

BIOGRAPHY OF SAINT JOHN CHYRSOSTOM

St. John was born in Antioch around 349 A.D. His father, a high-ranking civil servant named Secundus died shortly after his birth, leaving his wife Anthousa a widow at age twenty. She could have remarried, but she chose to follow St Paul's biblical counsel "to the unmarried and the widows . . . to remain single" (1 Cor 7:8), enrolling in the Church's order of widows and committing herself to a life of prayer, continence, and service.

Anthousa's piety made a deep impression on young John. He also lived with an aunt, Sabiniana, who served the Church of Antioch as a deaconess. Her contemporaries tell us that she "conversed intimately with God." Needless to say, John grew up in an unusual, almost monastic household.

He seemed destined to be a civil servant like his father, but after graduation he and a friend decided to form a "brotherhood," a household sharing a common life of voluntary poverty, prayer, and contemplation. They had gone far with their plans when John broke the news to his mother.

And she hit the roof. She begged him not to make her a widow all over again. He could not resist her pleading, so he agreed to pursue his life of renunciation at home. He adopted the dress of monks, a coarse, sleeveless garment, took up Scripture study under a renowned master, and applied himself in service to the bishop of Antioch.

After three years, he managed to break free, leave his home and join the solitaries in the wilderness nearby. He read the Scriptures for hours each day until he had memorised entire books as well as large passages from the Bible.

He lived in a cave by himself. He did not permit himself to lie down, by day or night. He slept hardly at all, and went without protection from the heat and cold. His diet was wretched. So zealous was he that he continued even after his health began to fail. After two years, he could go on no longer. He needed medical care. So he returned, disappointed, to the city.

ORIGINAL IDEAS ON MARRIAGE

A simple search on google using the words “St John Chrysostom “ and “marriage or sex” would reveal countless opinions and ideas. Some show St John as adamantly against marriage while others show how much he beautifies this sacrament of the Church.

However it is important to consider his opinions in context of what was happening in his life.

His negative comments – negative to society today however pure in intention I must add was based on his letter to Theodore his friend.

THE ISSUE CONCERNING THEODORE & MARRIAGE

On returning back to his city after his health deteriorated, St John was made aware that one of his fellows in the ascetic life, Theodore, began having second thoughts about the monastic way.

St Theodore’s parents needed him to run the family business. And there was a young woman beckoning, too. Her name was Hermione. He erased his name from the rolls of the brotherhood, and went home.

The situation demanded a response from St John, and respond he did. His response has come down to us with the title **Letter to Theodore After His Fall**. We have it in two parts, totaling 24,000 words — the words of a furious man shaking his friend by the lapels.

In this letter we see a scathing attack on Theodore by St John about his decision to leave his heavenly bridegroom for an earthly one.

“It is an evil thing to wed a very poor wife, or a very rich one; for the former is injurious to the husband’s means, the latter to his authority and independence. It is a grievous thing to have children, still more grievous not to have any. . . . Is this then life, Theodore, when one’s soul is distracted in so many directions, when a man has to serve so many, to live for so many, and never for himself?”

The rhetoric heats up and boils over, as John tries to show the transitory nature of bodily beauty, and the grossness of its constituent parts. Hermione may be beautiful, but “the groundwork of this bodily beauty is nothing but phlegm, blood, rheum, bile, and the fluid of digested food.” Consider, he continues, “what is stored inside those beautiful eyes, that straight nose, and the mouth and cheeks, and you will affirm the well-shaped body to be nothing but a whited sepulchre; the parts within are full of so much uncleanness.”

John goes on to compare such illusory and passing beauty with the true and lasting beauty of the soul of a monk steeped in prayer. Needless to say, the earthly beauty comes up the loser.

He is careful to acknowledge that marriage is an honourable estate, citing Hebrews 13:4, but insists it cannot be honourable for Theodore.

“It is no longer possible for you to observe the right conditions of marriage. For if he who has been attached to a heavenly bridegroom deserts him and joins himself to a wife, the act is . . . worse than adultery in proportion as God is greater than man.”

For these passages, John has been vilified by secularists, feminists, and hedonists. But I’d like to plead his case. John was, after all, operating in crisis mode. His friend had already gone back on a lifelong commitment, checked himself out of the holy brotherhood. Theodore was breaking a promise he had made to God. John recognised this as an emergency demanding forceful intervention.

So he used his rhetoric the way some men might use their muscles. And he succeeded in talking Theodore back to the brotherhood. Theodore would go on to become one of the most influential theologians in antiquity, the celebrated theologian-bishop of Mopsuestia.

