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*Saint John CHRYSOSTOM**The Father of Liberation Theology*

Saint John CHRYSOSTOM could be considered one of the dissonant voices which had the courage to challenge the powerful Byzantine emperors for the sake of solidarity with the poor and marginalized Christians. The archbishop did not try to isolate Christians from society, nor to reject any form of possession. He tried to change the society itself, by stressing that exaggerated wealth could be a danger for the stability of public life, provoking tensions, envy, robberies and inequalities. He did not separate Christians from the world, but rather tried to make them a ferment and a matrix of a new state in which the real palaces are the churches.

THE BISHOP OF THE POOR

In 397 John CHRYSOSTOM became the archbishop of Constantinople, supported by the influential eunuch of the emperor Arcadius, Eutropius. The Byzantine official made this choice not because he was a religious man but because he was a pragmatic one. John was a real monk, without political experience, a modest and solitary person, and Eutropius considered him a perfect future marionette. He was already leading the political destiny of the empire by profiting of the Arcadius' weakness, and he wanted the religious power, too.

But the eunuch was wrong. Indeed, Saint John did not want to involve himself in the political games; but on the other hand, he was also not willing to tolerate the abuses created by the Byzantine two-headed eagle.

The archbishop didn't reject the political system as such, but rather the unworthy representatives. He stressed that in the same way, God instituted marriage and its good effects but He was not guilty for the conflicts within families and the mistakes of the partners.

Therefore, Saint John supported poor people but accepted the principle of subordination that is also present in nature in order to organize the life of the irrational creatures: "In bees, for example, or cranes or herds of wild grazing animals. Neither is the sea devoid of this social organization, but many marine

species marshal themselves behind a leading fish and so make long expeditions in formation" (*The Twenty-Fourth Homily on Romans*).

Human society is built in the same way, based on subordination between parents and children, elder and younger, teachers and students, rulers and servants. For this reason he asked the Christians not to be ashamed of subordination, because God instituted it. Christians should not fight against the political power which confers stability; they should continue to pay taxes as recognition of the legitimacy of this institution and pray for it.

In a society, the rulers have the role played by cross beams in a house, keeping the unity and the right order: "For what cross beams are in a house, rulers are in cities, and just as if you were to take away the former, the walls, being separated, would fall in upon one another so, if you were to deprive the world of magistrates and the fear that comes from them, houses, cities and nations would fall upon one another in unrestrained confusion, there being no one to repress, or repel, or persuade them to be peaceful through the fear of punishment."

But on the other hand, rulers have to be just and protect the poor servants as members of the same family, and this idea was not very much appreciated at the Byzantine court at that time. The main target of the protests launched by the bishop was the empress Eudoxia. The daughter of a Frankish general, she loved luxury and was suspected of having immoral relations with an official. After the death of the consul Theognostus she seized the property of his widow. Bishop John asked her to return the stolen goods; she considered the attitude abusive and conflict became eminent.

Emperor Theodosius was also criticized for the cruel taxes imposed in order to pay the Gothic mercenaries and for his vices, but even John CHRYSOSTOM never contested his political authority. He only condemned the sins of the Christian Theodosius.

THE NATURE OF SACRAMENTAL AUTHORITY

Nor was the other head of the Byzantine eagle spared the reproaches of Saint John. The ministers of God very often used to cross the boundaries of the symphony, involving themselves in political life, living in luxury, acting like earthly rulers. In the *Treaty on the Priesthood*, John CHRYSOSTOM emphasized the sublimity of the priesthood and the necessity of its witness in the world without being contaminated by earthly influences.

According to him, the priests live among the people, using the means of this life, adapting to the various situations, but they should not forget their real mission. They have to be the salt of the earth and not the gold of the political power. Those who want the clerical office just for a good career are punished by God, as well as those who ordained them. The ministers who introduce secular ambitions into the Church, are compared with the waves that break the silence of the sea.

The candidates for the priesthood should not be selected as the officials were, by taking into consideration material benefits. The archbishop deplored the elections made according to earthly criteria: important family, great wealth, relationship, influence or force. If all these are conditions for a social position, the important element of an ordination is "the test of the character."

The priests do not need the authority conferred by any social advantages. Their authority has its sources in heaven and they are not consecrated *ad imperium* but rather *ad servitatem*. The love of power is foreign to the Church because it divides, while real love unites.

The instrument of the priest must be persuasion and not force: "We have not lordship over your faith, beloved, nor commend we these things as your lords and masters. We are appointed for the teaching of the word, not for power, not for absolute authority. We hold the place of counselors to advise you. The counselor speaks his own sentiments,

Suggested Reading

John CHRYSOSTOM, *The Twenty Fourth Homily on Romans*. In *From Irenaeus to Grotius*.

A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought, Cambridge, 1999.

John CHRYSOSTOM, *On the Priesthood*. In *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Michigan, 1956.

FOUYAS Methodios, *The Social Message of Saint John Chrysostome*, Athens, 1968.

PAGELS Elaine, *The Politics of Paradise*, In *The City of God*, New York, 1995.

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not forcing the hearer, but leaving him full master upon what is said" (*Homilies on the Epistles of Saint Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians*).

