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## The Basis of John Chrysostom's Teaching on Widowhood

### 1. The ideal widow

The example of the biblical widow is mentioned quite often by the Church Fathers. Many of them subject the state of a widow to a detailed analysis, focusing mostly on aspects such as poverty, loneliness, or a huge dependence on other people. However, the interest in widows' lives as such is somewhat lesser. It is true that among the Fathers of the Church there are comparisons made between the life of a widow and that of a virgin, or of a woman with a living spouse. Nevertheless, analyses of a widow's life as such, without making greater reference to other states of life, are rare among the Fathers. The situation changed however, when widows began to form associations. For instance, they created their own "formation" known as *ordo viduarum*<sup>2</sup>, which gradually began to grow in importance.

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<sup>2</sup> The intentions to join this specific "order of widows" were not always genuine. In the case of some women, the decision was motivated by an opportunity to free themselves from domination of men. Entering the order allowed them to avoid tyranny from a second husband after remarrying. Some Church Fathers were aware of this, see Hieronymus, *Epistula* 22, 16, PL 22, 403-404, Johannes Chrysostomus, *De non iterando coniugio*, ed. B. Grillet – G.H. Ettlinger, SCh 138, Paris 1968, p. 176, 188; Ch. Methuen, *The "Virgin Widow": A Problematic Social Role for the Early Church?*, HTR 90/3 (1997) p. 298; J.M. Bassler, *The Widow's Tale: a Fresh Look at 1 Tim 5:3-16*, JBL 103/1 (1984) p. 29-32.

John Chrysostom is one of the Church Fathers who took a sincere interest in all struggles present in the lives of widows. Moreover, he not only described their calling but carefully analysed the theological sources of widowhood. The greatness of his legacy dedicated to widows is impressive, as well as his pastoral devotion to them, which made him unique among the Church Fathers. He may boldly be called the widow's chaplain and there are several reasons for this.

The first reason comes from his personal experience. John became a half-orphan shortly after his father's death, so he grew up in the shadow of widowhood. One of the fragments of his work *De sacerdotio*<sup>3</sup> contains a statement of his mother Anthousa about widowhood. She enumerates all the hardships of widowhood from top to bottom and in her opinion "the horrors of widowhood"<sup>4</sup> are a curse rather than a blessing. Hence, young John had an excellent opportunity to observe and experience widowhood at first hand. Nevertheless he formed his own opinion on this, differing significantly from the one of his mother, and he did so quite early.

The second reason comes from his devotion to monastic life. John began a celibate life in a semi-communal way of monasticism. The solitary life he undertook later did not last long, however. According to Kelly he most likely severely damaged his health due to his self-mortifications, which probably led to rushes of blood to his head, stomach problems, sensitivity to cold and insomnia<sup>5</sup>. As a result young John had to withdraw from the monastic life. Yet this early period of life defined him. As Kelly also clearly states, "he not only remained a monk at heart [...] but continued to practice his routine of monastic austerities"<sup>6</sup>. Therefore an attentive reader of Chrysostom has to keep in mind that all of John's later statements on widowhood will have a monastic background more or less visible. Ignoring this factor in any way could lead to many misrepresentations. His years of monastic life shaped his understanding of humanity, his perception of the Holy Scriptures (especially of St. Paul's writings),

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<sup>3</sup> See Johannes Chrysostomus, *De sacerdotio* I 2, 37-41, ed. A.M. Malingrey, SCH 272, Paris 1980, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *De sacerdotio* I 2, tr. W.R.W. Stephens, *Treatise Concerning the Christian Priesthood*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 1/9, ed. Ph. Schaff, Buffalo 1889, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> See J.N.D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth. The Story of John Chrysostom – Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop*, Ithaca 1995, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly, *Golden Mouth*. p. 35.

his attitude towards others and his pastoral care, with no exception towards widows.

Chrysostom's attitude towards widows did not change after his priestly ordination. On the contrary, as a priest he noted that the Church of Antioch supported three thousand widows and virgins to whom he provided pastoral care<sup>7</sup>. He maintained friendly relations with some of them, as evidenced in his letters which have survived to our times. In some of these he wrote words of comfort to widows due to their loss. This particular testimony can be found in *Ad viduam iunioem* where John tries to give hope to Therasius' widow, which he based on a solid Christian teaching. These words of consolation were written more than a year after the death of Therasius, so his wife<sup>8</sup> received not only personal condolences, but also a deeply thought-out message.

In other letters, such as his correspondence with his friend Olympias, he gave a lot of instructions and advice on how to challenge the daily routine in a Christian way. Chrysostom was perfectly aware what kind of difficulties a widow may encounter. Olympias, as the leading deaconess of the cathedral in Constantinople, took all that information seriously. She could have been inspired by John's attitude and it was probably her, not John's mother, Anthousa, who was trying to be a living example of his ideas.

All these women (Chrysostom's mother, Anthousa, Therasius' wife, and Olympias) had much in common – they were young widows and had similar high social status. However, each one of them experienced their widowhood in a different way and none could meet all Chrysostom's criteria of the ideal widow. Anthousa's widowhood was an unwanted burden as she had never come to terms with her husband's death. She loved John's father Sekoundos<sup>9</sup> deeply, as it is testified by Chrysostom him-

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<sup>7</sup> See Johannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia in Matthaicum* 66, 3, PG 58, 630. For John's actual engagement with widows and women in general at Antioch, see W. Mayer, *John Chrysostom and women revisited*, in: *Men and Women in the Early Christian Centuries*, ed. W. Mayer – I.J. Elmer, Early Christian Studies 18, Strathfield 2014, p. 211-225.

