God Knows There’s Need: Christian Responses to Poverty

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shepherds. From that point onward, the image had become famous as that of
the miraculous injured Virgin. The Carmelite, in turn, showed the image to the
duke and urged him to avenge the injury done to God and his mother.
Likewise, the Viennese called on the Weeping Madonna of Pötsch to secure
victory over the Turks in 1697. Schreiner convincingly shows how military
violence tapped into, was coincident with, and borrowed from the behaviors
of religious rituals.

Overall, the fact that these scholars (and others in the volume) combine
historical and anthropological insights to analyze religious phenomena is
attributable in large part to the inspiration they drew from Trexler’s work.

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God Knows There’s Need: Christian Responses to Poverty. By Susan R.

The poor, always with us, are rediscovered at times of major socioeco-
nomic shifts. In the last decades, a huge international body of literature has
developed on the history, roots, and effects of poverty. Academics, however,
feel safest when they focus on historical, sociological, political, and economic
studies, but this does not occur in Susan R. Holman’s study. Her interweaving
of history with “cross-disciplinary and ecumenical bridges” of “sensing need,
sharing the world, and embodying sacred kingdom” (p. 15) echoes the moti-
vation of Gerhard Uhlhorn’s magisterial study of the history of Christian char-
ity “to awaken and to further the works of Christian love in wider circles” (Die
christliche Liebestätigkeit [1895], p. 3).

Holman, a patristic scholar (The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops
in Roman Cappadocia [New York, 2001]), combines historical and personal
narratives to connect “early Christian responses to need, justice, relief, and
poverty with modern responses to those issues in Christian tradition today”
(p. 2). Her historical narrative includes St. Clement of Alexandria, the
Cappadocians, and St. John Chrysostom as well as lesser known figures such
as Euphemia of Amida and her daughter Maria, Jacob of Sarug, and Rabbula,
among others. Her personal narrative is informed by her experience of work-
ing in a government-funded inner-city program. Physically and spiritually
exhausted by daily confrontation with the overwhelming needs of low-
income women and children, Holman chanced upon St. Gregory of Nyssa’s
sermon “On the Love of the Poor.” She quit her job, enrolled in graduate stud-
ies, and pursued the question of how people in the early Church responded
to the needs of the poor.

Holman’s conviction that early church texts directed to social issues are
valuable resources for us includes her warning that such texts require critical
reading. Thus she provides a proficient discussion of the hermeneutics of his-
tory and languages with attention to differing views of social justice and
gender relations. Her solid academic work enhanced by engaging personal
narrative will be appreciated by both those in academe and those laboring in
the vineyard of ecclesial- and government-sponsored social welfare programs.
For the latter, this is also a book of pastoral care, for it reminds us that we are
not the first concerned for the least among us. Holman also reminds us that
our perception of the needs of others is influenced by our own needs includ-
ing personal limits and the limits of resources. Examples from the early
Church provide “permission to sometimes say no” (p. 152). Respecting limits
“is necessary advice, especially for women drawn to Christian social action
who are trained, as women often are, in utter self-negation” (p. 39). Her dis-
cussion of the Orthodox view of care for the needy as the liturgy after the
liturgy, “liturgy as social gospel” (p. 163; emphasis in original), anchors her
perspective. One of Holman’s strengths is avoiding the easy path of exhorta-
tion, “must-y” sermonizing, using instead her historical resources as means of
proclamation, “embodying sacred kingdom” (chap. 8).

Her discussion of the transition from the early church to today is rather
cursory. There is no mention of the modern blossoming of social welfare in
Catholic caritative orders and Protestant diaconal movements, nor are we
alerted to the dangers of medieval and modern ideologizing of the patristic
insight into the reciprocity of the needs of rich and poor; a development that
stretched from objectifying the poor as the means to gain heaven through
alms, then as an object of philanthropy, and finally as a cheap labor pool. But
readers always ask more of good books than their authors intended.

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Ancient

Allen Brent. (New York: T&T Clark, Continuum. 2009. Pp. xii, 180. $44.95

Aimed at the nonspecialist reader, this book reprises the main insights of
a number of Allen Brent’s more technical monographs composed for the
scholarly community, especially The Imperial Cult and the Development of
Church Order (Boston, 1999) and Ignatius and the Second Sophistic
(Tübingen, 2006). These volumes take up the genuine Ignatian correspon-
dence as it relates to its imperial, political, and cultural contexts, and they set
an exciting and innovative course that will redefine Ignatian studies for the
foreseeable future. Brent offers an invigorating picture of a complex histori-
cal figure whose letters can often appear arcane and bewildering to a modern
reader. It is a book many will find difficult to put down. With freshness and
creativity Brent sketches a vivid historical narrative of St. Ignatius and his
innovative role in the emergence of the threefold office of bishops, elders,
and deacons as the chief form of early Christian leadership.