

On the Priesthood - Part 4

by St. John Chrysostom

St. John Chrysostom emphasizes the importance of character, ability, and piety in the priesthood, and warns against the dangers of human opinion, envy, and corruption in the election process.

Scripture: Matthew 3:10

Topics: "Church Leadership", "Spiritual Integrity"

Description

John Chrysostom preaches about the challenges and responsibilities faced by bishops in the church, highlighting the need for discernment, patience, and skill in managing various aspects such as overseeing widows, caring for virgins, and handling judicial matters. He emphasizes the importance of avoiding favoritism, maintaining integrity, and upholding justice even in the face of criticism and false accusations. Chrysostom warns against the dangers of appointing unworthy individuals to positions of authority, stressing the detrimental effects it can have on the church and the souls under their care.

Transcript

Are you then for sending me forth into so great a warfare? And did you think that my soul would be equal to a contest so various in character and shape? Whence did you learn this, and from whom? If God certified this to you, show me the oracle, and I obey; but if you cannot, and form your judgment from human opinion only, please to set yourself free from this delusion. For in what concerns my own affairs it is fairer to trust me than others; inasmuch as no man knows the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him. 1 Corinthians 2:11 That I should have made myself and my electors ridiculous, had I accepted this office, and should with great loss have returned to this condition of life in which I now am, I trust I have now convinced you by these remarks, if not before. For not malice only, but something much stronger -- the lust after this dignity -- is wont to arm many against one who possesses it. And just as avaricious children are oppressed by the old age of their parents, so some of these, when they see the priestly office held by any one for a protracted time -- since it would be wickedness to destroy him -- hasten to depose him from it, being all desirous to take his place, and each expecting that the dignity will be transferred to himself.

15. Would you like me to show you yet another phase of this strife, charged with innumerable dangers? Come, then, and take a peep at the public festivals when it is generally the custom for elections to be made to ecclesiastical dignities, and you will then see the priest assailed with accusations as numerous as the people whom he rules. For all who have the privilege of conferring the honor are then split into many

parties; and one can never find the council of elders of one mind with each other, or about the man who has won the prelacy; but each stands apart from the others, one preferring this man, another that.

Now the reason is that they do not all look to one thing, which ought to be the only object kept in view, the excellence of the character; but other qualifications are alleged as recommending to this honor; for instance, of one it is said, let him be elected because he belongs to an illustrious family, of another because he is possessed of great wealth, and would not need to be supported out of the revenues of the Church, of a third because he has come over from the camp of the adversary; one is eager to give the preference to a man who is on terms of intimacy with himself, another to the man who is related to him by birth, a third to the flatterer, but no one will look to the man who is really qualified, or make some test of his character.

Now I am so far from thinking these things trustworthy criteria of a man's fitness for the priesthood, that even if any one manifested great piety, which is no small help in the discharge of that office, I should not venture to approve him on that account alone, unless he happened to combine good abilities with his piety. For I know many men who have exercised perpetual restraint upon themselves, and consumed themselves with fastings, who, as long as they were suffered to be alone, and attend to their own concerns, have been acceptable to God, and day by day have made no small addition to this kind of learning; but as soon as they entered public life, and were compelled to correct the ignorance of the multitude, have, some of them, proved from the outset incompetent for so great a task, and others when forced to persevere in it, have abandoned their former strict way of living, and thus inflicted great injury on themselves without profiting others at all.

And if any one spent his whole time in the lowest rank of the ministry, and reached extreme old age, I would not, merely out of reverence for his years, promote him to the higher dignity; for what if, after arriving at that time of life, he should still remain unfit for the office? And I say this now, not as wishing to dishonor the grey head, nor as laying down a law absolutely to exclude from this authority those who come from the monastic circle (for there are instances of many who issued from that body, having shone conspicuously in this dignity); but the point which I am anxious to prove is, that if neither piety of itself, nor advanced age, would suffice to show that a man who had obtained the priesthood really deserved it, the reasons formerly alleged would scarcely effect this.

