

Alms, the Elm, and the Grapevine in Caesarius' *Sermo 27*

Viewing the preacher's role as prophetic, Caesarius, bishop of Arles from A.D. 502-542, exempts no aspect of life from sin's corruption and the prophet's scrutiny, a stance that has made him a byword for confrontation motivated by ascetic zeal. Imitating the humble style of the sacred writings he cites, Caesarius employs metaphors from everyday life to illustrate the teachings of the Bible and persuade his audience to change their behavior.

In *Sermo 27*, a metaphor from viticulture frames Caesarius' admonition to give alms to the less fortunate. In classical literature (especially Ovid *Metamorphoses* 14.623ff.) the image of the grapevine supported by the elm tree is an image of a fruitful marriage; in the second-century *Shepherd of Hermas* 3.2, it is the image of a symbiotic relationship between rich and poor created by the giving of alms. Aiming the lesson more pointedly at his wealthy parishioners, Caesarius emphasizes how the prayers of the poor confer greater benefits than the ability of the wealthy to offer physical succor, and he punctuates his persuasion with the warning of Jesus that every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down (Mt 7.19).

This paper aims to illuminate specific rhetorical strategies employed by this famous fiery preacher and explore the burgeoning use of the Fathers of the Church as a storehouse of spiritual wisdom at the end of antiquity. It provides some brief discussion of viticulture and the transference of the metaphor of the elm and the grapevine to Christian literature. I argue that Caesarius' image of the elm and the grapevine was a creative and memorable reworking of tradition that served to motivate his listeners to adopt spiritually salubrious thoughts and behaviors that benefited members of all social classes.