The Poverty Plateau: The Space of the Urban Street Poor in Early Christian Literature

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Summary

The city street is a thick territory made of superposed plans of existence with only a few passages in-between – whether these are visual, olfactory, or interactional contact zones. As universal urban agents transiently sharing one of these in-between zones, beggars and almsgivers are also urban types that span the history of the inter-spatiality between the city of the rich and the city of the poor. Such history has a critical turning point which dates back to early Christ religion and the related urban textual production. The aim of this paper is to sift through the early three centuries of early Christian literature in order to blend together the notion of co-spatiality and the figure of the urban street poor and see what happens. The paper will show how and to what extent changes and breakthroughs in the social imagination of beggarly poverty correlate with the perception of different spatialities simultaneously situated in the same street spot. The display of the destitute goes hand in hand with the reappraisal of the layered quality of the street.

Focus, applied concept and method

> 'We call a "plateau" any multiplicity connected to other multiplicities by superficial underground stems in such a way as to form or extend a rhizome' (G. Deleuze and F. Guattari)
>
> 'It is the poor who tells us what the *polis* is' (O. Romero)
>
> 'What about the street, however?' (H. Lefebvre)

Street Poverty in the Urban Baklava: 'Co-spatiality' along a Roman *via*

The rise of cities was a boost in the history of human inequality.[1] Periods of strong urbanisation normally tend to exacerbate disequalising forces and processes (Scheidel 2017: 73). The often repeated, city-friendly argument that, 'even when compared with the most dire urban poverty, conditions in rural areas are usually worse' (Glaeser 2011: 73) may sound like a weak alibi. While depending upon the consumption capacities of a middle class (Smith 2019: 185–202), cities, past and present, polarise wealth

and work as generators of poverty both outside and inside their – more or less easily legible – boundaries. Like restless machines working at full speed, cities from all over the world have survived the centuries by enslaving humans, starving farmers, exploiting villagers, luring immigrants into misery, and pauperising large segments of the homegrown population. At the same time and with the same rhythm, city economies have aggrandised aristocratic and bourgeois fortunes by snapping up agriculture-, industry-, and trade-based values, siphoning off wealth to a few urbanites' pockets, and concentrating urban real estate in even fewer hands.

Economically uneven conditions of living are reflected in the different ways in which individuals are incorporated into city life, squeezed in and out of the urban fabric. City-space (i.e. residential zoning, mobility patterns, clustering of work/consumption/leisure time) both materialises and underwrites these processes, thereby producing the well-studied effect of the many cities in one city (Park 1925: 41). As Bong Joon-ho has crudely shown in his 2019 masterpiece *Parasite*, a poor family does not inhabit the same city of a rich household. A homeless person 'falls in' and dwells in the spot that better-fed and -housed others simply drive by, walk past, or at worst stumble upon (L'Heuillet 2016: 90–94). Defined as the vertical superimposition of two or more spaces occupying the same extent and thus allowing for the coexistence of heterogeneous spatial arrangements, engagements, and actions (Lévy 2003: 213), 'co-spatiality' is a palpable trait of city life whose staggering effects have even inspired award-winning science-fiction novels (Miéville 2009). The rich and the poor can sense its reality without a geographer explaining its meaning as a structural feature of the city-space.

Streets are the most obvious, regular, and objective matrix of overlapping spatialities within an urban environment, past and present. The coexistence of heterogeneous spatial arrangements, engagements, and actions on an urban street is a flagrant everyday experience. Furthermore, co-spatiality accounts for the regular manner in which we engage the street: simultaneous presence in a common space without being compelled to interactively share it is a good description of most of our street activities. Lastly, both the interactive and non-interactive aspects of the daily street co-spatiality refer to material spatial actions whose meaning is generally there for all to see (walking, running, strolling, begging, stopping and asking for information, stealing wallets, lifting or lowering the shutter, etc.).

Although ancient Mediterranean cities made a rather indiscrete use of space and were normally characterised by very little spatial segregation (Maier and Urciuoli 2020), the Roman imperial urban society was a 'fiercely segregated society' where various kinds of intermediaries operated between classes and thus avoidance of direct contacts was the rule (Woolf 2006: 85). In these densely nucleated environments, too, no other urban element instantiated more systematically the multi-layered reality of the city, and thus the existence of effective co-spatialities, like its street network, in general, and its primary streets, in particular. First, contrary to segregated secondary alleys, which rather 'isolated different parts of the city and kept out people who did not live or work in that area' (Kaiser 2011: 200), spatially integrated thoroughfares running along the blocks functioned as territories of superposed plans of existence with several passages in-between – whether these were visual fissures, olfactory cracks, fortuitous frictions or interactional contacts. Second, in wide streets more frequently than in other densely populated urban environments like baths, marketplaces, and even multi-story buildings (*insulae*), 'the non-interaction of several actors intervening in an apparently common but not really shared space remain[ed] commonplace' (Lévy 2003: 214).

Heterogeneous in size, ambiance, paving material, quantity and type of human traffic, the planned design of this 'connective architecture' (MacDonald 1986: 32) operated the disorderly life of cities by funnelling the most diverse urban flows and hosting a variety of meaningful movements (Laurence and Newsome 2011). As key venues for many activities, primary streets allowed for spatial actions that could interact differently with each other or, in most cases, not interact at all:

> In comparison to the other urban environments we could name, such as the forum and the amphitheatre, the street thus appears less predictable and more inclusive. It comprises a broad cast – from the enslaved to the moneyed, indeed, virtually anyone across society – brought close in a spontaneous and *minimally regulated* environment (Hartnett 2017: 4; emphasis mine).

A smooth, anonymous walk on a clear *via* was not an easy practice. The narrowness of most streets and the frequent impediments to movement slowed the streetwalkers. Visual spectacles, dominant soundscapes, and miasmic smellscapes overstimulated their sensory spheres. The low volume of vehicle traffic (Laurence 2008) compared to modern-day car-based mobility put people willy-nilly in contact (Hartnett 2017: 38–39, 79–84; Kaiser 2011: 21–24; Laurence 2015: 181–185). Especially wide and crowded pathways were the place for social display (Hellström 2015), reciprocal monitoring, public scorn and commentary (Hartnett 2017: 87–102; Kaiser 2011: 38). Spots and structures for loitering and enjoying street sociability were not lacking (Hartnett 2017: 46–59). Yet tactics of past pedestrians, too, included a quest for unobstructed walking and mutual carelessness (see Goffman 1963). The very minimalist character of street rules, which made interaction open, ubiquitous, and unpredictable, and thereby the experience of co-spatiality alternatively imposed, chosen, or refused (Lévy 2021: 7), also enabled people to be too busy, become blasé enough, or simply feel too different to *properly* interact: that is, to really share a common space (Lévy 2003: 214).

