

Poverty and Charity in Early Christianity. Some Preliminary Observations*

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Foreword

Please allow me to begin by saying a word which I would like to put as a foreword to any of my papers. I am totally convinced that study of early Christianity is far from being an inquiry into antique objects; it is of vital importance to people who would intend to seriously reflect on what Christianity was in its essence. And evidently, this question is closely related to another one, i.e., what will become of Christianity in the future. For any religion, the period of its beginning has a special importance, and so is also the case with Christianity.

Concerning the subject mentioned in the title of this paper, perhaps some more explanation is not out of place. Now we are in an age of globalization which was accelerated from the 90s of the twentieth century, and the trend of which no one can stop any more. In this globalization, the so-called “developing” countries are now really developing and catching up the so-called “developed” countries, and in particular, countries of great tradition like China and India are emerging in the international community, not only as economic powers, but also as political powers. People in the developed countries (such as Korea and Japan) are now facing multiple challenges coming from these and other developing countries. For instance, we can import less expensive and well-made clothes from these countries, and thus the textile industry in our own countries is becoming less and less viable. The same thing happens in many fields of industry, and its natural result is high rate of unemployment in those fields. And since, theoretically at least, a country under non-socialist regime is not structured so as to share its wealth among its people, there arises necessarily polarization of the society between the rich and the poor. Of course, the problem of polarization between the rich and the poor exists also in developing countries, but it is much more serious in developed countries, because whereas developing

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countries can expect the size of economy to grow substantially, developed countries, by definition, cannot have such prospect. In any case, the cause of polarization of the society in recent years can be new, but the result is always the same: in a given society there are the rich on the one hand, and the poor on the other.

Nowadays, problems of this kind are dealt with mainly by the government; people regard the government as primarily responsible for these problems which are classified as the problems of social security or social welfare. However, this notion of social security or social welfare is fairly new, and evidently mankind had lived many centuries (or even millennia) without such notion. From a historical perspective, it is a fairly recent phenomenon that the government is seen as a primary actor in taking care of the poor.

From what has been said above, one of the points I would like to make must be already clear. If I am not mistaken, before the government it was the church, at least in Christendom, that primarily took care of the poor. It is here, however, that my problem starts.

How did the church, or (to be more specific) the early church, care for the poor? The activities of the primitive church, on the one hand, are well known from the New Testament, especially from the Acts and some Pauline epistles. For some years, on the other, I have studied some aspects of Christian monasticism in the fourth century¹, and I understand that not only the idea of voluntary poverty was cherished by the monks of the period, but also that the monks cared for the poor through almsgiving etc. However, for the period between these two, i.e., the primitive church and early Christian monasticism, I am afraid that our knowledge is rather vague.

Thus in the first part of this paper, a survey will be made about how the sources say of the charity as conceived and carried out by the early church². By the early church the period up to the rise of Constantine the Great is meant, because the period later than that is now covered, in reaction to the sketch published by the famous historian Peter Brown³, by a thorough investigation of the problem of poverty made by the Australian research project team⁴. On the other hand, the evidence of the New Testament will not be dealt with, because New Testament studies are a notorious field where too many discussions are made compared with the scarcity of the evidence.

The second part of this paper will be concerned with problems related to the terms “deacon (diakonos)”, “diakonia” and the like. How were the terms used in the early church, especially in relation to its activity of charity? For various practical reasons, only one specific problem

1 Published as TODA S., *Kirisuto-kyō shūdō-sei-no seiritsu (The Making of Christian Monasticism)*, Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 2008 (in Japanese).

2 A survey of non-Christian sources on the theme of charity is conveniently provided by H. BOLKESTEIN, *Wohltätigkeit und Armenpflege im vorchristlichen Altertum*, Utrecht: A. Oosthoek, 1939.

3 P. BROWN, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire*, Hanover: University Press of New England, 2002.

4 P. ALLEN, B. NEIL & W. MAYER, *Preaching Poverty in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Realities (Arbeiten zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte, 28)*, Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2009.

will be treated.

