"EVERY GOOD AND PERFECT GIFT COMES FROM ABOVE": THE EPISCOPAL CONTROL OF CHARITY AND CHRISTIAN(-IZED) PATRONAGE

The post-Constantinian church did not have to defend or argue for but simply took for granted the episcopal role in centralized almsgiving unlike its counterpart in the previous centuries. In course of the third century, Christian koinonia and mutual care grew comprehensive and the church experienced increasing structural and cultic institutionalization. The ecclesiastical charity then mirrored and corresponded to this process of institutionalization revolving around clerical authority and functions, especially those of bishops (though not without challenges). In this paper, I will examine the ways in which the church as a growing institution centralized its charitable ministries under clergy (bishops in particular) and the process of Christianized patronage through which the clerical control of charity for those in need took place. I will analyze the rationale for ecclesiastical control of almsgiving via Christianized patronage by looking at the Didascalia in its rather comprehensive portrait of institutional church life in Syria on the one hand and the letters of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, who eventually succeeded in establishing theological and practical foundation for Christianized patronage that would last for centuries to come, on the other.

CHRISTIAN(-IZED) PATRONAGE IN THE DIDASCALIA

The Roman patronage networks, which formed a bedrock of Roman social relations of reciprocity, worked based on (or because of) the structural inequality and limited access to resources; as the patron of superior status bestowed gifts and benefits (beneficia) on (typically) one’s client(s) of inferior status, the client(s) in return showed gratitude by loyalty and public praise, which in turn enhanced the honor and
status of the patron and thus motivated and obligated him or her to bestow further beneficia, and the cycle continued.\(^1\) Patronage networks therefore functioned as a necessary means of socio-political cohesion and control based on the ethics of reciprocity (between unequals). By the third century CE, with the church as “a society within the society” more or less established,\(^2\) we see the major development of Christian patronage also working in a context of structured inequality — religious as well as socio-economic hierarchy — with similar albeit transformed dynamics. Early on, even in the first century, Christians had already adopted the prevailing Roman patronage system and Christianized it over the subsequent centuries as the wealthier lay householders naturally took leadership of the nascent Christian communities by offering their houses for assembly. These wealthier members also contributed to the care of the needy in their Christian communities with dinners (meals), hospitality, burial plots, and almsgiving, although these works of charity were exhorted to and practiced by the faithful in general and were not confined to the wealthy. However, there is no doubt that the more affluent members were major contributors to the common fund (koinos), agapē, etc. and felt greater expectation and obligation to share their resources with the poor in their communities; but in return, the poor recipients of alms and other acts of charity were exhorted and obligated to pray for salvation and spiritual blessings for their donors (patrons) in gratitude (e.g., Herm. Sim. 2.4–10; Clement of Alexandria, Quis div. 31–35; Ap. Trad. 28.1–4). This “established” symbiosis between the wealthy and the poor with theological undergirding and spiritual sanction shows the Christianized patronage at work at the most basic level. In the course of the third century, there was a notable shift from patronage of the wealthy lay leaders in household settings to patronage of bishops and other clergy in a more formalized church structure with the ownership of buildings and other properties as the clergy largely took over the official roles of patrons with their el-

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evated status. Once the (wealthier) individuals handed over their gifts to the church (alms for common treasury, burial lands, food, clothing, shoes, etc.) the bishops and other clergy under the bishop’s authority replaced the donors as administrators of the properties and exercised full control over their management and distribution (e.g., Didasc. 9).

