

## **At the Third Altar: Caring for the Treasures of the World**

Rt Rev'd Prof Stephen Pickard  
Executive Director  
Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture  
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### *Reassessing Wealth and Treasures*

Laurence of Rome (Latin: *Laurentius*, 225–258) was one of the seven deacons of Ancient Rome under Pope Sixtus II. When Sixtus became the Pope in 257, he ordained Laurence as a deacon, and though still young appointed him first among the seven deacons who served in the patriarchal church. Laurence was therefore called 'archdeacon of Rome'; a position of great trust that included the care of the treasury and riches of the church and the distribution of alms among the poor.

At that time the Roman authorities had established a rule according to which all Christians who had been denounced must be executed and their goods confiscated by the Imperial treasury. At the beginning of August 258, the Emperor Valerian issued an edict that all bishops, priests, and deacons should immediately be put to death. Pope Sixtus was captured at the cemetery of St. Callixtus while celebrating the liturgy and executed forthwith.

After the death of Sixtus, the Prefect of Rome demanded that the person responsible for the church's treasures, Deacon Laurence, turn over the riches of the Church. Tradition has it that Laurence asked for three days to gather together the wealth. He worked swiftly to distribute as much Church property to the poor as possible, so as to prevent its being seized by the prefect. On the third day, at the head of a small delegation, he presented himself to the Prefect. When Laurence was ordered to give up the treasures of the Church he presented the poor, the crippled, the blind and the suffering, and said these were the true treasures of the Church. One account records him declaring to the prefect, 'The Church is truly rich, far richer than your emperor'. The consequence of this act of defiance was that St Laurence,

the last of the seven deacons, suffered a martyr's death.

Who are the treasures of the church? 'In as much as you have done it to least of these my brothers and sister you have done it to me'. It's pretty clear who Jesus regarded as the treasures of his society; it was the least – those forgotten, ignored looked down upon, those passed by on the other side of the road, those wandering the face of the earth (60 million of them at present with nowhere to lay their head), those in boats, dying in trucks, caught in crossfire, the poorest and most forlorn.

I count it an honour to have been asked to give this annual John Roffey lecture. I knew John personally, and I certainly knew of his reputation and his deep commitment to the poor and marginalized from his time as CEO of Anglicare South Australia. Before his work with Anglicare John was and always remained a scholar of Hebrew Scripture with a passion for the prophetic.

He was a fearless and scholarly advocate for the treasures of God. How many occasions would you have found John passionately defending those forgotten and depowered as a result of government policies that disenfranchised the poor, made it more difficult to meet the needs of the disadvantaged and whose final effect was to increase inequalities. John was acutely aware of where the true treasures of the people of God could be found. And I use this phrase in the broadest sense of all of God's children. Basic to Christian faith is an affirmation that all human beings are created in the image of God; none are superior to others and all are worthy of recognition and respect. To bear the image of the Maker is to bear the image of the One who treasures all things irrespective of race, creed, colour, language or religion. And this of course goes to the contentious issue about who should be given priority among the Syrian refugees. There should be no discrimination according to race, colour, religion. Nor I might add on the basis of who will bring more skills to this country – economic discrimination is never far from the door.

John was a defender of the treasures of God. The spirit that inspired courage and faithfulness in St Laurence is an eternal spirit. This same spirit inspired John. He was not someone who would have been ever prepared to sacrifice the poor and

disadvantaged to the gods of power on the altar of greed. In truth the altar of greed occupies a prominent place in our present day Australia. This altar is built upon the maxim of 'I consume, therefore I am'. Greed has an insatiable appetite. It is a voracious altar and it gobbles up many. The litmus test is simple: the level of inequalities between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' is increasing. And alas we of the 'haves' are, without even thinking, complicit in this new consumer religion which consumes the lives of the 'have nots'.

In my address today I want to briefly consider the wealth and treasures of Anglicare – I am not referring to the assets ledger much beloved of Anglicare Boards. I am referring of course to the real treasures which make sense of the work of Anglicare. In particular I would like to take a brief moment to locate these treasures within the greater economy, not the economy of the state and its bean counters and budget allocations, but the economy of God's love. Where do the treasures fit within God's new economy? Have the treasures of God an altar where they are no longer sacrificed to the gods of power and greed but a different altar where they are appreciated as the great gifts to the world? I want to talk about the third altar of the poor.

