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The material and the spiritual wealth

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Abstract. Material wealth without virtue, that is, without spiritual wealth, is a loser. Well-being, as the possession of goods, is not an end in itself for our life, but rather a means by which we can also help our fellow men. The writings of the Holy Fathers are rich in references about the equality of people. Wealth is not depicted as a bad thing in itself. It is possible to be rich and still remain a good Christian, that is, to be both materially and spiritually rich. Those who seek to gather material wealth most often become spiritually poor.

Keywords. Material wealth, spiritual wealth, education, Holy Fathers, virtue

1. The material wealth

Saint Basil the Great, especially, is not against the idea of prosperity, but actually explains who the real owner of goods is: God. He shows that wealth can be providential and using it with a Christian conscience is a requirement of a good steward. Saint John Chrysostom reminds us of such a steward: the righteous Job, who did not allow himself to be enslaved by wealth but was like an "administrator" of some foreign wealth. Job was rich spiritually, more than he was rich materially. Job did not cry when he lost his wealth¹.

Paradoxically, by despising wealth, human becomes rich. His hand becomes fruitful, giving alms from his possessions, while the hand that steals is "dry". Wealth is not depicted as a bad thing in itself. It is possible to be rich and remain a good Christian, that is, to be both materially and spiritually rich. Christ Himself does not defame riches, but rebukes those who allow themselves to be controlled by those riches. A rich human will hardly enter the kingdom of heaven. Unfortunately, misused wealth brings darkening of the mind and a series of losing pleasures, ie: pleasure, greed, envy, vain glory and others².

Those who seek to gather material wealth most often become spiritually poor. Greed becomes a means of gathering wealth, it becomes avarice and leads to the loss of heavenly

1 **Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom)**, *La Matei, Omilia XXI, (Homily XXI in Matthew)*, colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 23 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 23), traducere, introducere, note și indici de Preot Profesor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru (translation, introduction, notes and indexes by Priest Professor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru), Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church), București (Bucharest), 1994, p. 273.

2 **Sfântul Ioan Gura de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom)**, *La Matei, Omilia XLVIII (Homily XLVIII in Matthew)*, colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 23 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 23), p. 527.

things. For the Christian, his fortune should be the kingdom of heaven. Stinginess also becomes a way to accumulate as much wealth as possible. To the stingy human, wealth is an end in itself. The sun, the beauties of the world do not bring him pleasure and he would prefer gold instead. Out of stinginess, even other sins are no longer of interest to him. He becomes the slave and prisoner of his fortune, increasing this disease of his soul³.

The oppression of one's fellows can be a source of unjust accumulation of wealth. Saint John Chrysostom states that, however, there are rich people who earn their wealth honestly and use it properly⁴. They are really wealthy. The Holy Fathers strongly combat the vices that are related to the abusive gathering and the wrong use of material wealth⁵.

2. The prejudices of rich people against their fellows show their spiritual poverty

Saint Basil the Great teaches that even sinful human should not be reproached. The apostle Paul, writing to Timothy, asked him to use rebuke and exhortation with moderation, avoiding reproach. Rather, we are exhorted to patience because it stops anger⁶.

Great and often rich people must not despise the small and apparently inferior to them, because they cause their own injury. Because of the love of silver, the human hierarchy changed. Those who have money are admired and happy and those who do not have money are despised. All people talk about money and how some have become rich, or how they can become rich. Lack of money is considered a misfortune. Saint John Chrysostom reprimands the rich who run away from the poor, avoiding meeting them. It reminds them that they are all human, equal, free, that they share the same nobility, that they share the same nature. Unfortunately, the rich often offend the poor and consider themselves entitled to judge the life of the poor, to examine it, forgetting that their role is to be merciful, not judge. The rich material boasts of his possessions. But what are these goods? Stones, wood, animals, clothes, and gold and silver are earth and dust. The rich and wise human should aim for a different kind of wealth and clothing: the clothing of virtue⁷.

Saint John Chrysostom regulates the relations between masters and their servants from a moral point of view, starting from the need for gentleness, tolerance, and Christian love. Ask the masters to treat the servants with gentleness, not malice. Often the rich human is harsh with his subjects who do him wrong, but lenient with those close to him⁸.

3 **Sfântul Ioan Gura de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom)**, *La Matei, Omilia LXXXIII (Homily LXXXIII in Matthew)*, colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 23 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 23), p. 944.

4 **Sfântul Ioan Gura de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom)**, *La Matei, Omilia LXXXIII (Homily LXXXIII in Matthew)*, colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 23 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 23), p. 946.

