

Miltiadis Vantsos
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Philanthropy According to Saint Gregory Palamas¹

FOREWORD

by Julianna Giannoutsou PhD

Assistant Professor, International Relations & Development
Founder & Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Philanthropy
LCC International University

As I embarked on a journey to explore the work of St. Gregory Palamas, I recalled my trip to the 2009 ARNOVA conference. At that time, I was a Philanthropic Studies Doctoral student at IUPUI, serving as the Managing Editor of *NVSQ*. I travelled to Cleveland with my colleagues and fellow students. During a mini-bus ride, I had a conversation with Professor Dwight Burlingame, then co-Editor-in-Chief of *NVSQ*, about the meaning of philanthropy. We discussed the various ways one can be philanthropic, and as a non-native English speaker who often paid attention to word formation, I shared an observation: I found it interesting that the root of the word *forgiveness* is *give*.

To my surprise, Professor Burlingame responded without hesitation, as if he had already reflected on the topic. He said, “Yes, because forgiveness is generosity of the heart.” That response stayed with me for years. The idea that forgiveness is a form of philanthropy had not occurred to me before. After our conversation, this new understanding sparked a question in my mind: why hadn’t any of the philanthropic studies research articles I was reading explored this expression of philanthropy? Moreover, I began to wonder what other forms of philanthropy might be missing from the research agenda. “Is there a missed opportunity to inspire human potential for love and goodness in the world?” I thought to myself.

I am deeply grateful to Professor Miltiadis Vantsos for illuminating the work of the 14th-century Orthodox Christian saint, Gregory Palamas, who

1 This article appears in *Philanthropia* with a permission from the School of Social Theology and Christian Culture at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki where the original version of the article in Greek language was published in 2013 in the 2nd volume of *Cosmos*, the scientific e-Journal on Orthodox Theology & Christian Culture.

argued that philanthropy is for everyone and highlighted the multitude of ways it can be expressed. I am also thankful for the opportunity to launch *Philanthropia* with Drs. Marty Sulek and Andrew L. Williams, supported by LCC International University—a journal that will provide a platform for exploring philanthropy through the lens of the humanities and normative theory. It is a happy coincidence (or, as some might say, *providence*) that all three of us graduated from the Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy and found ourselves at a university in Klaipeda, Lithuania.

ABSTRACT

Saint Gregory Palamas emphasizes the central role of philanthropy in spiritual life and fostering harmonious social coexistence. He teaches that God reveals Himself as both good and philanthropic, calling every person to imitate His philanthropy. This imitation extends beyond financial generosity, focusing instead on a loving attitude toward others. Philanthropy, according to Palamas, is accessible to all, as it can be practiced in various forms—whether by offering material support, forgiving wrongs, or providing guidance and comfort. Moreover, each person is capable of discerning the needs of others. Lastly, philanthropy is presented as spiritually beneficial, compensating for a lack of virtues in the philanthropist, as long as it is carried out sincerely and without seeking praise, motivated solely by unselfish love.

INTRODUCTION

Saint Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki, lived in the 14th century and is considered the most important Father of the Church during the last centuries of the Byzantine Empire. Although most of his work has a doctrinal content, St. Gregory was not only a charismatic theologian, distinguished by the precision of his formulations, but also an exceptional clergyman (or shepherd) who took special care of the moral and spiritual life of the faithful.

In his sermons, where he addresses almost all topics concerning Christian ethics, he emphasises philanthropy and its synonyms, love (ἀγάπη), mercy (ἔλεος), beneficence (εὐεργεσία), and benevolence (ἀγαθοποιεῖν),² to indicate that the relationship with God and the spiritual life necessarily include a loving attitude towards one's fellow human beings, especially those in need. Philanthropy has always been a very important theme, because in every age and in every society, even the most prosperous, there are always poor, homeless, and sick people who need the help of their fellow human beings.

