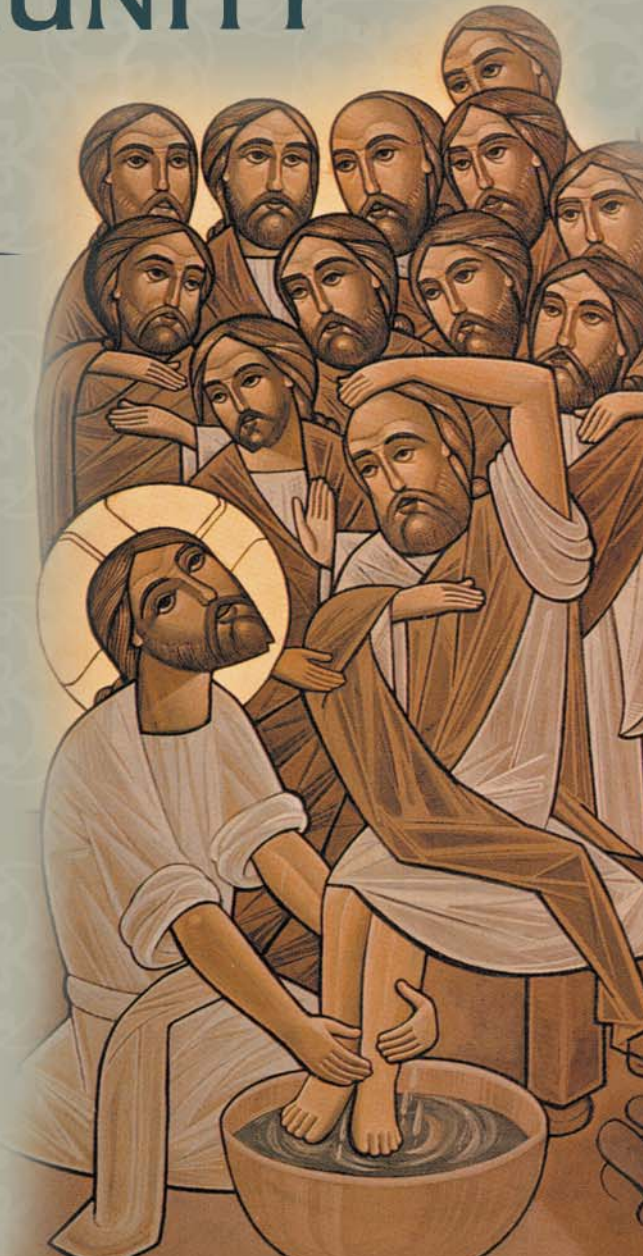


BLESS USA

COMMUNITY of LOVE



Cover icon by Dr. Isaac Fanous portraying our Lord Jesus Christ washing the feet of His disciples.

“Our Lord, in loving each human being right to the end, did not limit Himself to teaching us in words. In order to give us an exact and telling example of humility in the perfection of love, He put on an apron and washed the disciples' feet... The spiritual field of battle, the sure way of inner advancement, [the] continual practice in the keeping of the commandments, this is what you will find in a community,” ~ St. Basil the Great.

B L E S S U S A
C O M M U N I T Y O F L O V E



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PO Box 384
Cedar Grove, NJ 07009
973.857.4299
www.blessusa.org

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His Holiness Pope Shenouda III
117th Pope of Alexandria and Patriarch of the See of St. Mark

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Preface

All who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need... Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need, (Acts 2:44-45; Acts 4:34-35).

Christians in the Early Church lived together in a community of love: united in faith, filled with compassion, sharing everything and eager to serve one another. Throughout history, the Church has provided for Her children, and today She continues to keep the spirit instilled by Christ our Lord through diverse services that meet all of Her children's needs. This book aims to give the reader a better understanding of what a community of love is, how the Early Church built a community of love, and how the Church continues to nourish the community of love through the services of BLESS in Egypt and BLESS USA in the United States.

The book is divided into three parts:

Part I. The Ancient Community - describes the biblical foundation of a community, as well as the concept of service to the needy, as taught by our Lord Jesus Christ. It also

discusses how the Early Church strived to build a community of love and tracks the development of service to the needy through the first centuries of Christianity.

