2nd Homily On the birthday of our Savior

John Chrysostom (c. AD 349–407)

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John Chrysostom: On the Birthday of our Savior Jesus Christ, a Sermon.[1]
[Translated by Bryson Sewell]

I see a strange and novel mystery: shepherds sound all around my ears, not piping a barren tune, but singing a heavenly hymn. Angels are singing, archangels are dancing, the cherubim are hymning, the seraphim are glorifying, all are celebrating, since they see God upon the earth, man[2] in Heaven. [I see] the one who is on high lower because of His plan,[3] the one who is below on high because of His love for humanity. Today Bethlehem resembled Heaven: in place of stars it received angels hymning, in place of the sun it contained the righteous One[4] without confining [Him].[5] And do not ask how: for where God wills it, nature's order is overcome. For He willed it, He had the power, He came down, He saved - all things follow upon God.[6] Today, He who Is[7] is born, and He who Is becomes what He was not. For being God, He becomes human, though He did not cease from being God. For He hasn't become human by separating[8] from His divinity,[9] nor again has He become God by advancing[10] from a human. But, being Word, because He could not suffer [as Word], [11] He became flesh, His nature[12] remaining unchanged. But when, on the one hand, He was born, Jews denied the strange birth, and Pharisees misinterpreted the divine Books, and scribes spoke what was in opposition to the Law. Herod[13] sought the [child] who was born, not in order to honor Him, but to destroy Him. For today they saw [that] all things [were] opposed [to them].

For the psalmist says, "it was not hidden from their children for another generation."[14] For kings came, in astonishment at the heavenly King, for He had come upon the earth without angels, without archangels, [M. 387] without thrones, without dominions, without powers, without authorities, but walking a foreign and untrodden path, He came forth from an uncultivated[15] womb, neither leaving His own angels deprived of His authority, nor having ceased from His own divinity in His incarnation with us. But kings came to worship the heavenly King of glory,

while soldiers [came] to serve the commander-in-chief of power; women [came to see] the one who was born from a man, in order that He might change the woman's grief[16] into joy; the virgins [came to see] the child of the virgin, because the Creator of milk and breasts, who makes the fountains of breasts to produce naturally flowing streams,[17] received a child's nourishment from His virgin mother; the infant [came to see] the one who became an infant in order to furnish praise from the mouths of infants; the children [came to see] the child who produced witnesses because of Herod's madness; the men [came to see] the one who was incarnated and healed the woes of slaves;[18] the shepherds [came to see] the good shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep; the priests [came to see] the one who became the high priest in the order of Melchizedek;

the slaves [came to see] the one who took the form of a slave in order to honor our slavery with freedom; the fishers [came to see] the one who makes hunters of people from among fishers; the tax collectors [came to see] the one who appointed an evangelist from among the tax collectors; the prostitutes [came to see] the one who offers His feet to the tears of prostitutes; and, that I may speak but briefly, all sinners came to see the lamb of God who takes upon himself the sin of the world, Magi accompanying,[19] shepherds praising, tax collectors speaking the good news, prostitutes bearing perfume, Samaritans thirsting for the fountain of life, the Canaanite woman with undoubting faith. Since everyone else, then, is exulting, I too want to exult, I want to dance, I desire to celebrate. But I dance, not by striking a lyre, not by shaking a thyrsus, not with flutes, not by lighting torches, but, in place of the musical instruments, I bear[20] the swaddling-clothes of the Christ. For these are my hope, these my life, these my salvation, these my flute, these my lyre. And so I come bearing these, so that, after receiving [the] power of words by their power, I may say together with angels, "Glory in the highest be to God!,"[21] and with shepherds, "And peace on earth, and good will among men."[22] Today, the one who was inexplicably begotten from [the] Father is born from a virgin, inexpressibly for my sake.

But at that time, on the one hand, He was begotten from the Father before [the] ages, as the one who begot [Him] knows. But today, against nature, He was born again, as the grace of the Holy Spirit understands. And His birth on high[23] is real, and His birth below not false, and He was begotten as God from God, and truly the same one was born a human from a virgin. On high He alone is the only begotten from the Only, below the same one, alone, is the only begotten from [the] only virgin. For just as in the case of His birth on high it is impious to conceive[24] of a mother, so also in the case of His birth below it is blasphemous to conceive[25] of a father. The Father begot [Him] without change, and the virgin bore [him] without corruption. For God did not submit to begetting with fluxes,[26] for He begot [Him] in a manner fit for God. And the virgin didn't submit to corruption when she was giving birth, for she gave birth after a spiritual manner. And so His

begetting on high has no explanation, nor does His [M. 388] coming forth in later times endure to be investigated unduly. For today I know that, on the one hand, the virgin gave birth, and today I believe that God begot [Him] out of time. I have learned to honor the manner of the birth with silence, and I have undertaken[27] not to inquire unduly with words.

For in the case of God, one ought not to give attention to the nature[28] of the deeds, but to believe in the power of the one who brings [them] about. For there is a law of nature, whenever a woman, after being joined in marriage, gives birth. But when a virgin, after giving birth, without experience in marriage, again appears as a virgin, the deed is beyond nature. Consequently, then, let that which is in accord with nature be investigated, but let that which is beyond nature be honored with silence, not as something that ought to be avoided, but as something inexpressible and worthy of being honored with silence. But grant me pardon, I beg you, if I want to end my sermon in the introduction. For since I am lowly in respect of the inquiry of those who are greater, I do not know how and where I shall turn the rudders of my words. For what am I to say, or what am I to speak? I see the woman giving birth, I perceive the [child] who was born, yet I do not comprehend the manner of the birth. For nature is overcome, and the boundary of order is overcome, where God wills [it]. For the deed did not occur in accord with nature, but the miracle is beyond nature. For nature was nullified, and the will of the Master brought [it] to pass. Oh the unspeakable grace!

The only begotten before [the] ages, the intangible and the simple and the incorporeal entered into my contemptible and visible body. Why? So that, by being seen, He might teach, and that by teaching He might lead us to what is not seen. For since humans consider[29] the eye more trustworthy than the ear, they doubt what they do not see, and for this reason He endured to present a spectacle of Himself to their eyes through the body, so that He might destroy their doubt. And He is born from a virgin who is ignorant of the matter. For she did not help bring about what occurred, or contribute to what was done, but she was a mere instrument of His inexpressible power, only knowing what she learned from Gabriel when she asked, ”How will this happen to me, since I do not know a man?”[30] And he says, ”Do you wish to understand this? The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will over shadow you.”[31] And how was He with her, and then only a little later from her? [It is] just like when an artist finds great material, He fashions a most beautiful vessel. In this way, too, Christ, when He found the body and soul of the virgin holy, fit out a living temple for Himself, framing the person in the virgin in the manner He willed and, after entering into it, He came forth today, feeling no shame for the ugliness of the nature.

Nor did it bring hubris to Him to wear His own work. And the thing that was fashioned gave a harvest of greatest glory, since it was a garment of the artist.

For in this very way, in the first molding, it was impossible to frame the human before the mud came into his hands. In this way also it was impossible for the perishing vessel to be altered unless it became [the] garment of the one who made it. [M. 389] But what am I to say, or what am I to speak? For the miracle strikes me senseless. The Ancient of days has become a child, He who sits on a high and lofty throne is placed in a manger, the intangible and simple and uncompounded and incorporeal One is turned about by human hands, He who tore the bonds of sin asunder is entwined in swaddling-clothes, since He will this. For He wants to make dishonor honor, ill-repute to put on glory, the boundary of hubris to show the way of virtue. And so He enters my body so that I might contain his Word. And after receiving my flesh, He gives me His own Spirit, so that by giving and receiving He might procure the treasure of my life. He receives my flesh to sanctify me, He gives me His spirit to save me. But what am I to say, or what am I to speak?

”Behold, the virgin will conceive.”[32] No longer is it said that it will happen, but it is wondered at that it has occurred. For it occurred among Jews, among whom it was also spoken, yet it is believed by us, among whom it wasn’t professed. ”Behold the virgin will conceive. The written character belongs to the synagogue, but the possession belongs to the church. The former[33] discovered the writing-tablet, the latter[34] discovered the pearl. The former dyed the wool, the latter put on the purple robe. Judea bore Him, and the world received Him. The synagogue reared and suckled Him, and the church held him and enjoyed the fruit of the harvest. The branch of the grape-vine is with the former, and the grape-cluster of truth is with me. The former gathered in the grape-cluster, and the gentiles[35] drink the mysterious drink. The former sowed the seed of the grain in Judea, and the gentiles harvested the crop with the sickle of faith. The gentiles piously clipped the rose, and the thorn of unbelief remained over for Jews. The nesting flew away, and the senseless [parents] lie near the nest. The Jews interpret the foliage of the written character, the gentiles cull the fruit of the Spirit. ”Behold, the virgin will conceive. Tell me, O Jew, tell me, finally, to whom did she give birth? Have confidence in me, as if with Herod. But you do not have confidence [in me]; I know why: because of the plot. For you spoke to him[36] that he might kill Him.

