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# THE CHURCH AND THE STATE IN THE WORK OF SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

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## Abstract

The Church and the State are two social realities. By its origin, the Church includes the visible and invisible world alike. The State, reflected in the daily life of society, is a purely immanent of principles and rules that ideologically leads the visible world. At first glance, the two elements of our study seem to have nothing in common. However, shortly after the cessation of persecution, in 313 AD, Saint John Chrysostom in his homilies shows the points of contact between Church and State. For the secular society, the proposed Johannine analysis can be a starting point for the current missionary dialogue, and necessary between Church and State.

*Keywords:* mission, Christianity, religion, society, secularism

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## 1. The Church

The Greek word *ecclesia*, translated into Romanian by *church*, referred in antiquity to a gathering of citizens. Specifically, the meeting was convened by an ambassador of the state leadership, a public servant, who used to bring into notice the sovereign's provisions, orders and laws. In the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, *ecclesia* has the general meaning of *secular assembly* (Psalm 25.5, Ecclesiastes 22.34).

With the spread of Christianity, the word *ecclesia* acquires the meaning of assembly of the believers participating in the Eucharistic sacrifice and in the other services of praise and glorification of God [1]. These believers, after being baptized, become members of the Church, communicate with the Sacraments and are led by the spiritual pastors (bishops, priests and deacons) to the Kingdom of God. The believers assembly is made in the name of Christ and for acquiring the communion with Christ, who said that "where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in their midst" (Matthew 18.20). Thus we can speak of the Church sanctified and raised to the honour of God, formed by *the assembly of the elect*.

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Unlike other Church Fathers, who, for Church use the term *assembly*, Saint John Chrysostom uses the term *society*. He understands it as a well-organized, comprehensive, lively society, different from other human societies; a perfect, divine and independent society for it is born from Jesus Christ, the Man-God [2]. Saint John Chrysostom says about this society called Church, that it is God's house. Due to the divine Eucharist kept in the Church, it becomes "His palace and His throne" [2, p. 638]. In this palace everything is full of glory; here live thousands of angels who adore the Great King [2]. In the Holy Church, the Sacraments are accomplished, where "the Great Victim is sacrificed, the Blood of God flows here, this is where the sacrifice of the New Testament is accomplished" [2].

Saint John Chrysostom describes *the Society* (the Church) in detail, as a whole, a body, a house, a barn, a kingdom. The Church is the place where those who believe in the love of God are united and bound in harmony and peace forming a body of it, a society. This society is "an assembly, a cohesion between several states, an order, a hierarchy, different organs but linked by a common action, an authority, a force that keeps the body altogether" [2]. The Church is a *house* built on the foundation of the apostles, like the house built on the rock, where "the stones are all cemented in the same unit" [2]. As the Church on Earth is a *stable*, having "a flock and a shepherd", in the sky it is a *kingdom* "whose subjects are harmoniously united under a supreme authority and distributed in different functions for the common good" [2].

In the thought of Saint John Chrysostom, the Church is presented as a *body*. As the human body is made up of many members, the Church embraces all the faithful people of all times and all places. They are the patriarchs, the prophets, the righteous of the Old Law, "all the people who truly serving God in the bosom of barbarism and idolatry, have remained faithful to the law dug deep in their heart, are members of the Church, the angels, like humans are part of it" [2, p. 116].

If Saint Cyril of Alexandria understood by Church the crowd of believers, Saint John Chrysostom sees the Church as being built of the believers' souls, which he compares to precious stones and metals. Thus, he says that in this building called Church, the stones will be distinguished by their brightness: "You shall see here many who replace the gold adorning the ceiling. You will see many others who contribute to the adornment of the statues. You will see others that stand for columns. It is customary to name the people columns or pillars, not only by their strength, but also because of their beauty that adorns the building, with their heads covered with gold. You will then see a big crowd, which more or less occupies the surrounding sprawling distance and place. That big crowd substitutes the stones built into walls. But a prettier image should be pictured. This church was not built of such stones, but of gold and silver, and also of the most precious ones, and, in a word, the gold here is not scattered all over the place in abundance." [3]

