

Comparing and Contrasting the Philosophy of Economics in Ancient Greece and in the New Testament. Towards a Fair Distribution of Wealth: From the Ancient Greek Syssitia to the Christian Common Meals of Love

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Introduction

A thorough understanding of the socio-economic views of the Disciples and of the construct of the primeval Church of Christ can better be achieved if they are examined and compared to the works of ancient Greek literature. Indeed, a comparative retrospective co examination of both the New Testament and the Greco-roman letters has become fundamental in the biblical, theological and philological research not only for the historic data they provide but also for their rich theological content.

Quite many comparative studies between the biblical and the Greco-roman literature have been put forward so far on the subject of credit and lending at interest¹, political philosophy², Household-economics and organization and administration of an economic unit³. This study considers the institution of syssitia, as it is described in specific constitutions (politeumata) in ancient Greek city states, and attempts its comparison to the institution of communal meals, an institution which is pivotal in primeval Apostolic Church. In this respect, it is essential to analyze the historic, anthropological and social background of the biblical texts [1-10].

A detailed research of the institution of syssitia in «prosperous» societies as described by Aristotle is presented in Section 1 of this study in order to effectively co examine the institution of ancient Greek syssitia and the construction of the vital components of the Primeval Church as well as the problems that entailed from its organization. The institution of the ancient Greek syssitia is viewed in the scope of a fair distribution of wealth, the accomplishment of which would bring «unity» (homonoia) among citizens and would eliminate discord and revolts in the state that implemented it.

One of the major concerns of the Disciples was to guarantee a unified Church, free of rivalry among its members. Section 2 analyzes the crucial role of the communal meals of love for the integrity of the Church. This institution reflected the socio-economic status of the particular community and determined the way goods were distributed among its members. Given the available data, the most characteristic example is the Church of Corinth. The problems among the scholars and the painful problem of «schisms» or «discords» that emerged in the Church of Corinth all derive from the uneven distribution of wealth. Section 3 compares the similarities and differences between

ancient Greek syssitia and communal meals. The Conclusions summarizes the outcome of this research.

The Institution of Syssitia

According to Aristotle, there were two prosperous city-states⁴ in antiquity that developed the institution of syssitia within a broad context of socio-economic institutions that were essential for their smooth function: Crete and Sparta.

The institution of syssitia appears to be the evolutionary form of symposia, a basic component of aristocratic life style that dates back to Homeric ages and was observed by a large number of areas in Greece, Asia Minor and Italy such as Megara, Boeotia, Macedonia, Miletus, and Thourioi. It was later abandoned except for the cases of Crete and Sparta. Other than Homer, the only reference about syssitia as an integral part of the organization of their social life but without much detail is made by Diodorus Siculus concerning the people living on the complex of Lipari Islands in the Tyrrhenian Sea, off the northeastern coast of Sicily [11-20].

In their effort to colonize Sicily around 580 BC, Greek colonists from Knidos were defeated by the locals and their leader, Pentathlos, was killed. On their way back home, their vessels were driven ashore Lipari, the largest of the Aetolian Islands, where they settled and organized their life anew on the site of the village now known as Castello. The colony successfully fought the Etruscans who tried to take over the islands and control the Tyrrhenian Sea. The inhabitants organized their defense in a way that would allow them to efficiently repel «the thieves». For this reason, they shared the tasks, they provided the division of labour, such as the «building of ships» and «farming the islands». They lived their life together, worked together and ate common meals at the syssitia. It is interesting to note that although there is scanty information about them, the life style of the inhabitants of Lipari consists «a small but interesting corner of Greek history», a case study of a society based on joint ownership and collective farming.

The organization and operation of syssitia in crete

The institution of the syssitia⁵ was considered extremely important for the maintenance of the social system and the security of social

¹ Maloney 1971, pp. 79-109; Gordon 1982, pp. 406-426; Especially for the Old Testament see Oikonomou 1973; Patras 2007, pp. 3-11.

² Antonopoulos and Terezis 2009, pp. 129-192.

³ Lehmeier 2006. Baloglou 2013, pp. 43-80.

⁴ Cf. Microyannakis 1972-1973, pp. 402-415; Idem, 2002-2003, p. 49. Baloglou 2011.

⁵ Cf. Mandalakis 2004, pp. 189-220.

peace in the Doric society of the Cretan cities where it was observed until the Hellenistic Ages. The Cretan syssitia and their organization, called *andreaia* according to Aristotle and Ephorus, attracted the interest of many writers among whom are Plato, Ephorus, Plutarch and the Cretan historians Dosiadas and Pyrgion.

Aristotle, who is concerned mostly with the physical and social aspect of the institution, after comparing the Spartan syssitia versus the Cretan, openly states his preference of the Cretan version of the institution. He briefly describes the operation of the syssitia: «In Crete they were even more communal. Of all the ripe fruit, livestock and income tax that the citizens brought in, a part was put aside for the gods and the communal ceremonies while the rest was offered to the communal meals so that everybody would eat, women, children and men together».

