

The Good Word

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PART III: THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE TO LEPROSY IN THE 4TH CENTURY AD

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AN EPIDEMIC OF LEPROSY IN THE 4TH CENTURY IN THE EASTERN ROMAN EMPIRE

In the second century AD the renowned philosopher - physician Galen of Pergamon in Asia Minor stated that *elephantiasis*, *Elephant Disease* [medical leprosy] flourished especially in the Roman province of Aegyptus [Egypt]. From Egypt leprosy then spread to the provinces of Judæa, Syria, and Asia.¹ Because of the sudden increase in numbers of patients with this leprosy in the 4th century, leprosariums began to appear in the Eastern Roman Empire as Christians recognized the need to assist those afflicted by this most terrifying disease, described by some as a *living death*, and something demonstrably different from the *tzara'at* / *lepra* of the Old Testament:

“It is important to notice that [it was] Aretaios, a Greek medical scientist, [who] first described *elephantiasis* as a kind of *living death*. Two fourth-century Christian writers -- St. Gregory of Nazianzos [St. Gregory the Theologian c. AD 369-372] and an anonymous biographer [c. AD 406] of St. John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople [from AD 398 to 405], adopted this image and used it to arouse sympathy for lepers. Since the writings of St. Gregory of Nazianzos were extremely popular, that image would be embraced by later Byzantine and Latin writers. Thus, the idea that leprosy was a form of living death did not derive from Christian interpretations of the Old Testament, but ultimately from Greek scientific [medical] writers.”²

Nevertheless, the first leprosarium to treat and house these unfortunates did not arise from the instigation of physicians. Nor did it arise as a result of the above 3 writers' wrenching portrayals of the *living death* of these unfortunate souls. Rather, action was begun by a solitary urban monk in response to a need he observed.

1. Galen, *Ad Glauconem de medendi methodo*. as quoted in Miller TS and Smith-Savage R, *Medieval Leprosy Reconsidered*, *International Social Science Review*, Vol. 81, No. 1/2 (2006), p. 20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41887256>

2. Miller, TS and Smith-Savage, R., *Medieval Leprosy Reconsidered*, *International Social Science Review*, Vol. 81, No. 1/2 (2006), p. 20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41887256>


Shortly after the dedication of Constantinople in AD 330 as the new capitol of the Roman Empire by St. Constantine the Great (AD 272-337) a surprising number of lepers began appearing in the city. In response to this a humble ascetic urban monk, St. Zotikos (celebrated December 31), quietly started a ministry of rescuing them from local governmental persecution by providing housing, food, and medical care for them outside the city limits of Constantinople:

THE LIFE OF ST. ZOTIKOS (ZOTICUS): FEEDER OF ORPHANS, PROTECTOR OF LEPERS, AND A PRESBYTER



FRESCO OF ST. ZOTIKOS, 11TH CENTURY, ST. SOPHIA CATHEDRAL, KIEV

“This saint came to Byzantium from Rome [c. AD 330] with Constantine the Great, under whom he held the rank of *magister* [a military or civil post of the highest grade]. Renouncing worldly honor and vanity, he entered the clergy and founded hospitals and hostels, where the sick could obtain medical treatment; the poor, orphans, and widows were fed;



and strangers found lodging. During those days there was an outbreak of leprosy, and the Emperor, to stop its spread, decreed that everyone infected with the disease be drowned.³ Saint Zotikos ransomed the unfortunates from the rulers's servants, and built special hospitals for them outside the city [across the *Golden Horn* waterway in Pera on the Mt. of Olives in Bithynia-Pontus]. Learning this, Constantine was greatly edified. Considering that Zotikos had, like a farsighted trader, invested wisely, he entrusted him with much gold to purchase costly pearls and brilliant jewels for the imperial regalia. The holy presbyter spent everything on paupers, lepers, and other sick folk.

“Before long, the great Constantine died. His son Constantius [II (AD 337-361)], an Arian heretic and persecutor of the Orthodox, succeeded him on the throne. Constantius hated Zotikos for his devotion to the true faith. Presently, the new Emperor demanded to see the gems purchased at great expense to the imperial treasury. The saint took him to visit the hospitals, and displaying the lepers and other sick, explained, “These are living jewels and the most beautiful of pearls. At a great price and with much labor I have collected them, to aid you in saving your soul.”