The Didascalia, in its rather comprehensive portrait of institutional church life in Syria with extensive (and often repetitive) regulations concerning the liturgy, charitable ministry, clergy, and laity, vividly illustrates this development. Detailing the office, ministry, and qualifications of clergy, bishops in particular, centering on charity, it describes bishops as the high-priests placed by God; “set in the likeness of God Almighty, [they] do hold the place of God Almighty” (5). As such, bishops are to their congregations “priests and prophets and chiefs and leaders and kings, and mediators between God and His faithful, ...witnesses of His will, [and] those who bear the sins of everyone” (8); and opposing bishops is opposing the Lord (9). Therefore, the bishop has “authority to judge those who sin — instead of God Almighty” (5) and to forgive and receive with mercy those who repent “as God Almighty” (6) as the physician of the church (7). He is to “take care of everyone” and “carry the burden of all” (7); for that reason, the bishop is to be honored “as God [is]” and be informed of everything in the congregational life (9). As God’s vice-regent on earth, the bishop is most of all to “love the orphans with the widows, and be a lover of the poor and also of strangers” (4; cf. 3.1), for whom he receives from the faithful their first-fruits, tithes, offerings, and gifts (9); his hands should be stretched out to give to all who are in want, but he must discern who is deserving of the church’s assistance — any glutton, drunken, or idle person does not deserve alms (4; 8). As God’s stewards, bishops’ chief responsibilities include excelling,

in dispensing those things that are given and come into the church [i.e., alms and offerings by the faithful] according to the commandment to orphans and widows and those who are afflicted and to strangers, like men who know that [they] have God who will require an account at [their] hands, who committed his stewardship unto [them] (8; cf. 9).

(3) This does not mean that other forms of patronage by the wealthier lay people suddenly stopped; they might still have been going on informally but certainly became sidelined by the clerical (especially episcopal) patronage.

Note here his role as a mediator not just in a liturgical sense but in terms of being a recipient and dispenser of alms. The bishop is the just distributor of what he has received to “each one as it is right for him” since he is required to be “well acquainted with those who are afflicted” as his stewardship demands (9). The people neither have any say in nor can make any judgment on the bishop’s dispensation of those alms, which is his God-given prerogative:

For you [congregation] are commanded to give, but he [bishop] to dispense. And you shall not require an account of the bishop, nor watch him, <as to> how he dispenses and fulfills his stewardship, or when he gives, or to whom, or where, or whether well or ill, or whether he gives rightly. Indeed, he has an inquirer, the Lord God, who delivered the stewardship into his hands and held him worthy of the priesthood of this entire office (9).

Rather, the bishop, with considerable economic power and control, is accountable to God alone but should model munificence, stewardship, and justice in his personal life for the people (5). He should neither love riches, money, nor “dainty meats,” nor live in luxury (4, 8; cf. 3; 5); he should in fact be “meager and poor in his food and drink, that he may be able to be vigilant to admonish and discipline those who are undisciplined” (4). Furthermore, he should not show favoritism for persons, and he must “not stand in reverence before the rich nor please him beyond what is right. And let him not despise nor neglect the poor nor be lifted up against them” (4). It is worth noting here that his impartiality is in terms of being “a lover of the poor,” not in a sense of being a “neutral,” detached third-party.5

The practical outworking of this impartiality toward others involved: taking care of anyone in need (“although she was not a widow”) due to illness, infirmity of body, and rearing of children (4); nurturing orphans by arranging adoption or by bringing them up himself, including giving girls in Christian marriages and teaching boys trades and seeing to it that they would be able to sustain themselves through trades (so that they would not drain the charity) (17); looking after the condemned or imprisoned confessors with visitations, refreshments,

(5) Cf. Deut 10:17–18; Peter of Alexandria, On Riches 71–72: “And if I do not love according to the manner which is acceptable for me, I shall be found beneath all of you. If I show favoritism and perverse justice, I shall be called the judge of injustice. ...Therefore, it is fitting that every orthodox bishop be a loving person according to the Lord’s <command>, according to that which is acceptable to him. If he has not done this, he has not given love.”
prayers, and their ransom by payments (19); providing shelters for the poor (especially the elderly) from the bishop’s congregation “or from another congregation...with all <his> heart...even if <he> has to sit upon the ground, that <he> be not as one who respects the persons of men, but that <his> ministry be acceptable with God” (12). The practice of the Roman church supporting and caring for more than fifteen hundred widows and people in distress under the episcopal authorization and administration indicates the similar kind of “established” expectations and responsibilities of the bishop as “a lover of the poor” (Eusebius, *HE* 6.43.2). Likewise, the multi-faceted charitable ministries of Cyprian of Carthage bear witness to this recognized episcopal role (see below). In turn, the comprehensive episcopal ministry of charity for the mass of poor (*plerique pauperes*, Minucius Felix, *Oct*. 36.3) contributed to the enhanced power of the bishop since those poor mass were dependent on the bishop as their bread-winner and patron and therefore stood behind him as his power base of loyal clients. Along with that, the necessary finances centralized in the treasury of the bishop for the poor, “helped to consolidate permanently the position of the bishop.”6 This dual phenomenon stabilized the eminent position and ideal of the bishop as the earthly deputy of God to whom the people should give their obedience and loyalty on the one hand and as the chief imitator of God’s compassion, munificence, and justice on the other.

