



## *Epieikeia toū Christou* (2 Cor 10:1a): Incarnational Paradigm and Sapiential Virtue

ANDREAS HOECK, S.S.D.

Saint John Vianney Theological Seminary  
Archdiocese of Denver

**Abstract:** To say that the Hellenistic lexeme *epieikeia* (ἐπιείκεια) denotes a multi-faceted crossroads of challenges, is an understatement. While substantial scrutiny has been brought to bear on it in secular circles of mainly legal scholarship down the centuries, predominantly under the assumed notional equivalency of equity<sup>1</sup>, its biblical implications have never been comprehensively analyzed, and to aid in motivating the world of exegetical disquisition to fill this lacuna is the purpose of the present study. Since the topic will be contemplated here from a Catholic perspective, the 1986 New Vulgate version of the Bible<sup>2</sup> will serve as the fulcrum of choices regarding texts and terminology. All English translations will be the author's, based on the Greek original and its Latin rendition. The underlying method of this essay could be termed three-dimensional, starting out with the examination in Chapter One of the unique expression of *epieikeia toū Christou* as found in Saint Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians, 10:1a. In its biblical singularity, that phrase will be considered the Archimedean point

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1 For a modern summary on *epieikeia*, see for example FALCÓN Y TELLA, *Equity and Law*; HAYAERT, "Æquitas, Epieikeia et Pensée Symbolique."

2 Also known as the Neo-Vulgate, whose complete title is *Nova Vulgata Bibliorum Sacrorum Editio*; it functions as the official Classical Latin translation of the original-language texts of the Bible published by the Holy See; completed in 1979, it was promulgated by St. John Paul II; a second revised edition was published in 1986, which is the current official Latin text of the Bible in the Catholic Church.

of the ensuing deliberations. Chapter Two of this study will more exhaustively explore the six linguistic and exegetic connotations of this mystifyingly meaningful word as found in the Old and New Testaments. Then, in Chapter Three, to further flesh out its signification, we will select and probe into four secular interpretations of *epieikeia*, keeping in mind that its origin is steeped in pre-Christian Greek culture, and has therefore been employed and commented on by numerous ancient, medieval, modern, as well as post-modern thinkers. This triple research into Jesus' *epieikeia*<sup>3</sup> gentleness will then flow in Chapter Four into a reflection on how each one of us can imitate him in this specific aspect. Yet without further delay, let us delve *in medias res*.

**Keywords:** Christology, tenderness, gentleness

**Resumen:** Decir que el lexema helenístico *epieikeia* (ἐπιείκεια) denota una encrucijada de desafíos de múltiples facetas es quedarse corto. Si bien a lo largo de los siglos se le ha aplicado un escrutinio sustancial en círculos seculares de erudición principalmente legal, predominantemente bajo la supuesta equivalencia nocional de equidad, sus implicaciones bíblicas nunca se han analizado exhaustivamente, y para ayudar a motivar al mundo de la disquisición exegética a llenar esta laguna es el propósito del presente estudio. Dado que el tema se contemplará aquí desde una perspectiva católica, la versión de la Biblia de la Nueva Vulgata de 1986 servirá como punto de apoyo para las opciones con respecto a los textos y la terminología. Todas las traducciones al inglés serán del autor, basadas en el original griego y su versión latina. El método subyacente de este ensayo podría denominarse tridimensional, comenzando con el examen en el capítulo uno de la expresión única de *epieikeia toū Christou* como se encuentra en la Segunda Epístola de San Pablo a los Corintios, 10,1a. En su singularidad bíblica, esa frase será considerada el punto de Arquímedes de las deliberaciones subsiguientes. El capítulo dos de este estudio explorará más exhaustivamente las seis connotaciones lingüísticas y exegéticas de esta palabra desconcertantemente significativa tal como se encuentra en el Antiguo y Nuevo Testamento. Luego, en el capítulo tres, para profundizar en su significado, seleccionaremos e indagaremos en cuatro interpretaciones seculares de *epieikeia*, teniendo en cuenta que su origen está impregnado de la cultura griega precristiana, y por lo tanto ha sido empleada y comentada por numerosos pensadores antiguos, medievales, modernos y posmodernos. Esta triple investigación sobre la mansedumbre *epieiqueal* de Jesús desembocará luego en el capítulo cuarto en

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3 May this author be forgiven for occasionally using *epieikeia* as an adjective for the sake of terminological consistency and cogency.

una reflexión sobre cómo cada uno de nosotros puede imitarlo en este aspecto específico. Pero sin más dilación, profundicemos *in medias res*.

**Palabras clave:** Cristología, ternura, mansedumbre

## I. CHRIST'S *EPIEIKEIA*

Aiming as we do for the most accurate feasible understanding of Christ's *epieikeia*, it seems only logical to commence these our indagations by evaluating the Hellenistic lexical background of this vocable.

### 1. *Hellenistic lexicality*

In the Greek Bible, that is the Old Testament Septuagint and the Koinē New Testament, following the Neo-Vulgate's canon, the concept of *epieikeia*<sup>4</sup> (ἐπιείκεια) is documented as a noun of feminine grammatical gender recurring nine times<sup>5</sup>; its rarer cognate adjective *epieikēs* (ἐπιεικής) has eight occurrences<sup>6</sup>; and its correlated adverb *epieikōs* (ἐπιεικῶς) features a mere three times<sup>7</sup>, bringing the total number of scriptural recurrences to twenty. Ergo, thirteen of these are found in the Old Testament, and an infrequent seven in the New Testament. When considering the lexicality of its compound structure, it connects the intensifying prefix *epí* (ἐπί), meaning “on, upon, onto, above, fitting”, with either the primary verbal root *eiko* (εἶκω), “to be weak”, “to give place”, “give way”, “give in”, “yield”, “submit”<sup>8</sup>, or otherwise with the primary verb *éōika* (ἔοικα), “to be like”, “to resemble.”<sup>9</sup> Through the sense of faintness as a copy, both verbs appear to be akin to the noun *eikón* (εἰκών), signifying “icon”, “image”, “statue”, “mirror-like reflex”, “precise reflection of a prototypical source”, “close resemblance”, “likeness”, “replication”, “form.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the word *epieikeia* transmits the idea of something being seemly, likely, truth-like, fair, appropriate, suited, reasonable, considerate, equitable, yielding, gentle,

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4 In pertinent literature, including the one cited in forthcoming footnotes, one often comes across its alternative abridged version, i.e., *epikeia*; for the sake of morphological precision, however, in this present study the original transliteration will remain the preferred one.

5 Cf. Wis 2:19; 12:18; Bar 2:27; Dan 3:42; 4:24; 2 Macc 2:22; 10:4; Acts 24:4; 2 Cor 10:1.

6 Cf. Esth 3:13(b); 8:12(m); Psa 86:5; Phil 4:5; 1 Tim 3:3; Ti 3:2; Jas 3:17; 1 Pt 2:18.

7 Cf. 1 Sam 12:22; 2 Kgs 6:3; 2 Macc 9:27.

8 Latin *cedere*; cf. Gal 2:5.

9 Cf. Jas 1:6.23.

10 E.g., 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15.

kind, mild, moderate, and even forbearing.<sup>11</sup> This equitable consideration and gentle adjudication of justice is inherently opposite to the use of force and violence, yet associated with the traditional virtue of *eusébeia* (εὐσέβεια) or devotion toward the gods.<sup>12</sup> Against the etymological backdrop of this Hellenistic conception, let us attempt to formulate an initial definition of *epieikeia*.

## 2. Precursory delineation

Since the days of the great classical Greek philosophers, *epieikeia* has been deemed to be a virtue concurrent with justice, or, as in Plato's opinion, for instance, as a dilution thereof.<sup>13</sup> It appreciates the reality that occasionally a generic law can be incommensurate when applied to a specific circumstance of human life. There is the acknowledgment that true justice can sometimes be achieved by not inflexibly applying the law to a particular situation. Rather, in kindly relaxing overly rigid regulations or legal standards, the intention of the lawgiver is correctly interpreted, and the spirit of the law is preserved. In that sense, Aristotle sets such equitable yieldingness against the strict imposition of the law, which he terms as *akribodikaios* (ἀκριβοδίκαιος, literally, "one who is precise as to his rights").<sup>14</sup> The judicious avoidance of such harsh legalism indicates respect for the natural law and for the common good. Understood in this way, the virtue of *epieikeia* resides not apart from justice, but rather outside or above it, as insinuated by the afore-mentioned prefix *epí* (ἐπί), "upon, above." It behaves like a superior remedy for the unavoidable shortage of foresight when it comes to the complexity of ethical situations that cannot be captured by an oversimplified systematization of justice. This particularized fine-tuning of jurisprudence treats the positive rule as a moral guideline and applies the spirit of the law to the conditions of a particular case. It is prone to pardon human failings while contemplating that juridical spirit and not the letter only, the intention and not the action, the whole and not merely the part, and the good rather than the evil. What is more, *epieikeia* is the great-hearted willingness to not rigorously insist upon one's rights, privileges, or entitlements, but to tolerate injustice, grievance, and even damage, desiring redress by words rather than by action, by equitable arbitration rather than by condemnation.<sup>15</sup> Combining both reasonableness and virtue, *epieikeia* safeguards the superior ideals of divine and

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11 Cf. BARCLAY, *New Testament Wordbook*, 38-39.

12 Cf. KITTEL, *Theologisches Wörterbuch*, 585.

13 Cf. *Nomoi*, VI, 757d-e.

14 Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, V, 15.

15 E.g., Mt 5:39-42; 1 Cor 6:7.

natural law in the face of the imperfections of positive ruling, notably when the obedient execution of the latter would be sinful or demanding of disproportionate heroism in its compliance.<sup>16</sup> With these preparatory ruminations apropos the etymology and generic gist of the word *epieikeia*, let us now turn to the pivot of this present treatise, namely, the matchless text in the New Testament that ascribes this Hellenistic construct to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, and that is 2 Cor 10:1a.