The citizens' exact contribution to the syssitia has been debated by many so in order to interpret the above citation accurately, we need to examine the inscriptions found in some Cretan cities, as for example in Gortyn⁶, Littos or Lyktos⁷ and Datala⁸. Following are some conclusions ensuing from the critical examination of the available data.

Firstly, the communal meals aimed at ensuring the equality and similar treatment of the citizens as far as provisioning was concerned by enabling the poor to eat on public funds. However, we should not overlook the fact that there existed a certain degree of socio-economic inequality as attested by an inscription found in Gortyn⁹. Inequality was already evident in the 5th century BC and is reflected in Aristotle's texts as well as in Ephorus' texts. Aristotle mentions a handful of powerful families who retained the privilege of passing power into alternative family stock, while Ephorus sees two distinct «classes», the wealthy and the poor, when he refers to the socio-economic reality of Crete [21-30].

Secondly, the syssitia burdened the community economically, especially those of Crete¹⁰. Each participant was to contribute to the syssitia by offering part of his yield. The citizens' contribution was the primary supply of the syssitia. In Crete contributions equaled 1/10 of the annual yield and therefore the danger of losing one's civil rights for not complying was essentially lower compared to that in other cities where citizens had to contribute to the syssitia equally regardless of the quantity of their yield¹¹. Thirdly, nourishment in communal meals under the auspices of the polis created in the citizens the sense of belonging and of being equally treated. And so political tensions were vented out which in other cities of the time would ultimately lead to the fall of aristocratic regimes¹².

Fourthly, the plenary participation of the population in the syssitia-women, children, teenagers and men- outlines the democratic nature of the institution. Women are in charge of the syssitia, take the best

quality food portions and offer them to those whose deeds in the war or in the community have been acknowledged. Fifthly, the physical environment of the operation of the syssitia, the syssitia *kosoikos* functioned also as a forum, a place where serious public affairs were discussed. It is during these discussions that the junior members of the syssitia were given the opportunity to become initiated in politics, learn the value of bravery and shape their character.

Sixthly, noteworthy is the term used by Aristotle as well as by other writers, regarding his vision of the ideal polis. Aristotle's objective is to ensure the minimum standards of living for all the citizens in his ideal polis so that none faces destitution. In the Athenian Democracy, the much sought public funds that would allow all the Athenians to eat at communal meals IV 33) were a vital issue. They were an issue that troubled 4th century BC financial policies and practices¹³.

The regulation and organization of the Spartan syssitia

The comparative examination of the Cretan and the Spartan syssitia results in important findings about their operational differences. In Sparta each male citizen undertook the responsibility of rendering an established amount of goods that made him eligible for participation in the syssitia. Failing to meet this obligation would automatically entail his exclusion from the syssitia and loss of civil rights. In Crete, however, the cost of the syssitia burdened mostly the city [31-40]. All the citizens had to bring in the ripe fruit, livestock and taxes part of which was put aside for the gods and the public ceremonies, while the rest was given to the syssitia to feed everyone in common meals.

Aristotle makes an unobjectionable statement here. The state functions as the supplier of the syssitia to a bigger extent in Crete than it does in Sparta¹⁴. In Crete the citizens' contributions came from their private property and constituted a regular source of replenishment for the syssitia. Although the Cretan syssitia are not explicitly stated in Aristotle's texts, their existence is considered certain, since common ownership characterizes the Cretan institution more than it characterizes the Spartan¹⁵. Consequently, the citation «from public funds» most probably refers to the income, produce and cattle that Cretan cities yielded from public and private land and pasture. The Cretan syssitia were supplied from the total amount of products that came from private or public land, from cattle that grazed in public land and from the fees paid by commissioned farmers. In this respect, it becomes easier to comprehend Aristotle's reference that in Sparta and in Crete the legislator had established through the institution of syssitia a form of communism at least as far as nourishment is concerned¹⁶.

Aristotle points out that in Sparta the institution of syssitia had developed quite differently from the legislator's initial intention. The citizens were to render the agreed upon contribution, «τὸ τεταγμένον», which was the same for everybody regardless of

⁶ Koerner 1993, No. 152; Efféterre and Ruzé 1994.

⁷ Dosiadas in FGrHist.458 F.2. For the problems of the critical presentation of the text cf. Latte 1968, p.299, not. 13; Link 1991, p. 123.

⁸ Efféterre and Ruzé 1994, I, No. 22 A1-10. For the problematic presentation and analysis of this text see Mandalakis 2004, pp. 205-207.

⁹ Fiorakis 1973.

¹⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* II 10, 1272 a17-18: «ἐν δὲ Κρήτη κοινότερος».

¹¹ Link 1994, pp. 14-20.

¹² Austin & Vidal-Naquet 1977, pp. 70-75. Mossé 1984 [1987] pp. 151-155.

¹³ Schütrumpf 1991, p. 338. For an extensive analysis of Aristotle's financial program see Baloglou 1998.

¹⁴ Link 1991, p. 119, not. 71; Talamo 1987, p. 17.