1. *Charity in the early church*⁵

(1) Church fathers

Before beginning the survey one thing should be noted. If we put aside recent studies on the topic, encouraged notably by the aforementioned monograph of Peter Brown, it seems that researches on charity in the early church have been conducted mainly in relation to the contemporary church's activity of charity; from the history of early Christianity people sought to draw lessons and inspirations applicable to actual practical problems which faced them.

In Clement of Rome one sees only some general exhortations to charity⁶: "Let the strong care for the weak and let the weak reverence the strong. Let the rich man bestow help on the poor and let the poor give thanks to God, that He gave him one to supply his needs". The so-called *second Epistle of Clement* is clearer about the importance of almsgiving, although its authenticity is now generally denied: "Almsgiving is therefore good as penitence for sin; fasting is better than prayer, but the giving of alms is better than both; love 'covers a multitude of sins', and prayer from a good conscience rescues from death. Blessed is every man who is found full of these things; for almsgiving lightens sin"⁷.

From the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the following passages are worthy of mention: "Thou shalt share all things with thy neighbour and shall not say that they are thy own property; for if you are sharers in that which is incorruptible, how much more in that which is corruptible?"⁸, and "Thou shalt not hesitate to give, and when thou givest thou shalt not grumble, but thou shalt know who is the good paymaster of the reward"⁹.

The *Shepherd of Hermas* contains an interesting chapter related to the problem of poverty and charity¹⁰: "While I was walking in the country I noticed an elm and a vine, and was considering them and their fruits, when the shepherd appeared to me and said: ... 'This vine ... bears fruit, but the elm is a sterile tree. But this vine, if it do not grow upon the elm, cannot bear much fruit. ... When ... the vine is attached to the elm, it bears fruit from itself and from the elm. ... This parable, therefore, applies to the servants of God, to the poor and the rich'.

5 For the following survey I am heavily indebted to various earlier (sometimes very old) works on the subject, especially W. LIESE, *Geschichte der Caritas*, 2 vols., Freiburg i. Br.: Caritasverlag, 1922.

6 Clemens, *Epistula ad Corinthos*, ch. XXXVIII: K. LAKE (transl.), *Apostolic Fathers*, I (Loeb), p. 73.

7 Ps.-Clemens, *Epistula altera ad Corinthos*, ch. XVI: *ibid.*, p. 155. If its date "the half century between 120 and 170 A.D." as the period "chosen by the general opinion of the best critics" (LAKE, p. 127), can be accepted, this document can still be regarded as a witness of the early church on the problem of charity.

8 *Epistula Barnabae*, ch. XIX: *ibid.*, p. 405. LIESE, *op. cit.*, p. 56, which quotes this passage, hastily adds that it is clear that the author of the *Epistle* does not deny proprietary rights, because just before the passage in question he affirmatively mentions the tenth commandment.

9 *Epistula Barnabae*, ch. XIX: *ibid.*, p. 405.

10 *Pastor Hermae*, Sim. ch. II: K. LAKE (transl.), *Apostolic Fathers*, II (Loeb), pp. 143-147.

‘How, sir?’ said I, ‘let me know’. ‘Listen’, said he. ‘The rich man has much wealth, but he is poor as touching the Lord, being busied about his riches, and his intercession and confession towards the Lord is very small But when the rich man rests upon the poor, and gives him what he needs, he believes that what he does to the poor man can find a reward with God, because the poor is rich in intercession and confession, and his intercession has great power with God. The rich man, therefore, helps the poor in all things without doubting. But the poor man, being helped by the rich, makes intercession to God, giving Him thanks, for him who gave to him, and the rich man is still zealous for the poor man, that he fail not in his life, for he knows that the intercession of the poor is acceptable and rich toward the Lord. Therefore the two together complete the work, for the poor works in the intercession in which he is rich, which he received from the Lord: this he pays to the Lord who helps him. And the rich man likewise provides the poor, without hesitating, with the wealth which he received from the Lord; and this work is great and acceptable with God, because he has understanding in his wealth, and has wrought for the poor man from the gifts of the Lord, and fulfilled his ministry rightly. ... Blessed are they who are wealthy and understand that their riches are from the Lord, for he who understands this will also be able to do some good service’.

