

PRINCE OF PREACHERS

MARTIN CONNORS, O.P.



T VARIOUS TIMES in history the Popes, at the earnest request of the hierarchy and laity, have seen fit to name certain saints as patrons of classes, occupations or institutions. Such a step was taken about forty years ago when Pius X declared Saint John Chrysostom to be the Patron of Catholic preachers and by so doing gave to all priests, but especially to the Order of Preachers, a model of Christian eloquence and sanctity. Such an act on the part of a Supreme Pontiff creates a twofold relationship: one on the part of the Saint in question and the other on the part of the particular group involved. To the Saint we see, as it were, the attribution of a new duty, a new charge or obligation. But how can this be? What mortal is so powerful as to be able to pierce the court of heaven and place upon one of its members an earthly task? In a sense, this is what the Pope can and does do, for we know that our patron saints exercise an individual protectorate over us even when we are not actually seeking aid from them. This then is the primary reason why the Church in her power and wisdom has given us the saints as our special protectors and guides.

There is, however, another reason for such ecclesiastical procedure . . . the other relationship which is placed upon us. The saint is not only our intercessor but our model as well, and we must strive to imitate him who has excelled in our particular walk of life. Although all virtues may be evident in the lives of the saints, some one more than others shines forth as predominate in the life of each. This is the motivating factor in the institution of patrons. Thus we have Thomas Aquinas, the Church's Prince of Theologians; Catherine of Siena, Protectress of the Holy See; and Albert the Great, the Patron of the Natural Sciences.

In the days of the early Church, God raised up a man who was so eloquent in speaking of divine things that his contemporaries called him "the golden-mouthed." Fifteen centuries later our Holy Father, bringing to a fitting climax the general attitude of the faithful and hierarchy in all ages, honored John Chrysostom and favored us by declaring him the Patron of Preachers. Since the Church in such actions partakes of Divine Wisdom, it will be highly profitable to consider her motives in this instance.

JOHN OF ANTIOCH

St. John did not blossom into the flower of Christian eloquence over night. On the contrary, it was only after long years of tremendous physical and spiritual exertion that he began even to exercise the sacred ministry. Born at Antioch about the year 347 of Christian parents he, in due course, undertook the usual classical education common in the early centuries. After development in the minor subjects of grammar, language and history, he was introduced to the great poets of antiquity, and with this foundation he began his study of philosophy under the masters of the city. However, like many of the youths of his day, St. John was more attracted to rhetoric, considering for later life a public office in the government or the practice of law. He did not travel to Athens or Alexandria to further his studies as did many other students, but continued them in his native city where he developed a keen scholarly mind coupled with a highly promising eloquence.

St. John's interest in purely secular studies began to dwindle as he lost little by little his worldly ambitions, and as he thought more on that true wisdom which alone could solve the problems of life. It was probably about this time that he came under the influence of Bishop Meletius, who gave such a new bent to John's life that at the age of twenty he turned from profane subjects, and devoted himself in all earnestness to mastering the Scriptures. In this choice he was most fortunate, for in his native city had been founded one of the two most outstanding theological schools of the early Church. Antioch, with its rival school at Alexandria, would mold in the future, as it had in the past, not only orthodox theology but, unfortunately, heresy as well. From the latter, by the grace of God, Chrysostom remained untainted, although this cannot be said for one of his fellow students, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and a later student, Nestorius. These years were most important in the life of St. John for they provided a solid foundation for him in the method of interpreting the Sacred Scriptures. Diametrically opposed to the mystical and allegorical spirit pervading the Alexandrian school, the masters at Antioch ever insisted on the prime necessity of the historical sense of the text, that is, the simple and primary meaning intended by the Sacred Writers. With absolute fidelity to this safe and sure method, Chrysostom in all his homilies shows himself to be a true son of Antioch, and yet does not so enslave himself as to refrain altogether from some allegorical expositions. This is not to say that he or his school denied that there were other meanings of the Sacred Text, but that the greatest importance must go to the exact literal sense.

THE MONK

Although this mode of life, taken up for the most part as it was with the study of sacred things, was at first satisfactory enough, John did not remain in it for many years. The stories of the holy, ascetical lives of the monks of the desert attracted him little by little with a dynamic magnetism. The mediocrity of Christian life which surrounded him seemed to be urging him on to a complete renunciation of all worldly goods and social contacts. This desire for the full perfection of the Christian life now had complete control over him and in the succeeding years, although he would make radical changes in his way of life, he would ever retain this desire. In fact, as we shall see, this became the goad of his life. Even when he is forced into a position where he has the care of other souls, he will continue in this spirit, idealistic as it may seem to some, but which will bear tremendous fruit.