There are also men who bring forward other pretexts yet more absurd; for some are enrolled in the ranks of the clergy, that they may not range themselves among opponents, and others on account of their evil disposition, lest they should do great mischief if they are overlooked. Could anything be more contrary to right rule than this? That bad men, laden with iniquity, should be courted on account of those things for which they ought to be punished, and ascend to the priestly dignity on account of things for which they ought to be debarred from the very threshold of the Church.

Tell me, then, shall we seek any further the cause of God's wrath, when we expose things so holy and awful to be defiled by men who are either wicked or worthless? For when some men are entrusted with the administration of things which are not at all suitable to them, and others of things which exceed their natural power, they make the condition of the Church like that of Euripus.

Now formerly I used to deride secular rulers, because in the distribution of their honors they are not guided by considerations of moral excellence, but of wealth, and seniority, and human distinction; but when I heard that this kind of folly had forced its way into our affairs also, I no longer regarded their conduct as so

atrocious. For what wonder is it that worldly men, who love the praise of the multitude, and do everything for the sake of gain, should commit these sins, when those who affect at least to be free from all these influences are in no wise better disposed than they, but although engaged in a contest for heavenly things, act as if the question submitted for decision was one which concerned acres of land, or something else of that kind?

For they take commonplace men off-hand, and set them to preside over those things, for the sake of which the only begotten Son of God did not refuse to empty Himself of His glory and become man, and take the form of a servant, and be spat upon, and buffeted, and die a death of reproach in the flesh. Nor do they stop even here, but add to these offenses others still more monstrous; for not only do they elect unworthy men, but actually expel those who are well qualified. As if it were necessary to ruin the safety of the Church on both sides, or as if the former provocation were not sufficient to kindle the wrath of God, they have contrived yet another not less pernicious.

For I consider it as atrocious to expel the useful men as to force in the useless. And this in fact takes place, so that the flock of Christ is unable to find consolation in any direction, or draw its breath freely. Now do not such deeds deserve to be punished by ten thousand thunder-bolts, and a hell-fire hotter than that with which we are threatened [in Holy Scripture]? Yet these monstrous evils are borne with by Him who wills not the death of a sinner, that he may be converted and live.

And how can one sufficiently marvel at His lovingkindness, and be amazed at His mercy? They who belong to Christ destroy the property of Christ more than enemies and adversaries, yet the good Lord still deals gently with them, and calls them to repentance. Glory be to You, O Lord! Glory to You! How vast is the depth of Your lovingkindness! How great the riches of Your forbearance! Men who on account of Your name have risen from insignificance and obscurity to positions of honor and distinction, use the honor they enjoy against Him who has bestowed it, do deeds of outrageous audacity, and insult holy things, rejecting and expelling men of zeal in order that the wicked may ruin everything at their pleasure in much security, and with the utmost fearlessness.

And if you would know the causes of this dreadful evil, you will find that they are similar to those which were mentioned before; for they have one root and mother, so to say -- namely, envy; but this is manifested in several different forms. For one we are told is to be struck out of the list of candidates, because he is young; another because he does not know how to flatter; a third because he has offended such and such a person; a fourth lest such and such a man should be pained at seeing one whom he has presented rejected, and this man elected; a fifth because he is kind and gentle; a sixth because he is formidable to the sinful; a seventh for some other like reason; for they are at no loss to find as many pretexts as they want, and can even make the abundance of a man's wealth an objection when they have no other.

Indeed they would be capable of discovering other reasons, as many as they wish, why a man ought not to be brought suddenly to this honor, but gently and gradually. And here I should like to ask the question, What, then, is the prelate to do, who has to contend with such blasts? How shall he hold his ground against such billows? How shall he repel all these assaults?

