

Baptism as Spiritual Marriage in the Teaching of John Chrysostom

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John Chrysostom's rich legacy as a ministry includes baptismal catecheses in which he addresses catechumens as well as the newly baptized, instructing them on the most important truths of the faith and leaving them guidelines concerning the morality of Christian life. Up until now, only twelve baptismal catecheses have been found.¹ It has been noted that they originate from various years of Chrysostom's activity. In them, we do not find a clear division into pre-baptismal catecheses (which typically deal with doctrinal matters) and mystagogical ones (which are dedicated to the explanation of baptismal rites and the meaning of sacraments). In the following article, which is based on baptismal teachings, I would like to especially focus on the vision of the sacrament of baptism as spiritual marriage which we can find in John Chrysostom's baptismal teaching.

1. The Inscription of the Name

The very first of John Chrysostom's available catecheses broadly develops the vision of spiritual marriage to which the catechumens have been summoned:

This is a time for joy and gladness of the spirit. Behold, the days of our longing and love, the days of your spiritual marriage, are close at hand. To call what takes place today a marriage would be no blunder; not only could we call it a marriage but even a marvelous and most unusual kind of military enlistment.²

1 In my translation, I make use of Paul W. Harkins' translation of Chrysostom's *Baptismal Instructions* (New York 1963).

2 John Chrysostom, *The First Instruction*, 1, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, translated and annotated by P. W. Harkins, New York 1963, p. 23.

What is important is that for the author this marriage begins at the moment of the ceremonial enrollment into the list of catechumens, or at the moment one makes a decision to be baptized at the next Easter.³ An external expression of this intention was the rite of giving and inscribing one's name, which customarily took place at the beginning of Lent. It has been noted that although previously the catechumen's mere application to the catechumenate was enough, in the fourth century this was replaced with the rite of giving one's name.⁴ Candidates who wanted to be baptized came to the Church and, after the appropriate verification concerning their conversion and way of life, inscribed their names into a special book we do not know much about, during a special meeting.

Although Chrysostom does not provide us with a detailed description of this celebration, on the basis of references originating in his catecheses⁵ as well as the way in which he describes this event we can arrive at the conclusion that this was a very important rite in the Antioch milieu as well.

As confirmation, we can also use a description of the rite of the inscription of the name originating from the second of the great catechists from the Antioch milieu: Theodore of Mopsuestia. According to him, this rite was of such great significance to the formation of the catechumen that the person responsible for the inscription wrote the names of both the catechumen and of his or her witness into a special book during the celebration.⁶

The important role of witnesses to this event – godparents and sponsors – was obvious for Chrysostom as well; he himself describes them as “spiritual fathers”⁷ because of their responsibility for the spiritual development of catechumens which rests on them.

Thus, the inscription into the list of candidates for baptism begins a new phase in the life of the catechumen; Chrysostom compares it to entering into

3 Cf. John Chrysostom, *The First Instruction*, 2, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, op. cit., p. 23.

4 Cf. R. Murawski, *Historia katechezy*, part 1: *Katecheza w pierwszych wiekach*, Warszawa 2011, p. 296.

5 Cf. John Chrysostom, *The First Instruction*, 18, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, op. cit., p. 30; *The Second Instruction*, 1, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, op. cit., p. 43; *The Second Instruction*, 9, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, op. cit., p. 46.

6 Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Homilia XII*, 4, [in:] *Le omelie battesimali e mistagogiche di Teodoro di Mopsuestia*, a cura di F. Placida, Messina 2008, p. 152.

7 Cf. John Chrysostom, *The Second Instruction*, 15–16, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, op. cit., p. 49.

the sacrament of marriage. The comparison between the inscription and marriage in this case is not a novelty;⁸ another catechist from the fourth century, Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, speaks about this rite in a similar way in his *procatechesis*:

Already there is an odor of blessedness upon you [...] Thus far there has been an inscription of your names, and a call to service, and torches of the bridal train, and a longing for heavenly citizenship, and a good purpose, and hope attendant thereon.⁹

On the other hand, none of the catechists of antiquity we know of¹⁰ expounds upon the metaphor of spiritual marriage in the context of early Christian initiation in such detail.

Although we can only find references to this topic in those of Cyril's catecheses that have been preserved, in Chrysostom this metaphor comes to the forefront in the way of teaching catechumens about the topic of the essence of the sacrament of baptism.

2. Spiritual Marriage

John Chrysostom develops the vision of spiritual marriage in detail in the next part of the previously referenced catechesis. At the very beginning, the catechist instructs that his audience does not interpret his words in a literal ("carnal") way because he speaks of the soul and of salvation. In this context, he outlines the vision in which the bridegroom comes to marry his bride. His great love for his beloved, who was ugly, or enslaved by sin, is evident in this

8 However, some scholars see the comparison between marriage and baptism only in Chrysostom – cf. A. Ceresa-Gastaldo, *Teoria e prassi nella catechesi battesimale di S. Giovanni Crisostomo*, [in:] *Catechesi battesimale e riconciliazione nei padri del IV secolo. Convegno di studio e aggiornamento, Facoltà di lettere cristiane e classiche (Pontificium Institutum Altioris Latinitatis), Roma, 5–6 marzo 1983*, cur. D. Felici, Roma 1984, p. 60.