Thus taking leave of his good friend, Bishop Meletius from whom he had received Baptism and the order of Lector, St. John retired with great joy to a monastery on the outskirts of Antioch. Four years of this hidden contemplative life served only as a sharp spur toward a more severe asceticism, to which he turned when he finally embraced the life of a hermit. However, he now received a sign from God that his life's work was to be in another sector of the vineyard for, due to his excessive mortifications, his health broke down and he was forced to return to the public ecclesiastical life of Antioch where he resumed his duties under Meletius.

That "God's ways are not our ways" certainly proved to be true in the life of Chrysostom. Unknown to him, the Divine Hand during these six years had fashioned in the soul of this man a well-spring of grace and truth. His character was now imbued with the immutable contemplative spirit from which would flow that golden eloquence which has echoed through the centuries. He came forth now to give to his fellow-men the treasured truths which he had received from the Holy Spirit during these years of silence.

THE PREACHER

Not long after his return he was ordained to the priesthood, at the age of forty, by Flavian, Meletius' successor. This new Bishop was also so closely attached to John and knew so well his character and abilities that he confidently ceded to him the position of chief preacher and teacher of the faithful in the diocese. Flavian himself, advanced in age and weakened in health, could no longer fulfill this

episcopal office. Then began that magnificent flow of sermons which could not be halted until the enemy, by trial and persecution, slowly grasped him in its strangle hold. In spite of an uncompromising fidelity to his lofty ideals that at times made him quite severe, Chrysostom immediately won the hearts of the people by his warm sincerity and evident love of all, both good and bad. He preached every Sunday, sometimes oftener, and in Lent daily. There was scarcely a church or chapel in Antioch that did not ring with his eloquent voice.

But all was not to go smoothly for very long. Without the slightest warning or expectation he was chosen by the authorities to be Bishop of Constantinople, the most important see in the East. Now, at last, he took the final step of total abandonment to God's work in the Church. The completely contemplative life for which he had once craved was gone now, ceding to a life far more active. The monk had now become the apostle. The sufferings and hardships that St. John was about to undergo were of a kind that he could have never equaled had he stayed in the desert. They would not be of human making but divine. They were to be God's instruments for bringing to flower all his natural talents and supernatural gifts. Having once occupied his see, St. John soon let it be known that he intended to correct all abuses, not only of the laity as he had done at Antioch, but also, now that he was entrusted with episcopal responsibilities, those of the clergy as well. Once again he found that his new flock recognized in him a loving father, and they soon took him to their heart. Naturally his severity and candid criticism was not without opposition. In spite of the fact that he was loved by both the poor and the rich, Chrysostom had enemies in the imperial court as well as in the streets; indeed they were not lacking even among his own brethren. Gradually antagonism against him increased until it finally reached its height with his condemnation to exile by the wicked Empress who had been urged on by a few unscrupulous Bishops and nobles. This first attempt, which proved to be unsuccessful because of John's popularity among the people, did not prevent his enemies from a second try which removed him from his see permanently.

His life as a Bishop had been difficult, but now he was to feel the most bitter blow of all. At the hands of his merciless keepers he had to suffer severe punishment, and was forced in spite of his age to make the long journey on foot to the place of his exile, deprived of any comfort whatsoever. Finally, unable to endure this extreme torture any longer he fell gravely ill and died, completely abandoned by all but Him Whose praises formed his final words: "Glory to God for all things."

Such was the life and death of him who has been acclaimed *Doctor Ecclesiae* and *Patronus Eloquentiae Christianae*. How often it has happened that great saints have suffered the most bitter trials for an entire lifetime both from those within the fold as well as without. Chrysostom was one of these. As monk, priest and bishop, he is a saint; as teacher, he is the first Doctor of the East; and as preacher, he is hailed as Prince. His life could be written under each title, but for us the three combine into one to show us how to profit by such a patron. For his preaching flowed from that bottomless well-spring of prayer and mortification that was lifelong, and as a preacher he ever continued to be the teacher of sacred truth.

HIS INSTRUCTIONS TO THE PREACHER

What was there about the preaching of this giant among men that has in all ages merited the incontestable title of Prince of Preachers? He himself provides the answer in a two-fold manner. In his treatise *On the Priesthood* St. John lays down certain instructions that must be followed by all shepherds to whom this sacred office is committed. The other way in which he teaches us, and the most effective, is by his own example. Both of these sources, when they have been studied and meditated upon, yield fruit far exceeding the effort expended. Here we can only indicate the chief characteristics of each.

The priest, as the guardian of the Mystical Body of Christ, must use every available means to preserve and foster the spiritual life of the faithful who are the members of that Body. Among those means preaching ranks first after the administration of the Sacraments, and from this draws its importance and necessity. The fact that Chrysostom treats of the office of preacher only after he has dealt with the necessity of sanctity in the life of the priest shows us that all true sacred eloquence must flow from personal holiness. He considers correct theological training as a prerequisite for every preacher who must be ready to dispel error wherever it confronts him. For this same reason he must learn the various methods of capturing the attention of the listeners and, having gained this, lead them in his grasp to the desired end.

These qualifications, however, will not assure a preacher of success. He must ever strive for that nobility of soul which contempt of praise and oratorical skill will give him. John tells us that he has very often seen the love of praise destroy in a man marvelous inclinations to superb eloquence. The desire to please God is sufficient recompense for the true preacher and in the last analysis is the most valuable and

only worthwhile reward. The oratorical skill that the preacher requires is best expressed in Chrysostom's own words:

"For it is not nature but education that makes an orator and though a man has reached the perfection of eloquence, he will soon lose it unless he cultivates his talent by constant labor and exercise."¹

HIS OWN PREACHING

The inestimable value of St. John's preaching evidences a perfection of both physical and intellectual capabilities. In both lines he had huge obstacles to overcome. We are told that he was a small man, not very impressive in appearance, and subject all his life to many infirmities, most of which flowed from the severe ascetical practices of his early years. As a young man he conquered strong inclinations to vanity, anger and ambition but, no doubt, had always to be on guard against these.

In youth he learned the methods of effective rhetoric from the Antiochan masters and by studying the famous pagan orators of Greece. He tells us himself that we can learn much from our enemies in the ways of combat and, in this case, of persuasive art. He always sought at the very outset of his sermons to establish close contact with his hearers. Chrysostom had such a burning desire to help them that he would go to great pains to discover their needs and to adapt his words to their understanding and position. By observing them closely in daily life and studying the pressing events of the moment, he attained a union with them that gained for him their total confidence. It is related that in times of trial they would run to the church and seek his words as a curing salve for their ills.

At the basis of all his preaching is St. John's profound grasp of the meaning of the Scriptures. We have seen how he was well grounded in this when he first began his studies under his Bishop. Most of his sermons are simply homilies on the Sacred text, and are usually divided into two parts. The first is exegetic, in which he presents in simple, clear language the theme and its development. He then moralizes on the dogmatic truth thus presented and applies it to his flock. In both sections he avails himself of that elegant classical training he had received and turns it now to embellish his words with bursts of stirring eloquence. His examples and descriptions assure us that his audience must have clung to his every word.

Although it is admitted by all that he was not a speculative the-

¹ *On the Priesthood*; V, 5.

ologian contributing new distinctions and clarifications to dogmatic truths, we can find everywhere in his writings a testimony to all the teachings of the Catholic Church. Perhaps the fact that he came midway between the great heresies of Arianism and Nestorianism and never had to confront them in their fiercest moments is the reason why he never turned his mind to speculation.

After all the praises of his writings have been spoken, after all the encomiums of his rhetoric have been written, one must always return to the prime source from which his golden eloquence flowed. This is evident from the very beginning of his priestly life when he was profoundly motivated with that single desire of forming in Antioch a Christian community in perfect conformity with the Gospel precepts. The intensity of this desire generated in him a deep conviction that his greatest means for attaining this end was through preaching. Basically then, his holy and simple sincerity is the key to his oratorical superiority. Cardinal Newman summarizes his character in these brief but beautiful words: "He was the mouth of gold because his head and heart were of gold."

From this brief sketch of the man and his work we can see why he has always been hailed as *the* preacher of the Church. Pius X, wishing to confirm this universal attitude of the faithful and clergy, in his decree declared and constituted the brilliant Doctor of the universal Church, the Holy Bishop, John Chrysostom, heavenly patron of preachers, and he has most whole-heartedly proposed him as an example of every virtue to all the faithful but especially as one to be imitated by sacred preachers of Christian eloquence. The Church has given us St. Thomas, Prince of Theologians, to teach us what to say; she has given us St. John Chrysostom, Prince of Preachers, to teach us how to say it.

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