



For the Nativity Fast

St. John Chrysostomos: Against Overeating*

IN HIS HOMILIES, St. John Chrysostomos often analyzed Holy Scripture—both the Old and the New Testaments. He would deliver this teaching in the Church, usually in the afternoon hours. He would expound on one of the texts of Holy Scripture in order, on the basis of some central theme. Occasionally, he would change his approach and examine a subject which he considered necessary to tackle, even if it had no immediate connection with his basic theme.

We find one such instance in his exposition of the Gospel According to St. Matthew, in his forty-fourth homily thereon. At the very end of this homily, he deals with the subject of “luxury,” though it has absolutely nothing to do with what comes before it. It is worth following the text itself, which we might characterize as incisive and, in all probability, opportune.

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Do not be surprised that Christ calls luxury [i.e., an affluent and hedonistic lifestyle of gluttony and wantonness—*Ed.*] “thorns.” You, of course, are not aware of it, being intoxicated with your passion. But those who are healthy know that luxury pricks sharper than any thorn, and that it consumes the soul more than worry, and causes most grievous pains both to body and soul. For one is not so sorely smitten by anxiety as by overindulgence. When such a man is beset by sleeplessness, throbbing of the temples, headaches, and stomach pains, you can understand how much

worse this is than any number of thorns. And as the thorns, on whichever side they are grasped, draw blood from the hands that seize them, just so does luxury destroy feet, hands, head, and eyes, and in general all of our members. It is also withered and unfruitful, like a thorn; yet it hurts much more than a thorn, and in our vital organs. Indeed, it brings on premature old age, dulls the senses, darkens our reasoning, blinds the keen-sighted mind, makes the body flabby, makes you a most copious repository of dung, and gathers together a great accumulation of evils. It makes the burden too great and the load overwhelming. Hence, our falls become many and continual, and our shipwrecks frequent.

For, tell me, why pamper your body? Are we to offer you as a sacrifice, to set you on a table? You do well to fatten birds. Or rather, you do not do so well even to fatten them, for when they are fattened, they are unprofitable for a healthy diet....

For nothing is so hostile and harmful to the body as luxury....

Wine merchants do not fill their wine-skins more than is appropriate, lest they burst. But these men do not see fit to make even this much provision for their own wretched belly. No, when they have stuffed it and distended it, they fill all, up to the ears, up to the nostrils, up to the very throat itself, thereby causing twofold distress: to the spirit and to the power that governs the living organism.

Can it be that your throat was given you for this end, that you should fill it up to the very mouth with wine turned sour and all other kinds of corruption? Not for this, O man, but that first and foremost you might sing to God, offer up holy prayers, read aloud the Divine laws, and give your neighbors profitable counsel. But you, as if you had received it for this end, do not allow it to perform those functions even for a short time, but subject it for your whole life to this evil slavery. It is as if someone who has been given a lyre with golden strings and beautifully constructed, instead of playing the most harmonious music with it, were to cover it over with much dung and clay. This is what these men do. It is not nourishment that I am calling dung, but luxury and such great wantonness. For, what is more than necessary is not nourishment, but merely injurious. Indeed, the belly alone was made merely

for the reception of food, whereas the mouth, the throat, and the tongue were made for other purposes also, far more necessary than these. Or rather, not even was the belly made simply for the reception of food, but for the reception of moderate amounts of food. And this it makes itself manifest by crying out against us in countless ways, when we vex it through this greediness. Not only does it clamor against us, but also, in avenging that wrong, it exacts the severest penalty from us. First, it punishes the feet, which bear and conduct us to those wicked revels, and then the hands that minister to it, binding them together for having brought it such quantities and kinds of provisions. Many have distorted even their very mouth, eyes, and head by overindulgence. And just as a servant, when ordered to do something beyond his power, often, out of desperation, becomes insolent to the one giving the order, so also the belly, together with these members, from being over-strained, often ruins and destroys the very brain itself.

And this God has ordered well, that from immoderation so much harm should arise, that when of your own will you do not live virtuously, at least against your will, for fear of such great ruin, you might learn to be moderate. Knowing these things, therefore, let us avoid luxury, and let us endeavor to acquire moderation, so that we might both enjoy bodily health and, having delivered our soul from all infirmity, attain to the good things to come, by the Grace and love for mankind of our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom be glory and dominion unto the ages of ages. Amen.**

* Boulgarakis, Elias, *Καθημερινές Ἱστορίες Ἁγίων καὶ Ἀμαρτωλῶν στὸ Βυζάντιο* [*Everyday Stories of Saints and Sinners in Byzantium*] (Athens: “Maïstros,” 2002), 2nd ed., pp. 161-164.

** St. John Chrysostomos, “Homily 44, on the Gospel According to St. Matthew” (*Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LVII, cols. 470-472).