



WHY NOT TO BE A PASTOR

DISCERNMENT INSIGHTS FROM ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

By Geoffrey Boyle

St. John Chrysostom ranks as one of the most remarkable bishops and theologians of all time. As Archbishop of Constantinople, he was a pastor's pastor, the "golden-mouthed" preacher, a saint whose life we strive to emulate in teaching and conduct.

So why did he write a book on why one *shouldn't* enter the priesthood (Holy Ministry)? Furthermore, why require this reading in the first year of seminary?

Perhaps we should say from the start that the discernment process doesn't end once enrolled in seminary. Discernment continues until Call Day. You don't know whether the Lord calls you into the ministry until you've got the papers in hand. (He does use means, after all.) Until then, pray, meditate on the Lord's words, and honestly reflect on your life and character, discerning whether you've got what it takes to serve in this office.

So, why ongoing discernment? Because future pastors must know exactly what they're getting into. That's Chrysostom's goal in his *Six Books on the Priesthood* (Yonkers, NY: SVS Press, 1996) and what discernment is all about.

Books I and II: Fleeing the Ministry

We begin with John's friend Basil accusing him of deceit. They were best friends, brother monks, aspiring theologians, devoted to piety and discipline. But when the bishops came to make them priests, John fled deceitfully. Basil wonders why.

John's defense for his deceit scandalizes some. He asserts that by "good management, tact, and skill" he evaded harm, both to himself and the church. Having

Strength for the office comes only from Christ who puts men into it.

defended his actions, he explains in Book II why he fled the office. The Holy Ministry depicts Christ's love for the church, and carrying out that office depicts our love for Christ ("Peter, do you love me? . . . Tend my sheep" [John 21:16]). The reason that we need good men—the *best* men—is because of the difficulty and importance of the minister's task: it's the office of Christ. Therefore, the man needs great tact, wisdom, and strength.

The healing of Christ's flock can't come from compulsion or force but only through the Word. To rightly apply this Word—or, as Lutherans like to say, rightly divide Law and Gospel—"the shepherd needs great wisdom and a thousand eyes, to examine the soul's condition from every angle" (58). He needs immense concentration, perseverance, and patience. He needs

love and wisdom. "He needs, therefore, a heroic spirit, not to grow despondent or neglect the salvation of the wanderers" (58).

He needs the seminary.

Chrysostom fled the call. Many accused him of vainglory on the one hand and refusing honor on the other. They claimed he insulted them by his rejection, to which John quipped, "We must not mind insulting men, if by respecting them we offend God" (65). That's good advice for us!

Books III and IV: Fitness for the Office

John begins Book III by defending himself from any charge of vainglory. The accusation makes no sense: how can one strive for glory while refusing it? John avoided the priesthood precisely to avoid such vainglory! He knew what it required and found himself lacking. Christ Himself instituted this heavenly office, "therefore the priest must be as pure as if he were standing in heaven itself" (70). Due to the heavenly splendor of the office and the gifts given therein, the man must exemplify utter humility.

Furthermore, the ministry requires strength and fear. John offers the example of St. Paul, whose love for Christ excelled all, who was caught up to the third heaven, yet always acted in fear and trepidation. "The man who accepts this responsibility needs great wisdom and, even before wisdom, the grace of God in good measure, and an upright character and a pure life, and more than human goodness" (76). John considered "how weak and puny [his] own soul is" (77). Do we?

Ponder for a moment some of the temptations—"beasts," as he calls them—that attack the office: anger, dejection, envy, strife, lying, hypocrisy, love of praise, pretending humility, and failure to scrutinize or rebuke some, or overdoing it with others. We do not entrust this office just to anyone. Examine your soul, consider the gravity of the office, honestly reflect on these temptations. Like today, John blames the trouble in the Church on "the careless and random way in which the prelates are chosen and appointed" (79). As St. Paul warns, "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands" (1 Tim. 5:22).

Beware of ambition. As humility opposes vainglory, freedom opposes ambition. "The pastor must purify his soul entirely of ambition for the office" (80). Ambition leads to flattery and flattery to the tolerance of evil, just to secure the office. Ambition covets honor even to the point of hiding disqualifying sins. It seeks not the work of the office but "absolute authority and power" (81).

Beyond ambition, the pastor must be "sober and clear-sighted and possess a thousand eyes looking in every direction, for he lives not for himself alone, but



for a great multitude” (82). He must also guard against temper and anger. The demeanor of the pastor rubs off on the people. An angry pastor means an angry people. So, he “must be armed with weapons of steel—intense earnestness and constant sobriety of life—and he must keep watch in every direction, in case anyone should find a naked and unguarded spot and strike him a mortal blow” (86). Another temptation comes in the form of loneliness and isolation—“each man stands alone” (89). Are you willing to hear confession and not divulge it? Can you bear others’ sins or have your words rejected? Do you lose your cool?

Consider, then, what qualities a man needs if he is to withstand such a tempest and deal successfully with these obstacles to the common good. He must be dignified yet modest, impressive yet kindly, masterful yet approachable, impartial yet courteous, humble but not servile, vehement yet gentle, in order that he may calmly resist all these dangers and to promote a suitable man with full authority, even though everyone opposes him, and reject an unsuitable man with equal authority, even though everyone favors him. One thing alone he must consider: the edification of the church. He must do nothing out of hostility or favor. (93)

Safeguarding against the temptations and attacks of the world, the flesh, and the devil does not yet suffice. Book IV demands a testing of the soul, investigating every part, so that no one enters the office by happenstance or convenience, least of all because it’s expected. Do not accept the office with your eyes shut, he warns (110). Not only must those who place a man into office make careful inquiry into the man’s character and capabilities, but even more should the man himself.

Books V and VI: Who Can Stand?

Book V extols the task of preaching as the chief use of the Word. However, rather than a preaching manual,

Chrysostom speaks of the powers or qualities needed: “contempt of praise and the force of eloquence” (128). He offers great advice when critiqued by our hearers: “We should not be much elated by their praise nor much dejected by their censure” (130). We seek to please God, not men, thus freeing ourselves from the “elusive, invincible, savage monster,” i.e., “popular esteem” (135).

In the end, Basil is dejected. Who could possibly stand before God as pastor? Who can avoid such temptations and attacks? Who has the strength, purity, piety, or faithfulness to carry out such a weighty office? John avoided it all by fleeing. But he let Basil be taken into this office.

Basil begs John for a word of comfort, help, consolation—anything that will allow him to stand with a clear conscience before his Lord in whose office he now stands. John smiles. He clasps him, kisses his head, and urges him to bear his fortune bravely saying, “For I trust in Christ, who called you and set you over his own sheep, that you will gain such assurance from this ministry that when I stand in peril on that great Day, you will receive me into your everlasting habitation” (160).

Strength for the office comes only from Christ who puts men into it. The ability, forbearance, wisdom, and freedom—they’re all from Christ. He sets men to stand in His stead and to live and work and speak at His command.

Discernment comes first: count the cost, examine your conscience, forsake ambition, learn the Scriptures, pay no attention to praise or blame, and honestly confront your own unworthiness. Then, clinging to Christ, look to Him who calls you and sets you over His own sheep. It almost seems that John wrote these *Six Books on the Priesthood* in order to demonstrate our lack and Christ’s abundance. He wants us to pursue this path with eyes wide open. Look to Christ and follow Him. 📖



Dr. Geoffrey Boyle is Assistant Professor of Pastoral Ministry and Missions and Director of Field Education at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne.