

St. John Chrysostom, *bishop & doctor* (†407)

ON THE PRIESTHOOD

(*excerpt*)

For it is necessary for one who is going to enter upon this path of life to investigate all matters thoroughly well, before he sets his hand to the ministry. Do you ask why? Because one who knows all things clearly will have this advantage, if no other, that he will not feel strange when these things befall him. Would you like me then to approach the question of superintending widows, first of all, or of the care of virgins, or the difficulty of the judicial function. For in each of these cases there is a different kind of anxiety, and the fear is greater than the anxiety.

17. But in the care of virgins, the fear is greater in proportion as the possession is more precious, and this flock is of a nobler character than the others. Already, indeed, even into the band of these holy ones, an infinite number of women have rushed full of innumerable bad qualities; and in this case our grief is greater than in the other; for there is just the same difference between a virgin and a widow going astray, as between a free-born damsel and her handmaid. With widows, indeed, it has become a common practice to trifle, and to rail at one another, to flatter or to be impudent, to appear everywhere in public, and to perambulate the market-place. But the virgin has striven for nobler aims, and eagerly sought the highest kind of philosophy, and professes to exhibit upon earth the life which angels lead, and while yet in the flesh proposes to do deeds which belong to the incorporeal powers. Moreover, she ought not to make numerous or unnecessary journeys, neither is it permissible for her to utter idle and random words; and as for abuse and flattery, she should not even know them by name. On this account she needs the most careful guardianship, and the greater assistance. For the enemy of holiness is always surprising and lying in wait for these persons, ready to devour any one of them if she should slip and fall; many men also there are who lay snares for them; and besides all these things there is the passionateness of their own human nature, so that, speaking generally, the virgin has to equip herself for a twofold war, one which attacks her from without, and the other which presses upon her from within. For these reasons he who has the superintendence of virgins suffers great alarm, and the danger and distress is yet greater, should any of the things which are contrary to his wishes occur, which God forbid. For if a daughter kept in seclusion is a cause of sleeplessness to her father, his anxiety about her depriving him of sleep, where the fear is so great lest she should be childless, or pass the flower of her age (unmarried), or be hated (by her husband), what will he suffer whose anxiety is not concerned with any of these things, but others far greater? For in this, case it is not a man who is rejected, but Christ Himself, nor is this barrenness the subject merely of reproach, but the evil ends in the destruction of the soul; *for every tree, it is said, which bringeth not forth good fruit, is hewn down and cast into the fire*. And for one who has been repudiated by the divine Bridegroom, it is not sufficient to receive a certificate of divorce and so to depart, but she has to pay the penalty of everlasting punishment. Moreover, a father according to the flesh has many things which make the custody of his daughter easy; for the mother, and nurse, and a multitude of handmaids share in helping the parent to keep the maiden safe. For neither is she permitted to be perpetually hurrying into the market-place, nor when she does go there is she compelled to show herself to any of the passers-by, the evening darkness concealing one who

does not wish to be seen no less than the walls of the house. And apart from these things, she is relieved from every cause which might otherwise compel her to meet the gaze of men; for no anxiety about the necessities of life, no menaces of oppressors, nor anything of that kind reduces her to this unfortunate necessity, her father acting in her stead in all these matters; while she herself has only one anxiety, which is to avoid doing or saying anything unworthy the modest conduct which becomes her. But in the other case there are many things which make the custody of the virgin difficult, or rather impossible for the father; for he could not have her in his house with himself, as dwelling together in that way would be neither seemly nor safe. For even if they themselves should suffer no loss, but continue to preserve their innocence unsullied, they would have to give an account for the souls which they have offended, just as much as if they happened to sin with one another. And it being impossible for them to live together, it is not easy to understand the movements of the character, and to suppress the impulses which are ill regulated, or train and improve those which are better ordered and tuned. Nor is it an easy thing to interfere in her habits of walking out; for her poverty and want of a guardian does not permit him to become an exact investigator of the propriety of her conduct. For as she is compelled to manage all her affairs she has many pretexts for going out, if at least she is not inclined to be self-controlled. Now he who commands her to stay always at home ought to cut off these pretexts, providing for her independence in the necessities of life, and giving her some woman who will see to the management of these things. He must also keep her away from funeral obsequies, and nocturnal festivals; for that artful serpent knows only too well how to scatter his poison through the medium even of good deeds. And the maiden must be fenced on every side, and rarely go out of the house during the whole year, except when she is constrained by inexorable necessity. Now if any one should say that none of these things is the proper work of a bishop to take in hand, let him be assured that the anxieties and the reasons concerning what takes place in every case have to be referred to him. And it is far more expedient that he should manage everything, and so be delivered from the complaints which he must otherwise undergo on account of the faults of others, than that he should abstain from the management, and then have to dread being called to account for things which other men have done. Moreover, he who does these things by himself, gets through them all with great ease; but he who is compelled to do it by converting every one's opinion does not get relief by being saved from working single-handed, equivalent to the trouble and turmoil which he experiences through those who oppose him and combat his decisions. However, I could not enumerate all the anxieties concerned with the care of virgins; for when they have to be entered on the list, they occasion no small trouble to him who is entrusted with this business.