

### **III. SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY**

## **FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES OF ORTHODOX ECCLESIOLOGY AT SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM**

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**ABSTRACT.** St. John Chrysostom addresses all the aspects of Orthodox ecclesiology. The Church, the Body of Christ, is a sacramental communion of the faithful with Christ and with each other. The communion between the human and the divine is achieved in the Church through the Holy Eucharist. The Church is divine guide, its role is sanctifying; outside of it man cannot attain salvation. Ordination is not a simple ceremony, but it has a sacramental character. Through the laying on of the hands of the Bishop candidates receive the grace of the priesthood. Hierarchy is a permanent reality of sacramental nature. In Chrysostom's views, the terms institution and event – much debated in current ecclesiology – represent two aspects of a single divine action in history.

**Keywords:** St. John Chrysostom, Church, priesthood, ordination, communion, ecclesiology.

In the Greek patristic literature there are no systematic treatises on ecclesiology. There was no the question on Church's being, a divine-human reality. "In the time of the Fathers, the Church had been a fountain of life so obvious that there was no question of its nature. On the other hand, the Church by its mysterious being, hardly lends itself to any formal definition"<sup>1</sup>.

In the Church of the first centuries, there is no controversy about the teaching on the Church or the priesthood.

The mystery of the Church was understood by the Fathers as included in the mystery of Christ. The building of the Church was a fundamental concern of all the Fathers. Much attention has been paid by them to the teachings on the

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Evdochimov, *Ortodoxia*, translated by Irineu Ioan Popa, (București: Ed. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1996), 135.

priesthood, resulting valuable treatises on the sublimity of the priesthood and the responsibility of those upon whom had been bestowed the special grace of the Sacrament of ordination, because the priesthood of Christ is perpetuated in the priesthood of Church.

Great personality of the Christian Church, the most prestigious representative of the School of Antioch in Syria, St. John, surnamed Χρυσόστομος (golden-mouthed) (354-407), Archbishop of Constantinople, the foremost orator and commentator of the Sacred Scripture throughout the entire Patristic Age, is a normative theologian of the Orthodox Church, next to Saint Basil the Great and St. Gregory Nazianzen, all three appointed: the world's great teachers and hierarchs.

We will highlight several aspects of ecclesiology of St. John Chrysostom, regarding the being of the Church and sacramental hierarchy which exclude any ecclesiological concepts emerging in Western Christianity since the middle of the second millennium, such as:

- universal priesthood of all believers or denying of the sacramental priesthood, clergy identify with the faithful people
- definition of the Church as the congregation, the community of the saints, the elected, predestined;
- separation between the seen and the unseen Church;
- the Christomonism or neglecting of the pneumatological aspect of the Church;
- the equality of the ranks of bishop, priest and deacon in the early Church;
- the existence, in the early Church, of several structures: the Episcopal, Presbyterian and Congregationalist one.
- The branch theory, according to which the Church came not into being really, we have just branches of its in history, in which there are elements of truth mixed with false teachings.

In his extensive opera, in which there is not a special work on the Church, the elements of ecclesiology intertwine with items pertaining to Christology and soteriology and should be particularly sought in particular in homilies, of which 250 are dedicated to St. Paul's epistles, "the great exegete sees in Christ the center of the biblical message, the vital issue of messianism and apostolic preaching, the fundament of the new settlement of salvation: Christian Church"<sup>2</sup>.

Chrysostom's ecclesiology is in line with general teaching on Church of the Eastern Holy Fathers. "The specifics of the Church is the junction of the supernatural and eternal factor with the natural factors of time and space, on

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<sup>2</sup> Ilie Moldovan, "Aspectul hristologic și pnevmatologic al Bisericii după Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur" in Studii Teologice, (9-10)1968, 706.

the same existential meridian. Church is built up according to both a divine and a created reality”<sup>3</sup>.

The Church is a theandric body, having a divine aspect that makes its specificity: “Church does not consist in buildings. It is not defined by its material sensitive aspect. Its essence lies in its divine aspect. Christ’s presence in it is the most important element of the Church... Therefore the great reality of the Church is the divine reality, the presence of Christ within the Church”<sup>4</sup>, but it having also a human aspect, a truth expressed by the Holy Father thus: “In the multitude of believers lies the Church”<sup>5</sup>.