¹⁵ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* II 9, 1271 a28-29: «Ἐδειγὰρ ἀποκοινοῦ μάλλον εἶναι τὴν σὺν ὄδον, καθάπερ ἐν Κρήτῃ». Cf. Mandalakis 2004, p. 195.

¹⁶ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* II 5, 1263 b40- 1264 a1: «τὰ περὶ ἀκτῆσις ἐν Λακεδαίμονι καὶ Κρήτῃ τοῖς συσσιτίοις ὁνομαθῆται ἐκοινώσῃ».

one's productive potential. Those who failed to meet this obligation could no longer participate in the syssitia and lost their civil rights. There was a «requirement by the polis», a «paternal» one, according to which the one «who did not redeem the fee» was not allowed to be part of the community, that is of the polis, resulting in loss of civil rights. Therefore, the «democratic nature» of the syssitia ends up being «less democratic».

In conclusion, Sparta virtually applied economic criteria that had to do with the assets of her citizens in order to grant them civil rights and citizenship eventually resulting in the gradual decrease of their number. That became the cause of Aristotle's criticism.

It is interestingly enough, to point out, Saint Great Basil, Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia, who had classical Greek influences¹⁷, remembered on the organization of the Spartan syssitia. It is noteworthy that he delivered a speech,¹⁸ during the famine of AD 368 in Asia Minor, where there have been echoed the Spartan polity wrapped in Christian veil¹⁹, praising the system of common ownership so that people will be able to enjoy earthly goods. He reminisces both the ancient Spartan and Cretan customs as well as the life of the first Christians. «Let us enjoy what the charitable Greeks bequeathed to us», notes Saint Great Basil, since «their humanitarian laws designated one common dining table, common meals under a common roof for the populous citizens». And so he urges his fellow people to imitate the example of the first «three thousand Christians as they shared everything, their life, their soul, opinion and dinner table».

The above statement coming from a prominent priest of Christendom is of significant historic importance considering that it compares institutions of two very different ages.

The Institution of the syssitia in Aristotle's «best polis»

It is noteworthy that through his writing Aristotle reveals to us that the institution of syssitia is age old, the beginning of which is lost in the mists of myth. He states that the practice of syssitia is ancient; the ones in Crete took place around the ages of King Minos' reign, while the syssitia in Italy long before those. In his effort to identify the first one to initiate the institution, Aristotle mentions the «Italus», who turned the citizens of Oinotroi from nomads to farmers, established laws and was the first one to found the syssitia. This reference by Aristotle leads to the following conclusions [41-50].

Firstly, the institution of syssitia appears in organized societies and follows a special law order. With this statement, Aristotle implies that nomads are not law-abiding people. Secondly, the institution of syssitia derives from the peaceful co-existence of the citizens and does not have war-like origins, as Plato supports and is apparent in the constitution of his Republic²⁰.

The above information is consistent with Aristotle's²¹ both in terms of its components and its type. Similarly, he seizes the opportunity to emphasize that it is useful for the well organized cities to provide syssitia. Furthermore, he suggests that the buildings in which the

syssitia are offered be conveniently located near the ones that are dedicated to the gods and near those in which the city keeps its most important archives.

Evidently, what Aristotle bears in mind when he plans out his «best polis» that should be founded around the syssitia is the organization of the Cretan syssitia. A comparison between the two passages, the first one Politics II 10, 1272 a17-21 and the second one VIII 10, 1330a9-14 may as well be convincing. Their only difference is that in the passage that discusses land distribution and syssitia supplying in the best polis-state there is no provision for communal operations that apparently burdened the state-budget in Crete²², which Aristotle did not favor anyway. «Many of which he would be glad to abolish», as Newman remarks.

The Creation and Constitution of «Common Meals»

The social dynamics of the theology of the New Testament focus firstly on the problem of gender equality, secondly on the issue of slavery, thirdly on wealth management and fourthly on dealing with fringe groups.

From its early days already, the social organization of welfare was a matter of great importance for the Apostolic Church, the organization of which was gradually imposed by the Apostles on all the newly established Churches. Besides, the Apostles' mission was to meet both the material and spiritual needs of their followers as it is witnessed by the two miracles of feeding the multitudes that Jesus worked in Bethsaida. The first miracle, the feeding of the 5000 is present in all canonical Gospels: Matthew 14:13-21, Mark 6:31-44, Luke 9:10-17 and John 6:5-15. The second miracle, the feeding of the 4000 is reported by Mark 8: 1-9 and Matthew 15:32-39 and is also known as the miracle of the seven loaves and fish [51-60].

The organization of social welfare does not only present the Church as a systematically integrated society but is also vital for illustrating the pastoral activity of the Disciples and of all those who were authorized to do so since providing for the people was a task absolutely intertwined with the spiritual hypostasis (existence) and promotion of the members of the Church. This is clearly depicted in the New Testament by the term «society», which refers both to the mystical and spiritual life and also to the creation of a spirit of understanding among the members of the Church regarding the various needs that their fellow people faced²³. In the first Church of Jerusalem the organization of welfare began so dynamically that the system of common ownership was established almost immediately. «They shared everything, the farms and the property and made division of it among them all, as they had need» (Acts 2: 44-45). This is clearly a form of common ownership of commodities which took place in Palestine. It was dynamic in nature and constituted an act of love of the first, primeval Church²⁴.