Another passage of the same work can be of importance to today’s actual situations around us, especially for us in Japan where the rate of suicide has been quite high during these years¹¹: “Say to all men who are able to do right, that they cease not; the exercise of good deeds is profitable to them. But I say that every man ought to be taken out from distress, for he who is destitute and suffers distress in his daily life is in great anguish and necessity. Whoever therefore rescues the soul of such a man from necessity gains great joy for himself. ... For many bring death on themselves by reason of such calamities when they cannot bear them. Whoever therefore knows the distress of such a man, and does not rescue him, incurs great sin and becomes guilty of his blood”.

Polycarp of Smyrna, writing to the Philippians, says¹²: “When you can do good defer it not, ‘for almsgiving sets free from death’.”

To come next to the period of the apologists, Justin Martyr gives in one passage a description of how the church service was performed on Sunday, and in it are mentioned charitable actions¹³: “... The wealthy among us help the needy; and we always keep together; and for all things wherewith we are supplied, we bless the Maker of all through His Son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Ghost. And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president

11 *Pastor Hermae*, Sim. ch. x: K. LAKE (transl.), *Apostolic Fathers*, II (Loeb), pp. 303-305.

12 Polycarpus, *Epistula ad Philippenses*, ch. x: K. LAKE (transl.), *Apostolic Fathers*, I (Loeb), p. 295. The quoted passage (‘for almsgiving ...’) is actually a citation of Tobit 12:9.

13 Justinus, *Apologia*, ch. LXVII: A. ROBERTS et al. (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1913, p. 186.

verbally instructs, and exhorts to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and, as we before said, when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president in like manner offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen; and there is a distribution to each, and a participation of that over which thanks have been given, and to those who are absent a portion is sent by the deacons. And they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president, who succours the orphans and widows, and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want, and those who are in bonds, and the strangers sojourning among us, and in a word takes care of all who are in need”.

Although the *Epistle to Diognetus* is not a work of any known apologist, it can be mentioned here because of its usual dating (ranging from the latter half of the second century to the third century). In a language reminiscent of that used by the apostle Paul in II Corinthians (ch. 6), the author describes Christians¹⁴: “They love all men and are persecuted by all men. They are unknown and they are condemned. They are put to death and they gain life. ‘They are poor and make many rich’; they lack all things and have all things in abundance” etc. Later the author puts forward his Christian ideal in a more straightforward manner¹⁵: “For happiness consists not in domination over neighbours, nor in wishing to have more than the weak, nor in wealth, and power to compel those who are poorer, nor can anyone be an imitator of God in doing these things, but these things are outside His majesty. But whoever takes up the burden of his neighbour, and wishes to help another, who is worse off in that in which he is the stronger, and by ministering to those in need the things which he has received and holds from God becomes a god to those who receive them, – this man is an imitator of God”.

From the end of the second century onward, we have much more information than before concerning the problem of charity in early Christianity. Among the Greek fathers it is Clement of Alexandria who provides us with detailed accounts on the subject by his *Quis dives salvetur*, a treatise specially dedicated to the problem of the rich in the church. According to Clement, by saying to the rich (young) man “Sell thy possessions” Jesus does not exhort him to “abandon his property; but bids him banish from his soul his notions about wealth, his excitement and morbid feeling about it, the anxieties, which are the thorns of existence, which choke the seed of life”¹⁶. “Riches, then, which benefit also our neighbours, are not to be thrown away. For they are possessions, inasmuch as they are possessed, and goods, inasmuch as they are useful and provided by God for the use of men; and they lie to our hand, and are put under our power, as material and instruments which are for good use to those who know the instrument. ... So let no man destroy wealth, rather than the passions of the soul The renunciation, then,

14 *Epistula ad Diognetum*, ch. v: K. LAKE (transl.), *Apostolic Fathers*, II (Loeb), p. 361.

15 *Epistula ad Diognetum*, ch. x: K. LAKE (transl.), *Apostolic Fathers*, II (Loeb), p. 373.