The differences that drew urbanites apart while using the same street were manifold and the resulting overlapping spatial layers could be structural and permanent as well as situational and ephemeral. Co-spatiality as vertical dialogue between the surfaces could therefore fail, modestly succeed, or triumph. In this article, I will focus on the specific spatial layout that is associated with the condition of utter destitution characterising the urban street poor as beggarly non-working poor.[2] Co-spatiality will be measured according to the urban actors' capacity, willingness, and interest in seeing the streetscape as an urban 'baklava' and then in crossing the thick 'dough' of indifference, inattention, and denial of unpleasant views that cover up the street poverty layer (Lévy 2021: 3). To dig all this out, I will concentrate on a religiously specific section of ancient Mediterranean literature.

State of the art
Thick Streets: When a Beggar and a Priest Meet

Imagine a wide and well-trodden avenue (*via/platea*) of an average size city of the Roman empire in the mid-3rd century CE, a thoroughfare with high density of entrances, swarming with activities, and cram-full of people. Now zoom in on two of them. They are both Christ-believers but the one is a beggar, the other is a priest. Since they depend on the wealth of other Christians and are fully or in part free from 'normal work,' specialised literature happens to call them both 'poor.' Yet the former is a 'real poor' facing involuntary poverty,[3] while the latter belongs to the ranks of the 'holy poor' who voluntarily

practice some sorts of renunciation and material deprivation. As shown by the following two aquatic images by Peter Brown, the routes of their financial support discursively intersect but practically part:

> Like the swirling currents of a great river, the two streams (the 'real' poor and the 'holy' poor) *intermingled*, throughout the centuries, in all debates on religious giving in Christian circles (Brown 2016: 16; emphasis mine).
>
> Altogether, the stream of giving that flowed toward the poor alone, according to the primordial sayings of Jesus, had become *divided*. Some of this stream now flowed toward the leaders of the Christian movement and similar privileged persons (Brown 2016: 18; emphasis mine. See also Brown 2002: 24).

Dedicated studies have proved that, throughout the first three to four centuries of the common era, regular collections did not follow a single standard pattern and thus alms-boxes, where present, did not necessarily make this distinction (Finn 2006: 41–47). However, as far as the city-space is concerned, the 'stream of giving' that previously 'flowed toward the [real] poor alone' had bifurcated more neatly: indeed, it had forked at the interface between the exterior space of the avenue, where the beggar lay and the priest moved, and the interior world of the house, where the priest dwelled and the beggar was rather kept out. Their successful and failed encounters on that lot of street are what this paper is about.

In ancient Mediterranean cities, too, housing indexed and displayed one's social standing and, indeed, some Christian religious specialists were likely to be housed or lodged as badly as other socially ill-positioned members of their congregations (Oakes 2016). Yet, however nomadic, none of them was and is known for dwelling and/or scratching out a living on the street. Housing and lodging conditions did discriminate between types and gradients of poverty but street life only told the truth about the poor's place in the urban society. Inclusive and fluid though it might have been, the 'street's visible stage' (Hartnett 2017: 86) left no doubt as to the reality and gravity of poverties pouring out into it. Arrived at the spot where the involuntary real poor set up camp, begged for board and shelter, performed or looked for casual labour, the voluntary holy poor could allow himself to decide whether to glide long and cast aside his gaze, stop to assist, or observe and come up with an idea for a sermon. The non-motive character of the beggar's street life, as well as the casual nature of the vagrant's roof, marked out a discrete layer of existence whose name the priest could bear only metaphorically and whose conditions he did not dare to mimic.

For a long time, the way in which ancient Christian authors gazed upon city streets and their penniless inhabitants has garnered very little attention from scholars of early Christ religion in general. Among the aspects that may account for this sustained negligence are: the scarce and fragmentary state of the non-literary types of evidence (inscriptional and archaeological; see Welborn 2015: 189–190); the relatively recent rise of Roman street studies (see Kaiser 2011: 2–7); the problematic character of the key literary genres (i.e. satire, comedy, controversy) for the reconstruction of ancient Mediterranean urbanites' perceptions of streetscapes and experiences of street life (Hartnett 2017: 17–19; Welborn 2015: 200–215); the preferential option for wealth, patronage, and divestment prescriptions (see Holman 2001: 12; Friesen 2008b) as well as the primary emphasis on cross-class compromise, harmony, and solidarity that made 'capitalist criticism' the mainstream approach of late 20th-century early Christian scholarship to the topic of economic poverty (especially on Paul see Friesen 2004: 331–337; Welborn

2017).

The situation has changed in the last two decades due to a growing sensitivity to the spatiality of ancient urbanism (Laurence and Newsome 2011; see Lätzer-Lasar and Urciuoli 2020; Maier and Urciuoli 2020) and a prior but equally increasing intent to challenge the static stylisation of so much of the written poverty (see Liu 2017: 24–32). Early Christian scholars have developed poverty scales for Roman imperial city populations – including their Christ-believing minorities (Friesen 2004; refined in Scheidel and Friesen 2009) – and challenged functionalist views of the ideological management of socio-economic discrepancies in the Christ groups (see Welborn 2017: 374–390). Late antiquity studies have surveyed the treatises and the sermons of the bishops to shed light on their textual construction of the individual and social body of the beggarly poor (Holman 2001; also De Vinne 1995). The following inquiry will combine and leverage all these bodies of research to peel the 'poverty plateau' from foliated reality of the urban street.

Chronologically, the article sits in-between Paul's dedication to the 'needs of the saints' (*Romans* 12:13) and the late antique bishop's 'love of the poor' (Brown 2002). It will sift through about three hundred years of Christian literature in order to show to what extent the literary emergence of, and engagement with, the urban destitute relate to the awareness and the crossing of the spatial thickness of the urban street.

Historical and spatial exposition, agents

Peeling and Levelling the Street: Early Christian Gazes upon Street Poverty

'Is This Not the Man Who Used to Sit and Beg?'

