



■ On the Occasion of the Commemoration of the Three Holy Hierarchs (30 January)

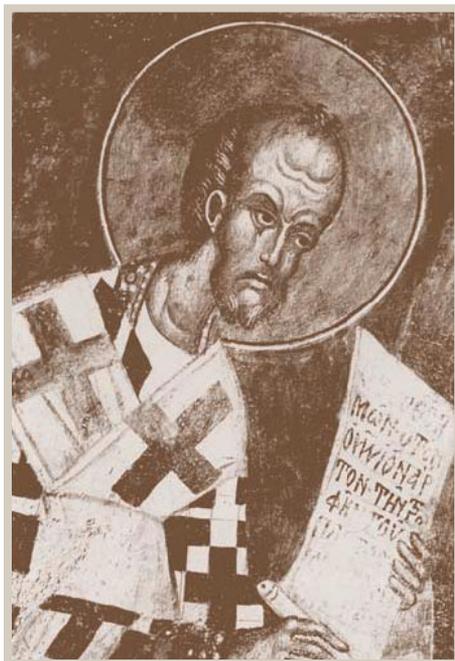
## St. Neilos Berates the Emperor\*

**C**ONSTANTINOPLE, 407 A.D.

The Emperor of Byzantium was Arcadius (395-408), and the Archbishop of Constantinople was St. John Chrysostomos (†407). The third person in our story who, in this case, occupies the first place, is St. Neilos of Ancyra (†ca. 430).

**The Saint** is better known from his writings than from his life, about which we have minimal information. In fact, it was five centuries after his repose that the chronicler George the Monk, who wrote the *Brief Annals of Various Chroniclers and Interpreters* during the era of Michael III (842-867), talked about him for the first time with any exactitude.

**We are** also informed by the same chronicler that the Saint



knew and admired St. John Chrysostomos and that he had heard his teachings.

**St. Neilos**, at any rate, must have been well known in Constantinople, and certainly must have had connections with high-ranking persons before he left for Ancyra, in the vicinity of which he either formed or took over direction of a monastery.

**Among** his important acquaintances was General Gaïnas, a Goth by race and an

Arian by creed, who was active in Constantinople from 392 until his death in 401.

**When St. Neilos** assumed direction of the monastery in the region of Ancyra, he received eight letters from the General on dogmatic subjects. The letters have not been preserved, but the responses sent by the Saint are extant.

**Another** important acquaintance of his was the Emperor Arcadius (395-408). We deduce this from a letter sent by Arcadius to the Saint after the removal of St. John Chrysostomos from the Throne of Constantinople. The purpose of his letter was to request that the Saint help, through his prayers, to deliver the capital from “very frequent earthquakes” and from the impending “ethereal fire” that usually followed an earthquake.

**Bear in mind** that, during the first exile of St. John Chrysostomos, what was described as a “fault rupture” —that is, a kind of localized earthquake—occurred in the Empress’ bedchamber, which occasioned the recall of the Archbishop to Constantinople.

**No historiographer** has recorded the occurrence of any general earthquakes during the subsequent, and final, exile of the Holy Father, though the event is “maintained” by the same Emperor in his letter to the Saint. Nevertheless, the occurrence of new earthquakes did not lead, this time, to the Archbishop being recalled.

**It was** evidently for this reason that St. Neilos not only refused “to help,” in accordance with the Emperor’s request, but, on the contrary, expressed the opinion that the proposal and request for aid were incompatible with the actions taken against the Archbishop.

**In a subsequent** succinct letter of St. Neilos to the Emperor, he ascribes the responsibility for Chrysostomos’ exile not only to the Bishops, but also to Arcadius himself.

**We quote** these two letters because they are more eloquent than any narrative.

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## I. To Emperor Arcadius

*How is it possible for you to envisage the deliverance of Constantinople from frequent earthquakes and from the approaching conflagration, when countless outrages have occurred there and wickedness circulates like currency, along with great audacity, on account of the exile of the Pillar of the Church, the light of Truth, the trumpet of Christ—John, the most blessed Bishop? How can you urge me to offer up prayer when the city is quaking from the wrath of God, and day by day waits for fire to descend from above, while I am consumed by the fire of despondency, and my thoughts are disturbed and my mind is disrupted by the excess of transgressions taking place at the present time in Byzantium?<sup>1</sup>*

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## II. To Emperor Arcadius

*You sent John, the luminary of the inhabited earth and leading man of Byzantium, into exile without reason, because you allowed yourself to be deceived by the Bishops, who, in their great frivolity, are devoid of sound judgment. Now, having deprived the Catholic Church of pure and true teachings, do not remain insensible.<sup>2</sup>*

\* **Source:** Elias Boulgarakis, *Καθημερινές Ιστορίες Αγίων και Ἀμαρτωλῶν στὸ Βυζάντιο* [*Everyday Stories of Saints and Sinners in Byzantium*] (Athens: “Maïstros,” 2002), 2nd ed., pp. 27-29.

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### Notes

1. St. Neilos of Ancyra, *Epistles*, Book II, No. 265, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXXIX, col. 336AB.
2. *Idem*, *Epistles*, Book III, No. 279, *Patrologia Græca*, Vol. LXXIX, col. 521D.