16 Clemens Alexandrinus, *Quis dives salvetur*, ch. xi: A. ROBERTS et al. (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1913, p. 594.

and selling of all possessions, is to be understood as spoken of the passions of the soul”¹⁷. As is evident from what Antony the Great and Francis of Assisi later did, this spiritualizing interpretation of Clement is not necessarily followed by the entire church. However, in the church it apparently got the upper hand on the literal interpretation; the acts of Antony and Francis will remain heroic.

Having presented such an interpretation, Clement exhorts passionately to do almsgiving. For instance, he says “See then, first, that He has not commanded you to be solicited or to wait to be importuned, but yourself to seek those who are to be benefited and are worthy disciples of the Saviour. Excellent, accordingly, also is the apostle’s saying, ‘For the Lord loveth a cheerful giver’, who delights in giving, and spares not, sowing so that he may also thus reap, without murmuring, and disputing, and regret, and communicating, which is pure beneficence”¹⁸. Clement also says: “One purchases immortality for money; and, by giving the perishing things of the world, receives in exchange for these an eternal mansion in the heavens! Sail to this mart, if you are wise, O rich man! If need be, sail round the whole world. Spare not perils and toils, that you may purchase here the heavenly kingdom”¹⁹.

It is precisely to the subject of charity that one of Cyprian’s writings, *De opere et eleemosynis*, is devoted. As the leader of the church in Carthage, Cyprian exhorts people to do almsgiving, adducing various biblical passages: “The Holy Spirit speaks in the sacred Scriptures, and says, ‘By almsgiving and faith sins are purged’. ... Moreover, He says again, ‘As water extinguisheth fire, so almsgiving quencheth sin’. ... The Lord teaches this also in the Gospel. For when the disciples were pointed out, as eating and not first washing their hands, He replied and said, ‘He that made that which is within, made also that which is without. But give alms, and behold all things are clean unto you’ ”²⁰. He adds: “The Holy Spirit speaks by Solomon, and says, ‘He that giveth unto the poor shall never lack, but he that turneth away his eye shall be in great poverty’, showing that the merciful and those who do good works cannot want, but rather that the sparing and barren hereafter come to want”²¹.

According to Lactantius, a contemporary of Constantine the Great, whether one is rich or poor is not important among Christians, and people in the church address themselves as brothers in an egalitarian manner. And charity is mentioned in this context²²: “Since we measure all human things not by the body, but by the spirit, although the condition of bodies is different, yet we have no servants, but we both regard and speak of them as brothers in

17 *Quis dives salvetur*, ch. XIV: *ibid.*, p. 595.

18 *Quis dives salvetur*, ch. XXXI: *ibid.*, p. 600

19 *Quis dives salvetur*, ch. XXXII: *ibid.*, p. 600.

20 Cyprianus, *De opere et eleemosynis*, ch. II: A. ROBERTS et al. (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1919, p. 476. The passages quoted are from Prov. 16:6, Eccclus. 3:30 and Luke 11:41 respectively.

21 *De opere et eleemosynis*, ch. IX: *ibid.*, p. 478. Here Cyprian quotes Prov. 28:27.

22 Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones*, V, ch. XVI: A. ROBERTS et al. (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1913, p. 151.

spirit, in religion as fellow-servants. Riches also do not render men illustrious, except that they are able to make them more conspicuous by good works. For men are rich, not because they possess riches, but because they employ them on works of justice; and they who seem to be poor, on this account are rich, because they are not in want, and desire nothing²³.

So much for Christian ideals on poverty and charity, since the church fathers seem to represent less the average thought of Christians of the period than idealistic (if not to say radical) tendencies in early Christianity. To sum up various passages quoted above, it seems that, throughout the period in question, the ideal of the church is more or less the same: people, especially the rich, are exhorted to do almsgiving. As to the question how the church sees the poverty, sometimes one finds the notion that the poor are rich in spiritual matters (e.g. intercession), but sometimes the plight of poverty is openly described.

(2) Other documents

We expect to find more down-to-earth descriptions of the situations in the documents related to the administration of the church.