Presbyters and deacons, who are likened to be the priests and the Levites, respectively, and whose ministries are the extensions of episcopal ministries, are also given specific criteria for their qualifications and roles concerning charity, accountable to the bishop (9; 3.2–4). Qualifications for the presbyterate, which is responsible for teaching and intercession, include that the candidate be “humble, poor, not a lover of money, having labored much in the services of the weak, proven to be pure, ...if he has been as a father to the orphans, if has served the poor” (3.2).7 Those for the diaconate include that the candidate be the one “who is witnessed of by all the believers, who is not entangled by the business of the world,8 ...who has no riches” (3.4). Deacon’s ser-

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(7) A negative example is given in Peter Alexandria, *On Riches* 73.

(8) Cf. *Herm. Sim*. 8.8.1; 4.5; 9.20.1; *Vis*. 3.5.6–7.
vice in particular is detailed in close association with episcopal responsibilities and supervision:

first, those things that are commanded by the bishop so that they only may be done for proclamation, and of all the clergy he shall be the counselor and secret of the church: he who serves the sick, he who serves the strangers, who supports the widows and goes round in all the houses of those who are in want, lest there should be any one in necessity or sickness or in misery (3.4).

The deacon is also to clothe the dead and bury “strangers, those who are (away) from their dwellings, bypassers or captives” (3.4). He is the practical and “hands-on” manager of the church charity, responsible for relating all necessary information and care to the bishop and congregation (3.4; 9). Cyprian charged his presbyters and deacons with these very tasks with detailed directives during his hideaway (Epp. 5.2.1; 13.4.2; 14.2.1), as indeed the Apostolic Tradition (Latin version) specified the purpose of deacon’s ordination “to the service of the bishop, that he may do those things that are ordered by him” (8.2). It seems that the role of deacons as the “personal hands and feet of bishop” was widely acknowledged by the third century.

**Christian(-ized) Patronage in Cyprian’s Letters**

This theme of Christianized patronage became most conspicuous during Cyprian’s turbulent episcopacy. Cyprian (and other church leaders in general) linked almsgiving and other works of mercy (justice) essentially to God’s eschatological judgment and the givers’ (performers’) salvation and penance as signs of their faith in gracious and munificent God and their commitment to his church, thus having eternal consequence on their ultimate destiny and affecting their present standing in the church. Using theological and ecclesiastical concepts, Cyprian has defined charity of individuals and the church as imitation of and response to God’s generous beneficia. God in his selfless condescension demonstrated his gracious munificence and largesse by giving himself and his beneficia to all; imitation of God’s generosity takes place in the context of hierarchy of the strong and the weak, the rich and the

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(9) Cf. Deacon Eusebius mentioned by Dionysius in HE 7.11.24.

poor, and the clergy and the laity in the church. As the faithful are called to imitate God’s munificence, as in the Didascalia, the bishop as the earthly head of the church is identified as the supreme imitator of God’s munificence. The bishop, appointed by the one God, is the one shepherd of the one church as God wills (Ep. 69.5.1), and the church consists of the people who remain united with their bishop (Ep. 66.8.3). Then, as God’s representative, the bishop “becomes the fountainground of munificence, the patron of good works in his community.” Cyprian characterizes the ministry of charity as the defining feature of the church and his episcopacy (Epp. 14.2.2; 5.1.2; 12.1.1; 13.7); and there is a range of considerable charitable works that Cyprian as the authoritative imitator and redistributor of God’s generous bounties has undertaken and directed for those in spiritual and physical need (forgiveness and reconciliation for the lapsi and material aid for the poor and the confessors, including ransoming of captives).