*St Chrysostom Advocate for the poor*

To help me do this I want to return to the fourth century preacher and writer, St. John Chrysostom Archbishop of Constantinople (modern day Istanbul) 347-407. One of the great cities of the ancient world. Chrysostom was known for his eloquence in preaching and public speaking. He was a fierce denouncer of wealth, envy and greed and abuse of authority by both ecclesiastical and political leaders. He had a saying: 'As a moth gnaws a garment, so doth envy consume a man'.

This 'prophet of charity' gained a reputation as the 'golden mouth' of the ancient world. In an age which didn't have sophisticated means of communication – many books, loud speakers, power point, email, internet, podcasts, twitter, Ted talks; where aural communication was the staple diet – Chrysostom was an orator and preacher of the highest caliber. He could hold his hearers with conviction,

argument and oratory. Barack Obama is a fine modern example – did you hear his oration at the funeral of the 9 people murdered in the Charlottesville church, Virginia, USA – he spoke, paused for what seemed an eternity, then spoke, then of course broke into song.

Chrysostom above all was an advocate for the poor and a constant thorn in the side of the wealthy. His seven sermons on Lazarus and the rich man are justly famous in the early church on the theme of wealth and poverty.<sup>1</sup>

The Orthodox Church priest and theologian, Fr. Florovsky writes that Chrysostom ‘simply could not evade social problems without detaching Christianity from life, but social problems were for him emphatically religious and ethical problems’.<sup>2</sup> He was concerned with the renewal of society, with the healing of social ills. He was preaching and practicing charity, founding hospitals and orphanages, helping the poor and destitute. He wanted to recover the spirit of practical love. He wanted more activity and commitment among Christians; to follow the way of Jesus into the world. Chrysostom was always against compromise, against the policy of appeasement and adjustment. No doubt he would not have made a good politician in today’s world; those who chop and change their principles or simply bully to get their way, driven by self-interest, but often dressed up as care for the common good. We are in a sorry state. We need a Roffey, a Laurence, a Chrysostom. Chrysostom was a prophet of an integral and practical Christianity. And that meant connecting faith with helping those he saw lying and scrounging on the streets and in the lanes of Constantinople.

Not surprisingly one of his constant and favorite subjects was that of wealth and misery. He was not primarily a social reformer, even if he had his own plans for Christian society. He was concerned with the ways of Christians in the world, with

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<sup>1</sup> *St John Chrysostom on Wealth and Poverty*, translated and introduced by Catherine P Roth, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, New York, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> *St John Chrysostom: Prophet of Charity*, Archpriest Georges Florovsky, [www.catholicculture.org](http://www.catholicculture.org)

their duties, with their vocation. In his sermons we find, first of all, a penetrating analysis of the social situation. He finds too much injustice, coldness, indifference, self-interest, suffering and sorrow in the society of his day. It is all about the acquisitive spirit of life. This acquisitive spirit breeds inequality, and therefore inequality and injustice. He is upset and angered by the fruitless luxury of life. He regards wealth as a standing temptation. Wealth seduces the rich. Wealth itself has no value. It is a guise, under which the real faces of human beings are concealed. Those who hold possessions come to cherish them, and are deceived; they come to value them and rely on them. All possessions, not only the large ones, are dangerous, in so far as we humans learn to rely upon what is, by its very nature, something passing and unreal. How would we survive this preaching? He was a tough nut precisely because he cared for the poor.

### *The Altar of the Poor*

In one of Chrysostom's sermons on poverty based on the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Church at Corinth (1 Corinthians 9) he is concerned to connect the Church and its central act of worship i.e. the Eucharist, with the poor of the world. It's a fair enough issue. Basically what's the point of week in week out breaking bread, sharing a common cup to remember the One whose life was given for others, if this has no connection to what is happening in the world to those in need. An age old issue, a very real contemporary issue. Chrysostom addresses the issue head on. He wants a practical Christianity but he desires a principled practice. He wants head and heart on the same page.

