

## The Condition of the Church and Our Passions

From *Homily 29 on The Acts of the Apostles*, by St. John Chrysostom

*Through this man*, nay more, by Him (Jesus Christ), *is remission of sins* (Acts 13:38). And besides, he wished to bring them to a longing desire of this great thing. Well then, His death was not dereliction, but fulfilling of Prophecy. For the rest, he puts them in mind of historical facts, wherein they through ignorance suffered evils without number. And this he hints in the conclusion, saying, *Look, you despisers, and behold* (Acts 13:41; Habakkuk 1:5). And observe how, this being harsh, he cuts it short. Let not that, he says, come upon you, which was spoken for the others, that *I work a work which you shall in no wise believe, though one declare it unto you* (Acts 13:41). Marvel not that it seems incredible: this very thing was foretold from the first (that it would not be believed). Behold, you despisers, as regards those who disbelieve in the Resurrection.

This too might with reason be said to us: Behold you despisers. For the Church indeed is in very evil condition, although you think her affairs to be in peace. For the mischief of it is, that while we labor under so many evils, we do not even know that we have any. What do you say? We are in possession of our Churches, our Church property, and all the rest, the services are held, the congregation comes to Church every day. True, but one is not to judge of the state of a Church from these things.

From what then? Whether there be piety, whether we return home with profit each day, whether reaping some fruit, be it much or little, whether we do it not merely of routine and for the formal acquittance of a duty. Who has become a better man by attending (daily) service for a whole month? That is the point: otherwise the very thing which seems to bespeak a flourishing condition (of the Church), does in fact bespeak an ill condition, when all this is done, and nothing comes of it. Would to God (that were all), that nothing comes of it: but indeed, as things are, it turns out even for the worse.

What fruit do you get from your services? Surely if you were getting any profit by them, you ought to have been long leading the life of true wisdom (lit., *philosophy*), with so many Prophets twice in every week discoursing to you, so many Apostles, and Evangelists, all setting forth the doctrines of salvation, and placing before you with much exactness that which can form the character aright. The soldier by going to his drill, becomes more perfect in his tactics: the wrestler by frequenting the gymnastic ground becomes more skillful in wrestling: the physician by attending on his teacher becomes more accurate, and knows more, and learns more: and thou — what have you gained?

I speak not to those who have been members of the Church only a year, but to those who from their earliest age have been attending the services. Think you that to be

<p><b>Church-going is nothing unless we reap some fruit for ourselves.</b></p>	<p>religious is to be constant in Church-going? This is nothing, unless we reap some fruit for ourselves: if (from the gathering together in Church) we do not gather something for ourselves, it were better to remain at home. For our forefathers built the Churches for us, not just to bring us together from our private houses and show us one</p>
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to another: since this could have been done also in a market-place, and in baths, and in a public procession:— but to bring together learners and teachers, and make the one better by means of the other.

With us it has all become mere customary routine, and formal discharge of a duty: a thing we are used to; that is all. Pascha comes, and then great the stir, great the hubbub, and crowding of — I had rather not call them human beings, for their behavior is not commonly human. Pascha goes, the tumult abates, but then the quiet which succeeds is again fruitless of good. Vigils, and holy hymn-singing. — And what is got by these? Nay, it is all the worse. Many do so merely out of vanity. Think how sick at heart it must make me, to see it all like (so much water) poured into a cask with holes in it!

But you will assuredly say to me, We know the Scriptures. And what of that? If you exemplify the Scriptures by your works, that is the gain, that the profit. The Church is a dyer's vat: if time after time perpetually ye go hence without receiving any dye, what is the use of coming here continually? Why, the mischief is all the greater. Who

(of you) has added ought to the customary practices he received from his fathers? For example: such an one has a custom of observing the memorial of his mother, or his wife, or his child: this he does whether he be told or whether he be not told by us, drawn to it by force of habit and conscience. Does this displease you, you ask? God forbid: on the contrary, I am glad of it with all my heart: only, I would wish that he had gained some fruit also from our discoursing, and that the effect which habit has, were also the effect as regards us (your teachers)— the superinducing of another habit. Else why do I weary myself in vain, and talk uselessly, if you are to remain in the same state, if the Church services work no good in you?

Nay, you will say, we pray. And what of that? *Not everyone that says unto Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the Kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of My Father which is in heaven* (Matthew 7:21). Many a time have I determined to hold my peace, seeing no benefit accruing to you from my words; or perhaps there does accrue some, but I, through insatiableness and strong desire, am affected in the same way as those that are mad after riches. For just as they, however much they may get, think they have nothing; so I, because I ardently desire your salvation, until I see you to have made good progress, think nothing done, because of my exceeding eager desire that you should arrive at the very summit. I would that this were the case, and that my eagerness were in fault, not your sloth: but I fear I conjecture but too rightly.

For you must needs be persuaded, that if any benefit had arisen in all this length of time, we ought ere now to have done speaking. In such case, there were no need to you of words, since both in those already spoken there had been enough said for you, and you would be yourselves able to correct others (see Hebrews 5:12). But the fact, that there is still a necessity of our discoursing to you, only shows, that matters with you are not in a state of high perfection. Then what would we have to be brought about? For one must not merely find fault. I beseech and entreat you not to think it enough to have invaded the Church, but that you also withdraw hence, having taken somewhat, some medicine, for the curing of your own maladies: and, if not from us, at any rate from the Scriptures, you have the remedies suitable for each.

**I entreat you that you  
also withdraw from  
Church having taken  
some medicine for the  
curing of your maladies.**

So wash out, if not the whole at once, a part at any rate, part today, and part tomorrow, and then the whole. And with regard to repentance too, and confession, and almsgiving, and justice also, and temperance, and all other things, you will find many examples. *For all these things*, says the Apostle, *were written for our admonition* (1 Corinthians 10:11). If then Scripture in all its discoursing is for our admonition, let us attend to it as we ought. Why do we deceive ourselves in vain? I fear it may be said of us also, that *our days have fallen short in vanity, and our years with haste* (Psalm 77:33).

Who from hearing us has given up the theatres? Who has given up his covetousness? Who has become more ready for almsgiving? I would wish to know this, not for the sake of vainglory, but that I may be inspirited to more zeal, seeing the fruit of my labors to be clearly evident. But as things now are, how shall I put my hand to the work, when I see that for all the rain of doctrine pouring down upon you shower after shower, still our crops remain at the same measure, and the plants have waxed none the higher? Anon the time of threshing is at hand (and) He with the fan. I fear me, lest it be all stubble: I fear, lest we be all cast into the furnace. The summer is past, the winter has come: we sit, both young and old, taken captive by our own evil passions.

Do not tell me, I do not commit fornication: for what are you the better, if though thou be no fornicator you are covetous? It matters not to the sparrow caught in the snare that he is not held tight in every part, but only by the foot: he is a lost bird for all that; in the snare he is, and it profits him not that he has his wings free, so long as his foot is held tight. Just so, you are caught, not by fornication, but by love of money: but caught you are nevertheless; and the point is, not *how* you are caught, but *that* you are caught. Let not the young man say, I am no money-lover: well, but perchance you are a fornicator: and then again what are you the better? For the fact is, it is not possible for all the passions to set upon us at one and the same time of life: they are divided and marked off, and that, through the mercy of God, that they may not by assailing us all at once become insuperable, and so our wrestling with them be made more difficult.

What wretched inertness it shows, not to be able to conquer our passions even when taken one by one, but to be defeated at each several period of our life, and to take

credit to ourselves for those which (let us alone) not in consequence of our own hearty endeavors, but merely because, by reason of the time of life, they are dormant? Look at the chariot-drivers, do you not see how exceedingly careful and strict they are with themselves in their training-practice, their labors, their diet, and all the rest, that they may not be thrown down from their chariots, and dragged along (by the reins)?— See what a thing art (or, skill) is. Often even a strong man cannot master a single horse: but a mere boy who has learned the art shall often take the pair in hand, and with ease lead them and drive them where he will. Nay, in India it is said that a huge monster of an elephant shall yield to a stripling of fifteen, who manages him with the utmost ease.

To what purpose have I said all this? To show that, if by dint of study and practice we can throttle into submission even elephants and wild horses, much more the passions within us. Whence is it that throughout life we continually fail (in every encounter)? We have never practiced this art: never in a time of leisure when there is no contest, talked over with ourselves what shall be useful for us. We are never to be seen in our place on the chariot, until the time for the contest is actually come. Hence the ridiculous figure we make there. Have I not often said,

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Let us practice ourselves upon those of our own family before the time of trial? With our servants (or, children) at home we are often exasperated, let us there quell our anger, that in our intercourse with our friends we may come to have it easily under control.

And so, in the case of all the other passions, if we practiced ourselves beforehand, we should not make a ridiculous figure in the contests themselves. But now we have our implements and our exercises and our trainings for other things, for arts and feats of the palæstra (i.e., the arena, or contest-ground), but for virtue nothing of the sort. The husbandman would not venture to meddle with a vine, unless he had first been practiced in the culture of it: nor the pilot to sit by the helm, unless he had first practiced himself well at it: but we, in all respects unpracticed, wish for the first prizes! It were good to be silent, good to have no communication with any man in act or word, until we were able to charm the wild beast that is within us.

The wild beast (sinful passion), I say: for indeed is it not worse than the attack of any wild beast, when wrath and lust make war upon us? Beware of invading the market-place (i.e., going out into public) with these beasts, until thou have got the muzzle well upon their mouths, until thou have tamed and made them tractable. Those who lead about their tame lions in the market-place, do you not see what a gain they make of it, what admiration they get, because in the irrational beast they have succeeded in producing such tameness — but, should the lion suddenly take a savage fit, how he scares all the people out of the market-place, and then both the man that leads him about is himself in danger, and if there be loss of life to others, it is his doing?

Well then do thou also first tame your lion, and so lead him about, not for the purpose of receiving money, but that you may acquire a gain, to which there is none equal. For there is nothing equal to gentleness, which both to those that possess it, and to those who are its objects, is exceeding useful. This then let us follow after, that having kept in the way of virtue, and with all diligence finished our course therein, we may be enabled to attain unto the good things eternal, through the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom to the Father and the Holy Ghost together be glory, might, honor, now and ever, world without end. Amen.