Part II. The Contemporary Community - highlights the institution of BLESS in Egypt and briefly describes its various services. It focuses on the charity work of BLESS and how it strives to sustain the neediest individuals by providing for their basic essentials.

Part III. The BLESS USA Community - describes the mission and activities of BLESS USA, and how it supports the charity work of BLESS in Egypt. It also speaks of how the Church strives to unite Her children in Egypt and the United States as one community through the BLESS USA service.

Introduction

What is a Community?

The word "community" is often used to describe a unified body of individuals with common interests. Every individual is part of a community; whether it is on a religious level, a social level or a state level. The community defines the individual because the individual is reliant upon the group to give him/her an identity and a voice, just as the group is dependent on each individual to perform his/her own unique function. A community can be likened to the human body, which requires that each part serve a specific function in order for the body to operate properly as a whole: *"But now indeed there are many members, yet one body," (1 Cor. 12:20).*

Just as there is interdependence between the community and its individuals, likewise the members within a community depend on one another. Each member helps the other thrive and prosper, as they work in unison to meet the goal of the community. Again this can be likened to the human body; as St. Paul illustrates: *"...there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it," (1 Cor. 12:25-26).*

The Ancient Community



"Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages... healing every sickness and every disease among the people. (Mt. 9:35).

Love: The Creator and Coordinator of the Community

On a more profound level, community is the medium through which love is realized. As members of one body, we remember that love is the greatest commandment: "...love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself;" (Mt. 22:37-39). Christ our Lord showed us through His life that loving others means attending to their needs, both spiritual and physical: "He received them and spoke to them about the kingdom of God, and healed those who had need of healing... [And] He said unto them 'You give them something to eat,'" (Lk. 9:11, 13). Our Lord comforted people, fed them spiritually and physically, healed the sick, and gave life to the dead. Our Lord also taught us to show love to those in need, and gave them the honor of being called His brethren. He considered a charitable act of love toward one of His needy brethren as one done directly toward Him (cf. Mt. 25:35-36).

The fulfillment of the commandment of love can only be accomplished through community. Love is the creator and the coordinator of the community. St. Basil the Great writes: "Nothing indeed is so comparable with our nature as living in society and in dependence upon one another and as loving our own kind. Now, our Lord Himself gave us the seeds of these qualities and expected them to yield fruits in due time."¹ St. Clement also writes: "God Himself has created

1. St. Basil the Great, *The Long Rules: Man is a Social Animal*, Text: PG 31.917.

human beings for communion or sharing with one another, by sharing Himself first of all, and by sending His Word to all men alike, and by making all things common."²

Love in the Early Church

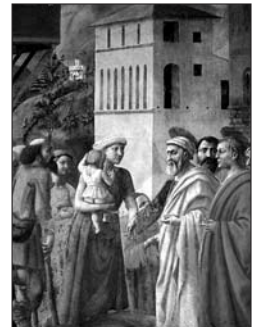
The Early Church provides us with a prime example of a community that strived for fellowship, unity and equality. The law of love removed all distinctions of race, class and gender - love was extended to all.

Nor was there anyone among them who lacked; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need, (Acts 4:34-35).

The Early Church provided for all Her children, while uniting them through Christ. This was a community of love that thrived and expanded rapidly, even in the face of persecution and heresies. A community was established that expressed, among other things, the Christians' willingness to love irrespective of circumstances and personal needs. St. Justin Martyr, a first century apologist, highlights this attitude in his writings: "We who loved above all else the ways of acquiring riches and possessions, now hand over to a community fund what we possess and share it with every needy person."³ Love in the Early Church took the tangible form of almsgiving, visiting the sick, purchasing the freedom of slaves from bondage and caring for travelers, widows and orphans.

2. St. Clement of Alexandria, *The Tutor: Be Content with What is Sufficient and Share Goods with Others*, 2, 12.120, Text: SC 108.228.