There is a saying: what the heart loves, the will chooses and the mind justifies. So you can find out what people really love, where their deepest passion is if you listen to the reasons they give for anything, push back to what they have obviously chosen and behind that is revealed what they really love. For example on refugees you know what is really important by tracing the arguments given for policies back to what lies behind them, in choices and deepest concerns e.g. political self-preservation might be what is really loved. And once this is chosen then reasons

are given which usually mask this love of the heart. Well so it is in most things. The theological reasons Chrysostom gives for the connection between Christ, the church and the poor, when you trace them back you discover Chrysostom has a heart for the poor. So his theology is not playing with words but a robust defense of his love for the poor. And he needs to make his case because of the apathy, ignorance and prejudice of the wealthy of the great city of Constantinople.

Chrysostom appeals to the image of the altar.<sup>3</sup>

The first altar is the altar of Christ's cross and resurrection. The stone that was rolled away from the tomb becomes, if you like, the new stone of the altar of Christ. This new altar is prefigured in the Old Testament upon which the sacrifices were offered. With the coming of Christ the stone altar of Old Testament sacrifice is radicalized. Christ becomes the new altar. Through Christ's sacrifice he forms from the stone altar of ancient times, a new living body. The altar of the cross - Christ's life of loving service and sacrifice comes to finality in the cross. It is the basis of our life. We owe everything to the altar of the cross and it gives our life meaning and purpose. However the cross of Christ has no independent existence, free floating above and beyond the world lost in some cyber space of the mind.

Rather the altar of the cross is 'refracted, as it were, into two closely connected altars'<sup>4</sup>: the stone altar made up of the ecclesial body of Christ, which is the second altar. And a special part of that body, i.e. the poor; which constitutes the third altar. Chrysostom states in his homily the stone altar 'is made of Christ's members themselves, and the body of the Lord becomes your altar'. In other words the altar of the cross expresses itself practically in two altars that are set up in the world.

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<sup>3</sup> Homily 20, *The Homilies of St John Chrysostom, Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Philip Schaff Gen. Ed., Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1989, Vol. 12, pp. 372-374.

<sup>4</sup> I am quoting from J M R Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ: At the Sources of the Ecclesiology of Communion*, Collegeville, Minnesota, The Liturgical Press, 2001, p. 69.

In the first place the church gathers to remember the life of Jesus by breaking bread as a symbol of his life given and by drinking from the common cup as a symbol of the life poured out for others. This is an altar of thanksgiving (this is the meaning of the word 'Eucharist'); it is the sacrament of salvation and healing. This is the second altar.

But what makes this altar of the body of Christ more 'awesome' than the altar of the Old Testament is not simply Christ, but the poor who make the altar of the ecclesial body 'more awesome'. This is the third altar. The stone altar becomes holy because Christ's body touches it; but that body is especially holy and sacred because of the presence of poor of that body. Chrysostom would have joined with those of more recent years who refer to the Church's 'preference for the poor'. The late former Bishop of Liverpool and former English cricketer, David Sheppard wrote a book and preached about the Church's 'bias to the poor' – a modern day Chrysostom perhaps? John Roffey was in the same mould.

The altar upon which the Eucharist is celebrated is simply stone and those who gather at this altar remain stony hearted if they are not connected to a third altar. This is the altar of the poor. How can the church remember Jesus who gave his life that the world might live if that same church forgets the world that is in need and the world that Christ came to save? The altar of the sacrament has to express itself in the altar of the poor.

So then there are three altars and they are all related and each has a place in the kingdom of God and without the third altar of the poor the cross and the Eucharist are diminished. Or from a different point of view, the Eucharist that celebrates Christ's life and sacrifice is not complete until the Church as body of Christ offers its sacrifice on the altar of the poor. Here is the final altar that shines a light upon the Eucharist and Christ's life.

