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The Church and the Poor.

A SERIES OF HISTORICAL SKETCHES.

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II.

The Early Church.

IN this paper I purpose to deal briefly with the philanthropic work of the Early Church—that is, during the period extending from the close of the New Testament to, say, the end of the third century. I do not intend to discuss at length disputed points of Church organization—*e.g.*, to what extent the various officials of the Church combined economic with spiritual functions; for instance, how the Bishops were responsible for the distribution of the alms of the faithful, at what period this responsibility began to be general, and when it ceased to be so.[1] Not that such questions are unimportant, but they are beside my present intermediate purpose. What I would rather do is to try to show for what particular classes of people the Church considered herself to be responsible, and consequently to what objects her funds were specially devoted.

It has been maintained, and with a considerable measure of truth, that by an outsider the Church might in those days have been regarded as a benefit society, the members of which were united by certain definite religious convictions. Certainly the philanthropic side of the Church's work during this period was an extremely important factor in the sum total of her energies.[2] I need not remind my readers that, owing to the careful investigations of many competent scholars, our knowledge of the nature of the Church's activities during this period has much increased.

[1] ποιμαίνειν, in Acts xx. 28, may have a temporal as well as a spiritual reference. *Cf.* Jude 12; 1 Tim. iii. 3. See Harnack, "Mission and Expansion of Christianity," vol. i., p. 157; Uhlhorn, "Christian Charity in the Ancient Church," p. 161: "The relief of the poor was more and more concentrated in the person of the bishop"; yet see p. 123.

[2] Harnack, "Expansion," vol. i., p. 149.

New materials have been brought to light, and old materials have been both studied and interpreted with much greater care.[1]

Upon one point I must again insist, because this is my chief object in all I am writing—namely, that we cannot separate the practical life of the Church from her doctrinal convictions. We cannot do this in any period of the Church's history. The study of doctrine and the study of conduct or ethics must be pursued together. While the doctrine believed inspires and rules the conduct, the actual conduct is not only the best of all explanations given to the doctrine, it is actually the proof of the sincerity of the doctrine professed. The creed of those days was not formulated as it was by the councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, but the principles or doctrines taught by Christ, in which that creed was implicitly contained, were the foundation and rule of the Church's life. I refer to the principles enunciated in such sayings as these: "One is your teacher, and ye are all brethren; and call no man your father on the earth; for One is your Father which is in heaven. . . . He that is greatest among you shall be your servant"[2]; and also: "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; even as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another."[3]

Two very striking testimonies to the way in which these principles were obeyed may be given. Neither are from Christians—indeed, both are from men who regarded Christianity from a very unsympathetic point of view. The first is from Lucian, the well-known author of the "Dialogues," who writes thus of the mutual relationships existing between members of the Church: "Their original law-giver had taught them that they were all brethren, one of another. . . . They become incredibly alert when anything occurs which affects their common interests. On such occasions"—when a possibility arises of their rendering useful service to their own members—"no expense is grudged."[4]

[1] The nature and wealth of these may be seen in the notes to Harnack's chapter on "The Gospel of Love and Charity," "Expansion," vol. i., p. 147 *et seq.*

[2] Matt. xxiii. 8 *et seq.*

[3] John xiii. 34.

[4] Harnack, "Expansion," vol. i., p. 149.

The second testimony is that of the Emperor Julian, who, though belonging to the fifth century, evidently speaks of the Christian system as this had long been in existence. Of Julian, Harnack writes: "The excellence of the Church's charitable system, the deep impression made by it, and the numbers it won over to the faith, find their best voucher in the action of Julian the Apostate, who attempted an exact reproduction of it in that artificial creation of his, the Pagan State-Church, in order to deprive the Christians of this very weapon. The imitation had, of course, no success."[1] Harnack also gives these two quotations from a letter of Julian's: (1) "These godless Galileans feed not only their own poor, but ours; our poor lack our care." (2) "This godlessness (*i.e.*, Christianity) is mainly furthered by its philanthropy towards strangers, and its careful attention to the bestowal of the dead." In the failure of Julian's project we have another proof that the Christian system of philanthropy was no mere carefully thought-out utilitarian scheme. It was the expression of a deep-seated belief in certain doctrines and principles, especially of a belief in the binding nature of such commands of Christ as to "love one another, even as I have loved you";[2] and to "be merciful even as your Father in heaven is merciful."[3]

The principal source of the charity distributed in the Early Church was the offerings made at the weekly Sunday Eucharist.[4] Of the collection and distribution of the voluntary contributions to the funds of the Church, Justin Martyr writes: "The well-to-do and willing give as each purposes; the collection is deposited with the president, who succours orphans, widows, those who are in want owing to sickness or any other cause, those in prison, and those on a journey."[5] The administration of the alms apparently lay finally with the president;[6] but in the distribution of these he would be assisted by the deacons, who would be expected to be

[1] Harnack, "Expansion," vol. i., pp. 161, 162. *Cf.* "Cambridge Medieval History," vol. i., p. 108 *et seq.*

[2] John xiii. 34.

