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**"Living Virtues and Charity Trees: Psalm Personifications in Action"**

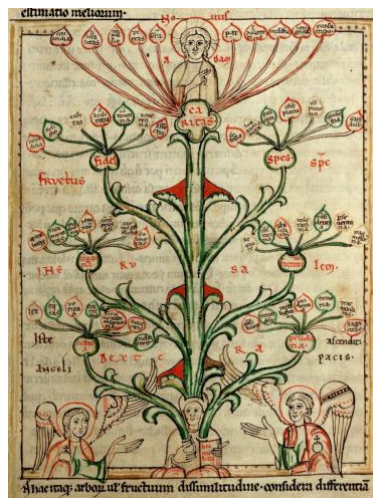
The poetic medium of the Psalms allowed artists to interpret abstract qualities of lyric into vibrant human characters, including those for places, natural phenomena, and inanimate concepts. Among them, a distinctive set of goods and evils, or virtues and vices, embodied psalm personifications with particular agency. The figure of Charity, the foremost of the three theological virtues, is depicted in some early medieval Psalters in the act of almsgiving wearing an olive tree crown. Specifically, the text of Vulgate Psalms 36 (v. 26) and 111 (v. 9), contains the effective words of lending, blessing, and showing mercy, and features Charity as an upright stem personifying this virtuous exchange.

From at least the ninth century, the vegetal crown of Charity suggests a connection to the fruitful olive tree, the *oliva fructifera* (Ps. 51:10), and echoes the description of the characterized "Righteous Man," who "shall flourish like the palm tree; .. and grow up like the cedar of Lebanon" (Ps. 91:13). Later, Charity's olive tree crown is replaced by a crown decorated with tongues of flames, which develops into a fiery heart that sometimes nourishes infants. The early arboreal imagery of Charity is also visually linked to its late medieval emblem of the pious pelican, an allegorizing symbol of self-sacrifice, and the diagrammatical *arbor virtutum*, or Tree of Virtues, which often features Charity at the top.

By reading the figurative language of the Psalms with an iconographic lens, we can begin to extrapolate meaning for the expression of personifications in the Middle Ages. The figure of Charity in the Psalms, bearing fruited branches that billow upwards and with a hand extending outward to the characterized poor, enacts this necessary social function as a living root.



Personification of Charity distributing money. Illustrating Psalm 111:9. Chludov Psalter, 9c. (Moscow, State Historical Museum, MS. gr. 129, fol. 116r).



Tree of Virtues. Leaf of Charity (Caritas) at crown of tree supporting Christ (as "New Adam") *Speculum Virginum*, ca. 1200. (Walters Art Museum, MS. W.72, fol. 26r).



Personification of Charity distributing money. Illustrating Psalm 36:26. Theodore Psalter, 1066. (British Library, MS. Add.19352, fol. 43v).