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# DOES THE CONCEPT OF DEPENDENCY HAVE A PLACE IN SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM'S SPIRITUALITY?

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I analyse Saint John Chrysostom's conceptions on human free will and freedom in order to find out if this Church Father, whose life and work have such a great influence over Orthodox spirituality, speaks about any kind of determinate dependency of human being that could limit its freedom and free will. The conclusion of this paper is that according to Saint John Chrysostom, the human being enjoys real natural freedom and free will and that there is no determination or natural dependency given by nature. A sort of dependency is created by sin, which is in Saint John's perception a result of the free human decision, sometimes benefiting of the negative contribution of devil's temptation, but this kind of dependency can be overcome by the strength of human will and with the assistance of the grace of God.

*Keywords:* Saint John Chrysostom, dependency, determination, human freedom, free will

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## **1. Introduction**

There is no doubt that the life, work and writings that Saint John Chrysostom (†407) produced during his life in Antioch and Constantinople has influenced Orthodox spirituality and worship more than any other Church Father before or after him. Even if "he did not expose *ex professo* a spiritual doctrine, his entire activity and writings present a lived spirituality" [1]. In a rather unsystematic way, his writings offer a quite clear response to the question posed by the title of this paper: 'Does the concept of dependency have a place in Saint John Chrysostom's spirituality?' In order to formulate a coherent answer to this question, I firstly present a brief introduction of the notions of human freedom and human free will by Chrysostom. In the second part, I analyse briefly the relationship between the grace given to Christians by God, especially through the sacrament of Baptism, and its relationship with the human freedom and free will in order to determine whether any kind of dependency or determination can be identified. The same kind of analysis is undertaken in the third part, for the

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discussion around the effects of the devil's influence and the consequences of the sin for the freedom and free will of the human nature.

## **2. Freedom and free will of the human nature**

The notion of human freedom is in general described by Saint John Chrysostom with the Greek word *proairesis* which plays an important role in Saint John's anthropology. *Proairesis* was originally a stoic notion. Epictetus of Hierapolis (AD 55-AD 135) transformed it into a central notion of ethics, designating basic preliminary decision about what is good and what is not. It was later adopted by Saint John Chrysostom and other Church Fathers to describe the freedom of the human nature in general [2]. According to Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG) search results, the notion of *proairesis* shows up 792 times in various forms in the extensive work we inherited from Saint John Chrysostom. Alone this high presence of the notion of *proairesis* in Saint John's writings speaks in itself about the importance that he gave to human freedom.

The notion of human free will is described by Christian authors since Origenes with the notion of *autexousia*. According to the same TLG search results, *autexousia* and its derivate appear 50 times in Saint John's writings.

It is obvious that in this short article, there is no way to present a detailed analysis of these two notions and of other aspects related with freedom and free will of human nature. In the next two sub-chapters, I will try to highlight the basic principles of Saint John's perception about freedom and free will in order to be able to answer to the issue of dependency posed in the title of this article.

### **2.1. The notion of freedom in Saint John Chrysostom's writings**

Every theologian familiar with Saint John Chrysostom's writings shall confirm that he was strongly convinced that the human being that was created after the image of God enjoys complete freedom. This stays on the basis of several ethical principles, like responsibility, reward, punishment etc. Freedom is for Saint John also the key of living a life according to the commandments of God or against them. The decision for good is an act of the will. On various occasions Saint John presented both the virtue and the sin as a result of the freedom that the human being enjoys. For instance, in the Commentaries on the Epistle of Saint Paul to the Ephesians he shows that "passion is not a matter of necessity ... but of deliberate choice and free will" [3].

Using the verse of Proverbs 8.3 „When a wicked man cometh into the depth of vice, then he despises", Saint John make efforts to show to his audience that God does not deprive us of free will: „As, then, when a man cometh into the depth of iniquity, he turns a despiser; so when he cometh into the depth of goodness, he quickens his exertions. For as the one runs riot in despair, so the second, under a sense of the multitude of good things, exerts himself the more, fearing lest he should lose the whole. 'For His good pleasure', he says, that is, 'for love's sake', for the sake of pleasing Him; to the end that what is acceptable

to Him may take place; that things may take place according to His will. Here he shows, and makes it a ground of confidence, that He is sure to work in us, for it is his will that we live as He desires we should, and if He desires it, He Himself both worketh in us to this end, and will certainly accomplish it; for it is His will that we live aright. Seest thou, how he does not deprive us of free will?" [3, p. 302]

Apart from the natural freedom in relationship with God that everyone was born with [3, vol. 11, p. 619], Saint John Chrysostom also emphasises man's freedom in relationship with the material goods of this world. For him, as long as our souls are not possessed by greed, we can own goods of this world as free man: "So, when God see that we do not depend greedy on such things, He let us to use the goods; so we own them as free man" [3, vol. 14, p. 692].