3. Justin Martyr, *The First Apology: The Sharing of Goods in the Early Christian Community*, 1.14, Text: PG 6.348,353.



"Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality," (Rom. 12:13-NIV).



"Is this not the fast that I have chosen... to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out," (Is. 58:6,7).

After Constantine's conversion, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The community of the Church expanded to encompass a much wider range of people from different religions, cultures and races.⁴ St. John Chrysostom writes: "*The Spirit is given to mankind to unite those of different races and cultures so that old and young, rich and poor, children and youth, men and women, every soul become in a manner of speaking one soul... preserved by the bond of peace.*"⁵ Love assumed a social dimension and charitable institutions were organized, not only for the sake of Christians but also for non-Christians. Social and economic conditions were marked by disparity, an unacceptable condition within a community. St. John Chrysostom encourages: "... let us do away with this situation (i.e. disparity of conditions). While the general and more essential things are drawing us together to the same end, let us not be driven apart by earthly and mean things - wealth, poverty and enmity."⁶ The Church became the administrator of social welfare and attempted to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor.⁷

As the need for services grew, it became necessary for the Church to implement an organized structure to better discern the needs of each individual. Each local bishop took responsibility for the development of his area. The direct administration was entrusted to a deacon, who had deaconesses and widows that aided him in specific services.



"I was a father to the poor, and I searched out the case that I did not know," (Job 29:16)

Community centers, hospitals, hostels and almshouses flourished throughout the Empire.⁸

8. Phan, 20, 26-28.

4. Peter C. Phan, *Social Thought: Message of the Fathers of the Church* (Delaware: Michael Glazier Inc, 1984) 24.

5. St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Ephesians*, 9, Text: PG 62.69-75.

6. St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John: The Origin of Social Inequalities*, Homily XV, 3, Text: PG 59.102.

7. Phan, 20-28.

The Contemporary Community



H.H. Pope Kyrollos VI ordaining H.G. Bishop Samuel and H.G. Bishop Shenouda (now H.H. Pope Shenouda III).

Institution of BLESS

The community of love and service instilled by our Lord Jesus Christ and nourished by the Church throughout history continues today. One of the ways we see this is through the service of BLESS (Bishopric of PubLic Ecumenical and Social Services), which extends support to hundreds of thousands of disadvantaged people in Egypt each year.

H.H. the Late Pope Kyrollos VI, very much aware of the difficult social and economic conditions of the time, took a progressive step in the history of the Coptic Orthodox Church. On September 30, 1962 His Holiness instituted BLESS by ordaining the late Bishop Samuel as its first bishop. In the ordination rite of H.G. Bishop Samuel, H.H. Pope Kyrollos VI declared:

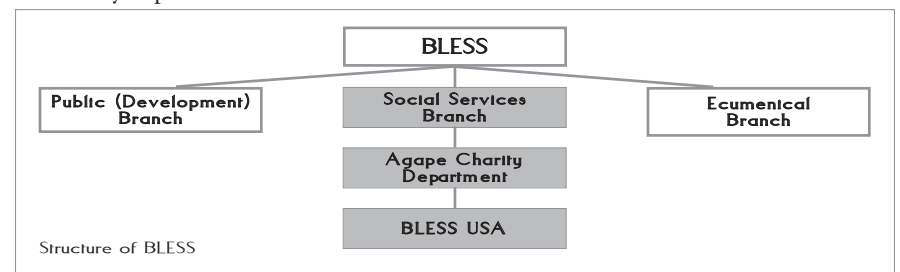
It has come to the attention of the Church...that some families that were doing well for themselves in the past now need someone to care for them. They need someone to provide them with clothing, food and spiritual guidance, all of which lead to their inner peace and the stability of their families. Also as social conditions in general, have worsened... the decision was made to ordain the blessed Father Makari El-Souriany. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we have granted him the office of bishop with the name of Bishop Samuel, so that he may organize a general and social service for the people, care for our emigrant children and attend to those who are interested in our Coptic Church.⁹

9. H.G. Bishop Samuel: Pages from his Life...Service...Thought, 35-37.

Thus, BLESS was officially established as an organized service of the Church. Striving to maintain the united community of love instituted by our Savior, BLESS began endeavoring to lessen the disparity that had developed between the poor and the rich, as well as bridge the gap between the Orthodox and the non-Orthodox, and the Christians and non-Christians.

