal virtue, both generated by faith-full obedience to God, were indispensable to covenant faithfulness and salvation. Social justice in turn could not be realised without submitting the social order to God and this inevitably meant faith engaging with education, law-making, political leadership, institutions of governance, society and social structures. Israel was not a pious idea in the minds of individuals but a life lived in common in society and before God. God would bring not only individuals to judgement but also whole nations.

This ecclesiastical polity was carried over into the Church. The State may have been pagan but St. Paul nonetheless ascribed a God-given mandate to rulers to maintain the peace, punish crime and raise taxes (Romans 13:1-7). In this he seems to be reflecting further on our Lord's teaching to render unto Caesar and God their respective dues (Mark 12:17). This principle was also embraced by the Fathers, Tertullian being a notable example.<sup>2</sup> Jesus Himself saw his own mission in terms of the fulfilment of a prophecy in Isaiah which had clear eschatological references to both social and personal transformation, (Luke 4:16-19; Isaiah 61:1,2):

So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/tertullian\\_on\\_loyalty\\_to\\_emperor.htm](http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/tertullian_on_loyalty_to_emperor.htm)

And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,  
Because He has anointed Me  
To preach the gospel to the poor;  
He has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted,  
To proclaim liberty to the captives  
And recovery of sight to the blind,  
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;  
To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.”

The Last Judgement certainly concerned the practice of charitable works by individuals—what we might describe as social welfare (Matthew 25:31-46). However, accountability to God did not stop at a personal response to need; it moved on to consider how humans might order their societies according to just and humane principles. For example, St John in his Apocalypse looked forward to the New Jerusalem prophesied by Ezekiel when *all* the nations would be healed by plants irrigated from the divine waters of the eschatological polis. Religion cannot ignore politics because God does not ignore the cities, towns and villages we build when He judges our compassion and our faithfulness to Him. Indeed, the whole world is His concern - so it must be the concern of all humans as well:

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.<sup>3</sup>

The practical realisation of these teachings is evident in the life of the early Church. The whole Christian community had a strong sense of its commitment to each and every member of the Body of Christ and beyond the Church to those in need.

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<sup>3</sup> Revelation 22:1-2; Ezekiel 47:1-12.

St Paul berated those who neglect the poor at the Eucharist (1 Corinthians 11:17-22). St Luke tells us in Acts that the believers held all their goods in common:

Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.<sup>4</sup>

When a certain Ananias and Sapphira deceived the apostles by holding back a portion of the sale proceeds of a piece of property that should have been put into the common fund, they both promptly dropped down dead (Acts 5:1-10). In the Middle Ages, so agitated did the Latin Church become (both Roman Catholic and Protestant) about this early radical Christian living that those who wished to return to it (mainly Anabaptists and other sectarians) were persecuted bitterly. Consider this, for example, from the Article 39 from the Church of England's Articles of Religion (1563), enshrined in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century versions of the Prayer Book:

The riches and goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same; as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast. Notwithstanding, every man ought, of such things as he possesseth, liberally to give alms to the poor, according to his ability.<sup>5</sup>

We see here a distinction being made between individual acts of charity (approved) and a social responsibility of Christians to redistribute wealth (disapproved). Admittedly, the sects of the Radical Reformation pursued a rigorous policy of wholesale communitarianism verging on what we might now call voluntary communism, but this is not actually what we see in Acts. Article 39 correctly surmises that there is something here threatening the established order of things.

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<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:44-47.

