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ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM AND HIS MESSAGE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE TODAY

by

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Description: Since its beginning, Christianity has challenged its members to stand up for the rights of the poor and to serve them. As early Christians faced issues of poverty, so do Christians today. Then, as now, Christians were called upon to change the very structures that took advantage of the poor or kept them in poverty. St. John Chrysostom firmly believed that in order to call oneself Christian, one must be mindful of one's neighbor, and care for him and his needs. This paper will take a closer look at some of Chrysostom's sermons in order to explore Chrysostom's perspective on social justice issues, and see how his call to action is applicable for Christians today.

This paper may be duplicated.

Joel Cassady

18 May 2010

Since the beginning of Christianity, Christ's followers have been challenged to stand up for the rights of the poor and to serve them. Indeed, Christ tells his disciples, "You always have the poor with you."¹ Early Christians, like Christians today, were challenged by many issues of poverty. Then, as now, Christians were called upon by religious leaders to change the very structures that took advantage of the poor or kept them in poverty. One such voice was John Chrysostom. Chrysostom firmly believed that in order to call oneself Christian, one must be mindful of one's neighbor and care for them and their needs. Chrysostom's strong words moved the people of his time into action on behalf of the poor, and those same words can inspire Christians today. The intent of this paper is to focus on Chrysostom's sermons for the poor, and to allow his words to challenge Christians today to act on their behalf.

Sources put Chrysostom's birth between 345 and 347 CE, in Antioch, Syria, which at that time had become one of the prominent cities in the Roman Empire. His father, Secundus, was *magister militum* of the Syrian imperial army.² His mother, Anthusa, was an intelligent and religious woman who was widowed at the age of 20, not long after Chrysostom's birth. As she never remarried, she raised by herself John and his elder sister, who died while still a child.³ Chrysostom was very close to his mother, and his religious and moral upbringing can be attributed to her.

Despite the difficult circumstances in which he grew up, Chrysostom received a fine education. His most notable teacher was the famous orator Libanius, who, at the time, was also

¹ Jn 12:8 NAB

² Donald Attwater, *St. John Chrysostom: The Voice of Gold*. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1939, 9.

³ Baur, Chrysostom. *St. John Chrysostom*. Vol. VIII, in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, edited by Charles G. Herbermann, 452 - 457. New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 1913. As found online at [www.http://oce.catholic.com/index.php?title=John_Chrysostom%2C_Saint](http://oce.catholic.com/index.php?title=John_Chrysostom%2C_Saint) accessed Dec. 2008, 452.

one of the most “tenacious adherents of the declining paganism.”⁴ Chrysostom was one of Libanius’ best pupils, and took an initial interest in law, no doubt looking towards a path of wealth and high public office.⁵ He would have likely had a successful career. Libanius himself, when asked on his deathbed to name a successor, commented, “It would have been John, had not the Christians stolen him from us.”⁶

Due to both the urgings of a close friend he studied with and also his meeting the Bishop Meletius of Antioch, Chrysostom began to withdraw from his study of law and pursued an ascetic and religious life.⁷ He was baptized in about 369 by Meletius, and ordained a lector soon afterward. Above all, Chrysostom desired to become a monk, and live the full ascetic life. However, at his mother’s request, he waited until her death before he retreated to the hills outside of Antioch, spending four years within a monastic community, and two more as an anchorite in a cave.⁸ Palladius, his fifth century biographer, says of those two years that Chrysostom, “Never relaxed...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.”⁹ As a result, Chrysostom was forced to leave, and, according to Palladius, “This is proof of the Savior’s providence that he was taken away from the ascetic life...forcing him to leave his caves for the benefit of the Church.”¹⁰ Chrysostom returned to Antioch, where he was ordained a deacon by Meletius in about 381. In

⁴ Baur, *St. John Chrysostom*, 453.

⁵ Attwater, *St. John Chrysostom: The Voice of Gold*, 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Baur, *St. John Chrysostom*, 453.