[3] Luke vi. 36.

[4] Harnack, "Expansion," vol. i., p. 155 *et seq.*; Uhlhorn, "Christian Charity in the Ancient Church," p. 141 *et seq.*

[5] "Apolog.," c. 6.

[6] Harnack, vol. i., p. 157, note 1.

familiar with the circumstances—that is, with the needs—of each member of the community.

Harnack states[1] that there were ten objects upon which the funds at the disposal of the Church seem generally to have been expended: (1) The maintenance of officials and teachers,[2] especially where their work for the Church withdrew these from their ordinary avocation.[3] (2) The support of widows and orphans, who were from the first special objects of philanthropy.[4] (3) The sick, the infirm, and the disabled. These, again, have always been objects of solicitude; moreover, the work which Christ Himself did on their behalf gave them a very special claim to help. (4) Prisoners and those languishing in the mines (to which many of those suffering for their faith were committed). The cruelty with which those in such positions were in those days treated is notorious. Both these classes must be visited and consoled, and gifts of food were often taken to them; not infrequently prisoners were ransomed by a payment of money.[5] (5) The burial of the poor; for in those days special importance was attached to an honourable burial, and to see to this became one of the tasks of the deacons.[6] (6) The (occasional) freeing of slaves—though this was the exception rather than the rule—as part of the more humane treatment enjoined by the Church towards these.[7] (7) Care for those visited by great calamities; as, for instance, those suffering from persecution or from an epidemic of the plague.[8] (8) The provision of work for the unemployed. This need was intensified by the fact that many converts to Christianity could no longer continue to follow their old avocations.[9] (9) Care of, and provision of hospitality for, brethren on a journey. These would be mainly of two classes: those travelling on behalf of the faith—*i.e.*, missionary teachers and evangelists—and those travelling in search of work.[10] (10) Churches in poverty

[1] Harnack, "Expansion," vol. i., p. 153.
[2] 1 Tim. v. 18, 19; 1 Cor. ix. 7 *et seq.*
[3] Harnack, "Expansion," vol. i., p. 158, note 2.
[4] 1 Tim. v. 16.
[5] Harnack, *ibid.*, p. 162.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 165. See quotations from Julian, Aristides, and Apost. Const.
[7] Harnack, *ibid.*, p. 167.
[8] Euseb., H. E., vii. 22; ix. 8.
[9] *Vide infra.*
[10] Rom. xii. 13; 1 Pet. iv. 9; Heb. xiii. 2, etc. By Clement of Rome φιλοξενία is joined to πίστις, cap. x. and xii., and to ἐυσέβεια, cap. xi.

or in peril. This was a practical recognition of the truth that, though congregations or local churches might be many, and placed in very different circumstances, the Church itself was one.[1]

It is obviously impossible for me to dwell upon all these spheres of philanthropic activity or all these objects of love and care, many of which have their counterparts in our Christian social work to-day. Upon a very few points, however, I would touch briefly. First, I would notice how the more we study the charitable work of the Early Church, the more are we struck by the wisdom, the remarkable skill, and common sense displayed both in the teaching about it and in its organization.[2] For instance, in the "Didache" the severest penalties are threatened against those who, not being in actual need, shall accept alms; we are also taught that most careful investigation must be made before help is given.

The provision of work for the unemployed, and of hospitality for those seeking work, were matters which very soon claimed the careful attention of the Church. This is evident from the twelfth chapter of the "Didache," which runs thus:

"(1) But let everyone that cometh in the Name of the Lord be received, and then proving him ye shall have complete understanding. (2) If indeed he that cometh is a wayfarer, help him as much as you can, but he shall not remain with you more than two or three days unless there be necessity. (3) But if he willeth to settle among you, and is a craftsman, let him work and [so] eat. (4) But if he have no craft, according to your understanding provide that a Christian shall live with you without being idle. (5) But if he will not act thus he is one who maketh merchandise of Christ; beware of such."