More than this, a recent research demonstrated convincing evidence that Saint John Chrysostom believed in the prevalence of *proairesis* over the natural needs of human beings, like food, drink, sleep, hunger, thirst, birth, death, etc. The martyrs who were tortured were those who overcame these natural needs. Even if Saint John lived in a time of no persecution, he taught his audience that the imitation of martyrs in overcoming these natural needs is possible through asceticism [4].

## ***2.2. The notion of free will in Saint John Chrysostom's writings***

The will for doing good as a natural gift from God offered to every human being by nature plays an important role in Saint John Chrysostom's teaching [5]. He taught the converts about the role of choice in the change of the soul [6] and that in the relationship with Christ 'good will' needs to be brought [6, p. 136].

Saint John Chrysostom was strongly convinced that human beings possess free will that can be used either for committing good or evil. In one of his homilies he answers the question of the origin of evil. It is placed in the wrong use of the individual free will: "Whence then are evils?" one may say. From willing and not willing. But the very thing of our willing and not willing, whence is it? From ourselves. But you do the same in asking, as if when you have asked, whence is seeing and not seeing? Then when I said from closing the eyes or not closing the eyes, you were to ask again; the very closing of the eyes or not, whence is it? Then having heard that it was of ourselves, and our will, you were to look again for other cause." [3, vol. 10, p. 366]

For Saint John Chrysostom, spiritual death has its origin in the free will. He speaks on the one hand about a physical death which is the result of the fall of the first-created man and, on the other hand about a spiritual death which is a matter of choice: "There is, we know, a corporal, and there is also a spiritual dying. On the first it is no crime to partake, nor is there any peril in it, inasmuch as there is no blame attached to it, for it is a matter of nature, not of deliberate choice. It has its origin in the transgression of the first-created man, and thence forward in its issue it passed into a nature, and, at all events, will quickly be

brought to a termination; whereas this spiritual dying, being a matter of deliberate choice has criminality, and has no termination.” [3, p. 97]

There are many examples in Saint John Chrysostom’s writings in which he carefully underlines that certain decisions (good or bad) were the result of human free will. For instance, those who participated in the Crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ were involved in this as a result of their free will and they were entirely responsible for their actions, even if the Crucifixion was part of God’s plan for the salvation of humanity [3, vol. 14, p. 472]. His apology of the free will goes so far that he carefully underlines that Christ’s teaching in parables did not nullify the free will of His hearers [3, vol. 10, p. 312].

### **3. Freedom and free determination and relationship with grace of God**

„A key factor in John’s understanding of synergism in salvation and his concept of human nature was his dogmatic stance against any form of fatalism” [7] concludes a study on Saint John’s pastoral doctrine. In term of synergism between human nature and grace, Saint John is a classic representative of patristic thinking [8] underlines another research.

One of the starting points of his synergism is the conviction that there is an internal affinity between the human and the Christian concerns. The Christian one is not thinkable without the human one [9]. We, as human beings, are inclined to promote the good and to avoid the evil naturally. However, the good intention of Christians is based not only on the general human natural inclination to do so, but is also a result of the grace we received firstly through Baptism and later through permanent contact with God.

Saint John Chrysostom makes efforts to bring to the catechumens the conscience that through the Baptism they receive the grace of the Holy Spirit in abundance. The receiving of the grace of the Holy Spirit is described in colourful images. Saint John speaks about the soul of the newly baptized that just received the grace of the Holy Spirit as being more luminous than the sun: “Certainly the earth is not so light when the sun rises, as the soul shines is when it (the soul) receives the grace of the Holy Spirit” [6, p. 116].