Particularly, in his challenging context of theological and moral controversies of apostasy and socio-ecclesial factionalism for the control of church resources and charity, Cyprian succeeded in establishing himself as patron to his congregation and clergy, using both his personal and common funds and laying the theological and ecclesiastical foundation of Christianized patronage that would last for the ages to come. And by acting as patron, he secured political leverage, centralized charity, and therefore enhanced his ecclesiastical authority. While confronting a double challenge of facing opposition by a majority of the presbyters and some lower clergy members and of dealing with mass apostasy and readmission of the (wealthy) lapsi in his hideout during the Decian persecution, Cyprian attempted to take control of the situation in his congregation through following patronal activities. First, he insisted that only the bishop could dispense the church’s spiritual beneficia (i.e., reconciliation and readmission) to the lapsed by imposition of his hands based on the criteria approved by him, and he took charge of dispensing the church’s material beneficia (cash from


(12) Straw, “Cyprian and Mt. 5:45,” p. 335.

(13) Cf. ibid., p. 336.

(14) This is also characterized by Pontius as such.
the common funds, food, and clothing) to those in need of assistance (the poor and the confessors) through his loyal clergy. Note that he limited spiritual beneficia only to the lapsi (both the sacrifiers and the certified) who would submit to the public rituals and disciplines of penance in prayer, fasting, and almsgiving for an appropriate period of time based on the different types and levels of their apostasy (cf. Epp. 15.1.2; 16.2.3; 19; 21.2.2). The penitent who is obedient to the precepts and to the “bishops of God ... earns the Lord’s favour by his acts of submission and his just works (operatori iustis, e.g., almsgiving)” (Ep. 19.1). Those lapsi who refused the episcopal imposition of the penitential disciplines were excommunicated along with the laxist clergy who rebelled against Cyprian and demanded immediate reconciliation of the lapsi even without penance.

Note also that he confined material beneficia only to the deserving and meritorious, i.e., those confessors who would uphold Cyprian’s policy of readmission of the lapsi and submit to his episcopal authority in humility and loyalty (Ep. 14.2.2–3.2; cf. Epp. 5.1.2; 12.1.1; 13.7) and the poor who did not apostatize (stantes) during the persecution and remained loyal to him (Ep. 12.2.2; cf. 14.2.1; 5.1.2). On the one hand, while Cyprian did acknowledge a privileged status of the confessors who would sit at the final judgment as “the Lord’s friends” and thus their spiritual power to intervene with God on behalf of the lapsi (e.g., Epp. 15.1–3; 6.2), he chastised those confessors who collaborated with the laxist faction by writing the wealthy lapsi letters of reconciliation for money without his episcopal authorization (Ep. 15.3.2). On the other hand, while he made sure that the confessors in need were generously cared for both from the common fund and his personal resources (Ep. 14.2.2; cf. Epp. 5.1.2; 12.1.1; 13.7; 77.3.1; 78.3.1; 79.1.1), he at the same time unequivocally reminded those confessors who had received the church’s assistance (through his direction and approval) that he was indeed their patron through and through and that they were therefore expected and obligated to obey his will which in fact reflected God’s own (Epp. 14.2.2; 12.1.1; 13.7; 5.1.2). After all, the bishop, as God’s representative and successor of the apostles, “stands alone” and commands obedience on God’s behalf (Ep. 66.4.1). If these confessors were

(15) A dying penitent with a letter of peace from the martyrs would be received back as an exception — Ep. 19.2.1.

