Chrysostom's First Sermon

John Chrysostom (c. AD 349–407)

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Homily given by St. John Chrysostom on the day that he was ordained priest.
Foreword. John was called to the priesthood and ordained by Flavian, bishop of Antioch, early in the year 386. So this is the date of his first discourse: he had not yet descended into the lists, as he himself puts it. In this essay, his modesty shines no less than his eloquence: he frequently calls himself a little boy μειρακίσκος; although, as his birth dated back at least to the year 347, he was then about forty years old. This shows that the terms, childhood, old age, and the like, so often used by the speaker, provide no data when it comes to working out the dates of his life. This point we have already made and solidly proven in the famous discourse on his mother.

HOMILY.
St. John Chrysostom speaks of himself, the bishop and the people. 1. Is what has happened to us true? Is what strikes us reality? Are we not in the grip of an illusion? Are these hallucinations of the night and of dreams, or the clear sight of day, and are we all awake at this hour? Who can persuade himself that in broad daylight, when men have all their intelligence and all their activity, a poor child, without any merit, is vested with such power and such an honour? That this might happen in a dream is not a wonder: awkward people, men so poor they do not have even necessary food, they sometimes dream that they take on strength and beauty, that they are seated at a royal table, but this alas! is just an effect of sleep, a trick of the imagination; we know that dream is a skilled craftsman of errors and wonders; it likes to trick us, it delights in a world of strange phantoms. Daytime is another matter, and nothing similar takes place in the world of realities. It is impossible, nevertheless, to doubt it: this is all too certain, everything is done, done, done before your eyes; the wonders of the dream are overwhelmed by the simple truth, and I see here now this great city, so many people, this astonishing multitude, who direct their eager eyes to my littleness, as if something remarkable and beautiful must come out of my mouth.

Well! even if my words could flow with the fullness and majesty of the great rivers, and I had in me the waves of eloquence, the sight of the crowd gathered to listen would stop them suddenly in there course and make them flow back to their source. And when we are so far from such an abundance, where our words can not even compare with the slightest rain,

how could they not be withered by fear to some degree? How is it that the same phenomenon does not happen in the soul as in the body? What can I say? Does it not often happen that we seem to be afraid of the things that we have before us and that we have a firm grasp of, as if our nerves were paralyzed and our powers destroyed. This is what I fear at the moment: the thoughts that I have gathered with much trouble, although they are basically irrelevant and worthless, I tremble to see them escape my memory, fade and vanish, leaving my soul in a vacuum. I beseech you all, you who command, and you whom I must obey, the agony in which you have thrown me by your willingness to come and hear me: change it, by your fervent prayers, into a holy boldness; inspire me with the strength by your representations to He who fills intrepid pioneers of truth with his word (Psalm., 67:12), to put His discourses on my lips. Ephes., vi, 19.

This will not be difficult for you, numerous as you are, and having so many merits to present to God, to strengthen a soul which is lacking experience and frozen with fear. In fact you will satisfy a duty of justice by fulfilling our wishes: for you and your charity, we will face up to the chances of a most violent and most tyrannical game, in addressing, despite our inability, the Ministry of the word, in coming to tread the burning arena of intellect, we who have never attempted this noble exercise, and always kept silent in the ranks of listeners.

What sort of man would be so cold, so insensitive as to remain silent in the face of such a meeting, even if he was not speaking to brothers whose sympathy is equal to their pious impatience, and if he was the most incompetent of men to speak in public? I promised myself, opening my mouth for the first time in church, to devote to God the first fruits of my word, this gift that comes to us from him. It must be so: if the first-fruits of the crops and the wine-press are owed to him, still more are those of the word: to him, thus, our first flowers! The more the fruits are blessed for us, the more they are acceptable to Him. The grape and the ear of corn grow from of the bosom of the earth, nourished by the waters of heaven and the labors of man: the sacred hymn of devotion born of the soul is nourished by a pure conscience, and God receives it into the heavenly granaries. As the soul is superior to the earth, so the latter result outweighs the first. As one of the prophets, a man eminent and sublime, Hosea, speaking to sinners who wanted to appease the wrath of God, advised them to make an offering, not whole herds of cattle, nor abundant measures of wheat, nor a turtle-dove, or pigeon, or anything similar, finally, and what then? what does he say? "Bring words with you. Hos. xiv, 3. — What kind of sacrifice is that?