Church members are righteous people and sinners. “There are in the Church many people raised up to a height as the head, looking the heavenly ... Others who serve as legs, treading on the earth, but healthy feet ... neither those, says he, do not think the high, against the bottom, nor they do not blaspheme the top”<sup>6</sup>.

The Church is the Body of Christ, according to the word of the Apostle Paul, so “there is a close connection between Christ as the head of the body, and Christians as members of this body”<sup>7</sup>.

Christ is the head and founder of the Church, which has its basis in the Incarnation: “Sometimes you see Him holding the entire edifice from above, another time holding the whole building from below, being at the same time its foundation”<sup>8</sup>, as well as in the Pentecost: “The Church has, in the same time, the foundation in Christ and in pneumatology”<sup>9</sup>. The Church is the Body of Christ over which the Holy Ghost rests. The Church is linked to the initial descent, but also by the continuing descent of the Holy Ghost, as hypostasis, upon the human beings. The Holy Ghost is present in the Church and, at the same time, always comes, more and more deeply: “Without the Ghost, the Church would not have founded; but if Church exists, is a sign that the Ghost is present in it”<sup>10</sup>.

The Church is a reflection of the communion of love of the Trinitarian persons: “Christians form an omousianic unity and a plurality of hypostatic communion, communicated to the Church, by the Holy Trinity”<sup>11</sup>.

Through Christ, as the head of the body, we have access to the communion of the Holy Trinity: “He was made himself the head of the whole Church. Lifting it

<sup>3</sup> I. Moldovan, “Aspectul hristologic...”, 709.

<sup>4</sup> Vasile Hristov, “Noțiunea de Biserică după Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur”, in Studii Teologice, (1-2) 1960, 80.

<sup>5</sup> Saint Jean Chrysostome, *Ouvres complètes*, vol. IV, (Arras: 1887), 316.

<sup>6</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Commentarium in Epistolam ad Ephesios*, IV, 1 in P. G. 62, 75.

<sup>7</sup> Mihai Enache, “Învățătura despre Biserică după Sfântul Ioan Gură de Aur”, in Ortodoxia, (1)1974, 129.

<sup>8</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Commentarium in Epistolam ad Ephesios*, IV, 1 in P. G. 62, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *In Psalmum 148* in P. G. 55, 483.

<sup>10</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *In Sancta Pentecostem* in P. G. 50, 450.

<sup>11</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *De incomprehensibili Dei natura* 36 in P. G. 48, 725-726.

with a crane as strong, He sits it at incomparable heights and even sits it on His throne. Where is the head, there is the body, too, no possibility of separation"<sup>12</sup>.

The unity between Christ and the Church is fully achieved by the Holy Eucharist. "The ecclesiology of Chrysostom was placed in a sacramental perspective. St. John Chrysostom rises the Eucharistic realism to a supreme dogmatic and missionary height"<sup>13</sup>.

St. Eucharist creates a communion between the divine and the human. The sacramental Communion is achieved by the Eucharistic union of the faithful with Christ, through an osmosis of energies, though keeping each of their identity, without being merged or joined. "Christ did not satisfied Himself to become man, to be slapped and be killed, but He mix Himself and unites us; He makes his body again, not only in faith, but in reality... What angels are fearful to look and dare not see, for fera of the lightning coming out from there, that is the thing that we feed, we unite and become one body and one flesh of Christ"<sup>14</sup>. By taking part in the Holy Eucharist we keep belonging to the Body of Christ, i.e. the Church. St. John Chrysostom strives to strengthen, concretely, the link between the believers, to liturgical action, for this purpose, he says that if the Church weakens, on this aspect (liturgical, Eucharistic), the unity of Christians weakens, too<sup>15</sup>. "The Church of Christ is alive and strong, insofar as it feeds on the Body and Blood of its Divine Founder, because without communion among Christ Christians, it can not speak of a Church"<sup>16</sup>.

Christ is actually present in the Eucharist, with His Body and Blood. "In the Eucharist we are united with Christ, really, in fact, not only by love, or by faith"<sup>17</sup>.

During the Divine Liturgy is updated the unique and unrepeatable sacrifice made by Christ, once for all, in a bloody manner. "We sacrifice always the same (Christ) and not a lamb today and another tomorrow, but always the same, because there is one sacrifice...We offer today the sacrifice that was made then"<sup>18</sup>. Christ is That Who sacrifices Himself, bloodless. He is the celebrant of liturgical offering. "the Sanctifier of the Eucharistic sacrifice is the sacrificed"<sup>19</sup> while the priests are seen celebrants: "through the priests were you born to eternal birth, through them you have obtained the eternal kingdom, through their hands all are made, by the priest you become worthy to receive the frightening sacraments, ie

<sup>12</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Commentarium in Epistolam ad Ephesios*, III, 2 in P. G. 62, 26.