⁸ *Ibid.* 453

⁹ Palladius, *Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom*. Edited by Robert T. Meyer. Translated by Robert T. Meyer. New York: Newman Press, 1985, 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

386, he was ordained a priest by Meletius' successor, Flavian, and spent the next twelve years in Antioch as a priest. Palladius says that as a priest in Antioch, Chrysostom, "Shed great glory on the priesthood...by the strictness of his lifestyle...it was all smooth sailing with Christ as pilot."¹¹

As a priest, Chrysostom immediately put his skills of oration to work from the pulpit, so much so, that in 553, almost 150 years after his death, Pope Vigilius gave him the surname "Chrysostom," or "golden-mouthed," and the appropriate title has stuck ever since.¹² Though his theological and exegetical contributions are overshadowed in the West by one of his contemporaries, St. Augustine of Hippo, Chrysostom is a Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church and highly revered to this day in the Eastern Church as one of the Three Holy Hierarchs, the other two being Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus. He was well known during his time for his theological and exegetical work, receiving the title *vir illustris* from St. Jerome.¹³ But while he was theologically and doctrinally sound, Chrysostom is best remembered for his sermons.

Chrysostom's sermons typically consisted of taking a biblical passage and progressively exploring it, letting it speak to him and through him to his audience.¹⁴ His method of exegesis, the "grammatico-historical," was common to Antioch, and differed from the allegorical and mystical methods of exegesis common to Alexandria.¹⁵ Chrysostom Baur considers John

¹¹ Ibid, 36.

¹² Baur, *St. John Chrysostom*, 452.

¹³ Attwater, *St. John Chrysostom: The Voice of Gold*, p. 47

¹⁴ Stephen Neill, *Chrysostom and his Message: A Selection from the Sermons of St. John Chrysostom of Antioch and Constantinople*. Edited by Stephen Neill. Translated by Stephen Neill. London: Lutterworth Press, 1962, 17.

¹⁵ Baur, *St. John Chrysostom*, 456.

Chrysostom, “The chief and almost the only successful representative of the exegetical principles of the School of Antioch.”¹⁶ His sermons were eloquent and extraordinary, even among the Greeks.¹⁷ He was quick to improvise, and would not hesitate to divert his message when appropriate. According to Baur, with “Whole-hearted earnestness and conviction, he delivered the message...which he felt had been given to him.”¹⁸ The people loved hearing him, and frequently responded to his sermons with applause, for which he would admonish them:

When you applaud me as I speak, I feel at the moment as it is natural for a man to feel...I am delighted and overjoyed. And when I go home and reflect that the people who have been applauding me have received no benefit...I feel as though I had spoken altogether in vain...And I have often thought of laying down a rule prohibiting all applause, and urging you to listen in silence.¹⁹

Chrysostom’s skills from the pulpit were put to task early in his career as a priest. During Lent of 387, the Emperor Theodosius, in order to pay for war and for an upcoming celebration the following year, raised taxes within the wealthy cities of the Eastern Empire, one of which was Antioch. The people, enraged at the news, formed a mob and stormed through the city. They made it to the imperial governor’s *praetorium*, and found he had slipped out a back door.²⁰ What were present were statues of the imperial family. The mob proceeded to destroy the statues, leaving some within the house and carrying some pieces out to the streets. The rioting lasted three hours, after which the governor was able to round up his troops to disperse the crowd.

Once all the dust settled, the people realized what had happened, and were fearfully anticipating the Emperor’s response. Theodosius took great offense to such actions to great

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Neill, *Chrysostom and his Message*, 80.

²⁰ Attwater, *St. John Chrysostom: The Voice of Gold*, 38.

offense. The bishop Flavian went to Constantinople to reason with the Emperor, and in the meantime, although Chrysostom was left to comfort the anxious people of Antioch, he was not a major player in calming the response of Theodosius. Nor was he, according to the sources, involved in interceding with the soldiers the Emperor sent immediately upon hearing of the incident. Chrysostom was, however, front and center in urging his people to seek repentance and to pray for mercy. The people, and the city, responded. In the end, Flavian was able to play to the Emperor's Christianity, and Theodosius was merciful to Antioch. Chrysostom, as any good priest would, turned the event into a learning experience, even praising God for the lessons the people could take away, "Let us always give thanks to God who loveth man; not merely for our deliverance from these fearful evils, but for their being permitted to overtake us...He ever disposes all things for our advantage, with that loving kindness which is His attribute, which God grant, that we may continually enjoy."²¹

Donald Attwater calls the issue of the statues a major point in Chrysostom's life, where he first saw the impact he could make and the abilities he possessed.²² He spoke words of comfort, and people listened and responded. But Chrysostom used the pulpit for more than comforting purposes. Throughout his time in Antioch, and beyond, Chrysostom's primary subject of discourse was the poor, and it was on their behalf that the golden-mouthed preacher called the people to action.