For if he manages the business upon upright principles, all those who are enemies and adversaries both to him and to the candidates do everything with a view to contention, provoking daily strife, and heaping infinite scorn upon the candidates, until they have got them struck off the list, or have introduced their own

favorites. In fact it is just as if some pilot had pirates sailing with him in his ship, perpetually plotting every hour against him, and the sailors, and marines. And if he should prefer favor with such men to his own salvation, accepting unworthy candidates, he will have God for his enemy in their stead; and what could be more dreadful than that? And yet his relations with them will be more embarrassing than formerly, as they will all combine with each other, and thereby become more powerful than before. For as when fierce winds coming from opposite directions clash with one another, the ocean, hitherto calm, becomes suddenly furious and raises its crested waves, destroying those who are sailing over it, so also when the Church has admitted corrupt men, its once tranquil surface is covered with rough surf and strewn with shipwrecks.

16. Consider, then, what kind of man he ought to be who is to hold out against such a tempest, and to manage skillfully such great hindrances to the common welfare; for he ought to be dignified yet free from arrogance, formidable yet kind, apt to command yet sociable, impartial yet courteous, humble yet not servile, strong yet gentle, in order that he may contend successfully against all these difficulties. And he ought to bring forward with great authority the man who is properly qualified for the office, even if all should oppose him, and with the same authority to reject the man who is not so qualified, even if all should conspire in his favor, and to keep one aim only in view, the building up of the Church, in nothing actuated either by enmity or favor. Well, do you now think that I acted reasonably in declining the ministry of this office? But I have not even yet gone through all my reasons with you; for I have some others still to mention. And do not grow impatient of listening to a friendly and sincere man, who wishes to clear himself from your accusations; for these statements are not only serviceable for the defense which you have to make on my behalf, but they will also prove of no small help for the due administration of the office. For it is necessary for one who is going to enter upon this path of life to investigate all matters thoroughly well, before he sets his hand to the ministry. Do you ask why? Because one who knows all things clearly will have this advantage, if no other, that he will not feel strange when these things befall him. Would you like me then to approach the question of superintending widows, first of all, or of the care of virgins, or the difficulty of the judicial function. For in each of these cases there is a different kind of anxiety, and the fear is greater than the anxiety.

Now in the first place, to start from that subject which seems to be simpler than the others, the charge of widows appears to cause anxiety to those who take care of them only so far as the expenditure of money is concerned; but the case is otherwise, and here also a careful scrutiny is needed, when they have to be enrolled, for infinite mischief has been caused by putting them on the list without due discrimination. For they have ruined households, and severed marriages, and have often been detected in thieving and pilfering and unseemly deeds of that kind.

Now that such women should be supported out of the Church's revenues provokes punishment from God, and extreme condemnation among men, and abates the zeal of those who wish to do good. For who would ever choose to expend the wealth which he was commanded to give to Christ upon those who defame the name of Christ? For these reasons a strict and accurate scrutiny ought to be made so as to prevent the supply of the indigent being wasted, not only by the women already mentioned, but also by those who are able to provide for themselves.

And this scrutiny is succeeded by no small anxiety of another kind, to ensure an abundant and unailing stream of supply as from a fountain; for compulsory poverty is an insatiable kind of evil, querulous and ungrateful. And great discretion and great zeal is required so as to stop the mouths of complainers, depriving them of every excuse. Now most men, when they see any one superior to the love of money,

immediately represent him as well qualified for this stewardship. But I do not think that this greatness of soul is ever sufficient of itself, although it ought to be possessed prior to all other qualities; for without this a man would be a destroyer rather than a protector, a wolf instead of a shepherd; nevertheless, combined with this, the possession of another quality also should be demanded.

And this quality is forbearance, the cause of all good things in men, impelling as it were and conducting the soul into a serene haven. For widows are a class who, both on account of their poverty, their age and natural disposition, indulge in unlimited freedom of speech (so I had best call it); and they make an unseasonable clamor and idle complaints and lamentations about matters for which they ought to be grateful, and bring accusations concerning things which they ought contentedly to accept.