<sup>13</sup> I. Moldovan, "Aspectul hristologic...", 716.

<sup>14</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homiliae in Matthaem* 5 in P. G. 58, 743-744.

<sup>15</sup> M. Enache, "Învățătura despre Biserică...", 132.

<sup>16</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia III,2 in Epistolam ad Hebraeos* in P. G. 63, 30.

<sup>17</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia XLII, 3 in Johanem* in P. G. 59, 260.

<sup>18</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia L in Matthaem* in P. G. 58, 507.

<sup>19</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Holilia I de prodicione Judae* in P. G. 49, 380.

Divine Communion<sup>20</sup>. This is illustrated brilliantly in the prayer which the priest read during the Cherubic Hymn: “and, by the power of thy Holy Spirit, enable me, who am clothed with the grace of the priesthood, to stand before this Thy Holy Table, and to perform the sacred Mystery of Thy holy and immaculate Body and precious Blood...for Thou art He that offereth and is offered, that accepteth and is distributed”<sup>21</sup>.

Therefore, the Eucharist and the Church multiply the grace in the Christian souls and make those seeking the Kingdom of heaven worthy of spiritual progress. “The integration into the Body of Christ begins with the Baptism and fulfils with the Eucharist. We all received the same Ghost, and tasted the same grace, which makes us and binds us as one body, through a unique Ghost”<sup>22</sup>.

The Eucharist is the Sacrament, par excellence, of the Church. If in the Holy Communion we have the Eucharistic Christ, the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ. “In this mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ, the Church communicates, in the most real manner, with Christ Himself and becomes one body with Christ”<sup>23</sup>, it is the sacrament of unity of the Church, feeding us with the body of Christ, the many becoming one, because of the ferment and of the spirit of life which animates them. Because what is the bread? The body of Christ. What become the communicants with it? Body of Christ; not many bodies, but one”<sup>24</sup>. The Saint Father draws attention to the character of fearful mystery of the Eucharist and the necessity of worthily sharing the Body and Blood of the Lord: “Think, man, what sacrifice you will touch, what kind of meal you approach. Remember that being earth and ashes, you partake of the Body and Blood of Christ”<sup>25</sup>.

The moment of Church’s founding, through the Sacrifice of the Cross is marked by St. John the Evangelist through the words “It is finished” (Jn 19:30), spoken by Jesus and the piercing of Lord side, from which flowed blood and water (Jn 19:34). Interpreting these texts St. John Chrysostom says: “But because the Church is from Christ's right side, what can we say? For as Christ was raised on the cross and suffered and died, one of the soldiers piercing Him into His side, blood and water flowed, and from this water and blood is constituted the whole Church. The Lord himself confessed saying “except a man be born of water and of the Ghost” (Jn 3,5) (apparently) here He calls the blood Ghost”<sup>26</sup>, or “Not without

<sup>20</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia X in Epistolam ad Thessalonicenses* in P. G. 62, 79.

<sup>21</sup> *Liturghia Sfântului Ioan*, IV<sup>th</sup> edition, (Cluj-Napoca: Ed. Renașterea), 2006, 43-44.

<sup>22</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia XXX, 1,2 in Epistolam I ad Corinthios* in P. G. 61, 250-251.

<sup>23</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia IX,2 in Epistolam ad Romanos* in P. G. 60, 477.

<sup>24</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia XXIV,2 in Epistolam I ad Corinthios* in P. G. 61, 200.

<sup>25</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *In natale Domini nostri Jesu Christi* 7 in P. G. 50, 361.

<sup>26</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Quales ducendae sint uxores?* in P. G. 51, 229.

reason, or randomly flowed these founts, but because these both have formed Church. Those who share the sacraments know this thing, they are reborn by water and fed by the Blood and the Body of Christ"<sup>27</sup>.