In the primeval Apostolic Church social organization is evident already from the first days after Pentecost (Acts II: 42; 44-47; IV 23-37;

¹⁷ Schoinas 2006, pp. 263-279.

¹⁸ St. Great Basil «Homily (Ομιλία) ρηθείσα ενλιμώ και αυχμώ», PG 31, cols. 303-328.

¹⁹ Tsakonas 1955, p. 13.

²⁰ Cf. Schütrumpf 2005, pp. 397-398.

²¹ Aristotle, Politics VIII 1, 1332 a14. This term has been used also in other passages. Cf. Politics 1324 a17-18; 1334 a23-25.

²² Newman 1887[2000] p. 353. Cf. Latte 1968, p. 299.

²³ Acts 2: 42. Rom. 15:26; IICor. 8:4; Hebr. 13:16. 1 Ioan. 3:6-7.

²⁴ Cf. Hadjimichalis 1972,p. 113.

VI ; VI 1), especially after the establishment of joint ownership. Consequently, the conventional form of ownership which classifies people into wealthy and poor²⁵ was abolished by the Apostolic Church and was turned into an element of unity, an expression of equal participation of all its members in these goods, a true «society». In short, because «the multitude of the believers was one heart and one soul, no one claimed that their possessions were their own but rather that everything they had was common» and so there was none among them who was needy.

The existence of similar institutions in the community of Qumran²⁶ among the Healers of Egypt²⁷ and in Roman Collegia²⁸ does not diminish the value of the institution in the Primeval Church²⁹. The members of the community shared their assets willingly and voluntarily, those who owned lands or houses sold them in order to put the proceeds at the feet of the Apostles for distribution to everyone as needed.

This is not a random incident and neither is the term at his feet a figure of speech. It is the result of an age old procedure that began in the ages of the prophets Michaeas and Isaiah, when the practice of accumulating wealth was criticized as being the cause of destitution of farmers. It continues with the teaching of Jesus Christ who equated the practice of accumulating wealth to theft in accordance with the prophetic tradition and asked that the young and rich landowner sell the assets he had accumulated in order to give it to the poor who had lost their land through the mechanisms of land ownership, borrowing at interest and debt [61-69].

The procedure of selling property in order to give the money to the poor found a worthy imitator in the face of Barnabas, a Levite born in Cyprus. Barnabas sold a field he owned in the outskirts of Jerusalem and turned over its price to the Apostles to give it to the members of the Church³⁰. However, the case of Ananias and Sappheira was a warning to others. They also sold a piece of property but kept back part of the money for themselves and brought the rest to put it at the Apostle's feet saying that it was the whole fee. Ananias was punished with death by the Holy Spirit. «Upon hearing Peter, Ananias fell down and died» and so did his wife «at that moment she fell down at his feet and died».³¹

The way commodities were distributed among the first Christians and the way they were fed added another 3000 believers to their number on that day as Luke states. This number is so large that St. John Chrysostom exclaims: «If we could apply joint ownership in our days, both rich and poor would lead a better life. In fact, this would please the rich more than it would please the poor». And then he used some hypothetical numerical data to prove that to redistribute the rich people's wealth for the benefit of the poor would be in the best interest of the rich.

St John Chrysostom addressed the questions of wealth and poverty and described the voluntary nature of giving founded in indissoluble spiritual bonds among Christians. He pointed out that «they noticed that the spiritual assets are common and that nobody possessed more than the other and so they soon ended up giving away their material possessions. Their feeling was that they were under the paternal roof where there were no cold words as «mine» or «yours». So they felt comfortable to be able to sit at the dinner table together. Neither were the poor embarrassed nor did the wealthy brag about their riches. And that's exactly what made them feel graced. The poor felt that they were well taken care of and probably enjoyed themselves. And the rich also felt that they were praised and so they united with the poor».

St. John Chrysostom emphatically praised the voluntary efforts of the Christians to establish unity and made a great mark of honor «they were so generous that there was not any among them that lacked because they did not give away only part of their property saving some of it for themselves, neither did they offer everything and yet they considered it to be common property. When they ridded themselves of this (social and psychological) anomaly, they lived in abundance and mutual respect. And they did not dare place their possessions in the hands of the Apostles, neither did they hand in their property with pride but laid it at the Apostles' feet and asked them to distribute it and gave them the power to spend it as if it were common, not as if it were their own. This freed them of vanity. If this took place now, we would all be living happily, both the wealthy and the poor.

The institution of deaconship

The institution of deaconship should be examined in the context of a fair distribution of the harvest. The reason is that there arose complaints on the part of Grecian or Hellenistic Jews of Diaspora (those whose ancestors had been dispersed from the land in Israel's captivities) against native Hebrews (those who were born and raised in the land of Israel) because their widows were discriminated against in the daily serving of food. The Hellenistic Jews of Diaspora most likely did not speak Aramaic but spoke Greek or the language of the nation from which they had come and so they had their own Synagogue.