In the canonised stories of Jesus and his first disciples extreme life conditions are pervasive and, like life in general, mainly lived outdoors. This is not to imply that urban streets are always in the spotlight. In Jerusalem, with the exception of contagious lepers, people with serious physical ailments and impairments can be found hanging around *loci celeberrimi* (Newsome 2011: 22–26) like the Temple and other urban or peri-urban sacred hot spots (Bethseda pool; dam of Siloam) either begging those coming for religious purposes (*Acts* 3:1–10) or looking for wondrous healings (*John* 5:2–3) or possibly both (Holman 2001: 50–51). The spectacle of human disablements (see Solevåg 2018) proves and highlights the spatial prominence of these religious architectural and infrastructural 'landmarks' and 'nodes' (Lynch 1960: 72–83) that stand out uniquely against the background of the entire city, work as busy points of intersection, and are therefore uneasy to miss. Such places of cleansing, in which ritual impurity and physical brokenness cluster, are singled out for their 'cleanliness' and thus their entryways uncoupled from the ordinary streets where everyday dirt and material waste massively gather (Lynch 1960: 79).

Leaving the city's hustle and bustle behind, roads located at the city gates and 'edges' (62–66), where the urban thins out and all traffic slows to a walking pace, can also be spots of miracles: according to the chosen variant, Jesus restores the sight of either one (*Mark* 10:46–52; *Luke* 18:35–43) or two blind men (*Matthew* 20:29–34) on the first stretch of a roadway connecting Jericho to Jerusalem. The narrow alleys of Galilean small towns are like nets that trap the healer: in Capernaum – the fishing 'village of Nahum' that Jesus made his 'operational base' (Tiwald 2021: 155) streets are settings of extorted healings (*Matthew* 9:20–22) or places where the invalid chase after the healer, and then, once recovered, rush out

onto to publicise the miracle (*Matthew* 9:27–31).

Disabled or not, the urban destitute are sometimes spotted at their place along the city 'paths' (Lynch 1960: 49–62). As much as he may have ignored Lazarus' pains and pleas, Luke's over-consuming 'rich man' could not look past the emaciated and ulcerated body of 'a poor man (τις […] πλούσιος)' who, for many years, lay, starved, and finally died at the gate of his mansion (πρὸς τὸν πυλῶνα; *Luke* 16:19–22). The pluperfect passive form of the verb (ἐβέβλητο) suggests that Lazarus might have been a cripple set down by others, i.e. friends or family members, at the rich man's gate long ago (Metzger 2007: 139). Unable to reach the rich man's leftovers, he probably depended on the generosity of the passers-by. A few manuscripts of Luke magnify the townspeople' indifference to Lazarus by adding the clause 'but no one was giving [anything] to him,' which looks like a scribal expansion (138).

More explicit examples of visual and interactional contacts can be mentioned. The first is certainly Luke's version of the parable of the 'great dinner' (*Luke* 14:16–24), where the urban householder, angry with his peers for declining his invitation, orders his servant to 'go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town (εἰς τὰς πλατείας καὶ ῥύμας τῆς πόλεως) and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame' (14:21).[4] Like the divine host of the messianic banquet, this rich patron knows exactly where to find those who have neither excuses to desert his table nor means to reciprocate the favour (Rohrbaugh 1991: 144). A third command soon follows to search country 'roads and hedges (ὁδοὺς καὶ φραγμοὺς)' in order to fill the remaining places with an assortment of extra-urban destitute and outcasts disallowed from living within the city walls (*Luke* 14:22–23; see Braun 1995: 93–94).

The second and most insightful example is offered by the first part of a long story reported in *John* 9:1–12 and concerning a blind man healed by Jesus in therapeutic cooperation with the Siloam pool:

> As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar (προσαίτης) began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know' (*John* 9:1–12).

Leaving the temple by one of the roads leading from it, Jesus finds the man and heals him on spot. This small lot of urban soil is recognised by neighbours and passers-by (οἱ […] γείτονες καὶ οἱ θεωροῦντες) as his usual place. They had taken notice of him in their daily routines and tied so closely his needy figure to the streetscape that some can hardly recognise him once his regained sight had displaced him from the usual begging location. They 'found it easier to believe that the fellow before them was someone else' (Carson 1991: 365–366; also Solevåg 2018: 69–71). As a tile who fled its mosaic, the healed beggar has to explain

to the townspeople sticking to their customary patterns of movement how he came to desert his post. Indeed, whether they formerly ignored or assisted him, he was the one sitting there broken and jobless – if not roofless (see *John* 9:18–23) – while they were passing by him on their way home or to the workplace. He was staying, they were moving. Any time some sorts of interaction took place, the plane of the street proved thick and foliated: same extension, different layers.

'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' This specific treatment of poverty, which foregrounds the spatiality of destitution by nesting the body of the beggarly poor inside the city's street network, and then contrasting it to other spatial agents, habits, and arrangements, is only one option among many in early Christian literature. Mixing sensationalism and realism in order to craft a memorable and instructive religious narrative, authors of miracle scenes and conversion stories may be especially eager to accommodate the standard spectrum of street-living poverties and disabilities and feed the never-ending fascination with their representation (see Solevåg 2018: 29–31). Yet other textual agendas are less interested in this kind of show. They rather stand in the way of both the spatialisation of poverty and the emergence of the multi-layered space of the street through the appearance of vagabonds, beggars, performers, and non-working inhabitants in general.

Early Christian texts written around the same time and originating in often indiscernible urban settings happen to pass over the street poverty plateau in at least three manners. First, they can offer no vision of poverty while voicing a radical denunciation of economic exploitation and injustice. Consider *Revelation*. Neither the wide-angle lenses through which the Seer magnifies the social distances within the Roman system of inequality (*Revelation* 13:16–17) nor his meticulous inventory of Rome's trade imports aimed to feed the tastes and guarantee the leisure of the Roman wealthy (18:11–14; e.g. Friesen 2008a: 21–23; Bauckham 1993) allow the reader to zoom in on any specific socio-spatial milieu of the immense destitution generated by the evil machine of the empire – urban streets included (Nicklas and Walt 2021: 257–258).

Second, early Christian texts can opt for focusing on higher economic profiles among the urban populations and thus overshadowing beggarly poverty when describing urban street life. In *Luke-Acts*, a man lame from birth, who begged at a gate of the temple, is restored by Peter with a miracle that elicits the same flabbergasted reaction described in *John* 9:8–10 – this time from 'all the people (πᾶς ὁ λαὸς)' who crowd this busy part of the city and stare at a paralytic street beggar walking into the sacred temple (*Acts* 3:1–10). Yet, interestingly, the Greek word usually designating the utterly destitute, 'πτωχός,' never appears in *Luke-Acts*, whereas it occurs ten times in the same author's Gospel – i.e. twice the occurrences of *Mark* and *Matthew*. As Steven Friesen has pointed out, the Paul of *Acts* seems to roam the streets of several Mediterranean cities as if he were 'the only believer near the subsistence level,' if not the only poor around (Friesen 2008a: 30). Scholars denying Luke's loss of interest in beggarly lives suggest that his idealisation of the social welfare arrangements among the early Christ groups implies that there was no Jesus follower who was actually in need (*Acts* 4:34). In other words, 'πτωχεία [i.e. acute poverty] was abolished' (Esler 1987: 186).