Inspired by Apostle Paul, who wrote to the Colossians that *He (Christ) is the Head of the Church's body* (Colossians 1.18), Saint John Chrysostom points out, like Saint Gregory of Nyssa, that Christ is the Head of the Church. After speaking about His goodness, in the end he talks about His love. "He is the head of the Church's body. He does not say that He is the head of fullness, but of the Church's body, wishing thereby to present Him more familiar, closer, emphasizing that He who is so high and above all, has approached all of the vulgar. All over the place, He is the First, the above, the First in the Church, for He is the Head, the First in Resurrection. It is admirable how Paul struggles to show Him as the first in creation (as a man) though (in Genesis) it is said that the first is Adam, and it really is, but He (Christ) is the Head of the Church before Adam's creation, before any man. He is Head of the Church, namely the First, as He is the first in creation, and the first among people, the first by body, I say." [3, p. 36] Therefore, the source of spiritual life is Jesus Christ, "in Him we live and move and are" (Acts 17.28), because "as we were incorporated in Adam to die, we are now in Christ Jesus to live. We are only one with Jesus Christ, He is the head, and we are the body, where there is the head, there are the limbs too." [2, p. 143]

Saint John Chrysostom compares the church to a bride: "Jesus Christ has it as a bride of His; Jesus Christ is its Head, and it is the body so well that the Church of Jesus Christ is like Jesus Christ continued, living, acting in the world during all ages" [2, p. 117]. It is rather present the idea that Christ is the head and believers are the body: "Did you see the greatness of the very high power to those who believe? Did you see the hope of the calling? Let us therefore respect our Head, Christ, let us understand whose head are we, the body, the head to which everything was submitted. After this example we have to be better than the angels and more special than the archangels, like those who are preferred by everybody." [3]

Unlike other Church Fathers, Saint John Chrysostom refers in his writings to that the Church has been and will always remain strong and victorious. According to Christ's teachings, who said that *the gates of hell shall not prevail against it* (Matthew 16.18), Saint John Chrysostom states that the Church, as a divine-human institution, does not age and cannot be broken again. Nobody can do anything to it, and those who fought it throughout the ages have perished. The barbarians only destroyed its walls, but the Church has another dimension, transcendental, it is above the heaven and the "being fought in war, it overcomes, being hunted, it rises to the surface, gets hurt, but does not fall under the blow, it is troubled, but it does not plunge into the waves, it is embarrassed, but it does not suffer shipwreck, it struggles, but it is not beaten, it is hit, but not defeated" [4].

Throughout history, the people of the Church have been persecuted, caught up, mocked and martyred. Despite the attacks of all kinds, the Saviour's words echo saying: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me" (John 14.1) for "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, while every branch

that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” (John 15.1-2), for “without Me you can do nothing” (John 15.5). These words have burned the thorns and cleansed the field beyond the power of fire and lit the flame of faith in the souls’ candles “while some of the faithful laid in prison, others were exiled abroad, wealth was taken to others, others were killed and cut into pieces, others were fired, others drowned, while believers endured all sorts of punishments, being ridiculed, expelled and banished from all places as enemies of humanity, others, much more than those persecuted, came to faith” [5]. In this whirl of suffering, the persecuted became more zealous, like the burning bush that was not consumed. The more they saw the blood of the believers’ bodies flowing, the more, those suffering without anyone forcing or compelling them, became bolder, hotter for faith, for they saw how “the number of Christians was increasing more and more and they became more ardent believers, not just when their brothers in faith were suffering these tortures, but also when their teachers suffered the same, some being banished, others whipped, others enduring countless other torments” [5].

For the Holy Father, the Church of Christ never gets old [6], but it always hardens it, becoming more powerful.

The Church is above all, and nothing is more powerful than it and nothing rises to its value. “The Church is higher than the sky, larger than the earth, brighter than the sun. How many people have struggled with it and have not managed to overcome it? All those who fought against it were given to perdition, while the Church ascended to Heaven.” [7] Church becomes victorious in war, and in times of adversity it gets even brighter. It “is hurt, but does not fall. It is hit by the waves, but does not flip. The storm starts against it, but it does not flounder. It fights and it is not overcome. If you fight a man, you will either conquer, or will be overcome. But if you fight the Church, it is impossible for you to conquer, for God is stronger than anyone. If God Himself built it, who can move it from its place?” [7]