(16) Already in Tertullian, Mart. 2; Origen, Mart. 30; and Cyprian’s contemporary, Dionysius of Alexandria in Eusebius, HE 5.42.5.
to object to his authority and not “conduct themselves humbly, modestly, and peacefully,” they would be excluded from his patronage — i.e., church’s assistance (Ep. 14.2.2). Since “the bishop is in the church and the church is in the bishop,” whoever “is not with the bishop is not in the church” (Ep. 66.8.3). Therefore, for Cyprian this seemingly harsh decision would still be justified because those who oppose the bishop “by definition defy the Church and lack charity”; for Cyprian, bishop, church, and ministry of charity (to the worthy) always belong together, and the confessors “lack what the bishop has, [i.e.,] the power and organization to perform great eleemosynary works, a history of charitable deeds.” It seems that, in the words of Bobertz, “Cyprian believed that in making the confessors clients, he would in turn have a prior claim on the spiritual resources they might control.” By his material patronage of the confessors, he tried to curtail and control any spiritual patronage the confessors exercised independently of his supervision, especially in aiding the laxist party toward an open rebellion, and a rival charity toward the “other poor” (i.e., the undeserving and unfaithful — the poor lapsi and the unruly confessors). The laxist faction likely created (or at least attempted to create) an alternative network of spiritual and material patronage through those confessors who collaborated with them and through the wealthy lapsi who would provide resources for the ministry of charity in return for the “fast track” readmission, respectively. Whereas he was willing to compromise the progressive readmission of the lapsi in consultation with the episcopal council and his congregation, he would surely not let the confessors dictate the term whatever spiritual prerogative they might have. In respect for the confessors, “Cyprian was prepared to accept their libelli purely as recommendations to be acted on at his episcopal pleasure.” In dispensing and controlling both spiritual and material beneficia as the imitator and administrator of God’s benefaction, Cyprian consistently stressed the recipients’ (clients’) submission to the bishop (patron) as quintessential condition and expectation in reciprocity.

(17) Straw, “Cyprian and Mt. 5: 45,” p. 336; cf. the similar charge against heretics by Ignatius, Smyrn. 6.2.
(18) Ibid., p. 336.
(19) Bobertz, “Cyprian of Carthage as Patron,” p. 158.
(20) Ibid., pp. 163–191.
Second, he strove to keep the loyalty of the rest of the clergy and created new “client” clergy in Carthage who would be loyal to and dependent on him (Epp. 38–40).\(^{22}\) For one thing, Cyprian clearly saw the status difference between himself and his clergy as both social and religious; his flight during the persecution was necessitated because he was a person of prominence (insula persona) (Ep. 8.1.1), whereas his clergy could carry on their delegated ministry in Carthage since they were not (cf. Epp. 5.2.1; 13.4.2; 14.2.1).\(^{23}\) Cyprian also (though not unusually) expected the proper obedience and subservience of his deacons to the episcopal authority and commands befitting their station or position (locus) (Ep. 3.1.1).\(^{24}\) Then, in the face of the major clerical opposition, Cyprian bypassed what was apparently a customary policy of consulting the existing clergy and unilaterally appointed two young confessors, Aurelius and Celerius, as lectors of the Carthaginian church (Epp. 38–39). Moreover, he informed the existing clergy and laity that he “marked them out for the rank of presbyter” (Ep. 39.5.2). With these unusual moves, Cyprian was “now not only restoring the depleted ranks of his clergy” but also “drawing into his clerical following what [had] proved to be a source of potential rivalry and rebellion — those blessed with the special graces and spiritual prerogatives of confessors.”\(^{25}\) It is indeed significant that these young confessors appear to have been leaders among the confessors who objected to Cyprian by granting their own reconciliation to the lapsi (Epp. 27.1; 23).\(^{26}\) Therefore, in order to defend his potentially controversial but politically savvy decision, he went to great lengths to talk about hav-

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\(^{24}\) Cf. Ep. 12.1.1, for a reference to Cyprian’s own locus (station, position) and gradus (rank); see Clarke, The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage, vol. 2, transl. and annotation by G. W. Clarke (ACW, 44), New York, Ramsey, NJ, 1984, p. 15: “one gets a sense of the grand seigneur prospect from which Cyprian viewed his clerics. They were ministri, that is to say, his servants, recipients of the sportulae which he dispensed. It was not merely desirable, it was altogether necessary that he should have such clerics at his disposal, for the dispatch of his letters (Ep. 29)...”


