

The Life of St. John Chrysostom – An Overview
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My name is Fr. Gregory Joyce. I am the Rector of St. Vladimir Church in Ann Arbor, MI. My task here today is to give an overview of the life of St. John Chrysostom in 20 minutes or less. In addition, being the first speaker, I've really got to give a zinger of a talk to get you excited about the next speakers. That's a pretty tall order, I think. Let's see if I can do it!

My undergraduate work was in History. It has been my experience that a 20 minute talk comprised of principally dates and names is an excellent cure for insomnia, but not a very good way to get people interested in what actually happened. Thus, I'll try to avoid such a laundry list of data. Together – yes, I expect YOUR participation in this – I think we can learn something about St. John Chrysostom's life, and especially what he means to us in our days – nearly 1600 years after his repose. If you have questions please raise your hand and I'll stop and we'll discuss these. If you don't we'll talk a bit at the end of my presentation. Without further adieu, then, let us begin!

As I believe we are all aware, we are here to prepare ourselves for the 1600th anniversary of St. John's repose. This anniversary takes place next year and will be marked by a hierarchal Divine Liturgy headed by our First Hierarch, Metropolitan Laurus, at the only parish named after St. John Chrysostom outside of Russia, the parish in House Springs, MO, just outside St. Louis. If you're quick on the fly with your subtraction you can figure out that St. John must have reposed in the Lord in the year 407. He died in exile, in fact, but more about that later. He was born in Antioch – in Syria – 60 years before that, in 347. His parents were unbelievers according to St. Dmitry of Rostov, but other sources say that his mother was a believer and his father a

pagan. In any case, and according to all sources, they both ended their days as Orthodox Christians, at least partially inspired by the example of their pious son. Before we get to that, though, let's talk just a bit about the early life of St. John.

When he reached the proper age to study he was entrusted to those in Antioch that could provide him the best possible education, as his father, being a Roman General, was quite wealthy. These were pagan philosophers, but just as with St. Gregory the Theologian and St. Basil the Great, who also received the best education that the world could offer them a generation before St. John, all these three prominent hierarchs used what they learned in the world and applied this knowledge to the support of the Holy Church. None became eminent pagan philosophers, but rather all took the education they received at the hands of the pagans and turned it to good. This is the first lesson, and perhaps the most important lesson, we can learn from the life of St. John Chrysostom in my opinion. All of us here either are, have been, or soon will be college students as I understand it. We have all, in our own generation, pursued or are pursuing the same goal of education – the best education we can attain – that St. John Chrysostom did. It is up to us, however, to decide how we will use this education. Will we use it for the good of our fellow man and of the Holy Church as did St. John, or for some other lower pursuit? Each of us has to make that decision and be very careful as we make it, but I hope St. John's example provides us a good path to follow as we consider our future.

Having received the best education, St. John was baptized by Patriarch Meletius of Antioch and soon went to Athens to pursue further studies. Please note that this time in the history of the early church, and in this area, infant baptism was not always practiced, but rather many were baptized when they reached the age of 16 or so. As with many instances in the early church there was a variety of practice throughout the Church, and over time infant baptism

became the norm that we practice today. Shortly after St. John's baptism his father departed to the Lord. His mother was left a relatively young widow, and this is not an inconsequential variable in the decisions that St. John makes in his life as a young man as we shall see.