2 For the concept of philanthropy and its synonymous terms, see Daniel F. Caner, "Clemency, A Neglected Aspect of Early Christian Philanthropy," *Religions*, 9 (2018): 229; Marty Sulek, "On the Classical Meaning of *Philanthrôpía*," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 39 no. 3 (2010): 385-408.

Nevertheless, it is not always accepted without controversy, as ethical aspects of justice, responsibility, and the worthiness of the beneficiaries are often raised. Philanthropy is even rejected on the grounds that the provision of financial assistance legitimizes and perpetuates the superiority of those who provide it over those who receive it.³

The present study, however, will not deal with the criticisms of philanthropy and the contemporary reflection on its application, but will limit itself to presenting the way in which Saint Gregory understands the concept of philanthropy,⁴ and to highlight the importance he attributes to it for spiritual life and harmonious social coexistence. In my opinion, Saint Gregory's views are clear and practical, they give hope and options to those who want to help and be helped, and because of their timeless character, they can be particularly useful for modern man and society.

PHILANTHROPY IS A CHARACTERISTIC OF GOD

For Saint Gregory, philanthropy is first and foremost a characteristic trait of God. God reveals Himself to humans as good and philanthropic. Every work of God, every intervention in the history of divine economy, and every commandment is done for the benefit of humans. According to the Archbishop of Thessaloniki, God's philanthropy is twofold: before the Fall, it consists of providing all the resources that allow humans to freely achieve the likeness of God, while after the Fall, it is manifested in patience and the restoration of the possibility of deification for humans⁵.

More specifically, God first creates the world and the angels for the sake of humans and then forms humans "in His image and likeness". With much

3 Gianis Varoufakis, *Against Philanthropy* (Athens, Artemis Publishing, 2009), 71–76. The author expresses his opposition to philanthropy, as he characteristically states (p. 75), "... philanthropy not only constitutes the organized expression of a modern misanthropy but, above all, because it is the greatest enemy of solidarity".

4 For a broader understanding of Christian philanthropy from an orthodox point of view, see Demetrios Constantelos, *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare* (New York: New Rochelle, 1991); Vasileios Kalliakmanis, "Volunteerism and Social Responsibility" (Thessaloniki: 2002); Georgios Mantzaridis, "Sociology of Christianity" (Thessaloniki: 2004), 331–354; Miltiadis Vantsos and Marina Kiroudi, "An Orthodox View of Philanthropy and Church Diaconia," *Christian Bioethics* 13, no. 3 (2007): 251–268.

5 "Ελέους μὲν οὖν ἅπαντα τὰ πρὸς ἡμᾶς παρ' αὐτοῦ γεγονότα· τί γὰρ ἕτερον τὸ κινήσαν πρὸς τοσαύτας καὶ τηλικαύτας εὐεργεσίας ἢ φιλανθρωπία καὶ ἀγάπη καὶ ἔλεος; Ἀλλὰ διπλοῦν ἐμφαίνεται τοῦτο τὸ ἔλεος· πρὸ μὲν γὰρ τοῦ ἁμαρτεῖν ἡμᾶς εἰς αὐτὸν, ἐλεῶν ἀνεπλήρου διὰ πλείστων εὐεργεσιῶν τὴν τῆς φύσεως ἔλλειψιν· μετὰ δὲ τὸ ἁμαρτεῖν ἡμᾶς εἰς αὐτὸν, ἐλεῶν διέμενε μακροθυμῶν, καὶ οὐ τοῦτο μόνον, ἀλλ' ὑπὸ πολλῆς συμπαθείας καὶ τὰς δωρεὰς αὐξῶν ἐπὶ τὸ κρεῖττον αἰεὶ, καὶ εἰς ἐπίδοσιν ἄγων, μὴ μόνον οὐκ ἀποδιδούς κακὰ ἀντὶ κακῶν, ἀλλ' οὐδ' ἀπλῶς ἀγαθὰ παρέχων ἀντὶ κακῶν, ἀλλὰ τὰ τῶν καλῶν κάλλιστα, καὶ ὧν οὐδὲν ἦ μείζων ἢ κάλλιον". St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 36*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 151, 452AB, ed. J.-P. Migne and Ioānñs K. Diōtēs (Athens: Kentron Paterikōn Ekdoseōn, 1987).