Here we see combined (as they are combined now) two of the most difficult problems which meet the Christian social worker at the present time—those of (1) vagrancy and (2) unemployment. These two problems generally resolve themselves into one—how to help the honest seeker after work, and how to discriminate between him and the idle vagrant, whose object is

[1] From the time of Acts xi. 27 *et seq.*

[2] Dobschütz, "Christian Life in the Primitive Church," pp. 296, 297. "The finest achievement of the Churches is their organization of Christian charity," etc. (*cf.* Uhlhorn, p. 125).

to live upon the charity of others. We are also well acquainted with those who try to make use of a profession of Christianity[1] (or Churchmanship) as a means of enlisting the sympathy of those who are at once credulous and tender-hearted. The above is by no means the only reference to the subject in early Christian literature; for instance, in the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies we read: "For those able to work, provide work; to those incapable of work, be charitable." Occasionally in those days the problem was complicated, because converts felt compelled to give up avocations which they could not conscientiously continue.[2] For such people the Church felt bound to provide either different work, or at least to provide the necessaries of life. The care of "brethren on a journey" was from the first, and long continued to be, a very important part of the Church's philanthropic work. A survival of it was found in the *hospitia*,[3] which, either as a part of the monasteries or as separate buildings at intervals along the great high roads, formed resting-places for wayfarers.

Few problems are of greater complexity and need more careful handling than that of "the right to work." I cannot enter upon it here further than to say that all Christian workers should realize it to be a part of their duty, whenever possible, to find work for the honest seeker after work. Owing to the much greater complexity of modern industry, and to cycles of good and bad trade (and corresponding cycles of unemployment), the problem is on a far larger scale, and one of much greater difficulty to us than it was to the early Christians. Still their example, the earnestness with which they pursued this object, and the care they expended upon it, may be a most useful inspiration to ourselves.[4] Among the various ways of giving help this is generally by far the most permanent and efficacious, and the one most likely to have the best effects upon the moral character of the recipient.

[1] This practice is as old as the "Didache," xii. 5: χριστέμπορός ἐστι.
[2] Cyprian, Ep. ii.
[3] The ξενοδοχεῖα.
[4] Harnack, "Expansion," vol. i., p. 176: "The Church formed a guild of workers. . . . The Churches were also Labour Unions. . . . Their attractive power was consequently intensified."

It is certainly a very great pity that those who have been responsible for the government of this country during the last six years have made no really serious attempt to deal with the crying evil of vagrancy. In 1906 a full and admirable Report,[1] expressing the unanimous opinion of a body of Commissioners thoroughly qualified to deal with the subject, and which embodied excellent recommendations, was presented to Parliament. Then the Poor Law Report of 1909[2] revealed not only the extreme diversity of treatment adopted by various Poor Law authorities in their dealing with tramps, vagrants, and wayfarers, but it showed how thoroughly incapable, if not how inhuman, some of these authorities were in the way they behaved to those who sought admission to the casual ward. In spite of both these Reports, no new legislation has even been attempted;[3] and still to-day the idle vagrant and the honest seeker after work are alike relegated to the tramp ward of the workhouse. Probably there is no matter connected with the help of the poor which more urgently calls for a wiser treatment than this.

Attention is frequently called in early writings to the effect upon those outside the Church of witnessing the care which the Christians bestowed upon those needing help; for instance, upon the sick, and upon those visited by some calamity[4] beyond their own control. Eusebius notices this in a description he gives of the conduct of the Christians during a plague which occurred in the reign of Maxentius Daza[5]: "The Christians were the only people who amid such terrible evils showed their fellow-feeling and humanity by their actions. Day by day some would be active in attending to the dead and burying them, for there were numbers of these to whom no one else paid any attention; others gathered into one place all who were afflicted by hunger throughout the whole city, and gave food to them all. When this became known people glorified the Christians' God, and,

[1] Report of the Departmental Committee on Vagrancy, vol. i. [Cd. 2852].
[2] See Minority Report, part ii., cap. i., E.; also cap. v., A., iv. e.
[3] With the single exception of "the Labour Exchange," an indirect method.
[4] Harnack quotes Heb. x. 32 *et seq.* [5] Harnack, "Expansion," i. 173.

convinced by the very facts, they confessed that the Christians alone were truly pious and religious."[1] Undoubtedly there were times when more converts were won over to Christianity by witnessing conduct of this kind than were won by appeals directly addressed to the intellect through preaching and teaching.

This experience has counterparts in two directions at the present time: first, every parish priest with experience could point to instances in which the careless, even the godless, have been actually converted through deeds of self-sacrificing kindness done to them or to their friends in times of sickness, misfortune, or bereavement; secondly, by means of the work being done by the Medical Missions, now connected with all our great Foreign Missionary Societies, the way is often paved for an entrance for the heathen into the Church. A man or woman cannot be for weeks in a Christian hospital without to some degree coming under the influence of Christianity.