5 **Diac. Prof. (Deacon Teacher) Teodor V. Damșa**, „Bogăția și sărăcia în lumina omiliilor Sfântului Vasile cel Mare” („Wealth and poverty in the light of the homilies of Saint Basil the Great”), în *revista Mitropolia Banatului (in the Metropolis of Banat journal)*, an XXIX (year XXIX), nr. 4-6/1979, p. 304.

6 **Sfântul Vasile cel Mare (Saint Basil the Great)**, *Omiliile la Hexaemeron, la Psalmi și cele 24 de Omilii și cuvântări, (Homilies to Hexaemeron, to Psalms and the 24 Homilies and speeches)*, colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 17 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 17), traducere, introducere, note și indici de Preot Profesor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru (translation, introduction, notes and indexes by Priest Professor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru), Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church), București (Bucharest), 1986, p. 331.

7 **Sfântul Ioan Gura de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom)**, *La Matei, Omilia XXIII (Homily XXIII in Matthew)*, colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 23 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 23), p. 309.

8 **Sfântul Ioan Gura de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom)**, *La Matei, Omilia XXXVII (Homily XXXVII in Matthew)*, colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 23 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 23), p. 460.

Material wealth does not make the one who possesses it any better, nor does it elevate him above others. There is nothing to be praised about the human who gets rich by stealing, even by murder, or by associating with bad people. The rich human who uses his wealth properly is only obeying God's commandments. And the one who does not use it well, becomes a slave to money, is controlled by it and there is really nothing to praise about him.

3. The temporality of material wealth - an impetus to acquire spiritual wealth, starting from the reconsideration of human's attitude towards fellow men in need

Looking at the world, the work of the Creator and the wise way it was ordered, we can better understand what human nature is like. We realize that nothing that is human remains in time, stable. And we learn that we should not rejoice too much, nor be conceited, when in life everything seems to be going well for us! Let us not brag about the power we may have at one time, nor be proud of our material wealth, because it is so fickle and changeable. Let's not put our trust in the strength of the body, but take care of the soul, "the immovable good"⁹.

Often, people put their hope in worldly things, in money, in powerful people, or in the health and vigor of their bodies. But the surest help does not come from these, but from the Lord. Saint Basil the Great therefore urges us not to put our hope in people, but to pray and ask with humility and tears for God's help, relying on our hope in the One who can truly save us, our Lord Jesus Christ¹⁰.

"The rich became poor and went hungry", says the Psalmist (Psalm 33, 10). These words are life-building, because they teach us not to rely on worldly wealth and the fleeting glory it brings. The rich became poor because they sinned. It is hard for a rich human not to sin. But soon he ends up being hungry, deprived of the word of the Lord. And those who seek the Lord will not be deprived of all good things. The Lord Himself is the perfect good, and all those who seek the Lord will not lack this good¹¹.

Interpreting the words: Those who trust in their strength and boast of the abundance of their wealth (Psalm 48, 6), Saint Basil the Great has in mind, on the one hand, those who rely on the physical strength of the body, and on the other hand, those who are proud of their wealth. They forget that their soul is not strong enough to save itself, nor do they have the necessary wisdom, which comes only from God¹².

The respect and praise that people bring are also relative and subjective. They do not, most often, reflect human dignity. But we forget that in God is our salvation (Psalm 61, 7). Happy is he who does not rejoice in what men consider great in this life but boasts in Christ¹³.

9 **Sfântul Vasile cel Mare (Saint Basil the Great)**, *Omiliile la Hexaameron, la Psalmi și cele 24 de Omilii și cuvântări*, (Homilies to Hexaameron, to Psalms and the 24 Homilies and speeches), colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 17 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 17), p. 144.

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11 **Sfântul Vasile cel Mare (Saint Basil the Great)**, *Omiliile la Hexaameron, la Psalmi și cele 24 de Omilii și cuvântări*, (Homilies to Hexaameron, to Psalms and the 24 Homilies and speeches), colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 17 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 17), p. 271.

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13 **Sfântul Vasile cel Mare (Saint Basil the Great)**, *Omiliile la Hexaameron, la Psalmi și cele 24 de Omilii și cuvântări*, (Homilies to Hexaameron, to Psalms and the 24 Homilies and speeches), colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 17 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 17), p. 335.

Saint Gregory of Nyssa was concerned all his life for his spiritual perfection, and this spiritual experience he transmitted to us in his beautiful moral-ascetic writings. He sees around him that men often seek the vanities of worldly glory, and boast of the honour their fellows give them, or of power and wealth¹⁴. None of these last: neither strength, nor beauty of the body, nor wealth, nor glory. They can "bloom" for a moment in a person's life, but then they fall¹⁵.

