



ON THE PRIESTHOOD



JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

ON THE PRIESTHOOD

Translated from the Greek by W. R. W. Stephens
From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Vol. 9,
edited by Philip Schaff, D.D., LL.D.

First Edition by the
HOLY NATIVITY PRESS
GATINEAU, QUEBEC
2026

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note apparatus is retained where it serves the text; we have set aside those notes that pertain only to the nineteenth-century volume context, and any commentary at variance with the Orthodox confession of the Fathers themselves. We add a subject index and a scripture index for the text in hand.

The texts are typeset in IM Fell English, a face cut by John Fell in seventeenth-century Oxford and freely available again through the work of Igino Marini. The Greek is set in Philokalia, designed for the Athonite tradition.

HOLY NATIVITY PRESS

Gatineau, Quebec

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ON THE PRIESTHOOD

INTRODUCTION

By W. R. W. Stephens, Translator

The events recorded in this celebrated treatise on the Priesthood must have occurred when St. John Chrysostom was about twenty-eight years of age. His father had died when he was a young child; his mother was a devout Christian, but had not destined him for the clerical vocation. The great ability which he showed in early youth seemed to mark him out for distinction in one of the learned professions, and at the age of eighteen he began to attend the school of Libanius, the most celebrated sophist of the day, who had won a great reputation as a professor of philosophy and rhetoric, and as an eloquent opponent of Christianity, not only in his native city, Antioch, but also in Athens, Nicomedia, and Constantinople.

The artificial character however of his writings indicates the decadence of literary power; he could skillfully imitate the style of ancient writers but he could not inform himself with their spirit; "his productions" says Gibbon [ch. xxiv], "are for the most part the vain and idle composition of an orator who cultivated the science of words."

In the school of Libanius Chrysostom no doubt studied the best classical Greek authors, and although he retained little admiration for them in later life and probably read them but rarely, his tenacious memory enabled him to the last to adorn his homilies with quotations from Homer, Plato and the Tragedians. In the school of Libanius also he began to practice his nascent power of eloquence, and a speech which he made in honor of the Emperors is highly commended in an extant letter of his master. Thus the Pagan sophist helped to forge the weapons which were destined to be turned against his own cause. When he was on his death-bed being asked by his friends who was most worthy to succeed him, "it would have been John," he replied, "if the Christians had not stolen him from us."

In due time Chrysostom began to practise as a lawyer; and as the profession of the law was reckoned one of the surest avenues to political distinction for a man of talent, and the speeches of Chrysostom excited great admiration, a brilliant and prosperous career seemed to lie before him. But the soul of the young advocate had drunk draughts from a purer well-spring than the school of Libanius could supply, and like many other Christians in that age when society, even Christian society, was deeply tainted by Pagan sentiments and habits of life, especially in a profligate city like Antioch, he recoiled from the contrast between the morality of the world in which he lived, and the standard of holiness which was presented in the Gospel. The chicanery and rapacity also prevalent in the profession which he had adopted became especially repugnant to his conscience. And these feelings were strengthened by the influence of his intimate friend Basil who had been a fellow pupil with him at the school of Libanius.

The first book of the treatise on the Priesthood opens with a description of his friendship with Basil; how they studied the same subjects together

under the same teachers, and how entirely harmonious they were in all their tastes, and inclinations [ci and ii.] Nevertheless when Basil decided to follow what Chrysostom calls the “true philosophy,” by which he means a life of religious seclusion and study, Chrysostom could not immediately make up his mind to follow his example. The balance he says was no longer even between them; the scale of Basil mounted heavenward, while his own was depressed by the weight of earthly interests, and youthful ambitions. For a time he continued to practise in the law courts and to frequent the theatre, and other places of amusement. But gradually the study of Scripture, and saintly Bishop of Antioch so wrought upon his mind that he resolved to abandon his secular calling. And in the first place after the usual course of probation he was baptized. It may seem surprising that he had not been baptized in childhood; but a corrupt practice of delaying baptism (which Chrysostom himself often reprobates in his Homilies) was prevalent at that time. It was due in some persons to a notion that sin before Baptism was comparatively venial, in others to a dread of binding themselves or their children to the purity of life