

## **Learning from the Church Fathers (17) John Chrysostom (c.347 A.D.-407 A.D.)**

Many have the mistaken perception that Christianity is a Western religion. But the fact is that the greatest theologians of the early church such as Origen, Athanasius, and John Chrysostom were not located in the western part of the Roman Empire, but in the eastern part. John Chrysostom made a lasting contribution to both the Western and Eastern churches. This humble man bequeathed the most voluminous work of the Greek church fathers, comparably only to Augustine in the West.

### **John's Roots**

John was born in the city of Antioch in Syria, the third city of the Roman Empire, and the chief centre of Greek culture in Asia. His parents were wealthy. His father was Secundus, a government official, and his mother Anthusa, a devout Christian, who was widowed when she was only twenty years old. She never remarried. John's mother saw to it that he had a good classical education, with law in mind as a career. He was a brilliant student. He was educated under Libanius, the most outstanding orator of his day, who was openly hostile to the Christian faith. After John met Meletius, Archbishop of Antioch, he was baptized and decided to become a monk. After his mother's death he lived for six years with a colony of monks and for two years as a hermit.

### **John's Lifestyle**

In his hermitage John committed large parts of Scripture to memory. After the Christian faith had become legal throughout the Roman empire and even favoured by the Emperors, asceticism became the new vehicle for expressing one's total devotion to Christ. John desired to take seriously Paul's words, "Those who belong to Christ have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24). He fasted so much that his health broke down from too much austerity. The slightest excess of food gave him headaches and sharp stomach pains. His ancient biographer wrote, "He never relaxed for that two-year period, not in the days nor at night, and his gastric organs became lifeless and the proper functions of the kidneys were impaired by the cold." On icons John is regularly depicted with receding hair, a sparse beard, and an emaciated, ascetic face. We may find John's attitude too extreme, too other-worldly. But perhaps our cozy Christianity and comfortable lifestyle have made us forget that the Bible often speaks about bodily renunciation (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24-27).

John was persuaded to return to Antioch and become a priest. In later years he became the bishop of Constantinople. But he was ill fitted to be bishop of such an affluent city filled with gossip and intrigue in the name of religion. In a city hell-bent on self-aggrandizement, many were offended by his ascetic refusal to give lavish hospitality. John would never have chosen a pastoral career, but he believed that it was the Lord's will for him. Perhaps better than anyone else, John reminds us the ministry is not our own. The initiative is with God, not man.

### **Church and State**

In John's time, church and state were not separated. They were intertwined. In 398 A.D.,

Emperor Arcadius made John bishop of Constantinople, not because he liked him, but because he thought John's prestige might be useful to him. In his position as a priest in Antioch, this had not been dangerous politically, but this was not the case as bishop of the highly sensitive capital. His attempts to reform the morals of Constantinople and the court were not well received. A zealot for the cause of Christ since his early years, without regard for politics, power, and wealth, he was outspoken in his critique on worldliness and frivolity of the imperial court and especially the foolishness of fashionable women. Empress Eudoxia was outraged. She took it, rightly perhaps, as a criticism of herself. She became John's bitter enemy. John also had enemies within the church. A worldly and ambitious bishop Theophilus accused John of false teaching, in sympathy with the teachings of Origen. Theophilus was supported by Eudoxia.

### **John Chrysostom – The "golden-mouthed"**

John mastered the art of persuasive and effective preaching. His fame as preacher won him the name *Chrysostomos*, "golden-mouthed". But there was nothing golden about the tongue-lashing he used to denounce sinners, heretics, and lax clergy. His popularity with the common people was unquestioned, but the clergy and the ruling classes had no love for him. He always either inspired great affection and loyalty or kindled strong resentment, and he didn't care either way. Seated before his standing congregation, he proclaimed the Gospel in all its fullness. The values John had learned as a hermit – disdain for sensual pleasures and the trivial pursuit of a vain society – were the same values he advocated as preacher. For example, in a sermon preached in Antioch, John said that the greatness of a city comes from the virtue and piety of its inhabitants. "That's what gives a city its dignity and ornamentation and security. If these things aren't found, then even if the city were to enjoy countless honours from emperors, it would be the most worthless place of all... To me, a city whose citizens don't love God is more worthless than any country village, and more dishonoured than a cave."

John drew such great crowds in the church of Antioch, rapt in adoration of the eloquent preacher, that pickpockets took the opportunity to "help" themselves. On occasion John had to recommend his listeners to leave their purses at home. And he demanded attention. He wanted the congregation to listen when he preached. "Inattention," John told his congregation, "is disgraceful. When an imperial decree is read, you do not dare to speak or move lest you be charged with sedition. But you are not afraid of incurring a greater danger by showing disrespect to the word of God." He preached against charms, magic, fortunetellers, astrology, and other superstitions. He warned against worldliness. He often complained about people who filled the church on the festivals of Jerusalem, but also filled the theatres on the festivals of Babylon.

