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## *John Chrysostom on Education*

*When examining the role of education in Christianity from a historical perspective it is certainly important also to explore the part played by John CHRYSOSTOM (354–407), as he belongs among the crucial authorities of the early Church. He is considered the third of the great doctors and ecumenical teachers of the Church and is also referred to as doctor eucharisticus, i.e. the teacher of Eucharistic theology of the Church.*

### ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM'S EMPHASIS ON MORAL FORMATION

Saint John CHRYSOSTOM was born in Antioch. His pious mother, Anthusa, made a great effort to raise and educate him, as his father died at a rather young age. At first, John attended the school of LIVANIUS, the great master of rhetoric. He spent four years in the mountainous area surrounding Antioch under the wise direction of a strict and devout monk. Soon afterwards, he was ordained deacon and later presbyter in Antioch, where he completed twenty years of service.

In December 397, at the age of 44, he was ordained archbishop in Constantinople. Being very young, John was very strict and exacting towards his own scholarly work as well as himself.

He used his knowledge of philosophy and his rhetorical skills in the service of the Old and New Testament and left to the Church an immortal legacy. Educating humans as moral beings possessing reason serves as a point of departure in Saint John Chrysostom's overall teaching on child education. As he writes in one of his works: "We must reinforce this image of the Heavenly King and restore the likeness of God. This is our duty that we can expect to be rewarded for in the future."

John CHRYSOSTOM placed the greatest emphasis on religious and moral education. In his opinion, the work of the teacher, which is the art of educating the soul, is the most important task of all. No other work can compare to it. "Children are like statues; they should be examined and perfected on an everyday basis" According to the holy father, those parents who do not raise their children in piety are child-killers rather than parents. Saint John Chrysostom repeatedly says in his lectures that it is not just giving birth, but also educating the child in a proper way that makes a mother or a father; and that it is only those who take care of their children's education who can be called parents.

The holy father claimed, "Education is much more important than nature." Taking care of children's education brings tremendous benefits. This is clearly demonstrated by the following statement of the teacher of the Church: "If we took great care when educating our children, we would need no law, no courthouses, no punishments, no public executions, no tortures. We witness many sins being committed all the time. As we do not take care to perfect our souls, their state is worse than that of a derelict inn, unspeakably disorderly and filled with smoke and filth." The Doctor of the Church claimed that this disrupts "the whole universe" All the aforementioned considerations, however, are directly related to the moral requirements of children's education.

In addition, Saint John CHRYSOSTOM focused also on the psychology of children that should make us take greater

care of education. Children seem often reckless. They want neither to listen nor to think of beneficial or necessary matters. They do not realize when a crime is being committed before their very eyes. Furthermore, children are prone to vengefulness and anger. Yet other passions rule over them—vanity, self-will, envy. They suffer from pride and carelessness, too. It is evident that all these elements in children's nature require an educator who can at least diminish these negative phenomena, if not transform them altogether.

### EDUCATION AND THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

According to the Doctor of the Church, the right instruction of a person comprises *knowledge of God*, and the right education directs the person to the path of piety, awakening in her or him striving for virtues that represent a genuine treasure, wisdom and adornment of the soul.

The Doctor of the Church often talked of piety as a treasure and adornment, as opposed to the wealth, veneer and luxury that parents strive to provide for their children. He rightly claimed that no matter how great or precious a treasure may be it can cause harm, if the young person still has not learned to treat it in accordance with moral requirements.

Saint John CHRYSOSTOM writes in one of his works, "We should take care to provide children with piety and all virtues, not with silver and gold. We should not induce in young people an addiction to wealth and glory, because they will enslave them. It is the one who does not need anything who is really wealthy."

The best legacy and wealth for our children, according to Saint John CHRYSOSTOM, is making them co-heirs of God Godself by providing charity for the poor. Thus, we accumulate for them the genuine wealth of God's goodness and mercy, and God's ever-lasting protection, while at the same time preparing a legacy for the future life.

In St. John's opinion, raising children in chastity and humility is crucial. His requirement for humility and chastity as important aspects of the piety-based education was also related to the social circumstances that surrounded him.

Both Antioch and Constantinople, where Saint John lived and taught, were marked by over-liberal morals. His words provide evidence that in spite of the strictness demonstrated and, as he put it, "the existence of internal premises and premises for women in the houses, doors and locks, guards, maids and female supervisors, and the great care on the part of parents" (1/2. 249) it was hardly possible to preserve young women's (and men's) chastity.

### THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURES IN EDUCATION

What are the measures and means that Saint John offered for the successful education of children in the spirit of piety? It is above all the study of the Holy Scriptures. The Scriptures, according to the Doctor of the Church, are the eternal base of religious and moral education.

