

## **Saint John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople**

John was born in Antioch about the year 354. His father, Secundus, was an imperial commander and his mother's name was Anthousa. We do not know who the ancestors of John's father were nor their ethnicity. He was in the Imperial Army Corps of Syria, which was headquartered and Antioch.

His mother was a young patrician of pure Hellenic descent. Both of his parents were Christians prior to the birth of her son, John. He also had an older sister. We do not know her name.

In his early childhood, John showed a great love for learning. His father died while John was still a boy, leaving his mother a widow at 22 years of age. She committed to never remarry wanting to keep her marriage bed undefiled. Anthousa worked very hard to make sure her son knew the Bible. She also instilled in him a love for piety and self-control. Knowing that he had a brilliant mind, she was determined to make certain that he had the best education possible.

She sent them to the leading scholars at that time to study Greek philosophy and the classics as well as rhetoric. Although his teachers still believed in the Greek gods, they had many Christians among their pupils. They included St. Basil and St. Gregory.

John became an expert in the skills of logic, rhetoric, and every kind of knowledge. After he completed his studies, it was expected that he would enter into the practice of civil law. He was also drawn toward the monastic life. He had gradually developed a strong love for monasticism and a desire to become a monastic.

John's mother, seeing that he was being drawn to become a monk begged him not to do so until after she had left this world. If you did, she would suffer a second widowhood. His father had died when he was a young boy and she would once again be left all alone. John chose to respect and honor his mother. The bond between his mother and her son had been forged in the furnace of their loss of a much-loved husband and father. They had braved together the struggles of life, and church and political unrest, from his earliest youth, but he was called upon to play the man early on, and he could not abandon her now. He knew too well the sacrifices she had made for him and he was eternally grateful.

He did not give up his desire to become a monastic, instead he lived a monastic existence at home. He secluded himself and practiced a hard asceticism. His diet consisted of the plainest food. He slept on the bare floor, and often rose up to pray. He struggled to keep silence, lest he should fall into his former habit while attending sessions at court of judging others.

He eventually set aside his desire for legal practice and litigation. He left behind his continual attendance at the courts of law and his passion for the theater. When he was 18 years old he left the pagan teachers and joined himself closely to the Patriarch of Antioch, Meletios, who was a holy man from Armenia.

Soon John became a catechumen. When he was 21 years old he was baptized. His receiving baptism at such an age of maturity was not on account of negligence on his mother's part or his. It was a custom of most Christians at that time to delay baptism for fear they would sin after baptism and forfeit their salvation. Although this delay in baptism had become the custom of the people, the bishops often spoke against this procrastination.

It is said that from the time of his baptism, John never swore, nor defamed anyone, nor spoke falsely, nor cursed, or even tolerate inappropriate jokes. John spent the next three years in association with Patriarch Meletios. The patriarch soon ordained him to be a Reader and assigned him to the Church at Antioch.

John's mother fell asleep in the Lord all she was in her 40s. After her funeral, John lost no time distributing his worldly goods to the poor and setting free the servants of his mother's household. He was now free to become a monastic. He chose one of the poorest of the monasteries to be his home.

In the monastery John continued unceasing prayer while also practicing the other virtues. He soon became an example to others. Daily, he would visit the sick of the monastery. He comforted them and encouraged them. He rarely slept.

There was an elder at this monastery named Hesychios, who was exceedingly virtuous. One day he had a vision. He saw a man in white clothing. He appeared to have descended from heaven. The man stood before John, who was at prayer, and was praying with him. He held in his hand a rolled up scroll. The holy John, when he saw him, fell down prone in fear. The visitor raised him up and said "Cease fearing, be of courage."

When John asked him who he was, he said, "I came to thee, sent from God. Receive this which I shall give thee." It appeared that he gave John the rolled-up scroll and said to him, "I am the Theologian and Evangelist John. Take the scroll which I am giving thee. And from this day thy mind shall be opened to understand the meaning of all the Divine Scriptures." The holy John said, "I am not worthy of such grace." The Theologian then made the sign of the cross over John, and embraced him with a kiss, giving him courage. Then he ascended back to heaven. It was several days before the elder told anyone about this vision. When he told the vision to the other monks he made them promise not to tell John for fear that John would flee the monastery to avoid honor and praise.

One day an old man, who was exceedingly rich, became gravely ill. On one side of his head he suffered such great pain that the visual axis of one eye was caused to deviate. He made haste therefore to the monastery where John was living. He fell before the holy John's feet and besought him to heal him. Then John said, "This has taken place because thou dost not believe in Christ with all thy soul and thou hast committed sinful deeds. If with all thy heart pray and promise to leave off those bad things, without difficulty you shall file be healed." Then with tears the noble man confessed that Christ is the true God. He also promised to leave off his sinful ways.

He then took hold of the saint's cassock and immediately the pain in his head ceased, and the eye was restored and returned to its position as before.

John performed many other miracles which I do not have time to tell you about.

After living in the monastery for four years he left the monastery in order to flee the praise of people. It is believed that he went to a mountain near Antioch and lived in a cave. He spent his time learning the New Testament entirely by heart. He had no light nor bedding. Most of the time he went without sleep. He lived on a biscuit and water, which was brought to him daily by an acquaintance. He endured the chilly nights and the burning heat of the day. The two years that he spent away from society caused serious impairment of his health, which was to plague him until this death. Due to his health problems, he returned to Antioch.

