

# ON THE DISCOURSE OF THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CARITATIVE DIMENSION IN SOCIAL WORK

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## **Abstract**

The early beginnings of Christian caritative social work against a Biblical and Ancient Greek background have been well explored in literature. The methodological approach, the use of theological analysis of social work approach to the client, opens the doors to the positive identification of burning issues in the practice of modern social work. The Christian world-view has always put personal responsibility and involvement on micro, mezzo and macro levels in focus, and the realisation of personal potential in social functions is revealed by the application of the Trinitarian view of God in Christianity. The theological approach to the analysis of the meaning of social work, its mission and mechanisms, focuses on the crossing of both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the Christian faith as a practice, and puts forward service to the needy and the poor, solidarity with outcasts and marginal people, support and encouragement, as following in the footsteps of Christ. By that approach, the essence of caritative social work is discovered: personal engagement versus estrangement, community resources versus individualism, mutuality versus ignorance. The innovative discourse inviting the disclosure of possible personal transformation dynamics has an impact on the positive solution of the client's social problems within the community, especially during a humanitarian crisis. The methodological approach may also be helpful for the identification of stagnation in the social work profession.

**KEY WORDS:** the Trinitarian concept of caritative social work, community, personal social responsibility and involvement.

## **Anotacija**

Ankstyvoji krikščioniškojo karitatyvinio socialinio darbo pradžia bibliiniame ir senovės Graikijos kontekstuose yra pakankamai išsamiai atskleista literatūroje. Metodologinė prieiga – teologinės socialinio darbo požiūrio į klientą / socialinio darbuotojo santykio su klientu / kliento sampratos socialiniame darbe analizės taikymas – atveria galimybes veiksmingai nustatyti kai kurias aktualias šiuolaikinės socialinio darbo praktikos problemas. Krikščioniškoji pasaulėžiūra visada akcentavo asmeninę atsakomybę ir dalyvavimą mikro-, mezo- ir makrolygmenimis, o asmeninio potencialo realizavimas vykdant socialines funkcijas atsiskleidžia per trinarį požiūrį į Dievą krikščionybėje. Analizuojant socialinio darbo prasmę, jo misiją ir mechanizmus, teologinis požiūris į krikščioniškąjį tikėjimą kaip praktiką iškelia tarnystę vargšams ir skurstantiesiems, solidarumą su atstumtaisiais ir marginaliais, paramą ir padaršinimą kaip sekimą Kristaus pėdomis. Taip atskleidžiama karitatyvinio socialinio darbo esmė: asmeninis įsitraukimas vietoj atsiribojimo, bendruomenės išteklių vietoj individualizmo, abipusiškumas vietoj ignoravimo. Inovatyvus diskursas leidžia atskleisti galimą asmeninės transformacijos dinamikos poveikį teigiamam kliento socialinių problemų sprendimui bendruomenėje, ypač humanitarinių krizių laikotarpiu. Metodologinis požiūris gali būti naudingas ir nustatant socialinio darbo profesijos sąstingį.

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## Introduction

Social work practitioners in many countries have come forward with professional paralysis against the bureaucratic reality (Lishman, 2002; Huguenot, 2008). Disappointment in the limited possibilities to change the system requires a revision of social work methodology. The goal of the article is to offer a fresh view of a possible restart; it should be noted that current social work has developed from age-old roots stemming from the early days of Christianity. The restart is made possible thanks to encouraging the approach ‘innovation from antiquity’ proposed by Professor Skaidrīte Gūtmane from the European Christian Academy (Gūtmane, 2023).

A short overview of the concept is necessary. During the first centuries, Christians purposefully worked on the implementation of care for socially unprotected people and marginals, for those who suffered, for solidarity between and respect for every human being. The ‘horizontal’ in human relationships was as important as pure religious faith in Christ, the ‘vertical’. The first Christians had no doubt that ‘He makes all things new’ (Rev. 21:5), and the mystical presence of Christ was an effective engine to change attitudes towards those who are cast out on the social periphery. Their belief was strengthened by the words ‘Heaven and earth will come to an end, but My words will not come to an end’ (Mt. 24:35); consequently, they stay for ever and cannot be called off with time. The eschatological dimension made believers ready for the Second Coming of Christ. To use the most popular Christian symbol, the cross, vertical faith in Christ was crossed by the horizontal of social ministry. The symbol helps to identify positive elements of the caritative social work that sadly may be swept under the carpet of state-level bureaucracy.

The Law of Social services and social assistance accepted caritative social work as equal to ‘traditional’ social work in 2009 (Grozījumi Sociālo pakalpojumu un sociālās palīdzības likumā).

