The human compassion and mercy that were the ideals of social justice influenced not only the formation of ecclesiastical law and the application of discipline, but also the way in which the church interacted with the world. That the poor should be cared for was the practical result of an ideological change in the notion of justice, discussed in the previous chapter, from a Stoic model that viewed human associations as the calculated, rational means to certain social ends, to a Christian altruism, in which human beings, by their very nature, were responsible for each other.

Long before Christianity became the state religion, Graeco-Roman society had devised various means by which to ameliorate human suffering. Food shortages were regularly addressed by private benefactors, who sometimes served as government officials charged with administering the grain supply.\(^1\) A system of patronage also operated throughout the Graeco-Roman world, as Garnsey has remarked, in order to provide clients with “basic subsistence and physical protection.”\(^2\) To fulfill the expectations of congregations whose views were shaped by that world such bishops as Cyprian of Carthage, Ambrose of Milan, and especially Caesarius of Arles (d. 542) subsumed this long-standing system of patronage within the Christian ideology of charity, thereby “translat[ing Caesarius’] numerous acts of charity into political achievement,” as Klingshirn has observed.\(^3\) While this subtle shift in the ideological framework of social relationships was less developed in the thought of Leo, his contribution was to refine the theology of charity. He brought into sharper focus what constituted poverty, who the

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objects of poor relief were, and how those with means were to relate to those without.  

Although Leo was responsible for ministering to the poor of the city even before he became the bishop of Rome, i.e., when he served as archdeacon under Caelestine (pope, 422–432), his letters and sermons tell us almost nothing about the mechanics of that system. What those duties may have entailed can, nevertheless, be surmised from Ps. Clement of Rome, who said that deacons were to serve as “the eyes of the bishop”; they were “to learn who was sick from bodily disease, and to bring them to the attention of the people (if they are unaware) that they may visit them, and supply them with necessities according to the judgment of the bishop.”"5 Serving as “the eyes of the bishop” suggests that by the fourth century the deacon was charged with more than caring for the needs of the poor. He was expected to assuage human suffering in a variety of forms. Among the objects of poor relief that Leo, as bishop of Rome in the fifth century, attended to were “the illnesses of the dying, the feebleness of the infirm, the toils of those in exile, the abandonment of children, and the sorrows of widows in their loneliness.”6

Caring for the poor, sick, and otherwise needy required a steady source of funds, which was provided by the wealth of the church. That wealth consisted in the accumulation of individual donations as well as tax and other legal benefits, such as the right of the church to be named as the beneficiary in a will, that the state bestowed upon the church from the time of Constantine. When Leo became bishop, he was responsible for ensuring that such gifts continued to flow freely to the churches and for overseeing their distribution among those whom the church had registered on its list of the poor (‘matricula’). Encouraging almsgiving by his congregations was the way in which he

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6 Leo, Serm. 40.4, 1 March 442 (Recension A), Licet nobis, dilectissimi aegritudines decumbentium, inbecillitates debilium, labores (labor: B) exulum, destitutio pupillorum, et desolatarum lamenta (maestitudo: B) viduarum.