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“Pleasing to the eye”: The problem of physical beauty and beautification in the theology of Chrysostom

„Miłe dla oka”: zagadnienie piękna fizycznego i upiększania w teologii Chryzostoma

Abstract. “Pleasing to the eye” (Gen 3:6) – this is how Genesis describes the forbidden fruit when Adam and Eve were trying to apologise for eating it, as, since the time of the first people, beauty, or that which is “pleasing to the eye”, has been admired. Christian Fathers, since the time of the early Church, came up against the problem of beauty, as, although the human body was unquestionably beautiful, the question of the right attitude towards it was of particular concern to them. One of these Fathers was the most prolific Eastern Christian thinker and writer, St. John Chrysostom. As Chrysostom, drawing mainly from the Bible, saw, beauty, especially that of the human body, should be appreciated and even glorified. However, paradoxically one could say, physical beautification is morally disapproved. How is it possible, then, that the beauty of the body is desired, while its beautification should be condemned? That is the problem this work deals with.

Streszczenie. „Miły dla oka” (Rdz 3,6) – tak Księga Rodzaju opisuje zakazany owoc, gdy Adam i Ewa próbowali przeprosić za jego zjedzenie, ponieważ od czasów pierwszych ludzi piękno, czyli to, co jest „miłe dla oka”, było podziwiane. Już od czasów pierwotnego Kościoła, Ojcowie Kościoła stykali się z problemem piękna, gdyż chociaż ciało ludzkie było uznawane za bezsprzecznie piękne, to kwestia właściwego stosunku do niego wydawała się dla nich szczególnie ważna. Jednym z tych Ojców był najbardziej płodny myśliciel i pisarz wschodniochrześcijański, św. Jan Chryzostom. Chryzostom, czerpiąc głównie z Biblii, zauważył, że piękno ciała ludzkiego, należy doceniać, a nawet wychwalać. Jednak paradoksalnie można by powiedzieć, że fizyczne upiększanie było moralnie potępiane. Jak to więc możliwe, że pożąda się piękna ciała, a potępia się jego upiększanie? Właśnie temu problemowi poświęcony jest niniejszy tekst.

Keywords: John Chrysostom, beauty, beautification, human body, Eastern Christianity.

Słowa kluczowe: Jan Chryzostom, piękno, upiększanie, ciało ludzkie, chrześcijaństwo wschodnie.

1. The Eastern Church's concept of beauty

Does it derive from Satan or God? What should be our proper relationship with it? Should we embrace it or does it pertain to those unworthy, shallow things that Christians should turn down? These were some of the questions that the first Christian thinkers, reading the Scripture, had to face, in regard to the beauty of the body, as early Christians could not overlook the fact that, according to Genesis, man is made in the image of God; yet, Isaiah's words, "He had no beauty or majesty" (Is 53:2), were often taken to be "a repudiation of physical beauty in Christ" (Beardsley 1975, 90).

However, for Eastern Christianity, in particular, which largely inherited its concepts and views of beauty from the ancient Greek philosophers, notably Plato and Pythagoras, the beauty of humans, nature, and creation as a whole has generally been highly appreciated. For the Orthodox tradition, creation is understood aesthetically and not mechanically, or else, artistically and not scientifically, as Lynn White articulated (White 1967, 1206), while Orthodox theology begins in *philokalia*, "the love of beauty", therefore, one could say that without the experience of beauty, there is no Orthodox theology (Bentley Hart 2004, 30). According to Orthodoxy, the creation of the world shows evolutionary order, harmony, and extreme beauty and this is why it was named *cosmos*, which is the ancient Greek word for jewel (Vantsos 1997, 14). Beauty, in the thought of Greek Fathers, besides an ontological concept, became "an ethical and social construct, with a profundity that it has, perhaps, lacked within other systems where aesthetics tended for the most part to remain an accidental and peripheral category" (McGuckin 2013, 36).