<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately Chrysostom nowhere mentions her name, while the name of her husband (Θηράσιος) is mentioned twice. In *Ad viduam iunioem* John gave a number of details about the personal life of Therasius and his wife, hence he must have known them quite well.

<sup>9</sup> We know the name of John's father thanks to the testimony of historian Sokrates. It is most likely a Greek spelling of a Latin name. According to some scholars Chrysostom deliberately leaves no reference to him nor mentions his name. Perhaps Sekoundos was never baptized, but we can only speculate on this. See Kelly, *Golden Mouth*, p. 4.

self in *De sacerdotio*<sup>10</sup>, but she perceived widowhood in a very negative way<sup>11</sup>. Therasius' widow had a similar perspective. She was happy in her marriage, and the death of Therasius was also a huge blow for her. As her sorrow continued over a year after Therasius' departure, she probably saw more negative than positive sides of her widowhood. Additionally, Chrysostom admonishes her in a subtle way saying that she is still in grief not only because of her husband's death but also because of her loss of wealth and position in the imperial society. Olympias, in turn, saw her widowhood mostly in a positive way. She interpreted her new state as a chance to lead life fully dedicated to the service of the Church. Therefore, Chrysostom in his correspondence with Olympias did not have to convince her to refrain from remarrying. Even Emperor Theodosius himself could not persuade her to marry his own relative<sup>12</sup>. Yet despite Olympias's contempt for worldly things and the wealth, she still could not be Chrysostom's archetype of a Christian widow. Unfortunately, Olympias's marriage "does not seem to have been a happy one"<sup>13</sup>, therefore it is doubtful that the future unity with her departed husband in the afterlife was something she desired. Olympias was definitely trying to get closer to the Christian ideal but she does not meet Chrysostom's criteria of this ideal due to her relationship with her husband. Despite how insignificant this element might be, the future unity of spouses was vital for John. And as we shall see a little later, it was a cornerstone of his perception of widowhood.

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<sup>10</sup> Anthousa once said to her son that she had a great consolation in him because he was "a living image of him who had gone", see Johannes Chrysostomus, *De sacerdotio* I 2. No doubt Anthousa's marriage was a happy one, nevertheless, Chrysostom never mentioned the bond between his parents as the example of the ideal of true widowhood that he was trying to pursue.

<sup>11</sup> Anthousa objected to Chrysostom's plan to become a hermit together with his close friend Basil. Interestingly, she called his potential abandonment "a second widowhood (δευτέρῃ χηρείᾳ)". She asked her son "for one favour: 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" (Johannes Chrysostomus, *De sacerdotio* I 2, Stephens, p. 34).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. W.R.W. Stephens, *Introduction to the Letters to Olympias*, in: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Ser. 1, vol. 9, ed. Ph. Schaff, p. 287.

<sup>13</sup> See Stephens, *Introduction to the Letters to Olympias*, p. 287.

## 2. St. Pauls' teaching

All of Chrysostom's personal arguments are important, but far more significant are those which come directly from Christian teachings. There is one key figure that cannot be omitted – Paul of Tarsus. John quotes him almost constantly, therefore while analysing the sources of widowhood in Chrysostom's perspective the references to St. Paul have to be scrutinized as well.

However, one who thinks that John follows St. Paul indiscriminately would be gravely mistaken. Chrysostom's presentation of the apostle's letters is not a precise commentary but often an interpretation<sup>14</sup>. Sometimes this interpretation is quite distant from the original meaning and results in an opposite understanding<sup>15</sup>.

Nevertheless, what St. Paul says is crucial for John<sup>16</sup> and we can trace several motives for this. Firstly, Chrysostom perceives the embodiment of the ideal of Christian virginity in Paul. The apostle had lived in the desert before he preached; as one who never married<sup>17</sup>, he brought the Christian

<sup>14</sup> Cf. B. Grillet, *Introduction*, in: *Jean Chrysostome: À une jeune veuve. Sur le mariage unique*, SCh 138, ed. B. Grillet – G.H. Ettliger, Paris 1968, p. 59-60.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, in his teaching Paul distinguishes between the words that come from him and those that he has received from the Lord. But for John the apostle Paul is "the imitator of Christ" hence Christ is speaking through him even if he says otherwise. See Johannes Chrysostomus, *De virginitate* XIII 4, ed. H. Musurillo – B. Grillet, SCh 125, Paris 1966, p. 136, tr. S.R. Shore, *John Chrysostom: On virginity, Against remarriage*, New York 1983, p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> For the key scholarship on how John uses Paul as a model, see M. Mitchell, *The Heavenly Trumpet: John Chrysostom and the Art of Pauline Interpretation*, "Hermeneutische Untersuchungen zur Theologie" 40, Tübingen 2000; D. Rylaarsdam, *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy: The Coherence of his Theology and Preaching*, Oxford Early Christian Studies, Oxford 2014; B. Edsall, *The Reception of Paul and Early Christian Initiation: History and Hermeneutics*, Cambridge 2019; A. Heiser, *Die Paulusinszenierung des Johannes Chrysostomus. Epitheta und ihre Vorgeschichte*, Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum 70, Tübingen 2012.