The Agape Charity Department of BLESS

As envisioned by H.H. the late Pope Kyrollos VI, BLESS is comprised of three branches. The **Public Branch** (Development Branch) is dedicated to the improvement of impoverished towns and villages. The activities of this branch help community members discover their potential, and help them develop spiritually, intellectually, socially and economically. The **Ecumenical Branch**, deeply committed to Christian unity, deals with enhancing ecumenical relations between the Coptic Orthodox Church and other churches through participation in ecumenical dialogues and conferences. Lastly, the **Social Service Branch** aims to sustain the neediest of individuals by providing for their basic essentials. Although these three branches of BLESS offer a wide range of services, for the purpose of this book, we will focus only on the charity department of the Social Service Branch.





"Yet He sets the poor on high, far from affliction, and makes their families like a flock." (Ps. 107:41).

Deriving its name from the Greek word meaning unselfish and spontaneous love, the **Agape Charity Department** assists disadvantaged individuals through the following ten programs:

1. Sponsor a Family - offers aid to families living in extreme hardship. These families have no income as a result of the death, absence or terminal illness of the head of the household. Money is distributed on a monthly basis to these families in order to cover basic living costs such as food and shelter.

2. Medical Assistance - provides for a variety of medical necessities such as hospitalizations, surgeries, emergencies, x-rays, medications, dialyses, and care for the chronically ill.

3. Assistance for People with Disabilities - aids adults and children with mental and physical disabilities. This program helps people with mental disabilities by developing their potential and integrating them into society. It also supplies prostheses and medical equipment (e.g. wheelchairs, walkers, hearing aids, etc.) for people with physical disabilities.

"Wisdom and knowledge will be the stability of your times, and the strength of salvation," (Is. 33:6).



4. Education - assists students of all ages with school-related costs. Even though education in Egypt is free, students still need to pay for textbooks, supplies, uniforms and private tutoring.

5. Housing - provides for the homeless, for those migrating from rural areas, and for people living in overcrowded housing. Many people live in overcrowded conditions, where several families dwell together in one apartment, sharing everything including one bathroom. Also, because of poverty in the villages, there are a great number of people that migrate to the cities, seeking better lives and new homes. Furthermore, this program assists the many that are living in homes without running water, electricity and proper sanitation.



"For You have been a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shade from the heat," (Is. 25:4).

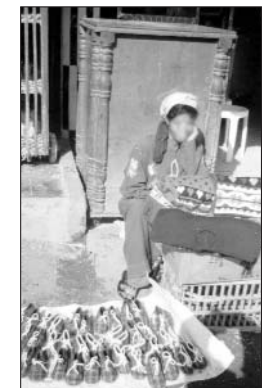
6. Roofing - builds roofs for homes in poverty-stricken villages, which contain an overwhelming number of "houses" that have no roofs. There are many families that lack shelter from the harsh elements of nature.

7. Outreach - seeks out *Those Who Have No One to Remember Them*, such as the sick and the elderly, to attend to their needs. Since these individuals are unable to go to their local church for support, BLESS servants offer them food, clothing, and services including medical care, hygiene education and home repairs.

8. Marriage Expense Assistance - assists young women with marriage-related costs such as apparel, furniture and household appliances, since women in Egypt are expected to present a dowry in order to get married. This program also extends aid to the bride's immediate family, so that in their own need the family does not take from their daughter.

9. Funding for the Underdeveloped - offers training and provisions to help individuals develop a trade,

"The Lord your God will bless you in all your produce and in all the work of your hands, so that you surely rejoice," (Deut. 16:15).





"He raises the poor out of the dust, and lifts the needy out of the ash heap." (Ps. 113:7).