In addition, for the majority of Greek Fathers, beauty is heavily associated with deification (*theosis*). In St. Gregory the Theologian's thought, for instance, beauty enlightens the eyes of the human intellect, while this enlightenment, in turn, produces doxology, and finally, doxology leads the human intellect to deification (McGuckin 2013, 40). However, the beauty of the body is the beauty most associated with deification, as it helps Christians in their effort to reach God and their journey toward eternal salvation and fulfilment. As St. Basil the Great holds, we can conceive the infinite God, who is more than beautiful (*yperkalon*), through examination and appreciation of the greatness of our perceptible and circumscribed bodies.¹ These bodies were initially created perfect, both in inner

¹ Basil the Great, *Nine Homilies on Hexaemeron*, 1.11, PG 29, 28 (The English translations of the works of the Greek Fathers, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Advent

and outer beauty, and, in fact, this original beauty has a strong moral dimension, as the prelapsarian body was not just beautiful *and* sinless, but beautiful *because* it was sinless. For the Eastern Christian tradition, bodily beauty is related to human nature and not to free choice and will; that is, humans do not become beautiful but are born beautiful. This very beauty and excellence of the original body is exactly the reason why beautification is considered to be futile and ethically reprehensible. After all, how can one improve and beautify something made directly by the perfect God? Would not any such attempt be an insult to Him?

Nevertheless, this is not absolute, since the enhancement and embellishment of creation are not inherently evil, "for we are co-workers in God's service" (1 Cor 3:9). What is troubling, therefore, is not beautification per se, but the apotheosis of external beauty and the obsession of humans to beautify their bodies which is accompanied by indifference to their souls and leads to lust and vanity. Additionally, often, as in the case of the forbidden fruit, external beauty can be deceiving and a person's obsession with it may lead to internal "ugliness" and sin. This is exactly the reason why, although beauty, especially that of the body, is not only appreciated but even glorified, the majority of Church Fathers maintained a sceptical or even hostile stance towards body beautification.² Besides, for God, external beauty is frivolous and insignificant, as "The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (Sam 16:7).

Perhaps the most actively confronted with the subject, amongst these Fathers, was the Antiochene preacher, writer, hermit, and later archbishop of Constantinople, St. John Chrysostom, one of the three hierarchs of the Eastern Christian Church. John was, undoubtedly, the most gifted preacher of his time (Brown 2008, 306) and one of the most prolific Christian writers, as more than 1000 of his original works are extant today (Mayer 2015, 141). He dealt with a huge range of issues, from the governance of the Church to the religious cultivation of the faithful. Regarding the latter, his aim was the spiritual guidance of the Christians of his time and, in this endeavour, one of the many issues he faced was bodily beauty and beautification.

website (<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/>). They also include the original source from *Patrologia Graeca* (PG).

² St. Clement of Alexandria, for instance, in his highly influential *Instructor*, very early spoke explicitly of the true beauty and against excessive physical beatification and adornment. See Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, 3, PG 8, 554–684.

2. "The body is God's work"

Before examining John's views on the subject, a brief presentation of his attitude toward the human body is needed. According to several ancient Greek philosophers, especially Plato, God, in order to punish the soul, imprisoned it in the body; therefore, the salvation of the human soul was directly related to its release from the human body and its disengagement from any carnal function and desire (Vlahos 2002, 9–10). These views influenced the early Christian world since, for some early Christian thinkers, such as Origen,³ bodies were a punishment for sin and the love of God required the suffering of the body and the severance of any bond with it. This was the prevailing understanding, concerning the human body, within the Christian environment in which Chrysostom emerged and began to unveil his God-inspired views.

