Against the circuses and theatres

John Chrysostom (c. AD 349–407)

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Homily of St John Chrysostom, archbishop of Constantinople, our sainted father: — Against those who have abandoned the church and deserted it for hippodromes and theatres.

[Translated by Mark Vermes] [272] Can this be tolerated? Can this be accepted? I want to call you to witness against yourselves. That is what God did with the Hebrews. He called them as witnesses against themselves when he said: ”My people, what have I done to you? How have I hurt you or how have I annoyed you? Answer me.” Again: ”What fault did your fathers find in me?” I shall imitate this, and shall ask you again: Can this be tolerated? Can this be accepted? After hearing lengthy series of speeches and so much teaching, some people have left us, and deserted us for the spectacle of horse racing. They have become so frenzied that they fill the whole city with their shouting and disorderly racket, creating huge laughter or rather lamentation. Meanwhile I, sitting at home, hearing the outbreak of shouting, have suffered more grievously than seafarers in a storm. For in the same way as those seafarers, when the waves break against the side of their ship, fear that their lives are in danger, so too have I, when those more dreadful cries have broken over me, cowered to the ground and covered myself up. The spectators higher up behave so disgracefully, while the ones further down in the middle of the crowd cheer on the riders and shout worse than the first group.

What shall I say? Or what explanation shall I give, if a visitor arrives from somewhere and challenges us and says: ”Is this the city of the Apostles? Is this the city that received so great a teacher? Is this the people who love Christ, who is the genuine, spiritual, spectacle?” You have not even shown respect for the very day on which the sacraments of the salvation of mankind were celebrated. But on Good Friday, when your Lord [273] was being crucified on behalf of the world, and such a sacrifice was being offered, and paradise was being opened, and the robber was led back to his old country; when the curse was being undone and sin was made to vanish, and the ancient war was ended and God was reconciled towards men, and everything was being transformed - on that very day, when it was necessary to fast and give glory, and to raise prayers of thanksgiving for the good things in the world to the one who created them, instead you left the church and the spiritual eucharist, and the assembly of the brothers, and the solemnity of the fast, and as a prisoner of the devil were you dragged off to that spectacle? Can this be tolerated? Can this be accepted? I shall not stop saying

these things constantly, and assuaging my pain that way, not by suppressing it with silence, but by bringing it out into public view and putting it in front of your eyes.

How will we be able to propitiate God from now on? How can we mollify his anger? Three days ago a stormy raincloud burst and soaked everything. It snatched their food from the very mouths of the farmers, so to speak, flattened the waving cornfields, and ruined everything else due to the abundance of water. Processions and supplications were held, and our whole city like a torrent ran to the places of the apostles. We claimed as advocates St Peter and the blessed Andrew, and the famous pair of apostles, Paul and Timothy. After that, when the anger eased, we crossed the sea and mastered the waves, and ran to the chief apostles, Peter the foundation of our faith, and Paul the instrument of divine election. We conducted a spiritual gathering, and proclaimed their struggles, their achievements and their victories over the demons. And yet, unalarmed by dread about what had happened, and not learning from the magnitude of the apostles' achievements, at once within the space of a single day, do you jump around and shout, not seeing that your own soul is being dragged into captivity by its base pursuits? If you were addicted to watching the circuit of wild beasts, why did you not yoke the wild passions in yourself, namely fury and desire, and place on them the bridle of philosophy, which is virtuous and light, and impose the correct argument, and drive them towards the prize of a higher vocation, not running from defilement to defilement, but from earth to heaven? That type of horse race produces great benefit as well as pleasure. But you simply put down your business and left it as it was, and sat watching other people's victories, frittering away such a day idly and in vain and for a base purpose.

[274] Do you not know that just as when we hand over money to our servants, and we demand accounts from them down to the last obol, in the same way God will demand an account from us of the days of our life, as to how we have spent each day? What then shall we say? What shall be our defence, when we are requested to give our accounts of that day? For your sake the sun rose, and the moon brightened the night, and the intricate pattern of the stars shone forth. Winds blew for your sake, and rivers flowed. For your sake seeds sprouted and plants grew, and the course of nature preserved its own order. Day appeared and night followed. And all of this happened for your sake. But do you, when all creation serves you, satisfy the desire of the devil? You have rented such a home from God, I mean this world, but you have not paid the rent. And you were not satisfied with the first day, but on the second day, when you should have paused for a while from the evil that was enveloping you, you returned again this time to the theatre. You ran from smoke into fire, descending into another pit that was even worse. Old men shamed their grey hair, and young men threw their youth away.

