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Saint John Chrysostom, on True Friendship Between People

Religion

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ABSTRACT

One of the main aspects of St. John Chrysostom's humanism as made known in his works is friendship and love of one's neighbour. Only on rare occasions do we encounter in literature such anengaging discourse on these matters. Some few of the Fathers of the Church and other religious authors address so appealingly love and friendship as St. John does in all his works and in all the circumstances of his life.

I underline the fact that, from St. John Chrysostom's perspective, friendship, in order for it to be strong and lasting, should have Christ as its basis, reason and model, our Saviour Who laid down His life for His friends (Jn. 15:13).

Introduction

For Christians, St. John Chrysostom does not merely embody the characteristics of an unequalled orator, a remarkable exegete, an austere ascetic, a great Hierarch who had ample theological and philosophical knowledge and a titanic volume of written works, being unmatched in its dimensions and content, with 18 volumes in the Migne edition (vols. 47-64), an affable and hearty shepherd of souls, a paradigm for the clergy of all time and all places, an heroic figure in painful trials, fervent and unstoppable in working for good and, at the same time, a good hearted person displaying exceptional spiritual traits, who was conscious of the rules of true friendship that he followed in an uniquely exquisite manner, with an unbounded love for people and an extraordinary capacity to forgive, a man whose actions, activities and virtues profoundly influenced Christianity.

Saint John Chrysostom's entire literary work 'was inspired by the actual needs concerning the salvation of the soul'. (Drobner, 2003, p. 438)

For him, love for God and people are not concepts deprived of meaning, but the most vivid and magnificent reality, the only reason why life is worth living, as he himself says: 'Is there anything else similar to love? It has no equal! It is the very root, beginning and origin of all goodness, a virtue that does not cause any sorrow, virtue that is full of gratification and that brings much rejoicing to those who experience it'. (Chrysostom, 1859 b, col. 733-734).

True Friend Is Another Me

The great Archbishop makes it clear that friendship issuch a close and intimate unification between the one who loves and the one who is loved, that they cease being two separate persons, but they become one and the same person, thus underlining the idea that a friend is an alter ego, another me: 'if one has twenty friends, that one sees with twenty other eyes, that one works with twenty other hands, that one walks with twenty other feet. One man can be in more different places at the same time owing to his friends'. (Chrysostom, 1862 a, col. 425). In truth, from St. John's perspective, if one has an enemy, then this enemy is not approached defensively by one person only, but by the twenty others, so that the enemy should lower his or her colours as the latter is not forced back by one individual, but by twenty. If one is not there, he or she is not at peril as that one is rich in the other twenty. He or she does not walk on his or her own feet, but on the others', he or she does not work with his or her own hands, but with the others'. Each of them has ten souls as it is not only him or her that attends his or her possessions, but the others do this as well. And if one hundred or one thousand stay together, it the same, and strength thus increases with number. Thus 'there is nothing wrong that can happen to the one who has so many standing around him; even as guards, who stand over the Emperor, are not so wakeful or watchful. These keep watch and ward over the king of necessity, those stand over their friend out of love and affection. In other words, love is stronger and more powerful than fear. The King has misgivings toward his guards, a friend trusts his or her companion more than he or she trust himself or herself and having this support he or she fears no one'. (Chrysostom, 1862 a, col. 425)

An Honest Friend is Much More Desirable than Light Itself

During his life, St. John encountered people who intended to disparage him or to assassinate him, but also real and devoted friends who provided him with help in difficult moments and fought for him courageously and unsparingly. The great preacher, with the following words expressed his belief that 'an honest friend is much more desirable than light itself. And do not wonder at me saying that, as it would be better if the sun ceased its light, rather than being deprived of real friends; it would be better to live in darkness, rather than living without friends. I shall tell you how this comes to be. Many people seeing the sun, live in darkness, yet, if they are surrounded by friends, they will not endure any adversity. I here speak about spiritual friendship and spiritual friends, who valuate nothing above friendship.' (Chrysostom, 1905, p. 179)