St. John desired to enter a monastery and pursue the life of a monk once he had finished his secular education. However, his mother convinced him not to make her a widow for a second time, so to speak, by depriving her of him just as she had been deprived of his father. St. John agreed to remain with his mother until her repose, and only then to enter into the monastery. This decision on St. John's part shouldn't be overlooked as something without consequence. First, we should observe how he is obedient to his mother. We live in such a time that we consider it great suffering if we don't get what we want when we want it – immediately. St. John understood, and we should too, that sometimes we have to wait for what we want, even if it is ostensibly something good for our souls. No doubt St. John took counsel with his own spiritual father as he made these decisions, and so too should we. Further, we see here something quite instructive: St. John used this time to study in great depth the Holy Scriptures. It is not as if he couldn't have done that in the monastery of course, but perhaps living in the world he was able to do so from a different perspective, or without the distractions that the obediences of a novice in a monastery would cause him. In any case, I believe the instructive lesson for us here is that he made the best of the situation that he was in given the circumstances at hand rather than simply grumbling, doing nothing, and becoming bitter. We need to do the same, I believe. That is, we have to make the best of the situation we find ourselves in for our salvation. Some things we can control, others we cannot. We should feel free to control those things that we can, but simply trust God that those we cannot He will arrange for us. Grumbling helps no one but the Evil One. If we make the best of the situation we find ourselves in without

grumbling, as St. John did, we will show ourselves to be good examples of Christian piety to those around us and make great strides in saving our own souls.

Once St. John's mother received her heavenly reward he entered a monastery in Antioch. He very quickly began to prolifically write, and this was a pursuit that he would practice throughout his life time, both in the monastery and in the world. At this time St. John wrote three important treatises: *On the Priesthood*, *On Contrition of Heart*, and *An Epistle to the Fallen Monk Theodore*.

At about this time St. John desired to live an even more perfect life and departed for the wilderness to live the life of a hermit. However, after two years of extraordinarily strict ascetic life he fell ill and had to return to Antioch. However, it seems that this was according to God's will, since upon returning to Antioch he was received joyfully by the Patriarch Meletius and ordained a deacon. As a Hierodeacon he served the Patriarch for five years, at the same time continuing to write edifying treatises on the Holy Scriptures and other spiritual topics.

After five years Patriarch Meletius reposed in the Lord and St. John returned to his monastery. However, he was not long to stay in the monastery, as the new Patriarch soon received a vision in a dream of an angel of the Lord who instructed him to go the monastery, find St. John, and ordain him a priest to serve again in the city of Antioch. In this way the luminary of the Church was not hid, but able to illumine the people. At this time he began to preach regularly with the Patriarch's blessing. Because of his beautiful speech and edifying discourses the people began to call him "John of the Golden Mouth", or "Chrysostomos".

When the Patriarch of Constantinople reposed in the Lord a search ensued to find a new Patriarch. Because St. John's fame as a pure man of prayer and an eloquent speaker had spread far and wide throughout the empire, it was not long before the Emperor heard of his life and

desired that he be the Patriarch of the Imperial City. However, when the Emperor sent his nobles to Antioch to bring St. John to Constantinople the people refused to let him go – such was their love for their teacher. However, eventually, at the pleading of the Patriarch of Antioch, Flavian, and the entreaties of the emissaries sent by the Emperor, St. John was allowed to travel to Constantinople. Such was his fame that the entire city went out to meet him with lighted candles upon his arrival, including the Emperor.

St. John, having long ago given up the things of the world for the things of the Heavenly Kingdom, made clear to everyone in his address upon ascending the Patriarchal throne in 398 that he was no respecter of persons of any rank. He stated clearly then, and lived his life according to the same words, that he would not hesitate to reprimand anyone of any state in life, including the Emperor, if they provided a poor example of Christian piety.

First, St. John put in order the ranks of the clergy in the capital. Many of the clergy had become servants of the church not in order to serve God, but for avarice. In short time St. John removed those unworthy of the clerical ranks and ordained those worthy to be servants of the Lord. He also saw to it that the pagan temples still open in the capital were closed. Further, he sent many missionaries to the non-Christian tribes of the empire to enlighten them, and many turned to the True Faith. Further, St. John saw to it that the poor and destitute were clothed, fed, and received medical aid from the Holy Church and founded many hostels for this specific reason. Still, as much as St. John zealously served God and his fellow man, much more did his enemies conspire against him, as he lived a pure life only to please God, and never to please men.

As mentioned before, St. John was not afraid to upbraid those who mistreated the poor or who used their station in life not to serve others, but to enrich themselves. This made him many

enemies both among the upper classes and the clergy, but the people loved him as a father. At this time too, early in his Patriarchate, as St. John continued to write explanations of the Holy Scriptures his cell attendant noticed that St. John often was visited in the evening as he was writing by an elderly man who stood over his right shoulder and whispered in his ear. The servant found this odd, and one day asked St. John about this. St. John admitted that he hadn't the slightest idea what the cell attendant was talking about, until the man pointed to an icon of St. Paul the Apostle that St. John kept in his cell and said it was that man that had visited him so regularly. Of course, it is clear that as St. John was writing the explanation of the Epistles of St. Paul that St. Paul himself was guiding him in his interpretive work.

As St. John communed with the saints, wrote edifying treatises, preached the True Faith, and was a champion of the people, his enemies continued to work against him. The Emperor very much favored St. John, but his wife, the Empress Eudoxia, being a great lover of gold and willing to abuse her power to get it at virtually any price, came to loathe St. John. He never failed to protect the poor, even against the Empresses' designs, and so he quickly fell from her favor. Further, the Patriarch of Alexandria, Theophilus, believing that he himself should have been chosen to be the Patriarch of Constantinople instead of St. John, worked diligently to dishonor and defame St. John. St. John had labored diligently to virtually put an end to simony in the Church as well, and thus those clergymen whom he had defrocked for being ordained for money, or for ordaining others for money, became his enemies as well. Thus, the lines began to be drawn – the evil against St. John, and the good, simple, and believing for him. Only the Emperor was able to protect St. John, but the Empress worked day and night to convince her husband that St. John should be deposed.

Finally, a certain incident took place which seemed to provide the Empress with her long-awaited opportunity to be rid of her nemesis forever or at least to lay the groundwork for her evil design. It happened that the military governor of Alexandria was summoned to the Imperial Capital under investigation for having abused the power afforded him by his rank. Among many of his misdeeds he had managed, under false pretenses, to deprive a widow of 500 pieces of gold. When he was summoned to Constantinople she followed him and appealed to the Empress to help her in her plight. The Empress, always looking for opportunities to increase her personal wealth, promised to help the widow, but had her own plans for extorting gold from the governor. She summoned him to her court and made him promise to pay her 100 pounds of gold for the evil deed he had done against the widow when he deprived her of 500 pieces of gold. However, the Empress, having accomplished this, gave only 36 gold pieces to the widow, thus depriving her of her last hope of recovering her lost savings and leaving her nearly destitute. In her desperation she turned to Patriarch John Chrysostom. When St. John had heard her sad story he resolved to help her, and thus he did. He summoned the military governor to the cathedral and had his servants lock the doors. He informed the governor that he would not be allowed to leave the church until he paid the widow her 500 pieces of gold. The governor, however, claimed that he had more than repaid the debt owed the widow via the Empress. That the Empress had not given the widow her due did not concern him. The Empress heard that St. John had detained the governor and sent her soldiers to free him. However, when the soldiers came to break down the doors of the church an angel appeared with a flaming sword and turned them back. The Empress dared not pursue the matter further, but she resolved that she would soon find a way to be rid of St. John. The governor had no choice – he repaid the widow her gold and she returned to Alexandria rejoicing.

When the time of the grape harvest drew near the Empress went to inspect her fields. She knew that the vineyard of a certain widow (not the one who had been repaid her 500 gold pieces, but another), who had several children and had as her only living this vineyard, had a vineyard near the imperial fields. There were certain arcane laws still in place at that time that gave the imperial family certain rights over property. For instance, if the Emperor or Empress went into any field and tasted of the grapes of that field, the property would become part of the imperial fields. Thus, the Empress sought out the field of this widow to taste the grapes and commandeer the vineyard. She knew that St. John would stand up for this widow, just as he did for the widow deprived of her gold. And so he did. After the Empress had taken the field the widow came to St. John in tears and begged him to help her. St. John wrote the Empress a letter and asked her to return the vineyard to the widow. The Empress feigned offence and wrote a very rude letter back to St. John, accusing him of meddling in affairs of the state. St. John went to the Empress and besought her personally to be merciful to the widow, but she refused and was even more insolent towards St. John. St. John noted that she was acting no different than did Jezebel and in turn she had him thrown out of the palace.