St John wrote his negative statements about marriage when he was young and inexperienced. As he emerged from relative isolation and entered the bustling life of the Church of Antioch, however, he encountered many families, *real* families, *ordinary* families, *Christian* families. He shared their life. He counselled them.

And he grew to appreciate marriage not as a mere concession to weakness, or a second-class citizenship in the Church, but as a distinct vocation from God and a path to holiness. Even more, he came to see it as a powerful image of God in the world: a sacrament of God.

But, again, that came only with time and experience.

In 381 he was ordained a deacon and licensed to preach. It was then that he earned the nickname Chrysostom (Golden Mouth), as he drew enormous crowds to church. After five years as a deacon, he was ordained to the priesthood.

HIS LATER IDEAS OF MARRIAGE

St John has left us with gems of wisdom on this wonderful sacrament. Below are extracts from his four main homilies on marriage. They provide a very insightful look into how this man really saw marriage – as an image of the union between man and woman who would become one with God.

A certain wise man, when enumerating which blessings are the most important included "*a wife and husband who live in harmony* (Sir. 25:1). In another place he emphasized this: "*A friend or a companion never meets one amiss, but a wife with her husband is better than both.*" (Sir. 40:23). From the beginning God in His providence has planned this union of man and woman, and has spoken of the two as one: male and female He created them (Gen. 1:27), and there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28). There is no relationship between human beings so close as that of husband and wife, if they are united as they ought to be. When blessed David was mourning for Jonathan, who was of one soul with him, what comparison did he use to describe the loftiness of their love? Your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women (II Sam. 1:26). The power of this love is truly stronger than any passion; other desires may be strong, but this one alone never fades.

This love (eros) is deeply planted within our inmost being. Unnoticed by us, it attracts the bodies of men and women to each other, because in the beginning woman came forth from man, and from man and woman other men and women proceed. Can you see now how close this union is, and how God providentially created it from a single nature? He permitted Adam to marry Eve, who was more than sister or daughter; she was his own flesh!

God caused the entire human race to proceed from this one point of origin. He did not, on the one hand, fashion woman independently from man, otherwise man would think of her as essentially different from himself. Nor did He enable woman to bear children without man; if this were the case she would be self-sufficient. Instead, just as the branches of a tree proceed from a single trunk, He made the one man Adam to be the origin of all mankind, both male and female, and made it impossible for men and women to be self-sufficient. Later, He forbade men to marry their sisters or daughters, so that our love would not be limited to members of our families, and withdrawn from the rest of the human race. All of this is implied in Christ's words: He who made them from the beginning made them male and female (Matt. 19:4).

The love of husband and wife is the force that welds society together. Men will take up arms and even sacrifice their lives for the sake of this love. St. Paul would not speak so earnestly about this subject without serious reason; why else would he say, Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord? Because when harmony prevails, the children are

raised well, the household is kept in order, and neighbours, friends and relatives praise the result. Great benefits, both for families and states, are thus produced. When it is otherwise however, everything is thrown into confusion and turned upside down. When the generals of an army are at peace with each other, everything proceeds in an orderly fashion, and when they are not, everything is in disarray. It is the same here. For the sake of harmony, then, he said, Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord

Let us assume, then, that the husband is to occupy the place of the head, and the wife that of the body, and listen to what "headship" means: For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the Church: and He is the Saviour of the Body. There fore as the Church is subject unto Christ, so let wives be subject to their own husbands in everything. Notice that after saying the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, he immediately says that the Church is His Body, and He is Himself its Saviour. It is the head that upholds the well-being of the body. In his other epistles Paul has already laid the foundations of marital love, and has assigned to husband and wife each his proper place: to the husband one of leader and provider, and to the wife one of submission. Therefore as the Church is subject to Christ--and the Church, remember, consists of both husbands and wives---so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands, as to God.

You have heard how important obedience is; you have praised and marvelled at Paul, how he welds our whole life together, as we would expect from an admirable and spiritual man. You have done well. But now listen to what else he requires from you; he has not finished with his example. Husbands, he says, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church. You have seen the amount of obedience necessary; now hear about the amount of love necessary. Do you want your wife to be obedient to you, as the Church is to Christ? Then be responsible for the same providential care of her, as Christ is for the Church. And even if it becomes necessary for you to give your life for her, yes, and even to endure and undergo suffering of any kind, do not refuse. Even though you undergo all this, you will never have done anything equal to what Christ has done. You are sacrificing yourself for someone to whom you are already joined, but He offered Himself up for one who turned her back on Him and hated Him. In the same way, then, as He honored her by putting at His feet one who turned her back on Him, who hated, rejected, and disdained Him as tie accomplished this not with threats, or violence, or terror, or anything else like that, but through His untiring love; so also you should behave toward your wife. Even if you see her belittling you, or despising and mocking you, still you will be able to subject her to yourself, through affection, kindness, and your great regard for her.

