

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
MEMORIAL OF SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM
WASHINGTON DC CHAPTER OF REGNUM CHRISTI
OUR LADY OF BETHESDA RETREAT CENTER, BETHESDA, MARYLAND
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My brothers and sisters,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the personal representative of the Holy Father to this country, I greet you and express to you the spiritual closeness and paternal affection of His Holiness Pope Francis. I thank you for your own consecration to Christ and for your commitment to extending His Kingdom. Today we are celebrating the Memorial of St. John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople and Doctor of the Church. He was born at Antioch in 349 and died in 407; he is often called “Golden Mouthed” for his eloquent sermons. As one of the patrons of the Second Vatican Council, he remains a fitting model of holiness for the Church of our day.

Many do not realize that before John became a deacon or priest, he spent four years in a monastic community, followed by two years in a hermitage. There in silence, John was able to reflect on God’s Word. I want to highlight this: before he could utter a single word or give a homily, John encountered the Word. This was the object of his contemplation: God and His creation. His starting point was not politics or economics. His starting point was God Himself. Today the Church finds herself in difficulty precisely because some bring their ideologies and politics to the Church and attempt to conform the Word to fit their agenda.

Some claim to have “knowledge” but they neglect the God who is the source of true knowledge, the God who is love. Paul warns the Corinthians of this in the first reading when he says, *“Knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up. If anyone supposes he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if one loves God, one is known by him.”*

There is nothing greater than to love God and to be loved by God. Love is the hallmark of the Kingdom. Our love begins with the contemplation of God’s Word. If we were to contemplate the Word of God that comes to us in the Gospel today, we would discover the centrality of the call to love. Jesus delivers his so-called “Sermon on the Plain.” The main element of it is the concrete demands of discipleship, which go beyond the externals of the law. Jesus’ disciples must love even their enemies. They must *turn the other cheek*; offer their cloak *and* tunic; and give generously without demanding return. Finally, they must follow the Golden Rule: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*

The Golden Rule takes on great significance where the poor are concerned. John Chrysostom warns that “for those who neglect their neighbor a hell awaits with an inextinguishable fire and torment in the company of the demons. Do not, therefore, adorn the church and ignore your afflicted brother, for he is the most precious temple of all.”

The starting point for our generosity is God Himself, contemplating the Word and the beauty of His creation. Paul says: *yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things are and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are and through whom we exist.*

Contemplation of God leads to action: love builds the kingdom. After contemplating Christ as a monk, John Chrysostom heard the call to the “pastoral life”, returning to Antioch, where he was ordained deacon in 381. There he oversaw charitable and social services, encountering the

poor and needy, face to face. Later, after his priestly ordination, he was commissioned by Bishop Flavian to preach, which he did for twelve years, earning the name “Chrysostom”.

He is a model for us because he practiced what he preached; he put love into action. Today’s Gospel lists the practical demands for every disciple: to love one’s enemies, to turn the other cheek, and to apply the Golden Rule. John Chrysostom reminds the Church that these are not abstract ideas but concrete requirements. I recount one incident from his life.

In 395, Emperor Theodosius died, leaving his two sons Arcadius and Honorius to rule in the East and West. In 397, Nectarius, the patriarch of Constantinople, died. Eutropius, the first minister to Emperor Arcadius, recommended John to be the new bishop. Nectarius understood politics and managed the Imperial Court. However, his desire to avoid conflict led to an unhealthy amount of “human respect” in dealing with the court, the clergy and laity and contributed to moral laxity. Eutropius presumed John would be like Nectarius and turn a blind-eye to his failings. He was not. John’s primary concern was preaching the Word of God.

Eutropius had been John’s great promoter and was named consul, but he governed badly, sold offices, and misused public funds. Eutropius was charged with keeping order in the cities and railed against offering sanctuary to “criminals” in the churches. Sanctuary allowed the “criminal” to put his affairs in order and to avoid execution. In his homilies, based on God’s Word, John began a blistering critique of Eutropius’ corruption and lack of concern for the common good and defended the Church’s right to offer sanctuary.

In 399, when conflict between John and Eutropius reached its climax, there was a stunning turn of events. Eutropius had been responsible for the marriage between Arcadius and the Empress Eudoxia. Swelled with pride, he told the Empress that he could have the marriage broken just as easily as he had made the match. The Empress was furious and demanded Eutropius’ expulsion from the Imperial Court.

Eutropius was stripped of his office, his titles, and his properties. He was then accused of many crimes. The mob and the authorities pursued him; they wanted blood. Where could he go? He had no refuge – except the Church. He fled to Chrysostom, knowing him to be a man of integrity; the saint allowed him to seek sanctuary in the church. Eutropius clung to the altar as the crowds gathered, but John protected him until he arrangements were made for his exile to Cyprus.

A worldly man would have left Eutropius to his own devices, but John was a man of the Church and a minister of God’s Word. He understood what it was to love one’s enemies and to practice the Golden Rule. I wonder how we would respond if one of our enemies or fierce critics came to us. What would we do? Or, if we had to seek their help, wouldn’t we want them to apply the Golden Rule to us?

The story of John Chrysostom and Eutropius could easily be applied to contemporary issues like migration, but I think what the life of the saint teaches us is that if we are to give credible witness to the Gospel, we need to contemplate the Word and live it with integrity. The words that Christ speaks to us are not like other words but have bearing upon salvation. Consider the final words of our Gospel: *“Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven. Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.”*

May Saint John Chrysostom inspire us to be generous in showing mercy, and may he intercede for us so that we may share more deeply, now and eternally, in the life of the God, *from whom all things are and for whom we exist.*