<sup>17</sup> This idea, no matter how popular among post-Nicene Fathers, is nowadays considered at least doubtful. Some evidence suggest that St. Paul could have been married, but widowed at a relatively young age. Firstly, Paul never used the appellation *παρθένος* or *εὐνοῦχος* of himself, although he used them quite often in various contexts. Secondly, the verse 1Cor 7:8 where he suggests: "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am", was written during the *κοινή* period. In that time there was no special word in use for a man who lost his wife, hence some authors suggest that the word "unmarried" (*ἀγάμοις*) should be translated as "widowers". Thirdly, some scholars refer to the Pharisaic origin of Paul who as Gamaliel's disciple should have been married.

communities closer to the concept of virginity. All this makes him a true imitator of Christ (Παῦλος [...] ὁ τοῦ Χριστοῦ μιμητής)<sup>18</sup>. Chrysostom clearly needs Paul's as an example for further argumentation, so he refers to the apostle's words or life almost constantly.

The second motive comes from Paul's letters. John quotes them extensively without hesitation. He tries to mention all verses where the Apostle of Nations writes about widows and widowhood. This is Chrysostom's attempt to create specific argumentation on widowhood using Paul's teaching as a cornerstone. To achieve that, the Golden Mouth will follow most of St. Paul's advice in general, but he will also reconcile seemingly contradictory statements if necessary:

Paul did not forbid those who desired to remain as widows, rather they compelled him against his will to impose this rule upon them. If you wish to learn the will of Paul, hear what he says: "Given my preference, I should like you to be as I am" (1Cor 7:7), that is, continent (ἐν ἐγκρατείᾳ). Saint Paul would not have been inconsistent (οὐκ ἂν ἐμαχέσατο ἑαυτῷ) or been caught in so great a contradiction nor would he, who desired that all men be continent (ἐν ἐγκρατείᾳ), have forbidden women who wished to remain as widows<sup>19</sup>.

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Finally, the oldest ante-Nicene textual evidences testify for his widowhood and not against it. For instance, Origen in his commentary on 1 Corinthians refers to the verse 1Cor 7:8-9 and indicates that Paul's state is the "secondary good" (δεύτερον καλόν) while the "first good" is when a person does not touch a woman. For more details see R.F. Collins, *Accompanied by a Believing Wife: Ministry and Celibacy in the Earliest Christian Communities*, Collegeville 2013, p. 113-128; K. Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians*, Downers Grove 2011, p. 198-199; W.S. Orr – J.A. Walther, *1 Corinthians. A New Translation*, Garden City 1976, p. 205-206; E. Arens, *Was St. Paul Married.*, "Bible Today" 66 (1973) p. 1189; J. Jeremias, *Was Paulus Witwer?*, ZNW 25 (1926) p. 310; K.P. Donfried, *Paul's Jewish Matrix: The Scope and Nature of the Contributions*, in: *Paul's Jewish Matrix*, ed. T.G. Casey – J. Taylor, Roma 2011, p. 40-41; A. Pitta, *Paul, the Pharisee, and the Law*, in: *Paul's Jewish Matrix*, ed. T.G. Casey – J. Taylor, Roma 2011, p. 99-121; B.D. Chilton – J. Neusner, *Paul and Gamaliel*, in: *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees*, ed. J. Neusner – B.D. Chilton, Waco 2007, p. 208-223; E. Fascher, *1 Kor*, Theologischer Handkommentar zum Neuen Testament 7/1, Berlin 1980, p. 183; H. Baltensweiler, *Die Ehe im Neuen Testament*, Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments 52, Zurich 1967, p. 186.

<sup>18</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *De virginitate* XIII 4, ed. H. Musurillo – B. Grillet, SCh 125, Paris 1966, p. 136.

<sup>19</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *De non iterando coniugio* III, ed. B. Grillet – G.H. Ettinger, SCh 138, Paris 1968, p. 172, 174, tr. S.R. Shore, *John Chrysostom: On virginity, Against remarriage*, New York 1983, p. 134.



It should not surprise us that John tries to reconcile the teaching of St. Paul<sup>20</sup>. In fact, the apostle does not mention anywhere continence (ἐγκράτεια) here nor does he wish it for all humanity. John, however, is “virgin-minded”, hence he perceives widowhood through the state of virginity. These two states would be regularly compared by him<sup>21</sup>. This explains the differences between Paul’s original thought and Chrysostom’s reflection on it. John simply had a specific idea in mind and often drew far-reaching conclusions. It is because he saw that many times widows “had lived more recklessly and arrogantly after the death of their husbands”<sup>22</sup>. Therefore, his specific goal was to present the ideal of Christian widowhood.