Fathers brought their sons, from the beginning guiding inexperienced youth into the pits of depravity, so it would not have been a mistake to call those men child killers rather than fathers, as they surrendered their children's souls to evil. What kind of evil, you ask. Because of it I am in agony, because although you are ill you do not know you are ill or call

the doctor. You have become filled with adultery, and you ask ”What kind of evil? Have you not listened to Christ when he said: ”Anyone who looks at a woman with desire has already committed adultery with her”? ”What if I do not look at her with desire? you ask. How will you be able to convince me? For if anyone cannot control what he watches, but is so enthusiastic about doing so, how will he be able to remain virtuous after he has finished watching? Is your body made of stone? Or iron? You are clothed with flesh, human flesh, which is enflamed by desire as easily as grass.

Why do I talk about the theatre? Often if we meet a woman in the marketplace, we are alarmed. But you sit in your upper seat, where there is such an invitation to outrageous behaviour, and see a woman, a prostitute, entering bareheaded and with a complete lack of shame, dressed in golden garments, flirting coquettishly and singing harlots' songs with seductive tunes, and uttering disgraceful words. She behaves so shamelessly that if you watch her and give consideration, you will bow your head in shame. Do you dare to say you suffer no human reaction? Is your body made of stone? Or iron? I shall not refrain from saying the same things again. Surely you are not a better philosopher than those great and noble men, who were cast down merely by such a sight? [275] Have you not heard what Solomon says: ”If someone walks onto a fire of coals, will he not burn his feet? If someone lights a fire in his lap, will he not burn his clothing? It is just the same for the man who goes to a woman that doesn't belong to him. For even if you did not have intimate relations with the prostitute, in your lust you coupled with her, and you committed the sin in your mind.

And it was not only at that time, but also when the theatre has closed, and the woman has gone away, her image remains in your soul, along with her words, her figure, her looks, her movement, her rhythm, and her distinctive and meretricious tunes; and having suffered countless wounds you go home. Is it not this that leads to the disruption of households? Is it not this that leads to the destruction of temperance, and the break up of marriages? Is it not this that leads to wars and battles, and odious behaviour lacking any reason? For when, saturated with that woman, you return home as her captive, your wife appears more disagreeable, your children more burdensome, and your servants troublesome, and your house superfluous. Your customary concerns seem to annoy you when they relate to managing your necessary business, and everyone who visits is an irritating nuisance.

The cause of this is that you do not return home alone, but keeping the prostitute with you. She does not go visibly and openly, which would have been easier. For your wife could have quickly driven her away. But she is ensconced in your mind and your consciousness, and she lights within you the Babylonian furnace, or rather something much worse. For it is not tow, naphtha and pitch, but her qualities mentioned above that provide fuel for the fire, and everything is upside down. It is just like people suffering from a fever, who have no reason to rebuke those who attend them, but because of the affliction of their illness are unpleasant to everyone, reject their food, insult their doctors, are bad tempered with their families and furious with those who care for them. Just so those who suffer from this dread disease are

restless and vexed, and see that woman at every turn. What a terrible state of affairs! The wolf and the lion and other beasts when they are shot at flee the huntsman. But a man, though the most intelligent, when wounded pursues the woman who has wounded him, so as to receive a much more deadly missile and revel in the wound. What is most sickening of all, is that he makes the disease incurable. For if someone does not hate the injury and does not want to be free of it, why would he summon a doctor?

Therefore I lament and am in torment, because after receiving such a brutal outrage you return from the theatre, and for the sake of a small pleasure you undergo continual pain. For even before the punishment of Hell, you demand the ultimate penalty here. Tell me, does it not merit the final punishment, to nurture such a desire, to be constantly enflamed, and to carry everywhere the furnace of unnatural love and the condemnation of your own conscience? How will you climb those sacred steps? [276] How will you touch the heavenly table? How will you hear the sermon about temperance, when you are full of such injuries and wounds, and your intellect is the slave of your passion? Why should I say anything else? From what is now going on amongst us it is possible to see the pain of your intellect. Now just as I am speaking these words I can see some people beating their foreheads, and I am very grateful to you for being such a compassionate people. In fact I think many of those who have never sinned are beating themselves, because they suffer pain from their brothers' wounds. Therefore I lament and grieve, because the devil is tormenting this flock. But if you want to we can quickly block his entrance. How and by what means? If we could see those who are diseased becoming healthy. If we could unfurl the nets of our doctrine and go around seeking those who have been captured by wild beasts, and snatch them from the lion's throat.

