

ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM: AGAINST INDECENCY IN THE THEATER

A grievous conflict is at hand, and against the powers unseen is our wrestling; against the spiritual wickedness our fight, “against principalities, against powers” our warfare (Eph 6:12). And it is well for us, if when we are earnest, sober, and thoroughly awakened, we can be able to sustain that savage attack. But if we are laughing and sporting, and always taking things easily, even before the conflict, we shall be overthrown by our own negligence.

It does not become us, then, to be continually laughing, dissolute, and luxurious, but it belongs to those upon the stage, the harlot women, the men that are trimmed for this intent, parasites, and flatterers; not them that are called unto heaven, not them that are enrolled into the city above, not them that bear spiritual arms, but them that are enlisted on the devil’s side. For it is he, yes, it is he, that even made the thing an art, that he might weaken Christ’s soldiers, and soften the nerves of their zeal. For this cause he also built theaters in the cities, and having trained those buffoons, by their pernicious influence he causes that kind of pestilence to light upon the whole city, persuading men to follow those things which Paul bade us flee, “foolish talking and jesting” (Eph 5:4).

And what is yet more grievous than these things is the subject of the laughter. For when they that act those absurd things utter any word of blasphemy or filthiness, then many among the more thoughtless laugh and are pleased, applauding in them what they ought to stone them for; and drawing down on their own heads by this amusement the furnace of fire. For they who praise the utterers of such words, it is these above all who induce men so to speak; wherefore they must be more justly accountable for the penalty allotted to these things. For were there no one to be a spectator in such cases, neither would there be one to act; but when they see you forsaking your workshops, your crafts, your income, and in short everything, for the sake of continuing there, they derive hence a greater forwardness, and exert a greater diligence about these things.

And this I say, not freeing them from reproof, but that you may learn that it is you chiefly who supply the principle and root of such lawlessness; you who consume your whole day on these matters, and profanely exhibit the sacred things of marriage, and make an open mock of the great mystery. For not even he who acts these things is so much the offender, as you are sitting before him; you who bid him make a play on these things, or rather who not only bid him, but are even zealous about it, taking

delight, laughing, and praising what is done, and in every way gaining strength for such workshops of the devil.

Tell me, then, with what eyes will you after this look upon your wife at home, having seen her insulted there? ... Do not tell me that what is done is acting, for this acting has made many adulterers, and subverted many families. And it is for this most especially that I grieve, that what is done does not so much as seem evil, but there is even applause and clamor, and much laughter, at commission of so foul adultery.

What say you? That what is done is acting? Why, for this selfsame reason they must be worthy of ten thousand deaths, that what things all laws command men to flee, they have taken pains to imitate. **For if the thing itself be bad, the imitation thereof also is bad.** And I do not yet say how many adulterers they make who act these scenes of adultery, how they render the spectators of such things bold and shameless; for nothing is more full of whoredom and boldness than an eye that endures to look at such things.

And you in a marketplace would not choose to see [such things], or rather not even in a house, but call such a thing an outrage. And go you up into the theater, to insult the common nature of men and women, and disgrace your own eyes? ... Or is it that when we are apart, then such a thing is outrageous, but when we are assembled and all sitting together, it is no longer equally shameful? No, this is absurdity and a disgrace, and words of the utmost madness; and it were better to besmear the eyes all over with mud and mire than to be a spectator of such a transgression. For surely mire is not so much a hurt to an eye, as an unchaste sight...

Now if you grieve at hearing these things, I thank you much, for “who is he who makes me glad but the one who is made sorrowful by me?” (2 Cor 2:2). Do not then ever cease to grieve and be vexed for them, for the sorrow that comes of such things will be to you a beginning of a change for the better. For this cause I also have made my language the stronger, that by cutting deeper I might free you from the venom of them that intoxicate you; that I might bring you back to a pure health of soul, which God grant we may all enjoy by all means, and attain unto the rewards laid up for these good deeds, by the grace and love towards man of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

(Commentary on Matthew 2)