Having been thrown out of the imperial palace St. John issued an edict to his porters that when the Empress next came to the cathedral church they were to shut the doors and refuse her entry. And so it happened on the feast of the Exultation of the Cross. The Empress came to the church, the doors were shut, and she was refused entry. One of her servants unsheathed his sword to strike at the doors, but his arm withered. The Empresses' retinue scattered in fear, but the soldier with a withered arm was allowed to enter the church, begged forgiveness of St. John, and was healed.

This was all too much for the Empress and she began to work with the above-mentioned Patriarch of Alexandria to depose St. John. Remember please, this was that same Patriarch that felt that he or his chosen should be ruling in St. John's place, and was somewhat infamous for his poor treatment of the simple and pious in his Patriarchate, while favoring those who were less than pious in their work for the Holy Church. The Patriarch of Alexandria came to Constantinople at the invitation of the Empress. In fact, he had been summoned earlier to Constantinople to stand trial for certain of his impious acts by the Emperor, but leveraging the Empresses' hate for St. John, managed to put himself into the place of judge of St. John, rather than answering for his own terrible conduct as Patriarch. At the same time, certain people in cahoots with the Empress began to actively slander St. John to the Emperor. Every word of St. John's sermons were twisted and spun to seem to be against the Royal House, and eventually the Emperor was swayed and began to oppose St. John as well. Finally, Theophilus arrived in Constantinople. He convoked a hasty council with the support of the Royal House at which St. John was neither represented nor even present. St. John was deposed from his Patriarchal throne and sentenced to exile. The charges against him were specious, but that was inconsequential. The Emperor did not even read the proceedings of the council – he sent soldiers immediately to carry out the sentence.

When the soldiers that were sent by the Emperor to deprive St. John of his throne the people stood guard at the Patriarchal residence for three days and would not let them in. However, St. John feared for the people, that is, that the soldiers might decide to force their way in and kill some of the innocents, and that the Emperor might levy still more charges against him. Thus, after three days, St. John secretly slipped out of his residence and surrendered himself to the soldiers. They quickly took him out of the city and put him into a ship and sailed away.

The people of the city revolted when they found out that their luminary had been taken from them. For nights there were riots and the people surrounded the Imperial palace. Before the disturbance had subsided a great earthquake struck the city. The Imperial House was especially shaken. The people began to cry out for St. John to be returned – they saw God’s punishment of the unjust treatment of St. John manifest in the earthquake.

The Emperor immediately recalled the saint and restored him to his Patriarchal throne. St. John took up his cross as if nothing had happened and began to again guide the flock of the city. However, those who hated St. John had not be satiated by this turn of events and they began to again plot his destruction. As always, St. John refused to seek to please men, but only to please God, and this meant to those against him that he must be destroyed. In this way St. John showed himself to be not a politician or diplomat, but a servant of God.

Soon after St. John’s return the Empress had a silver statue erected of herself near the Church of the Holy Wisdom. Many of the people, still pagan in nature although ostensibly Christian, began to gather at the statue and danced, and sang, causing great confusion and scandal in the city. St. John spoke out against the statue and the impious revelry taking place near the church. The Empress used the occasion of his words to again seek redress from the Emperor. The Emperor, not understanding the truth of the matter, again convoked a counsel against St. John. This time the Patriarch Theophilus was afraid to come near to Constantinople for fear of the people, but he sent three of his bishops in his place. Again St. John was not even present to defend himself, but was condemned, this time based on heretical canons – not even those of the Holy Church. These were used, apparently, because there was no other accusation to be found against him given his pure and perfect life and worthy oversight of the Holy Church.