lyricism and vividness, Saint Gregory describes the beauty of creation and the functionality of its individual elements in a way that serves the material and aesthetic needs of humans.⁶ However, because humans encapsulate both the sensible and the intelligible world, God foresaw enriching human nature with conscience to help cultivate virtue. Thanks to divine wisdom and philanthropy, a prudent person does not need a teacher to understand the good, as they possess an innate moral law that guides them towards it.⁷

Human refusal to follow the path of likeness to God does not repel divine philanthropy, as God has shown and continues to show patience for human sin. Thus, He did not abandon His creation but sent fathers and prophets to guide them, provided a written law to aid the innate law, and revealed His will through numerous miraculous events. However, such is the magnitude of divine philanthropy, notes Saint Gregory, that God did not stop at these gifts but sent His Son, who emptied Himself of the riches of His divinity and took on human nature to teach humans His will and save them through His death and resurrection.

The incomprehensible philanthropy of God for humans is praised by Saint Gregory in almost every homily, whether for Christmas, Baptism of Christ, the Annunciation of the Theotokos, the Passion and Resurrection of Christ, the Ascension, Pentecost, or any other feast and worship gathering. His purpose is not only for humans to realize the multitude of divine benefits and respond with gratitude but also to become philanthropic themselves, imitating God's philanthropy. Humans are called to be merciful, just as God the Father is merciful.⁸

PHILANTHROPY IS THE DUTY OF EVERY PERSON

Imitating divine philanthropy may seem difficult, if not impossible. How can a person imitate a characteristic of God? Furthermore, philanthropy is often perceived as not pertaining to every person, as it seems that only the wealthy, who have the financial means to help the poor and needy, have the duty of philanthropy. Saint Gregory refutes this notion by emphasizing that, first, all people are called to philanthropy; second, that philanthropy should be directed toward every person; and third, that it is an easily achievable duty. After presenting these views of the saint, we will conclude the discussion with a brief reference to an essential prerequisite under which philanthropy constitutes a God-pleasing act.

6 Ibid., *Patrologia Graeca* 151:449CD; St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 3*, *Patrologia Graeca* 151:33CD.

7 St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 3*, *Patrologia Graeca* 151:36B.

8 St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 44, 8*, in *Ἑλληνες Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας* (ΕΠΕ), vol. 79, *Γρηγορίου του Παλαμά Απαντα τα Ἔργα*, vol. 11 (Thessaloniki: 1986), 57-59.

Saint Gregory initially emphasizes that all people are called to philanthropy, as it is not so much about financial means as it is about love for one's neighbor and the willingness to offer help. There are many ways one can assist: by providing food, shelter, medicine, and other material goods; by showing forbearance, patience, and sympathy towards those who have harmed or wronged us; by giving appropriate advice that encourages virtue or deters from sin; and by offering comforting words that strengthen faith, bolster hope, and relieve those who are sorrowful.⁹ And if someone does not have surplus goods, he observes, through voluntary fasting and self-restraint, one can secure food for their hungry neighbor.¹⁰ If one is not good with words to give advice and console, they can show patience and teach those around them through their example. By keeping God's commandments and cultivating virtues, one benefits all those with whom they interact, as they become a teacher of virtue through their actions. Thus, every person has the capacity to offer valuable assistance to their neighbor, which is why God expects works of philanthropy from everyone.

