

Words of Saint John Chrysostom

In View of the Election of a Metropolitan for the Orthodox Church in America On the Feast of St. John Chrysostom November 13, 2012

These words of Saint John Chrysostom are taken from his work *Six Books on the Priesthood*.¹

The “Priesthood” about which St. John speaks refers primarily to the Church’s Bishops. By extension his words also apply to the Church’s Presbyters (now usually called priests) whom the Bishops ordain and appoint to be heads of churches and monasteries in their dioceses.²

+ *Through the intercessions and teachings of our father among the saints, John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, Lord Jesus Christ our God have mercy on us and save us!*



Speaking to the chief of the apostles [the risen Christ] said, “*Peter, do you love me?*”; and when Peter confessed that he did, the Lord responded, “*If you love me, tend my sheep.*”³

The Master asked the disciple if he loved him...to teach us how much he cares for the supervision (Greek: *episkope*) of his flocks. Once this is evident, it will be equally obvious that a great, indescribable reward will be in store for the man who works hard at the tasks which Christ values so highly.

And so when the disciple said, “*You know that I love you*”, and called as a witness of his love the very one whom he loved (i.e. Christ himself), the Savior did not stop there but went on to describe the proof of love. He did not want to prove then how much Peter loved him...but he wanted Peter and all of us to learn how much he loves his own Church, in order that we too might show great concern for the same thing. (II.1)



A man who loses sheep through the ravages of wolves or the attacks of robbers or some other accident might perhaps meet with a measure of pardon from the owner of the flock. [...] But anyone entrusted with human beings, the rational flock of Christ, risks a penalty ... of his own soul for the loss of the sheep. Moreover, he has a far greater and more difficult struggle. His fight is not with wolves; his fear is not of robbers; his care is not to protect the flock from pestilence. Well then, against whom is the war? With whom is the battle?

Listen to St. Paul. He says:

Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:12)

The same [Apostle Paul]... showed us these enemies as well:

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: fornication, adultery, impurity, lasciviousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strifes, jealousies, wraths, factions, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults (Gal 5:19-21) and more besides these. (II.2)



The work of the priesthood is done on earth, but it is ranked among heavenly ordinances. And this is only right, for no man, no angel, no archangel, no other created power, but the Paraclete himself (i.e. the Holy Spirit) ordained this succession, and persuaded men, while still remaining in the flesh, to image the ministry of angels.

The priest, therefore, must be as pure as if he were standing in heaven itself, in the midst of those powers. (III.4)



...the man who accepts this responsibility needs great wisdom and even before wisdom, the grace of God in good measure, and an upright character and a pure life and more than human goodness....

More billows toss the priest's soul than the gales which trouble the sea.

First of all there is the dreadful rock of vainglory... [And then] anger, dejection, envy, strife, slanders, accusations, lying, hypocrisy, intrigue, imprecations against those who have done no harm, delight at the disgraceful behavior in fellow priests, sorrow at their successes, love of praise, greed for preferment (which more than anything else hurls the human soul to destruction), teaching meant to please, slavish wheedling, ignoble flattery, contempt for the poor, fawning on the rich, absurd honors and harmful favors which endanger giver and receiver alike, servile fear.... restraint of plain speaking, much pretended and no real humility, failure to scrutinize and rebuke, or, more likely, rebuking beyond reason the lowly while not daring so much as to open his lips against the powerful. And these wild beasts and more are bred upon that rock [of vainglory]. And those who are once seized by them cannot help being dragged into the kind of servitude which makes them do over and over again...things that are too bad to mention.

The priestly office might well accuse us of not handling it rightly. The office is not itself the cause of the evils I have mentioned. It is we on our part who besmirched it with stain upon stain by entrusting it to commonplace men. And they eagerly accept what is offered to them, without first examining their own souls or considering the gravity of the matter. And when they come to exercise this ministry, their eyes are blinded with inexperience, and they fill the congregations entrusted to them with a thousand and one troubles.