There is no influence more powerful than the bond of love, especially for husband and wife. A servant can be taught submission through fear; but even he, if provoked too much, will soon seek his escape. But one's partner for life, the mother of one's children, the source of one's every joy, should never be fettered with fear and threats, but with love and patience. What kind of marriage can there be when the wife is afraid of her husband? What sort of satisfaction could a husband himself have, if he lives with his wife as if she were a slave, and not with a woman by her own free will? Suffer anything for her sake, but never disgrace her, for Christ never did this with the Church....

Paul has precisely described for husband and wife what fitting behaviour is for each: she should reverence him as the head and he should love her as his body. But how is this behaviour achieved? That it must be is clear; now I will tell you how. It will be achieved if we are detached from money, if we strive above everything for virtue, if we keep the fear of God before our eyes.

What Paul says to servants in the next chapter applies to us as well, ...knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same again from the Lord (Eph. 6:8). Love her not so much for her own sake, but for Christ's sake. That is why he says, be subject...as to the Lord. Do everything for the Lord's sake, in a spirit of obedience to Him. These words should be enough to convince us to avoid quarrels and disagreements. No husband should believe any accusation he hears from a third party about his wife, and vice versa; nor should a wife unreasonably monitor her husband's comings and going, provided that he has always shown himself to be above suspicion. And what if you devote the day to your work and your friends, and the evening to your wife; but she is still not satisfied, but is jealous for more of your time? Don't be annoyed by her complaints; she loves you, she is not behaving absurdly -her complaints come from her fervent affection for you, and from fear. Yes, she is afraid that her marriage bed will be stolen, that someone will deprive her of her greatest blessing, that someone will take from her him who is her head.

A wife should never nag her husband: "You lazy coward, you have no ambition! Look at our relatives and neighbours; they have plenty of money. Their wives have far more than I do." Let no wife say any such thing; she is her husband's body, and it is not for her to dictate to her head, but to submit and obey. "But why should she endure poverty?" some will ask. If she is poor, let her console herself by thinking of those who are much poorer still. If she really loved her husband, she would never speak to him like that, but would value having him close to her more than all the gold in the world....Furnish your house neatly and soberly. If the bridegroom shows his wife that he takes no pleasure in worldly excess, and will not stand for it, their marriage will remain free from the evil influences that are so popular these days. Let them shun the immodest music and dancing that are currently so fashionable.

I am aware that many people think me ridiculous for giving such advice; but if you listen to me, you will understand the advantages of a sober lifestyle more and more as time goes on. You will no longer laugh at me, but will laugh instead at the way people live now like silly children or drunken men. What is our duty, then? Remove from your lives shameful, immodest, and Satanic music, and don't associate with people who enjoy such profligate entertainment. When your bride sees your manner of life, she will say to herself, "Wonderful! What a wise man my husband is! He regards this passing life as nothing; he has married me to be a good mother for his children and a prudent manager of his household."

Will this sort of life be distasteful for a young bride? Only perhaps for the shortest time, and soon she will discover how delightful it is to live this way. She will retain her modesty if you retain yours. Don't engage in idle conversations; it never profits anyone to talk too much.

Whenever you give your wife advice, always begin by telling her how much you love her. Nothing will persuade her so well to admit the wisdom of your words as her assurance that you are speaking to her with sincere affection. Tell her that you are convinced that money is not important, that only thieves thirst for it constantly, that you love her more than gold; and indeed an intelligent, discreet and pious young woman is worth more than all the money in the world.

Show her that you value her company, and prefer being at home to being out. Esteem her in the presence of your friends and children. Pray together at home and go to Church; when you come back home, let each ask the other the meaning of the readings and the prayers. If you are overtaken by poverty, remember Peter and Paul, who were more honoured than kings or rich men, though they spent their lives in hunger and thirst. Remind one another that nothing in life is to be feared, except offending God. If your marriage is like this, your perfection will rival the holiest of monks.

If we seek the things that are perfect, the secondary things will follow. The Lord says, *Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you* (Matt. 6:33). What sort of person do you think the children of such parents will be? What kind of person are all the others who associate with them? Will they not eventually be the recipients of countless blessings as well? For generally the children acquire the character of their parents, are formed in the mould of their parents' temperament, love the same things their parents love, talk in the same fashion, and work for the same ends. If we order our lives in this way and diligently study the Scriptures, we will find lessons to guide us in everything we need!

How beautiful is that! God Bless

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