This time, although deposed, St. John was not quickly sent into exile. The Emperor sent a letter to St. John asking him to leave, but St. John replied that the Emperor was the secular power and that if he wanted to depose the Patriarch based on laws other than Church laws he would have to send his soldiers to drag him from his residence. St. John acted in such a way since he feared God's judgment for abandoning his flock. The Emperor did not know what to do. He felt that he could not force St. John to leave. Still, the other enemies of St. John were not hesitant. Several plots against St. John's life were hatched, but none were successful. The people began to guard St. John day and night. Finally, the Emperor issued a decree deposing St. John. A certain noble convinced St. John to leave the city lest the people again rise up against the Emperor and be slaughtered in the street. St. John decided to heed these words and left the city forever.

When St. John left the city a fire broke out on the altar of the Patriarchal Cathedral. This fire spread quickly throughout the city, but only destroyed the homes of those who worked unjustly against the saint. It twisted like a snake through the air, destroying the homes and palaces of the unworthy and sparing the homes of the just.

The soldiers that accompanied St. John on his journey to exile were instructed by the Empress and paid large sums from her treasury to inflict St. John with the most rude treatment and torture that they could muster. She ordered this that St. John might perish quickly. Once St. John reached the place of his exile in Armenia word came that he would need to be sent still further away, to a place on the Black Sea. However, the Lord deigned otherwise. A few days before his repose the Apostles Peter and John appeared to St. John and instructed him. They told him that he had only a few days to live, that a place had been prepared for him in the Heavenly Kingdom, and that he should endure and be comforted, because the end of his earthly journey

drew near. The Apostles then gave St. John something to eat. He ate nothing further for the rest of his life.

After two more days of travel they reached the city of Comana. Here there was a church dedicated to the patron saint of that city, St. Basiliscus. They reached that city on the eve of the feast of the Exultation of the Cross. That night, the holy martyr Basiliscus appeared to St. John in a dream and said to him, “take heart brother John, tomorrow we shall be together!” The martyr also appeared to one of the priests in his church and instructed him to prepare a place for St. John, for he would be coming the next day.

On the feast St. John begged the soldiers to stay in Comana so that he might serve the Divine Liturgy. However, they wanted to be on their way so they loaded him onto a boat and sailed away. Having sailed about three miles they again reached shore, but realized that they were in Comana once again! Seeing God’s hand in this action, they allowed St. John to go to the Church. St. John served the Divine Liturgy, partook of the Holy Mysteries of Christ, and said, as he was accustomed to saying at all occasions, “Glory to God for all things!” He then crossed himself, said “Amen”, laid down at the foot of the altar, and surrendered his soul to the Lord.

Two priests had accompanied St. John into exile because of their love for him. Once he had died they were free to go their way, and went west, to Rome. They reported what had happened to the Pope of Rome, Innocent, and to the Emperor of the Western Empire, who was the brother of the Emperor who deposed St. John. The Pope and the Western Emperor wrote stern letters to the Eastern Emperor, calling him to repent of his unjust actions, to punish those who were responsible, or to face the wrath of God. The Emperor of the east indeed did repent, and punished the guilty harshly. Even his wife did not escape his wrath – she was banished to a certain palace for the rest of her life. Only her servants were allowed to see her. And even those

who escaped the punishment of the Emperor did not escape the punishment of God. The Empress herself was stricken with a terrible disease and her flesh was consumed by worms. Upon her death her very tomb quaked constantly until the relics of St. John were translated from Comana to Constantinople 42 year later! At that festive occasion her son, the new Emperor, having opened the reliquary of St. John with the new Patriarch and having found them incorrupt,