### 3. *A pars pro toto of redemption in Christ*

Commencing with a thought regarding the epistolary context of this verse: in carrying on with his earlier personal apologia at 2 Cor 1:12–2:11, also known as the *Defensio Pauli Prima*<sup>17</sup>, the Apostle subjoins a second one, the *Defensio Pauli Altera*<sup>18</sup>, in 2 Cor 10:1–13:10, struggling to ward off the impugment by those Corinthian Christians who denigrated or downright denied the authority of his apostolic ministry among them. In its central section, viz., 11:16–12:10, his defense takes the form of a boast, brought forward by a prologue at 11:1–15, and followed by an epilogue at 12:11–18. These sections in turn are framed by an introduction, 10:1–18, and a conclusion, 12:19–13:10, both of which profess Paul’s assuredness about his divine mission, representing the literary purpose of the letter. These passages are not only emotionally charged and intensely rhetorical but also proliferate in autobiographical insights pertaining to the heart of the Apostle of the nations. Thus, he launches his personal defense by submitting this formula of adjuration: “I myself, Paul, appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Cor 10:1a), suggesting that his opponents in that local church were lacking in those two qualities, and that he could plead with them hinged on what they knew about the divine-human traits of Jesus as possessing them. This his solemn conjuration (<sup>NVg</sup>*obsecro vos*) then flows into a brief asseveration that he is not relying on the frailty of human conventions, but rather conquers in the power and knowledge of God in Christ (cf. vv. 1b–6). In other words, Paul prefers to react without sternness against the rebellious Corinthians. On the contrary, he points to the Lord’s own clemency as the very source of his apostleship, affiliating himself with it as paternal founder of the community.<sup>19</sup> By the same token, he unmasks the hostile operations of certain unnamed in-

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16 Cf. VIRT, *Epikie-verantwortlicher Umgang mit Normen*; VVAA., *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 290–91; ALPHONSUS OF LIGUORI, *Theologia Moralit*, I, tr. 2, ch. 4, 201.

17 NESTLE-ALAND, *Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine*, 473.

18 NESTLE-ALAND, *Novum Testamentum Graece et Latine*, 486.

19 Cf. 2 Cor 12:14.

truding missionaries criticized throughout 2 Cor 10-12. Instead, the Corinthians should emulate Jesus' loving-kindness to live harmoniously with him and with one another.<sup>20</sup> In this way, the Apostle prepares his ecclesial audience for a more truthful perception of his seeming weakness, since he was reviled by them on account of his mirroring of these blessings of the God-Man.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, he implores them by these, to demonstrate that he is naturally predisposed to such soothing procedures of administration, even though he will resort to more serious ones if met with persistent disobedience and resistance. If they only meditated on the sympathetic deportment of their divine Master, so worthy of his and their emulation, they would fathom that there were no grounds to despise his deeds of considerateness toward them, much less to dismiss them as undue fragility or spinelessness. His cordial solicitation uncloaks his wish to direct the attenders of this fledgling church community into conformity with such virtue, instead of engaging in scorn toward their spiritual shepherd. Apparently, his adversaries and sundry false teachers were playing upon his Latin-inspired name "Paul", signifying "the little one", contemptuously relating it to his small physical stature, his feeble bodily presence, and his inconsequential speech among them.<sup>22</sup> It is as if he was affirming that despite of being "the least of the apostles" and an *abortivus* (1 Cor 15:8-9), he was by no means ashamed of his name or heritage, and that he beseeched them through the benevolent Spirit of their Lord not to join in those counterproductive sneers. In point of fact, Paul was the same in his beliefs and practice, in his doctrine and life, in his presence and absence, contrary to what his challengers were sadly propagating about his outward appearance and bearing. Thus, he entreats his ecclesial children not to compel him to exert his mandate with rigor upon his return to Corinth, hoping that their dealings will warrant for his mercy: "What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?" (1 Cor 4:21).

But before exegeting the exceptional Pauline expression *epieikeia tou Christou*, let us briefly pore over the more extended part of this verse, "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ (*diá tēs praútetos kai epieikeías tou Christou*, διὰ τῆς πραΰτητος καὶ ἐπιεικείας τοῦ Χριστοῦ, *per mansuetudinem et modestiam Christi*)", where the two attributes of meekness and gentleness seem to be synonymous, forming a literary hendiadys.<sup>23</sup> Read in this key,

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20 Cf. 2 Cor 13:11; see also STEGMAN, *Second Corinthians*, 222-23.

21 Cf. BROWN-FITZMYER-MURPHY, *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 825.

22 Cf. 2 Cor 10:10.

23 A similar combination can be found, albeit in an inverted order ("reasonableness and mildness"), in the Greek philosopher PLUTARCH'S *The Life of Pericles*, 39, 1, and *The Life of Julius Caesar*, 15, 5; 57, 4, by the same writer.

the former noun, *prautes* (πραΰτης, *mansuetudo*, “meekness”), being appreciably more commonplace in the Scriptures<sup>24</sup>, elucidates the latter, *epieikeia* (ἐπιείκεια, *modestia*, “gentleness”), adjoining the element of meekness to that of *epieikeial* altruism and forbearance of a superior toward his subjects.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, both locutions are not wholly commutable, since meekness is detailed as an interior attitude or a passive condition of the human heart and mind, whereas gentleness preferentially alludes to external behavior or the tenderness in action as regards the other. Accordingly, *epieikeia* is more relational in that it seeks to mend potential blunders of legalistic justice, making generous concessions for particular cases and their circumstances, eager to accommodate them in amicability and sage restraint. With that in mind, let us now scrutinize the way in which Paul puts to use the word *epieikeia* to illustrate the person and mission of Christ Jesus himself. It should be underlined once more that this concept is the only one of its kind in the New Testament, which makes it at the same time more effortful for the interpreter, but also lends itself to a wider palette of exegetical elucidations. Besides Acts 24:4, it is also the single recurrence of *epieikeia* as a noun in the New Testament, since elsewhere its derivative adjectival form appears. Likewise, nowhere else in Scripture is Jesus directly credited with meekness and gentleness, although the idea is communicated in various other guises.<sup>26</sup>

Yet without further ado, let us anatomize the master-statement of this study, namely, *epieikeia tou Christou* (ἐπιείκεια τοῦ Χριστοῦ, *modestia Christi*), as found at 2 Cor 10:1a. For the sake of interpretive accuracy, we shall look at it as an exegetical genitive, which means that the genitival correlation between *epieikeia* and Christ can be either possessive or subjective. In the previous case, “gentleness” touches on the very core of the person of Christ, that is, he owns it, and it thoroughly belongs to his personhood. In the latter scenario, Jesus becomes the one who shows forth kindness, making it known by his way of acting and exercising highest authority. When honing in on that former, possessive dimension, the second divine person of the Blessed Trinity, the consubstantial *Verbum Dei*, displayed his *epieikeial* spirit by choosing to hypostatically adopt our human nature in an act of incarnational kenosis or most humble surrender.<sup>27</sup> This must be reckoned as the foremost exemplification of *epieikeia*, namely,

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24 Recurring as a noun six times in the Old Testament and twelve times in the New Testament, and as an adjective an additional eighteen times in the Old Testament and four times in the New Testament, amounting to a total of forty occurrences.

25 LEIVESTAD, “The Meekness and Gentleness of Christ”, 156.

26 E.g., Isa 40:11; 53:7; Mt 11:29; 12:19-20; Rom 12:1.

27 Cf. 2 Cor 8:9; Phil 2:7.

that the eternal Word would set aside the supernal glory due his divine nature and dignity, embrace the status of a slave on earth, and thereby evince his salvific love for humankind. From that moment onward, God's gentleness bears a name and has a face, and that is Christ himself as otherworldly kindness personified.<sup>28</sup> Envisaged through this prism, "gentleness" becomes but the companion or coequal of his divine glory, his transcendent majesty and omnipotence. Precisely by humbling and enfleshing himself in our earthly circumscription, the Lord is equipped to lavish redemptive graces on all the members of humanity.<sup>29</sup> And pivoting now to the latter, subjective scope of the exegetical genitive, one must intuit that the God-Man's entire earthly and glorified existence could be accounted for as a simple expansion of his *epieikeia* nature as taken on in his Incarnation. Among many other manners, he showed his divine *epieikeia* in his meek and conciliatory demeanor during the course of his life, embarked on in his unassuming birth at Bethlehem<sup>30</sup>, but also by his gentleness toward everyone he met, and his revolutionary instruction of loving one's foes.<sup>31</sup> How can we not mention his non-retaliatory patience and meek forbearance during his Paschal Triduum in Jerusalem, as well as his prayer to his heavenly Father to exonerate those who put him to death, a death he accepted with *tapeinotic* resignation, to cite Paul's own wording from his Kenotic Hymn.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, the Lamb of God's earthly *epieikeia* should not be misread as weakness, since he is also the King of kings and Lord of lords in glory.<sup>33</sup> Yet still, instead of jealously guarding and enforcing his rights, he elects to exhibit the leniency<sup>34</sup> and mercy that only an omnipotent Redeemer can impart. Certainly, his mystical clemency is continually shown in his celestial Reign, in the working of his grace, and in his priestly mediation, not provoking anyone into the prospective harshness of his vindication. All in all, one could opine that Christ's *epieikeia* straightforwardly represents the divine Law as embodied Clemency, fulfilling and transcending both the natural law and the Old Testament Torah.<sup>35</sup> In sum, when applying this Hellenistic term to him, Paul is ultimately delineating Jesus'

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28 Cf. LAMBRECHT, *Second Corinthians*, 161.

29 Cf. KITTEL, *Theologisches Wörterbuch*, 586-87.

30 E.g., Zech 9:9; Mt 20:20-28; Mk 9:35-40; 10:13-16; 14:55-61; 15:16-19; Lk 23:34; Jn 13:2-17.

31 Cf. Mt 5:38-48; Lk 6:27-36.

32 Cf. Phil 2:8; Lk 23:34; 1 Pt 2:23; see also HARRIS, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 668.

33 Cf. Phil 2:9-11; Rev 19:16.

34 See the variant rendering *lenitatem* at 2 Cor 10:1a, shown by the 6<sup>th</sup> cent. AD Vetus Latina Codex *Wirceburgensis*.