And St. John Chrysostom starts from examples from nature, to prove how changeable and unstable material wealth is. The objects or materials that we consider synonymous with wealth are not valuable in themselves. Only human is the one who gives them value. Unlike flowers, for example, which are beautiful in themselves. People look with admiration at the material wealth, the glory of life and the honour of their peers, considering them the "lights" of this life. But they are a shadow and a dream. Today people praise someone, considering him important, and tomorrow they despise him. Life is like a theatre stage. Actors are the people themselves. When the show ends, the actors return to what they really are, simple people. The facts remain after them. That is why Saint John Chrysostom urges us to stop suffering for nothing, that is, for transient, worldly things. Let's turn our gaze from the stones and the stone columns to the sky. And looking from there, from the height, towards the things below, we will understand that they are "nothing". God gave us the body made of earth, so that we could raise it to heaven, and not so that through it we could drag the soul down to earth. Earthly are our bodies, and if we will, they will become heavenly. Saint Amphilochius of Iconium also speaks about the temporality of human beings. Because human knows that he will die, says this Holy Father, human should take care above all of spiritual wealth and the "meals of the age to come", without considering the present immortal, nor remaining without feeling. Looking at those before us, even at the strongest ones, we see how nothing is left of them. An illness can still fall on an emperor and death will snatch him in a "single night" and he will be taken to the other world, without anyone being able to help him, without wealth, glory, or brilliance being of any use to him. And at the judgment of God he will be investigated for his deeds¹⁶.

Often, helping one's own children is a false pretext for scorning and neglecting one's peers. Human always finds a reason for the justification of his greed, with direct consequences for his fellow men. One of the common pretexts is the need to accumulate assets for the welfare of one's offspring. They want a secure future, even when they enjoy abundant wealth and "store" it, "bury" it, burying their own heart along with the treasure (Matthew 6, 21). In fact, says Saint Basil the Great, placing children and taking care of them as a pretext for lavish enrichment is a satisfaction of one's own lust for wealth. Because no one can know how the child, who has become an adult, will use what he received from his parents. The parable of the prodigal son, so anchored in the realities of life, shows us that the wealth received by an unprepared child-adolescent becomes material support for a debauched life, becomes "matter" for the work of sins, with consequences for those parents who offered it. Because those parents will also be punished for the sins committed in the gathering of unjust wealth, but they will also be punished for oppressing others in order to acquire it.

14 **Sfântul Grigorie al Nissei (Saint Gregory of Nyssa)**, *Despre feciorie (About virginity)*, traducere de (translation by) Laura Pătrașcu, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church), București (Bucharest), 2003, p. 27.

15 **Sfântul Grigorie al Nissei (Saint Gregory of Nyssa)**, *Despre feciorie (About virginity)*, p. 33.

16 **Sfântul Amfilohie de Iconium**, *Cuvânt de îndemn la virtute și că trebuie neîncetat să ne amintim de moarte (A word of exhortation to virtue and that we must always remember death)*, traducere de (translation by) Laura Enache, Editura Doxologia (Doxologia Publishing House), Iași, 2014, pp. 71-74.

Saint John Chrysostom insists more clearly on this common theme for the Christian family, emphasizing the social consequences that lead to the injustice of fellow human beings, to their contempt, to the denial of their dignity and their right to life. To a parent who tried to justify his greed through the need to feed his own children, or even for his own feeding, the Great Hierarch presents the consequences of his actions: the starvation of others, the theft of their belongings and even the crime, which will bring with it "the most severe punishment hard". In fact, it is not care for one's own family members that drives such behavior, but "soul disease". Many times, parents do not get to enjoy their efforts, but comfort themselves, hoping that their children and grandchildren will enjoy their work. They build great houses, which they die and do not see finished. Leave legacies, which others will receive. They do many things, which they will not personally enjoy. St. John Chrysostom harshly rebukes these. It is not because of the multitude of children that we are crazy about riches, but because of the love of silver¹⁷.

And yet, there is an "inheritance" that parents must leave to their children: Christian education, the teaching of virtue, the only one that, in the difficult moments they will go through, will save the ship of their soul. Only by carrying such a legacy in their souls, they will be able to cross the sea of life well. If we all sought to teach (children) more about virtue than about all the other goods of the world, believing that virtue is the true good, and other goods are of little importance, the sons of men would adorn themselves with very great goods¹⁸. Christians should leave the wealth of faith to their children, the imperishable one, useful now and in the future, while earthly wealth often perishes before us. Parents are therefore teachers for their sons. They must not become a reason to do harm to fellow humans, to exploit the poor, to disregard them. We must teach children to put virtue above everything else¹⁹.