Now the superintendent should endure all these things in a generous spirit, and not be provoked either by their unreasonable annoyance or their unreasonable complaints. For this class of persons deserve to be pitied for their misfortunes, not to be insulted; and to trample upon their calamities, and add the pain of insult to that which poverty brings, would be an act of extreme brutality. On this account one of the wisest of men, having regard to the avarice and pride of human nature, and considering the nature of poverty and its terrible power to depress even the noblest character, and induce it often to act in these same respects without shame, in order that a man should not be irritated when accused, nor be provoked by continual importunity to become an enemy where he ought to bring aid, he instructs him to be affable and accessible to the suppliant, saying, Incline your ear to a poor man and give him a friendly answer with meekness.

Sirach 4:8 And passing by the case of one who succeeds in exasperating (for what can one say to him who is overcome?), he addresses the man who is able to bear the other's infirmity, exhorting him before he bestows his gift to correct the suppliant by the gentleness of his countenance and the mildness of his words. But if any one, although he does not take the property (of these widows), nevertheless loads them with innumerable reproaches, and insults them, and is exasperated against them, he not only fails through his gift to alleviate the despondency produced by poverty, but aggravates the distress by his abuse.

For although they may be compelled to act very shamelessly through the necessity of hunger, they are nevertheless distressed at this compulsion. When, then, owing to the dread of famine, they are constrained to beg, and owing to their begging are constrained to put off shame, and then again on account of their shamelessness are insulted, the power of despondency becoming of a complex kind, and accompanied by much gloom, settles down upon the soul. And one who has the charge of these persons ought to be so long-suffering, as not only not to increase their despondency by his fits of anger, but also to remove the greater part of it by his exhortation.

For as the man who has been insulted, although he is in the enjoyment of great abundance, does not feel the advantage of his wealth, on account of the blow which he has received from the insult; so on the other hand, the man who has been addressed with kindly words, and for whom the gift has been accompanied with encouragement, exults and rejoices all the more, and the thing given becomes doubled in value through the manner in which it is offered. And this I say not of myself, but borrow from him whose precept I quoted just now: My son, blemish not your good deeds, neither use uncomfortable words when you give anything. Shall not the dew assuage the heat? So is a word better than a gift. Lo! Is not a word better than a gift? But both are with a gracious man. Sirach 18:15-17

But the superintendent of these persons ought not only to be gentle and forbearing, but also skillful in the management of property; for if this qualification is wanting, the affairs of the poor are again involved in the same distress. One who was entrusted not long ago with this ministry, and got together a large hoard of money, neither consumed it himself, nor expended it with a few exceptions upon those who needed it, but kept the greater part of it buried in the earth until a season of distress occurred, when it was all surrendered into the hands of the enemy. Much forethought, therefore, is needed, that the resources of the Church should be neither over abundant, nor deficient, but that all the supplies which are provided should be quickly distributed among those who require them, and the treasures of the Church stored up in the hearts of those who are under her rule.

Moreover, in the reception of strangers, and the care of the sick, consider how great an expenditure of money is needed, and how much exactness and discernment on the part of those who preside over these matters. For it is often necessary that this expenditure should be even larger than that of which I spoke just now, and that he who presides over it should combine prudence and wisdom with skill in the art of supply, so as to dispose the affluent to be emulous and ungrudging in their gifts, lest while providing for the relief of the sick, he should vex the souls of those who supply their wants. But earnestness and zeal need to be displayed here in a far higher degree; for the sick are difficult creatures to please, and prone to languor; and unless great accuracy and care are used, even a slight oversight is enough to do the patient great mischief.

17. But in the care of virgins, the fear is greater in proportion as the possession is more precious, and this flock is of a nobler character than the others. Already, indeed, even into the band of these holy ones, an infinite number of women have rushed full of innumerable bad qualities; and in this case our grief is greater than in the other; for there is just the same difference between a virgin and a widow going astray, as between a free-born damsel and her handmaid. With widows, indeed, it has become a common practice to trifle, and to rail at one another, to flatter or to be impudent, to appear everywhere in public, and to perambulate the market-place.

But the virgin has striven for nobler aims, and eagerly sought the highest kind of philosophy, and professes to exhibit upon earth the life which angels lead, and while yet in the flesh proposes to do deeds which belong to the incorporeal powers. Moreover, she ought not to make numerous or unnecessary journeys, neither is it permissible for her to utter idle and random words; and as for abuse and flattery, she should not even know them by name. On this account she needs the most careful guardianship, and the greater assistance.

