

On the Priesthood. Book I.

John Chrysostom

Patristic · Nicene & Post-Nicene · Treatise

STROMATA 99

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INTRODUCTION

Cast as a dialogue between Chrysostom and his friend Basil, the six books *On the Priesthood* open here with an autobiographical frame: two young men of fourth-century Antioch bound by study and ambition, one drawn swiftly into the monastic life, the other held back by a widowed mother's tears. The treatise that unfolds from this scene became the foundational Christian meditation on pastoral office, shaping Gregory the Great's *Pastoral Rule* and, through it, the entire Western literature on the cure of souls. Chrysostom's defense of his own flight from ordination turns, by degrees, into an exalted and terrifying account of what the priesthood demands. Expect a personal apologia that slowly tightens into something closer to an examination of conscience.

I had many genuine and true friends, men who understood the laws of friendship, and faithfully observed them; but out of this large number there was one who excelled all the rest in his attachment to me, striving to outstrip them as much as they themselves outstripped ordinary acquaintance. He was one of those who were constantly at my side; for we were engaged in the same studies, and employed the same teachers. We had the same eagerness and zeal about the studies at which we worked, and a passionate desire produced by the same circumstances was equally strong in both of us. For not only when we were attending school, but after we had left it, when it became necessary to consider what course of life it would be best for us to adopt, we found ourselves to be of the same mind.

And in addition to these, there were other things also which preserved and maintained this concord unbroken and secure. For as regarded the greatness of our fatherland neither had one cause to vaunt himself over the other, nor was I burdened with riches, and he pinched by poverty, but our means corresponded as closely as our tastes. Our families also were of equal rank, and thus everything concurred with our disposition.

But when it became our duty to pursue the blessed life of monks, and the true philosophy, our balance was no longer even, but his scale mounted high, while I, still entangled in the lusts of this world, dragged mine down and kept it low, weighting it with those fancies in which youths are apt to indulge. For the future our friendship indeed remained as firm as it was before, but our intercourse was interrupted; for it was impossible for persons who were not interested about the same things to spend much time together. But as soon as I also began to emerge a little from the flood of worldliness, he received me

with open arms; yet not even thus could we maintain our former equality: for having got the start of me in time, and having displayed great earnestness, he rose again above my level, and soared to a great height.

Being a good man, however, and placing a high value on my friendship, he separated himself from all the rest (of the brethren), and spent the whole of his time with me, which he had desired to do before, but had been prevented as I was saying by my frivolity. For it was impossible for a man who attended the law-courts, and was in a flutter of excitement about the pleasures of the stage, to be often in the company of one who was nailed to his books, and never set foot in the market place. Consequently when the hindrances were removed, and he had brought me into the same condition of life as himself, he gave free vent to the desire with which he had long been laboring. He could not bear leaving me even for a moment, and he persistently urged that we should each of us abandon our own home and share a common dwelling:— in fact he persuaded me, and the affair was taken in hand.

But the continual lamentations of my mother hindered me from granting him the favor, or rather from receiving this boon at his hands. For when she perceived that I was meditating this step, she took me into her own private chamber, and, sitting near me on the bed where she had given birth to me, she shed torrents of tears, to which she added words yet more pitiable than her weeping, in the following lamentable strain: My child, it was not the will of Heaven that I should long enjoy the benefit of your father's virtue. For his death soon followed the pangs which I endured at your birth, leaving you an orphan and me a widow before my time to face all the horrors of widowhood, which only those who have experienced them can fairly understand. For no words are adequate to describe the tempest-tossed condition of a young woman who, having but lately left her paternal home, and being inexperienced in business, is suddenly racked by an overwhelming sorrow, and compelled to support a load of care too great for her age and sex. For she has to correct the laziness of servants, and to be on the watch for their rogueries, to repel the designs of relations, to bear bravely the threats of those who collect the public taxes, and harshness in the imposition of rates. And if the departed one should have left a child, even if it be a girl, great anxiety will be caused to the mother, although free from much expense and fear: but a boy fills her with ten thousand alarms and many anxieties every day, to say nothing of the great expense which one is compelled to incur if she wishes to bring him up in a liberal way. None of these things, however, induced me to enter into a second marriage, or introduce a second husband into your father's house: but I held on as I was, in the midst of the storm and uproar, and did not shun the iron furnace of widowhood. My foremost help indeed was the grace from above; but it was no small consolation to me under those terrible trials to look continually on your face and to preserve in you a living image of him who had gone, an image indeed which was a fairly exact likeness.