Saint Gregory supports this teaching with the Gospel passage of the Last Judgment,¹¹ in which, according to the Holy Gospel, all nations will be gathered before the throne of God, and the Son of Man will separate the righteous from the unrighteous based on their deeds towards their fellow humans. The righteous will inherit the kingdom of heaven because they kept God's commandments and demonstrated acts of love towards their neighbors, which are specifically mentioned: "For I was hungry, and you gave me food; I was thirsty, and you gave me drink; I was a stranger, and you welcomed me; I was naked, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you visited me; I was in prison, and you came to me".¹²

Christ does not merely encourage specific acts of charity with this phrase, but reveals that acts toward a needy neighbor are as if they are done to Him. Therefore, Saint Gregory emphasizes that a person can make Christ Himself a debtor with a little food, a little water, and some clothing. He also interprets the beatitude of the merciful in the Sermon on the Mount in the same way.¹³

In the same passage, those on Christ's left are condemned because they were merciless and heartless toward people in need. Saint Gregory explains that they are punished because lack of compassion towards a person who has

9 St. Gregory of Palamas, Homily 13, *PG* 151, 161CD.

10 St. Gregory Palamas, Homily VIII, *PG* 151, 96CD.

11 «ὡς γὰρ ἡ ἀγάπη, ἀδελφοί, καὶ τὰ τῆς ἀγάπης ἔργα πλήρωμα τῶν ἀρετῶν ἐστὶ, οὕτω τὸ μῖσος καὶ τὰ τοῦ μίσους ἔργα, ὁ ἀσυμπαθὴς τρόπος, ἡ ἀμετάδοτος γνώμη, πλήρωμα ἐστὶ τῆς ἀμαρτίας· καὶ καθάπερ τῇ φιλανθρωπία ἔπονται καὶ σύνεισιν αἱ ἀρεταὶ, οὕτω τῇ μισανθρωπία αἱ κακίαι· διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἀπὸ ταύτης μόνῃς καταδικάζονται». St. Gregory Palamas, Homily IV, *PG* 151, 60D.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., *PG* 151, 57D.

nothing to eat or drink is not just a sin, but “the fullness of sin”. He characteristically writes: “For as love, brethren, and the works of love are the fullness of the virtues, so hatred, the works of hatred, the unfriendly conduct, and the unshared opinion are the fullness of sin; and as philanthropy is followed by the virtues, so is misanthropy followed by the vices; for this reason alone they are condemned”.¹⁴

While man is called to love his neighbor “as himself,” the merciless person loves money more than his fellow human. Thus, the refusal of charity is characterized by the Archbishop of Thessaloniki as “misanthropy”.¹⁵ He wonders, what is a worse sign of hatred than loving money, which is surplus, more than a brother? Therefore, the merciless and uncharitable who hoard their treasures may seem powerful in the eyes of people, but in reality, they are “worthy of mourning”¹⁶ because they fail to resemble God, who is merciful and philanthropic. To these, Christ will justly say, “I do not know you.”

Saint Gregory explains their rejection as follows: “they do not have the image of the heavenly one; they did not become merciful like the Father; they did not share what they possessed with those in need, just as He freely shared His own goods with all; they were not kind to their neighbors, nor did they bring those far away close through good deeds; therefore, due to this dissimilarity, the good one neither knows nor admits such people.”¹⁷Top of FormBottom of Form

Behind mercilessness lies, according to Saint Gregory, the passion of greed. It is greed that prevents the foolish rich man in the well-known gospel passage from using the abundance of his estates for the benefit of the poor. The greedy rich man continuously enlarges his storehouses to accommodate the large harvest and is revealed to be foolish and “worthy of death”. What condemns him is not injustice, but greed and mercilessness, the fact that he does not show mercy to his fellow humans with the goods he had in abundance.¹⁸

The same applies to the rich man who refuses to show mercy to poor Lazarus. He is not condemned for acquiring wealth unjustly, but for being merciless and indulgent, because he did not give from his surplus to cover Lazarus’s lack of food.¹⁹ Greed drives away divine grace and becomes a cause of death, first of the soul and then of the body.