For the enemy of holiness is always surprising and lying in wait for these persons, ready to devour any one of them if she should slip and fall; many men also there are who lay snares for them; and besides all these things there is the passionateness of their own human nature, so that, speaking generally, the virgin has to equip herself for a twofold war, one which attacks her from without, and the other which presses upon her from within. For these reasons he who has the superintendence of virgins suffers great alarm, and the danger and distress is yet greater, should any of the things which are contrary to his wishes occur, which God forbid.

For if a daughter kept in seclusion is a cause of sleeplessness to her father, his anxiety about her depriving him of sleep, where the fear is so great lest she should be childless, or pass the flower of her age (unmarried), or be hated (by her husband), Sirach 42:9 what will he suffer whose anxiety is not concerned with any of these things, but others far greater? For in this case it is not a man who is rejected,

but Christ Himself, nor is this barrenness the subject merely of reproach, but the evil ends in the destruction of the soul; for every tree, it is said, which brings not forth good fruit, is hewn down and cast into the fire.

Matthew 3:10 And for one who has been repudiated by the divine Bridegroom, it is not sufficient to receive a certificate of divorce and so to depart, but she has to pay the penalty of everlasting punishment. Moreover, a father according to the flesh has many things which make the custody of his daughter easy; for the mother, and nurse, and a multitude of handmaids share in helping the parent to keep the maiden safe. For neither is she permitted to be perpetually hurrying into the market-place, nor when she does go there is she compelled to show herself to any of the passers-by, the evening darkness concealing one who does not wish to be seen no less than the walls of the house.

And apart from these things, she is relieved from every cause which might otherwise compel her to meet the gaze of men; for no anxiety about the necessaries of life, no menaces of oppressors, nor anything of that kind reduces her to this unfortunate necessity, her father acting in her stead in all these matters; while she herself has only one anxiety, which is to avoid doing or saying anything unworthy the modest conduct which becomes her. But in the other case there are many things which make the custody of the virgin difficult, or rather impossible for the father; for he could not have her in his house with himself, as dwelling together in that way would be neither seemly nor safe.

For even if they themselves should suffer no loss, but continue to preserve their innocence unsullied, they would have to give an account for the souls which they have offended, just as much as if they happened to sin with one another. And it being impossible for them to live together, it is not easy to understand the movements of the character, and to suppress the impulses which are ill regulated, or train and improve those which are better ordered and tuned. Nor is it an easy thing to interfere in her habits of walking out; for her poverty and want of a guardian does not permit him to become an exact investigator of the propriety of her conduct.

For as she is compelled to manage all her affairs she has many pretexts for going out, if at least she is not inclined to be self-controlled. Now he who commands her to stay always at home ought to cut off these pretexts, providing for her independence in the necessaries of life, and giving her some woman who will see to the management of these things. He must also keep her away from funeral obsequies, and nocturnal festivals; for that artful serpent knows only too well how to scatter his poison through the medium even of good deeds.

And the maiden must be fenced on every side, and rarely go out of the house during the whole year, except when she is constrained by inexorable necessity. Now if any one should say that none of these things is the proper work of a bishop to take in hand, let him be assured that the anxieties and the reasons concerning what takes place in every case have to be referred to him. And it is far more expedient that he should manage everything, and so be delivered from the complaints which he must otherwise undergo on account of the faults of others, than that he should abstain from the management, and then have to dread being called to account for things which other men have done.

Moreover, he who does these things by himself, gets through them all with great ease; but he who is compelled to do it by converting every one's opinion does not get relief by being saved from working single-handed, equivalent to the trouble and turmoil which he experiences through those who oppose him and combat his decisions. However, I could not enumerate all the anxieties concerned with the care of

virgins; for when they have to be entered on the list, they occasion no small trouble to him who is entrusted with this business.