35 Cf. Mt 5:17-18.



way of having been made sin by his Father while being sinless, that we might be transformed into the justice of God.<sup>36</sup> In him our trespasses are absolved and we are made alive, “erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands; he set this aside, nailing it to the Cross” (Col 2:14). Thus, he replaced unbending systems of legal obligation and the punishment they inflict on those who break them, and in place of that he put his *epieikial* Self, acquitting us from guilt and liberating us from undying death. He did not come to judge and pronounce sentence on the world, but to save us by the gentleness of his Spirit, which is just another strand of his divine love for the human family.<sup>37</sup> In that sense, *epieikeia* is descriptive of the salvific aftereffect of Christ’s being and action, he who is gentle and humble in heart, who will grant rest for the soul, whose yoke is indeed easy, and whose burden is light.<sup>38</sup> He became *Sacerdos et Victima*<sup>39</sup> to cleanse us from our sins, delivering us from the eternal castigation under the draconian letter of the law.<sup>40</sup> Although the word *epieikeia* had been in colloquial usage in ancient Greece hundreds of years before the Lord Jesus walked on the earth, Paul employs it in his Letter to the Corinthians and to all Christians since, albeit not in its original legal setting, to characterize the Son of God’s loving-kindness in bringing about our salvation. That fascinating lexico-theological scale of denotations cannot be captured in one single Latin or English word, and so let us inspect the multifarious auxiliary renderings of it as found in the Bible and in secular literature, too.

## II. COMPLEMENTAL SCRIPTURAL DIMENSIONS

As noted already above, within the canonical boundaries of the New Vulgate, the word *epieikeia* and its adjectival and adverbial cognates recur twenty times, and is translated in six different ways, offering irrefutable proof of the multifariousness and sophistication of this Hellenistic notion. Let us now proceed to examine each one of the renditions separately and more in depth, essaying to apply them to the person of Christ. The theological purpose is to further round out the picture of his *epieikeial* nature and mission.

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36 Cf. 2 Cor 5:21.

37 Cf. Jn 3:17; 12:47; Rom 8:39; Titus 3:4-7.

38 Cf. Mt 11:29b-30.

39 Cf. the Litany of “Our Lord Jesus Christ, Priest and Victim”, as mentioned in St. JOHN PAUL II’s *Gift and Mystery*.

40 Cf. 1 Jn 1:7b; Rom 8:2.

## 1. Modestia

In addition to the one at 2 Cor 10:1a, another seven, or nearly half, of all recurrences of the Greek word *epieikeia* are rendered either by the noun *modestia*, or by its adjective *modestus*, or again by the adverb *modeste*. But before absorbing ourselves in the exegesis of those scriptural passages, let us first focus on the etymological backdrop to better grasp their import, specifically in relationship to Jesus' gentleness. Even though the lexical root *mōs-* is of elusive emergence, it is generally held that the Latin stems from the Proto-Indo-European *moh-*, conveying someone's intention, cognitive purpose, or volitive inclination. As such, it may be linguistically linked to the ancient Greek *maíomai* (μαίωμα), "to pursue, strive", and perchance to *mōusa* (μοῦσα), "muse", or even to the English word "mood." Besides, a probable derivation from the Proto-Indo-European *med-* has been hypothesized, indicative of the idea of "measuring", which in turn would be akin to *modus*, having to do with "manner" or "mode." Contemporary Bible translations of *modestia* comprise "modesty", "moderation", "kindness", "soundness of mind", "temperance"<sup>41</sup>, "restraint", "propriety", "appropriateness", and "seemingness."

With these explanations in mind, let us now turn to the first of seven verses that, aside from 2 Cor 10:1a itself, render the Greek *epieikeia* as *modestia*, namely, Wis 2:19. This passage illuminates the paradigmatic animosity that the impious bear toward the righteous<sup>42</sup>: "Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find out how gentle he is [ἵνα γνῶμεν τὴν ἐπιεικίαν<sup>43</sup> αὐτοῦ, *ut sciamus modestiam eius*], and make trial of his forbearance." Undoubtedly, the archetypical pattern for such temperateness conflated with patience can be discerned in Christ, who reacted with kindness toward those who scorned him along his public ministry. But he resigned himself to this epic antithesis between good and evil persons especially during the untold sufferings of his redemptive Passion. Ergo, the Lord's *epieikeia* implies purposeful self-mastery even under the pressures of opprobrium and torment. That divine discipline is also reflected in the way he refrains from punishing all those who disobey him, sin against him, or even blaspheme his name, down the centuries of the Church's eschaton, reserving judgment and retribution for the end of the ages.

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41 Reflective of the ancient Greek ideal of *sophrosýne* as excellence of character and soundness of mind conducive to qualities such as self-control, prudence, and temperance.

42 Cf. FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *Ant.*, 6, 92; *Contra Apion*, 2, 29.209; PHILO, *Virt.*, 81.125.140.148; *Spec. Leg.*, IV, 23; *Leg. Gaj.*, 119.

43 This is a slightly shortened spelling of the noun, also embedded in Bar 2:27; 2 Macc 2:22, that is, *epieikía* (ἐπιεικία), in lieu of the usual *epieikeia* (ἐπιεικεία).

Next, the concept of *epieikeia* is reiterated at 2 Macc 9:27, this time in the form of an adverb, *epieikōs* (ἐπιεικῶς)<sup>44</sup>, at the end of king Antiochus IV Epiphanes' letter to the Jews. He sent them this missive immediately before his death, handing over his ascendancy to his son, and simultaneously pledging to the Jewish community about the latter's benevolence toward them: "For I am sure that he will follow my policy, and will treat you with moderation [*modeste*] and kindness [φιλανθρώπως, *humane*]." On this occasion, modesty is attributed to an earthly ruler<sup>45</sup>, and it is coupled with the notion of philanthropy or humaneness. That constellation recalls Paul's declaration to his disciple Titus: "But when the goodness and loving kindness [φιλανθρωπία, *humanitas*] of God our Savior appeared, <sup>5</sup>he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:4-5). In attribution to Jesus, there is a nuance of loving closeness to the human condition, denotative of his profound comprehension of it as *perfectus Deus, perfectus Homo*.<sup>46</sup> And that nearness to each one of us by virtue of his Hypostatic Union allows him to also execute his mission as Savior of the human family with utter distinction and "modesty."

And thirdly, we find the Greek neuter adjective *epieikēs* paraphrased by the Latin noun *modestia* in Phil 4:5, "Let your modest attitude be known to everyone; the Lord is near!" Paul instructs the church at Philippi to be mindful of their future glorification, which should prompt them to maintain their lovable levelheadedness even in the face of persecution. In a context of spiritual joy<sup>47</sup>, Christ Jesus raises us above rigorism toward others. Contrariwise, narrow selfishness creates inner sadness, sullen insensitivity and inflexibility toward our neighbor, and a troublesome spirit within ourselves. Christians' calm and settled mind ought to shine before others<sup>48</sup>, shouldering the infirmities of those who are enfeebled, uncomplainingly putting up with affronts and hurts, always glad to interpret circumstances in the most positive sense possible. Corresponding to Paul's typical concern of how outsiders and unbelievers regard the Church, he wants his fellow-Christians to engage in such agreeable modesty publicly, that it might be seen and known to all, and that God might be extolled in them.<sup>49</sup>

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44 Preceded by its mention at 2 Kgs 6:3, where, however, it remains unaddressed by the New Vulgate; the only additional adverbial recurrence is at 1 Sam 12:22, where it features in its unabridged version *epieikēos* (ἐπιεικέως).

45 Cf. FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *Ant.*, 10, 83; 15:14.182; PHILO, *Som.*, II, 295.

46 Cf. the ATHANASIAN CREED.

47 Cf. Phil 4:4.

48 Cf. Mt 5:16.

49 Cf. 1 Cor 14:16-25.

They are not to avenge themselves, but conserve an undisturbed heart in lenity, leaving all wrongs for the Almighty to repair.<sup>50</sup> The baptized members of the Mystical Body of Christ are called to be longanimous and disciplined, persuaded that the Lord at his Parousia will inaugurate his cosmic Kingdom in justice and holiness. That way, *epieikeia* is a temporal echo of Jesus' heavenly glory in the hearts of his followers in this world.<sup>51</sup>

Featuring fourth in line is a quotation in Paul's First Letter to Timothy where he recommends guidelines as to the moral character of someone selected for the hierarchical office of a bishop. Among others is the prerequisite that such a man should not be "a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money" (1 Tim 3:3). "Gentle" here is a translation of the original Greek adjective *epieikés* (ἐπιεικής), as well as the Neo-Vulgate's adjective *modestus*. What is most salient in this list of ethical stipulations is the fact that it is encompassed by and stands in stark contrast to articulations of murderous brutality (πλήκτης, *percussor*) and quarrelsomeness (ἄμαχος, *litigiosus*). Its subtext, therefore, is that of demureness and sympathetic steadiness.<sup>52</sup> God's consecrated minister must be a man of mild and kind etiquette, benignant and unflagging toward the prejudices of others. In his courteous fairness he will not exact his right with ruthlessness, nor stormily jab someone, but rather brave reproaches and injuries with composure, and admonish his flock with gentleness. This non-violent comportment adds another tincture to the *epieikeia* of Christ in 2 Cor 10:1a.

Resembling the above is the fifth mention of the adjective *epieikés* as *modestus* at Titus 3:2, where it again sits in antinomy to litigiousness: "Remind [the baptized believers] to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be compliant, to be ready for every good work, <sup>2</sup>to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle [ἐπιεικεῖς, *modestos*], and to show every courtesy to everyone" (Titus 3:1-2). As a matter of syntactical fact, the auxiliary verb *esse* conjoins both *non litigiosus* and *modestus*.<sup>53</sup> And just as in 2 Cor 10:1, it is integrated with "meekness" (πραΰτης, *mansuetudo*). What has changed when compared to 1 Tim 3:3, however, is the context, in that it now extends the commitment of gentleness to all Christians, and not exclusively to their episcopal leaders. Here, *epieikeia* becomes practically indistinguishable from friendliness, yieldingness, and peaceable temperateness. Paul urges the Cretans to aspire to nobler and more passionate maxims of Christian morals than was normal praxis

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50 Cf. Rom 12:19-21; see also THURSTON-RYAN, *Philippians and Philemon*, 144.