The need to return to the roots of caritative social work was stressed by the philosopher and theologian N. Wolterstorff, a professor at Yale University (USA). He invites us to look upon the Church’s roots of the profession, because dating the origins of social work to the beginning of the industrial era in the mid-19th century is a ‘rude attack of secular social work [concept] and is academically irresponsible and morally reprehensible’ (Wolterstorff, 2006). In this context, readers should be reminded about the warning signs of the low prestige of social work in society, professional burn-out, and high level of rotation of social work professionals. It co-

mes in a sharp contrast with the enthusiastic expectations and willingness to work with people on one hand, and bureaucratic routine in the workplace on the other. The gap has been traumatic in far too many cases, and it strips young specialists of the willingness and potential to invest in building a professional career.

The history of caritative social work puts the issue of methodology in the front-line. On one hand, the conceptual basis of caritative social work keeps its value regardless of its age-old history. On the other hand, meeting with a narrowly cultic approach to Christian faith that lacks a manifestation on societal level is disarming. Latvian readers may remember the ill-fated ‘Christian’ woman Oliniete from the novel ‘Times of the Land Measurers’ by the brothers Kaudzītes (from the late 19th century): she had ‘the word of God always in her mouth’, whereas she was evil and cruel in her doings with people. Her image is deeply printed in the Latvian cultural memory as a hypocrite *par excellence*, and her image was copied from sad reality. If the Christian faith separates itself from respect for people, distorted forms arise both in faith and in professional work. The practice of social work alienates from clients and turns into formal procedures, the administration of eternally insufficient financial means (Lūse, 2011).

## 1. Methodological issues

### Practising philanthropy in the Greco-Roman world

Care for those who are not able afford ‘social services’ began long before the Christian era, when people were guided by their ‘altruistic instinct’. Several researchers deal with these initiatives (Hands, 1968; Frank, 1932). The overall socio-cultural climate of the Greco-Roman background should be described for the better perception of Christian philanthropy. It was the world in which the early Christian Church and the Church Fathers (key Christian activists and thinkers from the second to the eighth centuries) acted. When Christians spoke about philanthropy, they presented themselves as heirs of more ancient cultural traditions. The synthesis of the ancient and new culture was obvious, both in theology and the social ministry. Mutual interference between the Greek *logos* (‘word’ as an attribute of God) and the Christian *pistis* (‘faith’ in the Risen Christ) was made firm during the fourth and fifth centuries, and laid the foundations of the later Greek Byzantine culture.

Terms like *dikaïosynē* (‘righteousness’), *eleos* (‘grace’), *philoxenia* (‘hospitality’), *aretē* (‘virtue’) and *isonomia* (‘equality before the law’) were widely used in Greek culture. The related terms *agapaō* and *agape*, ‘love Divine’, were rarely used by Homer (circa eighth century BC), whereas *phileō*, *philos*, *philotēs*, ‘affection

and friendship’, is mentioned four times. The term *philanthropy* was first mentioned by Aeschylus (525–456 BC) in his theocentric system. God is ‘philanthropic’ towards men; consequently, people should imitate God in that sense. *Philanthropy was made anthropocentric as a human reference to God’s initiative*. For example, Aeschylus reminded us that the semi-god Prometheus decided to bring fire to people, and give them knowledge and skills, because he had great ‘philanthropy’ towards men. For this, he was chained to a cliff and his liver was daily torn out by an eagle (for this reason Prometheus was compared to the Crucified). In the works of Plato (circa 427–348 BC), philanthropic virtues are praised, since they work for the development of the human species, they refine the human character, and promote friendship. Divine philanthropy is manifested in many ways, but human philanthropy should be promoted and encouraged for the benefit and well-being of all of society. By that, *dōrētēs* or philanthropist benefits in two ways: first, he enjoys inner satisfaction from giving; second, he helps the neighbour. Therefore, philanthropy was far from being a philosophical abstraction or theoretical dreaming. Plato’s disciple Aristotle (384–322 BC) stressed the importance of righteousness, condemned poverty, and described how extremes of wealth and poverty threaten democracy. The Athenian rhetorician Demosthenes (384–322 BC) taught that ‘law does not ask something cruel, violent or oppressive, and everything must be done in the spirit of democracy and philanthropy.’

In the Greek Septuagint (translation of the Old Testament, third century BC), the New Testament (end of the first and second centuries), and the works of Plutarch (AD 46 – after AD 119), *agape* and *philantrōpia* were used as synonyms. ‘Philanthropy’ became a standard term in the transition from Greek culture to Christian (Constantinelos, 2008). The famous theologian and preacher St John Chrysostomus from Antioch (modern-day Syria, died circa 407) stressed that Christian philanthropy is an imitation of Divine philanthropy. Philanthropy was well known in Athens. In Crete there is a well-known tradition of respecting foreigners in the land by offering them the place of honour at the table, etc.