Writing about friendship, the Golden-Mouth demonstrated how much rejoicing and satisfaction honest friendship brings by itself. 'One may speak about thousands of treasures and yet nothing is more valuable than a true friend… One rejoices when he or she sees one's friend, that one heartens in their soul, owing to an unspeakable satisfaction that fuses with that of the friend and even only remembering him or her, one's soul exalts and takes wing. I mean here real friends, friends who share intimate spiritual and intellectual connections, friends who are ready to die for one another, who love each other sincerely and not simply those acquaintances with whom we share our meals and we take for friends because they praise us, do not believe that I speak about them. If one has a friend as the one about whom I speak, the former shall undoubtedly understand my words. Seeing him or her every day will not be enough; this is true for both of them. I once met somebody who was raising prayers to the Saints for his friend and was asking them to liaise with God for the latter

(his friend) and only them for him. This is a real friend, the one who neither time nor place could prevent from loving and being loved'. (Chrysostom, 1905, p. 178)

The Categories of Friendship and Its Fundamental Principles

Enumerating the categories of friendship and its fundamental principles, St. John asserted his dissatisfaction and grief with the fact that '… we do not base our love onlove for God, but we exercise friendship for other reasons: some of us are in it for our relatives, others by habit, others for the same profession, others for neighbours; any reason other than faith in God; when only faith in God should bring friends together. Things happen quite contrarily; we make friends with the Judeans and the pagans, not with friends and sons of the Church'. (Chrysostom, 1994, p. 692)

Harmful friendships are depicted in the great Chrysostom's work as being even worse than enmities. 'Do not stay together, thus, with friends who cause you mischief! Do no stay together with friends who love more your meals than your friendship! As all these bring to a close friendship after having eaten and enjoyed the feast; others yet, friends who value virtue, will stay together with you forever, they will abide with you in all your misery and mischief. Friends who congregate with you for eating and drinking, the pests, will avenge on you and will denigrate you' (Chrysostom, 1994, p. 565). Generally speaking, we bear the tag established by others and our friends. In this regard, the saintly Archbishop emphasizes the following principles: 'I know many virtuous people who have acquired ill fame because of their friends in parties and drinking; they have said about them that they are impostors, scarlet who corrupt others families, child abusers. And people trust their words, they start believing they abuse children as they attend nothing honourable and waste their lives in vain'. (Chrysostom, 1994, p. 565)

Love Comes to an End when It Is Not Based on a Spiritual Foundation

Master of word and of nuances, St. John presents in encomiastic terms spiritual love that does not aim at personal gain, but it serves unselfishly sublime ideals. As people congregate on the basis of these ephemeral reasons, this is why friendships are not sincere and do not last. Love for one another comes to an end and they start quarrelling, conflicts on money ignite envy, love for worldly glory and other similar things. Love comes to an end when it is not based on a spiritual foundation. If it had had a spiritual root, there would not have been any worldly reason to put an end to the spiritual love. Love for one's neighbour that is based on love for Christ is lasting, unspoiled, invincible and uncrushed. Neither slander, nor perils, nor death, nor anything alike could bring it to an end. Whatever could a man who loves his or her neighbour like this endure, that one will never stop loving his or her neighbour, as he or she considers the foundation of his or her love, namely Christ. But the one who loves because he or she is loved brings his or her love to an end if the friend causes any grief; on the contrary, the one who cleaves to his or her friend having the example of Christ in mind will never bring to an end his or her love. Commenting on the First Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians, the same patristic father states: 'True friends overwhelm with their love parents and sons alike, friends in Christ, I will say'. (Chrysostom, 1905, p. 183) From where St. John stands, the branches of friendship do not bear emeralds, but the balm of virtue that is more pleasant than the former. 'Any rejoicing, a common or a lofty one, no matter how pleasant it should be, cannot be as sweet as friendship. Honey temporarily assuages hunger, but friendship never comes to an end, when one remains a true friend, as feelings become more profound, nore joicing can bring toan end esteem. A friend is more worthy than life. Many people, after their friends' passing away could not live any further in this life. One's friend brings relief while in exile, too; without him or her you cannot enjoy staying at home either. One's friend brings relief in poverty; without him or her health and wealth are unbearable. A true friend is another me. My words are scarce to describe the real essence of friendship. It is obvious to me that my words do less than what one should say.' (Chrysostom, 1862 b, col. 403-406)