Chrysostom targeted those who were wealthy without being charitable. He said:

Many reproach me saying continually thou fastenest upon the rich: while they on the other hand fasten upon the poor. Well I do fasten upon the rich: or rather not the rich, but those who make a bad use of their riches. For I am continually saying that I do not attack

²¹ John Chrysostom. *Twenty-One Homilies on the Statues*. Vol. 9, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff, translated by W. R. W. Stephens, 317-489. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995. Homily XXL, 489.

²² Attwater, *St. John Chrysostom: The Voice of Gold*, 47.

the character of the rich man, but of the rapacious. A rich man is one thing, a rapacious man another: an affluent man is one thing, a covetous man is another. Make clear distinctions and do not confuse things which are diverse.²³

For Chrysostom, wealth in and of itself was not the root of evil. The overzealous desire for money – greed – was what led one to evil.²⁴ This evil manifested itself in the wealthy who took advantage of and overlooked the needs of the poor. No more is this stance by Chrysostom more apparent than in his homilies regarding the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31). For Chrysostom, greed overtook the rich man, who, though he daily walked by Lazarus, was blinded by his avarice so that he did not see Lazarus' poverty nor was he moved to help him:

If we suppose that he passed the man by on the first day, he would probably have felt some pity on the second day; if he overlooked him even on that day, he surely ought to have been moved on the third or fourth or the day after that, even if he were more cruel than the wild beasts. But he felt no such emotion, but became harder-hearted and more reckless...the very appearance of the poor man was pitiful, as he was overcome by hunger and long illness. Nevertheless, none of this tamed that savage man. This cruelty is the worst kind of wickedness; it is an inhumanity without rival.²⁵

When the avarice that blinded the rich man in Jesus' parable blinds those who are rich, they hurt only themselves by neglecting the poor. "Don't you realize," Chrysostom told his people, "that, as the poor man withdraws silently, sighing and in tears, you actually thrust a sword into yourself, that it is you who received the more serious wound?"²⁶

In order to avoid the rich man's fate, Chrysostom called the rich to use their wealth to the benefit of the poor, "All the wealth of the world belongs to you and to the others in common, as

²³ John Chrysostom. *Two Homilies on Eutropius*. Vol. 9, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Philip Schaff, translated by W. R. W. Stephens, 245 - 265. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995. Homily II, 254.

²⁴ Attwater, *St. John Chrysostom: The Voice of Gold*, 60.

²⁵ John Chrysostom. *First Sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man*; quoted in Catharine P Roth, *John Chrysostom: On Wealth and Poverty*. Edited and translated by Catharine P. Roth. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984, 21-22.

²⁶ John Chrysostom. *On Matthew: Homily 35,5*; quoted in William J. Walsh, S.J., and John P. Langan, S.J. "Patristic Social Consciousness -- The Church and the Poor." In *The Faith That Does Justice*, edited by John Haughey, S.J., 113 - 151. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1977, 118.

the sun, air, earth, and all the rest...Do not say 'I am using what belongs to me.' You are using what belongs to others."²⁷ Almsgiving, for Chrysostom, was a duty for the rich.²⁸ This duty not only manifested itself in the lavish giving of money,²⁹ but also in opening one's home to the poor.

Make yourself a guest-chamber in your own house: set up a bed there, set up a table there and a candlestick...Have a room to which Christ may come. Say, 'This is Christ's cell; this building is set apart for him.' Even though it is just a little insignificant room in the basement, he does not disdain it. Naked and a stranger, Christ goes about – all he wants is a shelter. Make it available even though it is as little as this.³⁰

If the rich of his time were unable to grasp the concept that their wealth in fact belonged to the poor, Chrysostom found other ways to show that the poor needed assistance. One such way was by acknowledging Christ's presence in the poor. In responding to requests for more Church decorations, Chrysostom replies:

Do you really wish to pay homage to Christ's body? Then do not neglect him when he is naked. At the same time that you honor him here with hangings made of silk, do not ignore him outside when he perishes from cold and nakedness. For the One who said, 'This is my body'...also said 'When I was hungry you gave me nothing to eat.'...For is there any point in his table being laden with golden cups while he himself is perishing from hunger? First fill him when he is hungry and then set his table with lavish ornaments. Are you making a golden cup for him at the very moment when you refuse to give him a cup of cold water? Do you decorate his table with cloths flecked with gold, while at the same time you neglect to give him what is necessary for him to cover himself?...The conclusion is: Don't neglect your brother in his distress while you decorate his house. Your brother is more truly his temple than any church building.³¹

Writers after Chrysostom shared his vision of Christ within the poor. St. Vincent de Paul, a seventeenth century priest who founded an order of priests and brothers to serve the poor of

²⁷ John Chrysostom. *1 Corinthians: Homily 10.3*; quoted in Walsh & Langan, "Patristic Social Consciousness," 129.

²⁸ Walsh & Langan, "Patristic Social Consciousness," 142 .

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ John Chrysostom. *On Acts: Homily 40.2*; quoted in Walsh & Langan, "Patristic Social Consciousness," 132.

³¹ John Chrysostom. *On Matthew: Homily 50.4*; quoted in Walsh & Langan, "Patristic Social Consciousness," 131.

France wrote, “It is from your hands that Our Lord, in the person of the sick, seeks relief.”³²

Mother Theresa of Calcutta, the twentieth century figure of saintliness, pointed out that, “We should not serve the poor like *they were* Jesus. We should serve the poor because *they are* Jesus”.³³

The Jesuits, William J. Walsh and John P. Langan, explain that Chrysostom, “Recognized the poor as privileged members of the body of Christ, and took upon himself the task of defending them against their wealthy oppressors...Never perhaps had the poor possessed so eloquent a public defender.”³⁴ The recognition of Christ within the poor and the acknowledgment of the poor’s privilege within the body of Christ give to the poor a dignity that neither their status nor their treatment by others can take away.

In his fifteenth homily on Matthew, Chrysostom explored Jesus’ choice to call the subjects of the beatitudes “blessed,” saying:

And he doth not introduce what he saith by way of advice or of commandments, but by way of blessing, so making his word less burthensome, and opening to all the course of his discipline. For he said not, ‘This or that person,’ but ‘they who do so, are all of them *blessed*.’ So that though thou be a slave, a beggar, in poverty, a stranger, unlearned, there is nothing to hinder thee from being blessed, if thou emulate this virtue.³⁵

The Church today maintains Chrysostom’s belief in the dignity of humanity, particularly the poor. In the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ letter *Economic Justice for All*, the bishops note that:

The basis for all that the Church believes about the moral dimensions of economic life is its vision of the transcendent worth – the sacredness – of human beings. The dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured....When we deal with each other, we should

³² Vincent de Paul, *Spiritual Insights from the Letters of St. Vincent de Paul*. June 05, 2008. <http://www.vincentians.ie/quotes.htm> (accessed December 8, 2008).

³³ Jose Luis Gonzalez-Balado, *Mother Theresa: In My Own Words*. New York: Random House, 1996, 30.

³⁴ "Patristic Social Consciousness," 142.

³⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *The Preaching of John Chrysostom*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967, 43.

do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27).³⁶

Mother Theresa takes the idea of dignity even further, claiming the poor are the ones who truly understand human dignity, “All my years of service to the poor have helped me to understand that they are precisely the ones who better understand human dignity. If they have a problem, it is not lack of money, but the fact that their right to be treated humanly and with tenderness is not recognized.”³⁷

Once one understands and acknowledges the dignity within each person, the next step is action. For Chrysostom, action on behalf of one’s neighbor is the true testament of what it means to be a Christian. “There is nothing more chilling,” he says, “than the sight of a Christian who makes no effort to save others, from which effort we are exempted neither by poverty nor lowliness nor bodily infirmity. To make weakness an excuse for hiding our Christian light is as insulting to God as to say that He could not make the sun shine.”³⁸

For Chrysostom, even the poor were expected to share what little they had:

You say that you are yourself too poor to help others. If that is what is worrying you, listen to me when I tell you that poverty is not a bar to almsgiving, for were you a thousand times poorer than you are you would still not be poorer than the woman who had only a handful of flour or that other who had only a couple of pennies. These, by giving all that they had to the poor, showed that great poverty is not incompatible with great generosity....To strip oneself of all is to become rich; a small gift may earn a crown of glory.³⁹

³⁶ United States Council of Catholic Bishops. "Economic Justice for All (1986)." In *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, by David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, 572 - 664. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992, #28.