you may ask. — The greatest of all, O my beloved! the most beautiful, most perfect. Who says so? A man deeply versed in the science of religion, the famous, the magnanimous David. Rendering thanks to God one day for a victory he had won, he said: "I will praise the name of my God through a song, and I will honour him by my praises. Psalm., 68:31. And to show the excellence of this sacrifice, he immediately adds: "And this tribute will be more pleasing to God than the sacrifice of a young bull whose horns and nails have begun to grow. Ibid., 32.

And I too wanted to sacrifice some victims on this day, to water the spiritual altar with streams of mystical blood. But, alas! a wise man closes my mouth and stops me with these words: "Praise loses its beauty on the lips of a sinner." Eccli., xv, 9. Although a garland may be priceless, it is not enough that the flowers are pure, pure also must be the hand that has woven it. Likewise, although an anthem may be worthy of God, the devotion of the words must be united to the piety of the soul who offers them. And mine has no purity, no confidence, it is full of sins. Under these provisions, silence is not only commanded by this law, there is a still more ancient law that the prophet who spoke to us earlier of sacrifices gives: "Praise the Lord in the heavens, praise him on the highest peaks;" and further on: "Praise the Lord upon the earth." Psalm., 148:1 and 7. In calling for the same purpose the two types of creatures, those of the upper world and those of the underworld, things visible and invisible, those who fall within our senses and those that are perceived by the intelligence, in forming a single choir of heaven and earth to celebrate the King of the universe, David does not accept the sinner, he obviously excludes him from this divine harmony.

2. So that the truth is put in its true light, let us return to the main features of this psalm. Having said: "Praise the Lord in the heavens, praise him on the highest peaks," the Psalmist continues: "All you angels of the Lord, all ye Virtues of God, set forth his praises." You see the angels who praise the Creator, you see the archangels, you see the cherubim and seraphim, the supreme virtues. In this last word, all the people in heaven are included. Do you see the sinner? And let no one say: How could we see a sinner in heaven? —Well, descend to earth, pass to another part of the choir, the sinner is no more visible: "Praise the Lord, inhabitants of the earth, sea-monsters, and all who people the depths, beasts of the field, and cattle, reptiles, and birds that go through the air on your wings."

It was not without reason that I stopped once more, in repeating these words: confusion reigned in my thoughts, I could not restrain my tears, and I was about to burst into tears. What could be conceived more appalling, tell me? The scorpions, reptiles and dragons are called by the Prophet to praise him who gave them life: the sinner alone is excluded from the sacred choir. And nothing is more just. It is a perverse and cruel beast, sin; it works its malice, not on the body, its slave, but even on the glory of God, "Because of you, says the Lord, my name is blasphemed among the nations." Isa., 52:5. That is why the Prophet banishes the sinner from the concert of creatures, like a bad citizen is exiled from his homeland. A skilled musician removes from his lute a string that makes inharmonic sounds, so that it does not destroy the effect of the instrument; a doctor versed in his art does not hesitate to cut off a gangrenous limb, lest the evil is communicated to the healthy part of the body: the Prophet does the same, and makes dissent and decay disappear from the universe.

What conduct should we adopt? Expelled, cut off as we are, we should, it seems, condemn ourselves to silence. So we should not mention ourselves, I ask? Is it not permissible to celebrate the Lord by our hymns? Have we have in vain solicited the help of your prayers, called for the protection of your charity? I think not: I perceive, I have adopted another way

to glorify God. Your prayers illuminate my perplexity like lightning in the darkness: I will praise those who serve the same God as myself. Yes, I can praise them, and these praises, directed to servants, turn to the honour of our common Master. It is impossible to doubt it, because the Saviour said: "Let your light shine before men, so that they shall see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven." Matth., 5:16. See then another kind of glorification which the sinner himself can use without violating the law.

