



Acts of an Apostle

Basil the Great stands tall in a long line of Christian caring

Contrary to established wisdom in some circles, the Christian Church has had a long, albeit by no means perfect, tradition of looking after those in need. One shining example is Basil of Caesarea in Cappadocia.

Basil was born about 328, and became known finally as Basil the Great. He was essentially an ascetic and a theologian, being a follower of Athanasius, but with a reputation for being more sensitive. His grandparents were martyrs as well as Christians, and his family possessed considerable wealth.

Being the son of a professor of rhetoric meant that as a youth Basil was steeped in Greek culture. His good friend Gregory of Nazianzus was to call him *"a ship heavily laden with culture"*. Basil did well as a student in Caesarea, then Constantinople, and finally Athens. Later he was to comment that at Athens, he had *"lavished much time on the vanity of the precepts of that wisdom made foolish by God"*.

Perhaps through the influence of his sister Macrina, Basil came to seek to follow the ascetic and contemplative ideals of communal monasticism (as opposed to more solitary forms of monasticism). For all that, Basil always opposed the more extremist followers of Eustathius of Sebaste who said that married Christians could not be saved.

Basil journeyed through the east, to Egypt, Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia to visit monks, and sought to retire to a hermitage near a waterfall on estates on the river Iris at Annesi in Pontus, where his sister and mother were living. But the contemplative life was always somewhat elusive for Basil, and in 364 he was ordained as presbyter (his friend Gregory of Nazianzus was forcibly ordained by his father, who was a bishop).

Six years later Basil became Archbishop of Caesarea, ruling over a mountainous and barren region, which in the fourth century was populated by an uneducated and unsophisticated people. It was the age of the great Trinitarian disputes in the Church in the aftermath of the Council of Nicaea in 325, which declared that the Son of God is of the one essence with the Father. A succession of emperors were not fond of the view that Christ is truly God, and this led, for example, to the exile of the great Athanasius from Alexandria on five occasions. Basil always stood firm for Nicene orthodoxy, although as he himself commented: *"Hunting truth is no easy task; we must look everywhere for its tracks."*

Basil died in 379, aged about 50, just before the triumph of Nicene orthodoxy at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

Basil, however, deserves to be known for his example of caring as well as his capacity for leadership, his championing of communal monasticism, and his refusal to compromise the full deity of Christ and the Spirit. In 368 Basil had helped to organise famine relief in difficult times when there were a thousand theological distractions. He also established charitable institutions, hospitals and schools.

It has been said that the reputed founder of monasticism, Antony, was stirred by Matthew 19:21 (*"If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me"*), whereas Basil's text was Acts 2:44 (*"All the believers were together and had everything in common"*). Basil emphasised the importance of manual labour, the

need to obey the superior, and the centrality of fraternal charity. According to Gregory of Nazianzus, these qualities were imbibed from Basil's family. Gregory praised them for *"their care of the poor, their hospitality toward strangers, their purity of soul achieved through austerity, the dedication of a portion of their goods to God"*.

Gregory especially praised Basil for what he did to improve the lot of lepers in Cappadocia. The situation before Basil began his work was grim indeed — Gregory described *"that terrible and piteous spectacle of men who are living corpses, the greater part of whose limbs have mortified, driven away from their cities and homes and public places and fountains, aye, and from their own dearest ones, recognizable by their names rather than by their features"*.

Basil took the lead in pressing upon men that they ought not to despise their fellowmen nor to dishonour Christ by their inhuman treatment of lepers. Rather, they needed to *"lend to God that mercy of which they stand in need at his hands"*. The text behind this thought seems to be Proverbs 19:17, *"He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward him for what he has done"*.

Such was the impact of Basil's preaching and example that even the leaders of society came to vie with one another in their philanthropy and magnanimity towards the lepers. It is here that Basil's true greatness is to be located. Gregory noted: *"Others have had their cooks, and splendid tables, and devices and dainties of confectioners, and exquisite carriages, and soft, flowing robes; Basil's care was for the sick, and the relief of their wounds, and the imitation of Christ, by cleansing leprosy, not by a word, but in deed."* Basil's example continues those found in the New Testament. The church took up a collection for famine relief in Judea (Acts 11:27-30). Even in the midst of his tense theological battle with the Galatians over justification by faith in Christ alone, Paul recalls that he was asked to remember the poor, and adds that this was the very thing that he was eager to do (Gal.2:10). Religion which is approved by God is many things, but one of them is to look after orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27).

And so the story has continued. In the period of the early Church, homes were given to babies who had been left to die. Prisoners were visited, especially those suffering for the faith. In fact, it was not altogether unusual for this to cost the visitor his or her life. There are a number of records of Christian visitors being arrested and then beheaded, thrown to the beasts or sent to mines to be worked to death. It was a monk, Telemachus, who ran into the arena in Rome in 391 to try to stop the cruel gladiatorial games which saw crowds gather to watch gladiators kill one another or kill prisoners. Telemachus' brave intervention led to his death.

In the Middle Ages, Francis of Assisi sought to identify with the lepers. In the 18th century revival, George Whitfield laboured mainly to bring the gospel to those without it, but he also supported his orphanage Bethesda ('House of Mercy') in Georgia. In our own day, James Montgomery Boice is known, rightly enough, for his expository preaching at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, USA, yet his church manages to combine evangelism with welfare work, and there is a group which provides alternatives for girls seeking abortions, as well as a ministry to homosexuals and the administration of a Christian High School.

At her best the Church has managed to preach the gospel truly and live out some of its implications. These two are not contrary to one another. Salvation by grace is the message of Galatians, but this is also the book which tells us to do good to all men, especially those who are of the household of faith (Gal.6:10). One might conclude by citing Gregory again: *"A noble thing is philanthropy, and the support of the poor, and the assistance of human weakness."*

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