³⁷ Jose Luis Gonzalez-Balado, *Mother Theresa*, 29.

³⁸ *On the Acts, XV*; quoted in Attwater, *St. John Chrysostom: The Voice of Gold*, 50.

³⁹ John Chrysostom. *No One Can Be Harmed Except by Himself, VI*; quoted in Attwater, *St. John Chrysostom: The Voice of Gold*, 65.

The poor were not Chrysostom's only social issue of focus. At a time when slavery was commonplace culturally, Chrysostom more than once showed himself "exercised in mind as to how such an unnatural institution had arisen in the world."⁴⁰ Chrysostom points out to his people:

For to that end did God grant us both hands and feet, that we might not stand in need of servants. Since not at all for need's sake was the class of slaves introduced, else even along with Adam had a slave been formed; but it is the penalty of sin and the punishment of disobedience. But when Christ came, he put an end also to this, 'For in Christ Jesus there is neither bond nor free' (Gal 3:28).⁴¹

In looking at Chrysostom's homilies, it is not always easy to discern in what location he is presiding and to whom he is orating. What is sure is that the message he gave to the people in Antioch was similar to the message he would give to the people in Constantinople. After bishop Nectarius of Constantinople died in 397, the Emperor Arcadius, under the suggestion of his minister Eutropius, appointed Chrysostom to fill the vacant seat. In order to avoid a riot in Antioch, his removal from the city was done in secret, and he was informed of the imperial decree upon his arrival in the capital.⁴² Chrysostom was ordained Bishop of Constantinople on Feb 26, 398, by Theophilus, Patriarch of Alexandria, who had had his own candidate for the seat in the capital, and was less than happy that his candidate was not selected.

Chrysostom immediately went to work reforming the church in Constantinople. He started by cutting expenses and ending the frequent banquets of the episcopate. The new bishop

⁴⁰ Attwater, *St. John Chrysostom: The Voice of Gold*, 67.

⁴¹ John Chrysostom. *First Corinthians*. Vol. 12, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Talbot W. Chambers, translated by Hubert Kestell Cornish and John Medley, 244 - 249. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995. Homily XL, 248.

⁴² Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*. Vol. 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation. New York: Harper Collins, 1984, 196.

himself lived “little less strictly than he had formerly lived as a priest and monk.”⁴³ Luxury items that adorned the bishop’s palace were sold and the money given to feed the poor.⁴⁴ Chrysostom then went to work reforming the clergy, calling his priests to an austere life, doing away with the “spiritual sisters” that lived with some of the priests who claimed celibacy,⁴⁵ and even dismissing deacons who had committed grave penalties against the church (one for murder, another for adultery).⁴⁶ Chrysostom next turned to the laity, preaching against the extravagance of the rich, particularly against the absurd finery in the dress of women.⁴⁷ Some responded with offense to the new bishop’s demands, but others responded positively. It is said he had intimate friends even among the wealthy classes in the city, and that his flock, as a whole never forgot his care for the poor.

Regardless of how favorably or unfavorably his people looked upon him, his message stayed the same. He had little patience for the ridiculous spending habits of the wealthy in Antioch and Constantinople:

Don’t envy the man whom you see riding through the streets with a troop of attendants to drive the crowds out of his way. It is absurd! Why, my dear sir, if I may ask, do you thus drive your fellow creatures before you? Are you a wolf or a lion? Your Lord, Jesus Christ, raised man to Heaven: but you do not condescend to share even the market place with him. When you put a gold bit on your horse and a gold bracelet on your slave’s arm, when your clothes are gilded down to your very shoes, you are feeding the most ferocious of all beasts, avarice: you are robbing orphans and stealing from widows and making yourself a public enemy.⁴⁸

⁴³ Baur, *St. John Chrysostom*, 454.

⁴⁴ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 196.

⁴⁵ Baur 454

⁴⁶ Baur, *St. John Chrysostom*, 454.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 454

⁴⁸ John Chrysostom. *On the Psalms, XLVIII*; quoted in Attwater, *St. John Chrysostom: The Voice of Gold*, 62.