According to Saint John Chrysostom, we as human beings have “more than a moral obligation” [10] to respond to the grace of Christ who suffered for our salvation. The response that is expected from those who received the grace of Christ through the Holy Spirit is that they live a spiritual life, free of sins. In one of his homilies on Pauline epistle to Romans, Saint John shows that through Baptism God confers to man the Spirit. The duty of those who received the Spirit is to preserve Him through a spiritual life [3, vol. 11, p. 734]. It is not enough to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit. The grace needs to become ‘operative’ in those who received it, and this is possible only if the receiver of the grace collaborates with it and the spirit who grant it [6, p. 385]. The duty of everyone who received “the light ... the grace of the Spirit” is to make it more luminous “through good deeds” [6, p. 405]. These ‘good deeds’ are the result of the human free will in collaboration with the grace of God. It is clear that in

Saint John`s spirituality, a human being can commit good deeds as a result of its own good will, but a human being that was illuminated by the grace of God and collaborates with it can do so much better. For Saint John it is crucial that those who received the grace of God do not keep it inactive but make it lucrative in them. The more we use the grace of God in us, the more God enhances it in us [6, p. 407].

We can conclude that the more a human being is dedicated to God and His grace, the more freedom men enjoy [3, vol. 14, p. 675].

#### **4. Free will and determination of human nature by sin and devil**

I presented Saint John clear emphasis of man`s freedom and free will, and the role of the grace and how its support and collaboration does not violate human freedom and free will, but rather stimulates them. In this last part of this article, I intend to research in which way sin and devil might impose a sort of dependency over human nature.

##### ***4.1. The role of the devil in human determination***

In Saint John Chrysostom`s thinking about the sin and evil in the world, the intervention of the devil is taken into consideration. There are various ways in which the devil tries to make people commit sins. For instance in one of his sermons, Saint John describes how the devil sends robbers and pickpockets to distract the attention of people in the church, while he preaches: “but he (the Devil) did send robbers and pickpockets to mingle among you and had them ready on more than one occasion to snatch from the many people gathered here the money which they had tied up in their purses ... The devil contrived this not to make you poorer but to let the loss of your money make you feel deeply disgusted and lead you away from your eagerness to hear the homily. He once stripped Job of all his possessions not to make him poorer but to strip him of his piety.” [11]

He informs the catechumens about the fact that also after Baptism, they will be confronted with the temptations of Satan. But even if also after Baptism we are victims of the devil`s evil influence, he is deeply convinced that at the end it is our choice which decides either to commit the sin or not. More than that, Saint John ensured his audience in different occasions that:

1. No real damage can be caused by the devil: „Nobody, not even the devil can cause damage to the soul of the Christian believers“ [6].
2. Especially after the Baptism, there is no way for the devil to reach a newly born Christian, unless he lowers himself to him. Saint John tells to those who received Baptism that they have moved up into heaven where devil has no access: “You are in heaven (after receiving Baptism) and it is inaccessible for the devil” [3, vol. 13, p. 392]. The catechumens are told that, at least in the moments after they will receive the illumination of the

Baptism, the devil will just look at the transformation they went through and will go away ashamed [6, p. 363].

3. Christ's support is always with us in moments of temptation. Saint John compared the Christian fighting against the temptations of Satan with a fighter in the Olympic Games. While in the later the judge is impartial, in the spiritual fight with the devil, our Judge who is Jesus Christ supports us: "In the combats the judge stands impartially aloof for the combatants, favouring neither the one nor the other, but awaiting the outcome. He stands in the middle because his judgment is impartial. But in our combat with the Devil, Christ does not stand aloof but is wholly on our side." [6, p. 365]

After all these guarantees given by Saint John that the devil's temptations can be overcome with the help of God, we shall ask the question if in Saint John's opinion the devil can impose any determination upon human beings. The answer is certainly negative: no determination can be imposed neither by God and neither by the devil upon human nature. However, those who conduct a life dominated by sin are following more the devil's will rather than their own will or God's will. That is why in a certain context Saint John affirms that those people living constantly in sin become demons. In the second homily on Lazarus resurrection Saint John discusses the superstition held by simple people that those people having part of a violent death are becoming demons. His answer is: "This is quite impossible. It is not the souls of those who die violently which become demons, but the souls of those who live in sin." [12] Here Saint John does not mean that those people who live in sin become ontologically demons. This assignment has, on the one hand rather a moral role which is to keep the auditorium away from every sin and on the other hand it shows that as those people committing the will of God became more similar to their Creator, so those following the will of the devil become similar to it.