ing been guided by the divine stamp of approval and a vision as well as their extraordinary virtues and qualities (e.g., *Epp*. 38.1; 39.1.1–2). In addition, Cyprian enrolled Numidicus, the presbyter and confessor from another community, in the Carthaginian presbyterate with similar praises concerning him (*Ep*. 40). Cyprian insisted that these were necessary appointments because the depleted number of clerics in Carthage was scarcely enough for the daily works (*operis*) of the church (*Ep*. 29.1.1). These new clerical clients of Cyprian’s joined the ministry of the existing presbyters and deacons who had been given the charge to care for the poor and the confessors in the absence but on behalf of the bishop and thus to keep material patronage intact in the face of the laxist party led by the deacon Felicissimus (*Epp*. 14; 5; 41.1). Of equal significance, Cyprian declared that the new appointees were to receive the equal salary and honor as the current presbyters of Carthage (*Ep*. 39.5). Cyprian, making several references in his letters about the clerical salaries/stipends (*stipendia*), clearly indicated that those were given because the clergy would (and should) devote their full attention and devotion to the sacred ministry (*Epp*. 1.1.2; 34.4.2; 39.5.2; cf. *Ep*. 42.2.1). While presbyters and deacons also received allowances (*sportulae*) apparently from the gifts of the faithful, it was the bishop who dispensed those allowances and the monthly stipends (*divisiones*) to them according to various levels of office (*Ep*. 39.5.2; cf. *Ep*. 42.2.1). Thus, the episcopal distribution of clerical *beneficia* (i.e., gifts and payments) put them under the line of Cyprian’s patronage and the expectation of their loyalty to be reciprocated in return even as they distributed material *beneficia* as (proxy) patrons to those in need under the direction of and on behalf of the bishop.

The fixed clerical salary, which is a sign of professionalization of clergy, which was in turn a part of greater institutionalization of church, was a new development in the proto-orthodox Church in the (mid-) third century. It was initially attested in the late second century

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(27) Cf. Bobertz, “Cyprian of Carthage as Patron,” p. 193: “it was precisely the act of appointing new clerics for Carthage which would be the most likely to upset the precarious balance of power relations between Cyprian and the clergy.”


within the circle of the sectarian New Prophecy. An anti-New Prophecy writer, Apollonius (recorded by Eusebius), accuses its founder Montanus of appointing “collectors of money,” organizing “the receiving of gifts under the name of offerings,” and providing salaries for those preachers of New Prophecy “in order that its teaching might prevail through gluttony” (Eusebius, *HE* 5.18.1–2). Apollonius goes on to accuse the prophetess Priscilla for receiving “gold and silver and expensive clothes” (Eusebius, *HE* 5.18.4). Along with other confessors of New Prophecy, these leaders were denounced for their “avarice” of making gain “not only from the rich but from the poor and from orphans and widows” and their disobedience of the scriptural commandment forbidding a prophet receiving gifts and money (Eusebius, *HE* 5.18.4, 7). Presumably, the followers of New Prophecy (“the rich, the poor, orphans, and widows”) supported their prophets and confessors with gifts and offerings (their common fund?) not unlike the instructions given concerning prophets who wanted to settle in the Diddachist community (*Did* 13.7); but Apollonius’ (and also Eusebius’) bias against this “heresy” apparently prompted this unsavory charge and colored his characterization. That the proto-orthodox Church employed the accusations of financial scandals of paid leaders/clergy against sectarian and heretical groups is confirmed by other reports by Eusebius and Irenaeus. Eusebius reports that around the same time (late second century) the disciples of Theodotus “the cobbler,” who taught the heresy that Christ was a mere man ( adoptionism ) and therefore who was excommunicated by Victor, bishop of Rome, deceived a certain confessor Natalius to be their sectarian bishop with a fixed salary of one hundred fifty denarii per month (Eusebius, *HE* 5.28.10). Although Natalius eventually repented in public in tears and humiliation, after having repeated visions of the Lord warning him of his “covetousness,” “he was scarcely admitted into communion” by Zephyrinus, Victor’s successor (Eusebius, *HE* 5.28.11–12). Irenaeus, the major heresiologist bishop, linked the reason behind the secrecy of gnostic teachings with gnostic teachers’ practice of receiving “a high price” for teaching their mysteries (*Adv. Haer.* 1.4.3; cf. 1.13.3).