Patriarch Meletios had been called by the Emperor to participate in another council. This became known as the Second Ecumenical Council. As part of his preparation to attend the Council, Patriarch Meletios decided to ordain John to be the deacon for the Church of Antioch.

He knew that the church would be in good hands if something happened to him as he traveled for the church. Soon, after Patriarch Meletios left for Constantinople but he fell asleep in the Lord. His relics were brought back to Antioch. Hearing of the death of Patriarch Meletios, John returned to his monastery. He lived there for another three years.

A priest named Flavian became patriarch of Antioch after the death of Patriarch Meletios. Once while praying Patriarch Flavian had a vision of an angel of our Lord, who said to him, "Go to the monastery where John abides and bring him to the church of thy patriarchate, so as to ordain him to the priesthood, because he is an elect vessel of habitation for God, as the Apostle Paul, and in the future he shall enlighten all the inhabited world." That very same night the same angel also approached John, while he was praying. He spoke to him saying, "Tomorrow, when Patriarch Flavian comes and seeks thee, immediately go with him, for it is God's will that thou be ordained a priest."

How did John get the name Chrysostom? After his ordination he taught at every instance that he could. Some named him "the mouth of Christ," others "a second Paul," and still others, "Golden – mouth" which in Greek is Chrysostom.

One day, a certain woman, on hearing one of his sermons, did not quite comprehend his full meaning. She lifted her voice among the people, and said, "O spiritual teacher, though I call thee John of the golden mouth, yet the well of thy holy teaching is a such a depth, the rope of our minds is short and cannot reach it depths."

Then many of the people present said, "God Himself has given John this name through the mouth of this woman. Let him henceforth be called Golden – mouth or Chrysostom." Henceforth, to this day he is called Chrysostom. Fr. John took to heart what the woman said and from then on he spoke in simple words.

Towards the end of the year 397, the Bishop of Constantinople died. The Emperor Arkadios had heard of the good reputation of the priest John and decided to send for him. He had hopes of making him the new Bishop.

Because Fr. John was so popular with the people of Antioch the soldiers which were sent to accompany him had to kidnap him from Antioch without the people being aware. Then on December 15 at 398 Fr. John was ordained the Bishop of Constantinople. Although the bishop of Alexandria opposed this since he had his own man whom he desired to become the new bishop he was forced to accept the ordination.

The new Bishop of Constantinople reformed many of the things that his predecessors had done. They were used to throwing rich banquets and he put a stop to this preferring to spend the money on the poor and the sick. He also kept tight control of the philanthropic institutions that were attached to his Archdiocese. He made certain that the money spent was spent wisely. And that the institutions which were supposed to help those in need, were actually being helped.

After simplifying his own living quarters, he reformed the many excesses of his clergy. You wish to root out worldliness, self-indulgence and avarice. He removed many clergymen who had been ordained with impediments to the ordination. This angered a lot of people, but also gained the support of many other faithful followers. At first even the Empress, Evdoxi, warmly supported his endeavors.

Bishop John demanded that his clergy live a simple, temperate life, and he set the example. Another problem that plagued the church at that time was that some of the bishops were guilty of the buying or selling of ecclesiastical privileges, for example pardons or benefices. Bishop John deposed many of those bishops.

Bishop John also wished to bring about a spiritual revival. He encouraged the faithful to attend the Divine liturgy. Although the liturgy had been shortened by St. Basil the Great, people still complained that it was too long and they stayed away. So, guided by God, Bishop John set about shortening the liturgy. The liturgy, which we celebrate today, has been given the name the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. The liturgy that Bishop John wrote has evolved over the centuries to what it is today.

Over the years of his episcopacy, he made many enemies especially among the wealthy and powerful. He did not hesitate to condemn them for misusing the power and for not sharing their wealth with those who were in need. Although the people glorified him, the envious loathed him, and the Empress, on two occasions, sent him into exile. Bishop John spent three years in exile, and reposed as an exile on the Feast of the Elevation of the Precious and Life-giving Cross, September 14, 407, in the town of Comana in Georgia. His last words were, "Glory be to God for all things," and with that, the soul of the golden-mouthed bishop was taken into Paradise. Chrysostom's head reposes in the Church of the Dormition in Moscow, and his body reposes in the Vatican in Rome.

The principle persecutors of Bishop Chrysostom were Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria and Empress Eudoxia. After Chrysostom's death, bitter punishment befell them both. Theophilus went mad, and Eudoxia was banished from the imperial court by Emperor Arcadius.

Eudoxia soon became ill with an incurable disease. The empress finally died in corruption and agony. Even after death, the hand of God lay heavy on her. The coffin containing her body shook day and night for a full thirty-four years until Emperor Theodosius translated the relics of St. John Chrysostom to Constantinople.

We must take time and reflect on the teachings of St. John Chrysostom. You can find his writings translated into English in many books. You can also find them on line for free. He was truly a holy man whom we can emulate in his love for the church, the sick, and the poor.

Through the prayers of St. John Chrysostom, Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on us.