

Christian Philanthropy – A Contemporary *Modus Vivendi*

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Abstract: This study examines Christian philanthropy as a fundamental expression of ecclesial life and as the concrete manner in which the love of Christ becomes active in the world. Drawing on biblical and patristic foundations, the research highlights the historical development of philanthropy, its salvific role, and its relevance in a society marked by individualism and moral crisis. Philanthropy is presented not merely as a social action, but as an ethos and a mode of Christian existence—a continual calling to communion, responsibility, and self-giving. In the contemporary context, it remains an essential instrument for the reconstruction of community and for the reaffirmation of human dignity in the light of the Gospel.

Keywords: Christian Philanthropy, Service, Communion, Ethos, Contemporary Relevance

Introduction

Christian philanthropy represents one of the most profound and defining expressions of the Christian faith, being the concrete way in which the love of God becomes visible in the world through human actions. From the earliest days of the Church until today, almsgiving, care for those in need, and service to one's neighbor have constituted not merely social practices, but an essential dimension of life in Christ—a form of confession and fulfillment of the Gospel. Philanthropy is not an occasional gesture, nor an act reserved only for a select few, but a calling addressed to every Christian, for the love of humankind is, in essence, the very mode of existence of Christ and, by extension, of His Church.

This study aims to analyze Christian philanthropy as a living reality, beginning with its fundamental foundations, continuing with a historical overview of its expression within the Church, and culminating in its contemporary forms. Understanding philanthropy in the light of ecclesial tradition reveals that service to one's neighbor cannot be separated from salvation, for every act of active love is a response to God's love and a participation in His work in the world. Philanthropy is therefore both service and a salvific path—a responsibility that goes beyond the purely moral sphere and penetrates the theological, spiritual, and communal dimensions of life.

In a society increasingly indifferent toward God and toward one another, Christian philanthropy gains special relevance. It becomes a way of life—a *modus vivendi*—through which the Christian is called to witness to the presence of Christ in the world and to restore compassion, solidarity, and responsibility to the center of social life. In this sense, the present work explores the contemporary significance of Christian philanthropy and the ways in which it can respond to the challenges of the modern world while remaining faithful to the spirit of the Gospel and to the values of the Orthodox tradition.

Thus, Christian philanthropy is not merely a theological concept but a form of life, a path of service, and a calling to fulfill our vocation to love as Christ has loved us. It is within this horizon that the reflections of this work are situated, seeking to demonstrate that philanthropy, when lived authentically, remains today the surest way to restore humanity to the light and joy of God's presence.

Christian Philanthropy – Key Foundations

From an etymological perspective, *philanthropy* denotes the love for humankind. It is the form of love manifested by God through Jesus Christ, the One who offers Himself to humanity and extends His help to all. In the Christian understanding, philanthropy is also a living practice of faith, evident in the early communities of the Church through collections, common meals, and material support offered to those in need with the help of the deacons. These actions were connected to the fraternal *agape* meals and aimed at the good of all. Philanthropy essentially means giving from one's own well-being for the well-being of another, and over time the term came to be associated with offering help to those in difficulty and with supporting humanitarian initiatives. If *agape* expresses the love that is offered unconditionally, *philanthropy*—from the Greek *philanthropia*, formed from *philia* (love) and *anthropos* (human being)—acquires a profound anthropological dimension, as it points to the love Christ shows to the world (Greek Lexicon, n.d.). This love is lived by every believer through personal participation in the work of God's grace and becomes a gift to others in the context of the common life in Christ, oriented toward His Kingdom. Philanthropy is therefore a universal way of life addressed to all people, expressing mercy, justice, kindness, and concrete support.

God reveals Himself as rich in mercy and full of love for humanity. From this love springs the commandment to love one another. Scripture, as the Word inspired by God, transmits a teaching valid for all humanity, whose foundational principle is love. The human being is obligated to love God and, at the same time, to love oneself and one's neighbor with the same measure of divine love. The obligation to do good to all, as shown in the Epistle to the Galatians, highlights that Christian philanthropy is not limited to those who share the same faith. Love toward all people is expressed through the good we can concretely offer. The love of enemies is the fullest expression of this universal philanthropy. The enemy is the one who is not our friend and not close to us. Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, places this principle at the center of Christian life, presenting it as the most perfect of faiths. To love one's neighbor means to bless when one is cursed, to do good when one receives harm, and to pray for the other. Through such acts, we live the concrete love that God has for us.