According to Chrysostom, these conceptions of the body are not legitimate, as spiritual life does not impose the condemnation of the flesh, but the renunciation of sin that springs from carnal desires. Christians should neither abhor their bodies nor degrade them, since the renewal and fulfilment in Christ are not limited only to the immaterial soul, but also to the material body. "Do you not see", he asks in his commentary on Paul's Epistle to Galatians, "that the ministry of the flesh produces for us a thousand benefits?"; while, regarding the unity and correlation between body and soul, he adds, "For my part, I perceive by their acts that they are not only not contrary but closely accordant and attached one to another."⁴ John, therefore, defends the body and distinguishes it from fleshly desires, while, regarding the introduction of sin and perishability and again defending the body, he declares, "You should not wish to eliminate the flesh, but the decay, not the body, but death. The body is one thing and death is another, the flesh is one thing and decay is another. Of course, the body is perishable, but the body is not decay; and the body is mortal, but the body is not death. The body is God's work, but corrosion and death were introduced by sin."⁵ For John, the human body, created in God's image, is not only beautiful but even perfect

³ See Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 15, PG 11, 584; *An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, First Principles: Book IV, Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily XXVII on Numbers*, trans. Rowan Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 52.

⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Galatians*, 5, PG 61, 671–72.

⁵ John Chrysostom, *On the Resurrection of the Dead*, PG 50, 420–32 (translated by the author).

and this is why all the perceptions against it, Christian and not, are condemned. Evil comes, first and foremost, from the inside and not from the body, which is affected by the sinful soul and this is a key point for Chrysostom's understanding of sin. After all, it was the deceived souls of the protoplasts and not their bodies that made them ignore God's command and desire what they should not desire.

Chrysostom, therefore, honours the human body and does not abhor it. The perishability of the flesh as well as every bodily passion comes from human intervention, as God originally created the body perfect and imperishable. Moreover, the fact that it became mortal not only does not invalidate its divine origin but also, in reality, confirms it and reveals the wisdom of the Creator. For Chrysostom, death was beneficially bestowed, since, if sinful humans remained deathless, so would sin, while, in his phrase, "It was to make us better, more temperate and more compliant to him, which is the basis of complete salvation."⁶ God allowed the human body to decay, not, of course, because He hates people, but instead in order to help them realise their mortal nature. Even more, by allowing His own Son to die, He emphatically revealed death so that humans can realise and comprehend the perishability of the body, ceasing to worship it. Hence, thereby, God educates humans and prevents them from worshipping their flesh, committing the sin of idolatry.⁷

3. Chrysostom on beautification

As already mentioned, in the beginning, the human body was created sinless and beautiful. This original beauty, inward and outward, is particularly emphasised in John's work *On Changing Names*: "he (man) was very beautiful in his body, and he shone forth like a golden statue."⁸ This very beauty is the reason why the Holy Father rejects physical beautification, against which he, envisaging the glory of the Kingdom of Heaven, counter-poses the beauty of the soul, characteristically saying,

⁶ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Hannah*, 1.2, PG 54, 635; *Old Testament Homilies, Vol. 1: Homilies on Hannah, David and Soul*, trans. Robert Charles Hill (Brookline, Massachusetts: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2003), 70.

⁷ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Statues*, 11.13, PG 49, 121–22.

⁸ John Chrysostom, *On Changing Names*, 2.4, PG 51, 129–30 (translated by the author).

You women, that wear gold [...] at last, though late, lay aside the disease of the desire for golden ornaments [...] change the ornaments which you wear, and clothe yourselves instead with almsgiving. What is the use, I pray you, of these precious stones, and of the garments spangled with gold? 'My soul,' you say, 'is glad, and is pleased with these things.' I asked you the profit, but you tell me the hurt. For nothing is worse than being taken up with these things, and delighting in them, and being riveted to them.⁹

As Jesus Himself said, His and His Father's commands lead to eternal life (Jn 12:50) and, for John, there is only one way to achieve this: by turning beauty inwards. Turning beauty and beautification inwards, a double benefit will be achieved, as both genders will be benefited; women will become virtuous and chaste, while men will be freed from lust.¹⁰