Tell me, where do you think all the disorders in the churches originate? I think their only origin is in the careless and random way in which the prelates are chosen and appointed.

For the head ought to be the strongest member in order to be able to control the evil exhalations which proceed from the rest of the body, and regulate them properly. But when the head happens to be weak itself, it cannot ward off those infectious attacks, and becomes weaker than it naturally is, and destroys the rest of the body along with itself. (III.7-10)



[The priest] must first of all purify his soul entirely from ambition for the office. For if he is strongly attracted to this office, when he gets it he will add fuel to the fire, and being mastered by ambition, he will tolerate all kinds of evil to secure his hold upon it, even resorting to flattery, or submitting to mean and unworthy treatment, or spending lavishly. I pass over...the fact that some men, in contending for this office, have filled the churches with murder and split cities into factions.

The right course, I think, is to have so reverent an estimation of the office as to avoid responsibility from the start; and, after being appointed to it, not to wait for the judgment of others if you should happen to have committed a sin that calls for deposition, but to anticipate this and depose yourself from office. In this way a man will probably induce God's mercy. But if he clings to a position for which he is not fit, he deprives himself of all pardon and provokes God's anger the more by adding a second and more serious offense. But no one will ever be content to do so; for it is indeed a terrible temptation to covet this honor. And in saying this, I do not contradict St. Paul, but entirely agree with what he says. What are his words? *"If a man seeks the office of a bishop, he desires a good work."* (1 Tim 3.1) I meant it was terrible to desire, not the work, but the absolute authority and power.

I think that a man must rid his mind of this ambition with all possible care, and not for a moment let it be

governed by it, in order that he may always act with freedom. For if he does not want to achieve fame in this position of authority, he will not dread its loss either. And if he does not fear this, he can always act with the freedom that befits Christian men. But those who fear and dread deposition from this office endure a bitter slavery, full of all kinds of evil, and cannot help often offending man and God. But the soul ought not to be in this position. As in war we see soldiers of fine spirit fighting eagerly and falling bravely, so those who have come to this ministry should be ready either to be consecrated to the office or to be relieved of it, as befits Christian men, knowing that such deposition earns a crown no less than the office itself.

For when anyone has this done to him because he will not submit to anything which is unbecoming or unworthy of his position, he procures a greater punishment for those who wrongfully depose him, and a greater reward for himself. [...] This is surely true even when anyone is expelled by men of his own order (i.e. brother bishops), either through envy, or to please others, or through enmity or any other wrong motive. But when he gets this treatment from his enemies, I do not think any argument is needed to prove how great a benefit they confer on him by their wickedness.

So we must be thoroughly on our guard against ambition, and examine ourselves carefully to prevent a spark of it from smoldering anywhere unseen. It is much to be desired that those who at first were free from this ambition should be able to keep clear of it when they have entered office. But if anyone nurtures within himself this terrible, savage beast before attaining office, there is no telling what a furnace he will fling himself into after he has attained it.

A priest must be sober and clear-sighted and possess a thousand eyes looking in every direction, for he lives not for himself alone, but for a great multitude. (III.10-11)

But there are not many, indeed only one or two here and there, who can bear insult and abuse and vulgar language and taunts from inferiors, spoken casually or deliberately, and complaints made at random by the rulers and the ruled. You see men who are valiant in ascetic practices so far losing their heads at these things that they become wilder than savage beasts. We must debar such men from the priesthood. For it would not harm the common life of the Church if a prelate should neither starve himself of food, or go barefoot. But a furious temper causes great disasters both to its possessor and to his neighbors.

There is no threat from God against those who omit these ascetic practices, but those who are angry without a cause are threatened with hell and hellfire. (Mt 5:22) As, then, the lover of vainglory adds fresh fuel to the fire when he assumes the government of numbers, so a man who cannot control his temper while alone or in the company of a few others, but is easily thrown into a passion, is like a wild beast baited by crowds all around when he is entrusted with the rule of an entire congregation. He cannot live in peace himself and spreads evils galore among the people committed to his charge.