Third, early Christian writers can prefer to locate destitution elsewhere than in the urban street network of a rather 'under-urbanised and mostly rural world' (Woolf 2020: 13). In the *Letter of James,* the 'poor' is first represented as a visiting destitute (πτωχός) who shows up in shabby clothes at the assembly attended by the readers (*James* 2:1–7) and then collectively portrayed as tenant farmers and day

labourers crying out for justice (αἱ βοαὶ τῶν θερισάντων; *James* 5:4). The polemical targets of the teacher-author are, on the one hand, the wealth-based system of honour operating within religious institutions and hampering cross-class solidarity along religious networks and, on the other, the exploitation of landless field labourers by rich landowners (Friesen 2008a: 23–26). Although the first poor is likely to be a street person happening to crash a Christian gathering as an outsider (Johnson 1995: 221), the type of destitution that manifests and makes a place for itself in the public outdoor space remains outside the spotlight.

However, speaking of textual agendas, the richest and most significant material for an analysis of the opposite tendencies towards beggarly poverty – that is, either passing over or peeling off its street-spatial layer – is provided by a specific body of texts: namely, those documenting the development and enhancement of the care of the poor as both a regulative discourse and a regulated practice. The extant stock of sources about the early Christian discourse and practice of caring for the poor coalesces around two main tendencies and concerns: a) the idealisation-cum-spiritualisation of the dyad poverty/wealth and b) the promotion of a centralised almsgiving. When the two motifs are found in the same author, they clearly serve the same purpose: the recipient-poor functions as a stylised 'signifier' (Holman 2001: 54; also Buell 2008: 40) of more or less articulate systems of material↔spiritual exchange in the sense of 'prayer for wealth' (Brown 2016: 8). The related developing doctrine is technically called 'redemptive almsgiving' (Garrison 1993) and aims at orderly channelling riches into Christian assemblies, redistributing some surplus income, and bridging the in-group social fissures by avoiding burdening the rich with strict eschatological impediments and/or radical requests of dispossession.

Against a well-established research background, my aim is to show the ways in which the just-mentioned tendencies and concerns intersect with the spatialisation of urban destitution, as well as with the materialisation of the street as a foliated reality that is characterised by horizontal plans of existence and vertical lines of contact. How and to what extent do the specific spatial arrangements of social marginality and material inadequacy, which are related to street poverty, fit into these theologised mechanisms of exchange? What do Christ-believing religious entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and church leaders – that is, the writing cultural elite dealing with the promotion and organisation of religious giving – have to say about this poverty plateau? In the next two sections, I will move to the analysis of some of such scripts.

The Idealisation of Poverty and the 'Spaceless' Poor

> In retrospect, Christian preaching in favor of extensive outreach to the poor might seem to represent a novel surge of humane feeling. But it had its shadow side. It blurred traditional boundaries. To present poverty as the sole requirement for generosity devalued the status of thousands of persons who thought of themselves as citizens first and only then as poor. It treated them as part of the same miasma of misery as the beggars, the homeless, and the immigrants who crowded into every city. So a wide and indiscriminate vision undermined the delicate balance of institutionalized groups – benefactors, town councilors, and *populus* – on which the life of the cities of the Roman empire had depended for centuries (Brown 2012: 70).

Describing the effects produced by late antique clerical rhetoric, Peter Brown adopts the point of view of many economically disadvantaged citizens who come to share the degrading company of the outcasts.

However, examined from the perspective of 'the beggars, the homeless, and the immigrants,' the changes effected by a homogenising vision producing *one and only one* new social category for assistance are no less significant: the 'poor' evens out all difference between types and forms of social inferiority and material inadequacy by first uprooting them from their distinctive socio-spatial milieux of urban integration and exclusion. On the one hand, both the early Christian machine of in-group charity and the late antique ecclesiastical restyling of the public giving include types, gradients, and temporalities of poverty that – like impoverished immigrants and refugees, non-citizens in general, homeless, prisoners, much of the lower class population, after all – were mostly excluded by the Greek and Roman traditional systems of civic benefaction and mechanisms of poverty relief (Holman 2001: 32–42; Cecchet 2014; Veyne 1976). On the other, these organised practices of poverty-assistance and the related rhetoric potentially collapse the non-working street poor into the undifferentiated pastoral category of '(all) those in need' (Justin, *First Apology* 13.1 and 15.10: τοῖς δεομένοις; 14.2: παντὶ δεομένῳ; 67.7: τοῖς … λειπομένοις … καὶ ἁπλῶς πᾶσι τοῖς ἐν χρείᾳ οὖσι; see also *Didache* 1.5; 4.8; 11.12). In consequence, existences defined by spatial practices and habits as disparate as casting a mat on the street, picking through garbage, huddling against the warm walls of the public baths, housing in a slum, sharing a cramped upper-story apartment, or holding a house as a low-income widow may be *discursively* taken en bloc and gazed upon in the same way. The catch-all aid category of the 'poor' does not necessarily guarantee the beggar more visibility than the exclusive political notion of the 'people' – whether δῆμος or *populus.*

The *Shepherd of Hermas* serves as a case in point. The author of this long, literarily variegated, and politically sedate apocalypse, composed in Rome around the mid-2nd century CE, is a freedman named Hermas who delivers a host of visions and uses a variety of mediums to convey different divine messages including that of a second repentance. Hermas is (or was) a tradesperson (Lampe 1987: 188–191) who had reinvented himself as a small religious entrepreneur to reform a Christ-believing Roman audience which presumably includes some enterprising colleagues (Rüpke 1999; Maier 2020: 111–112; Arcari 2020: 367). His text welds the topic of urban poverty to a hammering preaching operating as a 'call for charity' (Friesen 2008a: 34) addressed to hesitant, 'double-minded (δίψυκοι)' and still too worldly prosperous believers (Urciuoli 2018: 217–220). Hermas leverages the terror of the divine judgment to urge his wealthy audience to repent, 'seek out the hungry (ἐκζητεῖτε τοὺς πεινώντας)' (*Shepherd* 17.5), and supply them with sizeable surplus donations (e.g. 14.6; 107.5).