And these terms were necessary! P. Garnsey and R. Saller, in their study of the Roman Empire, analyse the ‘system of inequality in Rome’ (Garnsey, Saller, 1987). Its dominating role around the Mediterranean Sea was secured by juridical institutions, the legislative system, private property, work control, and brutal power. The Roman economy can be characterised as preindustrial farming. Most people lived on country farms or in small towns and villages, only 10% to 15% lived in big cities with 10,000 or more inhabitants. This means that the majority of people were farmers (80% to 90%), and some kind of entrepreneurship on a larger scale or production was a rarity. There was no middle class in Rome. The biggest land properties belonged to a small number of super-rich (circa 3% in the big ci-

ties, making up circa 1% of all inhabitants), and they benefitted from the work of poor landowners and slaves. Local governments could compete with rich owners in benefitting from taxes. Poverty was widespread both in the country and in cities. The works of the first Christian authors were addressed to the poor and directed against the rich.

Two spontaneous initiatives of philanthropy are described briefly below, and they did not function as a regular system for long.

The first of these instruments was the *gift economy* practised in almost all ancient societies, including in Ancient Greece (its rudiments are sometimes visible even today). It was effective in communities of 50 to 200 people (interestingly, this is close to the number of people in the average cell phone catalogue, i.e. the number of people we are more or less familiar with). Community members were connected by kinship, friendship or neighbourhood. The essence of the gift economy was rather simple: the community provided effective support for those who needed it in an emergency (the death of a family member, a shipwreck, a burnt-down house, etc). Members of the community collected donations and did not require reimbursement. The gift economy functioned without strict accounting; however, it was an effective regulation of relationships inside the community, it was visible to all, and was well remembered. In close daily living, members of the community appreciated each member's skills, productivity and personal characteristics. Offering support was taken as self-evident, and it had to be observed. Whoever gave less than they could was mean and lost the respect of the community (Bollier, 2002). Of course, the community could be larger than 200 members; therefore, we can speak not only about 'communities of our own', but also about 'the nation as a community' (some kind of local patriotism in practice). People outside the community did not enjoy the benefits of the gift, and were at risk of hopeless poverty. Today, we can observe self-supporting communities in various interest groups and between colleagues at work, people join communities in times of crisis, etc.

Also, so-called *liturgies for the poor* were known. A classic example comes from Athens, where liturgies were practised at least until the third century BC. The Greek word *leiturgeia* is made up of two roots, *laos* for 'people', and *ergo* for 'activity, labour', which makes 'work for the benefit of people' (*munera* in Latin). These were not religious ceremonies, contrary to the meaning of the word today. They were various sponsorship undertakings during city festivals; it could be publicly giving money to the poor, for example, some wealthy citizens in their chariots drove around the city and generously threw money to beggars who hastily collected it. Liturgies could take the form of entertainment or theatre performances for those who could not afford them, wages for choir singers, covering study expenses for gifted youth, gymnasiums, lavish dinners for relatives, etc. A special

type of liturgy was the sponsorship of big state or city projects. Of course, liturgists benefitted, as they secured positions, honour, a good reputation, etc.

When liturgies were made mandatory and they became more expensive, wealthy people avoided them; also, various ever-demanding religious festivities made them oppressive and disadvantageous, and the practice was abandoned.

Interestingly, the word '*leiturgeia*' was later accepted into the standard lexicon of the Church. God in Christ serves the people by giving them gifts, as it is said: 'He who takes my flesh for food and my blood for drink has eternal life' (Jn. 6:54). People usually accept the liturgy as an act performed by a priest, whereas the original meaning is the opposite: the liturgist is God Himself in Christ, who presents His wealth to the poor and needy.

## 2. The attitude towards the needy in the Old Testament

No doubt, practical charity was well known to the mother religion of Christianity, Old Testament Judaism. 'Variety of forms of social support and charity is one of the characteristics of [Biblical] Books of Law' (Тантлевский, 2000). The Old Testament religion was both personality and community-oriented. Illustrations can be found in several chapters of books of the Torah, the so-called Codex of Blessings (the third and fifth book of Moses, called Leviticus and Deuteronomy), and books of the prophet Isaiah (circa 1300 to 700 BC). The normative Mosaic law prescribed several charitable undertakings during the Sabbatical year and the Year of Jubilees: 'But let the seventh year be a Sabbath of rest for the land; do not put seed into your land or have your vines cut ... And the Sabbath of the land will give food for you and your man-servant and your woman-servant and those working for payment, and for those of another country who are living among you ... And let this fiftieth year be kept holy, and say publicly that everyone in the land is free from debt' (Leviticus 3:4–12).