What the proto-orthodox Church had thought of as a sectarian and heretical “novelty” of paying their leaders/clergy with gifts and fixed stipends became within a few decades a mainstream, “orthodox” practice with growing hierarchy and disparity between clergy and laity. Thus, in addition to Cyprian’s witness, the *Didascalia* states that clergy, following after the Old Testament priests and Levites, is
to receive from the people the service of food, clothing, and “other things” (8). And in equal importance, whatever the widow receives from the people, the deacon is to receive double, the presbyter double, and the bishop quadruple (9). “To every [ecclesiastical] position,” the laity is supposed to “pay the honor which is right to him, by gifts and honors and with earthly reverence” (9). This discriminating honor and gifts according to one’s clerical rank as in the case of Cyprian’s congregation, recalls the contemporary Greco-Roman practice of citizens and members of associations receiving public gifts in proportion to their status (not to their needs) as a way to confirm and reinforce social hierarchy. Now in a Christian context, “the bishop receiving the largest share with the lower clergy receiving lesser amounts (but always more than the laity, even widows!) would have served to reinforce the hierarchical structure of the Christian community.” As in the case of Cyprian, while the congregation is responsible to honor and support clergy with gifts in acknowledgement of their dependent status, the bishop is to dispense to his clergy, thirty-three in total (3.5), from the same offerings and gifts given by people for charity (the common fund) (8). Bishop Cornelius’ run-down of massive one hundred fifty-four Roman clergy suggests that they were also regularly supported by the common chest (most likely in proportion to their rank as well), along with more than fifteen hundred widows and people in affliction (Eusebius, HE 6.43.11).

The upshot of all of these developments is the perception and reality that “all good things flowed from the bishop,” while his status was maintained “in relation to lower clergy, lay patrons, and people” in all respects through “the structure and process of the patron-client social exchange.” The bishop, now the ecclesiastical benefactor par excellence, both steered and responded to this perception and reality. Richard Gordon has shown how the fusion of Roman public beneficence and the sacrificial system of imperial and civic priesthood (by the same elite individuals) implicitly legitimated “both the divine necessity and

(32) It mandates the presence of 12 presbyters, 7 deacons, and 14 subdeacons in 3.5.
(34) Bobertz, “Cyprian of Carthage as Patron,” p. 73.
the social responsibility of the existing social order.”

Similarly, the fusion of marked munificence and sacerdotal authority and distinction of the bishop with theological justification might reflect a Christianized version of that “divine necessity and social responsibility” of the ecclesiastical and social hierarchies within the church. And the church, headed by the bishop and his clergy, functioned as a benefactor to the poor and positioned itself as an advocate of the poor in solidarity with them even as it accumulated wealth and other resources more and more (often in the name of benefaction to the poor). Thus the consolidation of clerical (episcopal) power and the articulation of the church’s explicitly self-identifying ministry for the poor occurred concurrently in close relation to each other. This role of the church had an interesting layer of complexity against the social background of clergy that, while an increasing number of bishops such as Zephyrinus and Cyprian came from a rich elite background with financial means, most of the clergy came from the lower status and “middling” group who were still vulnerable to poverty well into the fourth and fifth centuries (cf. Cyprian, Epp. 5.2.1; 13.4.2; 14.2.1). With a more manifest ministry of “ecclesiastical redistribution of wealth (which was never questioned as such),” the magnetic power of the church was also exhibited in attracting those Christian men “who found it difficult enough to support themselves in normal conditions” now into the high calling of clerical profession “with gusto.”


(37) P. Brown, Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire, Menahem Stern Jerusalem Lectures, Hanover, NH, 2002, pp. 20, 48–50. During the Valerian persecution, Cyprian was first condemned to exile (deportatio) befitting his higher social status (later executed by sword), while his Numidian bishop colleagues were condemned to the mines (opus metalli), which was a plebian punishment (Ep. 76). The Church, however, especially in the major cities such as Rome, Antioch, Alexandria, and later Constantinople, did increasingly recruit its clergy from the “wealthy urban classes of professionals and merchants” in the Late Antiquity. See J. Hillner, “Clerics, Property and Patronage: The Case of the Roman Titular Churches,” Antiquité Tardive, 14 (2006), p. 68.