In the fourth century the ideal of Christian widowhood was not ultimately defined. There is previous evidence like the western document *Traditio Apostolica* or the Syriac *Didascalia Apostolorum*, both from the third century, describing the widows’ routine, how they should behave and what their responsibilities were. They were portrayed as an “altar of God”<sup>23</sup>, because their main duty was to stay at home and pray for the Church. They were also an extension of the bishop’s hands. They assisted female catechumens at baptism, they offered service by entering into places where men could not have been sent<sup>24</sup>, so they were expected to excel in irreproachable morality, chastity and other qualities needed to complete their tasks. Widows held no liturgical function such as presbyters or deacons inasmuch as they were not ordained, although they could enter into a specific order called “ordo viduarum”. In the beginning their Association had much authority, especially in the Eastern Church, but gradually their authority

<sup>20</sup> Here John quotes 1 Cor 7 in part because in the original Paul qualifies that he wish all men to be as he is, with caveat that “it is better to marry than to burn”. That makes Paul’s attitude to young widows more consistent than John would admit here.

<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the two treatises of Chrysostom: on virginity (*De virginitate*) and on widowhood (*De non iterando coniugio*) were written about the same time, in 382-383.

<sup>22</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *De non iterando coniugio* III, Shore, p. 135.

<sup>23</sup> *Didascalia Apostolorum in English* XV 72. See *Didascalia Apostolorum* III 6, 3 (altare Dei), *Constitutiones Apostolorum* III 6, 3 (θυσιαστήριον Θεοῦ), ed. F.X. Funk, Paderborn 1905. Cf. Polycarpus Smyrnensis, *Epistula ad Philippenses* IV 3, PG 5, 1009. For an interpretation of this expression, see B. Thurston, *The Widows as the “Altar of God”*, “Society of Biblical Literature, Seminar Papers” 24 (1985) p. 279-289; C. Osiek, *The Widows as Altar: The Rise and Fall of a Symbol*, “The Second Century” 3 (1983) p. 159-169.

<sup>24</sup> See Ch. Methuen, *Widows, Bishops and the Struggle for Authority in the Didascalia Apostolorum*, *JEH* 46/2 (1995) p. 199-201.

began to wane<sup>25</sup>. In the times of John Chrysostom the order of widows was not present in the same form as before<sup>26</sup>. It had slowly been transformed into the institution of virgins and the office of deaconesses. Regardless of that, John was seeking the ideal of a Christian widow. He would openly compare virgins with widows by observing their actions such as daily religious routine or life challenges at that time.

It would be a great simplification if one looked at a widow only from the perspective of a virgin. As we shall see later, Chrysostom's view on widowhood is much broader and cannot be reduced only to the existential level. There is also an essential level of widowhood origins. If we deny this, widowhood seems just a poorer version of virginity, which is contrary to John's idea of widowhood, where a widow can have her own glory and challenges that are inaccessible to a virgin. He says that the state of widowhood could be abused, especially if a widow treated it only as an opportunity to maintain financial independence or social position. However, a widow could through her modest life show respect for her husband both during his lifetime and after his death. This respect shines out especially when a wife is no longer compelled to show it. Such respect is simply inaccessible to a virgin<sup>27</sup>.

This leads to the third and strongest motive for the constant reference to the authority of St. Paul – the concept of unity. It derives from

<sup>25</sup> There are several explanations for this process. According to Jouette Bassler (*The Widow's Tale: a Fresh Look at 1 Tim 5:3-16*, p. 35) the reason is that "widows' circle had evolved to the point that chastity, not widowhood, was determinative feature". In Charlotte Methuen's (*Widows, Bishops and the Struggle for Authority in the Didascalia Apostolorum*, p. 199-201) opinion the problem could be that widows usurped too much authority. Jean Daniélou (*The ministry of Women in the Early Church*, Leighton Buzzard 1974, p. 20-21), in turn, says that the decline of widows' order is somehow linked to the expansion of the institution of deaconess. There are some testimonies that deaconesses were, at least primarily, recruited from the group of active widows. Cf. Tertullianus, *Ad uxorem* I 7, 1-3, CCSL 1, p. 381. See also A. Faivre, *Naissance d'un hiérarchie: les premières étapes du cursus clerical*, Paris 1977, p. 106-109; V.A. Karras, *Female Deacons*, "Church History" 73/2 (2004) p. 274; J. G. Davies, *Deacons, Deaconesses and the Minor Orders in the Patristic Period*, "Journal of Ecclesiastical History" 14 (1963) p. 1-15.

<sup>26</sup> Chrysostom in the homily *In illud vidua eligatur* mentions the choirs of virgins which existed in his days in the likeness of the former choirs of widows, see PG 51, 323: "καθάπερ γάρ εἰσι παρθένων χοροὶ, οὕτω καὶ χηρῶν τὸ παλαιὸν ἦσαν χοροὶ".

<sup>27</sup> See Johannes Chrysostomus, *Ad viduam iuniorum* III, ed. B. Grillet – G.H. Ettlinger, SCh 138, Paris 1968, p. 125-127, cf. M.M. Konieczko, *Znaczenie małżeńskiej jedności w nauczaniu św. Jana Chryzostoma o wdowieństwie na podstawie „Oracji do młodej wdowy”*, *Studia Antiquitatis Christianae Series Nova* 24, Katowice 2021, p. 188.