Where to find all these empty bellies? Second-century Rome had around half a million inhabitants and more than sixty miles of streets (Pliny, *Natural History* 3.67). It is therefore safe to conclude that the street network of the capital accommodated the highest number of most visible beggars and non-working poor in general per hectare in the Roman empire. Moreover, as Harry Maier has recently argued, the most plausible setting of Hermas' living quarters and audience is a densely populated 'face block neighbourhood' where different forms of economic fortunes and misfortunes clustered and lived cheek-by-jowl, monitored, helped out, and competed with each other (Maier 2020). From the vantage point of his *insula*, Hermas could then draw on a whole inventory of urban miseries for reminding the rich believers where to 'seek out' the hungriest among 'the hungry.' As Maier puts it, 'the poor Hermas describes should be understood as the neighbourhood poor where Hermas' listeners live' (Maier 2020: 112).

However, Hermas' rhetoric and terminology of poverty offer a particularly striking example of how an

early Christian writer may gaze upon urban destitution by glossing over its spatiality. Normally but not exclusively designating the working poor (Welborn 2015: 194–195), the word πένης is very little used but still largely preferred over its non-working twin, the πτωχός, without thereby implying any sharp distinction in terms of economic resources, social integration, and housing options (see *Shepherd* 51.4–5). The most frequent lexical choice is the even broader formula 'those in need (οἱ ὑστερούμενοι)' (17.2.4 and 6; 27.4; 38.10; 57.7; 104.2). The only sub-categories of poor being mentioned as recipients of material aid are 'the widows and orphans' (αἱ χῆραι καὶ οἱ ὀρφανοί: 8.3; 50.8; 103.2; see also 38.10). Hermas makes no reference to his 'neighbors by default,' as French philosopher Hélène L'Heuillet calls the proximate destitute who beg down the street (L'Heuillet 2016: 77).

After all, in order to fit in Hermas' model, the poor's only requirement is to be a fellow Christian who has to pray to the right God for the salvation of his benefactor/s (Osiek 1983: 39–46, 83–84). Their mutually beneficial exchanges are metaphorically conveyed via a rural image of arboreal symbiosis (*Shepherd* 51). From this 'plutocentric perspective,' economical disparity is to be worked out within Christ assemblies, softened via generous giving, and eventually condoned through an eschatologised model of mutual dependence between poverty and wealth as mere 'facts of social life' (Friesen 2008a: 34).

> And so both accomplish their work. The poor person works at his prayer in which he is rich and which he received from the Lord; and he gives it back to the Lord who supplied it to him in the first place. So too the rich person does not hesitate to supply his wealth to the poor person, since he received it from the Lord (*Shepherd* 51.7; transl. Ehrman 2003).

Defined by his/her religious allegiance more than by his/her life and housing conditions, the poor of the *Shepherd* is a static faceless and spaceless ideal placed nowhere but at the gates of heaven. The rich, instead, is located anywhere within the range of his purchasing power of landlord and real estate owner (*Shepherd* 50) as well as compulsive consumer (36.5; 38.3; 45.1; etc.). A flat and one-layered space, the only function of the Roman street in the *Shepherd* is to lead both the poor and the rich to domestic Christ assemblies that operate as equalising settings of their orderly interaction.

Not all texts promoting redemptive almsgiving as material↔spiritual exchange across social divides are equally silent about street poverty. Whereas the agenda remains the same, the beggarly poor happen to surface in order for their extreme attributes to be marshalled for the salvation of the rich. Composed in the second largest city of the empire around 200 CE, Clement of Alexandria's *The rich man's salvation* is a sermon-styled treatise aimed at widening the needle's eye, easing the rich man's way to heaven, in short: 'work[ing] out salvation for them by every possible means' (Clement of Alexandria, *The rich man's salvation* 1). One of these 'means' is certainly rejecting the idea – which a literal understanding of *Mark* 10:17–31 may suggest – that abject misery per se brings one to heaven. Not only does Clement admit to prefer Matthew's socially sanitised, dematerialised version of the Blessing ('Blessed are the poor in spirit,' *The rich man's salvation* 17), but he reduces *ad absurdum* the notion of a poor who is unconditionally blessed and whose dirty rags alone are able to earn her/him the eternal life. Where can this rhetorically functional poor be better found than on the street?

> For it is no great or enviable thing to be simply without riches, apart from the purpose of obtaining life. Indeed, if this were so, those men who have nothing at all, but are destitute and beg for their daily bread, who lie along the roads in abject poverty (οἱ μηδὲν ἔχοντες μηδαμῆ, ἀλλὰ ἔρημοι καὶ μεταῖται τῶν ἐφ᾽ ἡμέραν, οἱ κατὰ τὰς ὁδοὺς ἐρριμμένοι πτωχοί), would, though ignorant of God and God's righteousness be most blessed and beloved of God and the only possessors of eternal life, by the sole fact of their being utterly without ways and means of livelihood and in want of the smallest necessities (Clement of Alexandria, *The rich man's salvation* 11; transl. Butterworth 1919; slightly modified).

Turning the spotlight on street poverty can not only be instrumental in the rich man's collection of treasures in heaven, but, if done properly, it is also critically important for preventing despair. Psychologically, this is a very thin line to walk. For Clement does not hesitate to call charity a 'divine market' (32) and markets, past and present, operate also with psychological rules. On the one hand, feeding the hungry or receiving the homeless (ἄρτον διδόναι τῷ πεινῶντι, ὑποδέχεσθαι τὸν ἄστεγον; 13) can be less burdensome if the better-off believe a beggar is not necessarily closer to God than they could ever be. On the other hand, it could be harder to convince the rich to turn part of their surpluses into alms if they suspect that an 'ill-clad' and 'ungainly' appearance (33) might cover up a 'spurious and falsely named poor (νόθος … πτωχὸς καὶ ψευδώνυμος):' namely, a 'fleshly poor (σάρκινο[ς] πτωχό[ς]),' a 'poor in worldly goods (πτωχός… κατὰ κόσμον)' but not in spirit as everybody is required to be (19). How to solve this riddle? Clement's answer is that the rich must donate without bothering to assess the moral state and religious allegiance of their recipients. For human judgment can be mistaken and therefore castigated by 'eternal punishment.' Ignorance being beneficial, indiscriminate giving is recommended as the best strategy to pass the needle test (33).