(38) Brown, Poverty and Leadership, p. 20.
The church then navigated a balancing act between keeping the faithful’s (especially the rich’s) motivation for almsgiving on high to meet increasingly overwhelming needs and keeping them (the rich) in check and control in proper respect for clerical authority and institutional structure through which the appropriate means of salvation were to be found. Although somewhat simplistic, Countryman’s words hold largely true that “the finances of the church were ...divided between two groups of people: the role of the rich was to give, that of the ministers to spend” (162). Again, the rich were certainly not the only group of the faithful who contributed; however, they were the most targeted and solicited group by the bishop to give and whom the church depended on not only for manifold works of charity but also for the support of clergy now. As the patronage of the Christian wealthy largely shifted to that of the bishop who controlled the church treasury, and as the wealthy increasingly lost control of their donation and influence on the congregation in the traditional mode of Roman patrons, there were occasional tensions between the clergy and their rich members. In the traditional Christian teaching, the rich were constantly urged to give without expecting in return from their recipients here and now (except an eschatological return from God) but at the same time were given perennial warnings about the danger of their wealth and chastisement of their arrogance and indifference (in continuity with the New Testament). However, the rich could and did at times disregard or show their disapproval of the clergy (i.e., withheld their loyalty) by refusing to give or by giving only small amounts; some of them even attempted to influence and control clergy and the episcopal elections and collaborated with clergy whose policies would reflect their interests with their resources (e.g., the wealthy lapsi with laxist clergy in Carthage; wealthy laymen usurping the episcopal

(39) So far I have found only one text that explicitly exhorts the clergy (presbyter) to give alms: Peter of Alexandria, *On Riches* (74).


privilege of hospitality in Jerome, *In. ep. ad Titum* 1.8–9). Conversely, the bishops/clergy could and did promote and plead for more prodigal contributions for the common treasury by theological rationales of the spiritual benefits of alms on the one hand and by theological threats of divine judgment and punishments as well as moral/social shaming of selfishness of the rich on the other. The ever intensified clerical denunciation of avarice, luxury, and stinginess of the rich and their correspondingly elaborate promises of spiritual rewards and returns for the willing obedience (i.e., “cheerful giving”) of the rich well into the Late Antiquity (and beyond) indicate that the balance was indeed a hard act to achieve.

**Conclusion**

The church centralized its charitable ministry under the authority and administration of the bishop, who emerged as God’s earthly representative and a preeminent imitator of his benefaction, justice, and mercy, by contextualizing the existing patronage networks revolving around him. The boundless spiritual and material munificence of God, the ultimate patron and father, was mediated through the spiritual and material *beneficia* dispensed by the bishop according to his unique prerogative, merciful discretion, and righteous judgment. As a chief of clergy, he was distinguished among the rest of clergy in responsibilities, honor, and gifts, as clergy as a whole was set apart from the laity, whose influence diminished in proportion to cultic and structural hierarchy. The greater the social and material needs of those in the church, the more necessary it became for the clergy to take charge of ministry of charity; and the greater the social and material needs of those in the church, the more necessary it became for the clergy to turn to the wealthier members to contribute more for the good of many, including their own. The bishop used his spiritual *beneficia* and punishments to “encourage” the wealthy to give sacrificially for distribution of his material *beneficia* that “the giving and the spending were the responsibilities of two distinct groups of people.”

This resulted at times in tensions between bishop (clergy) and wealthy laity as the transfer of patronage (and therefore power) from the latter to the former reinforced and became almost complete in the context of the larger institutionalization of the church; and this

larger institutionalization would become a presupposed and sacred reality in post-Constantinian Christianity.

**SUMMARY**

This paper argues and demonstrates that the church in the third century successfully institutionalized charity by fusing Christian charity and Greco-Roman patronage, or rather Christianizing patronage, for the care of the poor and the vulnerable. At the center of this significant development was the clergy, particularly the bishop, who, acting as patron, centralized almsgiving as a means of social cohesion and social control. This is most clearly exemplified in the Syriac ecclesiastical manual Didascalia and the theology and activities of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage. The church with the episcopal power then consolidated its patronal power that allowed itself to collect, own, and distribute alms and services on behalf of the poor and others in need and therefore made itself the rightful recipient of alms and their sole dispenser — the development which Constantine would find ready for the service of the empire.