Chrysostom's reference to the apostle's passages: Ephesians 5:22-24 and 1 Corinthians 11:3, in which Paul defines marital unity as an exemplification of a pre-existing "unity" pattern between God the Father and His Son. For Chrysostom this specific bond between divine hypostases is an archetype of unity. He would often use it in reference to marriage, in order to describe the relationship between spouses:

Let us take as our fundamental position then that the husband occupies the place of the head, and the wife the place of the body (Υποθώμεθα οὖν τὸν μὲν ἄνδρα ἐν τάξει κεῖσθαι κεφαλῆς, τὴν δὲ γυναῖκα ἐν τάξει σώματος) [...] Then after saying, "The husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is of the Church", he further adds, "and He is the Saviour of the body". For indeed the head is the saving health of the body. He had already laid down beforehand for man and wife, the ground and provision of their love, assigning to each their proper place, to the one that of authority and forethought (τούτῳ μὲν τὴν ἀρχικὴν καὶ προνοητικὴν), to the other that of submission (ἐκείνῃ δὲ τὴν ὑποτακτικὴν). As then "the Church", that is, both husbands and wives, "is subject unto Christ, so also ye wives submit yourselves to your husbands, as unto God"<sup>28</sup>.

Paul's "head-body" metaphor would be fully adopted and expanded by John. He would use this specific "head-body" formula not only in reference to marriage but also as a description of social relationship or ecclesiastical unity. Such a submission of woman to man could be difficult to accept as a standard today, but it does not implicate a woman's lower dignity or value<sup>29</sup>. In fact Chrysostom clearly forbids a husband to "despise her as being in subjection, for she is the body; and if the head despises the body, it will itself also perish"<sup>30</sup>. In the same way the Church has to be subjected to Christ. Any household, community, or even the Church will fall apart if that order is destroyed. Therefore the wife's submission to her husband is not

<sup>28</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia in epistulam ad Ephesios* 20, PG 62, 136, tr. A. Gross, *Homily XX on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 1/13, ed. Ph. Schaff, p. 144.

<sup>29</sup> John's views may have been influenced by the fact that marriage ages for women (really just young girls) during the Roman Empire, which were a function of sex-selected infanticide, were 50% under 12 years old. See R. Stark, *Reconstructing the Rise of Christianity: The Role of Women*, "Sociology of Religion" 56/3 (1995) p. 229-244.

<sup>30</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia in epistulam ad Ephesios* 20, PG 62, 140, tr. Gross, p. 146.

a human invention but “God’s will from the beginning” (Οὕτως ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἠθέλησε, φησὶν, ὁ Θεός)<sup>31</sup>.

That marital metaphor – the “head-body” bond will be a significant part of Chrysostom’s teaching on widowhood. There are several implications of that specific order as we shall see, but the most important one is that the existence of a widow or widower is a result of God’s order, not a personal tragedy of one’s spouse’s death. Therefore, unlike many Church Fathers, Chrysostom perceives widowhood as something positive. He sees the harshness and all the challenges that widows have to go through probably better than any of the Fathers, but he still underlines the value of widowhood and its own glory.

However, even all these three motives combined cannot explain why Chrysostom relies so much on St. Paul’s texts. He could have used a different metaphor or have created one of his own. He could have quoted other fragments from the Holy Scriptures as well. Instead, in his major work dedicated to the problem of widowhood – Περὶ μονανδρίας<sup>32</sup> – John almost hides behind Paul’s authority. He does so especially at times when the reader of Chrysostom might have some doubts.

The reason for this may be John’s age and lack of authority. Most of the works dealing with the subject of widowhood or closely devoted to this subject, he simply wrote at a very early stage of his theological activity. Assuming the year 349 as his date of birth, his works, which constitute the core of his teaching on widowhood – *Ad viduam iuniorem* (380), *De virginitate* (382) and *De non iterando coniugio* (383) – are to be written at the age of 31, 33 and 34 respectively. Hence, at that time John was not yet known as the “Golden Mouth”. At that time Chrysostom was a deacon, involved in social work, and his words did not have the same authority as when he was bishop of Constantinople.

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<sup>31</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia in epistulam ad Ephesios* 20, PG 62, 136, tr. Gross, p. 144.

<sup>32</sup> The title should be translated as *On women’s absolute monogamy*. This is Chrysostom’s treatise dedicated to many questions of widowhood. However, the Latin translation of the title – *De non iterando coniugio* – could be misleading, as well as the English translation by Sally R. Shore – *Against remarriage*. The French translation in Sources Chrétiennes series – *Sur le mariage unique* – and the Italian one – *L’unità delle nozze* – are closer to the literal meaning. This is because there are different approaches to the issues that John raised in his treatise. Some scholars see Chrysostom rather as a rigorous preacher who imposes various restrictions on widows, than the one who seeks the ideal.

### 3. Three pillars of widowhood

The value of *χηρεία* in Chrysostom's teaching stems from his anthropology. Despite John's young age, his concept of widowhood was well thought-out and did not change later during his episcopacy. We can identify three important factors in his perspective: the reference to virginity, the reference to marital unity and philosophical influence on him.

The analysis of Chrysostom's first factor – the reference to virginity – is necessary for several reasons. To begin with, we should remember that for John it is the state of virginity, not marriage, that is the default position of humanity. God fashioned man for whom he made the world. After being fashioned, man remained in paradise and there was no reason for marriage (καὶ γάμου λόγος οὐδεὶς ἦν). Man did need a helper, and she came into being; but even then marriage did not seem necessary. It had not yet appeared but they remained as they were without marriage. They lived in paradise as in heaven and enjoyed God's company. The desire for sexual intercourse, conception, the pain of labour, childbirth and every form of corruption had been banished from their souls (καὶ πᾶν εἶδος φθορᾶς ἐξώριστο τῆς ἐκεῖνων ψυχῆς). As a clear river shooting forth from a pure source, so were they in that place adorned by virginity (παρθενία κοσμούμενοι).

