

41. Among the Eastern Fathers, perhaps the most ardent preacher on social justice was Saint John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople from the late 300s to the early 400s. In his homilies, he exhorted the faithful to recognize Christ in the needy: "Do you wish to honor the body of Christ? Do not allow it to be despised in its members, that is, in the poor, who have no clothes to cover themselves. Do not honor Christ's body here in church with silk fabrics, while outside you neglect it when it suffers from cold and nakedness... [The body of Christ on the altar] does not need cloaks, but pure souls; while the one outside needs much care. Let us therefore learn to think of and honor Christ as he wishes. For the most pleasing honor we can give to the one we want to venerate is that of doing what he himself desires, not what we devise... So you too, give him the honor he has commanded, and let the poor benefit from your riches. God does not need golden vessels, but golden souls." [30] Affirming with crystal clarity that, if the faithful do not encounter Christ in the poor who stand at the door, they will not be able to worship him even at the altar, he continues: "What advantage does Christ gain if the sacrificial table is laden with golden vessels, while he himself dies of hunger in the person of the poor? Feed the hungry first, and only afterward adorn the altar with what remains." [31] He understood the Eucharist, therefore, as a sacramental expression of the charity and justice that both preceded and accompanied it. That same charity and justice should perpetuate the Eucharist through love and attention to the poor.

42. Consequently, charity is not optional but a requirement of true worship. Chrysostom vehemently denounced excessive wealth connected with indifference for the poor. The attention due to them, rather than a mere social requirement, is a condition for salvation, which gives unjust wealth a condemnatory weight. "It is very cold and the poor man lies in rags, dying, freezing, shivering, with an appearance and clothing that should move you. You, however, red in the face and drunk, pass by. And how do you expect God to deliver you from misfortune?... You often adorn an unfeeling corpse, which no longer understands honor, with many varied and gilded garments. Yet you despise the one who feels pain, who is torn apart, tortured, tormented by hunger and cold." [32] This profound sense of social justice leads him to affirm that "not giving to the poor is stealing from them, defrauding them of their lives, because what we have belongs to them." [33]

120. Christian love breaks down every barrier, brings close those who were distant, unites strangers, and reconciles enemies. It spans chasms that are humanly impossible to bridge, and it penetrates to the most hidden crevices of society. By its very nature, Christian love is prophetic: it works miracles and knows no limits. It makes what was apparently impossible happen. Love is above all a way of looking at life and a way of living it. A Church that sets no limits to love, that knows no enemies to fight but only men and women to love, is the Church that the world needs today.