Saint John counsels us to foster close and true friendships with peaceful men, spiritual brethren and holy fathers, as unkind friendships usually lapse into wrongfulness; ones who keep company with the unvirtuous, as St. Paul the Apostle states: 'Evil company corrupts good morals' (1Cor. 15:33), the same happens to those who come together with the good friends. 'This happens as the Lover of mankind bore the good ones to forgather with the bad ones, so that the latter could benefit from this encounter and not to persist in their wrong doing, but, always having before them the example of the virtuous to assume the virtues of the latter'. (Chrysostom, 1987, p. 70) In this regard, the great Archbishop reminds us all under the form of numerous exhortations to seek after close friendships with those who can always stand our souls in good stead, to counsel us so that our souls stay on their way to salvation, to dissuade us from our sins, to draw our attention to our wrongdoings, to support us to rise after having fallen, to guide us towards God, by counselling us and praying for us. In fact, this is the very duty of a true friend and the ultimate intent of any friendship: helping each other and providing reciprocal support on the way to the salvation of the soul andintegral communion with God. This is what differentiates a true friend from an adulator: the former discloses – gently and with love – our wrongdoings and unvirtuous deeds, caring for our redress and accomplishment in Christ, as the latter sets in front of our eyes and reveals, many times exaggeratedly, only our good deeds, ensconcing our wrongdoings, thus aiming at wringing worldly benefits from us. In truth, when friends criticize us, for good reason or for nothing, they do not do this disdainfully or scornfully, but to redress us. Enemies, on the other hand, even when they scorn and criticize us for good reason, they do not do this to make us better and transfigure us, but they try to scoff at our errors. When friends praise us, they try to improve us; the enemies, on the other hand, even when praising us, they try to belittle us.

Saint John Chrysostom – a Model of Friendship in Christ, Our Friend

When addressing friendship as found in the Old Testament, St. John the Golden Mouthshed light on Moses, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph and David who did not consider their own benefit, but only their friend's interests, thus earning glory, and the selfish sustained loss, as in the case of Lot and even Jonah, in a moment of weakness. In this regard, St. John provided as an example, the high and beautiful friendship encouraged by St. Paul the Apostle who prayed to rid himself of the glory of the after life in return of the salvation of the others; he was doing this for people for whom he was not liable, as he had been sent to the pagans, not to the Jews. Thus, if one cannot experience a more profound love than this one (Jn. 15:13), then St. Paul perfectly observed its spirit and through what he did, he reached its uppermost point.

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Saint John Chrysostom laboured ceaselessly and helped as none other, all those who asked for mercy, support and relief from the Church. In his epistles one can see that, even tormented by the sufferings of exile, his heart, the one of a man and Hierarch, outpours love toall his friends and those who have their hearts open to him and this love returns to him, although, physically, they were far away as 'friendship cannot be brought to a standstill either by the length of the roads, or the sky, or the earth, or death, or anything else, as it is stronger and more powerful than anything else; although it originates in one single soul, it can embrace many souls'. (Chrysostom, 1862 c, col. 73)

Conclusions

During his life, Chrysostom met many people who aimed at disparaging him or at assassinating him, but true and devoted friends supported him in hard times and fought for him courageously and unsparingly. Saint John strongly believes that 'when one is hurt in love, one does not consider difficulties; one endures everything easily, no matter how many perils there are, no matter how serious the difficulties; one single thought prevails: to fulfil love'. (Chrysostom, 1987, p. 215)

Saint John's perspective on man is a fervent love for him. There is nothing else in the world that deserves so much love as man does and we owe every man love, as 'Christ loves each and every man with the same love with which He loves the entire world'. (Chrysostom, 1859 a, col. 647) On this pure and self-offering love and on this high Christian ideal were founded his true and honest friendships as well as all the good deeds of this shepherd of souls.

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