

Basil the Great on *Social Justice*

Critical Book Review

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Towards Course TRP2661 - Church of the Margins - Ministering to Christ
Given by Fr. Geoffrey Ready

April 4th, 2019

In his book “On Social Justice”, St. Basil the Great addressed social issues that are relevant, in various degrees, to our society today. The starting point was Christ’s instruction to the rich young man: *“If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me”* (Mt 9:21). Prior to Basil, there was a tension between two interpretations: St. Clement of Alexandria focused on the young man’s unhealthy attachment to material riches, rather than the actual ownership of those riches. While according to St. Athanasius, St. Anthony followed that instruction literally; sold his property and gave the money to the poor... anonymous poor. For Basil, it was to be interpreted according to the commandment: “love your neighbor as yourself”. Basil humanized the “anonymous poor”; giving with a personal touch in love.

In his homilies, he used very effective rhetorical devices; short punch lines dotted with quotes from the Bible; contrasting extremes in society (hoarding vs. starvation), with melodramatic imagery (the poor was so hungry that he went blind, or sold his child, etc.), followed by rhetorical questions shaming or rebuking the corrupt rich.

As he was responding to the issues of his time in Cappadocia, and to some degree, in Constantinople. Most of those issues would be too severe by today’s standards, such as total lack of state-run social programs, or even totally inapplicable, such as slavery. Only his homily *“Against Those Who Lend at Interest”* applies perfectly well today. I will start with it. Given how literally it applies to us today, I will only list selected quotes from it; no comment would be needed! The other homilies will be addressed with a critique to their applicability today, keeping in mind the word count limitations of this essay.

“Against Those Who Lend at Interest” (1, pp. 89-99)

Sympathizing with those who borrow out of need: *“... it is the height of inhumanity that those who do not have enough even for basic necessities should be compelled to seek a loan in order to survive...”* (1, p. 90) But those usually have poor credit, so they are unlikely to be able to borrow in the first place. Most borrowers are just vain consumers: *“... who devote themselves to unconstrained expenditures and useless luxuries, those who serve the passionate desires of women.”* (1, p.96). It is short sighted indulgence, followed by rude awakening: *“After receiving the money, on the first day he is joyful and festive, decked out on borrowed splendor, the change in his circumstances in clear evidence. There is a richly laden table and lavish clothing.”*. *“But*

as the money begins to dwindle, the interest ever increasing as time passes, the nights do not bring rest to him, nor does the coming of the day bring joy.” (1, p.91) He falls in the grips of loan sharks to whom Basil says: “Tell me, do you really seek riches and financial gain from the destitute? If this person had the resources to make you even wealthier, why did he come begging to your door?” (1, p.90) “Do you not know that you are taking in an even greater yield of sins than the increase of wealth you hope to receive through interest?” (1, p.91)

Then, his advice to borrowers: *“Drink water at your own cistern (Prov 5.15); that is , look to your own means. Do not turn to other springs, but draw forth from your own means. ... Do you have utensils of bronze, clothing, a beast of burden, vessels for all your needs? Sell them all; choose to give up everything rather than your freedom. “But”, says the borrower, “I am ashamed to put them up for public sale”. What will you do, when in just a little while someone else brings your possessions forward and auctions them off, disposing of them at bargain prices before your very eyes?” (1, p.92) Basil ends with condemnation of borrowing: “Borrowing is the origin of falsehood, the source of ingratitude, unkindness, perjury” (1, p.92)*

How applicable the, above quotes, to many of us today!

Holy simplicity describes the above as well as the other homilies: ***“To the Rich”, “I will tear Down my Barns” and “In Time of Famine and Drought”***. Basil was impressed by communal “cenobitic” way of life in monastic communities that he saw in Palestine, Syria and Egypt. like the first Christian community in Jerusalem, they shared a life of prayer, worship as well as communal property. (1, p. 19). *“... banish from the soul its opinions about riches, ...” (1, p. 22) “love your neighbor as yourself”* meant sharing your wealth with others. A sustainable way of life relies on simplicity in food, dress, and housing so that resources can be fairly distributed. (1, p. 26). That enables the rich to distribute the “extra” that they have, without missing it as the new essential. The extra things in consumerism are meaningless: *“Tell me, what better service do silver-encrusted tables and chairs or ivory-inlaid beds and couches provide than their simpler counterparts?” (1, p. 49) Only to impress others because they “fail to beautify the soul.” (1, p. 49). What real benefit is there in hoarding more crops? The rich man’s “miserly heart is never satisfied”. “I will pull down my barns and build larger ones”. (1, p. 60) Basil would say to him: “The bread you are holding back is for the hungry, ...” (1, p. 28). Yet, God’s goodness extends even to such greedy people. “For He sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous, ...” (Mt 5:45. 1, p. 60). But God’s patience ran out: *“...the multitudes of our sins has altered the course of the year ...producing these unusual temperatures.” (1, p.75) “... heavens have grown hard and unyielding, ...”. “I saw the fields and wept bitterly for their unfruitfulness” (1, p.74). It sounds like Global Warming due to global sin today!**

In his effort to deny the rich any right in having higher wealth, Basil asks rhetorically: *“What did you bring to this life?” (1, p. 32) “The earth was welcoming all to its riches:...” (1, p.31) That was an extreme position on denying any sense of deservedness. In his effort to combat the sins of greed and pride, he opens the door to the sins of sloth and envy. How about achievers like Henry Ford and Steve Jobs? They brought cars and computers to this world. Even in agricultural society like his, look into the results of “Agricultural Reform” by Nasser of Egypt. The distribution of the land to the workers resulted in drop in production due to their sloth. Egypt ended up*

importing wheat by borrowed money. Stalin led to famine in Ukraine. Chavez social justice for the poor, led Venezuela to the catastrophe it is in today.

Finally, a reality check on the sincerity of Basil's statement that "*A loaf of bread is enough to fill the stomach. Why then do you grieve?*"^(1, p.44) Compare that with what St. Gregory of Nazianzus said about St. Basil, in letter 25 to Amphilochios (2, p. 191) : "*We are not asking for bread from you, ...But if one asks for vegetables from a man of Ozizalaea, vegetables which are so abundant in your parts and so rare in ours, ... So kindly send us a load of nice vegetables, or at least what you can, since even small things look great to those in need; and in need we are, all the more because we are going to receive the 'great Basil.'* You have seen him contented and philosophizing; beware, lest you find him hungry and in a bad mood!" . So far for St. Basil being contented with a loaf of bread!

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1. Basil the Great. *On Social Justice*, Popular Patristics Series volume 38 (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2011)
 2. George Barrois. *The Fathers Speak (St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory Nazianzus, St. Gregory of Nyssa)*, St Vladimir Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1986