“...removed his purple robe, spread it over the relics [of St. John], lay his head on the saint's breast, and with tears in his eyes, groaned, "Holy father, forgive the sin committed against thee, and suffer me not to be punished for my mother's hatred and envy. Although the son of thy persecutress, I have done thee no evil. Forgive her offense, that I may escape blame for my kinship with her. I cast the imperial dignity at thy feet and lie helpless, awaiting thine intercession. Pardon the reckless violence of her who wronged thee, for she hath repented of her sin and asketh forgiveness through my lips, saying, 'Remember, father, thine instructive discourses against rancour, and consign my malice to oblivion. I wish to rise from my fall, so extend a helping hand. Thou didst say, If anyone hath slipped, let him rise and be saved. I cannot bear thy displeasure: even my tomb quaketh, giving my bones no rest. I fear consignment to Christ's left hand at the Dread Judgment and tremble, knowing that everlasting punishment awaiteth me. By thy teachings thou hast saved many: let me not remain alone without salvation. Reject me not who crieth unto thee, but avenge thyself on mine enemy the devil, who instructed me to sin against thee as Eve against God. Be not wroth with me, O compassionate one! In thy lifetime thou didst not remember evils done thee; do not remember them now that thou dwellest in heaven. I transgressed against thee in the temporal realm; do thou have mercy on me beyond the grave. My glory hath passed away and is useless to me; wherefore, I beg thy help, O father,

for thou abidest in divine light. Before I am condemned at Christ's tribunal, forgive me, who am bereft of any answer for myself.'""

At the Divine Liturgy served immediately before the relics of St. John were buried beneath the table of preparation of the Patriarchal Cathedral, many sick were healed and many other miracles took place, and finally, the grave of the Empress Eudoxia ceased quaking.

A certain bishop who was a disciple of St. John was allowed to see a vision of the Heavenly Kingdom after entreating the Lord to show him St. John's reward. He was shown all the saintly Patriarchs of Constantinople, but he did not see St. John. He was very sad at this, and when he was about to leave heaven he was stopped by an angel who asked him why he was sad, since no one ever left after such a vision without being spiritually joyful. He noted that he was sad because he had not seen St. John Chrysostom. The angel explained to him that he had not seen him because no mortal eye could behold God, and St. John stood in the very presence of the throne of God with the cherubim and the seraphim. Thus was the place of St. John in the heavens revealed to the pious bishop and through him to us.

Before we conclude this short talk I think it is important to establish that St. John's communion with the saints, the miracles associated with him, his prolific writing, and in general his saintly way of life are not unattainable for us. Rather – they are completely attainable and we should not be afraid to believe in and trust in God as St. John did. So often we approach our faith piously, but not really believing that the lives of the saints can be more than just a study – they can be US! We should not ask God for specific feelings or experiences lest we be fooled by the Devil, but certainly if we trust and love God, if we strive for humility in the service of God and our fellow man, if we use the gifts He has given us for His glory, if we zealously follow Him and desire to do His will, as did St. John Chrysostom, then we too can live a saintly life. We

shouldn't say that this is for someone else or for someone who lived long ago – this is for us too.

Let us be obedient to God's Holy Church and strive to follow the example of St. John

Chrysostom and we too can join him in the heavenly kingdom!

It is clear that the life of St. John Chrysostom contains many lessons for us in our times.

Some we spoke about during this presentation. Others I believe we should at least briefly

elaborate on here. Rather than me continuing to talk, however, let me ask you – what lessons do

you see here for us in our times?

- Worldly Education used for Good of Man and Holy Church
- Followed Mother's Entreaty – Received God's Blessings
- Used Talents Given by God to Glorify God (writing, speech, etc.)
- Did Not Fear to Speak Truth to Power
- Did Not Seek to Please Men – Always Sought to Please God
- Trusted God – Never Grumbled – Even in Great Suffering
- Served the Poor and Destitute
- Cared for Purity of Own Life – Even in the World as Patriarch

Reward for all these things: a great reward in the heavenly kingdom. What more could WE want?

All quotations from the Life of St. John Chrysostom and the Account of the Translation of the Relics of St. John Chrysostom from the Lives of the Saints by St. Demetrius of Rostov as published in English by Chrysostom Press, St. Louis, MO.