The eschatological state of the poor is symmetrical to that of the rich as long as no spiritual value or disvalue is put on material possessions or the lack thereof (*pace* Holman 2001: 53). For the purposes of this paper, however, it is important to note that Clement's spiritualised and eschatologically regulated type of wealth scale can go as far as to reshuffle and rebrand the extreme layers of a thousand-leaved urban street. Utter poverty as manifested by living on the street may happen to be 'spurious,' whereas great affluence paraded in the same space is simply 'false' wealth (*The rich man's salvation* 19). Following Clement's urban geography of salvation, the poverty and the wealth plateaus are not vertically superposed along the same route. Rather, they will 'interface' (Lévy 2003: 522), that is, they will be horizontally juxtaposed, at the border of the divine judgment.

The Promotion of a Centralised Almsgiving: The Beggar Comes Last

Listing and ranking poverties according to some criteria of entitlement to alms was methodologically at odds with Clement's efforts in the radical spiritualisation of the wealth/poverty divide. Yet, contrary to religious freelancers and self-authorised intellectuals, ordained bishops in charge of the redistribution to 'the poor' could not allow themselves the luxury of passing over the problem. City streets, as well as other loci of urban and suburban beggarly poverty like bridges, crossroads, public arcades, baths, eateries, slums, *insulae*, even graveyards were places swarming with candidates for almsgiving (Grey and Parkin 2003: 286). The flux of claimants had to be regulated, boundaries set, criteria found.

'Remember the poor' (τῶν πτωχῶν ἵνα μνημονεύωμεν; *Galatians* 2:10; see also *1 Corinthians* 16:1–4; *2*

Corinthians 8–9; *Romans* 15:26) is the earliest formula adopted by Paul to urge his addressees to contribute to the 'anomalous' and even 'transgressive' collection he was raising all across the Mediterranean for some needy members of the Jerusalem group of Christ followers, that is, for an 'extra-local, non-Greek group' of recipients far removed from that of the contributors (Kloppenborg 2017: 313, 331). Danger of loss, theft, and fraud logi(sti)cally increase when funds are raised and transported to a different locale (Kloppenborg 2017: 316). Yet the more local the cause and spatially closer the recipients, the more critical the task to discriminate among the potential receivers of alms. The process through which the bishops came to manage and then struggled to centralise this crucial function is an age-old matter of debate (e.g. Stewart 2014: 55–119) whose examination goes beyond the scope of this paper. The focus here is on the weakest vertex of the triangle of alms: the receivers. How to be among them? How to be part of this worthy 'sub-set of the urban poor' (Grey and Parkin 2003: 292)?

Being a fellow Christian was one major requirement for selection (Bremmer 2017: 17; Finn 2006: 88, 68; Brown 2002: 24) – and all the more so when group membership began to imply an orderly ritualised procedure for clearly demarcated congregations. Another criterion, which started being set for single women in general, a.k.a. 'widows (χῆραι)' (Maier 2021), at least as early as the mid-2nd century CE, was the local enrolment as church-aided poor (καταλεγέσθω; *1 Timothy* 5:9). However, lists of people entitled to support by common funds were hardly ubiquitous and comprehensive of all varieties of poverty. Nor is it clear 'how far any particular church's fund would stretch in meeting the[] various needs' (Finn 2006: 76). Summarising the results of a centuries-spanning survey of the varying patterns of regular collections, Richard Finn concludes that

> [t]he principal recipients of episcopal alms were the enrolled widows and their dependent children, together with the poorer virgins, whose enjoyment of a low but relatively secure dole helped to ensure their long-term survival on the edge of penury without falling into utter destitution. A varying number of destitute Christians and non-Christians, who were probably not enrolled and so had no title to alms, merely a claim to what was left, also benefited when and where there was enough to go round and so survived for a while longer. Among the destitute, Christian had a better claim than others (Finn 2006: 88–89).

As Finn indirectly recognises (Finn 2006: 260), the ranking order in the list does not follow from the importance of this organised help for the material survival of the recipient. Like Luke's Lazarus, street people were likely to satisfy their hunger with what fell from the patron-bishop's table and to settle for the leftovers of other needy clients, in this case, first and foremost, the widows. In terms of absolute numbers, there were certainly good reasons for prioritising concern for widows and orphans. Given that about 40 per cent of children lost their father at the age of 14–15, single women and their children 'generally made up a disproportionate percentage of the conjunctural poor' (Finn 2006: 24; see also Morley 2006: 28) as well as an equally sizeable sample of the relatively well-to-do who felt threatened by impoverishment (Brown 2002: 59). Therefore, in order to work as a viable category for charitable assistance and related social and economic control, widowhood had to be unpacked. The best example of this class, the 'real widow' (ἡ ὄντως χήρα; *1 Timothy* 5:5), had to be linked to some spiritual capital. According to the 2nd-century author of *1 Timothy*, widows entitled to church support must be sixty years and older, married only once, as well as 'well attested for […] good works' such as lodging strangers and assisting the afflicted (εἰ ἐξενοδόχησεν, […], εἰ θλιβομένοις ἐπήρκεσεν), which implies that these subsidised

single women were expected to be able to host, visit, and eventually feed even more vulnerable helpless persons (*1 Timothy* 5:10; see also Cyprian, *On works and almsgiving* 15). Evidence for a spectrum of Christ-believing unmarried women ranging from paupers to patronesses in different geographical and cultural areas are not lacking (Bremmer 2017).

After the widows, credentials for church alms become blurry. 'Apart from widowers and widows (*vidui aut viduae*),' the categories of recipients reported in the Latin translation of a 3rd-century Syrian church order called *Didascalia Apostolorum* cover people both *unable to* work for keeping themselves and *unable by* their work to keep a family (*Didascalia Apostolorum* 4.3.3). Moreover, the text recommends the bishops 'to oversee and take care of all people,' while the recurring references to the strangers (*peregrini*), the afflicted (*afflicti*), and the poor in general (*pauperes*) are no doubt meant to include also the beggarly street poor (*Didascalia apostolorum* 3.4.1 and *passim*; see Schöllgen 1998: 127–130). Yet, after all, the latter never managed to steal the limelight from widows and the like. Once again, the street fails to appear as the thick plane where the synchronic spatialities of begging and strolling, lying and moving, dwelling and travelling overlap and occasionally intersect.

In the middle of the 3rd century, the Roman bishop Cornelius, leader of a congregation that apparently supported 'fifteen hundred widows and persons in distress' (χήρας σὺν θλιβομένοις; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.43.11), was one of the earliest known church leaders who had to navigate the needs and the claims of an impressive figure of involuntary/real poor. The other is Cyprian. At once leader and wealthiest patron of the Carthaginian congregation (Bobertz 1992), Cyprian played the role of the educated theologian promoting the spiritual merits and the eschatological profits of charity aid (redemptive almsgiving) as well as of the ecclesiastical manager monitoring and centralising the traffic of alms (episcopal almsgiving). I will focus on some samples of this twofold commitment.

