

St. John Chrysostom: Voice of the OCL?

The following passage was included in the OCL Bulletin, "Charter Alert 2004." To the right are some observations.

How should the church be governed? Should the patriarchs act like emperors, issuing decrees which all believers must obey? Should bishops see themselves as local governors, demanding unquestioning submission of the people? Should the clergy be a kind of spiritual army enforcing the will of the patriarchs and bishop, and meting out punishment on sinners?

The first consideration for the Church is not how to punish sins, but how to prevent sins from being committed. And when a sin has been committed) the task of the Church is to encourage the sinner to confess the sin and make amends — so that no punishment is required. This is quite a different attitude to wrongdoing from that which the state adopts, and so requires a different style of government. Moreover, each individual is answerable not to a priest, bishop, or patriarch but to God. So the primary authority of those within the Church is not to issue decrees, but to stir the souls and enliven the consciences of believers, so that by their own volition they will obey the laws of God. In short those in authority within the Church should see themselves not as rulers, but as preachers and pastors.

The issue of hierarchs as emperors is a concern that was apparently as real in the Fourth Century as it is in the 21st. To be sure, the more despotic hierarchs are, the more rebellion will be seen, and the less Christ will be served.

The Church would benefit from its leaders to engage in some metacognition about their roles. That is, it would be beneficial for hierarchs to reflectively assess how they think of themselves in their roles as bishops, in view of the Scriptures, Fathers, and Canons of the Church. Bishop as despot is not supported in Orthodoxy, as Chrysostom attests.

Here we come to an irony of the OCL's use of this passage. By not immediately suspending the plaintiffs' standing in the Church, but rather calling for withdrawal of the lawsuit, Church hierarchs demonstrated their attempt to address the matter pastorally. Thus, they are attempting to withhold punishment from the plaintiffs. Is it a sin to engage in a lawsuit against the Church? We'll get to that...

Here's another irony in the OCL's use of this passage. Chrysostom distinguishes between the adversarial system of secular justice and the pastoral avenues of justice in the Church. In an allusion to I Cor. 6:5-7, Chrysostom underscores St. Paul's assertion that Christians should not take each other to civil courts. Given as well that they take the conflict to the secular sphere, causing public scandal, it could be concluded that the plaintiffs are in sin.

While the Canons do hold accountability structures, Chrysostom points out that God alone is the ultimate judge. If our hierarchs have acted wrongly or fail to properly exercise their offices to further the Gospel, God will judge them; the icon of the Last Judgment is filled with clerics. However, for hierarchs to fail pastorally and even procedurally does not waive the Pauline opinion that conflict within the Church be kept in the Church.

Comments by John Nixon. Chrysostom text attributed to [On Living Simply: The Golden Voice of John Chrysostom](#).