

“Saint John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople”

*Homily of His Grace Bishop Maxim of Western American Diocese
At the Pan-Orthodox Commemoration of the 1,600th Anniversary of the Repose of St. John Chrysostom which took place on Tuesday, November 13th, 2007, at St. Sophia's Greek Orthodox Cathedral, Los Angeles, California.*

1. If in every Divine Liturgy space and time lose their attribute of dividing and they become bearers of the communion of the living and the dead, those nearby and those afar, the Local and Universal Church, history and the eschaton, then all this in a unique way has taken place here this morning (in the very Liturgy that we are serving). Thanks to the Liturgical commemoration of the unforgettable St. John Chrysostom, the archbishop of the city of Constantinople. Our city of Los Angeles today becomes the universe (oecumene) thanks to the presence of the representatives of the most holy local Orthodox Churches. And the present time today becomes the anticipation of the future, hope, and prayer for the unity of all. Truly, this is a great, historical, and God-given day! Today, St. John Chrysostom spiritually leads this celebration, and rejoicing he, with the words of St. Paul the Apostle, reminds and teaches us: “For in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me.” (1 Cor. 4:15-16)

Your Eminence, beloved brother in the Holy Spirit and co-celebrant of our Modesty, Metropolitan Gerasimos, Your Graces, and dear pious assembly of the fullness of the Church.

2. Today’s sermon is about a Saint, a Prophet, a Patriarch and an Apostle. It is difficult to expose all the significant aspects of the exceptional spiritual personality of the Golden Mouth (the life, literary work and the ecclesiastical ministry of this great Father and Ecumenical Teacher of the Church), of a man who made a unique synthesis of the message of Theology with the mystery of the Church, of an exemplary Apostolic model of ecclesiastical diakonia – from the caves of the desert of Antioch to the Throne of Constantinople, until his death in exile. His radiance affects not only the Ecumenical Throne, or the Orthodox Church, but also all the Christian Churches throughout the world.

3. This blessed Hierarchy is an example of the administration of the local Church and at the same time of all the oikoumene of the Orthodox Church, by means of service and kenotic oblation. We marvel at the variety of his spiritual gifts, as we study his sacred writings, and we glorify our God in Trinity who has so glorified the human race. As the vigilant eye of the whole universe, he was concerned that all people should “come to the knowledge of truth” (1 Tim. 2:4) and so he organized missionary ventures into the lands of the Goths, Scythians, Celts, Persians and Phoenicians. This profoundly inspired man toiled greatly for all people living in every corner of the earth so they may know the truth, namely Christ. Working for the establishment of God's Kingdom, he prayed for such things in common life so that no one would need to retire to the wilderness in search for perfection, because there would be the same opportunity in the cities. He wanted to

reform the city itself, and for that purpose he chose for himself the way of priesthood and apostolate.

4. Chrysostom was a testimony of living faith, and for that reason his voice was so eagerly listened to, both in the East and in the West; For him, faith was a norm of life, and not just a theory. He wanted dogmas translated into experience and he was not a preacher of independent ethics, since his ethics was deeply rooted in the faith. He preached Christ, crucified and risen, the Lamb and the High Priest. The whole meaning of human life for Chrysostom was in that it was, and had to be, a life in freedom, and therefore a life of service. Christ came, as Chrysostom used to remind, precisely to heal the will of man. God always acts in such a way as not to destroy our own freedom.

5. It is well known that St John did not want to be a philosopher but an ecclesiastic, a man who lived through (by) the Eucharistic (event). When we talk about the Eucharistic theology of St. John Chrysostom, we must do so from the perspective of pastoral ministry emphasizing the very important line of his theology, a well known Pauline Christ-centrism in which Christ has not only brought life, rather He has become our Life Himself. This living Life is a pillar which maintains cohesion between God and man. Only participation in Him can, through the grace of God which is a part of man, elevate him above nature.

Chrysostom did not believe in abstract schemes; he had a fiery faith in the creative power of Christian love. It was for that reason that he became both teacher and prophet for all ages in the Church. From the aspect of this true Life, asceticism and the holy virtues acquire new dimensions. They become an expression of freedom, love and responsibility. We talk not about fasting in terms of penalty and a condition for Holy Communion, but rather about repentance and faith as supposition of that true Life. This then gives a totally different dimension of our pastoral work which itself becomes lived (experienced) love and co-suffering with the Crucified Christ and every suffering person; it becomes separation of passions from the individual, sin from the sinner, and once identification with the Eternal Shepherd and Archpriest according to the order of Melchisedech.