As Hermas' *Shepherd* has shown, treatises written to urge the wealthy to donate in order to save their souls may well omit to locate and spatialise poverty. Cyprian's *On works and almsgiving* (ca. 253–256 CE) perfects this technique by placing all its few references to the poor, most of which are scriptural quotations, in a spatial vacuum. Having hardly a body – the physical-bodily characterisation of poverty boils down to a couple of references to the hunger, thirst, and nudity of the destitute (*On works and almsgiving* 22; also, partly, 17) – there is no way the poor can occupy and produce space. The allegation that the impoverished and the poor persons are invisible to the rich's eye (*egentem enim et pauperem non vident oculi...*; 15) sounds almost paradoxical in a text that has 'virtually nothing' to say about the former (Holman 2001: 12).

Contrary to this discarnate and unspatialised take on poverty, Cyprian's numerous extant *Letters* offer a close-up view of the bishop's daily engagement with urban poverty within Roman society, on the one hand, and his management of socio-economic cleavages and inequalities within his congregation, on the other. Cyprian laboured to centralise the local system of both 'holy poor' sustenance and 'real poor' relief (e.g. Cyprian, *Letter* 5.1.2; 41.2.1) in order not only to prevent other patrons from collecting and distributing salaries and charity funds, but also to turn clerical offices into full-time employment (1.1.2), to block funding to undeserving priests and rival factions (34.4.2), and to put his candidates for the clergy on the church payroll (39.5.2; Urciuoli 2017: 358–363; Bobertz 1997). He promoted and enforced episcopal almsgiving by every means in a period of time characterised by heavy political pressure on Christ-believers, fractionation of the local networks (see Brent 2010), and experiments with distribution

of charitable alms along 'confessional' lines, that is, according to the party affiliation of the recipients (Cyprian, *Letter* 41). Responsible for all Christian deserving poor under the so-called 'Decian persecution' (250–251 CE), Cyprian made a clear choice about where to channel the stream of giving and whom to prioritise as recipients:

> As I have by now frequently written, be unsparing also in the care and attention you give to the poor – that is to say, the poor who, standing steadfast in the faith (*his* [= *pauperibus*] *qui in fide stantes*) and fighting valiantly on our side, have not deserted the battlements of Christ. They are now deserving of even greater love and concern from us, for they have been neither constrained by poverty nor overthrown by the storm of persecution, but by remaining faithful servants of the Lord they have, besides, set the rest of the poor an example of faith (*ceteris quoque pauperibus exemplum fidei praeberunt*)
>
> (Cyprian, *Letter* 12.2.2; transl. Clarke 1984).

It is unclear whether these Christ-believing *stantes* were conjunctural poor that the state-led 'persecution' had recently impoverished (through confiscation of property and means of livelihood, loss of domicile, etc.) or native-born poor who 'have not succumbed to the temptations of apostasy under the pressure of poverty' – or both (Clarke 1984: 253–254). However, what matters is that these 'meritorious' (185) and 'persevering poor' (198) took priority over all the other recipients of almsgiving (Cyprian, *Letter* 5.1.2; 12.2.2; 14.2.1; 41.1.2). The Christian undifferentiated category of poor, which a few months earlier was still fully in force (*Viduarum et infirmorum et omnium pauperum curam peto diligenter habeatis*; *Letter* 7.2) is fractured along moral-cum-disciplinary lines (Clarke 1984: 185).

Whereas the old and new, voluntary and voluntary impoverished faced unemployment and exile, some of them coalesced in prisons (Cyprian, *Letter* 5.1.2; 8.3.1; etc.). It was especially from the *carceres* that the 'example[s] of faith' were expected to spread, reach out to 'the rest of the poor,' and infiltrate all locations of misery, including the streets. Maximally regulated environments, prisons can be said to operate in precisely the opposite way than streets do: prisoners were not only thrown into the same cramped place – which was particularly 'dark, hot, and overcrowded' when it came to the so-called *carcer inferior*, the lower section of many Roman prisons (Bremmer 2017: 356) – but they were forced to share the same space by being offered a very limited set of spatial actions and behaviours and thus almost compelled to interact. However constrained their freedom of movement and action, the Christian holy and real poor in prison could nevertheless engage in practices (visions, rituals, charismatic intercessions) and even acquire identities (martyrs and confessors) that were not shared by other prisoners. Co-spatiality, after all, is but another way of looking at and branding a topic that early Christian scholars conversant with critical spatial theory have already pursued in relation to Roman *carceres*: namely, how Christ-believers 'create[d] alternative spatialities from those defined through hierarchical practices operating in contemporary society' (Perkins 2002: 118; see examples in 122–129).

Explanatory hypotheses, potential generalisations, possible relations to other factors

Concluding Remarks: When They See Us

> From the late fourth to the early fifth century, the spokesmen of the church employ the full force of their rhetoric not only to make the homeless poor visible but also to make them brilliantly spectacular and salvifically powerful (De Vinne 1995: 4).

These words are taken from the prologue of Michael J. De Vinne's 1995 unpublished dissertation on the 'episcopal representation of the poor in the late Roman empire.' Without delving into the background story, De Vinne starts off with a radical change of scenery. Throughout a specific period of time, more or less independently from each other, a distinguished group of Eastern and Western rhetorically qualified bishops – John Chrysostom, the Cappadocian Fathers (i.e. Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil of Caesarea), Ambrose, and Augustine – laboured to do what the former leaders of the Christ groups had methodically abstained from: namely, to make a salvific graphic spectacle out of the urban destitute body. From Antioch to Milan, from Caesarea Mazaka to Constantinople and Carthage, a series of moralising shows in the form of homilies and sermons starring different kinds and figures of beggary thrived and spread under episcopal direction.

Building especially on Brown's paradigm of the Christian bishop as at once lover, governor, and inventor of the poor (1992: 71–117; 2002), studies like those of De Vinne (1995) and Holman (2001) have extensively described the emergence of these urban religious and literary events. They have shown that the acquired visibility of beggarly poverty relates to the survival of a 'more outward-going "civic" ideal of public benefaction' (Brown 2002: 27) which eventually grew into a richly subsidised imperial religion whose donors grew rapidly in numbers, ambitions, and means. Nor do the shifts in the discursive construction and rhetorical entitlement of the poor and their finally manifest bodies – individually and corporately – only correlate to the rise of a 'new style of urban leadership' competing and cooperating with the secular powers (Brown 1992: 77). Such changes in the representation of the homeless poor more specifically reflect a new politics and aesthetics of the bishops' gaze, which is aimed at setting the sights of their audiences 'on the rotting, starving, lamenting, supremely physical body of the poor around them — and to do something about it' (Holman 2001: 96; also De Vinne 1995: iv). I do not intend to reiterate the arguments of these well-researched studies. Equally beyond the scope of this article are the material transformations of the city-space strategically interwoven with these discourses: first of all, the foundations of the *xenodocheia/ptōchotropheia* – i.e. Christian poorhouses and hostels for wanderers that functioned also as hospitals (Finn 2006: 82–88; Brown 2002: 33–44; Holman 2001: 74–76) – and the implications of these new conspicuous buildings for the spatialisation of urban poverty. I will rather conclude by flashing a last street scene of co-spatiality.