The choice of material wealth, as a life option and its bad use, brings consequences both on the social level, by degrading the poorer fellows, but also on an individual level, through the present and future punishments that will fall on the rich, lacking in wisdom and measure.

Saint Basil the Great condemns not only the often-unjust way in which wealth is gathered, but also the greed of the rich and the luxury and unnecessary needs they create, in their desire to lead an increasingly better life, precisely because they result in impoverishment and humiliation of the most helpless: poor workers, widows, orphans. For Saint Basil the Great, wealth is used correctly only if, even in part, it is intended to help those in need²⁰.

The Great Hierarch starts from the Gospel words: "With what measure you measure, it will be measured to you" (Matthew 7, 2). We should not take these words as a threat, but they can be a warning, given precisely not to make a mistake, to avoid sinning. And the sins related

17 **Sfântul Ioan Gura de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom)**, *La Matei, Omilia XX (Homily XX in Matthew)*, colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 23 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 23), p. 270.

18 **Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom)**, *Către tatăl credincios (To the faithful father)*, traducere de Preot Profesor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru (translation by Priest Professor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru), Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church), București (Bucharest), 2001, pp. 310, 311, 317.

19 **Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom)**, *La Facere, Omilia XXIV (Homily XXIV on Genesis)*, colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 22 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 22), traducere, introducere, note și indici de Preot Profesor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru (translation, introduction, notes and indexes by Priest Professor Doctor Dumitru Fecioru), Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (Publishing House of the Biblical and Mission Institute of the Romanian Orthodox Church), București (Bucharest), 1989, p. 329.

20 **Preot Profesor (Priest Teacher) I.D. Popa**, „Aspecte moral-sociale în predica și viața Sfinților Trei Ierarhi” (Moral-social aspects in the sermon and life of the Holy Three Hierarchs), *în revista Glasul Bisericii (in the Voice of the Church journal)*, nr. 3-5/1980, p. 392.

to wealth have a direct and immediate consequence on the fellows, whose dignity and life are deeply affected by the approach and the rush of their fellows according to wealth²¹.

To describe inter-human relations, dominated by the struggle for material ones, in which greed far exceeds needs, the Cappadocian Hierarch starts from examples from the world of living things. For example, most fish feed on those that grow in the water, but some eat others, the bigger fish swallowing the smaller one. So do people greedy for wealth. This trampling on the rights of others leads to only one point: "final punishment"²².

The ultimate degree of degradation of the being of the greedy rich human is seen when he is no longer satisfied with the possession of gold but wants to be master even over the lives of his helpless peers. The starving poor human ends up selling his own child, turning him into a slave to the ruthless rich human, hoping to save his other children. We are not talking here about disregard for the human being, but about cruelty, which is not found even in wild animals. Suffering, hunger, poverty becomes an opportunity for even greater enrichment. For the merciless and greedy rich human, the lives of his fellow men are worth nothing. The suffering of others does not move him. Hunger does not touch him. He bargains for the other's life, sets the price in gold²³.

Wealth, as a common good, used well, has a positive social role. When it is possessed, or "buried" only in some people's fields, it has negative social effects, and on an interpersonal level, it leads to drama. There are tragedies suffered by the poor, but also by the rich, whose souls are impoverished in faith, impoverished in love, impoverished in the "hope of eternal life". Unfortunately, even if in this world it is often possible to escape present revenge and punishment, at the Last Judgment, all the unjust will revolt against the greedy and the unjust. Because facts accompany us like a shadow²⁴.

The love of silver gives birth to all evils, being their "root". It brings darkness into souls, makes human ignore any law, including the laws of nature and humanity. Greed, argyrophilia does not take into account either kinship or friendship relationships. The one who values wealth, money, and objects ends up despising the salvation of his soul, causing him future punishment and damnation. Such a human is not spiritually rich. Even in this life he is deprived of "God's love and help", being "poorer than all the poor". Paradoxically, when God sees that we prefer spiritual things, "then he gives us everything necessary for earthly life"²⁵.