51 Cf. KITTEL, *Theologisches Wörterbuch*, 586-87.

52 Cf. KNIGHT, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 160.

53 Cf. KNIGHT, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 333.

among the uncouth and greedy traders of that Mediterranean island. And since meekness had not been held up by classical Greek philosophers, this virtue would have been a surprising novelty for them. They were to be taught how to moderate both inner anger and outward infliction of punishment, imitating their divine Master, who bore a sinner's doom and endured the contradiction of sinners. *Epieikeial* mildness becomes yet another ingredient of Christ-like love: "If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also" (Lk 6:29a).

Continuing this vista of reasoning is the sixth and next to last recurrence of the adjective *modestus*, premised in the Epistle of Saint James, where the Apostle clarifies the characteristics of proper Christian wisdom: "But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle [*ἐπιεικῆς, modesta*], willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" (Jas 3:17). Only here do we learn that *epieikeia* is of empyrean origin<sup>54</sup>, that it pertains to divine wisdom, and that it surrounds itself with purity, peaceableness, pliability, mercy, and undissembled justice.<sup>55</sup> It encapsulates the virtuous inoffensiveness of spirit, of interior and exterior manner, and of toleration as the befitting spirit of religion.<sup>56</sup> A truly wise heart makes allowances for others and leniently judges the dues or duties they may owe us. For the sake of peace, one abstains from defensiveness, combativeness, and rigidity, and in its place becomes embracive of humaneness.<sup>57</sup> Christian *epieikeia* shuns any unfair or irrational argument and will not bear hard upon others for their shortcomings but shield them with the mantle of charity. In this way, it defies worldly wisdom which triggers disorder and wickedness.<sup>58</sup> But above all, this wisdom from above is identical with the person of Jesus himself, and consequently, his *epieikeia* is a supernatural and sapiential virtue.<sup>59</sup>

And lastly, in the seventh place, there is Saint Peter's injunction concerning domestic interrelationships, exhorting the servants of a household to heed the example of Christ who suffered malfeasance unwearingly: "Servants, accept the authority of your lords with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle [*ἐπιεικέσιν, modestis*], but also those who are crooked" (1 Pt 2:18). In this verse, the virtue of *epieikeia* is enriched by its notional proximity to goodness and thoughtfulness (*ἀγαθός, bonus*), as well as its basic dissimilarity with depravity, perversion, and moral twistedness bordering on cruelty (*σκολιός,*

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54 Cf. Prov 2:6; Wis 7:25-26.

55 Cf. 1 Cor 13:4-8a; Gal 5:22-23.

56 Cf. HARTIN, *James*, 194.

57 Cf. DAVIDS, *The Epistle of James*, 154.

58 Cf. Jas 3:16.

59 KITTEL, *Theologisches Wörterbuch*, 587.

*pravus*). This good-naturedness and unconditional beneficence is so plainly exhibited by the Lord who “does everything well” (Mk 7:37a) and who “goes around doing good” (Acts 10:38).<sup>60</sup> And this specific aspect of *epieikeia tou Christou* perdures to this day, as he showers his faithful with all that is good until the consummation of time. To conclude our reflections on the God-Man’s *epieikeia* as *modestia*, one might append the hint of measuredness and decorum that are illustrative of his chaste and virginal rapport with his Bride, the Church. Taking into account his real presence in the Holy Eucharist, one must acknowledge in him an unsurpassable grade of unassumingness, reserve, and self-effacement, roundly unblemished by earthly indecency or impropriety.

## 2. *Clementia*

If *modestia* is the most frequent Nova Vulgata metaphrasing of the biblical concept of *epieikeia*, then *clementia*, “clemency”, occupies the second place, recurring six times.<sup>61</sup> In order that we better comprehend this supportive connotation and its ascription to the person and work of Christ, let us again first lay some etymological groundwork. “Clemency” appears to spring from the Proto-Indo-European root *kley-*, “to incline”, or *kel-*, “to shelter”, “to cover.” Through the early Italic *kleināo* it evolved into the Latin coordinate of *clināre*, complete with its participial suffix *-menos*, signifying “to bend down”, “to lean”, “to incline.” Figuratively, this bodily posture conveys the idea of being inclined, that is, favorably disposed, toward someone, perhaps even to the point of covering, sheltering, and protecting the subject. Thus, it captures the glossarial spectrum of “lenience”, “benignity”, “sympathy”, “philanthropy”, “calmness”, “sweetness”, “humaneness”, “placidness”, “easiness”, “tolerance”, “graciousness”, and “indulgence.” In modern parlance, to be clement means to show an empathetic and condoning disposition towards errors or faults of offenders, and, if need be, to diminish the exactingness of penalization due, or to cancel it altogether.

Keeping in mind this word-history, let us now check into the first scriptural verse where *epieikeia* is converted into “clemency” in the Neo-Vulgate, namely, NVg Esther 3:13(b).<sup>62</sup> It forms part of the exordium of a letter written by king Artaxerxes at the instigation of Haman, an antagonistic official in the court of the Persian empire, instructing his satraps to push for the annihilation of Jews

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60 Cf. Mk 7:37a; Acts 10:38b.

61 Not included in this list, however, is Dan 4:24, which in its Septuagint version (4:27) does contain the noun *epieikeia*, denoting clemency, yet stays untranslated by the New Vulgate.

62 Numbered as 3:13[2] by the Septuagint.

within their territories: “Having become ruler of many nations and master of the whole world, not elated with presumption of authority but always acting reasonably [ἐπιεικέστερον<sup>63</sup>, *clementer*] and with kindness [*leniter*], I have determined to settle the lives of my subjects in lasting tranquility and, in order to make my kingdom peaceable and open to travel throughout all its extent, to restore the peace desired by all people.” This text contrasts a mundane potentate’s clemency with the raw exercise of his authority, but in the same breath it also likens it to a sentiment of leniency. Connecting this dynamic to Christ’s own *epieikeia*, there is an obvious parallel of fulfillment, since as King of the universe unto whom “all power is given in heaven and on earth” (Mt 28:18a), he will “not break a bruised reed and a smoldering wick he will not extinguish”, until he has faithfully brought forth justice among all the nations (Isa 42:3). Indeed, the Gospels proffer copious testimony of Jesus’ clement conduct and dealings with his contemporaries, but also of his supernatural power and glory.

A second mention of *epieikeial* clemency is present in <sup>NVg</sup>Esther 8:12(1-m)<sup>64</sup>, where Artaxerxes issues yet another decree, this time to enforce immunity and security of the Jews, stating: “In the future we will take care to render our kingdom quiet and peaceable for all, <sup>m</sup>by changing our methods and always judging what comes before our eyes with more equitable consideration [ἐπιεικεστέρα<sup>65</sup>, *clementissima*].” Noticeable here is the conjunction of a quest for civilian peace by an earthly ruler, and the employment of clement considerateness regarding societal needs. Which again evokes the person of our Redeemer, the Prince of Peace<sup>66</sup>, who “comes to us, righteous and victorious, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey” (Zech 9:9).

Intimately connected to this recognition is the third New Vulgate passage that interprets the Hellenistic noun *epieikeia* as *clementia*, i.e., Wis 12:18. Situated within the broader context of variegated manifestations of God’s wisdom in human history<sup>67</sup>, it appertains to a textual segment that explicates the divine motivation in acting with moderation toward Canaan: since it was destined to become the Holy Land to be populated by his covenanted people, the Almighty chose to deal patiently with the heathen Canaanites, giving them an opportunity to repent, and thereby to contribute to the eventual arrival of the Messiah:

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63 This is the comparative of the adjective *epieikés* (ἐπιεικής), literally “gentler, kinder”, paraphrased by the New Vulgate as an adverb, *clementer*.

64 Numbered as 8:12[8-9] by the Septuagint.

65 Dissimilar to Esth 3:13(b), this comparative adjective is rendered as a superlative adjective, *clementissima*, in the Neo-Vulgate.

66 Cf. Isa 9:6d.

67 Cf. Wis 10-19.

“Although you are sovereign in strength, you judge with clemency [ἐπιεικεία, *clementia*], and with great forbearance [*indulgentia*] you govern us; for you have power to act whenever you choose.” Sapiential tradition here predicates *epieikeia* of God himself, as do the upcoming passages at 2 Macc 2:22; 10:4, in immediate preparation for Christ’s own divine clemency at 2 Cor 10:1a.<sup>68</sup> Astoundingly, despite the Lord’s all-powerfulness, he governs with sparing mildness like a sagacious King.<sup>69</sup> And the Church until the end of the days will bear great faith in his readiness to listen to our pleas for reconciliation in heaven, just as he heeded the cry of the blind beggar in Jericho, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mk 10:47).

Enclosed within the compiler’s preface to the Second Book of Maccabees, a fourth text contains the concept of *epieikeia* as clemency, too: “[Judas Maccabeus and his brothers] regained possession of the temple famous throughout the world, and liberated the city, and re-established the laws that were about to be abolished, while the Lord with great kindness [ἐπιεικίας, *clementia*] became gracious to them” (2 Macc 2:22). What is unique about this phrase is the subordinate function of God’s clemency to his graciousness (ἰλεως, *propitious*), which in an innovative way nuances and enriches the Pauline *epieikeia tou Christou*. It seems to reference the unrivalled act of mercy that the Savior lavishes on us his brethren, setting us free from our sins and from eternal damnation through his redeeming blood. That unearthly liberation appears to be prefigured in the historical deliverance and rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple during the Maccabean period, not long before the Lord’s nativity in their geographic vicinity.