On this account, even when you were an infant, and had not yet learned to speak, a time when children are the greatest delight to their parents, you afforded me much comfort. Nor indeed can you complain that, although I bore my widowhood bravely, I diminished your patrimony, which I know has been the fate of many who have had the misfortune to be orphans. For, besides keeping the whole of it intact, I spared no expense which was needful to give you an honorable position, spending for this purpose some of my own fortune, and of my marriage dowry. Yet do not think that I say these things by way of reproaching you; only in return for all these benefits I beg one favor: do not plunge me into a second

widowhood; nor revive the grief which is now laid to rest: wait for my death: it may be in a little while I shall depart. The young indeed look forward to a distant old age; but we who have grown old have nothing but death to wait for. When, then, you shall have committed my body to the ground, and mingled my bones with your father's, embark for a long voyage, and set sail on any sea you will: then there will be no one to hinder you: but as long as my life lasts, be content to live with me. Do not, I pray you, oppose God in vain, involving me without cause, who have done you no wrong, in these great calamities. For if you have any reason to complain that I drag you into worldly cares, and force you to attend to business, do not be restrained by any reverence for the laws of nature, for training or custom, but fly from me as an enemy; but if, on the contrary, I do everything to provide leisure for your journey through this life, let this bond at least if nothing else keep you by me. For could thou say that ten thousand loved you, yet no one will afford you the enjoyment of so much liberty, seeing there is no one who is equally anxious for your welfare.

These words, and more, my mother spoke to me, and I related them to that noble youth. But he, so far from being disheartened by these speeches, was the more urgent in making the same request as before. Now while we were thus situated, he continually entreating, and I refusing my assent, we were both of us disturbed by a report suddenly reaching us that we were about to be advanced to the dignity of the episcopate. As soon as I heard this rumor I was seized with alarm and perplexity: with alarm lest I should be made captive against my will, and perplexity, inquiring as I often did whence any such idea concerning us could have entered the minds of these men; for looking to myself I found nothing worthy of such an honor. But that noble youth having come to me privately, and having conferred with me about these things as if with one who was ignorant of the rumor, begged that we might in this instance also as formerly shape our action and our counsels the same way: for he would readily follow me whichever course I might pursue, whether I attempted flight or submitted to be captured. Perceiving then his eagerness, and considering that I should inflict a loss upon the whole body of the Church if, owing to my own weakness, I were to deprive the flock of Christ of a young man who was so good and so well qualified for the supervision of large numbers, I abstained from disclosing to him the purpose which I had formed, although I had never before allowed any of my plans to be concealed from him. I now told him that it would be best to postpone our decision concerning this matter to another season, as it was not immediately pressing, and by so doing persuaded him to dismiss it from his thoughts, and at the same time encouraged him to hope that, if such a thing should ever happen to us, I should be of the same mind with him. But after a short time, when one who was to ordain us arrived, I kept myself concealed, but Basil, ignorant of this, was taken away on another pretext, and made to take the yoke, hoping from the promises which I had made to him that I should certainly follow, or rather supposing that he was following me. For some of those who were present, seeing that he resented being seized, deceived him by exclaiming how strange it was that one who was generally reputed to be the more hot tempered (meaning me), had yielded very mildly to the judgment of the Fathers, whereas he, who was reckoned a much wiser and milder kind of man, had shown himself hotheaded and conceited, being unruly, restive, and contradictory. Having yielded to these remonstrances, and afterwards having learned that I had escaped capture, he came to me in deep dejection, sat down near me and tried to speak, but was hindered by distress of mind and inability to express in words the violence to which he had been subjected. No sooner had he opened his mouth than he was prevented from utterance by grief

cutting short his words before they could pass his lips. Seeing, then, his tearful and agitated condition, and knowing as I did the cause, I laughed for joy, and, seizing his right hand, I forced a kiss on him, and praised God that my plan had ended so successfully, as I had always prayed it might. But when he saw that I was delighted and beaming with joy, and understood that he had been deceived by me, he was yet more vexed and distressed.