The law connects care for the needy with the agrarian wisdom of a farmer; indeed, it becomes a cosmic rule. Corn and gleanings in the field were left for the needy and foreigners, widows and orphans, three groups in need of community support (see Deuteronomy 24:17; Isaiah 1:23; etc). The Law also prescribed that once in three years one tenth of the harvest must be put aside for them, and all Hebrew slaves had to be released (Deuteronomy 25:1; etc). Usurers had no right to profit from their Hebrew brethren or strangers in their land.

Orphans and widows, as an unprotected group, are mentioned in all ancient Near Eastern texts, and the Law of Moses was not an exception (Fensham, 1962). The only novelty was the inclusion of foreigners who were treated as unhappy ones who deserved care and protection. This attitude originates in the Exodus story

of 400 years' bondage in Egypt. Bitter suffering moulded compassion for those who are afflicted by the same fate. The weak and unprotected could speak to God and he responded, and their need was for 'righteous court': 'Take pleasure in well-doing; let your ways be upright, keep down the cruel, give a right decision for the child who has no father, see to the cause of the widow' (Isaiah 1:17; etc). The cry came out from the prophets' mouth against both arbitrary rulers and the religious fanaticism of priests who presented their offerings with 'hands covered in blood' (Isaiah 1:11–17); in other words, the Law of Moses was not written for the benefit of the ruling classes, rather it spoke out against both the political system and the hypocrisy of religious institutions. In order to balance the poor and the rich, corrections on a macro level were necessary; but then there were no instruments. Whether the Law of Moses spoke about the need for 'radical social work' remains an open question; we can speak for the time being about the macro and mezzo level in social work.

The Law of Moses tried to keep the world of people in harmony with the whole created world. Consolidating power was described by the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is usually translated as 'charity and love' (Berlin, Brettler, 2004). In our context, *hesed* sketches out the foundations without which members of society are stripped of mutuality and solidarity. Its Biblical parameters are the following:

1. *Hesed* describes mutual relationships rather than short help in an emergency.
2. The situation of the giver (the one who has and offers *hesed*) and the receiver is unequal.
3. It is not an emotional condition but a practice.
4. Although *hesed* foresees response, it is not an obligation (Glueck, 1967).

In the New Testament, the Hebrew *hesed* is reproduced as the already-mentioned Greek *agape*, their semantic fields fully overlap. The core is not just 'love' as romantic affection or emotional support, but a *socially responsible attitude towards other people*. Whoever has something to give is blessed if he does not keep it for himself. The process of the fusion of the Greek world and Christianity is visible already in the epistles of the Apostle Paul (written in the first and second centuries).

### **3. The theological foundations of philanthropy**

In dealing with social activities in the early Church, one should ask the questions: 'Did Christians analyse the socio-political reasons for poverty? Did they try to identify the roots of poverty? Did they ask why poor people have nothing to eat?' There is no research that gives answers to these questions (Christian Origins, 2005). However, for the time being, we may assume that the first Christians did

not deal with this question, since their primary task was to offer immediate help to those in need. They did so because they sought to follow in the footsteps of their Master: 'I give you a new law: Have love one for another; even as I have had love for you, so are you to have love one for another' (Gospel of John 13:34). It was solely a micro and mezzo-level practice with a transforming power for their personal spiritual well-being.

Philanthropy is mentioned in the books of the New Testament when the first Christian missionary apostle Paul found himself as a foreigner in a strange and distant land. The people there treated him 'philanthropically' (Acts of the Apostles 27:3; 28:2); the Epistle to Titus 3:4 mentions 'God's philanthropy towards people'. The idea of philanthropy was not attached to Christianity somewhere later, rather it was genetically intrinsic in its essence from the beginning. It is illustrated by the story of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:19–37). The Good Samaritan offered necessary help to a beaten and bleeding man on a roadside, took him to an inn and paid for his treatment, whereas the priest and Levite (a learned man, theologian) went past not noticing him. The story was used as an illustration to the question: 'Who is my neighbour?' The fact that Jesus puts intellectuals to shame shows that religious duty cannot be separated from care for man, especially if he is in need. Otherwise, his religion has no positive sense.

On a higher-level, Christian philanthropy is testified to by *xenofilia* ('love of foreigners'). The term pronounces the imperative of an unconditional, positive, supportive and encouraging attitude, not only towards 'my own', but towards every person in difficulty: the 'foreigner' is a man with no home, an outcast, rejected.

The Christian ethos brought lots of new things to the concept of philanthropy. To begin with, Christianity called on us to look on every man or woman as a *personality*. The idea of personality was again taken from the Greeks, the respective word *prosopon* means 'mask' (as in an ancient theatre hiding the face of the actor). The Christian 'personality' is anyone you deal with (like 'my neighbour', see Lk. 10:29), rather than just the wealthy and famous. Personality has nothing to do with the political or financial condition. 'The idea of personality was the biggest investment of Christianity in philosophy,' says the well-known Orthodox theologian and patrologist G. Florovsky (Флоровский, 2000). Looking through the personality prism, Christian anthropology paves the way for the Biblical description of man as created in the 'image and likeness of God' (*imago Dei*, see Genesis 1–2). This opinion is supported by eminent Orthodox theologians and philosophers of the 20th and 21st centuries.