Still in the Second Book of Maccabees, positioned within the narrative of the purification of the temple, one finds a fifth citation of God’s clement providence: “When [Maccabeus and his followers] had done this, they fell prostrate and implored the Lord that they might never again fall into such misfortunes, but that, if they should ever sin, they might be disciplined by him with forbearance [ἐπιεικίας, *clementia*], and not be handed over to blasphemous and barbarous nations” (2 Macc 10:4). Their imploration of pitying correction from on high, rather than being subjected to the excruciation of having to live among pagans, can again be projected onto the bond between Jesus and his faithful in the Church. Yet it could also be read in the key of one’s personal judgment after death, where a soul that is still sullied by venial sin, is assigned a temporary place in purgatory, but in the process happily escapes eternal punishment in hell.

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68 Cf. BROWN-FITZMYER-MURPHY, *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 825.

69 Cf. PHILO, *Spec. Leg.*, I, 97; II, 93.110; *Exsecr.*, 166; *Op. Mund.*, 103; *Flacc.*, 61.



And there is one more occurrence of *clementia*, a sixth one, sole in the New Testament, that can be instrumental, too, in fleshing out the meaning of the *epieikeia toū Christou* at 2 Cor 10:1a. It appears in the context of Paul’s trial before the Roman procurator Antonius Felix, about to be accused by Tertullus, the Jewish plaintiffs’ attorney, asking for a legal hearing; he opens his prosecutorial remarks by formally addressing Felix: “But, to detain you no further, I beg you to hear us briefly with your customary clemency [ἐπιεικεία, *clementia*]” (Acts 24:4). Luke seems to imply that the Jewish priests and elders are petitioning the Roman authority for a clement interpretation of the law in their favor by listening to their false accusations, but to apply it with strictness to the innocent defendant, Paul. Thus, the sacred author of these Acts of the Apostles makes use of *epieikeia* in its secular realm to characterize an ungodly man, whereas the Lord’s own clemency is always leaning toward overlooking the transgressions of his repentant brethren who call out to him with sincere hearts. His *epieikeial* clemency is centered on the efficaciousness of his redemptive work and his intercession on behalf of his people before his heavenly Father. It can be experienced in the reception of the holy sacraments, through which the Lord looks not on our sins but on the faith of his Church.<sup>70</sup>

### 3. *Mitis*

Apart from *modestia* and *clementia*, the Neo-Vulgate renders the vocable *epieikés* also with the Latin adjective *mītis*, albeit only once: “For you, O Lord, are sweet [χρηστός, *suavis*] and meek [ἐπιεικής, *mitis*], abounding in mercy [πολύελεος, *multae misericordiae*] to all who call on you” (Psa 86:5). Before proceeding to juxtapose this text with Christ’s own *epieikeia*, let us again first investigate into the etymological ambience of *mītis*: scholarly consensus points to the Proto-Indo-European root *meyh-*, transmitting the idea of somebody being “mild, soft, or pleasant.” It may be an original extension of the stem *meh-*, meaning “to measure”, through which it would then be philologically related to *modestia* and *moderatio*. Its vocabular gamut is inclusive of the notions of “meek”, “mellow”, “sweet”, “gentle”, “placid”, “peaceful”, “clement”, “tolerable”, as well as “soothing.” It found its way into the English glossary as “to mitigate” or “mitigation” via the Latin verb *mitigāre*, signifying “to relieve (pain)”, “make mild”, “make more tolerable”, “reduce in amount or degree.” Moreover, this excerpt from the psalter is one of just two biblical opportunities, the other being 1 Sam 12:22, for us to compare the Greek with its Hebrew

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70 Cf. ROMAN MISSAL, *The Order of Mass*, Communion Rite.

counterpart since all the other Old Testament books featuring *epieikeia* are of more recent date, and their Septuagint version does not possess a Hebrew precedent. Now, this Hellenistic notion per se is foreign to the Semitic thinking, and therefore does not have an analogous Hebrew term. Here, *epieikés* is chosen to render the Hebrew adjective *sallach* (סָלַח), which in itself is an absolute *hapax legomenon*, i.e., occurring nowhere else in the Old Testament Scriptures. Its lexemic signification is “ready to forgive”, “remitting”, or “placable.” It derives from the more familiar verb and primary root *salach* (סָלַח), meaning, “to forgive”, “to pardon”, “to spare.” Hence, in this Psalm, containing king David’s heartfelt entreaty for God’s assistance against his enemies, another notional layer is added to the concept of *epieikés* as *mitis*, and that is, the idea of divine amnesty for personal sins committed. This supernatural remission of moral guilt could be viewed as the outcome of the Lord’s assuaging sweetness. That mildness (*mītis*) dwells deep in his heart<sup>71</sup>, and he declares it to be a beatitude in Christian spirituality.<sup>72</sup> Yet, what does all of this mean with regard to the *epieikeia tou̯ Christou̯* (2 Cor 10:1a), especially appraising the Psalm-verse’s context of sweetness (*suavis*) and all-mercy (*multae misericordiae*), if not a further enhancement and upgrading of it through the reality of his conciliation of sinners.<sup>73</sup> The God-Man’s eagerness to extenuate the nefarious effects of human feebleness and failure due to original sin is evinced multiple times in the Gospels, and it endures until today through the ministry of his Mystical Body, the Church: “‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’<sup>11</sup>She said, ‘No one, sir.’ And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again!’” (Jn 8:10-11).

#### 4. *Moderatio*

In one singular instance, the Hellenistic term *epieikeia* is rendered in the New Vulgate by the Latin noun *moderatio*; and that text is found in the Book of Baruch as part of the exiles’ supplication for mercy as they recall the Lord God’s covenant<sup>74</sup>: “Yet you have dealt with us, O Lord our God, in all your moderation [*ἐπιεικίαν, moderationem*] and in all your great compassion [*οἰκτερισμόν, miserationem*],<sup>28</sup>as you spoke by your servant Moses on the day when you commanded him to write your law in the presence of the people of Israel” (Bar 2:27-28). To glean a deeper apperception of this amplified conno-

71 Cf. Mt 11:29.

72 Cf. Mt 5:5; see also 1 Pt 3:4; <sup>NVg</sup>Sir 10:17.

73 Cf. Rom 2:4.

74 Cf. Bar 2:11–3:8.

tation of the *epieikeia tou Christou* (2 Cor 10:1a), let us again start out with a closer look at the word's etymology. Similar to *modestia*, it is set up on the verb *moderāre*, which in turn derives from *modus*, signaling “measure” or “limit.” Its Proto-Indo-European root *modōs* stems from *med-*, meaning “to measure, take appropriate measures”, and a certain linguistic kinship with *mōs-*, “morals”, can be discerned, too. Lexically, the range of signification encompasses nouns of action like “moderation”, “self-control”, “restraint”, “guidance”, “regulation”, “keeping something within measure”, and “temperateness.” In projecting these tinges onto the person and work of Jesus, one should accentuate not just his own divine self-command and propriety, but also the mystical governance he provides for the Church. And closely related to that, he also offers advisement and moderates each soul of the baptized by his grace and light, bringing it to perfection with candor and kindness, rectifying any injustice, and blotting out its sins. In his commiseration, which is contextual to his *epieikeia* in the above verse of Baruch, he shows the path to general soberness of living unencumbered by all excesses, restraining inner passions and temper. The *epieikeial* Christ does not press the stringency of his law against his faithful followers as they might deserve<sup>75</sup>, but in his prudent mercy bestows on them his redeeming indulgence. Even to this day, as he is seated at his heavenly Father's right hand, by pardoning our offenses and lessening the intransigence of due punishment, he continues to give evidence of his moderation.<sup>76</sup>

### 5. *Mansuetudo*

There is a penultimate way in which the Nova Vulgata interprets the Greek vocable *epieikeia*, shedding further light on Christ's own, and it is located within the Canticle of Azariah, one of Daniel's three friends in the furnace, crying out to God in their distress: “Do not abandon us to shame but treat us in consonance with your gentleness [*ἐπιείκειαν, mansuetudinem*], in accordance with the greatness of your mercy [*πληθος του ελεους, multitudinem misericordiae*]” (Dan 3:42). This is the only time in the Bible that *epieikeia* occurs as *mansuetudo*, and for the sake of greater exegetical transparency, let us again first search into its provenance. This noun flows from the verb *mansuēscō*, or its synonym *mansuefācio*, combining *manus*, “hand”, with *suēscere*, “to be accustomed to”, the latter originating from the Proto-Indo-European reflexive pronoun *swé*, “self”<sup>77</sup>, augmented by *d<sup>h</sup>eh-*, “to put”, “to place”, “to set.”

75 Cf. *Psa* 130:3-4.

76 Cf. *VV.AA.*, *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 291.

77 Cognate to the later Latin personal pronoun *suus*.

Thus, its primordial sense has to do with “placing something as one’s own.” To be pointed out, too, is its double relevance as an intransitive verb, meaning “to become used or accustomed to”, “to grow tame”, and as a transitive one, signifying the action of “accustoming oneself”, “to train”, “to habituate”, “to domesticate”, “to break in”, “to master”, “to subdue”, “to tame someone or something”, “to subject.” The strictly lexicographical value, therefore, of *mansuetudo* is the state of being mild or having been tamed and brought into subjection. That metaphysical gentleness is again easily recognized in the person and work of our Savior Christ Jesus, who yields to his Father’s perfect will, and in his human nature acquiescing in suffering and death, is prepared to lavish his love on his brethren with divine softness.<sup>78</sup> It is the paradoxical tameness of the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” (Rev 5:5b). Further magnifying this attitude of his is the circumstance that in the Septuagint version of Dan 3:42, *mansuetudo* is not just followed but also directly preceded by the notion of “mercy” (*éleos*, ἔλεος). Undeniably, those who are touched by the benefactions of such a gentle Redeemer will vanquish the works of the flesh and produce the fruits of the Holy Spirit, as bespoken by Paul in his teaching to the Galatians: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup>gentleness [*mansuetudo*], and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23).