6. Truly Father of the Church and Carrying the Holy Spirit, interpreter of the Word of God, Interpreter of Jesus Christ, the hypostatic Word, the Son of God. St. Chrysostom himself, in his first homily on the Gospel according to Matthew, in the beginning of his interpretation of the New Testament, says something extremely important, for the Orthodox position and consciousness and understanding and the way of living the Word of God.

“It were indeed meet for us not at all to require the aid of the written Word, but to exhibit a life so pure, that the grace of the Spirit should be instead of books to our souls, and that as these are inscribed with ink, even so should our hearts be with the Spirit. But, since we have utterly put away from us this grace, come, let us at any rate embrace the second best course. For that the former was better, God has made manifest, both by His words, and by His doings. In other words, would be much better to learn the word of God directly from the Holy Spirit.”

7. As the Golden Mouth of the Church, he not only preached, but practiced charity, founding hospitals and orphanages, helping the poor and destitute. He wanted to recover the spirit of love in practice. He was prophet of an integral Christianity. Yet, poverty was not for Chrysostom just a virtue by itself. Poverty meant for him first of all a need and want, a suffering and pain. For this reason Christ can be found among the poor, and he comes to us in the guise of a beggar. Poverty is a blessing only when it is cheerfully accepted for Christ's sake.

However, St. John Chrysostom, who is present among us, comforting and teaching us, addresses us, as in the past, "to those scandalized ones in the middle of misfortune that has taken place". Hardships and misfortunes should not shaken our faith in God's love and the future. "I have a Teacher, he writes, that loves child more than a father and more soul-caring than a mother...God's providence is unsearchable, and his care for us is not understandable, unbreakable is his goodness and unsearchable love for mankind."

As a great interpreter of the mystery of the Church, St. John comes to us today to remind us that there is nothing more dangerous for Her than divisions: "Nothing vexes God more than division of the Church." Those that live without concern and do not labor for the Church's unity, will always be reprimanded by these words of St. John. The strength of Christianity was for him in humility and toleration, not in power.

Dear brothers and sisters,

8. When in the year of our Lord 438, Proclo, a dedicated disciple of St. John and archbishop, transferred the Holy Relics of the Holy Father, the Church was deeply divided. One part of the Church that revered St. John, called "Johanians", refused to accept his successors to the episcopal throne, while the Church in Rome seized communion with the Patriarchate of Constantinople, Alexandria and Antioch, because the successor of St. John erased his name from the Dyplich. And while communion between these patriarchates and the Church in Rome was re-established after adding Chrysostom's name to Dyplichs, the schism of Johaninians continued. As history characteristically has recorded, it stopped only when the relics of St. John were brought back to Constantinople.

If then the transfer of the relics of St. John Chrysostom had such a great and thrilling impact on the unity of the Church, then we have a right, if nothing else, to pray that his presence today contributes to the overcoming division, which in the last thousand years has anguished the Church. The road is a long one and is not easily treaded upon, but "hope does not shame us".

9. "The life of the holy Chrysostom is for us a firm foundation of our hope for the transformation of our life into an indestructible and God-like life". There is some unusual flavor of modernity in the writings of Chrysostom. His world was like ours, a world of tensions, a world of unresolved problems in all walks of life. His advice may appeal to our age no less than it did to his own. But his main advice is a call to integral Christianity, in which faith and charity, belief and practice, are organically linked in an unconditional surrender of man to God's overwhelming love, in an unconditional trust in His mercy, in an unconditional commitment to His service, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

May this our commemoration of Saint John Chrysostom today in Los Angeles serve as a source of sanctification, strength and hope for the Orthodox faithful. Finally, from this Holy Ambon we extend our wholehearted wishes to the beloved Hierarchs, to the devout clergy and to the entire flock of the Orthodox Church of America, and we pray that God may bless our efforts and good works, to the glory of our Father Who is in heaven and the honor of our Church and our people.