St. John Chrysostom shows the close relationship between the Church, in the sense of the faithfuls communion, with God and the church place of worship, where the community gathers to renew the communion with God, through the sacraments, especially St. Eucharist: "must be discipline and piety during services, no noise and disorder, as in other gatherings, because both the Church in the both meanings is the place of angels and of the Kingdom of God, or heaven down to earth"<sup>28</sup>, he stressed the importance of attending church by the faithful: "You do not know how important is your spiritual strengthening, namely that daily go to church, with so much zeal and you can not satisfy yourself of the spiritual teaching of here. As the appetite is a sign of good health of the body, so the zeal for godly teaching is a sign of the health of the soul"<sup>29</sup>.

Church means communion, living of the believers with God, and the communion of the faithful each other "Old and young, rich and poor, children and young, men and women, all souls form one body, as if it would be only a one body"<sup>30</sup>.

In the thinking of the great Antiochian bishop and theologian, Church is not just an association of those who believe that Christ has saved us through the sacrifice of the cross, a certain society, a "simple community who continue to live independently in time and in history, having only transcendent starting point"<sup>31</sup>, "but the indwelling of the sacrificed and risen Christ in the believers. "But the Church is not just a conglomeration of individuals gathered together by a binder, warmed by love, but also a found paradise of inner transformation, a holy place where the Son God dwells in the faithful's souls; a new creation in the grace of the Holy Ghost to all who lay aside the old man and receive Jesus Christ as a emperor of the life"<sup>32</sup>. The Church is more sustainable than heaven as Christ Himself says: "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Mt 24.35) ... " , that it is defended by its Divine Founder ... if we insult it, we insult its divine Founder Himself"<sup>33</sup>. Thus is illustrated the solidarity between the mystery of Christ and the mystery of the Church.

<sup>27</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia LXXX in Johanem* in P. G. 59, 463.

<sup>28</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia XXIV,5 in Epistolam I ad Corinthios* in P. G. 61, 313-314.

<sup>29</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia LIII in Genesin* in P. G. 53, 293.

<sup>30</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia IX in Epistolam ad Hebraeos* 4,3 in P. G. 62, 72.

<sup>31</sup> I. Moldovan, "Aspectul hristologic...", 712.

<sup>32</sup> Nicu Dumitrașcu, "Unele aspecte eclesiologice în scrierile Sfântului Ioan Gură de Aur" in *Revista Teologică*, (2)1994, 55.

<sup>33</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homiliae in Matthaem* 5 in P. G. 58, 290.

Salvation is realised in the Church and through the Church; it is “a spiritual school of morals”<sup>34</sup>, “in it learns the virtue and the true Christian living”<sup>35</sup>. Salvation can not be achieved in isolation, the Church is likened to Noah's ark, but unlike that “the Church transforms those who enter it and does not leave them as they are”<sup>36</sup> entering into the Church, the Holy Ghost raises our conscience to the heaven, removes us away from the earthly things and move us from earth to heaven”<sup>37</sup>.

In the Church every man appropriates on the subjective plan the objective salvation committed by Christ, through collaboration with grace. “It is not enough only God’s grace, to save ourselves, but we need to work freely with the grace”<sup>38</sup>.

Breaking the Church by heresy, schism or individualism lead to the loss of salvation: “You wanted to be saved? There had to get no away from the altar. Stay in the Church and therefore will not be betrayed by it”<sup>39</sup>.

Only the Church is the preserver and authorized interpreter of the revealed truth, as life in Christ, shows St. John, highlighting the link between this quality of the Church and that of organ of salvation: “... the Church saved us through the redemptive teachings contained in Christ's Church”<sup>40</sup>. Commenting the text of Matthew 18, 17, he states that the highest court, the highest authority is the Church, i. e. the Church’s primates<sup>41</sup>.

Regarding the relationship between the local and the universal Church, St. John says: “Many are the churches, by the number, but it is one, by the power, this is holy and it is called the body of the Holy among the saints”<sup>42</sup>.

The doctrine of the Holy Sacrament of Ordination and the sacramental priesthood is very clear, expressed in the Treaty on the priesthood of St. John Chrysostom, the classic book on the Divine Mystery of ordination, but also in other works.

The origin of the priesthood of the Church is in the priesthood of Christ “the power that He has, gave to the Apostles”<sup>43</sup> and their successors, the bishops and priests who are “mediators before Christ”<sup>44</sup> through them, says the great

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<sup>34</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia III in Epistolam ad Hebraeos 2* in P. G. 63, 30.

<sup>35</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Commentarium in Acta apostolorum* in P. G. 60, 200.

<sup>36</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia VI, 7 De Lazaro* in P. G. 51, 145.

