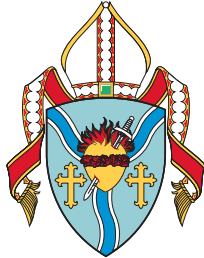


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Diocesan News

News and Views of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Kamloops



Who Are the Church Fathers?

A series of articles by Rev. Dale Normandeau,
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St. John Chrysostom (circa 344-407)

There is an ancient Chinese curse that goes: "May you live in interesting times."

While this curse was never deliberately directed towards St. John Chrysostom, his integrity, courage and oratorical skills would guarantee his own intimate experience of 'interesting times'.

As Bishop of Constantinople, he defended the poor and confronted and condemned the scandalous behaviour of the rich as well as the imperial court.

This latter action would earn him the wrath of Empress Eudoxia, and eventual exile. In time, however, he would be acknowledged as a powerful preacher, courageous defender of orthodoxy and reform, and one of the greatest bishops of the Eastern Church.

St. John Chrysostom was born in Antioch, the second most significant city in the Eastern Roman Empire, around the year 344. His father was a high-ranking officer in the Syrian Army, and his mother a devout Christian who directed his spiritual and educational formation.

Chrysostom received a classical education, being formed in Greek culture and philosophy. His life as a Greek scholar, however, came to an end when he encountered Bishop Meletius of Antioch. Chrysostom was so impressed with the saintly bishop that he turned his back on his classical studies, received the sacrament of Baptism in the year 370, and pursued the ascetical life of a hermit. Ill health, however, forced him to abandon the hermitic life, and he returned to Antioch, where he was ordained a priest in 386. Over the next 12 years, St. John Chrysostom excelled as a brilliant preacher and orator. Most of his sermons during this period focused on the interpretation of scripture and the cultivation of the virtues. His collected homilies and scriptural commentaries from this period leave us with a treasure trove of dogmatic, moral and historical knowledge. The people were so inspired by his sermons and oratorical skills that they gave him, posthumously, the honorific title of Chrysostom (meaning *golden mouthed* in Greek) in tribute to his skills as a preacher.

It was also during this time that he wrote his first great work, *On the Priesthood*, in which he wrote about his friendship with St. Basil and the sanctity and struggles the priest is called to embrace.

John Chrysostom's days in Antioch came to an abrupt end when Nectarius, the Bishop of Constantinople, died in 397.

As it was the prerogative of the time for emperors to appoint bishops, Emperor Arcadius called Chrysostom out of Antioch to Constantinople, which was the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, to become its new bishop. He was hurried out of Antioch to avoid the protests of its citizens and consecrated bishop of the imperial city on February 26, 398.

As Bishop of Constantinople, Chrysostom set about implementing reform throughout his Diocese. Palladius, a fourth century historian, describes Chrysostom as "sweeping the stairs from the top". He reduced the expenses of the Episcopal household, forbade frequent banquets, confined wandering monks to their monasteries, and condemned those clerics whose avarice and luxurious lifestyle had given scandal.

He set a personal example by his own frugal and ascetic lifestyle. With the money saved from his household, Chrysostom was able to finance the creation of a hospital for the poor. He also enhanced the liturgical life of his diocese by reviving and modifying the Byzantine Liturgy that bears his name today.

After reforming his priests, Chrysostom then turned his attention towards the laity.

His sermons often railed against the extravagances of the wealthy and some of the overindulgent finery of women's fashions. While many agreed with the blunt content of his sermons, often showing their approval by applauding him in church, the upper classes felt rebuked and offended.

Given the subject matter of Chrysostom's sermons, a major confrontation with the imperial court in Constantinople was inevitable.

The Eastern Roman empire was run from Constantinople by Emperor Arcadius, a weak-willed man who was dominated by his ambitious wife, Eudoxia. The Empress was a vain, self-important and easily offended woman who oversaw an imperial court that was akin to a blood-soaked soap opera. Ambitious leaders were constantly jockeying for positions of influence and prestige within the court – occasionally murdering those they considered their



ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

STAINED GLASS WINDOW IN ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM PARISH, NEWMARKET, ON – PHOTO BY DAVID JAFELICE

opponents and competitors. In only a few years, no fewer than three consuls to the Byzantine Empire were killed. It would only be a matter of time before Chrysostom would have to respond to the major scandal that was the imperial court.

Chrysostom had already gained the simmering disdain of the Empress by championing the cause of a widow whose vineyard Eudoxia had apprehended. He also had given a sermon against the vain luxuries possessed by some wealthy women, which the Empress received as a personal affront. She once had exiled John Chrysostom when trumped-up charges were brought against him. The Empress relented, however, fearing the hostility of the citizens, and allowed him to return.

EXILE AND DEATH

Eudoxia's hatred of Chrysostom reached its breaking point when a statue of herself was erected in front of the Cathedral. The dedication celebration was loud and boisterous and it went on for many days. Chrysostom complained that the noise and merriment was disturbing the work of the church offices. This complaint was interpreted by the Empress as a personal rebuke.

After two unsuccessful attempts were made on his life, Chrysostom was arrested during the Easter Vigil in the year 404. Subsequently, he was exiled for the second and

final time. He would remain exiled from Constantinople until his death three years later.

St. John Chrysostom was exiled to Cucusus, an isolated and inhospitable place in Eastern Armenia. While in exile, he maintained a flurry of correspondence with friends, while hoping to be allowed to return to Constantinople eventually. His enemies, who felt he was taking too long to die, ordered soldiers to take him to Pithyus, a place on the extreme edges of the Empire near the Caucasus. Chrysostom was forced to endure long marches along the way, the stress of which finally broke his already fragile health. He was taken to Comana on September 14, 407. He died only hours later. His final words were: "Glory be to God for all things."

Thirty-one years later, his body would be returned to Constantinople in a grand procession, being greeted by the contrite children of Eudoxia and Arcadius, who were pleading for forgiveness from the saintly bishop for the disreputable actions of their parents. St. John Chrysostom's body was then taken to the Church of the Apostles and reverently entombed.

St. John Chrysostom's writings can be divided up into three categories: the clerical and religious life; the homilies and commentaries; and the letters.

Most of the works on the priestly and religious life were written early in his writing career.

The bulk of his extant writings consists of sermons and commentaries on scripture, especially the Gospels of Matthew and John.

All 238 of his letters were written in exile and, despite his own sufferings, mainly express his deep concern for the spiritual welfare of his people in Constantinople.

This love and concern would not be forgotten by his flock and is still recalled by Catholics and Orthodox Christians today who continue to venerate this courageous shepherd. §

† PRAY FOR VOCATIONS †

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