Yet you do not speak to me, lest I should worship Him. To whom did she give birth? Whom? The Master of nature. And even if you are silent, nature cries aloud. For she gave birth, just as the one who was born wanted to be born. It was not permitted by nature, but, as the Master of nature, He introduced a foreign manner of birth in order that, even though He became human, He should not be born as a human, but is begotten as God. Today He came forth from a virgin who overcame nature and passed over marriage. For it was fitting for the ruler[37] of holiness to come forth from pure and holy offspring. For He is the one who, long ago, formed Adam from virgin earth, and from Adam formed woman without a wife.[38] For just as Adam produced a woman without a wife, in this way also today the virgin

gave birth to a man without a husband.[39] For He is a human, he says, and who will recognize Him? For since Womankind owed a favor to humankind, since Adam, without a wife, produced a woman, [M. 390] for this reason today the virgin gave birth without a husband, paying off the debt owed to men on Eve's behalf. For, lest Adam should become arrogant (since he produced a woman without a wife), for this reason the virgin also gave birth to a man without a husband, in order that by the shared miracle[40] He might show the equality of nature.

For just as He removed the rib from Adam and in now way lessened Adam, in this way also He formed for Himself a living temple in the virgin, and He did not dissolve her virginity. Even after the removal of the rib, Adam remained whole. And the virgin, too, after the infant came forth,[41] remained uncorrupted. For this reason He didn't fashion a temple for Himself from some other place, nor did He fashion and put on another body, lest He should seem to insult the dough[42] of Adam. For since the human, after being deceived, became a tool for the Devil, for this reason He recovered him who had been overthrown as a living temple, in order that, on account of the relationship[43] with his Maker, He should remove him from the Devil's acquaintance. Nevertheless, even though He became a human, He is not born like a human, but is begotten as God. For if He came forth from a common marriage, like me, He would be considered a lie by the many. But as it stands it was for this reason that He is born from a virgin, and even being born He keeps the womb unchanged and guards her virginity without loss, in order that the unusual manner of the conception should become an agent of a great faith for me.

And so if a Greek or a Jew asks me whether the Christ, being God in accordance with nature, has become human against nature, I will say, "Yes," calling as a witness of the argument the undefiled seal of her virginity. For in this way God is overcoming the order of nature. In this way He is the potter of the womb, and the originator of virginity, because He kept the manner of His birth undefiled, and inexpressibly built a temple for Himself, in the manner He desired. Tell me then, O Jew, did the virgin give birth, or not? If on the one hand she did give birth, confess the unusual birth.[44] If she did not give birth, why did you deceive Herod? For you told Herod, when he was inquiring where the Christ was born, that it was in Bethlehem of Judea. Did I know the village or the place? Did I know the worth of the one being born? Didn't Isaiah mention Him as God? For he says, "she shall bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel."[45] Did you not, senseless enemies, relate the truth? Didn't you, scribes and Pharisees, the strict observers of the Law, teach us all the things concerning Him? Did we know the language of the Hebrews? Didn't you interpret the Scriptures?

And after the virgin gave birth, and before she gave birth, lest it seem that you interpret what is said as a favor to God, did you not, when asked by Herod, bring in Micah the prophet as a witness, in order that he might ratify your word? For

he says, ”And you, Bethlehem, house of Ephrathah, in no way are you least among the leaders of Juda; for from you shall come a leader who will shepherd my people Israel.”[46] The prophet spoke ”from you” well. For He came forth from among you and He came into the world. For He who Is is advancing, ”but he who is not”[47] is created, or is becoming. For He both was, and was before, and always was. But, on the one hand, He always was as God, managing [M. 391]

the world. But today He came forth, on the one hand as a human, shepherding His people, while also as God, saving the world. Oh good enemies! Oh philanthropic accusers! Who, unawares, made known God born in Bethlehem, who pointed out the Master hidden in a manger, who unwillingly revealed the one lying in a cavern, who, not willing it, were benefactors,[48] who, desiring to conceal, revealed [Him]. Did you see your unlearned teachers? They do not understand what they teach; though they hunger, they offer nourishment; though they thirst, they give water; though they are poor, they enrich. Come, then, let’s hold a festival, come, let’s celebrate. For the manner of the festival is foreign, since the word of the birth is also novel, for today the temporal bond was broken, the Devil was put to shame, the demons fled, death was broken, Paradise was opened, the curse was destroyed, sin has gone out of the way, error has been driven off, truth has returned, the word of piety was spread about everywhere and ran. The citizenship of those above was planted in the earth, angels have fellowship with humans, and humans speak confidently with angels. Why? Because God came to earth, and man in heaven. All things have become mixed-up. For He came to earth, while being whole in heaven. And, being whole in Heaven, He is whole upon the earth. For being God, He became human, while not denying that he was God.