According to the established practice of philanthropy and almsgiving of the Great Jewish Assembly, every poor Hebrew was to receive money for 14 portions of food on Fridays, while a non-Hebrew (stranger) would receive the benefit only for one day. The Apostles noticed the murmuring of the Hellenes against the native Hebrews, gathered the believers together and asked them to find seven men to care for the meals as the needs of the growing Church kept them too busy to deal with all the responsibilities. The Apostolic Church then extended the system of daily distribution of food to all the Judean widows regardless of being native Hebrews or Hellenistic Jews. It is noteworthy here that this incident marked the beginning of ecclesiastical hierarchy since until then the handling of money and

²⁵ Theodorakopoulos 1974, pp. 354-360.

²⁶ The communism established by the Essaeans as it has been described by Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, was almost absolute. Eusebius, *Evangelica* VIII XII 114-6. Idem VIII XII 12 5. This information about the common ownership of goods is found also by Plinius, *Historia Naturalis* Ep.34:97 and Josephus, *Judean War* II 7, 3 and 4.

²⁷ Philon, *De vita contemplativa* 10-13[473]. Cf. Taylor 1998.

²⁸ Tacitus, *Annales* XIV 17. Plinius, Ep. 34:97. Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 8-9.

²⁹ Philippidis 1958, pp. 480-488. Agouridis 1963 177-206[=1971, 251-276].

³⁰ See Baloglou 2011a, pp. 247-298.

³¹ Rief 1960. Brown 1969. Repschinski 2009. All this scene and the description in the Acts has been characterized by Robbins 1998, p. 24, as the only event of economic interest in the New Testament.

food and the evaluation of each one's needs had been undertaken exclusively by the Apostles, though not by order of the believers. From then onward, the seven deacons would be handling these tasks as preachers and as missionaries in a fashion that was similar to the traditions of the Judaic cities in Palestine that applied strictly socio-economic³² criteria in handling public affairs³³ except that now they would be social workers acting by order of the believers as the verse indicates: «Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom».

The organization of the «common meals» and the institution of «Logeia»

The practice of offering «common meals», as described by Luke in the Acts (of) Apostles, concerns the Church of Jerusalem, however not exclusively, and reflects the prevailing socio-economic conditions in the area³⁴. Jerusalem was built in a mountainous area that did not have water resources or any other resources. The cost of living was high and the city relied economically on its Temple that attracted pilgrims from all the Diaspora. In this sense, it became a pole of attraction for beggars to such an extent that it was righteously called «the city of idlers». Therefore, the «Love Feasts» were instituted in consonance with contemporary attitudes and were the natural thing to do under the circumstances.

At the time, economic recess was accentuated by population explosion as well as heavy state and religious taxation imposed by Herod the Great (Josephus, *Judaean Archaeology*, who wanted to meet the immense expenditures for the construction of cities and grandiose edifices. This resulted in having poor unemployed and landless peasantry, but also big landowners and rich bankers all in one place, Palestine. The poor farmers became increasingly poorer swamped in debt and despair. Many ended up begging piously in the city streets or in the villages only hoping for a miracle that would save them. Others resorted to robbery and pillaging of those using connecting streets. These people took to caves and rocks for protection³⁵.

As far as the organization of the «common meals» in other communities is concerned, the case of the Church of Corinth is the most known because of the volume of information we have through Saint Paul's detailed descriptions. His Second Letter to the Corinthians is the most important source of information regarding the kind of problems that Christianity faced. The Apostle of Nations faced problems that had to do with the Sunday Dinner disorder and those who opposed him. Indeed, the «disorder» that took place during the common meals after Liturgy and Holy Communion in the First Church of Corinth was initiated by the members of the upper economic class and targeted the brothers of the lower economic class. Saint Paul's deep concerns about this vital problem³⁶ influenced his Eucharist Theology in the issue of the socio-economic effects. At least four «factions» (parts) of the Christians in Corinth are mentioned by

name. Moreover, the Church of Corinth consisted mainly of members, who came from the lower social and economic strata-the so-called «infants, diseased, non-born, non-existing»,-but also included some members who were educated,-«wise»,-«powerful» and of noble ancestry.

St. Paul wrote His First Epistle to correct what he saw as erroneous in the Church of Corinth. He had been informed about incidents of deviation from and distortion of true Christian life. Some had made factions, some had appealed to pagan courts, others had been eating pagan food, while some groups had been fighting one another regarding Sunday Dinner. There was also fighting over power among those who prophesied and those who spoke foreign languages. In his effort to restore social peace and uniformity of belief, St. Paul referred to three main points in his 1Cor. 11:17-12:31. Firstly, St. Paul referred to Eucharist, secondly to the distribution of offers and benefits and to the division deaconship and thirdly to the concept of the Church as congregation where each member is called to perform a specific and special task depending on merit by cooperating with other members of the society in order for them to become useful and integral members of their community³⁷. The Holy Eucharist depicts the unity of the Apostolic Church of Corinth participation in which does not assume a personal character but a collective one since «as there is one bread, the multitudes of us are one body, because we are all parts of the same bread». Therefore, any discrimination among the congregation is ruled out since the characterization of the Church as «the body of Christ» is depicted and expressed in all social events and in all aspects of life of its members. St. Paul considered that dining together on Sunday would be the believers' main manifestation of anticipation and an early savoring of God's reign. In addition, the Eucharistic Theory of Deaconship or Christian solidarity dates back to the Apostolic ages and to the first Christian ages when it was closely linked to the Eucharistic gatherings. And such being the nature of the institution of the common meals «of love», St. Paul makes persistent efforts for «the Collection for the Lord's People»³⁸, the selection of the seven deacons and the ordination of deacons and deaconesses during the Holy Sacrament³⁹.

St. Paul became aware of the socio-economic differences among the members of the Corinthian congregation because when they gathered to worship God, they lacked the spirit of love, self-sacrifice and community of Christ: «So when you get together, it's not the Lord's Supper that you eat, for as you are eating, each of you continues with your own meal. As a result, one goes hungry and another gets drunk» remarked he in 1Cor. 11:20-21.

The second problem he encountered in the Church of Corinth was its division into «factions». Usually, besides the underlying theological controversies, there is also the socio-economic dimension of the phenomenon, which is based on the differential conceptualization of the ways and methods used by the charismatic touring missionary

³² Cf. the 15th Canon of the Local Synod of Neocaesarea (315) and the 16th Canon of the Oecumenical Synod (680). Agapios (Leonardos) and Nikodemos 1864[2003], pp. 233-234;395.

³³ Strack and Billerbeck 1992-1998, vol. 3, p. 641; Meyer 19213, p. 155.

³⁴ Cf. the useful information given by Jeremias 1969. See also Agouridis 1989, pp. 161-162.

³⁵ Klausner 1926, pp. 174-190. Cf. Agouridis 2005, pp. 145-149.

³⁶ The problem of St. Paul's opponents as it has been described in His Two Letters to the Corinthians is one of the most distinguished and provocative issue in the modern literature. The reference -work for this problem is Georgi 1964.

³⁷ Ioannidis 2008a, ch. 2.

³⁸ Eckert 1981, pp. 65-80. Betz 1993. Georgi 1994.

³⁹ Theodorou 2009, p. 74.

community organizers. St. Paul's adversaries represent the type of charismatic touring missionary of the early ages of Christianity originating in Palestine and fitting the moral bill of having no home, family, property or security. On the contrary, the Disciple of Nations represents a type of missionary lawfulness, a form of «functional» legitimacy. So, while the charismatic touring missionaries depended on the community's financial support, St. Paul developed a new theological ethos that was oecumenical and at the same time social and moral. St. Paul took particular pride in being able to sustain himself and not becoming a burden for anyone. He had his own reasons for doing so, merely to shake off any suspicion on the part of his enemies that he profited from his mission. In his First Epistle to the Thessalonians 2:5 he wrote «You know that we have never used flattery, nor have we put on a mask to cover up greed, God is our witness» and reassured that as far as this was possible he did not exercise the right⁴⁰ his doctrine gave him to receive support from the community he served. Given that St. Paul's opponents in the Corinthian camp were members of the higher social strata, it is easy to understand the reason why they reacted against the program of collection for the poor people and also why St. Paul found it necessary to bring this matter up anew, analyze it in detail, and expound his positions in the austere letter he wrote to them.

A thorough examination of chapters 8 and 9 of II Corinthians⁴¹ leads us to the conclusion that the program of collecting for the poor was founded after the Lord's example of a fair distribution of material goods. In this sense, he praised the Macedonian attitude – «Brothers, we want you to know that the grace of God was given to the Church of Macedonia» for setting the standards of evaluating the true love of Corinthians. He reminded them of the «grace» of the Lord who «became poor for our sake although he was rich, so that we would become rich through his poverty».

All this gave St. Paul the opportunity to repeat his urge to the Corinthian Christians to volunteer their generous contribution to the fund raising program. Moreover, he pointed out to them that «it doesn't matter how much you have. What matters is how much you are willing to share from what you have». This was to mean that he would be pleased with just a symbolic act of giving on their part, while he had praised the Macedonians before for having contributed to the relief program far beyond their power. There is certainly some explanation for this differentiation. The Christian community in Corinth was of lower economic status, as it has been already stated, which St. Paul felt obliged to respect by asking that they offer only whatever they could.

According to the sociologist of the Age of the New Testament G. Theissen, «the primeval Hellenistic Christianity was not a proletarian movement of the lower classes, nor did it originate from the upper social strata. On the contrary, remarkable for its social structure is the fact that it consisted of several social classes of various attitudes, traditions and conditions». This view explains any possible conflict that may have arisen, indication of which is found in I Corinthians 11:20-2. «The Christians, who gather to eat on Sunday, do not eat the Lord's Supper but each one eats his own meal. So, one goes hungry while another gets drunk». This verse reveals the presence of heresies that led to deplorable incidents.