<sup>5</sup> [http://anglicanonline.org/basics/thirty-nine\\_articles.html](http://anglicanonline.org/basics/thirty-nine_articles.html)

Although Jesus had Himself referred to the ubiquity of poverty (Mark 14:7), this was not a fatalistic statement aimed at excusing his followers from doing anything about poverty, but rather, in context, He was reminding them of the priority of their relationship with Him. Beyond the New Testament, the Church took its commitment to the poor exceedingly seriously. Lists were drawn up in every parish of those for whom relief from distress—physical, economic and spiritual—was a first call on Church finances. Tertullian provides us with a witness to this practice of Christians giving sacrificially to a voluntary fund for the relief of those in need:

Even if there is a chest of a sort, it is not made up of money paid in entrance-fees, as if religion were a matter of contract. Every man once a month brings some modest coin—or whenever he wishes, and only if he does wish, and if he can; for nobody is compelled; it is a voluntary offering. You might call them the trust funds of piety. For they are not spent upon banquets nor drinking-parties nor thankless eating-houses; but to feed the poor and to bury them, for boys and girls who lack property and parents, and then for slaves grown old and shipwrecked mariners; and any who may be in mines, islands, or prisons....<sup>6</sup>

Before the Edict of Milan when Christianity was legalised, the Church could not formally and consistently enlist the aid of the State in facilitating its social works. However, after 313 AD the concept of “synergeia”—a harmony of Church and State action aimed at Godly governance and structured provision for those in need—was accepted and vigorously pursued without question. There are many well-known references by St. John Chrysostom to the relief of the poor; and his heartfelt righteous anger about social injustice frequently led him into conflict with the rich and powerful. This comment is typical:

Having said “The first and great commandment is ‘You shall love the Lord your God,’” he added “and the second ... is like it. ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’” And see how with nearly the same excellence he also requires

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<sup>6</sup> Apology 39.

this. For as concerning God, he said “With all your heart”: so concerning your neighbour, ‘as yourself’ is the same as ‘with all your heart.” If this commandment were duly observed there would be neither slave nor free, neither ruler nor ruled.... There would be no poverty, no unbounded wealth if there were love, but only the good parts that come from each. From the one we should reap its abundance, and from the other its freedom from care and should neither have to undergo the anxieties of riches nor the dread of poverty.<sup>7</sup>

Father George Florovsky comments thus on St John’s response to the crisis of the urban poor:

[St John] had to face the life in great and overcrowded cities, with all the tensions between the rich and the poor. He simply could not evade social problems without detaching Christianity from life, but social problems were for him emphatically religious and ethical problems. He was not primarily a social reformer, even if he had his own plans for Christian society. He was concerned with the ways of Christians in the world, with their duties, with their vocation.<sup>8</sup>

The monastic movement in the Church not only produced some of its most excellent and Godly bishops, but also maintained a prophetic example of radical Christian living in accordance with the gospel. This practical Christian idealism spilled over into the urban churches where such giants as St Basil the Great created the Basiliad or New City, described by Paul Schroeder as follows:

[The Basiliad was] the great philanthropic foundation established by St. Basil where the poor, the diseased, orphans and the aged could receive food, shelter, and medical care free of charge from monks and nuns who lived out

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<sup>7</sup> *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* section 32:11, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 12:263

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.orthodoxytoday.org/articles4/FlorovskyChrysostom.php>

their monastic vocation through a life of service, working with physicians and other lay people. The New City was in many ways the culmination of St. Basil's social vision, the fruit of a lifetime of effort to develop a more just and humane social order within the region of Caesarea, where he grew up and later served as a priest and a bishop.<sup>9</sup>

In some ways, St Basil was perhaps more visionary and systematic than St John Chrysostom in providing for the poor, the sick and the homeless. Nonetheless, St John also advanced Christian social concern in Constantinople through the enlisting of lay doctors and an army of female monastics and deaconesses. In their work, we see a recognition that the Church is called to move beyond welfare into transforming social structures through the provision of charitable institutions that will endure. In turn, the State itself would endorse these projects and embed them in the culture and political economy of the Empire. In this new Christian political economy, St Basil acquired from the State tax exemptions for his New City workers who provided support and care for all, irrespective of religion or social status. In all of these endeavours, the saints were exercising Christian vision and energy in institutions that provided universal care, not just the select few who had the citizenship, money or selective piety to avail themselves of Roman social infrastructures in the pre-Constantinian period. It should be noted, however, that all these Biblical and patristic examples grounded social responsibility and action in the covenant relationship between God and His People. A secular pursuit of social good (as that might be understood now) would not even have occurred to the early Church as being even remotely possible or maybe even desirable. In antiquity, most believers held to the view that God and God alone could renew the face of the earth, even if Caesar's help could often prove very useful in a material sense!