And when he had a little recovered from this agitation of mind, he began: If you have rejected the part allotted to you, and have no further regard for me (I know not indeed for what cause), you ought at least to consider your own reputation; but as it is you have opened the mouths of all, and the world is saying that you have declined this ministry through love of vainglory, and there is no one who will deliver you from this accusation. As for me, I cannot bear to go into the market place; there are so many who come up to me and reproach me every day. For, when they see me anywhere in the city, all my intimate friends take me aside, and cast the greater part of the blame upon me. Knowing his intention, they say, for none of his affairs could be kept secret from you, you should not have concealed it, but ought to have communicated it to us, and we should have been at no loss to devise some plan for capturing him. But I am too much ashamed and abashed to tell them that I did not know you had long been plotting this trick, lest they should say that our friendship was a mere pretence. For even if it is so, as indeed it is — nor would you yourself deny it after what you have done to me — yet it is well to hide our misfortune from the outside world, and persons who entertain but a moderate opinion of us. I shrink from telling them the truth, and how things really stand with us, and I am compelled in future to keep silence, and look down on the ground, and turn away to avoid those whom I meet. For if I escape the condemnation on the former charge, I am forced to undergo judgment for speaking falsehood. For they will never believe me when I say that you ranged Basil among those who are not permitted to know your secret affairs. Of this, however, I will not take much account, since it has seemed agreeable to you, but how shall we endure the future disgrace? For some accuse you of arrogance, others of vainglory: while those who are our more merciful accusers, lay both these offenses to our charge, and add that we have insulted those who did us honor, although had they experienced even greater indignity it would only have served them right for passing over so many and such distinguished men and advancing mere youths, who were but yesterday immersed in the interests of this world, to such a dignity as they never have dreamed of obtaining, in order that they may for a brief season knit the eyebrows, wear dusky garments, and put on a grave face. Those who from the dawn of manhood to extreme old age have diligently practised self-discipline, are now to be placed under the government of youths who have not even heard the laws which should regulate their administration of this office. I am perpetually assailed by persons who say such things and worse, and am at a loss how to reply to them; but I pray you tell me: for I do not suppose that you took to flight and incurred such hatred from such distinguished men without cause or consideration, but that your decision was made with reasoning and circumspection: whence also I conjecture that you have some argument ready for your defense. Tell me, then, whether there is any fair excuse which I can make to those who accuse us.

For I do not demand any account for the wrongs which I have sustained at your hands, nor for the deceit or treachery you have practised, nor for the advantage which you have derived from me in the past. For I placed my very life, so to say, in your hands, yet you have treated me with as much guile as if it had been your business to guard yourself against an enemy. Yet if you knew this decision of ours to be profitable, you ought not to have avoided the gain: if on the contrary injurious, you should have saved me also from the loss, as you always said that you esteemed me before every one else. But you have done everything to make me fall into the snare: and you had no need of guile and hypocrisy in dealing with one who was wont to display the utmost sincerity and candor in speech and action towards you. Nevertheless, as I said, I do not now accuse you of any of these things, or reproach you for the