Imagine again a busy urban main street. A Christian priest walking on it runs into a begging spot. This time the scene is set in a specific city, Caesarea Mazaka, the capital of Roman province of Cappadocia Prima, and on a feast day, somewhere between 365 and 372 CE. The beggars are many, a legion of whining lepers pressing in upon the city and lining the entryway of a church. Their wretched presence is simply impossible to miss and therefore all the *dramatis personae* – the priest, the beggars, and dozens of anonymous passers-by – come into contact.

They are driven away from cities, they are driven away from homes, from the market-place, from public gatherings, from the streets, from festivities, from drinking parties, even— how they suffer!—from water itself. They neither share the flowing springs with everyone else nor are they permitted the use of rivers to rinse away their contamination; and the strangest thing of all is that we drive them away from our midst as pariahs on one hand, and on the other bring them back to us claiming that they are really harmless, but all the while denying them shelter and failing to provide them with basic sustenance, treatment for their wounds, and dressing for their sores as best as we can. And so they wander about night and day, helpless, naked, homeless, exposing their sores for all to see, dwelling on their former state, invoking the Creator, leaning on each other's limbs in place of those they have lost, devising songs that tug at the heartstrings, begging for a crust of bread or a bit of food or some tattered rag to hide their shame or provide relief for their wounds. To them a kind benefactor is not someone who has supplied their need but anyone who has not cruelly sent them away. With most of them not even discomfiture is a deterrent from attending celebrations; quite the contrary, their destitution compels their attendance. I am referring, of course, to those religious festivals that we have organized for the public as a way of ministering to souls, when we meet either for some sacramental occasion or to celebrate the martyrs of truth with the aim of both honoring their trials and emulating their piety. Still, being human, they are both ashamed in the presence of their fellows on account of their misfortune, and they would rather be hidden in the mountains or crags or forests or, as a last resort, in the darkness of the night. Yet they throw themselves in our midst, miserable chattels, enough to make one weep (in fact there is perhaps a reason for this: they can serve as reminders to us of our own weakness and dissuade us from attaching ourselves to any single circumstance in our present visible world as though it were permanent); yes, throw themselves, some from a desire to hear a human voice, others to look upon a human face, others to collect scraps of food from the well-to-do, but all to enjoy a measure of relief by baring their private woes. Who is not overcome as their plaintive cries rise in a symphony of lament? What ear can bear the sound? What eye take in the sight? They lie beside one another, a wretched union born of disease, each contributing his own misfortune to the common fund of misery, thus heightening each other's distress; pitiful in their affliction, more so in the sharing of it. Some bystanders gather round them like spectators at a drama … (περιίσταται δὲ αὐτοὺς θέατρον συμμιγὲς …) (Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 14.12–13 [On the Love of the Poor]; transl. Vinson 2003).

As with the canonised gospels and acts of apostles, in Gregory of Nazianzus' sermon On the Love of the Poor the visual contacts between beggars and passers-by cut across the overlapping spatial layers of the urban street. Likewise, they depend on the spatial design of the city and the organisation of its ordinary and festal times as much as on the spatial routines and tactics of its inhabitants. Contrary to the Jesus stories, however, the reflections triggered by these encounters do not serve to highlight and advertise the wondrous healings of a wandering peasant preacher ('What happened to the sitting beggar? Who did this?'). Rather – and for the first time in the literary history of a religion that finds always new manners to be urban – they are solicited by the pastoral agenda of an urban priest ('How can one not be overwhelmed by this spectacle!'). Moreover, the infected ranks of homeless lepers described in Gregory's

oration are not human tiles that suddenly fled their place in the urban puzzle, like the blind man healed by Jesus in *John* 9:1–12. These are socially exiled people who return. Because of their repellent and reputedly contagious disease, they were 'driven away from cities, […] from homes, from the market-place, from public gatherings, from the streets, from festivities:' that is, from all the urban nodes, paths, and landmarks to which they now lay claim by overcoming their shame, placing themselves at the interface of the crowded church and the busy street, and 'throwing' their plagued bodies in the midst of the celebrants – regardless, or even ignorant, of their 'potential for the salvific realignment of others' eyesight' (De Vinne 1995: 17). A new undeniable spectacle is served.

'What shall we give [them] in exchange of the public spectacles?,' asks Augustine in one of his sermons on the *Psalms* (*Exposition of the Psalms* 39.9). Fulminating against theatre shows, games, and races, while at the same time employing their 'potent signifiers,' this late antique clerical rhetoric strives hard to divert the gaze of its flocks from one type of city show to another: from the gladiators killing each other in the *nested* environment of an amphitheatre to the lepers lying beside one another in the *co-spatial* scenery of a street at the entrance of a church (De Vinne 1995: 57). However, as Lévy notes, depending on many factors, including the segregationist quality of each society, co-spatiality tends to oscillate between a 'concrete reality' and a 'non-actualized virtuality' (Lévy 2021: 7). The connection between layers can be ephemeral, a matter of seconds. The vertically piled-up street space, which is revealed and even produced by the religious festival, instantiated by the beggars and the encounter with the passers-by, and eventually crossed by the latter through spontaneous reactions like shock, disgust, and compassion, may well operate as a beneficial 'reminder' of how precarious and even contingent one's own lifestyle is. Yet the time of the lepers' admittance into the visual and aural inventory of the urban space may not survive the entertainment deficits of the spectacle: 'Some bystanders gather round them like spectators at a drama, deeply affected, but only for a moment' (Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 14.13).

Footnotes

1

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2

Nonworking poor are unemployed or only occasionally employed people whose income falls below a given poverty line.

3

Poverty is called involuntary when it is caused by factors beyond individual control, or where choices are so limited that poverty is inescapable.

4

All biblical translations are taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, edited by Michael D. Coogan et al. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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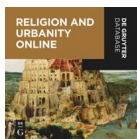
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