Like other Church Fathers, when referring to the ecclesiastical hierarchy and its role in the Church, Saint John Chrysostom uses the comparison with the body: this hierarchy is the head and the people are the limbs: “In the Church of Jesus Christ there are heads and there are people. There is a hierarchy of power and there are topics subordinate to it. See the human body. The head dominates and spreads the influence of movement to the rest of limbs. If the head is taken, everything breaks down and dies. In this head we find eminent functions, like heads and officials: they are the eyes, ears, tongue, charged with the highest services, with the vital missions. Under this hierarchy of power, the legs, the hands, the feet, the other subordinate ministers fulfil their apologetic, but quite precious and necessary ministrations listening to the head. The variety of limbs does not lie in the human body and in the Church, but they rather maintain it and use it. The heads, as greater subjects, as simple priests, laymen as well as priests, all have a purpose, a road, a greater good, a unique destiny and wait down here for equal spiritual goods. From the foregoing we must get the conclusion that the Orthodox Church is a society. It has, finally, the three elements and it reaches

the three conditions. It is the crowd. It consists of an infinite number of members which it recruits from all parts of the world over the centuries. It is the unity. Its different limbs have all than the same faith, the same holiness, and the same eternal destiny. It is a family sitting in the parental home, living in the same property and that must participate in the same inheritance. It is the authority. God has not left the limbs to live and act independently and after their liking. The chiefs lead the people; the bishops and priests under the authority of the Patriarch, lead the kingdom of Jesus Christ.” [2, p. 116-117]

The role of the Church is to bring salvation to those who err, to turn the sinners from evil to good, like Noah’s ark, which brought salvation to those who were in it.

The Church aims to save the erring, being a means of saving humanity from sin as Noah’s ark saved those on it. Those who enter the Church, unlike Noah’s ark, are transformed; the Church does not leave people as they are, for “the ship took and saved dumb; the Church took dumb people, and not only saved them, but it also changed them; the ship took a crow and it sent forth a crow; a raven takes the Church as well, but it releases a maize; it takes a wolf, and gives way to a sheep” [8]. The Church is a laboratory where Christians are sons of God by grace: “If a greedy and stingy man enters the Church and hears the words of the divine teaching, he changes his mind and turns himself into a sheep instead of a wolf, for the wolf kidnaps the foreign too, while the sheep gives even its wool” [8]. Thus, the Church is the best place for us to recover spiritually.

## **2. The State**

When talking about the state, Saint John Chrysostom starts from the words of Apostle Paul to the Romans: “Wilt thou not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain.” (Romans 13.3-4) God hath dominion over human communities to avoid anarchy, based on the example that dumb animals, and many species of fish, have a sensible order, thanks to the subordination to one of theirs: “And why wonder that this happens to human communities, when we see that the same thing was done with our body? For here, He did not make all the members alike in honour, but some are higher and others lower; He made some to rule the others, and others were made to be mastered. This could be seen by someone also among dumb animals, such as bees, cranes, and wild sheep. But even the seas have this wise policy, because there too, many species of fish are under the authority of others and are thus ordered to make very large travels in perfect order. Anarchy everywhere is a great evil and the cause of all disorders. Therefore, after he said where the mastery comes from, he immediately added: Wherefore, he who resists authority resists the ordinance of God. (Romans 13.2)” [9]

In *Cuvântul al IV-lea* of the book *Cele dintâi omilii la Facere*, Saint John Chrysostom, inspired by the writings of the prophet Habakkuk, says that domination is necessary in order to avoid people's misunderstandings: "Let us see, however, in the Old Covenant that for our wickedness this mastering was necessary. Some of the prophets, provoking the unjust, speak like this: Shall you be silent, when the righteous will swallow the unbeliever, and you will make people like the fish of the sea, and like the beasts that have no master (Habakkuk 1.13 -14). So this is the domination for, for us not to live like animals; these are the heads for, for us not to swallow each other like fish: as cures are for diseases, so are the punishments for sins." [10]

Often man is enslaved by sin and passion, which is why God put rulers: "As Paul says that the only dominion is from God. For He has ordained it for us to use, as the sin has brought this necessity, and God has turned it to our help; and as the need for medicine comes from wounds, and their use from the doctors' wisdom, so was made the necessity for the bondage of sin, and its return to our benefit – form the wisdom of God." [10]

The domination principle lies in the great wisdom of God, not being something invented by humans. The fact that some rulers are good and others are bad is because of the people who ask and raise their rulers. After many sins, God often allows evil rulers to conduct people, and vice versa, for the people's faith, the wicked to be replaced by the good ones. Saint John Chrysostom states: "Being dominions, and some to rule and others to be ruled, none of these happen by chance in the world, are not perpetuated among peoples like the sea waves carried by the wind to and fro, but all are the work of God and of his mysterious wisdom. Therefore, he did not say there is a ruler, but only from God, but he speaks for about the thing itself, saying that there is no dominion, but only from God, and the powers that are ordained." [9, p. 432-433] "The main right of such legislations is God's; therefore, he puts this right reasoning first, as it is commanded by God: *that there is no dominion*, he says, *but only from God*." [9]

Good leaders are like priests, and Saint John Chrysostom calls them *servants of God*. Such a servant "helps ease the good deeds because he punishes the wicked, while he rewards and honours the good, and with a word he is working to fulfil God's will. That is why he called him God's servant. Think about it: I, for instance, advise everyone to be careful, but the governor says the same by the laws that he applies; I urge everyone to not be greedy nor take away the right of another, but also the governor has to judge such things. So he is our leader and help, and for this was sent from God. So from both sides he is respected: both for he was sent by God and for he meets such service." [9, p. 435-436] Thus, those named to rule over nations only apply the just judgment of God, punishing the evil and praising the good, often bringing sinners' correction because "many, first doing good for fear of beneficiaries, afterwards do the same for fear of God" [9].