## 6. *Dignatus est*

And there is one finishing Latin rendition of *epieikeia* for us to discuss, namely, the phrase *dignatus est*, as found in 1 Sam 12:22. This expression forms part of Samuel’s Farewell Address to Israel, in which he highlights some of the Yahweh’s great feats toward his covenanted people, assuring them of his future ministrations: “For the Lord will not cast away his people, for his great name’s sake, because it has pleased [*ἐπιεικέως*, *dignatus est*] the Lord to make you a people for himself.” It is critical to underscore that the adverb *epieikéos* (*ἐπιεικέως*) in this verse qualifies the verb *proslambánein*, illustrating the way in which the Almighty benevolently takes to himself (*pros-*, “toward”, and *lambáno*, “to take, to receive”) his beloved people as with fatherly affection and divine condescension. That symbolism is already enshrined in the Latin verb *dignāre* and its cognate adjective *dignus*, springing as they do from the Proto-Indo-European *dek-*, “to take”, “to accept”, “to deign”, “to condescend.” Conveyed is the idea of someone who “deems worthy”, “thinks well of”, and “regards someone as suited to his or her dignity, privilege, and honor.”

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<sup>78</sup> SPICQ, “Bénignité, mansuétude, douceur, clémence”, 321-39.

An equivalent denotation is intimated by the pro-active binyan *hiphil* of the Hebrew verb *yaāl* (יָאָל), meaning “to be pleased and determined to undertake something.” With that philological hue, the *epieikeia toū Christoū* becomes revelatory of the decision of the second divine Person, the *Verbum*, to assume our human nature in the hypostatic union of his Incarnation. This event is foreshadowed, of course, by God’s embrace of his beloved people Israel, just as portrayed by Samuel in the above verse. Ever since, he has never stopped accepting his children and brethren, lifting us up, divinizing us, and leading us back into the Father’s heart in heaven. That is the quintessence of Jesus’s *epieikeial* “deigning” and our Christian “dignity.” Now that we concluded researching the biblical connotations of the Hellenistic idea of *epieikeia*, let us round off the mystical oil on canvas of Christ’s gentleness by surveying a few select examples from secular sources that are elucidatory of this concept, too.

### III. SUBSIDIARY JURISPRUDENTIAL FACETS

While the preceding biblical investigation into the varied linguistic flavors of the Hellenistic word *epieikeia* are necessarily tinged by the Semitic mindset, what follows is a condensed contemplation of some accompanying components of this notion through the lens of the Greek and Western way of theorizing. While the former tends to be more concrete and draw on natural observation, the latter enjoys an abstract and metaphysical analysis, although both aspects perforce intersect and overlap. Also, the fact that there is such an extensive series of paraphrasing around a single vocable patently speaks to its phenomenal conceptual elusiveness, even to the point – one might venture to say – of indefinability. But let us forthwith dive into the first and most prominent shade of extra-biblical or secular construal, in an endeavor to further elaborate on the *epieikeia toū Christoū*.

#### 1. *Equitableness*

A logical place to start is the dictionary entry, where the noun *epieikeia* (ἐπιείκεια) is rendered as “equitableness”, or as the case may be, as its abbreviated equivalence, i.e., “equity”, in opposition to the hardness of the legal dictate.<sup>79</sup> It is envisioned as a satisfaction of the spirit of the Law, as well as the intention of the lawgiver that goes beyond the mere letter. In that sense, it can be construed as a hermeneutic requiring the reconstruction of the legislator’s

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<sup>79</sup> Cf. LIDDELL-SCOTT, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 632.

intentions, formulated on the idea that laws tacitly incorporate exceptions in the name of the higher laws of God and nature.<sup>80</sup> Equity then turns into a tangible representation of the individual conscience as an act of application of a civic rule, clearly distinguishing it from purely gratuitous mercy.<sup>81</sup> True equity necessitates the adjudication and implementation of justice transcending ordinary justice.<sup>82</sup> It builds in an Aristotelian fashion on the acknowledgment of the authentic purpose of a given legislation, and must therefore be considered the perfection of moral competence. Equity, or to use its scholastic matrix *æquitas*, values the human capability of ethical discernment very highly, even to the point of authorizing it to override positive laws, in order that true justice can be achieved.<sup>83</sup> It empowers a responsible person to improve statutory law that needs adjustment or emendation due to its inherent incompleteness or other inadequacy, to do justice to a given circumstance of civic life. Equitableness presumes that an ordinary law is defective and not applicable in a case of hardship felt to violate natural law, as, for instance, when a nursing mother chooses to miss Holy Mass on a day of obligation rather than leaving her neonate alone. This equitable approach to the human legal system is equivalent to metaphysical goodness since it strives to ameliorate the individual and society at large. As such, like a particular species, it possesses complementarity and even superiority in the genus of jurisprudence that often manifests itself as a simplification of what is written in a legal code. It is not in vain that equity has a close connection with the concept of *gnóme* (γνώμη) as a part of prudence<sup>84</sup>, implying the faculty of reason and knowledge, leading to mindfulness and the use of good judgment.<sup>85</sup> Wherefore *æquitas* functions as a subjective part of justice, moderating its ineptitude or inefficacy by comparing an objective situation to an extraordinary condition of the person. This exception to the general rule of the common law constitutes a higher rule of human actions that exceeds nominal justice and becomes its supreme realization and rectification.<sup>86</sup> As such it must always make itself subservient to the idea of the common good and justice, whose ultimate accomplishment is to be found in the practice of unselfish devotion and service to the dignity of the other. At times that may involve not pressing one's rights to the limit, or else renouncing

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80 Cf. MANISCALCO, *Equity in Early Modern Legal Scholarship*, 13-14.

81 Cf. CROMARTIE, "Epieikeia and Conscience", 320-36.

82 TITI, *The Function of Equity in International Law*, 11ff.

83 Cf. ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean Ethics*, V, 10.

84 Cf. PRÜMMER, *Handbook of Moral Theology*, 45.

85 E.g., 1 Cor 7:25.40.

86 Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, Second Part of the Second Part, Question 120, Article 2.

certain entitlements and privileges that may work to the disadvantage of or callousness against another. Such equitableness redounds to a truly transcendent and humanitarian philosophy of life, superseding mere human justice.<sup>87</sup> Thus, equity signals earthly justice tempered by mercy and common sense. It is not difficult to recognize how this equitableness as a fundamental aspect of classical Greek *epieikeia* can deepen our intuition of the biblical *epieikeia tou Christou* enunciated by Paul at 2 Cor 10:1a. Although being the Pantocrator of the cosmos that we inhabit, and the Co-Author of all divine and natural law, the Lord Jesus knows and judges the intentions of each human heart with supernatural equity. He is the supreme Law-Giver and Judge, who in his cardiognostic judgment brings about incontrovertible and everlasting justice.<sup>88</sup> Both during his earthly life and now in heaven, the God-Man exercises his authority over each individual soul with endlessly wise and merciful equitableness.

## 2. Reasonableness

As a paramount corrective to a monolithic conceptualization of legal justice, the concept of *epieikeia* accedes to a benign reading of positive law emanating from the kind will of the lawmaker who would not want to bind or encumber his subjects in certain circumstances, permitting a reasonable moderation or relaxation of a strict right.<sup>89</sup> The reason behind this notion is the fact that laws are of their very nature universal, and that general laws cannot do justice to every particular circumstance. A legislator will take into account what usually and ordinarily happens when framing a law, but is ostensibly unable to foresee the limitless number of situations of human and societal life and provide proper laws for them. This objective deficiency is counterpoised by a sensible and liberal adaptation of a factual circumstance to the mind of the lawgiver, or to the tenor of natural and divine law. Ergo, with sweet reasonableness that knows when to ease the rigor of legal requirements concerning others, *epieikeia* carries out the genuine spirit of the law.<sup>90</sup> Evidently, this presupposes sincerity in wanting to abide by the law, and it also places a special emphasis on the *mens legislatoris*. In cases where the blind observance of the law would result in sinfulness by reason of a higher law, or when adherence to the positive law demands heroic effort not in proportion to the purpose of the legislator, rea-

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87 Cf. CHROUST, "Aristotle's Conception of Equity (*Epieikeia*)", 119-28.

88 Cf. Jn 2:24-25.

89 Cf. PRÜMMER, *Handbook of Moral Theology*, 217.

90 For a sweeping treatment of this topic, complete with an encyclopedic bibliography, see RILEY, *The History, Nature, and Use of Epieikeia in Moral Theology*.

sonableness must be brought into play in reaching a particular judgment. Thus, *epieikeia* amounts to the rational treatment of human regulations so as not to endanger superior or supernatural values through slavish adherence. Christian prudence should prevent us from sacrificing charity or the welfare of one's neighbor to zeal for the law, since to do so would eventuate in unfortunate forms of injustice. There can be no doubt that such reasonable justice requires a high degree of moral discernment and the willingness to take personal responsibility.<sup>91</sup> Moral manuals also outline the pertinent scholastic concept of *syndéresis*<sup>92</sup>, or "inborn knowledge", as an innate capacity of reason that intuitively apprehends the universal primary principles of ethical behavior, often distinguished from *syneidesis*<sup>93</sup>, or "conscience", as the human disposition to apply those general principles to specific situations in ordinary life. This practical reason seeks to bring prudence to bear on legal tradition, compares it to all the facets of a given situation, and enables the conscientious person to make a practical judgment of reason that will afford moral certitude, albeit without absolute certainty.<sup>94</sup> Arriving again at the point of applying this supplemental aspect of *epieikeia* to the person and mission of Jesus the Lord, one could bring up the paradoxical reasonableness of his coming in the flesh to redeem us from the dire consequences of original sin and from the pernicious law of personal sins. Humankind was created by God and for him, yet it went astray and tragically lost its way, and so the divine Son sacrificed his own life on earth to reconcile us with our Creator and to empower us to rise from sin and death. Moreover, and as documented by the Gospels, Jesus' justice descending from rationality and kindness broke a number of laws that the Pharisees of his time had absolutized.<sup>95</sup> Likewise, he actualized and spiritualized the Torah according to reason, moderating his contemporaries' zeal for it, to marshal all their energy toward the double commandment of love for God and neighbor in his New and Eternal Covenant. And even today, mainly through the holy sacraments of his bride the Church, Jesus exercises his *epieikeial* reasonableness by absolving us from sin, strengthening us in his love, and in ever more perfect charity making us transcend all human law.