3. But which of the servants of our God may we praise? And who else but our spiritual father, the minister of the Gospel charged with instructing the our land, and through our land the world? From him you have learned how to remain faithful to the truth unto death, and under his inspiration, you have taught the rest of mankind to give up life rather than piety. Would you like us to braid a garland for him, after that? This also was my desire, but I have before me a vast ocean of merits, and I fear that my feeble voice, once engaged in these depths, would no longer be able to return to the surface. It is necessary here to talk of brilliant deeds that are already long ago, of perilous journeys and long vigils, of dedicated care and judgments full of wisdom, of noble battles, victories added to victories, trophies to trophies: all things which are beyond the power not only of my tongue, but of human language, and which, to be celebrated with dignity, demand the voice and zeal of an apostle able to say and teach everything. But we will leave this difficult subject to deal with another that presents fewer dangers, a sea in which a small boat can venture. Let us talk simply of the austerity of his manners, his rigid temperance, his utter contempt for material well-being, the admirable simplicity of his table, and do not forget the grandeur and luxury that surrounded him in childhood.

It is no wonder, indeed, that a man brought up in poverty as a practical way of life, is resigned to such harsh deprivation. Poverty itself, the constant companion of his pilgrimage, makes every day the burden lighter. But anyone who has been master of much wealth does not readily disengage himself from it, such is the swarm of many passions that have enveloped his soul. On the eyes of his intelligence weighs a cloud so thick of disordered appetite, that he can no longer see the heavens, that constantly he has his head and heart inclined towards the earth. Nothing blocks our rise towards heaven like riches and the evils of which they are the source.

It is not I who say this. Christ himself pronounced this sentence: "A camel will pass more easily through the eye of a needle than a rich man will enter the kingdom of heaven." Matth., 19:24. However a thing so difficult, or rather, impossible, offers only more difficulty. What Peter doubted in the presence of his Master, the problem that demanded a solution, we have now amply witnessed by experience. Not only do the rich go into heaven, but he has also led in an entire people. And that, despite his wealth and other obstacles that are not inferior to that one: youth, a premature independence as a result the death of his parents, things are so full of charms and so fruitful in poisons. Our father has triumphed over all, he has somehow taken possession of heaven, embracing the heavenly philosophy. No, he did not allow himself to be seduced by the splendour of this life, he has not turned his eyes to the

glory of his ancestors. I am wrong, however; the glory of his ancestors, he has always had present to his mind. Not those to whom nature had united him by ties beyond his control, but those he himself chose in religion, and it is these that he has followed in his life.

He considered the patriarch Abraham, and the great Moses who, although high in the royal palace, accustomed from childhood to lavish meals, having lived among the parties of the Egyptians — and you know what were the manners of those barbarians, to what degree they heaped up pomp and pride — repulsed all these benefits to go knead clay, aspiring to become a slave, himself the son of his king and already sharing in the honours of the throne. Soon he reappeared, invested with a higher power than that of which he had deprived. After the exile, the servitude with his stepfather, the weariness of distance, he was on his return made the master, or rather the god of the king himself. "I have made you the god of Pharaoh. Exod., vii, 1. Without wearing the diadem, without wearing purple, or driving in a chariot of gold, trampling all this regal pomp underfoot, he eclipsed the splendours of royalty, "All the glory of the daughter of the king came from within. Psalm. 45:14. We saw him sceptre in hand, for he commanded, not only men, but also heaven, earth, sea, the very essence of air and water, lakes, springs, and rivers. The elements were transformed at Moses' command, nature obeyed his will, and it seemed a docile servant, eager, who, seeing the friend of its master, shows him its submission and renders him the duty that would be obtained by the master himself. This is the model on which he whom we are praising formed himself.

He imitated it from his youth, if ever he was young. Myself, I do not think so, since the maturity of his intellect dates even from the cradle. Still young in the number of years, he embraced all the teachings of the divine philosophy. Scarcely had he understood that human nature is like a wild and uncultivated soil than he set vigorously to work, he cut short all the diseases of the soul. The word of piety for him was like a sickle to cut off all weeds, and his soul was just like pure earth ready to receive the divine seed; this seed, he buried deeply, so that it was neither withered by the rays of the sun, nor suffocated by the thorns.