lonely position in which you have placed me by breaking off those conferences from which we often derived no small pleasure and profit; but all these things I pass by, and bear in silence and meekness, not that you have acted meekly in transgressing against me, but because from the day that I cherished your friendship I laid it down as a rule for myself, that whatever sorrow you might cause me I would never force you to the necessity of an apology. For you know yourself that you have inflicted no small loss on me if at least you remember what we were always saying ourselves, and the outside world also said concerning us, that it was a great gain for us to be of one mind and be guarded by each other's friendship. Every one said, indeed, that our concord would bring no small advantage to many besides ourselves; I never perceived, however, so far as I am concerned, how it could be of advantage to others: but I did say that we should at least derive this benefit from it: that those who wished to contend with us would find us difficult to master. And I never ceased reminding you of these things: saying the age is a cruel one, and designing men are many, genuine love is no more, and the deadly pest of envy has crept into its place: we walk in the midst of snares, and on the edge of battlements; those who are ready to rejoice in our misfortunes, if any should befall us, are many and beset us from many quarters: whereas there is no one to condole with us, or at least the number of such may be easily counted. Beware that we do not by separation incur much ridicule, and damage worse than ridicule. Brother aided by brother is like a strong city, and well fortified kingdom. Do not dissolve this genuine intimacy, nor break down the fortress. Such things and more I was continually saying, not indeed that I ever suspected anything of this kind, but supposing you to be entirely sound in your relation towards me, I did it as a superfluous precaution, wishing to preserve in health one who was already sound; but unwittingly, as it seems, I was administering medicines to a sick man: and even so I have not been fortunate enough to do any good, and have gained nothing by my excess of forethought. For having totally cast away all these considerations, without giving them a thought, you have turned me adrift like an unballasted vessel on an untried ocean, taking no heed of those fierce billows which I must encounter. For if it should ever be my lot to undergo calumny, or mockery, or any other kind of insult or menace (and such things must frequently occur), to whom shall I fly for refuge: to whom shall I impart my distress, who will be willing to succour me and drive back my assailants and put a stop to their assaults? Who will solace me and prepare me to bear the coarse ribaldry which may yet be in store for me. There is no one since you stand aloof from this terrible strife, and cannot even hear my cry. Do you see then what mischief you have wrought? Now that you have dealt the blow, do you perceive what a deadly wound you have inflicted? But let all this pass: for it is impossible to undo the past, or to find a path through pathless difficulties. What shall I say to the outside world? What defense shall I make to their accusations.

Chrysostom: Be of good cheer, I replied, for I am not only ready to answer for myself in these matters, but I will also endeavor as well as I am able to render an account of those for which you have not held me answerable. Indeed, if you wish it, I will make them the starting-point of my defense. For it would be a strange piece of stupidity on my part if, thinking only of praise from the outside public, and doing my best to silence their accusations, I were unable to convince my dearest of all friends that I am not wronging him, and were to treat him with indifference greater than the zeal which he has displayed on my behalf, treating me with such forbearance as even to refrain from accusing me of the wrongs which he says he has suffered from me, and putting his own interests out of the question in consideration for mine.

What is the wrong that I have done you, since I have determined to embark from this point upon the sea of apology? Is it that I misled you and concealed my purpose? Yet I did it for the benefit of yourself who wast deceived, and of those to whom I surrendered you by means of this deceit. For if the evil of deception is absolute, and it is never right to make use of it, I am prepared to pay any penalty you please: or rather, as you will never endure to inflict punishment upon me, I shall subject myself to the same condemnation which is pronounced by judges on evil-doers when their accusers have convicted them. But if the thing is not always harmful, but becomes good or bad according to the intention of those who practise it, you must desist from complaining of deceit, and prove that it has been devised against you for a bad purpose; and as long as this proof is wanting it would only be fair for those who wish to conduct themselves prudently, not only to abstain from reproaches and accusation, but even to give a friendly reception to the deceiver. For a well-timed deception, undertaken with an upright intention, has such advantages, that many persons have often had to undergo punishment for abstaining from fraud. And if you investigate the history of generals who have enjoyed the highest reputation from the earliest ages, you will find that most of their triumphs were achieved by stratagem, and that such are more highly commended than those who conquer in open fight. For the latter conduct their campaigns with greater expenditure of money and men, so that they gain nothing by the victory, but suffer just as much distress as those who have been defeated, both in the sacrifice of troops and the exhaustion of funds. But, besides this, they are not even permitted to enjoy all the glory which pertains to the victory; for no small part of it is reaped by those who have fallen, because in spirit they were victorious, their defeat was only a bodily one: so that had it been possible for them not to fall when they were wounded, and death had not come and put the finishing stroke to their labors, there would have been no end of their prowess. But one who has been able to gain the victory by stratagem involves the enemy in ridicule as well as disaster. Again, in the other case both sides equally carry off the honors bestowed upon valor, whereas in this case they do not equally obtain those which are bestowed on wisdom, but the prize falls entirely to the victors, and, another point no less important is that they preserve the joy of the victory for the state unalloyed; for abundance of resources and multitudes of men are not like mental powers: the former indeed if continually used in war necessarily become exhausted, and fail those who possess them, whereas it is the nature of wisdom to increase the more it is exercised. And not in war only, but also in peace the need of deceit may be found, not merely in reference to the affairs of the state, but also in private life, in the dealings of husband with wife and wife with husband, son with father, friend with friend, and also children with a parent. For the daughter of Saul would not have been able to rescue her husband out of Saul's hands except by deceiving her father. And her brother, wishing to

save him whom she had rescued when he was again in danger, made use of the same weapon as the wife. 1 Samuel 20:11

Basil: But none of these cases apply to me: for I am not an enemy, nor one of those who are striving to injure you, but quite the contrary. For I entrusted all my interests to your judgment, and always followed it whenever you bid me.