However, if Christian anthropology stopped where the image and likeness of God lies, equally important questions of solidarity, empathy, support and mutuality would remain unanswered. Without going further in the search for the Christian



roots of caritative *social* work, we need to identify the necessary elements in relationships between God and man.

Therefore, secondly, looking at man as a reflection of the image of God, we keep in mind that God in Christianity is actually Triune, God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the 'likeness of God' is not found in some superlative quality of being man as such, e.g. being 'smart' would elevate a person above others who lack such 'smartness'. In that case, 'godhead' would lead to self-elevation, arrogance and pride, but that is not the essence of Christianity. The Orthodox theologian and historian of Christian social ideas S. Chursanov is right in saying that 'Complete human unity reveals itself in the unity of free, unique and irreplaceable human personalities that constitutes itself in free inter-personal relationships that guarantee possession of the whole natural content and foresees sharing in collective possession with others, with impersonal beings and finally with all unanimated objects in the world' (Чурсанов, 2015). Such free and mutually supportive relationships of independent personalities are found in the Triune God described as perfect sharing.

This is indeed a cosmic and all-encompassing view of manhood and personality-in-community! It answers the question what it means to be created as *imago Dei*. The category is *not an individual one, but rather communal*. The application of the Trinitarian dogma in Christianity both solves the philosophical problem of personality and opens the doors to the concept of caritative social work. It refers to the European Christian foundations.

A detailed explanation of sharing between the Three was given in the writings of the early Church Fathers and discussed during the Trinitarian debates in the fourth and fifth centuries; going deeper into the subject is beyond the scope of this article. There is solidarity between the Three. The Father treats the Son, and the Son treats the Father, and they take the Spirit in the same manner: humility, love, cooperation and respect. The seemingly simple dogma meant much more than highly abstract theological issues, and had social consequences. The same solidarity should unite the rich and the poor, and indeed every man to man, be it family, community or society at large. The dogma creates the theological foundations for *new relationships between individual members of society*.

The concept is kept by the Church today. Pope Francis writes: 'The Father is the ultimate source of all, the loving and self-communicating foundation for everything, that exists. The Son, His reflection, through Whom all things were created, united Himself with the world when He was formed in Mary's womb. The Spirit, which is the link of love, is closely present in the heart of the Universe, encouraging and opening up new horizons. Creatures strive towards God, and in the same manner every living creature naturally strives towards other creatures,

so that everywhere in the Universe we find plentiful and persistent, stable relationships ... The more a man grows, the more he matures and sanctifies his life by creating relationships, and lives in closeness to God, togetherness with people and other creatures ... We are all interlinked with others, and this is what requires the development of global solidarity in a spiritual sense that grows out from the mystery of the Trinity.'

Theologically speaking, in striving for God, we must find an anthropologically equally important formula useful for real application. The Christian God in the Trinity reveals Himself in relationships between the Three, and it may be described as 1) solidarity in Creation; 2) solidarity in Salvation; and human society should be seen 3) as saving relationships between all members of a community, mutually supporting, teaching compassion and bringing individual members to a mutually beneficial goal. Such solidarity and free cooperation will be fully achieved only eschatologically in the New Heaven and the New Earth, within the New Nation. The early Christians dedicated themselves to that perfection. The New Testament writings emphasised that 'Love is of God, and everyone who has love is a child of God and has knowledge of God. He who has no love has no knowledge of God, because God is love' (New Testament First Epistle of John 4:7–8). God's love (*agape*) states that 'it is right for us to have love for one another' (First Epistle of John 4:11). The theological parameters of complete and harmonious community construct the key concepts in social work. The theological approach works effectively against an impersonal and alienated attitude towards the client in social work practice. *The less the human community is conditioned by some juridical or organisational issues and the less it is conditioned by some cultural or economic motivation and interest, the less it is subject to impersonal criteria of 'effectiveness' and the more it leads to perfection in free communal sharing inside the Triune God.*

This is one of the key principles of caritative social work: along with the necessary knowledge and skills, the attitude to the client should be empathetic and supportive, personally investing rather than remote. Professional competence in spiritual matters and the growth of the personality is highly appreciated. Otherwise, professional burn-out and high rotation risks will not be avoided. The principle helps to reduce withdrawal in the practice of social work and individualism, self-narrowing, and person-to-person remoteness in a professional setting.