This is how he has treated his soul. As for the flesh, he has checked its leanings by the remedies of temperance; seeing it as an impetuous horse, he pull on the reins by fasting, not afraid to bloody the mouth of the passions in order to master them and lead them to his goal. All the same he did so with a wise moderation, and was careful not to exhaust the body, lest, after having ruined the powers of the horse, he rendered it unserviceable. But he kept it no less from getting overweight and exuberant, so that it would not rise against reason, when responsible for his conduct; he did not want it either weak or recalcitrant. As he was in youth, so he showed himself later; and now that his age protects him against the storms of life, his vigilance is still the same. Youth, indeed, is like a sea of angry waves, constantly agitated by the winds, while old age is a quiet haven in which happy sailors whose courage has merited this noble repose enjoy profound security. Although, as I said, quietly sitting in the harbour, he watches with equal care. And this holy terror he received from Paul, who was transported into heaven, and on touching the earth again, exclaimed: "I fear that after

having preached the Gospel to others, I myself may be reproved. I Cor. 9:27. Thus he keeps himself in perpetual fear, so as to be in perpetual security.

He is always there at the helm, constantly observing, not the movement of the stars nor the rocks hidden beneath the waves, nor the dangers that threaten the ship, but the attacks of demons and the wiles of the devil, the struggles of the spirit and the tempests of the heart, looking out at all his army in order to make it invincible. It is not enough for him that the ship does not sink. He has left nothing undone so sedition or pirates cannot seize any of his traveling companions. Thanks to his care, thanks to his prudence, we pursue in peace the course of our voyage, setting out all our sails in the wind.

4. Certainly when we had lost the father that we had before, and who had formed himself for us, our state seemed deplorable to us, and we gave out inconsolable wailing, hoping that this throne would be occupied by a man like him, but as soon as his successor appeared among us, all this sadness vanished, our troubles vanished like clouds under the sun, and that not in a slow and gradual way, but with as much rapidity as if the blessed pontiff, rousing in the tomb, was back on his throne. What am I doing, though, what imprudence is mine? In my love for our father, in my admiration for his virtues, I have let myself be dragged beyond the limits, not of my subject, but those limits imposed on me by my youth; because I do not think that I have spoken an eulogy when I consider the merits which need celebration. No matter; let us bring our boat back into the port and confine ourselves to a respectful silence. It is not without regret, however, that my speech will stop. I long to take it further, and I feel a bitter pain to leave it incomplete. Children, it is impossible to appease our hunger. Let us cease to pursue what we never reach, and let us content ourselves with what we have said. When we have in our hands a rare and precious perfume, it is not just pouring it in the bowl, it's by dipping your fingertips in it that you change the air around you and anoint those present. This is what is happening to us right now, not by the powers of our eloquence, but the living emanations of his virtues.

Enough. Let us turn to prayer. Let us ask God that our common mother remains unshaken and unsullied, and that we shall long have this father, this pastor, this master, this pilot. I dare not speak to you about myself. I can hardly count myself among the priests, an abortion should not be counted among the children on whom nature has lavished all his gifts. But if you deign to remember me, as we remembers a miserable and wretched being, pray that a superabundant power comes on me from on high. I needed protection while I was living for myself, free from all other cares, and now I am obliged to appear in the church — is it by the favour of man, is it by the will of God? I have not said it to him, I should not discuss this matter before you, lest I be accused of hiding my thoughts — now that I belong to the people, and I submit, never more to shake off this heavy yoke, the more I need you all to extend a helping hand to me, that all pray for me so that I may restore intact to the Divine Master the deposit that he gave me. On that day each custodian will appear before the Supreme Court and give an account of his administration. Yes, pray that I do not experience the fate of those who were loaded with chains and plunged into the outer darkness, that I am

counted with those to whom will be shown mercy by the grace and love of Jesus Christ Our Lord, to whom glory, empire, and adoration belongs, for the ages of ages. Amen.

This text was translated from the French translation of the abbé Bareille (1865) by Roger Pearse, 2010. This file and all material on this page is in the public domain - copy freely. Greek text is rendered using unicode.

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