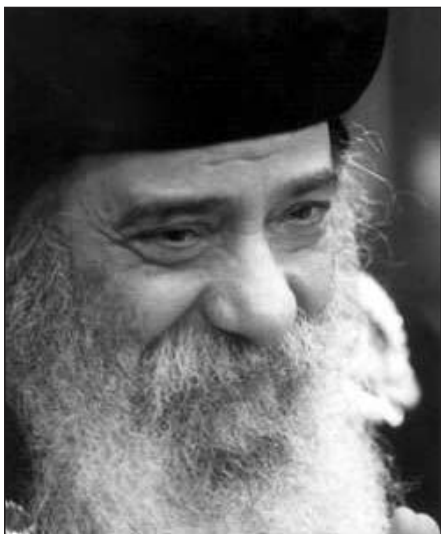
enabling them to generate income for their families and become self-sufficient. Such provisions include fruit/vegetable stands, street vending carts, sewing machines and livestock.

10. Emergency Assistance - extends relief to victims who have suffered from damages due to natural disasters, such as earthquakes and floods. This fund also supports families that suffer from violent aggression.

The distribution of funds in the Agape Charity Department is done under the direct supervision of H.H. Pope Shenouda III and H.G. Bishop Youannes, who is currently responsible for BLESS. His Holiness takes the utmost interest in the care of his disadvantaged children. In fact, His Holiness dedicates specific days of the week, during which he meets with his children, listens to their requests, and provides for their needs.

The Agape Charity Department is headquartered in the Coptic Patriarchate in Cairo. The BLESS servants in Egypt, led by H.G. Bishop Youannes, keep comprehensive track of individuals who receive funds from BLESS USA. They extensively investigate and verify every case requesting aid. After meeting their needs, the servants also follow up with these individuals to monitor their progress and to ensure that funds given are used for the intended purposes.

The BLESS USA Community
The Tradition Continues



His Holiness Pope Shenouda III

Although the 1970's witnessed a great period of immigration for Copts, they yearned to stay united with their mother Church and their fellow brethren in Egypt. Joined by love as one community, the hearts of these Copts were very much still beating for their brothers and sisters. They were eager to share their blessings with them and continue to be one united community that is not hindered by distance.

On his historical pastoral trip to the Coptic churches of the United States in 1989, His Holiness Pope Shenouda III was approached by many Copts to transform these sentiments into reality. That same year, under the guidance of His Holiness, BLESS USA was formed as an official non-profit charity organization of the Coptic Orthodox Church. It was established to collect contributions to support the ten programs of the Agape Charity Department of BLESS (*refer to diagram on p. 11*).

Originally existing as two separate branches in California and New Jersey, BLESS USA was combined into one entity in 1997 to encompass a wider scope of service. Today, it is headquartered at the Coptic Archdiocese of North America in New Jersey and continues to grow under the supervision of H.H. Pope Shenouda III, along with Their Graces Bishop Youannes and Bishop David.

BLESS USA's mission is: *To raise the standard and quality of living for needy and disadvantaged Copts residing in Egypt, and to aid in alleviating their suffering.* In order

to accomplish this mission, BLESS USA has set three goals that it aims to achieve. Its first goal is to **promote Christian concepts of love, unity and service**. This foundation is necessary because it encourages us to live according to the teachings of our Lord and motivates us to become actively involved in our community. The second goal is to **raise awareness in the United States about the conditions of needy Copts in Egypt**. When we understand the predicaments that our brothers and sisters face in Egypt, we can extend ourselves to assist them by all possible means. The third goal is to **build a community in the United States that supports the service and programs of the Agape Charity Department of BLESS**. By sharing a common bond in Christ our Lord, our community in Egypt and the United States is drawn together in love and functions as one family, like that of the Early Church. The culmination of the service is not monetary assistance, but rather it is the spirit of love in which charity is conducted: *"Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that abounds to your account... the things sent from you [are] a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God," (Phil. 4:17-18).*

Currently, BLESS USA is comprised of seven groups. Each group serves a particular purpose and conducts specialized activities enabling the organization to meet its goals. Groups are added periodically to meet the growing needs of the service. At present, the servants are divided among the following groups: Christian Education,

Coptic Archdiocese of North America





"Your word is a lamp to my feet. And a light to my path." (Ps. 119:105).