The often-quoted words of Christ ('the new law') in the New Testament 'Have love for the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind' (the Gospel of St Matthew 22:37), and parallel texts in other Gospels, connect the vertical of God's love with love for the neighbour, or horizontal. These words were first pronounced before Christ by Hillel, the second rabbi of the Temple; however, only with the coming of Christ did this invitation become possible,

and they were applied as a powerful engine for caritative social work. The further development of the call is in the Gospel of St Matthew 25:35–40. These words have been used as both an explanation and an imperative for caritative social work:

“I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

It should be noted here that changes in society as such have never been the focus of Christianity. On the contrary, Christianity invites us to initiate changes within a person. If the poor ones are here (and the elimination of poverty is probably impossible), then obviously there is an urgent need to care for the poor and needy, people who positively respond to the call: ‘Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn’ (Letter to the Romans 12:15). Neither political parties nor state social programmes are able to respond. On that theological basis, the Apostle Paul created a new Christian diaconal practice.

#### **4. Dimensions of charity inside the Church**

Following Christ in service soon became a sacred duty: ‘May the presbyter [who serves you] stand as an apostle in front of you, and widows and orphans be like an altar for you,’ says the ‘Apostolic Constitution’, document from circa 375–380 which prescribed the main liturgical guidelines, the principles of the Church organisation and morals. Before there were state-ordained bureaucrats, the social ministry was implemented by bishops, deacons and other ministers. The social ministry was combined with the spread of the Gospel. The tradition is illustrated by a few examples.

##### **Agape meal**

Members of early congregations used to celebrate common *agape* meals after Holy Communion. In a more narrow sense, *agape* means ‘love feast’. It is mentioned in several New Testament epistles (1 Corinthians 11:17–34; Jude 12; Second Epistle of St Peter 2:13), etc. As a form of special sharing, the meal prolonged the mystical unity with the Body of Christ celebrated in the Liturgy. Believers shared the food they brought with them, regardless of national or social differences. The governor of Pont and Bitney Plinius Younger (circa 61–113) wrote in his letter to

the Emperor Trajan: 'Christians in the prescribed hour early in the morning after they addressed Christ as their God in prayers' gather to 'enjoy a common and innocent meal'. The witness is more important because it comes from an outsider.

Although the Church did not call for the emancipation of slaves, *agape* was seen as a platform for help and mutual support, and ideas of equality and brotherhood flourished around the table.

Unfortunately, in time, *agape* turned into ordinary eating and drinking (mentioned in the Apostle Paul's critique in the First Letter to the Corinthians 11:21, 31) and its connection to Holy Communion finally disappeared in the third or fourth century. Today *agape* is visible in various kinds of 'Church coffee' after the service, special meetings for women, young mothers, families, men, etc, where topical issues of the Gospel are explained and discussed in a relaxed setting.

### Offering help outside the parish borders

A major stoic influence provided that philanthropy and other ideas of societal and personal ethics went beyond narrow Greek ethnocentric borders. In stoicism, all people shared the same humanity. Support beyond narrow ethnic borders is reflected in several early Christian writings, 'The Acts of the Apostles' and the epistles of the Apostle Paul, 'Didache', 'the Shepherd of Hermas', and the epistles of St Polycarp of Smyrna.

The Acts of the Apostles and the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius testify that there was a serious famine in Jerusalem in 44–48, soon after the Resurrection of Christ. Christian 'elders' in Asia Minor collected money and commanded Paul and his Christian brother Barnabas to deliver it (Acts of the Apostles 11:29; Epistle to Romans 15; Epistle to Galatians 2:10). Support was given to people in an emergency (persecuted believers and those who were caught unprepared, orphans, and widows). It was a spirit of free giving, with no strict accounting ('Didache').

The Church situation in the Roman Empire changed in the third century. Otherwise, the cruel emperor Caracalla enrolled all free inhabitants of the Empire as 'citizens of Rome'. The law was not announced due to human considerations: the emperor was planning tax increases. From then on, Christians had the unprecedented possibility to join Roman societal life, and their financial situation improved. During the years of persecution up to the fourth century, the mutual support network stretched all over the Empire. Effectively organised social support secured a respected position, and worked for the rapid spread of the Gospels. The financial capacity grew, and possible support for brothers near and far was strengthened.

The convergence of Greek and Christian ideas is best traced in the essay 'Against the Galileans' by the last pagan Roman Emperor, Julian the Apostate (his reign lasted only two years, from 361 to 363). He described with envy the Chris-

tian system of charity and support, and invited his pagan priests to follow their example: 'Let inns be built [in all cities] and foreigners benefit from philanthropy. I don't mean only our people but all who lack money ... Because it is not good for anyone that no Jew is seen begging and atheist Galileans [Christians] offer support not only to their needy, but also to ours, and people see that we help no one. Atheist Galileans turn to philanthropy, and by this diligent practice all their bad deeds are balanced.' 'Bad deeds' were Christian gatherings in hidden places shrouded in rumour, whereas their 'atheism' was their refusal to honour pagan gods. 'Also, Galileans begin with the so-called love feast or hospitality, service at the table ... By this, many are led into atheism.' He added: in their charitable practice, Christians do exactly what they preach.