As spiritual life is reflected in social life, Saint Gregory observes that social disputes disrupting harmonious social coexistence are due to the fact that “the

14 St. Gregory Palamas, Homily XIII, *PG* 151, 164D - 165A.

15 St. Gregory Palamas, Homily 39, *PG* 151, 489CD.

16 St. Gregory Palamas, Homily 48, 12, *EIII*, pp. 151-153. See also St. Gregory Palamas, Homily 13, *PG* 151, 164B.

17 St. Gregory Palamas, Homily 38, *PG* 151, 484B.

18 St. Gregory Palamas, Homily 27, *PG* 151, 318AB.

19 St. Gregory Palamas, Homily 45, 6, *EIII*, pp. 77-79.

fire of greed” characterizes many people and every aspect of social life: “Who does not know the fire of greed burning among us, rising high and reaching almost everywhere, in public taxes, in common markets, in trade?”²⁰ While greed creates feelings of injustice and leads to conflicts, philanthropy mitigates social inequalities and prevents or restores injustices.

PHILANTHROPY IS ADDRESSED TO EVERY PERSON

Philanthropy should not only be practiced by every person but, following the example of divine philanthropy, should be directed toward every person. Interpreting the parable of the weeds, Saint Gregory notes that God does not allow the uprooting of the weeds, which the enemy secretly sowed among the wheat, but waits patiently until the time of harvest, when the weeds will be separated from the wheat. God tolerates even the wicked out of philanthropy because, as he explains, many impious and sinful people who live among the righteous learn from their virtue, repent, and themselves transform from weeds into wheat.

The tolerance of evil, therefore, is due to the compassion and forbearance of God, who desires and awaits the repentance of the wicked.²¹ And when a person repents and returns, like the prodigal son, God the Father hastens with joy to meet him, to embrace him, and to celebrate the joyous event. From the parable of the weeds, one learns both that a person must love and help every fellow human being, even the wicked, and that the virtuous can offer the greatest assistance to the impious through love and a good example, which is repentance and returning to God.

When a person loves only those who love him and benefits only those who benefit him, he does not receive grace from God,²² because the good deed is done within a framework of reciprocity and receives its reward immediately.²³ Philanthropy attracts divine grace when it is directed toward individuals from whom no repayment is expected and when it has the character of forgiveness and patience.

The importance of philanthropy towards those who owe or have wronged us is also highlighted by Saint Gregory through the parable of the wicked servant.²⁴ This servant, who owed ten thousand talents, asked for more time to repay his debt, and the merciful Lord forgave him the entire debt. However, this same servant proved to be harsh and unforgiving towards another servant

20 St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 38, Patrologia Graeca* 151:484B.

21 St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 27, Patrologia Graeca* 151:318AB.

22 Luke 6:31–37.

23 St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 45, 6, Έλληνες Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας* (ΕΠΕ), 77–79.

24 Matthew 18:23–55.

who owed him a hundred denarii. Not only did he not forgive the debt, but he also had him thrown into prison.

When the Lord learned of this, he punished the wicked servant because, although he had been shown mercy, he himself did not wish to show mercy. According to Saint Gregory, Christians face the same danger. They repent for their sins, come to the churches, beseech God, and receive forgiveness. Yet, when they leave the churches and encounter people who owe them or need their help, they often prove to be harsh and merciless. The giver, by contrast, through philanthropy, proves to be worthy of divine mercy, and the debtor, by virtue of God's gratification, becomes a source of many blessings, far surpassing what he received.²⁵

PHILANTHROPY IS AN EASILY ACHIEVABLE DUTY

Philanthropy, according to Saint Gregory, is an easily achievable duty because it is innate and beneficial.²⁶ As humans are created “in the image and likeness” of God, they are naturally inclined to be favorable toward their fellow humans and have an innate will to do good. Even though this will is influenced and altered by sin, humans still inherently know what is good. For this reason, Christ included all good deeds toward one's neighbor in one brief commandment: “Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them”.²⁷ This brief commandment not only prevents a person from committing evil but also calls them to benefit their neighbor in a way they would wish to be benefited by them.