Pivotal in comprehending the relief program and, consequently, the policy of redistributing wealth that the Disciple proposes to Christians is the definition of the term «equality» used by St. Paul in verses. The term «equality» is used only twice in the Septuagint; the first is in Iob36:29 and the second in Zechariah 4:7- in fact, without a Hebrew equivalent. The term is also seen in St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians 4:1 in which he reminds the masters of servants of what is right behavior towards them: «Masters grant your servants that which is fair and equal, knowing that you also have a Master in Heaven». This verse belongs to a duty list. The term «equality» here does not refer to parity between masters and servants before Christ but to the fact that masters should take proper care of their servants, according to Theodoretus of Cyrillus.

Oecumenius' commentary interprets the issue in a similar fashion: «Justice and equality is the reward of the laboring servants and also abundance of the necessary goods». Even more understandable and sharp is John Chrysostom who raises the question: «What is the fair thing to do? What is equality?» only to provide his own answer: «Give them everything in abundance not only what they need, but reward them for their hard work». In this way John Chrysostom approaches St. Paul's interpretation of almsgiving. St. Paul does not recommend that the masters free their servants in the name of the new faith, but urges that masters be fair and always meet their obligations towards them⁴².

If we co-examine the passages in Colossians 4:1 and II Cor. 8:13-14, then the term «equality» is defined according to Hellenistic standards. In particular, the concept of equality bore a rather legal meaning in ancient Greek literature. Although in Gorgias Plato presumes that equality stems from cosmic equality or is part of it, and at the same time Euripides personifies it, equality in ancient Greece defines legal relationships. Equality was a basic principle in Athenian Democracy. Aristotle spoke of «freedom and equality», «political equality», and also of «a polis established on the equality of citizens». Consequently, while initially the term «equality» differed from the term «similarity» in that the former pertained to legal relationships and the latter to physical, gradually both terms came to mean the same thing: «A polis for the equals and similars» according to Xenophon, «equalities and similarities» according to Isocrates. Aristotle puts it very eloquently: «what is fair is what is equal» and so «equality» results in including the idea of justice: «Anfair judge» according to Plato, «equal and fair judges» according to Polybius. The Stoics, who lived in the New Testament ages and identified equality with integrity, stress that «equality and gratefulness follow justice», while to Philon this relation is exactly the opposite as «Equality is the mother of Justice».

Paul traces the notion of equality in ancient Greek literature and adds to it new content that is based on the idea of Christian love arising from Jesus Christ's teachings about the Kingdom of Heaven. In II Cor. 8:14 Paul takes it even further. Equality becomes the objective of social behavior- as «Christian behavior should be». However, this attitude contrasts the ideal of joint ownership of the early Christians, as it is expressed in the verses of Acts 2:44 ff, 4:36 ff, 5:16ff.

In the effort to resolve its social problems and release tension to some acceptable degree, the Roman society of the New Testament ages perceived equality as the extension of Roman citizenship to as many social strata as possible with the exception of some groups such as

⁴⁰ Weiss 2001, p. 423.

⁴¹ For a detailed analysis see Vasileiadis 2002. Idem 2006, pp. 305-400, 401-448.

⁴² Karavidopoulos 1981[2007], p. 522.

servants and foreigners. Christianity, though, conferred the state of freedom on all people without exception. According to Paul's statement «there is no difference between Jews and Greeks, between slaves and free people, between men and women, for you are all one in Christ Jesus». Compared to the growing social pressures and demands of the Roman Empire, Paul's perception of equality offered a new, successful form of social integration at a time when all efforts for reform by the Roman Imperium failed- as in the case of Gracchi for example- and led to a vicious cycle of alternating enlightened monarchy (2ndc. AD) with absolute monarchy (4thc.AD).

The social context of Paul's argumentative, as this materializes in the program of collection for the poor, brings forward the ideal of a fair distribution of wealth through the prospect of Christian brotherhood among all of Father's children and through Providence.

Wealthy Corinthians were not to keep for themselves more goods than necessary to get by. Therefore, it should be their duty to offer the rest of their belongings to the poor brothers of Jerusalem. If Christians perceive material possessions as God's gifts and not as human accomplishment, then they will contribute to reaching a state of equality where private property will be abolished, not through violence but through the power of love. St. John Chrysostom aptly remarks that if «we all have one stomach to fill and one life to live and one body to cover», then rich people won't have any reason to prosper in order to give their surplus to the poor.

In his effort to convince Corinthians to be generous and well-disposed in almsgiving, he urges them to regard it as a «blessing», as a «gift», a bounteous collection that is given largely and liberally rather than as something that is redundant, an act of covetousness of men who usually do what they do sparingly, tenaciously, keeping their money as long as they can, loathing to part with. «Superfluity» in the Septuagint and also in the New Testament implies someone's continual tendency to acquire more possessions disregarding others, in fact at their expense. Particularly in the Old Testament acquisitiveness is directly opposite to love for fellow people and especially for the poor who the (Hebraic) Law is to protect against. St. Paul uses the term with various connotations in his Epistles to the refer to sins of sexual nature and paganism. In any case, whether material greed or sensual greed, the result is the same i.e. a greedy person takes advantage of his fellow man instead of serving him.