For a blazing temper is a kind of pleasure, and it tyrannizes over the soul more harshly than pleasure, thoroughly upsetting {the soul's} entire healthy condition. It easily excites men to insolence, to ill-timed enmities and unreasonable hatred, as it is forever making them give wild offence and forcing them to say and do many things just as bad. (III.12-13)



The priest's shortcomings simply cannot be concealed. On the contrary, even the most trivial soon get known. [...] Therefore the beauty of his soul must shine out brightly all around, to be able to gladden and enlighten the souls of those who see.

The sins of ordinary men are committed in the dark, so to speak, and ruin only those who commit them. But when a man becomes famous and is known to many, his misdeeds inflict a common injury on all. They make backsliders even more slothful than they are in their efforts for what is good, and they drive to despair those

who want to improve.

For as long as a priest's life is well regulated in every particular point...intrigues cannot hurt him. But if he should overlook some small detail, as is likely for a human being on his journey across the devious ocean of this life, all the rest of his good deeds are of no avail to enable him to escape the words of his accusers. That small offence casts a shadow over all the rest of his life. Everyone wants to judge the priest, not as one clothed in flesh, not as one possessing human nature, but as an angel, exempt from the frailty of others. (III.14)



You will see the priest assailed with as many accusations as there are persons under his rule. For all who are qualified to bestow the honor are then split into many factions and the synod of presbyters can be seen agreeing neither among themselves nor with the one who has received the episcopal office.

Each man stands alone. One chooses this candidate and another that. The reason is that they do not all concentrate on the one thing they should — spiritual worthiness.

There are other considerations which influence appointment to office. For example, one man says, "Let this man be chosen because he belongs to a distinguished family." Another says, "Because he is wealthy and would not need supporting out of the Church's revenues." Another says, "Because he is a convert from the other side." [...] No one will look for the best qualified man or apply any spiritual test.

I myself, so far from thinking these are worthy grounds for approving priests, should not dare to select a man quickly, even if he showed great piety (though to me piety is no small qualification for that office), unless he combined with piety considerable intelligence as well.

Tell me, do we need to look any further for the cause of God's anger, when we expose the most sacred and awe-inspiring things to defilement by wicked and worthless men? When some men are entrusted with things unsuited to them and others with things quite beyond their powers, they make the Church as unstable as the Euripus.⁴

But I ask you now what a bishop ought to do when he has to contend with so many violent winds. How can he stand firm against such great breakers? How can he repel all of these attacks? [...] When fierce winds meet from contrary quarters, the sea which before was quiet suddenly rages and towers and destroys all who sail on it; so the calm sea of the Church, when evil men are accepted, is filled with surf and wreckage.

Consider then what qualities a man needs if he is to withstand such a tempest, and to deal with it successfully:

He must be dignified yet modest, impressive yet kindly, masterful yet approachable, impartial yet courteous, humble but not servile, vehement yet gentle, in order that he may be able calmly to resist all these dangers and to promote a suitable man with full authority, even though everyone opposes him, and reject an unsuitable man with equal authority, even though everyone favors him. One thing alone he must consider: the edification of the Church. He must do nothing out of hostility or favor. (III.15)



Anyone who by his ambition to obtain [the episcopate/priesthood] professes that he is suitable to exercise this ministry cannot make inexperience the excuse for his failure after he has been entrusted with it. He deprived himself of that excuse in advance by coming forward and grabbing the ministry easily. And once he has voluntarily taken up the work of his own free will, he can no longer say, "I committed such and such an error against my will," or "I did such and such mischief against my will." For he who will judge him on that Day (i.e. Christ on Judgment Day) will say: "Since you were conscious of your great inexperience and had not the ability to undertake this vocation without failure, why were you so ambitious and so presumptuous as to accept work beyond your powers? Who compelled you to do it? Who dragged you forcibly, though you (allegedly) shied off and tried to escape?"

For a man who has received an honor beyond his deserving should not use its greatness as a cloak for his faults. He ought rather to use God's abundant grace towards him as a stronger incentive to improvement. But because he has been so highly honored, he thinks that he is allowed to make mistakes, and is determined to prove that the cause of his own sins is the kindness of God. This is always the argument of irreverent men who manage their lives carelessly. We must not be like that; we must not fall into the same confusion as they do. Rather we should be at all times determined to play our part to the best of our ability, and be reverent in word and thought.

Do you see then, that it is not only those who snatch at the office, but those who are led to it through the insistence of others who have no excuse left when they stumble? (Num 11:15) And if those who often tried to refuse the work (like Moses did) but were ordained by God were punished severely (i.e. were not permitted to cross the Jordan and enter the promised land); if nothing could save from this danger either Aaron or Eli or that blessed man (Moses), the saint, the prophet, the wonderful, who was meeker than all men on earth, who spoke as a friend with God: surely we who fall so far short of his goodness shall not be able to plead as our excuse the consciousness that we were never eager for this office – least of all in the many cases in which those ordained proceeded, not from divine grace, but from human ambition.

God chose Judas and set him in that holy company, and granted him the rank of an apostle along with the rest, and gave him something more than the rest in the management of their money. And what happened? He abused both of these trusts, betraying him whom he was commissioned to preach and mis-spending what he was appointed to take good care of.... Did he escape punishment? No, this was the very reason why he brought on himself a heavier penalty. And rightly so, for we must not misuse the honors bestowed on us by God to offend God, but to please him the more. (IV.1)



The Physician did not come to condemn you but to heal you and to rid you completely of your disease. But you willfully refused the touch of those healing hands. Receive, then, heavier punishment. You would have been rid of your former diseases, if you had yielded to the treatment. But now that you have seen him coming and avoided him, you can no longer wash off these stains. And since you cannot, you will be punished both for them and for having frustrated the Lord's care....

To show that I do not say this to frighten you, but as the truth of the matter is, listen to what St. Paul says to his disciple Timothy, his true and beloved child: *Lay hands hastily on no man, neither be a partaker of other men's sins.* (1 Tim 5:22)

Equally, it will not help those who appoint a man to say that they did not know the man they appointed. The fault is all the greater because they promoted someone they did not know. What seems to be an excuse actually increases their guilt.

Surely anyone who is going to confer an appointment should make careful inquiry; but the one who is to be appointed should be more careful still.

I will not add the argument that no one can compel another against his will. Let it be granted that he has been subjected to irresistible force and every kind of stratagem, and so fell into the snare. Will that save him from punishment? For goodness' sake do not let us deceive ourselves so completely. Do not let us reply that we are ignorant of facts which are obvious to mere children. For surely this affectation of ignorance will not be able to help us on the Day of Judgment. (IV.1-2)

Footnotes

¹ The St. Vladimir's Seminary Press (1984) translation of St. John Chrysostom's *Six Books on the Priesthood*, including Graham Neville's 34 page introduction, runs 160 pages.

² In *Homily XI on First Timothy*, St. John Chrysostom says that "the reason for [St. Paul's] omission [of speaking specifically in his letter about Presbyters] was that between Presbyters and Bishops there was no great difference. Both had undertaken the office of Teachers and Presidents in the Church, and what he has said concerning Bishops is applicable to Presbyters."

³ In the final chapter of the Gospel according to St. John the risen Lord asks Peter three times if he loves him. Christ does this to erase Peter's three denials and so to reinstate him as the head of the twelve apostles. After receiving Peter's three assurances that he loves him, the Lord commands the chief apostle to tend His sheep and to feed His flock, and He concludes the conversation with the words: "Follow me." (John 21:15-25)

⁴ A narrow channel of water separating the Greek Island of Euboea in the Aegean Sea from Boeotia in mainland Greece. The channel is subject to strong tidal currents which reverse direction about four times a day.