The death of the Savior on the Cross is the supreme act of this love: Christ gives Himself so that we may have life and become partakers of eternity. In the hour of His crucifixion, He prays for those who harm Him, revealing that their sin springs from ignorance. From this example, Christian philanthropy becomes the work through which we help our neighbor emerge from ignorance and blindness, meeting him spiritually, psychologically, and materially. This expresses the "mystery of the brother," which means living, witnessing, and deepening the mystery of God's love—the One who loved humanity first and continues to come toward it with His love (Ciobotea, 1994, p. 13).

The eternal love of the Father for the Son becomes visible in the love shown to people, as the Holy Evangelist John testifies. At the final judgment, the sole criterion will be the way in which we responded to love and lived philanthropy in deeds. Concrete mercy—feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the imprisoned—constitutes the true test of love for one's neighbor. These are the gestures that draw us closer to God or distance us from Him, according to the Gospel of Matthew. To offer help with love and mercy to those around us means, in reality, to love Christ Himself (John Chrysostom, 1994, p. 584). The honor we render to Him is expressed through the sharing of our gifts with those in need. This represents the care every person should have toward those who suffer whenever there is the possibility to extend a helping hand.

The Christian faith does not consist merely in the union of those who confess together that Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son of God. It is, first and foremost, the way we understand that life has its source in God and, at the same time, the way we choose to live together, regardless of one's religious confession. It is no coincidence that one of the most important works of Romanian spirituality—Nichifor Crainic's *Holiness or the Fulfillment of the*

Human—shows that the perfection of the human being means truly living the life of Christ and fully assuming the human experience He lived (Crainic, 1993). Our existence must be lived in close connection with the existence of others, without isolation or rupture.

Christian philanthropy has a universal character because Christian theology affirms that life has its origin in God, the Creator of all. He is the One who brings each person into being out of love and desires that all humanity understand life as a work accomplished together with Him. God becomes present in the world through His gifts and also personally, calling each human being to communion, where our freedom meets His providential care (Stoica, 2005, p. 19). God is made present in every gesture of support toward one's neighbor, in each concrete act of mercy. For this reason, life seen as a gift from God reveals that the true and first philanthropist is the Holy Trinity, the source of perfect love and self-giving.

Christian Philanthropy – History and Contemporary Relevance

The original model of Christian philanthropy is presented in the writings of the New Testament, especially in the Acts of the Apostles, where the first concrete organization of fraternal assistance appears. Philanthropy is not merely a material act but a gesture that calls believers to communion, sharing, and a life in the Spirit. The Church reveals itself as the work of the Holy Spirit, yet this work is manifested through a call to unity and mutual support. The bond created among believers through almsgiving becomes a space of peace and love—virtues which, according to *The Shepherd of Hermas* (Hermas, 1995, p. 289), are indispensable both for inner life and for community life. To live in Christ means to preserve one's moral integrity and to ground one's entire life upon His word, received as foundation and light.

Christians of the first centuries were distinguished by sincerity and transparency in their relationships with others. Their behavior was guided by goodness, as exhorted by the Holy Apostle Peter in his first epistle: to flee from evil, pursue good, and seek peace—principles already present in the Psalms. True peace can be obtained only by avoiding evil and cultivating good. This attitude of openness, love, and understanding toward others constituted the philanthropy authentically lived in the early Christian communities (Teodorescu, 2008, p. 96). From its earliest decades, the Church was structured into clergy and laity, all forming the Body of Christ, whose Head is the Lord (Zizioulas, 2009). The bishop was the overseer of the community, the priest served liturgically, and the deacon was particularly responsible for social activities and for helping those in need. In the lower rank of the clergy, deaconesses fulfilled the same philanthropic responsibilities as the deacons. From the Jewish tradition, the order of “widows” was maintained—women dedicated to charitable service, often under the guidance of the deaconesses (Moisescu, 1955, p. 15).