Again, the judicial department of the bishop's office involves innumerable vexations, great consumption of time, and difficulties exceeding those experienced by men who sit to judge secular affairs; for it is a labor to discover exact justice, and when it is found, it is difficult to avoid destroying it. And not only loss of time and difficulty are incurred, but also no small danger. For ere now, some of the weaker brethren having plunged into business, because they have not obtained patronage have made shipwreck concerning the faith. For many of those who have suffered wrong, no less than those who have inflicted wrong, hate those who do not assist them, and they will not take into account either the intricacy of the matters in question, or the difficulty of the times, or the limits of sacerdotal authority, or anything of that kind; but they are merciless judges, recognizing only one kind of defense -- release from the evils which oppress them. And he who is unable to furnish this, although he may allege innumerable excuses, will never escape their condemnation.

And talking of patronage, let me disclose another pretext for fault-finding. For if the bishop does not pay a round of visits every day, more even than the idle men about town, unspeakable offense ensues. For not only the sick, but also the whole, desire to be looked after, not that piety prompts them to this, but rather that in most cases they pretend claims to honor and distinction. And if he should ever happen to visit more constantly one of the richer and more powerful men, under the pressure of some necessity, with a view to the common benefit of the Church, he is immediately stigmatized with a character for fawning and flattery. But why do I speak of patronage and visiting? For merely from their mode of accosting persons, bishops have to endure such a load of reproaches as to be often oppressed and overwhelmed by despondency; in fact, they have also to undergo a scrutiny of the way in which they use their eyes. For the public rigorously criticize their simplest actions, taking note of the tone of their voice, the cast of their countenance, and the degree of their laughter. He laughed heartily to such a man, one will say, and accosted him with a beaming face, and a clear voice, whereas to me he addressed only a slight and passing remark. And in a large assembly, if he does not turn his eyes in every direction when he is conversing, the majority declare that his conduct is insulting.

Who, then, unless he is exceedingly strong, could cope with so many accusers, so as either to avoid being indited altogether, or, if he is indited, to escape? For he must either be without any accusers, or, if this is impossible, purge himself of the accusations which are brought against him; and if this again is not an easy matter, as some men delight in making vain and wanton charges, he must make a brave stand against the dejection produced by these complaints. He, indeed, who is justly accused, may easily tolerate the accuser, for there is no bitterer accuser than conscience; wherefore, if we are caught first by this most terrible adversary, we can readily endure the milder ones who are external to us. But he who has no evil thing upon his conscience, when he is subjected to an empty charge, is speedily excited to wrath, and easily sinks into dejection, unless he happens to have practised beforehand how to put up with the follies of the multitude. For it is utterly impossible for one who is falsely accused without cause, and condemned, to avoid feeling some vexation and annoyance at such great injustice.

And how can one speak of the distress which bishops undergo, whenever it is necessary to cut some one off from the full communion of the Church? Would indeed that the evil went no further than distress! But in fact the mischief is not trifling. For there is a fear lest the man, if he has been punished beyond what he deserves, should experience that which was spoken of by the blessed Paul and be swallowed up by overmuch sorrow. 2 Corinthians 2:7 The nicest accuracy, therefore, is required in this matter also, lest

what is intended to be profitable should become to him an occasion of greater damage. For whatever sins he may commit after such a method of treatment, the wrath caused by each of them must be shared by the physician who so unskillfully applied his knife to the wound. What severe punishment, then, must be expected by one who has not only to render an account of the offenses which he himself has separately committed, but also incurs extreme danger on account of the sins committed by others? For if we shudder at undergoing judgment for our own misdeeds, believing that we shall not be able to escape the fire of the other world, what must one expect to suffer who has to answer for so many others? To prove the truth of this, listen to the blessed Paul, or rather not to him, but to Christ speaking in him, when he says: Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit, for they watch for your souls as they that shall give account. Hebrews 13:17 Can the dread of this threat be slight? It is impossible to say: but these considerations are sufficient to convince even the most incredulous and obdurate that I did not make this escape under the influence of pride or vainglory, but merely out of fear for my own safety, and consideration of the gravity of the office.

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