The Corinthian people's generosity, which is an imperative characteristic for them, leads them to self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency, a Stoic term, is a wise person's principle virtue⁴³. In the Cynic and Stoic Philosophy this term describes the person whose willpower makes him do with very little so that he can be independent and therefore content. Although for the Stoics self-sufficiency is resultant of all virtues, its essential characteristic is that it derives from human powers and limits itself- or rather exhausts itself- to the individual alone. On the contrary, Paul says that the source of self-sufficiency is God. Adequacy is God's gift, the result of God's grace. As a consequence, it is not exhausted exclusively in the narrow context of the individual. Its most important specification is caring for the others. Self-sufficiency is a virtue as long as it is accompanied by social welfare and as long as it is conducive to all that is virtuous.

The social aspect of Paul's relief program is attested in the reference he makes in his 2Corinthians 9:9 to the Old Testament and especially

to Psalm 111:9 «As the scripture says, He gives generously to the needy; his kindness lasts forever». The word «needy» appears only once in the Old Testament compared to the word «poor» that is widely used in the Gospels and scarcely used in the long Paul's Epistles, «needy» sounds weaker as it describes the one who is in socially and financial difficulties and generally the one who is in need. However, the word «poor» is used in its religious connotation, describing the one who has no possessions, relies on his fellow people's charity and as a result, has confided his existence in God. God will reward the work and philanthropic disposal of Corinthians in almsgiving righteously, that is by granting them prosperity and well-being.

Syssitia and Common Meals: A Unity in the Polis and in the Church

The whole effort to organize the syssitia and institute the relief program aims at a single thing: the unity of the Church, as this is reflected in the «Church in the house», whose representative is its bishop⁴⁴. Indeed, as «Head of the Eucharist», the bishop is the person around whom the Church is united (Ignatius of Antiocheia, To Magnesians 6), meets the credentials, sees to the salvation of his sheep and also to the fair management of the Christian members of the Church. Therefore, the bishop must divide wisely among the orphans, the weeping widows and the poor strangers the money that is «voluntarily» offered for the less fortunate members of the Church. Management of the money has to be distributed fairly among those who need it and not misused. This is how all discord, conflict and contention will be avoided in the body of the Church. The warrantor of the Church's unity is the bishop.

The magistrates in an ancient polis have the obligation to keep the people united. Consequently, it would not be far-fetched to compare the Bishop of the Church to the magistrates of a polis. For both of them have a common goal which is the eradication of rebellions, the persistence in keeping the Church as well as the city united as a whole.

Final Conclusions

Crete and Sparta, two «prosperous» pole is according to Aristotle which are also extremely important to Greek people's historic awareness, had instituted and implemented the syssitia aiming at a fair re-distribution of wealth. In spite of the Spartan institution drawbacks, as it grew to be in practice, the institution of syssitia satisfied the citizens' need for «equality», «equal rights», «justice» and state integration.

Aristotle, as a critical assessor of constitutions and of the political theories of various scholars analyzes the institution of syssitia and accepts it in his «best polis», because it is in accordance to the basic principle of self- sufficiency, conduces to smoothing out any social tension that might arise among citizens and also conduces to maintaining social unity and harmony.

All sources attest that, implicitly or explicitly, Jesus strongly opposed the mechanisms that disrupted social peace. The Oral Tradition of the Early Church known as the Q source, the teachings of prospering in Heavens versus prospering on earth and especially those regarding the incompatibility of worshipping both God and mammon, the demon of gluttony, riches and injustice in St. Mark's Gospel, the

⁴³ Pohlenz 1949, pp. 69-104; Ioannidis 1934[2001],pp. 188-189; Oikonomou 1980, pp. 17-34.

⁴⁴ Cf. the extensive analysis by Zizioulas 1965[2009].

identification of usurers as «thieves», St. Luke's special teachings, Jesus' teaching in Nazareth, the intriguing Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man and the excerpt on Final Judgment, all is consistent with the fact that Jesus followed the Prophets' tradition⁴⁵ (143) of demonstrating that daily sustenance- and not the unfair accumulation of wealth -is a better economic system. And so the Lord urged His followers to pray «Give us each day our daily bread» same as Matthew's 6:11 «Give us our daily bread».

The institution of syssitia falls into line with the aforementioned New Testament testimonies. It can be described as a supreme institution of the early Church, one that conveys to the participating Christian the sense of belonging to the one and unified Church regardless of one's socio-economic background. At the same time, logeia, Paul's pioneer program of collecting for the poor, in the form that it is postulated in II Corinthians chs. 8-9 and also the radical ethics of The Epistle of James aimed at «equality» and «equal distribution of wealth» which both describe a society beyond the bipolar system of capitalism and socialism. On the contrary, this system does not focus on the production and division techniques and processes but rather on the very source of material affluence as «The earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it».

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⁴⁵ It is worth noting that the Prophets in Israel criticized the unequal distribution of wealth, but they do not propose any social changes, but the internal change of men. Gordon 1975, pp. 76-78. *Oikonomou* 2006, pp. 444-447; *Idem* 2003, pp. 235-247.

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