Do not say to me "There are only a few who have been taken from the flock. Even if there were only ten, it would be no ordinary loss. Even if there were five, or two or one. That famous shepherd left behind the ninety nine sheep for the same reason, and ran after the one sheep, and did not return until he brought it back with him, and completed the defective number of one hundred through the restoration of that one which had wandered away. Do not say "It is only one. But consider, it is a soul, on whose account everything that can be seen came into being: laws, penalties and punishments, and countless wonders, and the infinitely varied works of God. On that soul's account he did not spare his only-born son. Consider what a price has been paid even for the one man, and do not undervalue his salvation, but go away and bring him back to us, and persuade him no longer to fall into the same mistakes. Then we have a sufficient defence. But if he should not give in, either to our advice or to your entreaties, then I shall thereafter use my power, which God gave us not for destruction but for construction.

Therefore I make this proclamation, in a clear and loud voice, that if anyone after this exhortation and teaching deserts back to the unlawful disgrace of the theatre, I shall not receive him within these precincts, I will not let him share in the sacraments, I will not let him touch the sacred table. Just as shepherds separate the sheep that are afflicted by

mange from the healthy sheep, so as to prevent the rest from catching the disease, so I shall act in the same way. For if in ancient times the leper was ordered to sit outside the camp, and even if he was a king, was expelled along with his crown, so much more should we expel from this sacred camp the one who has leprosy in his soul. Just as in the beginning I used exhortation and advice, so now after all this exhortation and teaching it is necessary from now on to deploy exclusion. For it is a year since I entered your city, and I have not ceased from frequent and constant reminders to you about this. [277] But since some have persisted in the putrefaction, well then from now on we should introduce exclusion. If I do not possess an iron sword, at least I have a word which is sharper than iron. If I cannot touch fire, I have a doctrine which is hotter than fire, and can burn more fiercely.

Do not scorn my decree. Although we are worthless and most pitiable, nevertheless we have been granted a status by the grace of God that can achieve these things. Let such people be ejected, so that those of us who are healthy may become more healthy, and those who are sick may restore themselves from serious illness. If you shudder when you hear this decree (and I see that you are all looking gloomy and flinching), let them repent, and the decree will be cancelled. For just as I have received the power to bind, so I have the power to release, and to recall them back. I do not wish to excommunicate our brothers, but to dispel the disgrace of the Church. For as things stand even the pagans will laugh at us, and the Jews will mock us, when we overlook our own members sinning in this way. But in the other case they will greatly praise us, and admire the Church, and respect our laws. So let not a single one of those who remain in this prostitution set foot in the church, but let him be censured by you, and let him be a common enemy. For if anyone, as it is said, will not heed my word set out in my letter, mark him out and do not associate with him. But do this: do not share conversation, or receive him into your home, or share your table, or your going out or going in, or visit the forum with him.

In this way we will easily win them back. Just as hunters chase their difficult prey not just from one direction but from all sides, and so drive them into the net, so too shall we herd together those who have been driven into a frenzy, and quickly hurl them into the nets of salvation, we on one side and you on the other. In order that this will happen you too will share our anger, or rather suffer pain on account of God's laws, and soon retrieve those of the brethren who are diseased in this way and breaking the law, so that you will keep them for ever. For it will be no ordinary charge against you, if you ignore such destruction, but you will be subject to the greatest penalty. In men's households if one of the servants is caught stealing silver or gold, the thief himself is not the only one punished, but also his conspirators and anyone who did not report him. So much more does the same thing happen in the Church. For at that time God will ask you: "When you saw no silver or gold vessel being robbed from My house, but temperance itself being stolen, and the one who had taken the venerable body, and shared in so great a sacrifice, departing into the place of the devil and committing such sins, how could you keep silent? How did you tolerate it? Why did you not report it to the priest? And you will be subjected to extreme chastisement.

For that reason I too, though it will cause me pain, will not fail to use any of the more grievous penalties. [278] For it is much better that we should suffer pain here and be freed of the coming judgement, rather than use indulgent words here and be punished then alongside you. For it is not safe or without danger for us to tolerate such things in silence. Each of you will give an account of himself. But I am liable to account for the salvation of all of you. For that reason I shall not cease doing and saying everything, even if I have to cause you pain or appear hateful, or tiresome, so that I will be able to stand before that awesome tribunal, without a stain or a blemish or any such thing. May it be with the help of the prayers of the saints that those who have been lost may quickly return, and those who have remained unharmed may advance towards greater propriety and temperance. In this way you may be saved, and we may rejoice, and God may be glorified now and always, and for unending ages upon ages. Amen.

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