“Constantius became infuriated with the saint and had him tied to the tails of a pair of unbroken mules. The animals dragged him over stony paths and fields, bruising and tearing his flesh. While the mules were being driven down a mountain, Zotikos' body was shattered so badly he surrendered his soul into the hands of the Lord. A spring appeared at the place where he breathed his last. Its pure, sweet water proved effective in curing every disease. Those healed by it praised the Lord's favorite and the one God, glorified in Trinity and worshipped by all forever. Amen.”⁴

[From a 2nd life of St. Zotikos] “When Constantius, a partisan of the Arian heresy, came to the throne on the death of his father (337), he began to persecute the defenders of Orthodoxy. Some courtiers, envious of the privileges which Zotikos had enjoyed in the preceding reign, took the opportunity of accusing him to the Emperor of holding subversive opinions, and of wasting public money on the care of lepers. Their calumnies grew all the louder when, in addition to leprosy, a dreadful famine threatened New Rome for, according to them, Zotikos was to blame for both these evils. Without waiting for Constantius' response, Saint Zotikos appeared at court splendidly attired, and offered to take the Emperor to view the jewels he had purchased on his behalf.

“When they reached the foot of the hill, Constantius was amazed to see a multitude of lepers coming toward him in orderly procession, holding burning tapers and led by his own daughter, whom Zotikos had saved from drowning when she had fallen sick of the disease. ‘Sire’, the Saint said, in

response to the Emperor's enquiry, ‘the people coming towards you are the precious stones and brilliant pearls that give lustre to the diadem of the heavenly Kingdom which you will inherit by their prayers. I decided to buy them in the interests of the salvation of your soul.’

“Devoid of all paternal affection, the pitiless tyrant was far from pleased: flying into a rage, he ordered his soldiers to seize Zotikos and have him dragged behind wild mules until his body was torn to pieces. Goaded by the executioners, the mules rushed downhill dragging the Saint over rocks and through brambles and brushwood. Zotikos lost his right eye as they passed the Church of St. Panteleimon, and a spring of healing waters immediately welled up at the spot. Then retracing their course, the mules rushed up the hill and stood stock still at the top, as though to venerate the Saint's inanimate body. When the executioners tried to get them moving again, they suddenly spoke like Balaam's ass, (Num. 22:28-30), and declared that the Martyr must be buried on the hill.

“Accordingly, repenting of what he had done, the astounded Emperor had the body of the holy Martyr buried with honour on the hilltop. And at the same place, he ordered the building of a hospital for lepers, where for centuries these unfortunates were to receive the best treatment that human skill could provide, and where many of them were miraculously healed through the prayer of Saint Zotikos, who is venerated as the institutor of the charitable foundations of the Queen of Cities.”⁵

Some academic historians have considered St. Zotikos to have been an Arian. But if that were true he would not have been honored as a saint by the Orthodox Church nor murdered by Emperor Constantius II “for his devotion to the true faith.” Moreover, he was defended by St. Gregory Nazianzos in his *Letter 77*⁶ to fellow hierarch Theodore the Archbishop of Tyana⁷ in Cappadocia.

In St. Zotikos we see a devoted urban hieromonk, full of Christian love for his fellow man, single-handedly rescuing the poor, orphans, and especially lepers from an initially unsympathetic local government. He proceeded to not only found a famous orphanage within the walls of the capital which included a hospital and accommodations for veterans, the elderly, and exiled foreign monks, but he also founded the first haven for those afflicted with leprosy and received some royal support from St. Constantine for a short time. However, it was only after Zotikos'


3. There are three different versions of the Life of St. Zotikos, none dating from before the 11th century AD. Georges Sidéris has argued from *Vita Zotici II* that it was the local city officials, out of fear of contagion, who issued community decisions to rid the Imperial city of lepers and not an imperial order from the emperor St. Constantine, in Miller TS and Nesbitt JW, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N, 2014, p. 31 and footnotes 14,15, p. 199.

4. St. Demetrius of Rostov, *The Great Collection of the Lives of the Saints, Vol. IV: December*, Chrysostom Press, House Springs, MO, 2000, pp. 609-610, (Translator: Fr. Thomas Marretta, GOC-K.)

5. *December 31: Memory of Saint Zoticus, Cherisher of the Poor and Servant of Lepers*, Hieromonk Makarios of Simonos Petra, *The Synaxarion: The Lives of the Saints of the Orthodox Church, Volume Two, November, December*, Holy Convent of the Annunciation of Our Lady, Ormylia, Greece, 1999, pp. 607-608.

6. Miller TS and Nesbitt JW, pp. 78, 207 (footnote 29). The letter referenced, *Letter 77*, is not found in *NPNF*.

7. Storin BK, in *The Letter Collection of Gregory of Nazianzos*, in *Late Antique Letter Collections: A Critical Introduction and Reference Guide*, University of California Press, Oakland, CA2017) <https://www.academia.edu/34830493> (It only lists the addressee.)



murder and burial that the well-known *Zotikos Leprosarium* was built by the Emperor Constantius II.

THE SPREAD OF LEPROSY TO CAPPADOCIA

By the second half of the 4th century the *Elephant Disease* had spread further east through the province of Bithynia-Pontus, then moved south and inland and arrived in Cappadocia, the provincial home of St. Basil the Great, St. Gregory the Theologian, and St. Gregory of Nyssa, where it demanded their attention.