In the midst of the early communities, the center of worship was the breaking of bread, that is, the Eucharist, which represented the fulfillment of Christ's command at the Mystical Supper and the permanent actualization of His sacrifice on Golgotha (Stan, 1972, p. 115). Ecclesial life revolved around the Holy Chalice, the liturgical assembly, and the bishop—elements that formed the fundamental model of ecclesial organization in the first centuries (Teodorescu, 2008, p. 169). Socially, Christians formed communities in which material goods were shared with all so that no one would lack anything (Martyrdom, 1997, p. 36). The organization was so well-established that each received what he needed, in the spirit of authentic love, as emphasized by St. John Chrysostom in his commentary on the Acts of the Apostles (St John Chrysostom, p. 233).

In the early Christian communities, the idea of inequality did not exist, because all lived from the abundance placed in common and from the gifts of others. Relationships among the members of the community were based on complementarity: each worked both for their personal growth and for the good of the entire community. Gifts were shared fraternally, offered and received for the benefit of all (Mircea, 1995, p. 22). The principal philanthropic expression of the Church was the concretization of love within the agape meals—fraternal

gatherings in which love manifested through deeds. Their purpose was to welcome those in need and to share a moment of joy, grounded in reciprocal love. These meals were filled with simplicity, joy, and communion, in total contrast with the opulence and extravagance of pagan feasts (Cabrol, 1929, p. 78).

This reciprocity of love was transmitted by the Church both within the community and toward those outside it. The deacons were entrusted with serving correctly and impartially, distributing goods according to principles of justice and balance (Justin, 1997, p. 95). Besides the agape meals, another form of philanthropy in the early Church was almsgiving and collections, offered as acts of solidarity and support. Almsgiving had to be given without regret, as a sincere expression of inner love. The practice of collecting offerings has been preserved in some local traditions to this day. In the first centuries, these gifts were brought immediately after the Liturgy, before Communion, as a voluntary offering. Loving mercy toward others expressed the philanthropic openness of the community, having both social and spiritual effects, since such deeds increased moral worth before God (Pâclișanu, 1937, p. 104). These practices continued throughout the centuries in the life of the Church. Numerous testimonies of philanthropy appear also in the Romanian lands—Wallachia, Moldavia, and Transylvania—where rulers consistently supported the Church’s social work. Beginning in the 14th century, philanthropic activity grew increasingly. A symbolic example is the way St. Neagoe Basarab presented himself: “Prince through the work of God,” indicating a leadership shaped by the spirit and by service (Neagoe Basarab, 1970, pp. 134–135).

At the end of the 18th century, Romanian rulers systematically organized the Church’s social work, since many poor people gathered around the places of worship. Thus appeared hospitals—called *bolnițe*—attached to monasteries (Samaritan, 1961, p. 130). When poverty became a genuine “social disease” (Dinu, 1968, p. 130) around Bucharest in the mid-19th century, one of the greatest supporters of the poor was St. Calinic of Cernica, known as “the benefactor of the poor” (Dinu, 1968, p. 131).

To this day, a social institution with a long history continues to operate in Bucharest, founded at the beginning of the 18th century near Antim Monastery and bearing the name of St. Anthim the Iberian. From the beginning, the Church understood philanthropy as support for those struggling with poverty, as care for the sick, and as openness toward every person in need. Philanthropy has never been a passing trend—unlike the spectacular acts of today’s wealthy benefactors—but has constituted the natural way of life of the Church, firmly grounded in Scripture, in the teaching of the Fathers, and in the organization of early Christian communities—a continuity preserved to this day (Vârtosu, 1938, p. 86).