In fact, the comparison between the embellishment of the flesh and that of the soul, the outer and the inner beauty, is dominant in John's theology. As he saw, physical beauty is nothing more than arteries, humours, veins, and flesh, while the beauty of the soul, which is eternal and never withers, is much more appealing (De Wet 2016, 517). Interpreting Paul's teaching on sexual immorality in his First Letter to Corinthians, John articulates that the one and true embellishment is achieved only by persistent and arduous struggles to find the one and only truth, that is, God. Conversely, the beautification of the body is carried out in synergy with the Devil, since it is performed for the purpose of adultery and prostitution.¹¹ And as that is the purpose of this kind of beautification, it could not obviously be done in cooperation with God, but with the Devil, who is the source of all evil and sin. Conversely, the excessive concern for the alteration and enhancement of our bodies and the constant effort to make them more attractive is a disease and an insult to God. In addition, Chrysostom asks, "For why do you add your own embellishments to the work which God made? Is not His workmanship sufficient for you? Or do you endeavor to add grace to it, as if forsooth you were the better artist? It is not for yourself, but to attract crowds of lovers, that you thus adornest your person, and insultest your Creator [...]. Do not therefore make Him so ill a return, but requite Him with modesty and chastity."¹²

⁹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, 89.3, PG 58, 785–88.

¹⁰ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, 69.3, PG 59, 380–82.

¹¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Corinthians*, 18.1, PG 61, 148.

¹² John Chrysostom, *Homilies on First Timothy*, 4, PG 62, 524–26.

Trying to make ourselves more beautiful is not only unreasonable but also has the opposite effect; it leads to ugliness, since it is impossible to prettify something that God Himself created. John also urges virgins not to imitate the actions of prostitutes, losing their modesty, since they are often influenced and imitate lustful women, trying to beautify their bodies,¹³ while, in the same context, he stresses,

Hereafter let there be no concern for external embellishments and expensive clothes, but let all your zeal be directed to making your souls comely, that they may shine forth with a brighter beauty. Pay no attention to garments made from the silkworms threads, nor to necklaces of gold. Do deeds worthy of your profession [...] and adorn yourself with good deeds [...] I wish you women to abstain not only from other hurtful practices, but also from the habit of painting your faces and adding to them, as if the workmanship were defective. By doing so you insult the Workman. For what are you trying to do, woman? By using rouge and eye shadow you cannot add to your natural beauty nor change your natural ugliness, can you? These add nothing to your beauty of face, but they will destroy the beauty of your soul.¹⁴

Continuing to address women, since, at the time, it was they who primarily engaged in beautification practices, John castigates their usual excuse that they do it to please men, as they should want to be desired for their inner beauty. Although so many people are hungry and even Christ Himself is starving, some women still waste their wealth to prettify their bodies, "a sin, which there is absolutely no excuse for."¹⁵ Whatever God created is good and there is no room for interferences and corrections since any such effort can only bring the opposite results. "Do you wish to appear beautiful?" he asks, "This shows you uncomely. Do you wish to please your husband? This rather grieves him; and causes not him only, but strangers also, to become your accusers. Would you appear young? This will quickly bring you to old age. Would you wish to array yourself honorably? This makes you to be ashamed."¹⁶

¹³ Chrysostom, *First Timothy*, 8, PG 62, 541–44

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, *The First Instruction Addressed to Those About to be Baptised*, 37–38, PG 49, 237–38 (translated by the author).

¹⁵ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Psalms*, PG 55, 507–508 (translated by the author).

¹⁶ John Chrysostom, *Matthew*, 30.5, PG 57, 369–70.

Chrysostom, as a great teacher, was intensely interested in the proper education of youth and could not ignore the negative effects that beautification had on them. He urges parents to protect their children from the terrible effects of beautification and to guide them in the opposite direction, which will make them great at the things that really matter. Especially the mothers of young girls are encouraged to guide their young daughters in this direction and prevent them from the passion of physical beautification since, in Chrysostom's view, adornment is a feature of prostitutes and young girls should abstain from it. Also, golden jewels have often been the cause of many evils and myriad quarrels within the household and gave birth to envy, malice, and hatred, while they lead to the sin of vainglory, the fruits of which John calls "ashes," "dust," "fire," and "smoke" (Laistner 1967, 90).¹⁷ Thus, besides prostitution, ornaments lead to conflicts, destroying the love, peace, and serenity of the family. Furthermore, if young girls grow up becoming accustomed to loving earrings, they will end up becoming "a sore vexation to her bridegroom and a greater burden to him than the tax collectors"¹⁸, while, even more, for boys, this habit could be catastrophic. For this reason, John suggests that Law should be stricter for them, forbidding any young man to be present in the theatre, so as to "not suffer utter corruption through his ears and eyes."¹⁹