Chrysostom: But, my admirable and excellent Sir, this is the very reason why I took the precaution of saying that it was a good thing to employ this kind of deceit, not only in war, and in dealing with enemies, but also in peace, and in dealing with our dearest friends. For as a proof that it is beneficial not only to the deceivers, but also to those who are deceived; if you go to any of the physicians and ask them how they relieve their patients from disease, they will tell you that they do not depend upon their professional skill alone, but sometimes conduct the sick to health by availing themselves of deceit, and blending the assistance which they derive from it with their art. For when the waywardness of the patient and the obstinacy of the complaint baffle the counsels of the physicians, it is then necessary to put on the mask of deceit in order that, as on the stage, they may be able to hide what really takes place. But, if you please, I will relate to you one instance of stratagem out of many which I have heard of being contrived by the sons of the healing art. A man was once suddenly attacked by a fever of great severity; the burning heat increased, and the patient rejected the remedies which could have reduced it and craved for a draught of pure wine, passionately entreating all who approached to give it him and enable him to satiate this deadly craving — I say deadly, for if any one had gratified this request he would not only have exasperated the fever, but also have driven the unhappy man frantic. Thereupon, professional skill being baffled, and at the end of its resources and utterly thrown away, stratagem stepped in and displayed its power in the way which I will now relate. For the physician took an earthen cup brought straight out of the furnace, and having steeped it in wine, then drew it out empty, filled it with water, and, having ordered the chamber where the sick man lay to be darkened with curtains that the light might not reveal the trick, he gave it him to drink, pretending that it was filled with undiluted wine. And the man, before he had taken it in his hands, being deceived by the smell, did not wait to examine what was given him, but convinced by the odor, and deceived by the darkness, eagerly gulped down the draught, and being satiated with it immediately shook off the feeling of suffocation and escaped the imminent peril. Do you see the advantage of deceit? And if any one were to reckon up all the tricks of physicians the list would run on to an indefinite length. And not only those who heal the body but those also who attend to the diseases of the soul may be found continually making use of this remedy. Thus the blessed Paul attracted those multitudes of Jews: Acts 21:26 with this purpose he circumcised Timothy, although he warned the Galatians in his letter Galatians 5:2 that Christ would not profit those who were circumcised. For this cause he submitted to the law, although he reckoned the righteousness which came from the law but loss after receiving the faith in Christ. Philippians 3:7 For great is the value of deceit, provided it be not introduced with a mischievous intention. In fact action of this kind ought not to be called deceit, but rather a kind of good management, cleverness and skill, capable of finding out ways where resources fail, and making up for the defects of the mind. For I would not call Phinees a murderer, although he slew two human beings with one stroke: Numbers 25:7 nor yet Elias after the slaughter of the 100 soldiers, and the captain, 2 Kings 1:9-12 and the torrents of blood which he caused to be shed by the destruction of those who sacrificed to devils. 1 Kings 18:34 For if we were to concede this, and to examine the bare deeds in themselves apart from the intention of the doers, one might if he pleased judge Abraham guilty of child-murder Genesis 22:3 and accuse his grandson and descendant Exodus 11:2 of wickedness and guile. For the one got possession of the birthright, and the other transferred the wealth of the Egyptians to the host of the Israelites. But this is not the case: away with the audacious thought! For we not only acquit them of blame, but also admire them because of

these things, since even God commended them for the same. For that man would fairly deserve to be called a deceiver who made an unrighteous use of the practice, not one who did so with a salutary purpose. And often it is necessary to deceive, and to do the greatest benefits by means of this device, whereas he who has gone by a straight course has done great mischief to the person whom he has not deceived.

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