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91 Cf. HÄRING, *The Virtues of an Authentic Life*, 118-20.

92 Properly *syntéresis*, from the ancient Greek noun συντήρησις, meaning "careful watching", stemming from the verb *syntereîn* (συντηρεῖν), "to keep guard."

93 From the Greek noun συνείδησις, "conscience, consciousness, awareness", derivative of the verb *synoida* (σύννοια), "to have joint knowledge of something, be aware of something."

94 Cf. BOHR, *In Christ, a New Creation: Revised Catholic Moral Tradition*, 180.

95 E.g., Mk 7:9.



### 3. Fairness

There is a second-last extra-biblical constituent of the *epieikeia toū Christou* that could be extrapolated, and that is fairness. Before sounding it out, however, let us again dissect the word's etymological background for the sake of a more exhaustive appreciation of it. Thus, the English adjective "fair" appears to have evolved from the Proto-Indo-European root *pēhk-*, meaning "to fasten", "to place", "to make pretty", "to decorate"; it then passed through the early Germanic and Gothic stage of *fagraz*, signifying something "beautiful", "fitting", and "nice." Derivative of that is the Old-English *fæger*, signaling what is "handsome", "attractive", "pleasing to the sight" of persons and body features, but also of objects, places, and weather. As it flows through the period of the Middle-English *fayr*, it interfuses the connotation of what is "morally good", only to eventually arrive at the present-day vocable "fairness", which is inclusive of the idea of what is "just", "equitable", "suitable", "honest", "decent", "balanced", "not excessive", "favorable", "gracious", "auspicious", and "proper." Its direct glossarial antonym would be "foul", "rotten", "unclean", "vile", "corrupt", "offensive to the senses", and "ugly." With this range of lexical coloring in mind, and returning to the *epieikeial* dimension of justice, one could argue that its most authentic iteration involves a fair or ideal mean between excess and defect in an almost stoical equilibrium. Such unalloyed fairness can be discerned as being the principle in ethics that determines when a law can be broken to achieve a greater good. Its general purpose is to provide a cure for circumstances where the legal provision is not supple enough for the customary court system to deliver a fair resolution to a case. Implied in this fair-mindedness are the ancillary attitudes of unselfishness, magnanimity, non-retributiveness, tolerance, chivalry, and the "spirit of a gentleman", above and beyond what is required by strict duty or formal law. There is also a touch of suitability, gentleness of spirit, and simply the display of the appropriate mentality of religion. In attempting to meet a person halfway, *epieikeial* fairness reveals the arbiter's self-discipline, courtesy, and respect for the dignity of the other, but also the complexity of individual human situations.<sup>96</sup> And it is precisely by perpending the exceptional circumstances of life that higher justice is achieved through considerateness and patient understanding<sup>97</sup>, often overlooking and perhaps even suspending a legal right in view of human weakness or

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96 Cf. VIRT, "Moral Norms and the Forgotten Virtue of Epieikeia", 20.

97 KASPER'S *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* employs the connate German noun "Nachsicht", communicating the idea of thoughtful and serene indulgence, 715.

inability.<sup>98</sup> To be certain, whereas equality<sup>99</sup> intimates the provision of the same to all, fairness lies in the recognition that not everybody starts out from the same place, acknowledging and making adjustments to inevitable imbalances. This, evidently, is an ongoing process that requires of each member of human society to identify and overthrow intentional and unintentional barriers arising from bias or systemic structures; it promotes freedom from favoritisms and strives to deal fairly and equally with all concerned. In that sense, fairness could be termed as natural justice, an equitableness that opposes the strict application of legal rules and regulations, to make relief available in cases where the common law would result in manifest unfairness.

When relating all this to Jesus' divine *epiēkeia*, the archetypal fairness of the Old Testament king Solomon comes to mind.<sup>100</sup> As the venerable narrative goes, once he ruled between two women who both claimed to be the mother of a newborn child; he exposed their true relationship to the baby by calling for it to be severed in two with each woman to receive half. This tactic permitted him to detect the actual mother who would beg that the sword be sheathed, and the child entrusted to the care of her rival. That Christ as the Son of Mary, "the fairest among women" (Cant 5:9a), and as the New Solomon, fulfilled this impartial approach to justice is shown repeatedly in the Gospels. To adduce just a few examples: he brought to bear against the Jewish leaders and their representatives his Solomonic counter-challenge: "Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God!" (Lk 20:25). In a similar vein of divine fairness, he urged the bystanders pressing in on the adulterous woman, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn 8:7). One might recall the passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews, too, that bespeaks his absolute fair-mindedness: "He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness" (Heb 5:2). In the Greek original, the New Testament hapax legomenon *metriopathéo* (μετριοπαθέω) is used, which is a composite verb of the word *métrio-*, having to do with "measuring", and *páthos*, "feeling", conveying the idea that Jesus as our High Priest commiserates with divinely-measured and emotional intensity.<sup>101</sup> Or in a rephrased fashion, in his salvific ministry toward us he is able to hold his sentiments in restraint with God-controlled moderation, dealing with us, sinners, in an appropriate, compassionate, and fair manner, never too severe

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98 Cf. PLATO, *Leg.*, V, 735a; *Ep.*, VII, 325b.

99 See the rare related Greek noun *isótēs* (ισότης), translated by the New Vulgate as *aequalitas* at 2 Cor 8:13-14, and as *quod est aequum* in Col 4:1.

100 Cf. 1 Kgs 3:16-28.

101 Translated well by the New Vulgate's phrase *aeque condolere*.

nor too tolerant. Hence, the Lord displays his divine *epieikeia* in the form of fairness and fair-mindedness, as the Psalm of David so poetically prophesied: “You are fairer than the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore, God has blessed you forever. <sup>3</sup>Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty One, in your magnificence and ornateness. <sup>4</sup>In your majesty ride on victoriously, for the cause of truth and meekness and justice; let your right hand teach you marvelous deeds!” (Psa 45:2-4).

#### 4. *Virtuousness*

A final and perhaps most relevant attribute of Christ’s *epieikeia* should be spotlighted, namely, its virtuous nature, safeguarding the superior values of divine and natural law in the face of the unpreventable fallibility of positive law.<sup>102</sup> Originally employed for the interpretation of legal conceptions in the ancient Greek *pólis*, the Aristotelian concept denoted a personal virtue involving clemency and moderation. And as such a virtue it surpasses mere action and becomes a habit or stable character-trait that occasionally sets aside the letter of the law in its generalizing terms, to prioritize the intended dictates of justice and common good. It carefully ponders laws that are not intrinsically unjust but could be harmful to the individual or to the common good if rigidly applied in unforeseen situations. If graciously infused by the Spirit of God, it becomes an integrant of supernatural charity that changes a willing mind.<sup>103</sup> Acting in accord with the *epieikeial* virtue of equity entails the acknowledgment of higher values, the acceptance of juridical limitations, as well as the cultivation of mental and volitive self-discipline, willing to sacrifice for a supernatural end.<sup>104</sup> It is a virtuous act to discern ways of attaining to or guarding the objective good in a given circumstance by ignoring the letter of the law. Thus, the upright mind is enabled to surmount doubt and to take a morally correct decision.<sup>105</sup> By no means does *epieikeia* sanction any arbitrary non-conformity or egregious deviation from established human law, but rather, it nurtures the acute attentiveness to its mitigating factors. That way, it seeks to honor the unchanging tenets of God and humanity and transfigure earthly justice

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102 Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, seconding Aristotle, defining *epieikeia* as a virtue that appertains to the virtue of legal justice, cf. *Summa Theologiae*, Second Part of the Second Part, Question 120, Article 1.

103 Cf. KINCAID, “The Virtue of Equity and the Contemporary World”, 114-33.

104 Cf. PINCKAERS, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, 402.

105 Cf. CESSARIO, “Epikieia and the Accomplishment of the Just”, 170-205, in HARAK, *Aquinas and Empowerment*.

into a Christian virtue that ultimately promotes humaneness and forgiveness.<sup>106</sup> It manages to resolve the arduous and abiding conflict between universal human law and changeable human reality: both coexist in time and space, and the adaptation of law and reality by means of legal relaxation, dispensation, contemporization, or interpretation, is a most virtuous undertaking. This harmonization between human life and divinely transcendental or natural law invests the individual with the right and duty to always choose good and steer clear of evil, to worship the one true God and obey his holy commandments.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, by adjusting positive law to the individual conscience, the virtue of *epieikeia* is both motivated by and expresses respect and responsibility for each person's inviolable dignity and inalienable rights. And the ethical knowledge and certitude of a well-formed conscience bears a relationship to the great virtue of prudence, entirely concerned with the sensible application of universal principles to peculiar circumstances. It brings perspicacity of judgement in cases where a higher rule takes precedence over a lower one. Thus, this virtue reconciles the possible tensions between the primary law for the Christian, that is, the internal law of the Spirit of Jesus, and that law's externalization in positive legal codes. To be sure, *epieikeia*, per se, cannot be utilized regarding the divine and natural law, but only concerning their imperfect expressions in human legislation. Since it is conceived as a virtue, there is no need for recourse to a superior jurisprudential authority.<sup>108</sup> And that it is in truth a virtue in the Bible is proven by the fact that it is habitually featured within a list of other virtues.<sup>109</sup>

Fixing our eyes one more time on the *epieikeia tou Christou* (2 Cor 10:1a), we now realize that it also signifies his divine-human virtuousness, as Saint Peter avouches: "His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and virtue<sup>110</sup>" (2 Pt 1:3). That he grew in virtue is declared repeatedly by Luke in his Gospel's Infancy Narrative.<sup>111</sup> This the Lord's earthly acquisition of experimental knowledge<sup>112</sup> must be considered inherent to and inseparable of his

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106 Cf. HEWITT, "Universal Justice and *Epieikeia* in Aristotle", 115-30.

107 Cf. FUCHS, *Personal Responsibility and Christian Morality*, 187.

108 Cf. EGENTER, "Über die Bedeutung der Epikie im sittlichen Leben", 115-27; HAMEL, "La Vertu d'Épikie", 35-56; HAYOIT, "L'Usage de l'Epikie", 513-18; di MARINO, "L'Epikieia Cristiana", 396-424.