In many of his writings, Saint John Chrysostom refers to the exhortation of Apostle Paul addressed to Romans: "All souls to obey the lofty dominations; for there is no mastery, but only from God; and those that are, are ordained from

God. Therefore, he who resists authority resists the ordinance of God and those who resist will attract condemnation.” (Romans 13.1-2) About rulers he teaches: “He who is subject to earthly dominions, in reality obeys God. And he who does not obey dominions resists God. Because, as Scripture says, for there is no mastery, but only from God: and those that are, are ordained from God (Romans 13.1). The fact that some master and others are mastered, some manage and others are managed, so that our society does not become like a stormy sea, is the work of God’s wisdom.” [7, p. 184-185]

Community members or citizens, that Saint John Chrysostom calls them believers ought not to feel humiliated, but obediently and without shame to bear their master, precisely because it is from God, therefore not contrary to the Christian lifestyle: “Did you see where he raised this issue, how he feared the listeners and how he shown that fulfilling with this command is a duty? So that believers cannot say that you demean us and make us contemptible, so that we who have the promise to enjoy the goods of the heavenly kingdom, to be subject to this world’s rulers, behold, the apostle shows that by doing this they are not subject to ephemeral rulers but to God Himself. But the Apostle does not say really so, but with the contrary idea he frightens his audience and makes things clear, saying that anyone who opposes the ruler struggles with God, who enacted all these. He is trying by all means to show the audience that we submit to rulers not for a whim or to their satisfaction, but for the duty that we have to obey. In this manner, even the wicked rulers could be attracted to the Christian faith and piety while the faithful obeyed their dominions without a murmur. There was much gossip those days, and the Apostles were vilified as bringing innovation and resistance, and were accused not only for their words, but also for doing everything to overthrow the public laws. So he says, when you will show the master of us all, Who advises us to do so, then you will shut the mouths of those who reproached us for introducing innovations, and, at the same time, you will able to speak with courage about the faith and truth dogmas. So do not be ashamed of such a submission, for God has enacted it all, and He is the great avenger of those who despise Him. He will not apply any penalty, but the roughest one; and nothing can escape you from that punishment, no matter how much you resist, but you will suffer the most severe condemnation, both from the people, for no one will come to help you, but also from God, who you make angry against yourself. However he says: *And those who resist will be doomed*. Then pointing to what one will gain by this fear, he convinces them by rational arguments to obey, saying thus: *For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behaviour, but for evil* (Romans 13.3)” [9, p. 434-435]

Just like the divine commandments, the state leads, in turn, by laws; laws that the righteous do not fear, but rather enjoy because they are valued and praised. St. John stated in this regard: “Then, for you to see that for those who live in virtue no bailiff is needed, listen to what Paul says: And if you want to be free from fear of the one in authority, do good and you will be commended (Romans 13.3-4). The judge says, it concerns you – and if you live right, not only as a viewer, but also as a commendable, because those who govern are also

governed by laws. However, the one who lives with gentleness does not need any law and you hear this from Paul, saying: *The law is made not for the righteous* (I Timothy 1. 9); and if there is no law, no dominion can be over him.” [10]

*Omilii la Epistola către Romani a Sfântului Apostol Pavel* takes up the idea that only the wicked are punished by the rule. He says: “Is somehow the beneficiary quarrelling on the one making good? Is he somehow frightening to those who make good deeds? Wherefore he says: Do you, therefore, want not be afraid of the power? Do well and you will have praise from it. Do you see how he befriends the ruler, who he shows as their praiser?” [9, p. 435-436] Laws arise, thus, as a codex confirming that heaven and earth are governed by the same rules planted by God in human consciousness, but also as a means of bringing sinners on the right path, for “stupid people cannot be so frightened by the future, as by the present. The one who prepares beforehand the souls of many with fear and honour, thus to become more skilled in teaching the word of God, is named the minister of God.” [9, p. 436-437]