To demonstrate that philanthropy is easily accomplished, the Archbishop of Thessaloniki, urges individuals to recall the expectations they have when seeking help from their neighbor. Since they evidently consider it just, right, and easy for the other person to provide the help they seek, they criticize anyone who refuses to help them. When someone makes a mistake, they expect forgiveness and not condemnation from their fellow human, because they obviously consider it just, right, and easy for the other person to show patience toward them. Therefore, what one reasonably expects from their neighbor, they are also obligated to offer to them.²⁸

Furthermore, besides being innate and easy, philanthropy is advantageous for a person since, through it, they can make up for the lack of certain virtues. Saint Gregory explains this view as follows: A person satisfies their material needs by exchanging the products they produce with those produced by others using money. However, something similar cannot happen in spiritual life, as it

25 St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 36, Patrologia Graeca* 151, 456D–457AB.

26 St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 45, 3, Έλληνες Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας* (ΕΠΕ), 73.

27 Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31.

28 St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 45, 3–5, Έλληνες Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας* (ΕΠΕ), 73–

is not possible for a prudent person to give a bit of prudence to a just person and receive from them the corresponding justice which they lack.

What does not fall under transactions and equal exchanges becomes achievable through God's philanthropy. By covering their neighbor's lack of shelter, clothing, and food, a person compensates for their own lack of virtues.²⁹ Saint Gregory marvels at the greatness of divine philanthropy, which allows a person to exchange cheap material things for virtues. To further emphasize how advantageous philanthropy is for a person, he asks rhetorically: If someone gave gold and asked for bronze in return, who would not consider such an exchange beneficial? However, by offering help to their neighbor, he continues, one does not exchange similar metals but gives human goods to receive divine gifts from God.³⁰

CONCLUSION

We conclude the presentation of Saint Gregory Palamas's views on philanthropy with an important observation. Philanthropy is praised by the saint as a "sign and fruit of love" (δειγμα και καρπὸν οὖσαν τῆς ἀγάπης).³¹ As an expression and fruit of love, philanthropy is the culmination of all virtues. The philanthropists on Christ's right hand at the future judgment were righteous and are characterized as "sheep," a term that indicates their likeness to the "Lamb of God".³²

However, when philanthropy is not performed out of sincere love for one's neighbor but from selfish motives, such as the desire for self-justification and the praise of others, it loses its value. A characteristic example is the Pharisee praying in the temple, who, although he gives a tenth of his possessions to the poor, does not leave the temple justified by God because he is arrogant and prideful.³³ The good is not truly good, Saint Gregory points out, when it is not done in a good way: "the evil one, knowing that the good is not good when it is not done in a good way, strives to persuade us not to perform good deeds with a God-pleasing purpose, nor for the praise of God, but for the praise of men, so that in this way, he deprives us of the reward from God and heavenly rewards."³⁴

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Miltiadis Vantsos is a Professor of Christian Ethics and Bioethics at the Faculty of Theology at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

29 St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 48*, 1–4, *Ἑλληνες Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας* (ΕΠΕ), 136–140.

30 St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 46*, 10, *Ἑλληνες Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας* (ΕΠΕ), 103.

31 St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 4*, *Patrologia Graeca* 151:56C.

32 *Ibid.*, *Patrologia Graeca* 151:53C.

33 St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 2*, *Patrologia Graeca* 151:25AB.

34 St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 6*, *Patrologia Graeca* 151, 77B. Cf. St. Gregory Palamas, *Homily 51*, 9, *Ἑλληνες Πατέρες της Εκκλησίας* (ΕΠΕ), 224.