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<sup>9</sup> *Building the New City: St. Basil's Social Vision* by C. Paul Schroeder - <http://www.incommunion.org/2008/12/07/building-the-new-city-st-basil%E2%80%99s-social-vision/>

It is clear from what we know of the Basiliad that “St. Basil the Great’s social programs inaugurated their own “attendant form of monasticism, in which serving others was considered integral to an ascetic life;” in fact, studies of Byzantine “holy men and women emphasise their role as agents of change who ignored social divisions in order to serve the needs of all, rich and poor alike.”<sup>10</sup> Not all the workers in the New City were monastics in the conventional (or indeed any) sense of the word but we do witness here a new synergy between active monastics and lay workers in a great Christian social project. This inter-relationship between spiritual and social transformation continues in contemporary Orthodoxy with a conviction that “the process of the transfiguration of our socio-economic order ... involves our personal and communal commitment and the struggle to forge a chain of good affecting all aspects of human life.”<sup>11</sup> Thus it is appropriate that Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima, working in the office of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul, should express the bold hope that in the twenty-first century:

We are Christians who live ... with a new awareness of the social and political structures prevailing in today’s world. We do not restrict ourselves to repeating what was said in the past in the socio-economic and political fields, but endeavour to produce a creative reconstruction or transformation of the world’s assumptions and discoveries for a better future of humanity.<sup>12</sup>

To implement that hope effectively will require considerable prayer and grace.

The model provided by St Basil in his “New City” endured as a basic template for monastic hospitality, social care, education and health well into the Middle Ages.

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<sup>10</sup> Maria Gwyn McDowell, “Communion of Saints” in Father John Anthony McGuckin (Ed.), *The Concise Encyclopedia of Orthodox Christianity* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), p. 107. See Sergi Hackel, *The Byzantine Saint* (Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 2001). Note also the extensive social contribution of the Romanian Orthodox Church, as set out in some detail by Theodore Damian, “Romania, Patriarchal Orthodox Church of” in McGuckin, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Orthodox Christianity*, p. 390.

<sup>11</sup> “Orthodox Pre-assembly Meeting Affirms the Need for Spiritual Transformation,” in *Grace in Abundance: Orthodox Reflections on the Way to Porto Alegre* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), p. 123.

<sup>12</sup> Metropolitan Gennadios of Sassima, “‘God, in Your Grace, Transform the World:’ An Orthodox Approach” in *Grace in Abundance*, pp. 21-22.

After the Reformation in the West with its dismantling of monasticism, this basic philanthropic work survived through the generosity of wealthy Protestant benefactors. The various movements for social reform in Europe in the 19th century, doubtless in part driven by the sobering impact of popular revolutions (intellectually inspired by the new rising middle classes) gradually moved the work out of the churches into the hands of the State. After the Second World War it became the consensus of most in Europe, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, including the churches, that the State should shoulder a greater share of responsibility for the social infrastructure. Universal social care, education and health, funded by taxation and national insurance, became the unchallenged platform for all European politicians and their electorates. This vast increase in the size and work of the public sector would have delighted the early Fathers, save perhaps for the degree of social compulsion necessarily involved in fiscal funding. However, voluntary contributions alone could not have delivered on the goal of universal provision, free at the point of delivery, so in this matter we are not comparing “like with like.”