Chrysostom was critical of the Church of his day because on the one hand it honours the stone altar 'because it receives Christ's body'; but on the other hand that same Church treats with contempt 'those who are themselves the body of Christ ... as they die'. He is talking about the poor. The poor 'are the most sacred part of the altar 'made' by the Eucharist'. He says 'You can see that altar [of the poor] everywhere, lying in the lanes and market places'. He observes that while the priest invokes the Spirit at the Eucharist the people of God invoke that same Spirit 'not by speech but by deeds because nothing so kindles and sustains the fire of the Spirit as this oil [of sacrifice at the altar of the poor] poured out in abundance'.

### *Anglicare at the third altar*

The identity and mission of Anglicare will be clear, strong, faithful and fruitful if it focuses its work on the third altar. The core mission areas of Anglicare are only core as they encompass the life of the poor. But the poor is code for all those who are left out, or lack something essential to their well-being. It encompasses those on the margins; those neglected, despised, forgotten, ill-treated, abused; those regarded of no account socially, economically, politically and spiritually.

What this also means is that as Anglicare invests deeply in its core mission and seeks the altar of the poor in the world it illuminates, enhances and completes the identity and mission of the Church that gathers at the Eucharist. The body of Christ formed from the cross of Christ; the body that gathers at the altar of Christ, always in truth includes the altar of the poor. It is the poor who make the Eucharist real. Every consecration of the bread and wine at the altar of the Eucharistic is simultaneously a consecration of the ecclesial body to a life of sacrifice on the altar of the poor. Henceforth it matters little whether it's high church or low church; charismatic or contemplative; everything depends on whether it is *true* church. And the litmus test of the Church's truthful remembering of Jesus will be its sacrifice at the altar of the poor. Anglicare's story is at heart a story of the Eucharistic life of the Church of Jesus Christ continued in the world for which Christ died and rose again. And the spiritual nourishment that comes from remembering a life given re-



orientates and focuses and re-energises work at the third altar. Working at the third altar can be exhausting, people get burnt out, they can lose energy, even despair at times. The body count at the third altar seems to mount and policies and practices of the state and the powers of global corporations to squeeze the life blood from the least are often overwhelming. We need to be reconnected to the other two altars; an integrative and practical Christian practice includes an appropriate element of transcendence; reminding us that we don't live and work in our strength; there is a resource, a source of renewable energy that is found as people gather to remember the living God in the midst. Even our best work at the third altar can become another form of self-love unless it is given back to the Lord for a blessing and renewal.

Chrysostom wanted to wake up and motivate the comfortable, the wealthy to get involved and find real religion. He also wanted to remind those whose who got it, who saw the poor and labored hard that their work was not ultimately owned by them, that they were following in the footsteps of one who referred everything back to God.

Barbara Brown Parker, the American episcopal priest, writer and extraordinary preacher, in her book, *The Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* writes: 'Whoever you are, you are human. Wherever you are, you live in the world, which is just waiting for you to notice the holiness in it'. I like this very much. The treasure we seek is before us; just waiting for us to notice its holiness. It is the treasure of the poor; they constitute the true altar whose holy and sweet fragrance ascends to the Lord of heaven and earth. Chrysostom said the fragrance of the poor ascends not just to heaven but right to the top: 'It passes beyond heaven itself, and the heaven of heaven, and arrives at the throne of the King'. Although your work might indeed be undertaken silently and without fanfare nonetheless your work speaks volumes.

Anglicare's vocation, its reason for being is to preside at this altar. Jesus said, 'where your treasure is there also is your heart'. If the treasure of Anglicare is the poor then

that is where your heart will be. And what the heart loves, the will chooses and the mind justifies. This being the case for Anglicare, it means that the will, the collective will of Anglicare expressed through its vision, its policies, its strategies and what it delivers; that will is embodied in practical love, generous care. This is the justification for the existence of Anglicare. But it can be traced back to its treasures. Lose sight of the treasure and you lose sight of the reason for one's existence. This is the altar upon which the people of Anglicare are called to labour. Chrysostom captured it well when he appealed to the image of the bee: 'The bee is more honored than other animals, not because she labors, but because she labors for others'; labouring at the third altar for others. This is where we find the true treasures of our common humanity. At this altar we offer a sacrifice of praise and give ourselves to serving at this altar for the sake of our common humanity; as a way of serving the common good of the world.