In another sermon, he admonishes those who use expensive silks in making footgear:

Ships are built, sailors and pilots engaged, sails spread and the sea crossed, wife and children and home left behind, barbarian lands traversed and the trader's life exposed to a thousand dangers – what for? So that you may trick out the leather of your boots with silk laces. What could be more mad?...Your chief concern as you walk through the public places is that you should not soil your boots with mud or dust. Will you let your soul thus grovel while you are taking care of your boots? Boots are made to be dirtied: if you can't bear it, take them off and wear them on your head. You laugh! – I am weeping at your folly.⁴⁹

Homilies such as these rightfully called the people of his time to task, but as the bishop of Constantinople, his enemies used such sermons to demonstrate to members of the court, particularly the Empress Eudoxia, that Chrysostom was insulting them and their lifestyles.⁵⁰ Palladius says that Chrysostom's enemies, "Pretended that certain homilies were really making sport of the Empress and of others of the court."⁵¹ It is not certain if the Empress had this impression before being influenced by Chrysostom's enemies, nor is it certain that Chrysostom indeed intended to make an example of the royal court. What is certain is that while the relationship between the bishop and the Empress was at first "true friendship," she eventually became one of his harshest enemies.⁵² The story commonly pointed to in highlighting this change took place in about 401, and consisted of the Empress depriving a widow of land.[need another citation here(Think it's baur)] Chrysostom considered this unjust and sided with the widow; Eudoxia took offense. Though relations between the bishop and the Empress were never again friendly after this incident, there is evidence that Chrysostom had begun to fall out of royal favor even before the issue with the widow.

⁴⁹ John Chrysostom. *On Matthew, IL*; quoted in Attwater, *St. John Chrysostom: The Voice of Gold*, 62-63.

⁵⁰ Baur, 454.

⁵¹ Palladius, *Dialogue*, 40.

⁵² Baur, *St. John Chrysostom*, 454.

The year 399 was a year of turmoil within Constantinople. The first issue to take place was the fall of Eutropius. Though only a minister in the court, Eutropius had a significant amount of power, which he wielded rather tyrannically. Many of the people he went after sought asylum in the church, and Chrysostom granted such requests and stood up against Eutropius. After a series of political events, the details of which are not entirely known, Eutropius found himself running from a vengeful mob. Ironically enough, the minister fled to the church, and in a significant display of integrity, Chrysostom defended his “erstwhile enemy” from the mob, from the army, and eventually from the Emperor himself.⁵³ However, Eutropius lost faith in the safety of the church and tried to escape in the night. He was later caught, exiled, and put to death.⁵⁴

Within a few months of the incident with Eutropius, an even more significant event took place. An imperial general, Gainas, was sent to subdue a revolt led by a man Tribigild. Gainas eventually turned traitor and united with Tribigild, and in order to restore peace, Emperor Arcadius was forced to name Gainas Commander-in-Chief of the Imperial Army. Two of Constantinople’s highest ranking officials were sent to Gainas as prisoners, likely to be put to death. Chrysostom intervened, apparently accepting a mission to Gainas. Chrysostom, in his meeting with Gainas, was able to get the officials’ lives spared and both of them freed from imprisonment.⁵⁵ Not long after, Gainas again started trouble and demanded for himself and his troops a Catholic Church within Constantinople (Gainas was an Arian Goth). Chrysostom again intervened, and Gainas, again, acquiesced.⁵⁶ Gainas was eventually defeated and slain by the Huns, and full power restored to the Emperor. These two events – the fall of Eutropius and the

⁵³ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 199.

⁵⁴ Baur, *St. John Chrysostom*, 454.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

revolt by Gainas – gained Chrysostom a great deal of prestige and influence amongst the people of Constantinople, but also resentment by the imperial court.