It was through these three great Cappadocian Fathers that the response of the Empire and its citizens to leprosy began to change dramatically! In Caesarea St. Basil the Great used his rhetorical skills, personal wealth, family and imperial connections, as well as his training in medicine to slowly build and organize the first full-fledged hospital campus with paid doctors, nurses, and support staff, to benefit his home community. This “hospital” eventually provided medical care, lodging, job training, and other services for the poor, the elderly, and victims of the *Elephant Disease*.

ST. BASIL THE GREAT OF CAESAREA AND HIS HOSPITAL

St. Basil of Caesarea (AD 330-379), a consummate monk and one of the great Fathers of the Church, was also an icon of compassion and mercy.

He was born into a Christian family from Cappadocia (eastern Turkey). His maternal grandfather suffered a martyr’s death during the persecutions under the Emperor Diocletian (AD 303–305). Nevertheless, his family commanded both wealth and prestige. His father owned multiple properties in several cities and served as a professor of oratory (public speaking), the most prestigious academic position in Greco-Roman society. As a result Basil received the best education possible in Caesarea and then in Constantinople. He subsequently spent six more years at the Academy in Athens studying philosophy, mathematics, and medicine. It was during this latter time in Athens, that he found the beauty and wisdom of the Holy Scriptures drawing him to Christ and the Church:

“Much time had I spent in vanity, and had wasted nearly all my youth in the vain labour which I underwent in acquiring the wisdom made foolish by God. Then once upon a time, like a man roused from deep sleep, I turned my eyes to the marvelous light of the truth of the Gospel, and I perceived the uselessness of *the wisdom of the princes of this world, that come to naught*, I wept many tears over my miserable life and I prayed that guidance might be vouchsafed me to admit me to the doctrines of true religion. First of all was I minded to make some mending of my ways, long perverted as they were by my intimacy with wicked men. Then I read the Gospel, and I saw there that a great means of reaching perfection was the selling of one’s goods, the sharing them with the poor, the

giving up of all care for this life, and the refusal to allow the soul to be turned by any sympathy to things of earth. And I prayed that I might find some one of the brethren who had chosen this way of life, that with him I might cross life’s short and troubled strait. And many did I find in Alexandria, and many in the rest of Egypt, and others in Palestine, and in Coele⁸, Syria, and in Mesopotamia. I admired their continence in living, and their endurance in toil; I was amazed at their persistency in prayer, and at their triumphing over sleep; subdued by no natural necessity, ever keeping their souls’ purpose high and free, in hunger, in thirst, in cold, in nakedness, they never yielded to the body; they were never willing to waste attention on it; always, as though living in a flesh that was not theirs, they shewed in very deed what it is to sojourn for a while in this life, and what to have one’s citizenship and home in heaven. All this moved my admiration. I called these men’s lives blessed, in that they did in deed shew that they *bear about in their body the dying of Jesus.*”⁹

The young Basil then decided to pursue that same type of ascetic monasticism. He returned home to Cappadocia where he established his own monastic community in the Pontic mountains, north of Caesarea.

But the God-given grace that poured into St. Basil would not allow him to remain hidden from the world for very long. In AD 365 he was ordained a priest and five years later he was elected bishop. This latest position afforded him an even greater opportunity to develop a new type of urban monastery — one focused not only on the salvation of his disciples, but one also focused on the direct care of the sick and poor in Caesarea.

STATUS OF THE POOR IN ANCIENT ROMAN SOCIETY


Contemporary historian Peter Brown of Princeton University, a specialist in the history of late antiquity, has noted that the poor were not simply pushed to the outskirts of the city and excluded from civic life, but were essentially invisible in the ancient world. Little or no thought was given to them at all. The wealthy would contribute large sums of money for public works projects in the city and might occasionally buy grain to be distributed to average citizens. But taking care of the indigent and homeless poor was not part of their traditional largesse.¹⁰

Historically, it generally fell to the Christians to minister to the Empire’s indigent sick and needy. They adopted infants left to die at the garbage dumps; they supported widows and orphans; they purchased the freedom of slaves; and they ministered to those

8. A region corresponding to the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon.

9. St. Basil the Great, Archbishop of Caesarea, *Letter CCXXIII, Against Eustathius of Sebasteia, NPNE, 2nd Series, Vol. 8, ¶2, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, MA, 1994, p. 263.*

10. Baker W, *Basil’s Hospital*, at <http://wesleybaker.blogspot.com/2013/02/basils-hospital.html>



condemned to work in the mines. Moreover, they stunned their pagan neighbors, for example, when they attended the sick in cities ravaged by the *Antonine Plague*¹¹ of AD 165-190 and the *Cyprian Plague*¹² of AD 250-270 leading many to turn to Christianity from paganism. [Note: The medical identity of both of these plagues remain shrouded in mystery to this day!]