Virginity is the best possible human condition while marriage stands much lower. Furthermore, virginity, although inferior in its nature to blessed spirits, is able to compete with them, because for Chrysostom one could refer to those living on earth as to the angels in heaven. There is no better tool for this than virginity. Through this specific state man can overcome his nature by achieving virtue. Only then those endowed with bodies will not be "inferior to the incorporeal powers"<sup>33</sup>.

A similar rule applies to a widow. Her position is not the same as that of a virgin because, in the view of Chrysostom, marriage is inferior to virginity by definition. Therefore, the widow's path will always be more difficult because of her previous marital state. This does not mean, however, that a widow is unable to "challenge" a virgin. On the contrary:

The widow is at the start inferior to the virgin alone, but in the end she equals and joins her (κατὰ τὸ τέλος ἐξισοῦται πάλιν αὐτῇ καὶ συνάπτεται) [...] the woman who bears widowhood easily often exer-

<sup>33</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *De virginitate* XI 2, SCh 125, p. 126, tr. S.R. Shore, *John Chrysostom: On virginity, Against remarriage*, p. 15.

cises self-control even while her husband lives; but she who endures the state grievously is ready to live not with two or three men only but with several<sup>34</sup>.

According to the cited fragments a certain hierarchy can be created. The highest place in this hierarchy would belong to blessed spirits, then to virgins who can imitate them, then widows who can imitate virgins, until we finally come to married people. This vertical structure seems quite transparent<sup>35</sup>, but with one serious caveat. The presented hierarchy concerns only the existential dimension. It cannot explain the values of individual states solely on the basis of their existence. In other words, to Chrysostom “virginity” (or in fact the angelic state) becomes a value only if the virgin actualizes it through her deeds. That is why the “ideal” widow can even surpass the virgin, especially “when the virgin has clung to worldly things”<sup>36</sup> and has wasted the greater potentiality that her condition has given her.

Practising virtue is what John sees as the primary goal. For this reason, he will be more interested in presenting his teaching to young widows<sup>37</sup> – that is those who still have a chance to practise the virtues, rather than “those who have grown old”<sup>38</sup>. Therefore, the question of a widow’s remarriage is not Chrysostom’s main concern. Although, when he writes

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<sup>34</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *De non iterando coniugio* II, ed. B. Grillet – G.H. Ettliger, SCH 138, Paris 1968, p. 166, 168, tr. S.R. Shore, *John Chrysostom: On virginity, Against remarriage*, p. 131.

<sup>35</sup> For more detailed description of this structure, see Konieczko, *Znaczenie małżeńskiej jedności w nauczaniu św. Jana Chryzostoma*, p. 84.

<sup>36</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *De non iterando coniugio* VI, tr. Shore, p. 145.

<sup>37</sup> This is a large discrepancy, and in fact opposed to what 1 Timothy says about accepting only older and tested widows, not the young ones (1Tim 5:11). Chrysostom tries to explain the difference between his and St Paul’s understanding by the fact that Paul required specific works from a widow. That she “has shown hospitality, washed the saints’ feet, helped the afflicted, and devoted herself to doing good in every way” (1Tim 5:10), because he “intended to entrust her with a sacred and honourable cause”, see Johannes Chrysostomus, *Ad viduam iunioem*, ed. B. Grillet – G.H. Ettliger, SCH 138, Paris 1968, p. 122 (own translation). Therefore, what Paul is interested in, according to Chrysostom, is to show evidence of practicing virtue. Chrysostom’s words, however, do not in any way explain the discrepancy in the understanding of the age limit when accepting the profession of widowhood, except that Chrysostom expects younger widows to be able to practice virtue, whereas Paul does not.

<sup>38</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *De non iterando coniugio* VI, tr. Shore, p. 142.

about widows, he clearly has in mind only a once-married widow who has professed her widowhood. John simply honours the old ideal of *univira* – a once married widow. A widow's remarriage is understandable and tolerated, but it will never be in accordance with the Scriptures nor with the ideals of absolute monogamy<sup>39</sup>. According to John it is rather a sign of certain human weakness<sup>40</sup>.

The source of widowhood will not be to substitute a virginity but to follow a virgin's behaviour. It is true that a widow, unlike a wife, can equal a virgin if certain requirements are met (she cannot remarry and she "should" be widowed in her youth), but the key is to practise chastity (τῆς ἀγνεΐας)<sup>41</sup>.