Publications, Distribution and Mail, Member Services, Research, Information Technology and Database.

As Christian Education is the cornerstone of the service, a dedicated group is responsible for conveying the teachings of our Lord regarding love, charity and service. This is accomplished by building

a library of spiritual resources and researching different spiritual topics and activities that are then organized in various media for distribution. The Christian Education Group promotes spiritual nourishment of the BLESS USA servants internally, while encouraging the community to participate in social service.

The Publications Group is responsible for writing and designing the service's printed materials (newsletters, booklets, pamphlets, posters, etc.). Most publications contain a spiritual message and are written in both English and Arabic. This group is constantly developing innovative and attractive methods in order to reach wider audiences. It provides a means of communication between BLESS USA and the community at large.

The Distribution and Mail Group is responsible for distributing the material that is produced

by the service. The group focuses on building relationships with members of the local community such as priests, church representatives and vendors. This group also researches the most cost-effective ways of distribution to target various audiences. In addition, this

"And the word of the Lord was being spread throughout all the region." (Acts 13:49).



group pursues the latest methods to enhance interest in BLESS USA and increase membership.

Member Services is the liaison between BLESS USA and its members. This group answers their questions, processes their contributions, and ensures that their requests and concerns are addressed. Member Services works with the utmost care and confidentiality to cultivate the current membership.

The Research Group is responsible for pursuing alternate sources of funding outside of the Coptic community, such as grants, government aid and independent charity organizations. The Research Group also monitors the trends and laws in the nonprofit sector. In addition, the group builds relationships with other nonprofits and local communities through participation in Matching Gift Programs, In-kind Programs and Umbrella Charities such as the United Way.



"He who earnestly seeks good finds favor," (Prov. 11:27)

The last two groups are dedicated to maintaining the internal operations at BLESS USA. The Information Technology Group handles the network, implements the latest technology and educates the servants on the system. The Database Group is responsible for the service's extensive database software. Servants in this group establish the protocol for data entry to maintain accuracy, develop workshops to educate servants, research methods to optimize database utilization and offer ongoing support.

Each group is headed by a coordinator, who ensures that the purpose of the group is fulfilled, manages assignment of projects, and makes certain that deadlines are met. Together these groups function as one entity, relying on the activities of one another in order to meet the mission of the

service. This cohesive unit is not only bound together by work, but it is also joined together by the love of our Lord Jesus Christ and endeavors to answer the Savior's call to serve in a community of love.

Final Thoughts

But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body (Col. 3:14-15).

At the dawn of the 21st century, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Coptic Church has expanded all over the world. Yet as the Church's presence continues to widen, the bond between Her community only continues to grow stronger. St. John Chrysostom said: "*Such is the power of love: it embraces, and unites, and fastens together not only those who are present and near, and visible, but also those who are distant. And neither time, nor separation in space, nor anything else of that kind, can break up and divide in pieces the affection of the soul.*"¹⁰ The love shared by Copts throughout the world is based upon the love of our Savior, who instructs us: "... love one another as I have loved you," (John 15:12).

St. Basil the Great writes: "*For the same Lord who divided the islands from the mainland by sea, bound island Christians to mainland Christians by love. Nothing, brethren, separates us from one another but deliberate estrangement. We have one Lord, one faith, one hope... The hands need each other. The feet steady each other. The eyes*

¹⁰. St. John Chrysostom, *Letter to Young Widow*, I, Vol. IX, 3.

possess their clear apprehension from joint agreement." ¹¹

Today, the Coptic Church continues to solidify Her bond by building upon the tradition of love and charity set by our Lord and fostered by the Early Church. With the establishment of BLESS in Egypt and later BLESS USA in the United States, the service of the Church not only grows deep but also grows wide, embracing all Her children in a community of love.



"I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me... Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me," (Mt. 25:35,36,40).

11. St. Basil the Great. *Writing to the Bishops of Pontus*, Text: LCL. ed. DeFerrari, III. 148

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All biblical references are from the New King James Version, except where noted.