Christian Philanthropy – Between Service and Salvific Fulfillment

Diakonia, or diaconal philanthropy, represents the way in which we manifest our Christian calling throughout history, following the example of Christ, the One who first bore the yoke of service. For this reason, we too are called to carry this light yoke together with Him, directed toward the salvation of each person and of the community. In the early Church, social work was carried out by the deacons, who constituted the main support of the bishop and served at the agape meals, as seen in the writings of the New Testament. They distributed the gifts and took care of the concrete assistance offered to those in need, using the goods of the Church for the benefit of all (Ocoleanu, 2004, p. 77).

Diaconal service has its source in the liturgical life, where the faithful gather, and it continues outside the walls of the place of worship, becoming the “liturgy of the neighbor.” The diaconate, in its true sense, is not merely a clerical rank but a profound ministry of service in and for the Church. Today, many of its original features have faded, and the diaconate is often perceived merely as a step toward the priesthood. Yet its very essence is oriented toward the neighbor, bearing an ecclesial openness directed toward society and toward the real mission of the Church (Schmemmann, 2007, p. 112).

Christ is the supreme Deacon, the One who served without reserve and offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice. He is both Sacrifice and the One who offers the sacrifice—the Servant par excellence. We too become servants insofar as we assume our Christian vocation and desire to live His life, remaining in communion, the only framework in which life acquires meaning and direction toward salvation. Nevertheless, salvation is not an exclusively individual reality but a profoundly communal one, for it is by serving others that we become capable of living true communion. In this way, the human being fulfills his existence as a gift received from God and offered further to others (Petcu, 2022, p. 563). To serve the neighbor represents the fundamental Christian mission (Rotaru, 2012, p. 5.), but the manner in which we fulfill it is essential. It must be rooted in the Gospel, in the writings of the Fathers, and in the way these principles are lived within the Church. Service to the world becomes what tradition calls “the liturgy after the Liturgy,” in which the believer offers others from the life he experiences in the worship of the Church. All these elements constitute the necessary foundation for the contemporary definition of Social Theology and Christian philanthropy.

True philanthropy means the concrete help given to the neighbor, a gesture through which we encounter Christ, for every outstretched hand awakens the personal relationship between us and the other. The Savior is often sought in the pages of Scripture, yet His presence becomes visible also in a small piece of bread offered to someone out of love. In this mutual encounter we discover Christ, the perfect Philanthropist, the One who out of love became human and out of love offered Himself in sacrifice. He is the center of our existence and the model we are called to follow (Stoica, 2005, p. 15).

We must not view our neighbor as an instrument of personal validation or as an opportunity for self-affirmation. Goodness and almsgiving must be lived as normality, not as exceptional deeds worthy of praise. Understanding philanthropy in this superficial way distances us from the Gospel and from the words of the Savior in the Sermon on the Mount. Authentic philanthropy requires the genuine living of the principle “let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing,” considering the help offered as a natural act, not a personal merit. Only in this way can we open the doors toward salvation and toward the encounter with God. Our deeds must be brought before Christ so that they may acquire salvific value. Fasting, prayer, and almsgiving are the three essential practices that assist us on the path of salvation, and the Savior shows us how we must fulfill them: not for people, but for God, without ostentation and without hypocrisy. Otherwise, we lose precisely the interior foundation required by the prophets of the Old Testament for the authentic fulfillment of moral life within the community (Petcu, 2005, pp. 448-458).

The Contemporary Relevance of Christian Philanthropy

The social work of the Orthodox Church has manifested itself throughout history in numerous directions. In the political sphere, the Church has sought to offer moral guidance to those involved in governing the state, calling all to responsibility and to a proper exercise of public office. Although it does not directly support any political party or alliance, the Church has the duty to contribute morally to civic life and to the promotion of peace among people, including among those with differing political views (Buchiu, 2011, p. 25).

Culturally, the social mission of the Church has aimed to encourage and provide a Christian foundation for certain cultural expressions (Rotaru, 2017, 57-76), orienting them toward goodness, beauty, and truth—realities that reflect the presence of God (Felea, 1994, p. 21). In the Romanian context, education emerged in close connection with places of worship. Within churches, the Romanian language, basic arithmetic, and other forms of knowledge appropriate for the time were taught for the first time. Even though schooling today functions independently from the Church and is administered by the state, it must not develop an atheistic or anti-religious orientation, as also warned by ecclesiastical documents from the Eastern tradition (Fundamentele, 2002, p. 258).