A study of the philanthropic work of the Early Church raises another question which is much debated at the present time—namely, whether religion and what usually comes under the comprehensive name of "relief" should be connected, and if so, what should be the nature of this connection. To-day the trend of opinion is towards their being separated as far as possible. We are told that clergymen and district visitors are not efficient administrators of charity; and also, that it is not wise for those whose work should be mainly spiritual, and who seek to obtain a spiritual influence, to run the risk of lessening this by mixing the spiritual with the material in their work. We are further assured that where the clergy or Church-workers give relief, people are bribed to attend a place of worship, or at least are induced to make a profession of religion from impure motives. But to divorce religion from charity is the very opposite of the practice of the Early Church. Indeed, it is not too much to say that by the early Christians the power (even the existence) of the spiritual was expressed by their use of the material. Indeed, as

[1] Euseb., H. E., ix. 8.

far as we can judge, those who continued to be responsible for the Church's system of charitable relief during the age with which we are dealing must have had in large measure the threefold qualification of the seven deacons, the men first chosen to discharge this office. They must have been men of unblameable reputation,[1] so little is recorded against them; they must have been men "full of Spirit,"[2] or they would never have persevered among the trials to which they were subjected; they must also have been men possessed with a large measure of common sense and skill.[3] Some of these men may not have been able to formulate their theology with the accuracy, or in the technical terms, of the Greek Fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries, but they evidently did their utmost to see that the responsibilities of the various relationships of life were rightly discharged, and that the possessions and opportunities of life were wisely used, Christianity has been defined as the highest form of common sense perfectly sanctified. This description is certainly applicable to Christ's treatment of men. It seems to be not inapplicable to the conduct of the early Christians towards the poor and those in need of help of various kinds.

That certain people with a spiritual avocation give charity unwisely is no valid argument against the connection of charity with religion. Christianity should actually help us to perform every kind of action more wisely. The true remedy is not divorce, but greater efficiency; a larger measure of the "Spirit of wisdom and understanding"; a greater knowledge of human nature, a deeper insight into its processes, also into its temptations and its weaknesses.[4]

Those who distributed charity in the Early Church had, generally speaking, one immense advantage over those engaged in the same work to-day, especially in large poor town parishes. Certainly in the second and third centuries the proportion of merely *nominal* Christians would be far less than is the case

[1] ἄνδρας . . . μαρτυρουμένους. [2] πλήρεις Πνεύματος.
[3] πλήρεις . . . σοφίας.
[4] I need not at the present time insist upon the value of some knowledge of at least elementary psychology to the Christian worker..

with us. Also the officials and Church-workers would know the members of the Christian community far more intimately than the average Christian worker at the present time is able to know these.[1] In those days when the numbers of the Christians were comparatively small, the deacons would know, and would be able to explain to the Bishop, both the circumstances and the character of those needing charity far more accurately than the average Christian worker could explain these to-day. The investigation in those days was probably far more thorough than it often is at the present time. It is generally owing either to their inability or their failure to make this that Christian workers are censured for foolish, indeed, sometimes for actually harmful, giving. Investigation is not only a far more difficult task than the average worker imagines, but it demands far more time and labour than the average worker is prepared to bestow upon it.

One question which we should at least attempt to answer is, What was probably the extent of poverty in the age of which we are speaking? Outside Rome, Uhlhorn believes that it was not great, and he gives reasons for this opinion. After stating these, he adds: "All this considered, we may well declare that in the earlier ages of the Church there was no pauperism of the masses except in Rome. . . . Independently of great calamities and times of famine, distress was confined to cases of individual poverty. . . . The duty of the Church was thereby essentially facilitated. In the presence of a poverty thus confined to individual cases, its almsgiving could also be of a strongly individual character."[2]

But even allowing for the comparative ease of its task, the charitable work of the Early Church demands our admiration; and undoubtedly, as I have already shown, the excellency with which it was performed was no unimportant factor in the victory

[1] In the next age we shall see how largely institutional methods superseded personal dealing. This was probably inevitable when the number of applicants for charity very greatly increased.

[2] Uhlhorn, pp. 104, 105. Eusebius states that 1,500 widows and indigent persons were supported by the Church in Rome (Euseb., H. E., vi. 43). The cost may have been anything between £5,000 and £10,000.

of Christianity over heathenism.[1] We must admire the motives from which the work was done, and the methods according to which it was pursued, for both were inspired by the strongest Christian convictions. The care of the poor was no mere appendage to the work of the Church; it was an essential part of that work, and it was carried out with a skill and a thoroughness which it should be our endeavour to imitate.

Peace.

By H. G. KEENE.

WORN by disaster, solitude, decay,
The veteran sadly draws precarious breath,
And, with lack-lustre vision, seems to say:
"There is no harbour for the soul but death."

And yet he knows full well his fight is done,
And surely it is time his care should cease;
He has attempted if he has not won,
And even victory leaves no gift but peace—

Peace, which the wise man for himself can make,
By resignation to the chastening rod;
Peace, which the world can neither give nor take,
The Spirit's inward joy, the peace of God.

[1] "It was as a charitable organization that the Christian Church carried to a victorious issue its mighty contest with the Roman Empire, the heathen religions, and its own sects" (Dobschütz, "Christian Life in the Primitive Church," p. 378).