The 'Edict of Milan' (313), pronounced by the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, accepted Christianity as equal to other religions in the Empire. The consequences of the edict were too many to name, and here we will mention only a few: many of those who persecuted Christians yesterday took honorable positions in the Church! Charitable work in the sunken Roman Empire was elevated to another level corresponding to the contents of faith and supported by the state.

Some conclusions about the stormy process of change are the following:

1. The social ministry attracted vast sums of money and lots of people. By this, the Church was moved to the forefront of Roman economic life.
2. The development and spread of charity work promoted Church administration.
3. Charity work and administration taught Christians how to deal with economic issues.

## **5. The initiative of the Cappadocian Fathers**

The Cappadocian Church (modern-day Turkey, Asia Minor) of the fourth century was well known for its care of the needy (Holman, 2001). This was mainly due to dramatic events at the end of the century: farmers and city people suffered from cold winters and summer droughts for several years. The Cappadocian Fathers (St Basil the Great, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Gregory of Nazianzas) in their homilies (sermons) urged Christians to 'follow God' by their philanthropic deeds. Speaking in modern terms, it was a major programme of economic innovation and food supply that operated with large sums of money and goods used for the improvement of the needy. Several principles described in their homilies have not lost their importance in caritative social work today: the fate of the starving was presented as a personal tragedy rather than an abstract 'project'; the needy are pictured as witnesses by the gates of Paradise, they will testify for the newcomer,

i.e. offering help to the needy was elevated to the highest religious duty; help was needed urgently, without waiting for the donors' 'personal motivation'. To Christian society of the day, these homilies sounded very impressive.

Behind these emotions and compassion was the strict position of the Cappadocian Fathers in discussions about the essence of the Trinity briefly described above. During those years, the theological foundation for social ministry was laid: 'The image of God in man is understood as an image of the Holy Trinity which manifests Itself in various human communities where people create diverse relationships. In a social context the human personality is seen as capable of reaching the likeness of God corresponding to its purposeful activity in joint projects, works of mutual help, and in all forms of mutuality that implement love of the neighbour' (Григорий Богослов, 2022; Кирилл Александрийский, 2011).

The Cappadocian Fathers had vast resources to turn the concept into practice. St Basil the Great was Bishop of Constantinople (370–389), his younger brother St Gregory of Nyssa was Bishop of Nyssa for four years, and his friend St Gregory of Naziansas was Bishop of Sesima and Constantinople for 18 years. By their efforts, charitable work in the Roman Empire was institutionalised for the first time. From then on, philanthropy was not offered from person to person, they created specialised organisations without relying on mere 'altruistic instinct' (Constantinelos, 2008).

St Basil the Great was both an excellent theologian and a powerful administrator. Philanthropy was organised in legislation, and, speaking in modern terms, human rights were defended: he preached against the death penalty in cases when the criminal did not pose a threat to society, supported the equality of women (especially in issues related to inheritance and child guardianship), supported poor farmers against rich landowners, made sure slaves were given the legal right to marry, etc. Of course, these initiatives were not immediately perfect, but the vector is clearly visible. The sum of these initiatives was described well by St John Chrysostom in his homily 'On Lazarus' (circa 347–407): 'I do not disregard anyone, since every person deserves our attention as created by God, even the lowest of slaves. I am not interested in social status, but virtue. I do not look upon the lord or a slave, but on a man. The one to whom heaven is open, the sun shines and the moon rises in the air filled with everything, to whom springs gush water, to whom the sea opens up endlessly, is man. Only because the only begotten God became man did my Lord pour out His blood for manhood. Who am I to disregard a man? How can I hope in forgiveness if I do so?'

The synergy of Trinitarian theology and caritative social work was best visible in the new city called Basilead established by St Basil not far from his capital

city Cesarea. Although our knowledge about the city is limited (Rosseau, 1994; Daley, 1999), the known facts are validated by directions of modern caritative social work. The city offered the first hospital, care for the poor, workshops for the unemployed, and schools. Interestingly enough, St Basil invited hermits from monasteries in Egypt whom he knew well: the ministry to the sick and poor was pronounced equal to ascetic deeds in the desert. Several authors confirm that philanthropic deaconia in Cappadocia during Byzantine times served as a prototype for the Church in the West, and even for the Islamic world after the seventh century (Constantinelos, 2008). One example is the monastery in Marseilles, France, established in the fourth century by the Roman St John Cassian, following the Egyptian example. Monks were actively involved in ministering to the needy. 'Almost all modern social services could be derived from those ancient organisations,' writes D. Garland (Church Social Work, 1992). The initiative may be described in a few short theses, some of which recall the principles of modern social entrepreneurship (Patitsas, 2008):