THE GREAT FAMINE OF AD 368 IN CAPPADOCIA

A critical moment early in St. Basil's priestly ministry which greatly increased the respect in which he was held and the influence he was able to exert among the authorities and general populace began with the severe famine which began in AD 368. Like another St. Joseph the All-comely of Egypt, St. Basil provided food for the hungry:

"35. He indeed could neither rain bread from heaven by prayer, to nourish an escaped people in the wilderness, nor supply fountains of food without cost from the depth of vessels which are filled by being emptied, and so, by an amazing return for her hospitality, support one who supported him; nor feed thousands of men with five loaves whose very fragments were a further supply for many tables. These were the works of Moses and Elijah, and my God, from Whom they too derived their power. Perhaps also they were characteristic of their time and its circumstances: since signs are for unbelievers, not for those who believe. But he did devise and execute with the same faith things which correspond to them, and tend in the same direction. For by his word and advice he opened the stores of those who possessed them, and so, according to the Scripture dealt food to the hungry, and satisfied the poor with bread, and fed them in the time of dearth, and filled the hungry souls with good things. And in what way? for this is no slight addition to his praise. He gathered together the victims of the famine with some who were but slightly recovering from it, men and women, infants, old men, every age which was in distress, and obtaining contributions of all sorts of food which can relieve famine, set before them basins of soup and such meat as was found preserved among us, on which the poor live. Then, imitating the ministry of Christ, Who, girded with a towel, did not disdain to wash the disciples' feet, using for this purpose the aid of his own servants, and also of his fellow servants, he attended to the bodies and souls of those who needed it, combining personal respect with the supply of their necessity, and so giving them a double relief."¹³

Thus by example and applying his great rhetorical skills St. Basil continuously exhorted his flock to fulfill their Christian duty by putting Christ's teachings into action:

11. Horgan J, *Antonine Plague, Ancient History Encyclopedia*, https://www.ancient.eu/Antonine_Plague/.

12. Horgan J, *The Plague of Cyprian, 250-270 CE, Ancient History Encyclopedia*, <https://www.ancient.eu/article/992/plague-of-cyprian-250-270-ce/>.

13. St. Gregory of Nazianzen, *Funeral Oration on the Great St. Basil, Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia*, ¶ 35, *NPNF, 2nd Series*, Vol. 7, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, MA, 1994, p. 407.

"Naked did you not drop from the womb? Shall you not return again naked to the earth? Where have the things you now possess come from? If you say they just spontaneously appeared, then you are an atheist, not acknowledging the Creator, nor showing any gratitude towards the one who gave them. But if you say that they are from God, declare to us the reason why you received them. Is God unjust, who divided to us the things of this life unequally? Why are you wealthy while that other man is poor? Is it, perhaps, in order that you may receive wages for kindheartedness and faithful stewardship, and in order that he may be honored with great prizes for his endurance? But, as for you, when you hoard all these things in the insatiable bosom of greed, do you suppose you do no wrong in cheating so many people? Who is a man of greed? Someone who does not rest content with what is sufficient. Who is a cheater? Someone who takes away what belongs to others. And are you not a man of greed? are you not a cheater? taking those things which you received for the sake of stewardship, and making them your very own? Now, someone who takes a man who is clothed and renders him naked would be termed a robber; but when someone fails to clothe the naked, while he is able to do this, is such a man deserving of any other appellation? The bread which you hold back belongs to the hungry; the coat, which you guard in your locked storage-chests, belongs to the naked; the footwear mouldering in your closet belongs to those without shoes. The silver that you keep hidden in a safe place belongs to the one in need. Thus, however many are those whom you could have provided for, so many are those whom you wrong."¹⁴


He was especially successful in persuading the wealthy to support his social projects for the poor. For example:

"But how do you make use of money? By dressing in expensive clothing? Won't two yards of tunic suffice you, and the covering of one coat satisfy all your need of clothes? But is it for food's sake that you have such a demand for wealth? One bread-loaf is enough to fill a belly. Why are you sad, then? What have you been deprived of? The status that comes from wealth? But if you would stop seeking earthly status, you should then find the true, resplendent kind that would conduct you into the kingdom of heaven. But what you love is simply to possess wealth, even if you derive no help from it. Now everyone knows that an obsession for useless things is mindless. Just so, what I am going to say should seem to you no greater paradox; and it is utterly, absolutely true. When wealth is dispersed, in the way the Lord advises, it naturally stays put; but when held back it is transferred to another. If you hoard it, you won't keep it; if you scatter, you won't lose. For (says the scripture), "He has dispersed, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever" (Ps 112:9 [KJV]).¹⁵

In reality St. Basil caused a "major social revolution ... that challenged directly the hypocrisy, corruption, and uncontrolled self-interest" of fourth-century

14. *St. Basil on Stealing from the Poor*, in Migne JP, *PG*, 31, 276B – 277A, §7, trans. Peter Gilbert, <https://bekkos.wordpress.com/2009/10/08/st-basil-on-stealing-from-the-poor/>.

