

St John Chrysostom for the Twenty-First Century¹

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Introduction

My intention in this lecture is to highlight a number of areas in which I believe St John Chrysostom has precious contributions to make to contemporary Christians. I would, however, like to begin by making a brief verbal sketch of his life, then mention some of the areas in which he has been duly influential throughout the history of the Church, and then address Chrysostom's relevance for the practice of contemporary Christianity.

St John was born in or around AD 347, as best as we can tell, in the city of Antioch. His father, Secundos, was a high-ranking civil servant in the Roman administration, and his mother, Anthusa, was a devout Christian, who has recently been numbered among the saints by the Church of Greece. Her feast day is shared with Ss. Nona and Emmelia, the mothers respectively of Ss. Gregory the Theologian and St Basil the Great. Hence, we commemorate on January 30th the Three Holy Hierarchs, and shortly thereafter, on the Sunday that falls in the postfeast of the Presentation, the holy mothers of the Three Holy Hierarchs.

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Student and Ascetic

Consider Chrysostom's life as divided into three fundamental phases: his early life as a student and ascetic, his life as priest in Antioch, and his life as bishop in Constantinople.³ Chrysostom's father died when he was a young boy, and his mother was but twenty years old. She spent the rest of her life completely devoted to John's formation as a Christian and a scholar. As a young man he was enrolled amongst the students of the greatest rhetor of the empire, the pagan Libanius.⁴ His education under Libanius followed a traditional Greek mode that had not changed much since the fourth century BC. It was under Libanius that Chrysostom learned the Greek diction and elegance of expression that would serve him so well as a preacher throughout his life. The curriculum was all in Greek, Latin forming no official part of his education, and focused on the classics. St John passed through all three stages of the traditional *paideia*: grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric with outstanding success. Libanius is said to have remarked in light of his approaching death that of all his students it was John who was most accomplished to succeed him, if it had not been that the Christians had stolen him. Indeed they had, and it would not be the last time in God's providence that he was stolen.

Chrysostom completed his studies about 367 and was baptized at the Paschal vigil of 368 by St Meletios, who served as the Orthodox bishop of Antioch from approximately 360 until his death at the second Ecumenical Council in 381. For three years after his baptism Chrysostom served in Meletios' presence in the church, and studied the Scriptures in a small monastic brotherhood gathered around Fathers Diodore and Car-

³ This three-fold division is reflected in the subtitle of the most recent scholarly biography of Chrysostom in English by J.N.D. Kelly entitled *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom- Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995). For a more recent contribution in German, but with an English translation, I recommend Rudolph Brändle (1999) *Johannes Chrysostomus: Bischoff- Reformier- Märtyrer* (Köln: Kohlhammer); English translation by John Cawte and Silke Trzcionka (Strathfield, Australia, St Paul's Publications, 2004).

⁴ Many of Libanius' speeches are extant, and a nice collection exists in English in the Loeb series.

terios. In 372, with rumors swirling of an impending ordination, Chrysostom fled to the mountains outside Antioch to struggle against his passions under the tutelage of an elderly Syrian master. By spiritual insight Chrysostom mastered himself during these years, and then retreated to a cave where for an additional two years he memorized the Scriptures and reportedly never laid down to sleep. Chrysostom described this period in his life as a time in which he devoted himself completely to prayer by night and Scripture study by day.⁵ Through this extreme asceticism Chrysostom broke his health, and returned to Antioch sometime around 378. St John's years as a student and an ascetic would leave a deep impress on his future, and provide the foundation for his powerful ministry as an exegete and preacher of the Holy Scriptures. The inspired content of his preaching ministry was formed in the mountains, and the masterful pedagogical style was formed in his schooling. This combination took the Christian world by storm.

Priest and Preacher in Antioch

After St Meletios' death he was sent back from Constantinople to Antioch to be buried next to St Babylas, and Flavian was elected bishop of Antioch. In his first year as bishop Flavian ordained Chrysostom, then aged thirty-two, a deacon, which office he would hold for five years. During this period Chrysostom never preached, but launched his writing career, producing pamphlets, letters and essays on various topics, especially on the ascetical life. Besides his liturgical and literary labors, St John served Flavian as his personal assistant and liaison in administering charity to the some 3,000 virgins and widows on the doles of the church. In AD 386, when Deacon John was 39 years old, Archbishop Flavian ordained him to the priesthood, and appointed him as the city's cathedral preacher.⁶ St John would serve in this capacity for twelve

⁵ *Thdr.* I.51–52; SC 117, p.50.

⁶ So esteemed was St John's preaching that he was often asked to preach in the presence of and often in place of the Bishop or Bishops in attendance. Some of his homilies from this period reflect the unenviable position of Chrysostom being the first preacher to be followed by a bishop's delivery. In