Eventually, Chrysostom’s enemies grew weary of his challenging sermons, tired of the reforms he brought to the capital city, and jealous of the power he had acquired.⁵⁷ Eudoxia found an ally in Theophilus, who helped drum up false charges against Chrysostom, and ordered Chrysostom to appear before a synod of 42 bishops and archbishops. This order was backed by imperial decree. Chrysostom would not present himself, refusing to recognize the legality of a synod formed of his open enemies.⁵⁸ Theophilus gave Chrysostom three summons, and, after the third, armed with the Emperor’s decree, Chrysostom was deposed.⁵⁹

The people erupted in anger. Bishops and priests from neighboring areas pledged their support. As Justo L. Gonzalez says, “One word from the eloquent bishop, and the entire conspiracy against him would crumble. Arcadius and Eudoxia were aware of this and made ready for war. But Chrysostom was a lover of peace.”⁶⁰ Chrysostom’s punishment was exile, and three days after being deposed, he surrendered himself to the soldiers who took him away. However, according to Palladius, “Scarcely had a single day passed when a calamity occurred in the royal bedroom. This caused such an alarm that a few days later they called John back through a house notary, so he was brought back to his own throne.”⁶¹ Fearing this “calamity” to be a sign from God, Chrysostom was reinstated, to the rejoicing of the people, and Theophilus and his parties retreated quickly from the capital.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 455

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 199.

⁶¹ Palladius, *Dialogue*, 57.

Once the fear of heavenly punishment faded, Eudoxia again clashed with the bishop, and summoned Theophilus to return to banish Chrysostom once again. Theophilus, though he refused to travel to Constantinople, encouraged the Emperor, along with other bishops, to sign a new decree of exile.⁶² According to Baur, there were two attempts on Chrysostom's life, both of which failed.⁶³ Finally, on 24 June 404, Arcadius signed the decree to banish Chrysostom for a second time.⁶⁴ Again Chrysostom had the support of the people and neighboring clergy and bishops, but again Chrysostom surrendered himself, and was exiled this time to Cucusus, a remote village in Armenia.⁶⁵ The second exile, however, instigated large riots within the city. In the disturbance, the cathedral and neighboring public buildings caught fire and were destroyed. The causes of the fires were never discovered, but several of Chrysostom's supporters and friends were tortured or banished as a result.⁶⁶

In his exile, Chrysostom took up the pen, and wrote to friends that he still had in the city, and also to Pope Innocent, who, in responses to Chrysostom, pledged his support.[cite this] Others in the area joined the Pope, and the actions of both the Emperor and Theophilus were condemned throughout the Empire. Though Chrysostom never gave up hope of returning, no action taken would result in his return. However, with its new famous inhabitant, "the little town of Cucusus seemed to have become the center of the world."⁶⁷

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 199.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Fearful of his influence from afar, Chrysostom was moved in the summer of 407 even further from Constantinople. His new destination was to be Pithyus, a town on the eastern bank of the Black Sea near the Caucasus. The journey was rugged, and made worse by his two soldier escorts, who caused the former bishop “all possible sufferings.”⁶⁸ On 14 September 407 Chrysostom was marched to the point of death. The party returned to Comana, the town in which they started the day, and it was there that Chrysostom received his last Holy Communion, ending, according to Palladius, with “his usual formula: ‘Glory to God for all things.’ Then he signed himself at the last Amen.”⁶⁹

In looking at Chrysostom’s legacy as bishop, some historians are apt to compare him with Ambrose of Milan, who was consecrated bishop of Milan about 15 years before Chrysostom was consecrated in Constantinople. As bishop, Ambrose, like Chrysostom, had many battles of power with the Emperor of the West, Theodosius. Unlike Chrysostom, Ambrose used his authority and humbled the Emperor into submission. As history compares the two bishops a connection is seen between the future courses of the churches in the East and the West and how they relate to the secular authority of the area. As Gonzalez points out, Theodosius was not the last Western Emperor to be humbled by a Latin bishop, and Chrysostom was not the last Greek bishop to be banished by an Eastern Emperor.⁷⁰ But it would seem that this correlation in the lives of the bishops could inaccurately imply a weakness on the behalf of Chrysostom. As can be seen by his life and his words, Chrysostom’s primary care as bishop was for the well-being of his flock. Like the Good Shepherd modeled by Christ, Chrysostom was not willing to sacrifice any of his flock on his behalf. Instead, Chrysostom became the martyr Palladius painted

⁶⁸ Baur, *St. John Chrysostom*, 455.

⁶⁹ Palladius, *Dialogue*, 73.

⁷⁰ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 200.

him to be, giving himself for the sake of his people and for the integrity of his message.⁷¹ Far from being weak, Chrysostom became one of the strongest examples of the sacrifices often required of a life devoted to social justice.