Being the impassible Word, He became flesh - for the sake of dwelling among us, He became flesh. For He did not become God, but He was [God]. For this reason He became flesh, so that a manger should receive Him whom Heaven could not contain. For this reason He was placed in a manger, so that He who nourishes all might receive a child’s nourishment from a virgin mother. For this reason the Father of the coming ages holds fast to the virgin arms as an infant at the breast, in order that He might become accessible to Magi. For the Magi came today, and, after they made a beginning in denying the tyrant, Heaven boasts, revealing its own Master by a star, and the Lord, sitting upon the body of a light cloud , hastens to Egypt, to one appearing to flee Herod’s plot, but in truth fulfilling what is spoken by Isaiah, ”For on that day Israel will be third among the Assyrians, and among the Egyptians my people will be blessed in the land which [the] Lord of hosts blessed, saying, ’My people in Egypt, among the Assyrians, and in Israel will be blessed.’”[49] What do you say, O Jew? Has the first become third? Were the Egyptians and Assyrians placed before, and the firstborn in Israel counted afterwards? Yes. The Assyrians will reasonably be first, since they worshipped Him first through the Magi. And the

Egyptians are after the Assyrians, since they received Him when fleeing Herod's plot.

And Israel is counted last, since they recognized Him after the ascension from the Jordan through the Apostles. And He entered into Egypt, shaking what had been made by human hand in Egypt, but not indiscriminately, when He closed off the gates of Egypt by the destruction of the firstborns. It is for this reason that He came in today as the firstborn, so that He [M. 392]

might put an end to the grief of the ancient gloominess. And Luke the Evangelist witnesses that the Christ is called the firstborn, saying, "She gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him the manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."[50] Therefore He entered into Egypt in order to put an end to the grief of the ancient gloominess, in place of whips imposing joy, instead of night and darkness giving [the] light of salvation. At that time the water of the river was profane because of the slaughter of the unripe infants. And so He who long ago had turned the water crimson entered into Egypt, and He made the river's streams to produce salvation, after He purified their defilement and profanity by the power of the Spirit. The Egyptians were in an ill plight, and in their madness denied God. And so He entered into Egypt and filled up God-loving souls with the knowledge of God. And He permitted the river to raise witnesses more endurable than crops. But, on account of the brevity of time, I wish to end my sermon here. And thus I shall end, having completed my sermon, that, the Word, being impassible, became flesh, His nature remaining unchanged. What am I to say, or what am I to speak? I see a craftsman and a manger, and an infant, and swaddling clothes, a virgin's birth lacking the necessities, all things cleaving to beggary, all things full of poverty.

Did you see wealth in great poverty? How He, being rich, became poor? How He had neither a couch nor a bed, but was cast upon a dray manger? Oh poverty, fountain of wealth! Oh immeasurable wealth, bearing the pretence of poverty! He lies in a manger, and He shakes the world; He is entwined in swaddling-clothes, and He will tear the bonds of sin asunder; He hasn't yet let out an articulate voice, and He instructed the Magi - and moved them to conversion. What am I to say, or what am I to speak? Behold, the infant is entwined in swaddling-clothes, and lies in a manger. Mary is also present, a virgin and a mother. Joseph, too, was present, a father in name. He is called a "husband; she is called a "wife" - lawful names that lack a union. Understand [this] with me only as far as words are concerned, but not deeds. He[51] was only betrothed, and the Holy Spirit overshadowed her. And so Joseph, confused, did not know what to call the infant. He did not dare to say [that the infant came] from adultery, he couldn't pour down blasphemy against the virgin, and he didn't endure to say that the child was his own. For he knew well that he new neither how or from where the child was born - and for this reason a

message from Heaven was given to him in his confusion about this matter through the voice of am angel: ”Do not be afraid, Joseph.