All kinds of evils arise from wealth: enemies, misunderstandings, intrigues, insults, suspicions, robberies, even murders and wars. The world ends up being full of crime and the land is stained with human blood. The love of wealth abolishes any idea of respect for one's fellows. The laws of nature, family, and divine commandments are no longer respected. And

21 **Sfântul Vasile cel Mare (Saint Basil the Great)**, *Omiliile la Hexaameron, la Psalmi și cele 24 de Omilii și cuvântări*, (Homilies to Hexaameron, to Psalms and the 24 Homilies and speeches), colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 17 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 17), p. 38.

22 **Sfântul Vasile cel Mare (Saint Basil the Great)**, *Omiliile la Hexaameron, la Psalmi și cele 24 de Omilii și cuvântări*, (Homilies to Hexaameron, to Psalms and the 24 Homilies and speeches), colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 17 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 17), p. 150.

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24 **Sfântul Vasile cel Mare (Saint Basil the Great)**, *Omiliile la Hexaameron, la Psalmi și cele 24 de Omilii și cuvântări*, (Homilies to Hexaameron, to Psalms and the 24 Homilies and speeches), colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 17 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 17), p. 417.

25 **Sfântul Ioan Gura de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom)**, *La Matei, Omilia LXXX (Homily LXXX in Matthew)*, colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 23 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 23), p. 913

graves fall prey to thieves and desecrations. Unfortunately, the reason for the exaggerated love of silver is most often not the lack of what is strictly necessary, but greed. It is not hunger, nor poverty, but the desire to live in unnecessary luxury, even at the price of plunging your neighbour into poverty. Because greed becomes the cause of denying and suppressing any form of justice and respect for fellow human beings. The lover of silver has no friends, only enemies and accusers. The greedy and miserly rich are afraid of losing what they have ill-gotten. He trembled at the thought that trouble might befall them. They are sad, fearful, angry. And because they are thinking about other people's fortunes, they no longer enjoy theirs. Lust for riches is like a fire, which burns brighter by adding wood. Lust for money increases when there is more gold. The stinginess of the lover of silver is a heavy burden. He considers his parents to be a burden to him, and raising children seems difficult to him. As the eternally thirsty, even if he drinks the water of a thousand springs, he still feels no joy, because he is not satisfied, so also the lovers of silver, not only do not rejoice, but also suffer, no matter how many fortunes they gather around them, because they do not know the end of such lust²⁶.

Wealth brings with it unnecessary luxury and vain glory. They not only do not raise human in his dignity, but even lower him. Human, created in the image of God, meant to reach the likeness of Him, considers himself insufficiently endowed by his Creator and wants to add objects made of metals considered precious, in order to beautify himself. But he who wants to be truly rich will not seek gold, will not be a lover of ornaments, will not gather vessels of precious metals, but will gather what he can give to the needy. Most often, the accumulation of wealth is done by wronging fellow men, and the wrongs will be paid from now on. The flight after riches brings misfortune, leaves orphans without support, puts in prisons, sends to courts, brings oppression of widows. Many are the punishments that come upon the greedy and their descendants. The sin that remains after stealing the wealth of others is endless. Paradoxically, fortunes often end up in the hands of enemies, but the sins committed to gather them remain as a heavy burden and human will give an account for them. Eternal punishment is likened to fire, and the rich cast themselves into a flame which they themselves have kindled and fed with their greed²⁷.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we must understand the social context in which the teaching of the Holy Fathers was formulated. God, with His generosity, makes it rain both on the righteous and on the sinners, offering all people the possibility of acquiring the material goods necessary to live in good order. The teaching of the Holy Fathers about human and his dignity is based on Christian moral principles. The Holy Fathers talk about the harmful influence of wealth on relationships between people. The rich human has a great responsibility and a debt commensurate with the gifts he receives. The temporality of material wealth is an impetus to acquire spiritual wealth, starting from the reconsideration of human's attitude towards his peers in need. Let us not attach our heart to wealth and worldly glory, but let us take from what wealth can offer us as much as it is useful to us. Let us not rely on worldly wealth and the fleeting glory it brings. The respect and praise that people bring are also relative and subjective. They do not, most often, reflect human dignity. Often, helping one's own children is a false pretext for

26 **Sfântul Ioan Gura de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom)**, *La Matei, Omilia XXVIII (Homily XXVIII in Matthew)*, colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 23 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 23), p. 360.

27 **Sfântul Ioan Gura de Aur (Saint John Chrysostom)**, *La Matei, Omilia IV (Homily IV in Matthew)*, colecția: Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești 23 (the collection: Fathers and Church Writers 23), pp. 64-65.

scorning and neglecting one's peers. And yet, there is an "inheritance" that parents must leave to their children: Christian education, the teaching of virtue.

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