We can conclude by saying that the actions of Satan are aimed to create a dependency of the human nature on sins, but everyone can reject it due to their freedom and free will. The recent study quoted above concludes in this sense that the prevalence of *proairesis* give to every demon just so much space (for action) as the human being allow him [4, p. 342].

#### ***4.2. Sin and its consequences for human freedom***

For Saint John, each human being participates in Adam's original sin [3, vol. 14, p. 194]. In this sense, Saint John's anthropology is closed to the Augustinian doctrine of original sin and its transmission. Because of this participation in Adam's original sin, we all, as human beings, who are born from 'the seed of Adam' suffer the consequences of the sin. However these consequences do not undermine our free will to reject the sin. Saint John insists that the catechumens give up their sinful habits before Baptism: "Consider your soul as an image (eikōna). Before the real colour of the Holy Spirit is applied upon you, erase your bad habits: swearing, lying ... give up the bad habits... so that you shall not fall into them after your baptism." [6, p. 124] Saint John

underlines many times that the Baptist erases all the sins [6, p. 133, 167]. Speaking about the remission of the sins, Saint John insists on the gratitude we have to show to God for this, but also on the fact that – following Saint Paul's teaching that "nothing is unclean of itself" (Romans 14.14) – nothing is unclean by nature. In anthropological terms it means that the sin cannot corrupt the human nature in such a way that it could be considered impure. At the same time, using again the Pauline authority, Saint John warns his auditorium: "Or don't you know that the unrighteous will not inherit God's Kingdom? Don't be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolatries, nor adulterers, nor male prostitutes, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor extortionists, will inherit God's Kingdom." (1 Corinthians 6.9-10)

We cannot use our fallen nature as an excuse for the sins we commit. In his exegesis to Matthew 7.11: "For if you, being evil, know to give good gifts to your children, how much more your heavenly Father", Saint John Chrysostom explains the reference to evil in humanity as being not absolute, or ontological, but comparative. "Now this He said, not to bring an evil name on man's nature, nor to condemn our race as bad; but it contrasts to His own goodness He calls paternal tenderness evil, so great is the excess of His love to man." [3, vol. 10, p. 161]

Evil is only disobedience to God and is not by nature: "In quite not then whence are evils, neither perplex yourself; but having found that they are from remissness only, free evil deeds ... But if evils were by nature, superfluous were all this admonition and advice, superfluous the precaution by the means that have been mentioned. But if it be not superfluous, as surely it is not superfluous, it is quite clear that wickedness is of the evil." [3, vol. 10, p. 366]

In some fragments of Saint John Chrysostom's writings it can be found the idea that the man is liberated from the sins by the Spirit of God, as a slave is liberated by an imperial letter [6, p. 169]. He speaks also about the "rejection of the burden of the sins" [6, p. 361]. Cain after he murdered his brother did not live like a free man, but like a slave "serving the love of money [3, vol. 12, p. 428]. These three quotations show that Saint John Chrysostom believed that freedom is given to men by God, but he is enslaved by the sin he commits. However, this enslavement through sin can be rejected by the will of the sinner and especially with the support of the grace of God.

## **5. Conclusions**

The well-known *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* which I quoted at the beginning of this short paper characterizes Saint John Chrysostom as being "marked by the spirit of the Gospel and of Saint Paul" and "a passionate admirer and a zealous admirer" of the later [1]. Based on Gospels and on the theology of Saint Paul, Saint John Chrysostom developed a spirituality that put emphasis on freedom and the free will of humans in such a way that he was suspected of being a semipelagian [13]. We can conclude by saying that in Saint John

Chrysostom's writings, there is no room for any dependency or determination in the field of anthropology. Neither the grace of God nor the action of devil or the negative effects of sin can create a real determination. While the grace of God stimulates human freedom and free will, a sinful life creates dependency on sins and in this way appears a certain dependency. This dependency created by sin is not ontological and therefore can be rejected by the sinner.

The ultimate conclusion of this study is that since human dependency and determination has definitely no space in Saint John's spirituality, it has also no proper space in Orthodox spirituality in general. This principal should be one of the starting points for developing a Christian anthropology in 21<sup>st</sup> century [14].

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