

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Maureen Boyard – Gregory the Great was a Father of the Church in the latter part of the 6th century AD, writing in Latin. He created many concepts related to hunger, simply because his papacy took place in a context of major crises – a Plague, Lombardic invasions, and difficulties in providing food to the city of Rome. We know that after his death, there were heated debates: some Romans apparently burned part of his writings, accusing him of having dilapidated a significant fraction of the Church's heritage, turning it over to the poor. Do the poor have a right to food? Conversely, can they be refused access to food? In order to answer such questions, all authors enlist the Bible. But the Bible isn't an instruction leaflet to apply as such, it's an entire library in which to burrow. So choosing one verse or interpretation among many may well lead authors to conflicting results. That is precisely what we find in Gregory the Great's writings. He proudly emphasizes that the poor are entitled to food.

We also find texts, such as Pseudo-Cyprian's *The Century's Twelve Abuses*, according to which being poor in one's material life doesn't automatically provide the dignity of poverty that may lead to gifts from the rich. What is expected from the poor in such texts is also humility, knowledge of their role in society, acceptance of the latter and giving up subversion of the social order. In exchange for food the poor must pray for the rich benefactor. What medieval populations deem essential, what frightens them most – at least in the texts we have accessed – is not death, so much as total societal disruption, the loss of all references. The world should run with an assigned place for each and all. Thus poverty is the loot of the poor. It is a gift-counter-gift mechanism in which alms are traded for prayers, and everyone is supposed to benefit since the poor manage to survive in the present world and the rich can expect a future life.

But must the Church feed all the poor, immediately, all those who need its mercy at a given time, or on the contrary should it restrict its help to a limited number, not all, in order to preserve its riches and institutional stability? Such debates are heated; it's literally a matter of life or death. There are those who are proud to concentrate on the Church's survival, and those who are in critical need of its help, since they know that if they don't get it, they'll see no future at all. To them, long term is a meaningless treasure. They can't afford thinking long-term because they'll be dead in the short term. Of course, those who wrote the scripts before us are not those who were dying of hunger. But we can't avoid recognizing that the very lives of these famished people rested on the choices described here.

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