CHAPTER SEVEN

BREAKDOWN IN THE STRUCTURES OF DEPENDENCE

INTRODUCTION

Letters to patrons, whether to men or women, were performative in the sense that they actively maintained ties of obligation or other bonds. Thus they offer a window onto the structures of dependence that remained in the fifth and sixth centuries. The crisis in the structures of dependence from the fourth to the sixth centuries has recently become the focus of great scholarly attention, partially inspired by Brown’s *Poverty and Leadership*. Brown followed the theory of Patlagean that a shift from a civic model of social relations to an economic model of social relations occurred in this period, whereby the poor became “visible” to the rich as deserving of help.¹ Our own findings in *Preaching Poverty* revealed a major problem with applying this theory to the fourth and early to mid-fifth centuries:² namely, that the social obligations between givers and receivers that underpinned the economic model—and Brown’s positing of the adoption of a biblical “language of claims” of the poor on the rich—did not and could not exist without the sort of judicial system that framed Hebrew Scriptures (especially Psalms), in which the poor were recognized as a body with rights to protection. The Judaic judicial framework was weakened to the point of obliteration by the strong resistance of the Graeco-Roman models of both personal and public patronage. This was evident from the gap between rhetoric and praxis in the philanthropic activities of bishops of the fourth and first half of the fifth centuries (especially John Chrysostom, Augustine and Leo I of Rome), as well as from the evergetism practised by elite ascetics. While the Jewish model of almsgiving rested upon a precept of equal human dignity between rich and poor, the Christianization of the personal patronage model was ruthlessly

hierarchical. Over the vertical relationship between the worldly patron and client, it introduced a third agent, God, the ultimate patron, who constituted the highest level of the social/spiritual hierarchy and to whom the debt of the sinner could never be repaid. Late-antique Christian charity in fact had four agents: the giver, the passive receiver, God, and the conduit/steward (bishop or ascetic) who mediated wealth, goods and services. All took turns to play the roles of creditor and debtor, giver and receiver.¹

From the late fifth through the sixth centuries, these traditional social structures were breaking down. The increasing aristocratization of the episcopate over the course of our two centuries of interest has been noted in the literature on Gallic and Roman bishops.⁴ The same trend can be observed in the East, where former consuls or curiales were often fast-tracked to the episcopate.

While there are several lengthy treatise-letters which are wholly or partly concerned with the value of poverty, such as Salvian of Marseille’s Ad ecclesiam sive adversus avaritiam, the anonymous Epistula de vera humilitate ad Demetriadem and the Pelagian tract Ad Celantiam,⁵ these tend to focus on spiritual or voluntary poverty adopted by elite ascetics. Bishops’ letters contain few pleas on behalf of the poor in general. Exceptions are Gelasius I’s appeal to Theodoric’s mother, Hereleuva, for assistance with poor relief, and his expression of thanks to a noblewoman who had returned estates (praededia) that had been stolen from the Roman church—whether by Ostrogoths or by Romans—for the feeding of the poor.⁶ Several other examples from Pelagius I will be treated below. Most bishops’ letters on this subject concern the formerly wealthy who have been impoverished by circumstances, as we saw in the letters of recommendation written by Theodoret of Cyrrhus on behalf of displaced persons.⁷ Wealth, nobility and connections seem to have played an important part in the success of individual petitions for aid. Supporting evidence for this bias in Rome and Ravenna comes from the

---


⁶ Frag. 36; ed. Thiel, p. 502; Frag. 35 to illustri Firmina; ibid., pp. 501–502.

⁷ Case-study 4 in Chapter 3 above.