Another aspect of Chrysostom's life that deserves reflection is his stance regarding monasticism. While he continually upheld the monastic lifestyle as the ideal and surest way to heaven,⁷² he believed that being married, or "of this world" as he would sometimes say, did not preclude someone from relationship with God and ascetic virtue: "Is it perhaps only monks who are obliged to please God? No! God wishes that all should become holy and that none should neglect the practice of virtue,"⁷³ Elsewhere he says, "You make a great mistake if you think that anything different is required from people of the world than from monks. The one difference is this, that the one takes a wife, the other does not; in all other things the same reckoning will be demanded from each."⁷⁴

While lay people were held to the ascetic virtues, monks were also not exempt from the duties of service. According to Blake Leyerle, Chrysostom, "had no patience for those who defended their retirement by saying, 'I have turned away from the world so as not to lose myself or become sluggish in virtue.'"⁷⁵ Chrysostom's response to such an attitude was unsympathetic: "How much better it would be for you to become sluggish but to benefit others, instead of

⁷¹ Palladius, *Dialogue*, 73.

⁷² Chrysostomus Baur, OSB, *John Chrysostom and His Time*. London: Sands & Co. Ltd., 1959, 112.

⁷³ John Chrysostom. *Hom. 21, 6 in Gen*, quoted in Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time*, 111.

⁷⁴ John Chrysostom. *Adv. Oppugnatores*, quoted in Baur, *John Chrysostom and His Time*, 111.

⁷⁵ Blake Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives: John Chrysostom's Attack on Spiritual Marriage*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, 197.

whiling away your time on mountaintops and neglecting your perishing brothers.”⁷⁶ Indeed, for Chrysostom, according to Peter Brown, care of the poor was the “fundamental duty of all Christians.”⁷⁷ Chrysostom places this value above even virginity, “For the greatest of things is charity, an austere life-style and the giving of alms, which hits a higher peak of virtue than does virginity. For without virginity, indeed, it is possible to see the Kingdom, but without almsgiving this cannot be.”⁷⁸

Leyerle describes Chrysostom’s attitude towards monks as “ambivalent.”⁷⁹ At work in some of his attitudes was undoubtedly an ever-existing tension between ecclesial authority and monastic autonomy, as well as his confrontation with those ascetics who lived amongst the “spiritual sisters” mentioned above.⁸⁰ However, as Leyerle acknowledges, Chrysostom’s own ascetic experience shaped not only his life, but his understanding of the Christian life.⁸¹ His goal, it seems, was bringing the ascetic lifestyle to the city.⁸² While he favored the life of virginity, he did not condemn or reject those who were married. Chrysostom called all Christians, lay and religious, to the highest ideals of Christian life – first and foremost, concern and care for others, informed by and combined with a lifestyle of virtue and prayer.

⁷⁶ John Chrysostom. *Hom. in 1 Cor. 6.4*, quoted in Leyerly, *Theatrical Shows*, 197.

⁷⁷ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, 311.

⁷⁸ *In Matt. 46.4; 47.4*, quoted in Brown, *The Body and Society*, 311.

⁷⁹ Leyerle, *Theatrical Shows and Ascetic Lives*, 197.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 197 – 199.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, 199, 201.

⁸² *Ibid*.

In the end, according to Stephen Neill, Chrysostom, “Is above all a preacher of the Christian life; gently and patiently he tries to lead his hearers forward in the way of holiness; they are to learn to reproduce in daily word and action the very life of Christ Himself.”⁸³

Chrysostom’s words can inspire and call our world to action. The poor today still need a defender like the “golden-mouth.” He calls today to Christians through his sermons to recognize the high dignity Christ places within those who are the least among us. Chrysostom calls Christians to live their faith by loving their neighbor, and gives Christ’s followers the ultimate example. Indeed, Chrysostom speaks from experience and calls Christians to that same experience when he says, “If you have love, you will not notice the loss of your money, the labor of your body, the toil of your words, your trouble or your ministering, but you will bear everything courageously.”⁸⁴

⁸³ Neill, *Chrysostom and his Message*, 17.

⁸⁴ *Homilies on Romans XXI*; quoted from New Testament Vol. 6: Romans, in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, by Gerald Bray, ed., Chief Editor Thomas C. Oden. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998, 314.

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