109 E.g., 1 Tim 3:3.

110 The Greek original carries the noun *areté* (ἀρετή), meaning "moral goodness", "ethical excellence", "virtue", "a gracious act", "uprightness", translated as *virtus*, "virtue", by the New Vulgate.

111 Cf. Lk 2:40, 52; see also 1 Sam 2:26.

112 Cf. OTT, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 167-68.

connatural goodness and holiness. Indeed, it remains a reflection of his heavenly Father's own virtuousness: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the virtues [*virtutes*] of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pt 2:9). When turning to him we can be hopeful that he will treat his brethren with that *epieikeial* loving-kindness and mercy: "For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving [ἐπιεικής, *mitis*], abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you" (Psa 86:5). Absolutely convinced of his infinite virtuousness, one can confess: "I know, O Lord, that your judgments are right [*æquitas*]" (Psa 119:75a). But after having reviewed the multi-colored features of the biblical and secular concept of *epieikeia* and how they show correspondence to Christ's, let us now take stock of ways to acquire and practice this virtue ourselves.

#### IV. IMITATION OF JESUS' *EPIEIKEIA*

In several of his biblical commentaries, the Doctor of the Church St. Albert the Great depicts Christ Jesus as a model of *epieikeia* par excellence ("Christus exemplum"), visible notably in his unprovoked conflicts with the Pharisees in the Gospels.<sup>113</sup> Thus, when St. Paul was incriminated for being cowardly, he reminded the recalcitrant Corinthian faithful that he was capable of being stern, but that he chose to wield his authority only in the spirit of the Lord, namely, as *epieikeia*.<sup>114</sup> He purposely mentions this eminent virtue of Christ as our great exemplar to whom all Christians are bound to be conformable. And so, like the Apostle, we are inspired to imitate the gentleness of the Lord. To fulfill our heavenly vocation<sup>115</sup> and partake of his kingly power, each one of his followers ought to be guided by his *epieikeial* gentleness in their interrelation with others, including the most unreasonable of our enemies. We should not take pleasure in severity nor unreasonableness, but rather live by and in the *epieikeia* of the Son of God, who offered himself as an innocent victim to free us from the consequences of lawlessness, sin, and death.<sup>116</sup> Sacred Scripture purposely quotes this Hellenistic virtue to invite us to become Christ-like through our imitation of him.<sup>117</sup> When Paul introduces his urgent appeal at 2 Cor 10:1a with the preposition *diá*

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113 E.g., *Enarrationes in Joannem*, cap. V, 16; cf. VIRT, "Moral Norms and the Forgotten Virtue of Epikeia", 24.

114 Cf. 2 Cor 10:2.8.

115 Cf. Phil 3:20.

116 Cf. VIRT, *Epikie-verantwortlicher Umgang mit Normen*, 154-58.

117 Cf. Jn 13:14-15; 1 Cor 11:1; Eph 5:1-2; 1 Pt 2:21; 1 Jn 2:6.

(διά, *per*)<sup>118</sup>, he intends to hold up this character-trait of Christ to be emulated by us.<sup>119</sup> That imitation of his *epieikeia* will be brought about by deliberate and persevering efforts on our part, purified and elevated by divine grace. With God's unfailing facilitation, it will mould our character and ease the practice of this particular good. And even though it cannot be acquired without our brave and manly engagement<sup>120</sup>, it will inevitably redound to deep inner happiness.<sup>121</sup> *Epieikeia* could be called the virtue of natural justice, described by St. Cyprian of Carthage as justice tempered with the sweetness of mercy. Inhabiting the will, it complements prudence as the perfection of practical reason.<sup>122</sup> Even if it is a sapiential virtue<sup>123</sup>, it nevertheless remains an ordinary part of our everyday lives, having nothing heroic or exceptional about it. Yet in that unpretentiousness it provides one additional way in which Christians can continue the Lord's redemptive work in this world. As pondered above, its chief manifestations include modesty (*modestia*), clemency (*clementia*), meekness (*mitis*), moderation (*moderatio*), mildness (*mansuetudo*), humbleness (*dignare*), equitableness, reasonableness, fairness, and virtuousness. At the same time, it is not exclusive of the spiritual overtones of yieldingness, self-forgetfulness, submissiveness, good-heartedness, warm-heartedness, tender-heartedness, charitableness, philanthropy, goodwill, high-mindedness, benignity, and the willingness to bear injustice or injury without retaliatory intent. Such patient bearing of abuse in equanimity of spirit overcomes the ancient *lex talionis* pursuant to the directives of the sermon on the Mount.<sup>124</sup> As disciples of Jesus, we are encouraged to interpret the mind of the human legislator with intelligence and lenience, always measuring it against divine and natural law.<sup>125</sup> That way we circumvent the liability of falling into licentiousness, but instead cultivate a magnanimous spirit of selflessness that does not haggle about one's rights. Such *aequitas* shies away from giving scandal or disturbing charitable relations, but it boosts the constant recognition of our lowliness, so that when Christ comes, he may exalt our moderation.<sup>126</sup> Not least, the acknowledgment of one's

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118 Cf. Rom 12:1; 15:30.

119 Cf. HARRIS, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 667.

120 Notice that the word "virtue" stems from the Latin *virtus*, which in turn derives from the noun *vir*, "man", with its Proto-Indo-European root *wiro*; as such it connotes the valor, virility, resoluteness, strength, and courage that form the basis of a mature moral character.

121 Cf. CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, no. 1810.

122 Cf. PRÜMMER, *Handbook of Moral Theology*, 217.

123 Cf. Jas 3:17.

124 Cf. O'BRIAN, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 487-90.

125 Cf. SILVA, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 256-59.

126 Cf. EDWARDS, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, 267.

own sin will teach us to meekly endure any provocations, and not to withdraw from their burdensome consequences.<sup>127</sup> Having said that, Christian *epieikeia* is not to be confounded with earthly stigmas like weakness or cowardliness, but is the fruit of saintliness and the regular reception of God's own mercy in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. As we await the eschatological Parousia of our Savior, we develop a habit of gentleness in imitation of the *epieikeia tou Christou*, informed by an individual conscience that is accountable only to God, and that already reflects the heavenly splendor of his glory.

## CONCLUSION

To this very day, the global community of legal experts is debating the literal circumscription of the Greek notion of *epieikeia*, but the perceived consensus reached among scholars who have studied at length its pioneering luminaries like Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Suarez in this regard, is that it should be rendered as natural justice in opposition to the imposition of the strict letter of the law. Put differently, equity is an alternative means of discernment and judgment that relaxes or negates the punitive sanction that one would receive if the exact letter of the law were painstakingly implemented. Its principal justification consists in the charitable interpretation of the legislator's intention concerning a specific situation of human life, oftentimes in light of a higher law. In an age where we are confronted with an increasing number of civic regulations, unfortunately met with a decreased emphasis on Christian prudence, biblical *epieikeia* can remind contemporary societies that laws are made for the human person, and not viceversa.<sup>128</sup> It also stands as a testimony to the reality that the one who lives by love, lives beyond the law, and perfectly fulfills it, too.<sup>129</sup> Earthly laws must always serve the greater purpose of charity, as St. Augustine put it with his inimitable succinctness: *Ama, et fac quod vis* ("Love, and do what you will").<sup>130</sup> Likewise, the official Code of the Roman Catholic Church closes with this programmatic *epieikeial* pronouncement: "Canonical equity is to be observed, and the salvation of souls, which must always be the supreme law in the Church, is to be kept before one's eyes."<sup>131</sup>

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127 Cf. Gal 6:1; 2 Tim 2:25.

128 Cf. Mk 2:27.

129 Cf. Rom 13:8-10; Mt 7:12; 22:39; Jn 13:34; Gal 5:14; Jas 2:8; 1 Jn 3:10.

130 Cf. *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos*, Tractatus VII (homiletically commenting on 1 Jn 4:4-12); the original reads: "Dilige et quod vis fac!" ("Love with care and then what you will, do!").

131 CODE OF CANON LAW, can. 1752 ("servata aequitate canonica et prae oculis habita salute animarum, quae in Ecclesia suprema semper lex esse debet").

Since the 1950s there has been a movement to revive the notion of *epieikeia* as a virtue allied with social justice, and today's rapidly changing cultures of post-modernity and post-Christendom only accentuate the urgent need for the renaissance of such an amazing virtue. This present study is intended to contribute in a small way to that current of thought, not least by re-discovering its biblical dimensions and by focusing it on the God-Man Jesus through 2 Cor 10:1a. *Epieikeia* must become more and more actionable these days as a much-needed antidote to the intrinsic constraints or rigidity of positive law that unavoidably fall short of genuine justice. In that sense it is a perfecting dynamism of the cardinal virtue of justice, that can be applied by any person using right reason and a well-formed conscience. While codified and explicit laws are evidently important, they are only rough approximations of true justice that takes into consideration real-life circumstances. Hence, positive law should be accommodating of *epieikeial* reasoning, and should state guiding principles rather than anticipate and micromanage future events. Worth mentioning is also the link established by the Eastern Orthodox Churches between *epieikeia* and the spirituality of God's ecclesial household or *oikonomia*, where the focus is on Jesus, the divine Housekeeper, forever concerned with the welfare of his children in the human family. In closing, the Hellenistic notion of *epieikeia* is indubitably one of the most challenging words to translate into English, or for that matter any other language, while preserving the breadth of its original meaning. As a matter of fact, there is no singular English word to accurately reveal its full range of signification, although terms like "gentleness", "equity", or "clemency" do come close. However, these vocables are found wanting when it is a matter of portraying *epieikeia*'s volitive and intellectual processes as well as its end-results. Yet, at the conclusion of this essay, we can confidently translate it as Christ himself. Indeed, the Pauline *epieikeia tou Christou* in its mystifying essence represents a paradigm of the Son of God's Incarnation, but also embodies a sapiential virtue to be put into practice by his faithful.

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