But John CHRYSOSTOM did not recommend the isolation of the clergymen and the refusal of a social life. The intervention of Bishop Flavian of Antioch is considered by him to be a good example of the role that the ministers can play in difficult situations, because the old bishop succeeded in saving the city while the officials were helpless.

THE SOCIAL MESSAGE OF JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

The patriarch directed his criticism also to the false Christians who boast this name but behave like pagans and thus compromise the Church. In the IVth century many people converted to the new religion, and some of them did it in order to gain political advantages. They benefited by the privileges and continued to live their traditional life.

A dangerous evil of the new hybrid Byzantine society was egoistic wealth, considered by John CHRYSOSTOM to be incompatible with the quality of a Christian. According to the bishop, the things possessed are called "goods" but do not make their owners good but rather, greedy and rapacious.

God did not create human beings as rich and poor. Everything in this world belongs to God and it was made for the common use: the stars, the sea, the heavens or the earth. Saint John stressed that men started to appropriate things, calling them "mine" and "yours" in an arbitrary way, while in fact a wealthy person never possessed but was *possessed by the goods* (*The Twelfth Homily on I Timothy*).

The archbishop did not try in this way to isolate Christians from the society and to reject any form of possession. He tried to change the society itself, by stressing that exaggerated wealth could be a danger for the stability of public life, provoking tensions, envy, robberies and inequalities. He did not separate Christians from the world, but tried to make them a ferment and a matrix of a new state in which the real palaces are the churches (*Homilies on the Epistles of Saint Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians*).

He also did not want to abolish the private property and to create conflicts in the empire. He did not consider property an evil in itself, but protested

against the selfish way of using it. The archbishop asked the rich to help the poor, considering them the children of the same God within a new Christian world.

John CHRYSOSTOM lived in two rich cities of the empire, Antioch and Constantinople, so his fight against de-Christianization through luxury is understandable. The reasons were religious as well as political. Excessive wealth was a danger for the Christian faith, which was the binder, the common denominator of the Byzantine State. In order to keep the political unity and the cohesion of a cosmopolitan world, it was necessary to overcome this potential disease of the official ideology.

The patriarch did not intend to start a war against the rich but against the bad use of richness. He stresses in the *Homily on the Fall of Eutropius*: "I am often reproved for always attacking the rich. Of course I do, for they are always attacking the poor and anyhow I never attack the rich as such, but only those who misuse their wealth. I keep on pointing out that I accuse not the rich but the rapacious: wealth is one thing, covetousness quite another."

Eutropius, the powerful eunuch, became an example used often by Saint John to illustrate in his sermons the instability and the danger of selfish wealth. He was considered *de facto* the ruler of the state. Statues of him were raised everywhere, he had power and wealth and was honored, but he disregarded the Church's rights. However, suddenly the official lost his power, became poor, hunted and disgraced. He begged the help of the patriarch and asked for the right of sanctuary, which he had tried to abolish.

John CHRYSOSTOM did not revert to revolution or a just war, but within his place and means he began to improve different aspects of spiritual and material life. He sold the furniture and the treasures of the Episcopal palace and gave the money to the poor and the hospitals. The Episcopal banquets ceased, since they were considered to be "a robbing of the temples." The unworthy ministers were punished; hospitals and hospices were built for strangers. The right of sanctuary was used for the protection of the poor and the slaves.

He also regarded slavery as a mark of sin because God made human beings equal. In the *Homily XXII on the Ephesians*, the archbishop showed that "slavery is the fruit of covetousness, of

degradation, of savagery, since Noah ... had no servant, nor had Abel, nor Seth." He stressed that the Church should not adopt this unnatural institution. He often protected the slaves and accused the officials who wanted to be Christians but also to keep a "sinful" institution.

CHURCH, SOCIETY AND TRANSFORMATION

With all these decisions, John CHRYSOSTOM challenged the marriage between state and church produced during the reign of Constantine. He did not ask for a divorce, but tried to set limits in order to influence the secular partner and to keep the identity of the ecclesiastical one. In his vision, Christians should live in society but not be conquered by it. They have the duty to work slowly but determinedly in order to transform it into a Christian family.

The sermons of Saint John were a signal of alarm. He tried to save the Church from the process of secularization. He did not want a hybrid society but a strong Christian one. He did not intend to transform the believers into aliens or isolated monks. They were to serve the Church and the state but in their own way, protecting the poor and the marginalized.

I consider that the Church needed this prophetic voice that attempted to tear it out of the political dream. For this reason the social doctrine elaborated by John Chrysostom can be considered crucial, a real definition of the proper involvement of the Church in the state. This doctrine should help the contemporary society to rethink and keep social values of Christianity in a secular Europe. Christian churches shouldn't emphasize only the social dimension; at the same time, they need to transform sermons into practice.

The AGAPE Document, prepared by the Commission for Justice, Peace and Creation of World Council of Churches with the aim of overcoming poverty, should not remain only a document, but it should be applied in daily life. The Christian message has the force to transform society if we are ready to act together as the children of the same God, as the inheritors of the message sent through centuries by John CHRYSOSTOM, the archbishop of Constantinople.