In *Didache*, we find only some normative passages without any allusion to the reality of the church²³: “Be not one who stretches out his hands to receive, but shuts them when it comes to giving”, “Thou shalt not hesitate to give, nor shalt thou grumble when thou givest, for thou shalt know who is the good Paymaster of the reward”, and “Thou shalt not turn away the needy, but shalt share everything with thy brother, and shalt not say that it is thine own, for if you are sharers in the imperishable, how much more in the things which perish?”²⁴.

Although Tertullian is one of the most “extremist” church fathers ever known, one of his works should be mentioned in this context, because in it he touches upon the church’s monthly donation²⁵: “On the monthly day, if he likes, each puts in a small donation; but only if it be his pleasure, and only if he be able: for there is no compulsion; all is voluntary. These gifts are, as it were, piety’s deposit fund. For they are not taken thence and spent on feasts, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house; such, too, as have suffered shipwreck; and if there happen to be any in the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God’s Church, they become the nurslings of their confession”. This picture of monthly donation remains highly idealistic, since its amount and extent etc. are not made clear.

23 The following three passages are from *Didache*, ch. iv: K. LAKE (transl.), *Apostolic Fathers*, I (Loeb), pp. 315-317.

24 These last two passages happen to be largely identical with the passages of the *Epistle of Barnabas* quoted above (see the text of notes 7 and 8). It is argued that a close parallelism can be observed between chs. 1-6 of the *Didache* and chs. 18-20 of the *Epistle of Barnabas*; see e.g. J. QUASTEN, *Patrology*, vol. 1, Westminster: Christian Classics, 1992 (repr. of 1950), p. 36.

25 Tertullianus, *Apologeticum*, ch. xxxix: A. ROBERTS et al. (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1918, p. 46.

It is especially the *Didascalia apostolorum* which allows us to get a glimpse of the actual church life of the period. Several chapters mention the church's activity of charity. Ch. 8 says that bishops are allowed to take from the gifts that are given to the church by people, but they should not consume them by themselves; they should "provide for the deacons and the widows and the orphans, and those that are in want"²⁶. In ch. 9 the bishop is likened to the high priest and God, the deacon to the Christ, the deaconesses to the Holy Ghost, the elders to the apostles, and orphans and widows to the altar. And – so the text says – since it is allowed only to the priest to approach the altar and offer the sacrifices on it, people have to present offerings, not directly to orphans and widows etc., but indirectly to their bishop²⁷; in this way concentration of the control concerning offerings is intended. On the other hand, the bishop is expected to be well acquainted with the situations of orphans, widows and the poor, "with those who are straitened, that thou mayest distribute to them like a good steward"²⁸.

Ch. 17 is devoted to the problems concerning orphans²⁹: "If one of the children of Christians be an orphan, either a boy or a girl, it is good that if there be one of the brethren who hath no children, he take the boy in place of children, and let him take a girl, every one who has a son; when her time comes let him give her to him in marriage, and fulfill his work in the service of God. ... O Bishops, take up the burden of them, that they be brought up so that nothing be wanting to them, and when it is the time for the maiden, give her in marriage to one of the brethren. And let the boy when he is grown up learn a handicraft, and when he is a man let him take the wage that is meet for his craft, that he may no longer be a burden on the charity of the brethren". The expression "a burden on the charity of the brethren" is noteworthy, because it shows that, for orphans, there were (or at least were expected to be) *continuous* supports based on the offerings of the church; and the word "burden" seems to suggest that it was not easy for the church to maintain such supports for a number of years.

It would not be useless to mention here what is written in ch. 18, although it does not directly concern the theme of charity. The bishop is advised not to receive gifts from those who are guilty, i.e., "from the rich who have put people in prison, who act badly towards their servants, or who deal hardly in their cities, or who oppress the poor, or from the impure and from those who use their bodies wickedly, from those who diminish and lend with usury; or from judges who are accepters of persons; from worshippers of gold or silver or brass; from those who change weights, or from those who measure in deceit; or from tavern-keepers who mix [wine] with water; or from soldiers who conduct themselves iniquitously; or from any arrogant princes who have been polluted in wars, and have shed innocent blood unjustly;

26 M.D. GIBSON (transl.), *The Didascalia apostolorum in English* (Horae Semiticae, 2), London: C.J. Clay and sons, 1903, p. 44.