The churches’ role in Western Europe in the period of the Welfare State has been reduced to “mopping up” operations at the margins of deprivation and need. This, combined with the exercise of a more vigorous prophetic voice on behalf of the poor - whenever it was judged that governments had been reneging on their social commitments - has set a limit of the churches’ role. In the communist period in Russia and Eastern Europe, even this aspect was severely constrained if not proscribed by the State - which became the sole provider. After the collapse of Communism in 1990 and the global financial crisis of 2008, the State’s social infrastructure and work in Europe and Russia has been put under immense strain, almost to breaking point in many countries. Christians are again asking of themselves, “How shall the City of God transform the City of Man?” It is to this ancient question in its modern context that we return in conclusion. The co-author of this lecture (Fr Gregory Hallam) now offers his own very personal provisional answer to this question. He believes that it is consistent with the Faith and Life of

the Orthodox Church but he is absolutely open to correction. This Manifesto is by its very nature a work in progress in his mind and according to his vision.

This Manifesto attempts to root itself in the Tradition of the Orthodox Church as set out by St Basil the Great in *On Social Justice*. In introducing that work, an Orthodox layman, Gregory Yova, who has worked for many decades with orphans in Mexico, has written:

When you read Basil's words, you will think they were written yesterday—not 1,600 years ago! It's unbelievable how precisely he describes our modern struggle with material wealth, our responsibility to our fellow man, and how to live a life in balance. The struggle he describes is the exact struggle facing any person with a conscience. How much is enough? How far should I go to provide for my family and myself? What is my responsibility to others?... Despite the fact that Basil's words feel right to us, my interactions with thousands of people have shown me that even those who are trying to live a life committed to Christ and his teachings are uncertain how to apply those principles in their daily lives.... No one can do it all at once. We must start the journey by taking *small* steps on a *daily* basis.<sup>13</sup>

Let us begin our journey with this Manifesto.

## A Manifesto for Change

### A Parable Revisited

The Church is an arena in which God can and does act. The relative opacity of the Church to the Divine Light of the Trinity arises from the sin of her members. The institutional aspect of the Church will always be compromised by these sins. However, the institutional aspect of the Church is the necessary aspect of the visible field in which wheat and tares (i. e. weeds) co-exist. The charism of Christian

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<sup>13</sup> Gregory P. Yova, Founder, Project Mexico and St Innocent Orthodox Orphanage, Foreword, St Basil the Great, *On Social Justice* Crestwood, NY: SVSP, 2009), pp. 9-10. The italics for “small” and “daily” are in the original text.

leadership in the Orthodox Church is to be found amongst the wheat, but the harvest is not yet. The wheat is not the weed killer! The function of the wheat is to be gathered in due time (vocation), ground finely (repentance) and leavened (Spirit-filled). The world needs bread, the Bread of Heaven (Matthew 5:14-16; Matthew 13:24-30; John 6:22-40).

## Renunciation

1. The Church must subvert worldly power by renouncing worldly power.
2. The Church must expand to fill the heavens or at least the whole globe. It must renounce all idolatrous conceptions of nationalism. The Body of Christ is not to be divided by flags.
3. The Church must utterly renounce all forms of violence and coercion both in the household of faith and in society at large.
4. The Church must renounce all forms of hatred expressed toward other people. A Christian may only hate his or her own sins.
5. The Church must renounce everything contrary to the love of God.

## Change

1. Each Orthodox community (parish, fraternity, monastery) must be true to itself as a Community of the Resurrection such that all may find hope and new life there in God.
2. The life in communion of the members of the Church locally and at every level must reflect the life of the Gospel in relationships both human and divine. This is impossible without repentance and a Christ-centred life in the Holy Spirit.
3. Each disciple is called to consecrate his or her own life to God as an agent for change in Christ's Name in the world.
4. Working within existing structures in society, little by little, he or she must play an active part in conforming those economic, social and political elements to the precepts of Gospel.

5. In serving God, the Lover of Mankind, it must always be Mankind that an Orthodox Christian serves, showing the love of God both for those near who are known to those afar off who are not personally known.

Orthodox Christianity is not, therefore, an ideology, a political program, a philosophy or a code of behaviour. It is simply a life in God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, lived sacrificially. Enduring change in the human family comes from powerful witness in hidden places and from the hearts and lives of countless unseen persons known and beloved by God. There is no limit to human potential and the regenerative power of our common life when the Kingdom of God is our primary concern. In that sense, St Augustine was right!