15. Basil of Caesarea, *Homily to the Rich*, in Migne, JP, *PG*, 31 277C-304C, trans. Peter Gilbert, <https://bekkos.wordpress.com/st-basils-sermon-to-the-rich/>



Caesarea. And this revolution, which included the founding of the world's first hospital, was based on his Christian understanding of love, of sharing one's wealth with the poor, particularly during times of crisis.¹⁶

No better witness to St. Basil and his new urban monastery-hospital complex were the praises of his close friend and fellow hierarch St. Gregory the Theologian, Bishop of Nazianzos (AD 329-390) delivered in his marvelous *Funeral Oration* in AD 379:

EXCERPTS FROM ST. GREGORY NAZIANZOS' "FUNERAL ORATION" ON SAINT BASIL THE GREAT AND HIS BASILIAD

"63. What more? A noble thing is philanthropy, and the support of the poor, and the assistance of human weakness. Go forth a little way from the city, and behold the new city,¹⁶ the storehouse of piety, the common treasury of the wealthy, in which the superfluities of their wealth, aye, and even their necessities, are stored, in consequence of his exhortations, freed from the power of the moth, no longer gladdening the eyes of the thief, and escaping both the emulation of envy, and the corruption of time: where disease is regarded in a religious light, and disaster is thought a blessing, and sympathy is put to the test. Why should I compare with this work Thebes of the seven portals, and the Egyptian Thebes, and the walls of Babylon, and the Carian tomb of Mausolus, and the Pyramids, and the bronze without weight of the Colossus, or the size and beauty of shrines that are no more, and all the other objects of men's wonder, and historic record, from which their founders gained no advantage, except a slight meed¹⁷ of fame. My subject is the most wonderful of all, the short road to salvation, the easiest ascent to heaven. There is no longer before our eyes that terrible and piteous spectacle of men who are *living corpses* [lepers], 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: they are no longer brought before us at our gatherings and meetings, in our common intercourse and union, no longer the objects of hatred, instead of pity on account of their disease; composers of piteous songs, if any of them have their voice still left to them. Why should I try to express in tragic style all our experiences, when no language can be adequate to their hard lot? He however it was, who took the lead in pressing upon those who were men, that they ought not to despise their fellowmen, nor to dishonor Christ, the one Head of all, by their inhuman treatment of them; but to use the misfortunes of others as an opportunity of firmly establishing their own lot, and to lend to God that mercy of which they stand in need at His hands. He did not therefore disdain to honor with his lips this disease, noble and of noble ancestry and brilliant reputation though he was, but saluted them as brethren, not, as some might suppose, from vainglory, (for who was so far removed from this feeling?) but taking the lead in approaching to tend them, as a consequence of his philosophy, and so giving not only a speaking, but also a silent, instruction. The effect produced is to be seen not only

in the city, but in the country and beyond, and even the leaders of society have vied with one another in their philanthropy and magnanimity towards them. Others have had their cooks, and splendid tables, and the 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.

"64. As to all this, what will be said by those who charge him with pride and haughtiness? Severe critics they are of such conduct, applying to him, whose life was a standard, those who were not standards at all. Is it possible that he who kissed the lepers, and humiliated himself to such a degree, could treat haughtily those who were in health: and, while wasting his flesh by abstinence, puff out his soul with empty arrogance? Is it possible to condemn the Pharisee, and expound the debasing effect of haughtiness, to know Christ, Who condescended to the form of a slave, and ate with publicans, and washed the disciples' feet, and did not disdain the cross, in order to nail my sin to it: and, more incredible still, to see God crucified, aye, along with robbers also, and derided by the passers by, impassible, and beyond the reach of suffering as He is; and yet, as his slanderers imagine, soar himself above the clouds, and think that nothing can be on an equality with him. Nay, what they term pride is, I fancy, the firmness and steadfastness and stability of his character. Such persons would readily, it seems to me, call bravery rashness, and the circumspect a coward, and the temperate misanthropic, and the just illiberal. For indeed this philosophic axiom is excellent, which says that the vices are settled close to the virtues, and are, in some sense, their next-door neighbors: and it is most easy, for those whose training in such subjects has been defective, to mistake a man for what he is not. For who honored virtue and castigated vice more than he, or showed himself more kind to the upright, more severe to the wrong doers? His very smile often amounted to praise, his silence to rebuke, racking the evil in the secret conscience. And if a man have not been a chatterer, and jester, and gossip, nor a general favorite, because of having pleased others by becoming all things to all men, what of that? Is he not in the eyes of sensible men worthy of praise rather than of blame? Unless it is a fault in the lion that he is terrible and royal, and does not look like an ape, and that his spring is noble, and is valued for its wonderfulness: while stage-players ought to win our admiration for their pleasant and philanthropic characters, because they please the vulgar, and raise a laugh by their sounding slaps in the face. And if this indeed be our object, who was so pleasant when you met him, as I know, who have had the longest experience? Who was more kindly in his stories, more refined in his wit, more tender in his rebukes? His reproofs gave rise to no arrogance, his relaxation to no dissipation, but avoiding excess in either, he made use of both in reason and season, according to the rules of Solomon, who assigns to every business a season."¹⁸