Remembering Paul again, the Holy Father, in another of his speeches, makes a comparison between the bonds, which the Apostle was imprisoned with, and the ornamental jewels, since, on his flesh, Paul gladly carried all his pains and weaknesses, the "thorns" (2 Cor 12:7), and "the marks of the Lord Jesus" (Gal 6:17), while his body was in chains for the "mystery of Christ" (Col 4:3). Exactly these chains, which are so much brighter than jewels, since they are respected not by humans, but by angels, Chrysostom urges women to envy. These shackles prettify the soul, while the jewels grieve it and whoever wears the latter, is full of arrogance, while whoever wears the former, has been freed from all passion. In fact, in the effort made by women to attract the attention of others by adorning their bodies, Chrysostom assures that the queen herself, who wears every type of gold jewellery, would no longer attract anyone, compared to Paul. But whether, at the same time that Paul was bound, she happened to enter the

¹⁷ John Chrysostom, *Address on Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring Up Their Children*, PG 63, 670.

¹⁸ Chrysostom, *Vainglory*, 673; Laistner, 94.

¹⁹ Chrysostom, *Vainglory*, 676; Laistner, 110.

church, everyone would turn their eyes from her to him; because to see a man greater than humans, an angel on earth, is so much more wonderful than to see an adorned woman.²⁰

Moreover, Chrysostom, after emphasising that women, through beautification, erroneously try to correct God's creation, advises them, if they want to "put on the new self" (Eph 4:24), as Paul puts it, to "wear" mercy, charity, wisdom, and humility. These ornaments are worth more than all the gold in the world and can make every woman look gorgeous. He also mentions that when a woman is physically adorned, she becomes filthier than naked women, just like Eve, who, when naked, was decorous because she was adorned with the grace of God, but when she covered her body, she became filthy, because she wore the "garment of debauchery." Women are also advised, if they want to please their husbands, to do it exclusively inside their homes, because, if they go around the church or the market decorated, other men will desire them, displeasing their own men.²¹

In addition, referring to the usual efforts of women to look younger, he underlines that, although the beauty of the body deteriorates by disease and senility and is eventually extinguished by death, the beauty of the soul remains flourishing, as nothing can destroy it. Besides, the beauty of the body often leads to impurity, while that of the soul is desired by God Himself. Thus, to be loved and liked by God, this very beauty we must seek and cultivate. It is Chrysostom's firm position that physical beautification decreases beauty and increases ugliness. For John, brilliant bodies and beautiful faces, if beautified more with external means, lose the glory of their beauty because they share it with cosmetics; on the contrary, if one does not add anything decorative to them, they alone will deserve all the praise and admiration for their beauty. This is exactly what happens with the brilliant soul, in which, if we bring something external, such as wealth or power, the glory is shared and the soul loses its brilliance; but if we free our soul from anything material and perishable, all its beauty will be apparent and its definite glory will shine.²²

Furthermore, although at first glance, the impression that he favours men and apportions full responsibility for beautification to women is given, this is not true. In one of his few, admittedly, references specifically to men and male beautification, John emphasises that if a man desires it, becomes petty, since it

²⁰ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Colossians*, 10, PG 62, 371–73.

²¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Ephesians*, 13, PG 62, 99.