For what is born from her is from the Holy Spirit.”[52] For the Holy Spirit overshadowed the virgin. And why is He born from a virgin, and keeps her virginity undefiled? Because, long ago, the Devil deceived Eve while a virgin; for this reason Gabriel shared the good news with Mary while a virgin. But Eve, when she was deceived, on the one hand, gave birth to a word[53] [that was the] cause of death. But, in contrast, after Mary was told the good news, she bore the Word[54] in flesh, the agent of our eternal life. Eve’s word pointed out a tree, through which she thrust Adam from Paradise. [M. 393] But the Word from the virgin pointed out the Cross, through which He led the bandit[55] (representing Adam) into Paradise. For since the Greeks didn’t believe, or the Jews, or the children of heretics, that God begot [Him] without change and without suffering, for this reason today, coming forth from a body liable to suffering, He maintained the body that was liable to suffering as impassible, in order to show that just as He didn’t dissolve her virginity after He was born from the virgin, in this way also God, His holy substance[56] remaining without flux or change, begot God in a manner fit for God as God.

For since humans, after forsaking Him, carved images in human form which they served to the assault of the Creator, for this reason today the Word of God, being God, was seen in human form, so that He might break the lie and secretly bring worship[57] to Himself. And so, let us give glory to Christ, the one who, from pathless ways, made a way, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, and into eternity.[58] Amen.

[End] [1] This translation was commissioned by Roger Pearse and translated from the text printed in the Patrologia Graeca, vol. 56, cols. 385-396. The translation has been placed in the public domain. The homily is transmitted under the name of Chrysostom, but scholars have usually considered that it is probably not authentic. According to J. Quasten, Patrology 3, p.454-5, its authenticity was defended by C. Martin, Un centon d’extraits de l’homelié in Salvatoris Nostri Jesu Christi Nativitatem de saint Jean Chrysostome, Museon 54 (1941), 30-33 and 48-52 (Greek text). [2]ἄνθρωπος. [3]Διˈοἰκονομίαν. Possibly, ”Because of His ordering” or ”dispensation.” [4] Literally, ”the one of righteousness.” [5] i.e. Bethlehem contained God but did not limit Him. [6] Or, ”all things are in agreement with God.” [7]ὁ ὢν. [8] Literally, ”in accordance with a separation from divinity.” [9]Θεότης. [10] Literally, ”in accordance with an advancement from a human.” [11]Διὰ τὸ ἀπαθές. [12] Φύσις.

[13] i.e. Herod the Great. See Matt 2:1-23. [14] Psalm 78:4. [15] I.e. never having experienced sexual intercourse. [16] Pl. [17]αὐτόματα ῥεῖθρα. [18] Or, ”servants.” Similarly with other references to slaves in this column. [19] Or, ”waiting upon [Him].” [20] Literally, ”bearing.” [21] Luke 2:14. [22] Luke 2:14. [23]ἡ

ἄνω γέννησις. [24]ἐννοῆσαι. [25]ὑπολαβεῖν. [26]ῥεῦσιν. [27] Literally, ”I undertook,” the aorist. [28] Φύσις. [29] Or, ”make.” [30] Luke 1:34. [31] Luke 1:35. [32] Isaiah 7:14. [33] i.e. ”the synagogue.” [34] i.e. ”the church” [35] Or, ”nations.” [36] Herod. [37] Πρύτανις. [38] Or, ”woman.” Similarly in this section for other instances of ”wife.” [39] Or, ”man.” Similarly in this section for other instances of ”husband.” [40]Τῷ κοινῷ τοῦ θαύματος. [41] Literally, ”the coming forth of the infant.” [42] Or, ”mixture.” [43]Συνάφεια. [44] Possibly, ”offspring.” [45] Isaiah 7:14; Matt 1:23. [46] Micah 5:2, though the text as quoted here differs drastically from the Septuagint text.

[47]ὀ μὴ ὢν. [48] Or possibly, ”committed a kind service.” [49] Isaiah 19:24. [50] Luke 2:7. [51] Joseph. [52] Matt 1:20. [53]ῥῆμα. There is a play on words here between ”word,” ῥῆμα, which here means a spoken word, by which death entered the world and humankind was cast from the Garden, and Word, Λόγος, through which humankind can again enter into paradise. [54]Λόγος. [55] The repentant thief who was crucified at the same time as Christ. See Luke 23:39-43. [56]Οὐσία. [57] Λατρεία. [58] Literally, ”into the ages of ages.” This text was commissioned by Roger Pearse, 2013. This file and all material on this page is in the public domain - copy freely. Greek text is rendered using unicode.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator’s own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.

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