The Church pays close attention to collaboration with schools regarding the education of younger generations. For this reason, partnerships exist between parishes and nearby educational institutions in order to maintain the connection between community life and the conscience of young people. Contemporary society is rapidly secularizing (Vasile, 2017, pp. 67-77), pushing out everything related to God, the family, and moral education, replacing them with a culture of consumption that dismantles the sacred meaning of life (Crainic, 1994, p. 93). In the realm of art, the Church has always viewed artistic creation in its spiritual and moral dimension, seeking to integrate cultural forms—musical, architectural, or pictorial—into the process of cultivating ethical and aesthetic values (Popescu, 1993, p. 93). The aesthetic must not replace the ethical, yet beauty can lead toward a virtuous life. Christian tradition has given rise to its own artistic style, visible in music, architecture, and the art of the icon—heritage shared by the entire Christian world (Uspensky, 1994, p. 188).

Another essential area of social involvement is philanthropy, as it has been understood throughout Christian tradition: caring for the sick and supporting those in difficulty. The Church fulfilled its pastoral mission also through the bodily care of the faithful, as evidenced by the veneration of the Holy Unmercenary Healers, such as Cosmas and Damian, who united faith with medical service and with self-giving love for people (Schonborg, 2000, p. 178).

The priest and the physician, each in his own way, fight against suffering and for the life of the one in need. Therefore, philanthropy is a form of personal responsibility, but also a communal one: an openness toward others and a care for their lives, understood as a gift from God entrusted to us for safekeeping. Thus, social ministry is not optional; it expresses the responsibility we have toward our neighbor and toward human life itself.

Conclusions

Christian philanthropy remains today one of the strongest expressions of faith and of the presence of Christ in the world. Throughout history, the Church has understood that merciful love toward one's neighbor is not merely a social activity, but a fundamental dimension of life in Christ and of bearing witness to the Gospel. From the early agape meals and the diaconal ministry to the organized philanthropic institutions of medieval and modern times, philanthropy has remained a natural mode of existence within the Christian community.

Understanding philanthropy as service and as an expression of salvific life has always led to an integrated vision of the human person and of the world. Helping one's neighbor is not merely an external gesture, but a participation in the work of Christ, the Perfect Philanthropist, the One who offers Himself fully for the life of the world. This spiritual dimension transforms philanthropy from a social action into an act of communion that heals both the soul of the one who receives and that of the one who gives. In this sense, philanthropy becomes part of the journey toward salvation—a concrete way of fulfilling the Gospel in daily life.

The contemporary relevance of Christian philanthropy is evident in a world where individualism, social fragmentation, and indifference toward the suffering of others are increasingly visible. In a society dominated by consumption, competition, and digitalization, philanthropy becomes a necessary antidote for regaining lost humanity. It reminds us that the human person cannot fulfill himself in isolation, but only in communion and through mutual service. Rediscovering this communal dimension is essential for the moral reconstruction of society and for the re-humanization of interpersonal relationships.

This study shows that Christian philanthropy cannot be reduced to occasional acts of charity; rather, it represents a way of life, a personal and communal ethos, a *modus vivendi* rooted in the very being of the Church. Philanthropy is not an accessory to Christian life but an identity-forming component, a natural extension of the love with which God loves all humanity. Through works of active love, every Christian becomes a witness of God's presence in the world and His co-worker in the renewal of creation.

Ultimately, Christian philanthropy remains the path through which we can rebuild not only individual lives but entire communities. It teaches us that true strength lies not in accumulation but in generosity, not in isolation but in communion, not in indifference but in compassion. By embracing philanthropy as a way of life, the human person draws closer to his original vocation: to be the image of God, reflecting in the world the light of His love. This is, in essence, the contribution of Christian philanthropy to the contemporary world and its fundamental mission: to restore meaning, dignity, and hope where they are fading.

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