Chrysostom's anthropological vertical hierarchy, although clear and most likely philosophical in origin, is almost entirely related to the behaviour of a widow. It would be possible to stop at this argumentation if not for his other words in *Ad viduam iunioem*:

Therefore, having put aside weeping and lamentation, hold yourself fast to the same way of living, and even [in a] much more accurate [way]<sup>42</sup>, so that when you arrive more quickly to the equal virtue as he did, you may dwell in the same tent with him and be reunited with him again for infinite ages in the next world – not through this bond of mar-

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<sup>39</sup> The term *univira* might have its Greek equivalent – μόνανδρος – but its meaning is understood differently by scholars. For instance, according to Sarah Pomeroy (*Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*, New York 1995, p. 161) this ideal was rigidly Roman with no counterpart in Greece. See also I. Kajanto, *On Divorce Among the Common People of Rome*, REL 47bis (1969) p. 112 and J.B. Frey, *La signification des termes MONANΔΡΟΣ et Univira*, RSR 20 (1930) p. 48-60; M. Lightman – W. Zeisel, *Univira: An Example of Continuity and Change in Roman Society*, ChH 46/1 (1977) p. 22-24; B.W. Winter, *Roman Wives, Roman Widows: The Appearance of New Women and the Pauline Communities*, Cambridge 2003, p. 19.

<sup>40</sup> For Chrysostom there is an interesting correlation between the duration of grief and the subsequent desire to remarry. In his opinion the widow "who endures the state grievously is ready to live not with two or three men only but with several" (Johannes Chrysostomus, *De non iterando coniugio* II, tr. Shore, p. 131).

<sup>41</sup> See Johannes Chrysostomus, *De non iterando coniugio* VI, ed. B. Grillet – G.H. Ettlinger, SCh 138, Paris 1968, p. 196.

<sup>42</sup> Chrysostom advises to never leave oneself unchallenged. It is true that some states, such as virginity, have an advantage over the others and anyone can surpass others in virtue if they work hard. Cf. Johannes Chrysostomus, *De non iterando coniugio* VI, SCh 138, p. 198.

riage, but through another [bond], a much better one. For this is only a close connection of bodies, but then there will be a unity of soul with soul more accurate (ψυχῆς ἔσται πρὸς ψυχὴν ἔνωσις ἀκριβεστέρα) and of a far more delightful and of a far better [kind]<sup>43</sup>.

As we can see, there is another goal in the widow's life, other than just practising virtue – a future unity with her departed spouse. In fact, Chrysostom underlines this even more, because this heavenly unity of the spouses will be something more than the unity existing on earth. Chrysostom in this phrase does not only point to a future reunion. He suggests the existence of marital relation in heaven.

Contrary to appearances, the thought we have just described is not accidental and is part of a bigger structure. It results directly from how Chrysostom perceives marriage and its value – through St Paul's "head body" metaphor. Here we get to the second source of widowhood – its essential level. If the aforementioned metaphor reflects the divine order, which is the connection between God the Father and his Son, then each marital relationship should resemble this unity. For instance, he says

One woman continued to cling to her husband as if he truly were her own flesh. She did not forget the head was given to her once for all time. The other woman did not consider either the first or the second husband to be the same as her own flesh; for her first husband was cast out (ἐκβέβληται) by the second, and the second by the first. She could neither remember the first husband well since she devoted herself to another after him, nor will she regard the second with the proper tender love since her thoughts are divided between him and her departed husband<sup>44</sup>.

In Chrysostom's opinion the remarriage of a widow creates conflict because "the husband-head" can be given truly only once and for a lifetime (ἄπαξ). Hence a remarried widow not only does not establish a lasting bodily connection with her second husband, but also defiles her previous connection with her first husband. For John the carnal union of spouses has a permanent character.

Eternity of the marriage union derives directly from the unity of the divine persons. It is this unity and its existence in the world that lies un-

<sup>43</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *Ad viduam iuniorem*, SCh 138, p. 158 (own translation).

<sup>44</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *De non iterando coniugio* II, tr. Shore, p. 132.



der a certain order that cannot be disturbed. Therefore, remarriage for Chrysostom, although not a sin<sup>45</sup>, will be a great violation because it violates the divine order. Marriage is not just a temporal and social invention. It reflects the order of unity between divine hypostases. Therefore, it participates in some unique way in the spouses' welfare, which is not possible for a virgin. A widow, provided she remains unmarried, can continue to be faithful to her deceased husband. The death of a spouse does not automatically mean a break in the bodily relationship with him. To assume such an end would deny the existence of unity between the invisible Father and the visible Son, described in 1Cor 11:3. Chrysostom refers to the existence of that order:

[...] there are not two bodies but one; he the head, she the body. And how says he elsewhere "and the Head of Christ is God?" (1Cor 11:3). This I too say, that as we are one body (ὅτι ὡσπερ ἐν σῶμα ἡμεῖς), so also are Christ and the Father (are) One (οὕτω καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς καὶ ὁ Πατὴρ ἓν). And thus then is the Father also found to be our Head (κεφαλὴ). He sets down two patterns (Δύο τίθησιν ὑποδείγματα), that of the body and that of Christ (τὸ τοῦ σώματος, καὶ τὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ)<sup>46</sup>.

According to John God the Father gave us two patterns (ὑποδείγματα) of unity, hence there are two exemplifications of the formula of unity between the Father and his Son in our world. One of the patterns is Christ himself (ὑποδείγμα τὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ) with His inseparable connection with the Church. The other one is the pattern of the body (ὑποδείγμα τὸ τοῦ σώματος) which refers to the conjunction of male and female.

The essential dimension of widowhood originates directly from ontology. By that means, one can happily conclude that for John the source of widowhood is not the tragedy associated with someone's death, but the marriage bond, and more specifically the moment of its conclusion. Even more can be said, because technically marital unity is the indirect source of widowhood, whereas the direct source is ultimately its archetype – divine unity.