27 Ibid., p. 48.

28 Ibid., p. 71 (ch. 14).

29 Ibid., p. 80.

or from the usurers and the covetous³⁰. Luke 16:9, the famous passage which includes the expression “unrighteous mammon”³¹, has given rise to many divergent interpretations among scholars, but I think that the passage just quoted of the *Didascalia* can be regarded as a clear answer made by the Christian tradition to the question how to interpret this biblical passage: the Christian tradition clearly and definitely rejects the use of money of bad origin.

Since the *Constitutiones apostolorum*, another canonical writing quite similar in content to the *Didascalia*, is usually dated to the late fourth century³² which is outside the scope of this presentation, it is not necessary to go through it here; it will suffice to take a look at Book 2, where charity to the poor etc. is mentioned in relation to the role of deacon. According to the *Constitutiones* it is the bishop, not the deacon, who is deemed responsible for distributing to the poor, to the orphans etc.³³: “Let him [i.e. the bishop] use those tenths and first-fruits, which are given according to the command of God, as a man of God; as also let him dispense in a right manner the free-will offerings which are brought in on account of the poor, to the orphans, the widows, the afflicted, and strangers in distress”. As for the deacon, who “is to you Aaron, and the bishop Moses”³⁴, it is he that actually realizes distributions to the poor etc., and he is supposed to know “any one to be in distress”³⁵. However, the deacon should “not do anything at all without his bishop, nor give anything without his consent”³⁶. This situation, that the bishop was responsible for the activity of charity, and that the deacon was only in charge of practical aspects of the matter, doubtless applies also for earlier periods. The bishop is the central figure in the church’s social activity.

Making a similar survey of the sources concerning economic problems of the early church, Charles Munier stresses the difficulty in grasping the reality of the church’s activity of charity, although some insight can be obtained from time to time through the correspondence of a bishop (e.g. Cyprian)³⁷. In order to go beyond a simple enumeration of the sources such as seen above, not only a precise evaluation of each source as to its date and place etc. will be absolutely necessary, but also a methodological breakthrough might be needed.

30 Ibid., p. 82.

31 The entire verse, quoted according to the Revised Standard Version, is as follows: And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal habitations.

32 See e.g. M. GEERARD, *Clavis patrum Graecorum*, vol. 1, Turnhout: Brepols, 1983, p. 220 (CPG 1730).

33 *Constitutiones apostolorum*, II, ch. XXV: A. ROBERTS et al. (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1913, p. 408.

34 *Constitutiones apostolorum*, II, ch. XXX: *ibid.*, p. 411.

35 *Constitutiones apostolorum*, II, ch. XXXII: *ibid.*, p. 412.

36 *Constitutiones apostolorum*, II, ch. XXXI: *ibid.*, p. 411.

37 Ch. MUNIER, *L’Eglise dans l’Empire romain (II^e-III^e siècles)*, III^e partie: *Eglise et cité*, Paris: Editions Cujas, 1979, pp. 100-101.

2. *Meaning of diakonia and its cognate words*

Recent discussions concerning the term *diakonia* and its cognate words have been made, not in the field of early Christian studies, but in that of New Testament studies, especially with reference to the Acts ch. 6. As mentioned earlier, study of these terms has had some relation with, and impact on, the church's practical activity, especially that of German evangelical churches which is precisely called "Diakonie" (the Catholic term which corresponds to it is "caritas").

To mention only one work on this subject, in 1990 John N. Collins published his book *Diakonia*, in which he argued that, "from the New Testament and other early Christian sources", the meaning of *diakonia* as service, taken e.g. in the sense of help to the needy, cannot be discerned³⁸, and that "care, concern, and love ... are just not part of their [i.e. *diakonia* and its cognates] field of meaning"³⁹. In view of the wide range of the evidence (including papyrological evidence) on which his discussion is based, this conclusion of Collins needs serious reexamination⁴⁰. And its evident implication is that *diakonia*, the term symbolically used for various social activities of the contemporary church, is a misnomer.