ST. BASIL THE GREAT'S "BASILIAD"

St. Gregory the Theologian praised St. Basil for many things, but especially for giving Caesarea the wonderful institution of mercy which St. Gregory called the *Basiliad* (or *Basileias*, *Basileiados*) in honor of his

16. Heyne T, *Reconstructing the World's First Hospital*, *Hektoen International Journal*, Spring 2015 at <https://hekint.org/2017/02/24/reconstructing-the-worlds-first-hospital-the-basiliad/>

17. *Archaic* (Old English): reward or recompense

18. St. Gregory of Nazianzen, *Ibid.*, ¶ 63-64, p. 416.



friend. His monastic institution created the first true hospital not only because it housed patients whose diseases were studied and treated within its confines, but also because it employed the physicians and nurses who treated these patients within its edifice.¹⁹ Moreover, we see immediately that Basil's "new city" offered an opportunity for spiritual and heavenly blessings through almsgiving as well as hands-on ministry to the most needy in society including those most wretched souls afflicted with the dreaded *Elephant Disease*. Here they were openly welcomed. Here they found shelter. Here they were accorded respect. Here they also found a community with a church and priests to minister to their profound spiritual needs. Even though contemporary Greek medical practice could provide no real cure for them, St. Basil felt they still deserved good care. So here they were treated by well trained sympathetic caregivers who provided them with the best medical care available including regular baths and wound care to ameliorate their sufferings.

However, to accomplish all of this St. Basil also needed to convince his fellow Christians that medical science was not opposed to God's will but was truly a gift from Him. From his university studies in Athens, St. Basil knew that from Hippocrates to Galen, Greek physicians had developed a sophisticated science of health based on observation, anatomical studies, and pharmacological experiments. But the one stumbling block Greek medicine had for many Christians was its historical association with the cult of Asclepius, the pagan god of healing who was symbolized by a snake. The devotees of Asclepius even hailed their god as "savior", the same title Christians gave to Christ.

Nevertheless, undaunted and with his rhetorical skills on full display, Basil countered such reservations head-on by proclaiming that medicine was a gift from God according to the Prophet Jeremiah:

"Is there no balm in Galaad [Gilead]? or is there no physician there? Why then has not the healing of the daughter of my people taken place?" (Jeremiah 8:22 LXX Brenton)

"... Basil argued that God gave the exiled Adam and Eve agriculture to feed their families, weaving to clothe their nakedness, and the logos of medicine to heal their diseases. For every illness God created a plant, mineral, or sea animal to heal it, and then he gave human beings intelligence to find these remedies.

"When a physician heals with medicines, insisted Basil, we experience a miracle of God's creation no less wonderful than those of the Bible. But he stressed that all healing ultimately comes from God: 'God sometimes cures us ... without visible means when he judges this mode of treatment

beneficial to our souls; and again He wills that we use material remedies for our ills ... to provide an example for the proper care of the soul' ...

"By purifying medicine of pagan associations, Basil removed doubts that bishops or wealthy Christians harbored about supporting institutions that provided medical care. His work both as patron of the *Basiliad* and as a theologian justifying Greek medicine encouraged the foundation of many Christian hospitals throughout the Greek-speaking provinces of the Roman Empire, where thousands found a balm in Gilead indeed."²⁰

However, it wasn't just the Christian faithful who needed convincing about the *Basiliad* and the proper place of Greek medicine in the treatment of leprosy. The Roman Provincial Governor of Cappadocia, Elias, had objections as well. He harbored serious misgivings and deep suspicions about what the Saint was up to. Consequently, in *Letter 94* to Elias, St. Basil defended his vision of a church, offices, and buildings for the medical staff and for the patients:

"Now I should like those who are besieging your impartial ears to be asked what harm the government suffers from me? What depreciation is suffered by any public interests, be they small or great, by my administration of the Churches? Still, possibly, it might be urged that I have done damage to the government by erecting a magnificently appointed church to God, and round it a dwelling house, one liberally assigned to the bishop, and others underneath, allotted to the officers of the Church in order, the use of both being open to you of the magistracy and your escort. But to whom do we do any harm by building a place of entertainment for strangers, both for those who are on a journey and for those who require medical treatment on account of sickness, and so establishing a means of giving these men the comfort they want, physicians, doctors, means of conveyance, and escort? All these men must learn such occupations as are necessary to life and have been found essential to a respectable career; they must also have buildings suitable for their employments, all of which are an honor to the place, and, as their reputation is credited to our governor, confer glory on him. Not indeed that for this reason you were unwillingly induced to accept the responsibility of ruling us, for you alone are sufficient by your high qualities to restore our ruins, to people-deserted districts and turn wildernesses into towns ..."²¹

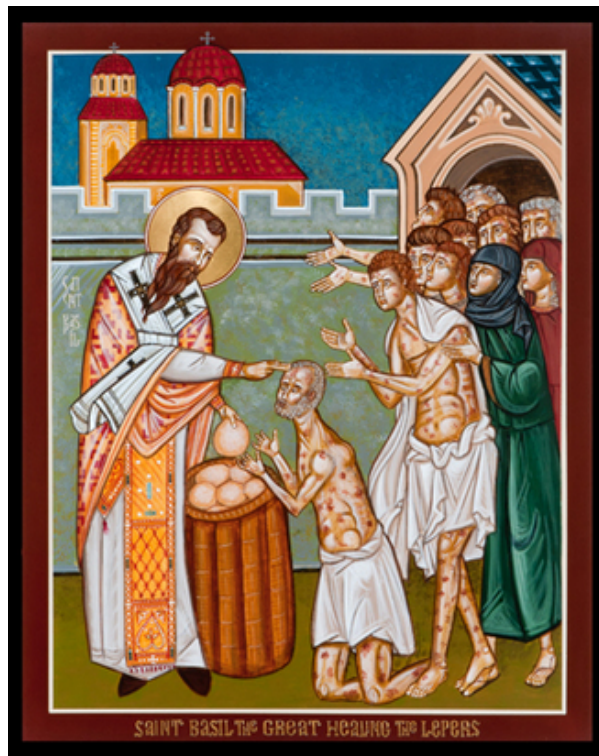
With such counterarguments as these St. Basil prevailed over the governor's objections by showing his hospital complex to be an honor to Caesarea as well as to the governor Elias himself. The idea of a long term live-in institution for the poor, travelers, the seriously ill (and especially lepers), which also provided training and work opportunities, was unprecedented in Roman society up to this time. So Caesarea and Elias would be credited for this great innovation. St. Basil called his

20. *Ibid.*

21. St. Basil the Great, *Letter XCIV, To Elias, Governor of the Province, NPNE, 2nd Series, Vol. 8, ¶2, Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, MA, 1994, p. 179-180.*

19. Miller TS, *Basil's House of Healing, Christian History*, 2011, at <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/basils-house-of-healing>

hospital complex a “πτωχοτροφεῖον”²², a *ptochotropheion*, i.e., a place for the destitute/homeless poor. This was in contrast to the Greek term usually used for a generic charitable house: ξενοδοχεῖον *xenodocheion*, a *guest house for foreigners, pilgrims, strangers*.



ICON OF ST. BASIL THE GREAT MINISTERING TO THE LEPERS

In earlier times physicians typically made house calls and treated patients in their homes. Charitable care for the poor was not organized and consequently left to the charitable hearts of physicians, individual Christians, monasteries and convents.

But St. Basil and his *Basilad* initiated a major shift

22. Greek πτωχοτροφεῖον, a *house for the the poor, for the sick; a hospital*. Πτωχος traditionally designated the destitute poor. “In the Greek texts of the first four centuries AD there are two common words for the poor person, *penes* [πένης, πένητος] and *ptochos* [πτωχός, πτωχοί]. *Ptochos* traditionally designated the destitute beggar who is outside or at the fringes of society, the *street person*, the extreme poor. *Penes*, on the other hand, is used to indicate the individual whose economic resources were minimal but who functioned within society, the *working poor*. The *penetes* differ from the *ptochoi* in that their social ties within the community remain intact: they retain their dwellings, families, and responsibilities, including their debts. *Penes* could also be a derogatory term for anyone forced to engage in manual labor for survival. *Penes* was often used in Christian texts as a generic term for all poor and might either imply the voluntary poverty of the monastic or even, with deliberate irony, the insatiable greed of the rich, *penetes* because they feel lack ... The poor in the New Testament are almost always *ptochoi* ... Basil shows a clear preference in [his poverty] sermons; he uses *ptochos* only to make a point or to explicitly quote another source.” Holman SR, *The Hungry are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2001, pp. 5-6.

in how the poor and lepers were treated by his changing society’s attitudes toward both the destitute poor and lepers, especially attitudes among the wealthy -- by showing them it was their Christian duty, in imitation of Christ, for their own salvation, to support such a ministry to the poor and outcast.