1. The new city did not accumulate financial capital, since its economic life was tuned to constant rapid motion. It did not launch abstract projects, and money was not collected by the most agile 'beggars'. The income was assigned for help, and erased any illusion that the situation could be improved by spontaneous donations.
2. It was not blind 'philanthropy without borders'. The city offered job opportunities attuned to local needs. St Basil combined knowledge with practical skills, and people were involved in improving what they already knew quite well.
3. The city was located some distance from the capital: receivers of help were visible to all, people knew them well, and it was mutuality transparent,
4. Organisations and institutions of help and workshops were a novelty, and, psychologically speaking, every novelty attracts people with initiative.
5. Homilies testify that St Basil and his friends turned harshly against 'loan sharks'. Since the needy were engaged in meaningful labour and their attitude towards loans changed, the sharks lost their power and influence.

Although Basilead has disappeared from the world map (its name today is Keyseri), 'perfect cities' of that type are found in many places today, in the Mount Athos peninsula, Russia, Cyprus, Romania, and even in Arizona (USA). Outside Orthodox territory, they are found in Peru, Haiti, etc. Establishing cities around monasteries should be mentioned among other reasons for the creation of the city.

## 6. Transformative power

Why should early Christianity not be taken as ‘primitive Communism’ or ‘dreams for a better future’? That view was spread in the writings of early communist activists (e.g. F. Engels called the caritative spirit of the early Church ‘proto-socialism’, and K. Kautsky agreed with him; read the novel *Mother* by M. Gorky and you will be amazed how precisely it reflects the Orthodox matrix). However, the question is not so much about long-gone history. The German theologian and researcher of the social teachings of the Christian Church E. Troeltsch argues that religious conscience possesses its own *dynamics of development which is primary with regard to societal facility*: ‘There is no doubt that for one part of society, its remoteness from personal involvement in the societal life and submission to the dominating role of the Empire led them into an enclosure of inner life, pressed to focus its energy on the morals of a personal life. One might also think that the devastating impact of the societal conflicts of the day on the human consciousness prepared the soil for finding salvation in religion’ (Troeltsch, 1992). On the contrary, the methodology proposed in this article leads to the conclusion that inwardly focused energy did not disappear into some ‘black hole’ beyond the visible horizon of societal life. Troeltsch continues, pointing to the transformative character of inner energy both on an individual and a societal scale: ‘It [the energy] was *embedded in the foundation of social ideas and these ideas acquired a transcendental turn.*’ Essentially, the value of religious conscience manifests itself during times of a humanitarian crisis since ‘religious conscience as a relatively independent phenomenon with its own inner dialectics and inner power of development *during times of total bankruptcy of human hopes* is able to occupy its due place and fill the void with its own ideas and own mood.’ Therefore, the religious conscience, ‘the new service to God and the new revelation of God’ in particular situations may change society one-sidedly: ‘It is clearly obvious that these new hopes opened up by Christianity did not show just another transformed social idea described in transcendental terms, i.e. promising the world equality, freedom and welfare without suffering and which will be established by God and His miraculous intervention when it was not available only by human efforts; the Christian ideal means a turn to religious treasures: a pure conscience, love of people, friendship with God available to all, and not submitted to some organisational and management mishaps. *It means a full change of values.*’ Troeltsch concludes that a proper understanding of the religious idea might lead to the right understanding of relationships between the individual and society at large, of the ‘result that follows every new revelation of truth’ (Troeltsch, 51).



## Conclusions and a few topics for further discussion

The human personality, responsible in the situation of a choice, is both a subject and an object of caritative social work. 'Renewal, improvement and provision of human social functioning', which is the goal and task of social work, starts with a personal decision. Social work is impossible without the interest of the social worker himself or herself in decisions made by the client, since then his or her understanding of the contents of the profession is disclosed. Charity/caritas/philanthropy is one of the most important social canons of the Christian faith. Ignorance of the canon causes the suffering of the client and society at large.

1. The roots of social work as a profession are *found already in the early years of Christianity* rather than in the mid-19th century industrial era. A system of professional charity institutions was organised, and all current social work institutions can be traced to them.
2. Early Christian institutions connected the *personal approach* to clients with social competence. Personality issues were put at the centre of early social work, called caritative social work.
3. A key word for caritative social work is *mutuality and solidarity* between members of society. It is best seen on a community level.

A human, ecological and economic crisis worries millions of people today, and not only in Latvia and Lithuania. Christian charity, in its essence, is one of the most important instruments for building a new society. The mission of caritative social work is to use and apply that potential, to overcome prejudices against Christianity, and to bring social work out of its stagnation by a return to work not only with social problems, but also with people in their social problems.

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