

John Chrysostom on Power and the Episcopacy in the Late Fourth Century

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This paper explores John Chrysostom's understanding of the power of bishops. In particular, it argues that Chrysostom's conception of the episcopacy was rooted in classical Greco-Roman political and philosophic theories of ruling and power, especially the virtues associated with "the good king." The bishop acquired this power by means of asceticism, which Chrysostom consistently referred to as the practice of philosophy. In an important treatise, *A Comparison Between a King and a Monk*, Chrysostom argued that the ascetic was more powerful than the king precisely because he possessed the classical virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, justice, philanthropy and beneficence to a degree greater than even the best of kings. Because of this the monk had more power than the earthly ruler, and was of greater benefit to people than rulers. Later in his career Chrysostom argued that a bishop possessed the philosophic temperament of the monk to a degree even greater than the recluse both because the bishop was himself a monk and because he lived and worked in the turbulent world of civic and imperial politics. Because his temptations were greater than the ascetic recluse, the bishop's *askesis* had to be superior, a point that endowed the bishop with even more power than the monk. To this philosophic temperament the bishop added the power of persuasion (rhetoric). In so doing, the bishop was able to do what earthly rulers strived for, but could seldom attain: to rule over *willing* subjects. Chrysostom's treatise *On the Priesthood* shows him conceiving the episcopacy along these very lines. In both its form and content, *On the Priesthood* is a highly sophisticated argument for the power of the bishop. The asceticism of the bishop was not to divorce him from political life, but to ensure he could act within it with the appropriate philosophic disposition, and therefore exhibit true leadership and power. His rhetorical training insured he could convince others of the truth without need of coercive force. In order to show how a bishop could display this power for the good of the people, the paper concludes by citing two of Chrysostom's *Homilies on the Statues* (*Hom.* 3 and 21), which depict a rather famous encounter between Bishop Flavian of Antioch and the Emperor Theodosius in the aftermath of the riots in Antioch in 387. The encounter, as Chrysostom describes it, illustrates how the bishop's powers supersede the emperor's.