In about 387 A.D. he preached a series of eight sermons usually known as *Homilies against the Jews*. Because of these sermons, John has been accused of encouraging anti-Semitism. But recent scholarship reminds us that they should be called *Homilies against the Judaizers*, since the principal adversaries are Christians who observe aspects of Jewish law and celebrate festivals with the Jews.

John was a master in expository preaching. He preached series of sermons on individual books of the Bible. For example, we have eighty-nine sermons on the Gospel of Matthew.

When we look at the sermons, we discover he proceeded through the whole of the Gospel verse by verse. Few preachers in the history of the church left behind such a treasury of expository sermons. For the feast days of Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, and Ascension, John composed special sermons.

Some of John's most eloquent sermons were pleas for Christian love. He preached against slavery and tried to better conditions for slaves, urging the church to purchase serfs and free them. "The world," he said, "is like a household wherein all the servants should receive equal allowances because all men are equal, since they are brothers." He frequently ended his sermons with an appeal to the congregation to remember the poor as they leave the church. His great authority as a preacher rested in his faithfulness to Scripture. When he preached, there was never any question that it was the Word of God he preached. Any one of his sermons could be read from the pulpit today, and it would sound just as relevant as the day he preached it.

## **Social Justice**

John was a champion of the poor and the oppressed. He worked for social justice both at the civic level and in family life, defending the dignity of women in marriage. He offended the men by repeatedly proclaiming that a woman had as much right to demand fidelity from her husband as a man had of his wife. He preached against dishonest dealings, false oaths, extortion, usury and profanity, and he hit hard on the smug and the pious, "Heaven," he told his listeners, "is for those who do positive good, not for those who merely abstain from sin." John didn't oppose riches, if they were used rightly. It was "tainted" money he detested, money that came from cheating workmen, high interest rates, and indulging in irresponsible luxury. John believed that even a hermit should care for the sick and provide alms for the poor. He does not beg, but gives to others.

## **John's View of Childhood Education**

John understood well the needs and emotions of young people, and the power of parents to form them in habits compatible with the Gospel. Therefore, he advocated that primary Christian education is to take place in the home. The parents are the only true teachers of their children. To explain his views he wrote *Homily On Vain-Glory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring up Their Children*. In this homily John recommends that parents tell Old Testament stories to small children to displace the tales of Greek heroes in their imaginations, to illustrate moral behaviour, and to prepare girls and boys to hear them read in church. New Testament stories should not be told until adolescence. Both mothers and fathers are to share in story telling. John admonished parents to make use of the beginning of life. When the wax is soft, it will take the imprint, but when the imprint is hardened it cannot be taken out. The parent should be like an artist, forever at work on a canvas to make it perfect. A child must be taught never to speak insultingly, never to speak ill of any person, never to swear, never be contentious. The lesson must be driven home by sternness and gentleness combined, but not by the rod, for the rod in the end only defeats itself.

John was deeply concerned about the pressures and temptation Christian youth faced. He noted that for them the greatest of all dangers was vain-glory, the pride of life, the desire for

earthly fame and for earthly possessions. He urged parents to keep their young people from the many worldly activities imperial Constantinople had to offer. But to say "no" without receiving an explanation is not sufficient. John said that Christian youths need to hear why they are forbidden to attend the theatre. And since they may not attend the theatre, with its ribald and suggestive entertainments, their parents should devise wholesome amusements for them and give them gifts. Wise advice, also for our day and age.

### **John's Impact on the Reformers**

The reformers became indebted to John after his sermons were translated by the German reformer John Oecolampadius (1482-1531 A.D.) who translated the sermons from Greek to Latin. For the first time much of John's treasury of expository preaching became available to the Western world. The Swiss reformer Zwingli (1484-1531 A.D.) began his reform in Zurich with a return to the classical practice of systematic expository preaching he had learned from John's sermons. Calvin (1509-1564), in defending his preference for psalmody, appealed not to Scripture but to John and Augustine. Calvin noted that John exhorted men, women and children regularly to sing the psalms so that in this way they might join the company of the angels.

### **Conclusion**

Though John would eventually become the most beloved of all the eastern church fathers, in his own day he was exiled by Emperor Arcadius. John died from being forced to travel long distances on foot in atrocious weather. His last words were, "Glory to God for all things." In 1568, Pope Pius V, bestowed upon John the honorary title "doctor of the church."

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November, 2008