²² John Chrysostom, *On Virginitly*, PG 48, 581 (translated by the author).

is worthless, greedy, as its care requires large expenses, therefore large income as well, misanthropist, caring about ornaments instead of his hungry neighbour, and arrogant, seeking the glory through the trivial. He also criticises some young men who brag about their clothes, ornaments, and hair, which are works of a foreign craftsman, more than the general who brags about the achievements of his army.²³

As already mentioned, the beauty of the human body is highly connected with deification. On the other hand, bodily beautification often distracts humans from this destination. The search for physical beauty, for Chrysostom, is considered futile and morally reprehensible, since only God constitutes the real and true beauty, the beauty that Basil the Great and, much later, Palamas called “archetypal.” He is the only source of beauty, which we can contemplate “with the opened eyes of our transfigured bodies.” (Evdokimov 1970, 21). Human beings, made in God’s image, are the first to depict this divine beauty. However, our fall effectuated our detachment from the source of true beauty and this is why, although we were created in the image of God, with the introduction of sin, human nature changed and became “ugly.” Thus, humans ought not to be obsessed with the earthly, material, and decaying fascinations that keep them enslaved, but instead use them as a means to reconnect with the supreme, divine beauty. If we know and perceive this beauty spiritually, we will understand how insignificant and abominable all the earthly and perishable things that we admire and love are. This is why, for Chrysostom, we should be undemanding and interested only in the very basics – namely food and clothing, while the concern for further bodily desires and embellishments leads to passions, such as vainglory, vanity, and egoism.²⁴ Even more, modesty and frugality in life liberate the heart, leave room for things of the highest value, and help humans maintain their spiritual unity and freedom. The beauty of life is experienced in simplicity and simplicity contains the restraint that contributes to the unification of human nature, body and soul. Any complex and difficult situation that arises in human life is a result of the human inability to perceive and embrace this very truth (Zisis 1997, 139).

Ultimately, the route to both death and glory, to both perfection and perishability, to both beauty and ugliness, begins from the inside out; just as the sinful soul affects and infects the body, so the pure and beautiful soul cleanses and beautifies the flesh. On the way to sin or virtue, the soul precedes. This is exactly

²³ John Chrysostom, *Matthew*, 49.7, PG 58, 502–504.

²⁴ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis*, PG 53, 348–50; Chrysostom 2001, 352–53.

why a "pleasing to the eye" human being has no moral value at all, without first adorning and beautifying his or her soul.

Conclusions

St. John Chrysostom is the most active and fruitful Eastern ecclesiastical Father. With his fiery language, he dealt with a huge range of issues and did not hesitate to criticise attitudes and actions, even of the political and ecclesiastical authorities of his time. The prolific Father, in his effort to spiritually guide the believers and to teach them the word of God, dealt, among other things, with the subject of physical beautification and, by presenting his views on the subject, his vivid interest in the human soul and its salvation from the passions that bodily beautification often causes, became clear. For Chrysostom, beauty comes directly from God, which is why it is glorified and why the beauty and grace of the human body, precisely because it was created by Him, are unquestionable.

On the other hand, the excessive concern for the adornment of our bodies and our efforts to make them more attractive are worthless, as the only beautification that humans should care for is that of the soul. The soul and not the flesh, he keeps repeating, must be adorned with charity, love, and mercy. The concern for the beautification of one's body, for John, stems mainly from vanity and vainglory, that is, the love for empty glory, which has no meaning and makes humans slaves to trivial things. As people care about nonsense, while many of their fellow human beings have nothing to eat, they are driven to greed, selfishness, and arrogance. The love of the flesh as well as the care for its embellishment derive from the Devil and do not please God, who desires souls to be beautiful and adorned instead.

Some of Chrysostom's presented ideas in this work may seem, especially in modern times, obsolete, outdated, strict, and even extreme. However, his interest in the salvation of the soul and his vast Christian background would not allow him to be lenient and conventional. Using the words of the Apostles and those of Jesus Himself, he revealed to the world the destructive effects that excessive care for the body and the entire material world, in general, can bring. His over-emphasis, at every given opportunity, on the need for the adornment and the beautification of the soul instead, is for the singular purpose of helping every human being reach salvation in Christ and theosis.

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