It seems to me that, in his book, Collins' contention is no less than that the description of the meaning of *diakonia* and its cognate words in Greek lexicons, starting with Liddell-Scott-Jones, is simply wrong or misleading. And if I am not mistaken on this point, then the real problem of his thesis lies in our field, i.e. that of patristic studies, because a cursory look at Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon*, the indispensable tool for early Christian studies, shows that the verb *diakoneō*, for instance, is sometimes used to mean "supply wants of, afford assistance to, minister", a usage which seems to contradict Collins' thesis⁴¹. Similar observations can be made also concerning *diakonia* and *diakonos*. To be sure, Collins would say that patristic

38 J.N. COLLINS, *Diakonia. Re-interpreting the Ancient Sources*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 71 ("Conclusion to Part I").

39 Ibid., p. 254.

40 Recently the same subject was studied again by A. HENTSCHEL, *Diakonia im Neuen Testament. Studien zur Semantik unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Rolle von Frauen* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 226), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007. However, I have to express my doubt about her study, since it is based on evidence much narrower than Collins' study; in particular, early Christian materials are almost entirely neglected, exceptions being *Didache*, Clement I. and Ignatius' letters. In this context it is noteworthy that the bibliography of Hentschel's study mentions under the category "Bibleausgaben und Hilfsmittel" (pp. 445-446) neither Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon* nor Glare's *Supplement to Liddell-Scott-Jones* (1996), both of which extensively cover the Greek language of the centuries of the Roman Empire, i.e., early Christian centuries. Even if the purpose of her work is to deal with the New Testament, it is hardly justifiable to study the problem from such a narrow perspective, especially when the *Christian* usage of a word (or a word-group) is in question.

41 This usage, applied "esp. of ministrations to poor, and those in receipt of subventions from Church funds" (Lampe, s.v.), is attested in the following passages: Basilus, Ep. 199 can. 24 (PG 32, col. 724B), Chrysostomus, Hom. 19.2 in Mt. (ed. Montfaucon, vol. 7, col. 246A = PG 57, col. 275), Palladius, Hist. laus. 58 (ed. Butler, p. 151), Nilus, Ep., vol. 2, no. 105 (PG 79, col. 248A).

literature “really lies beyond the area we need to examine”⁴², but in this case such an apology is totally unsuitable, because it is highly implausible that the use of *diakonia* and its cognate words in the early church differs significantly from that of the period of the apostles.

Final Remarks

This investigation on poverty and charity in early Christianity is still at its starting point; there remain a lot of things to be done before being able to say anything meaningful on the subject. Furthermore, what we saw above seems to suggest that a simple enumeration of the relevant sources, which itself has been repeatedly made, does not suffice; something like “Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen. The case of early Christianity”, so to speak, might be needed.

This reflection leads us to another point. At the outset I stressed the importance of early Christian studies, and it should be repeated here again, this time in relation to New Testament studies. Although all of us understand the particular importance of the New Testament for the life of Christians, that does by no means justify that *research* on the New Testament should be conducted independently of neighboring fields of study. In particular, the primitive church, i.e. the church of the apostles, stands in continuity (I would say “perfect continuity”) with the later, but still early, church; thus I argue that any research in the field of New Testament studies which shows discrepancies with what is known from patristic or early Christian studies should be seriously doubted. In other words, the importance of early Christian studies needs to be appreciated more fully by scholars of New Testament studies.

On the other hand, we, patristic scholars, can perhaps learn more from what has been done in the field of New Testament studies. For one thing, because of the scarcity of the evidence mentioned above, scholars of New Testament studies have developed various methods of research. Although many of those methods seem doubtful in validity, still we can, at least, learn more from their readiness to apply various methods to the materials. Thus I hope to be able to work more for interpenetration of these two neighboring fields of study, which will surely be fruitful.

42 COLLINS, *op. cit.*, p. 71. Unfortunately I have been unable to check his more recent work: J.N. COLLINS, *Deacons and the Church*, Harrisburg: Church Publishing, 2003.