Those who are placed in high office and perform their duties with honesty are servants of God and they are properly respected as such. St. Paul urges respect and veneration for such leaders, which was noted and praised by St. John Chrysostom as well: “Did you see how he drove their distrust? For it (the law) is God’s servant for your good (Romans 13.4). It is so far – he says – from frightening you that he praises you; and it is so far from preventing you from the good deeds that he himself works with you in committing them. So when you have him both as a praiser, and as a helper, why to disobey?” [9, p. 435-436] Also, Saint John Chrysostom concludes: “The one making good deeds is not afraid of the rule, but the one who does evil. So, do good, you all, not only to protect yourselves from the domination’s punishment, but also because your consciousness requires it. Thus, you will also have the blessing of the Lord and you will inherit the kingdom of heaven, by our Lord’s grace and love for people.” [7, p. 184-185]

Saint John Chrysostom distinguishes between the two verbs: *to obey* and *to listen*. He shows that the command for obedience to the lofty dominion is given to all, both to rulers and to the ruled ones, both to clergy and laity, because obedience is not towards men but towards God, it is not invented by men, but it belongs to the divine wisdom of the Creator. He shows that “this commandment is given to all without exception, to priests, to monks, and not just to those in the world, and therefore, he proclaimed this principle from the very beginning, saying: All souls must undergo the lofty dominions, namely, be it Apostle or Evangelist, or prophet, or anything, for such obedience does not offend piety. And he does not simply say to listen, but to obey.” [9, p. 432-433]

Elsewhere, commenting on the same words of Saint Paul, he says that God leaves us in the hands of the rulers, as a loving father sends his children to learn from some feared teachers: “See how, for those who do evil, I am both the governor, and the sword? Listen to this in plain terms: That is vindictive (...) to the one doing evil (Romans 13.4). And he did not say: Not in vain is the master -

but what? Not in vain bears he the sword: for as a loving father gives his children in the hands of some feared teachers who treats him with lightness and despise him because of his parental love, God too, although being despised by our nature, for His goodness gave us in the hands of the rulers, as to some teachers.” [10, p. 50-51]

Referring to the state leaders and officials, St. John exhorts them to love people, to have great love for the nation, to be like a father who loves his children. This way they become really strong and loved by the people [7, p. 184-185. Their importance for the people is shown by the association to various functions essential in achieving a good functioning of a smaller social body, saying: “Cast off the helmsman from the ship’s helm, and it shall be swallowed by waves. Cast off the general from the lead of the army, and it will be destroyed by enemies. Cast off a society’s leaders and it will become a jungle. As the nails are important for a house’s strength, so are the leaders for the functioning of an organized society and city.” [7]

In *Cele dintâi omilii la Facere*, Saint John also shows that a true ruler should be a good Christian, guiding with *justice, charity and self-sacrifice*. He needs wisdom to avoid being blinded by pride and vainglory, confronting pride, envy and other mind-bending sins.

Saint John Chrysostom painfully notes that some leaders, addicting themselves to weaknesses serving their personal interests, become burdensome to the community they lead, and fail to comply with the government: “Many leaders are gentle, measured and friendly when stealing the people, not because of their nature, but due to the oppression of conscience, for they lack courage because of the thefts, and, conversely, many leaders who do not take bribes are burdensome and harsh, again, not because of their nature, but due to the vain glory, for they know they clean of any bribe; rarely can you find a leader to have these two qualities: to be gentle and bribe less.” [11]

In *Omiliile la Epistola către Romani a Sfântului Apostol Pavel*, Saint John Chrysostom also stresses that in addition to obedience, believers have to pray for their rulers. “In another letter he not only commands (Paul - n. n.) to obey them, but also to pray for them, showing the benefit of doing this: to spend a peaceful and quiet life, in piety and decorum (I Timothy 2.2). Not little is their contribution to the state of the present life, to repelling the enemy, to preventing those who riot in the cities and to spreading all disputes. Do not tell me that, for instance, he uses his job wrong; just look at the good adornment of this order, and then you will see here too the great wisdom of Him who ordained it from the beginning.” [9, p. 438]

### **3. Conclusions**

The Church cannot ignore the worldly dimension. Its believers are at the same time, both the sons of God and the citizens of the state. On one hand, they are bound to live by the gospel, on the other hand, to observe the laws of the state to which they themselves belong.

If in the time of Saint John Chrysostom, the two realities formed a symphony. In the contemporary society, the social role of the Church must be emphasized through its involvement in everyday life: philanthropy, culture, economy and especially civic responsibility.

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