The existence and function of the *Basilad* is confirmed with two of St. Basil’s letters to Bishop Amphilochius, written in AD 373 (three years after St. Basil was ordained as Bishop of Caesarea. The fact that St. Basil was inviting a fellow bishop to visit suggests that his *Basilad* was nearly or already complete:

“Come...that you may also honour with your presence the Church of the Hospital (or *poorhouse*).”²³

“I was lately at Caesarea, in order to learn what was going on there. I was unwilling to remain in the city itself, and betook myself to the neighbouring hospital (or *poorhouse*).”²⁴



ICON OF ST. BASIL BLESSING THOSE COMING TO HIS *BASILAD* FOR CARE.
NOTE: THE BUILDING ON THE LEFT IS LABELED “BASILEIAS.”

“From the dating of the famine [AD 368], it appears that some facility (at least a soup kitchen of sorts) existed in 369. By AD 372 it had professional medical personnel; and by AD 373 it was sufficiently complete that he could invite fellow leaders to visit. We know that this “new city” housed lepers (based on Gregory’s eulogy), as well as other sick, the travelers, and strangers. It was staffed both by professional

23. Basil of Caesarea. *Letter 176: To Amphilochius, Bishop of Iconium*, *NPNF, 2nd Series, Vol. 8*, p. 220.

24. Basil of Caesarea. *Letter 150: To Amphilochius, in the name of Heraclidas*, *ibid.*, *NPNF, 2nd Series, Vol. 8*, pp. 207-209.

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physicians and by clergy in the adjoining church (not unlike later Christian hospitals). And we know, based on Gregory's reference to the "common treasury of the wealthy", that the poor were financed by donations from the rich. ... In sum, the *Basiliad* was an impressive social endeavor.

"But was the *Basiliad* also novel? Was it truly the world's first hospital? Historians have compared the *Basiliad* to other, prior institutions which cared for the sick. For example, the Roman *valetudinaria* and Asclepian Temples predated the *Basiliad* and certainly provided care for the sick. But were they truly hospitals?

"Per Andrew Crislip, a hospital must have three components: inpatient facilities, professional medical caregivers, and care given for free. Scattered throughout the empire, the Roman *valetudinaria* were complexes constructed to treat ill or wounded slaves and soldiers. These *valetudinaria* were financed by either wealthy slave owners or Roman legions, to keep the slaves working or soldiers fighting (respectively). But the facilities did not treat the poor, and they were hardly charitable in nature. Similarly, the Asclepian temples, dedicated to the Greco-Roman god of healing, are sometimes cited as potential predecessors for the *Basiliad*. But the medico-religious services provided in these Asclepian temples were not given for free: sacrifices or donations were expected. Furthermore, the Asclepian temples rarely employed professional physicians. Finally, they did not accept terminal cases: indeed, a patient dying inside of the hospital would have been seen as a ritual impurity.

"Thus, even the often-cited healthcare institutions which predated Basil did not perform the same functions that his *Basiliad* did. It seems that Basil started a new trend: soon after his death, similar Christian hospitals were sprouting up elsewhere in the Roman empire, and they had become commonplace within one century. For these reasons, historians have argued that "the hospital was, in origin and conception, a distinctively Christian institution."²⁵

25. Heyne T, *ibid*.

SERMONS BY ST. GREGORY OF NAZIANZOS AND ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA "ON THE LOVE OF THE POOR"

As we have previously noted biblical leprosy, *tzara'at / lepra* is not a disease but a characteristic mark on the skin of God's displeasure making the one bearing it "unclean" and requiring his isolation from the community. The medical disease of leprosy was originally called *elephantiasis*, or the *Elephant Disease*, but the Greek word *lepra* began being used synonymously with *elephantiasis* in the 4th century AD. Nevertheless, Greek physicians never confused the two. Church Fathers also considered *elephantiasis* a distinctive disease and didn't apply the *Levitical* "social-distancing" and quarantine from the community of biblical *tzara'at/lepra* to patients with *elephantiasis/medical leprosy*. Regardless, there was still great fear of contagion and acquisition of *elephantiasis* from the afflicted on the part of the general public outside of Caesarea because of the lepers' wretched appearances. To help the wider public overcome their fear of this horrific disease, St. Gregory of Nazianzos and St. Gregory of Nyssa delivered extraordinarily effective sermons traditionally titled "περι φιλοπτωχιας" (*On the Love of the Poor*) which will be presented in the following two articles. ❖ ❖ ❖