<sup>37</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia VI, 7 De Lazaro* in P. G. 51, 162.

<sup>38</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia in Epistolam ad Romanos 15* in P. G. 60, 541

<sup>39</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Himilia de capto Eutropio* in P. G. 52, 397.

<sup>40</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia I de baptiso Christi* in P. G. 50, 204.

<sup>41</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia LX in Matthaem LIX* in P. G. 58, 386.

<sup>42</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *In Psalmum 95* in P. G. 55, 774.

<sup>43</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *In Ascensionem IV* in P. G. 50, 777.

<sup>44</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia III,5 in Epistolam ad Colossenses* in P. G. 62, 324.

bishop, “the Saviour works salvation in the Church”<sup>45</sup>. The supreme shepherd of the Church entrusts them the mandate, through the Holy Ghost, not the community of the believers. “If the Holy Ghost would not be, it would not be pastors and teachers in the Church. For these are through the ghost, as also saith Paul, *over the which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops*”<sup>46</sup> thus being underlined the epicletic aspect of the mystery. The celebrant of the sacrament of ordination is Christ: “Because this is the ordination: put the man's hand, but God works everything and His hand is that which touches the head of that who is ordained, if is properly ordained... For if would not be the earnest of the Ghost, we did not have priests. Neither would be these ordinations without that coming (of the Ghost)”<sup>47</sup>.

The ministry of priests is indispensable for salvation, for the Church, its existence is contingent by the priesthood “nothing sacred is and is not celebrated in the Church without a priest”<sup>48</sup> and the effectiveness of the sacraments is not dependent on the worthiness of the celebrant, for Christ works “through all (priests and bishops) to save the people, even if they would be unworthy”<sup>49</sup>.

The work of St. John Chrysostom speaks about the three stages of sacramental hierarchy: bishop, priest (presbyter) and deacon. He distinguishes between the stage of bishop and presbyter, commenting the Pauline texts in which the terms are used interchangeably “in a city were more bishops? Not at all, but he calls the presbyters bishops, because then had a common name”<sup>50</sup>. The committing of the sacrament of ordination is the prerogative of the Bishop. “He (the Bishop) has, in a seen manner, the place of Christ as teacher, priest and shepherd”<sup>51</sup>. The priesthood is, therefore, the successor, in the Church, of three ministries of the Savior: teaching, consecrating and driving.

The sublimity of priest's mission is emphasized in two moments: the Mass, when he sacrifices Christ's Body and Blood and in the confession seat, the connection between the seen and the unseen aspect of the Church is illustrated by the work of the priest: “God strengthens, up, into heaven, those made by the priests down, to the earth. Lord strengthens the judgment given by the slaves. What else did God give to the priests than all the heavenly power? The Lord said: *Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose*

<sup>45</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia III,4 in Epistolam II ad Thimotheum* in P. G. 62, 612.

<sup>46</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia XIV in Sancta Pentecostem* in P. G. 50, 458.

<sup>47</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Commentarium in Acta apostolorum* in P. G. 60, 180.

<sup>48</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *De sacerdotio III,5* in P. G. 48, 642.

<sup>49</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia II,3 in Epistolam II ad Thimotheum* in P. G. 62, 610.

<sup>50</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia XIII in Epistolam I ad Thimotheum* in P. G. 62, 564.

<sup>51</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia II,4 in Epistolam II ad Thimotheum* in P. G. 62, 612.



*soever sins ye retain, they are retained*". What power can be greater than this? Lord said again: "Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son". I see, however, that all this power was entrusted by the Son to the priests<sup>52</sup>.

So St. John Chrysostom treats all the aspects of Orthodox ecclesiology.

Church, the Body of Christ is a sacramental communion, of the faithful with Christ and each other. The communion between the human and the divine is done in the Church, through the Holy Eucharist. The Church is divine guide, its role is sanctifying, out of it man can not achieve the salvation. Ordination is not a simple ceremony, but it has a character of Sacrament. Through the putting hands of Bishop, candidates receive the grace of the priesthood. Hierarchy is a permanent reality, of sacramental nature. And the "terms institution and event whereof is spoken so much in the current ecclesiology, represents, in the Chrysostom concept, two aspects of a single divine action in history"<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> Ioannes Chrysostomus, *De sacerdotio III,5* in P. G. 48, 642.

<sup>53</sup> I. Moldovan, "Aspectul hristologic...", 714.

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