In order for children to become real Christians, they need to listen to the word of God in church and at home. According to the comparison cited by the Doctor of the Church and taken out of Psalm 1: "The soul of the person



who reads and studies the Scriptures is like a tree rooted in a spring. Constantly watered by the Holy Spirit, the soul is not to be afraid of any circumstances i.e. diseases, calumnies, etc. The soul masters its passions and vicious thoughts with ease. Furthermore, it adorns itself with all fruits of virtue.”

Overall, reading the Holy Scriptures purges the conscience and subjugates the passions while at the same time enrooting virtues, elevating the reason, freeing the soul from the chains of the body—in short, bringing all possible goods. Reading the Holy Scriptures the sinner would not despair, because she or he would see that saints, too, have fallen and have risen again. The sinner would rather be motivated to reform her or his life, while the person of virtue would strive even harder to lead a pious life.

The Holy Scriptures have a great significance for the sinner; the holy books awaken the conscience and prevent sin. Through the Scriptures, it is as if the sinner enters the sanctuary to communicate with God Godself.

Saint John considered, consequently, that reading the Scriptures serves as “a great protection against sin while ignorance for the Scriptures is a great cliff, a great abyss. Knowing nothing of the divine laws is fatal for salvation. It is this ignorance that has given birth to heresies. It has brought a corrupt way of life. It has turned everything upside down. One who constantly and diligently reads the Scriptures will not remain fruitless.”

According to the Doctor of the Church, the Holy Scripture is the best means of the art of educating. In his opinion, it is necessary and imperative that children be taught to read the word of God. It is equally beneficial to listen to the word of God in the church. Saint John repeatedly talked about this need. He claimed that the church is the best school for educating children. The importance of the education given at home is great, because children of a younger age do not attend church frequently; and when they do, they spend there a rather short time.

Saint John thought that each home, each family, could be a small Church, and the education given at home could be an extension of the education in church. The parents should narrate what they have heard in church, and thus their children would receive an excellent lesson.

There is yet another specific trait of the holy father’s ideas about the education of children. He saw also the danger that non-Christian schools represented for the children of Christian parents, as there were no Christian schools at that time. Saint John insisted that parents send their children to be educated in monasteries. He gives the following justification for this advice: he would not mind sending children to school if they left the establishment with pure morals.

As experience showed, however, things worked the other way ’round, so educating children in desert monasteries emerged as necessary. In the opinion of Saint John, even if it is assumed that at school children advance in the field of science, he considered it incomparably better for them to be successful in saving their souls by living and studying in a monastery.

It is more hazardous for them to be at school and study various sciences than to acquire virtues in the desert. In Saint John’s opinion, these were the main means for religious and moral education of children.



## TEACHER AS MODEL OF VIRTUOUS LIFE

Besides these essential characteristics of the religious and moral education of children, we should note the pedagogical (or rather the didactic) requirements and rules of the holy father, which are applicable even today. The Doctor of the Church insisted that parents educate and influence their children by serving as models. He claimed that nothing is less useful than teaching only through words and not through actions; and that the best teacher is the one who teaches through her or his life and personal example.

According to the holy father, the most convincing education is the one conducted through actions and not through words. The opposite of this is to use meaningless words that bring only harm. Naturally, the holy

father did not deny the significance of words for education. He wanted, however, to emphasize the importance and power of educating through the personal example of a virtuous life. This is evident from the fact that he considered a perfect teacher and educator the one who teaches by using her or his words and the model of her or his life at the same time. Only such teachers can be fully successful in the task of properly educating their pupils.

Fully applicable nowadays also are the requirements that the holy father imposed on teachers in relation to their attitude to pupils. A teacher should be a model in every aspect, in all her or his actions, even in areas that at first glance seem unimportant, such as the ways of walking, dressing or looking.

She or he should be a model at all times - when she or he is silent, when she or he eats, when she or he talks. In short, the teacher should be an example of a virtuous life. The main duty and virtue of a teacher is to direct her or his pupils to the path of moral perfection, communicating to them what is good for them, not taking care of her or his own benefit and popularity.

According to Saint John, a teacher acquires a great authority when talking to the pupils firmly and without hesitation. Her or his words should be penetrated by the spiritual power and their tone should be one of sincere conviction.

Saint John’s ideas within his teaching on education of children will no doubt remain excellent unalterable models that have not lost their fine quality even nowadays. The objective of Sunday schools for children, for example, is to bring to children the truths of the word of God, to translate these truths into a language that is understandable to children, to establish the right foundations for their lives, and to teach them to respect their parents and peers.

### Suggested Reading

ATWATER Donald, *St. John Chrysostom, Pastor and Preacher*. London, 1959.

CONSTANTELOS Demetrios, *John Chrysostom’s Greek Classical Education and its Importance to us Today*. Greek Orthodox Theological Review 36 (1991).

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