<sup>45</sup> For some Church Fathers, like Athenagoras, remarriage is a sin. He would call them hidden adulterers, see Athenagoras, *Legatio*, in: *Legatio and De Resurrectione*, ed. W.R. Schoedel, Oxford 1972, p. 80-81.

<sup>46</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia in epistulam ad Ephesios* 20, PG 62, 140 (own translation).

#### 4. Holistic approach

Chrysostom's perspective on marital oneness includes all important aspects of marital life, and he seems to attach no decisive importance to any of them. It is also unlikely that John sees marriage in a dualistic view where earthly or "carnal" marriage union opposes the future one. Although he gives preference to the future unity of marriage in heaven, all components of the marriage union are meaningful to him. This is because they form the unity of marriage, which will be revealed in fullness in the afterlife, and that should be the goal of marriage.

The dualistic point of view, where the body opposes the spirit or vice versa, is hardly possible due to the phrase "the closeness of the union" (τὴν ἀκριβῆ ἔνωσιν) used by Chrysostom. In his opinion, the act of getting married does not automatically imply the unity of spirit or souls. This is due to John's perception of Paul's words:

A man shall leave, he (Paul) says, his father and mother. Behold, this then is from without. But he does not say, and shall dwell with, but shall cleave unto, thus showing the closeness of the union (τὴν ἀκριβῆ ἔνωσιν), and the fervent love. Nay, he is not content with this, but further by what he adds, he explains the subjection in such a way as that the two appear no longer two. He does not say, one spirit (Εἰς πνεῦμα), he does not say, one soul (Εἰς ψυχὴν) (for that is manifest, and is possible to any one), but so as to be one flesh. She is a second authority, possessing indeed an authority, and a considerable equality of dignity (ἀρχὴν ἔχουσα καὶ πολλὴν τὴν ὁμοτιμίαν); but at the same time the husband has somewhat of superiority<sup>47</sup>.

For Chrysostom, Paul's wording was not accidental. This is because married people are in a process where unity of bodies is the starting point and unity in heaven the ending. Therefore, the widow is living out a natural process in which she seeks to reunite with her spouse and which should not be annulled or terminated.

Owing to the introduction of the ontological factor, we can now finally bring all the factors together. Clearly there are present both the essential and existential orders of widowhood in Chrysostom's teaching together

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<sup>47</sup> Johannes Chrysostomus, *Homilia in epistulam ad Ephesios* 20, PG 62, 142, tr. A. Gross, *Homily XX on the Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 1/13, ed. Ph. Schaff, p. 148.

with his philosophical structure. Widowhood cannot be reduced only to the existential level as a poor relative of virginity. From his perspective, widowhood is inherent in human nature and is an integral part of marriage. The future unity of the spouses, which is possible through marriage, must be the goal of the Christian lives of the spouses, for it is the realisation of the pattern of unity received from God.

### **The Basis of John Chrysostom's Teaching on Widowhood**

(summary)

The paper presents the basis of John Chrysostom's teaching on widowhood. The author analyses the most important factors that contributed to the shaping of John's teaching aimed at widows. The first factor was his personal experience, such as the relationship with his mother or with befriended widows. The second factor was being under a strong influence of St. Paul's teachings, especially the Letter to the Ephesians and the First Letter to the Corinthians. The last factor was a consequence of John's distinction between the existential and essential sources of widowhood. The existential sources, i.e. mainly the imitation of virginity, are the result of John's understanding of anthropology, while the essential sources are rooted in the unity of divine hypostases and arise from his view on Christian marriage. Chrysostom's concept of widowhood takes on a coherent vertical structure in which one can see a trace of the influence of philosophy and education which he received.

**Keywords:** St. John Chrysostom; widow; widowhood; marriage; remarriage; marital unity; "head-body" metaphor; St. Paul

### **Źródła nauczania Jana Chryzostoma o wdowieństwie**

(streszczenie)

Artykuł przedstawia genezę nauczania Jana Chryzostoma na temat wdowieństwa. Autor analizuje w nim najważniejsze czynniki, które wpłynęły na kształt nauki Ojca Kościoła skierowanej do wdów. Pierwszym czynnikiem było jego osobiste doświadczenie, czyli relacje z matką oraz z wdowami, którymi się zajmował lub z którymi się przyjaźnił. Drugim był silny wpływ nauczania św. Pawła, szczególnie w Liście do Efezjan i w Pierwszym Liście do Koryntian. Ostatni czynnik był konsekwencją dokonanego przez Jana Chryzostoma rozróżnienia między egzystencjalnymi i esencjalnymi źródłami wdowieństwa. Źródła egzystencjalne, tj. głównie naśladowanie dziewictwa, są wynikiem spojrzenia Ojca Kościoła na antropologię, źródła esencjalne natomiast są zakorzenione w jedności boskich hipostaz i wynikają z poglądu Jana Chryzostoma na chrześcijańskie małżeństwo. Jego koncepcja dotycząca wdowieństwa przybiera spójną wertykalną strukturę, w której można dostrzec ślad wpływów filozofii i wykształcenia, jakie otrzymał.

**Słowa kluczowe:** św. Jan Chryzostom; wdowa; wdowieństwo; małżeństwo; ponowne małżeństwo; jedność małżeńska; metafora „głowa – ciało”; św. Paweł

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