9 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procatechesis*, 1, [in:] *Catechetical Lectures*, trans. E. H. Gifford, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310100.htm>.

10 The previous absence of the theme of marriage among the writings of the early Christian authors is explained by the fact that it was used in the gnostic literature, cf. J. Słomka, *Wczesnochrześcijańskie nazwy chrztu*, Katowice 2009, p. 184.

decision.¹¹ At the same time, he makes an attempt at emphasizing the distance that the bridegroom had to overcome to be with his beloved.

In such an understanding, the catechumen, who wants to be baptized, becomes the beloved, while the bridegroom is Christ, who takes the initiative and looks for man despite his weakness.

On this occasion, John Chrysostom makes reference to the vision of earthly marriage, noting commonly known rules related to entering into marriage. As has been mentioned before, this serves to emphasize the difference with regards to spiritual marriage:

In the spiritual marriage there is nothing like this. Why? Because this ritual belongs to the spiritual order. Moved by His kindness, our Bridegroom hurries to save our souls. Even if some one is ugly, or ill-favored to the eye, or poor as poor can be, or lowborn, or a slave, or an outcast, or maimed, or burdened with the weight of his sins, the Bridegroom does not split hairs, nor is He inquisitive, nor does He demand an accounting.¹²

This difference, as he later notes, is instead the elevation from carnal to spiritual reality.¹³ This is true especially with regards to the gift that has been given to the bridegroom:

No man would ever have allowed himself to do this, namely, to pour out his blood for the woman who was going to be his bride. But the kindly Master, imitating His own goodness, has accepted this great and marvelous sacrifice because of His solicitude for her, that by His own blood He might sanctify her.¹⁴

On the basis of an excerpt from the Epistle to the Ephesians,¹⁵ he develops in front of his audience the vision of the mystery of marriage in which two people become one. If in this understanding we move from human logic to the

11 John Chrysostom, *The First Instruction*, 3–4, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, op. cit., pp. 23–24.

12 John Chrysostom, *The First Instruction*, 15, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, op. cit., p. 28.

13 John Chrysostom, *The First Instruction*, 16, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, op. cit., p. 28–29.

14 John Chrysostom, *The First Instruction*, 17, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, op. cit., p. 29.

15 John Chrysostom, *The First Instruction*, 13, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, op. cit., p. 28.

logic of the spirit, we see the paradox of the situation in which Christ wants to marry the bride in the sacrament of marriage, even though she is not filled with grace and desirable, as would be in an earthly marriage.

As has been noted,¹⁶ this aspect introduces another element, for which the relationship between baptism and marriage seems so essential, becomes God's unconditional love for man. As an outstanding speaker, Chrysostom wants to move his listeners by building a graphic comparison between various physical and moral functions of the bride and the love of Christ the Bridegroom; the more the former are prone to degradation, the more His feeling is strengthened:

But when the good Master saw His bride in such a plight and swept down into what I might call the very abyss of wickedness, naked and unseemly, He considered neither her ugliness, nor her utter poverty, nor the enormity of her evils, but He manifested His own surpassing kindness and received her into His presence.¹⁷

It is worth emphasizing that the aspect of perfect love of the bridegroom for the sinful bride mentioned above appears several more times in the catecheses that have been preserved; thus, it must have played a key role in Chrysostom's pre-baptismal teachings.

A similar though appears in the teaching of the catechist several days¹⁸ before the candidates received the sacrament of baptism. In the instruction describing the baptism ceremony itself, Chrysostom once again references the topic of spiritual marriage. This time, he prompts the catechumens to vigilance, noting that they should be reading for the coming of the bridegroom, which will happen at night, which is a reference to the sacrament of baptism that takes place during the paschal night. Next, he once more notes the love of Christ the bridegroom to His beloved once more, emphasizing His initiative:

¹⁶ Cf. L. Zappella, *Introduzione*, [in:] Giovanni Crisostomo, *Le catechesi battesimali*, Milano 1998, p. 104.

¹⁷ John Chrysostom, *The First Instruction*, 6, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, op. cit., p. 25.

¹⁸ In the catechesis preached most likely on Holy Saturday.

When you hear: Behold, the Bridegroom is coming, be sure that you heed these words, for they are truly great and filled with an abundance of loving-kindness. He did not command human nature to come to Him, but He came to us.¹⁹

It is so great that when he emphasizes this once more, expounding on visual comparisons to his audience, the bridegroom is ready to give his life for his beloved, which would never take place in an earthly marriage. What is important, this sacrifice brings about the transformation of the beloved:

He came to her who was about to become His bride and found her naked and disgracing herself. He threw around her a clean robe, whose brightness and glory no word or mind will be able to describe.²⁰

3. The Wedding Robes

The catechist develops the theme of the Antioch robes in one of his later instructions,²¹ emphasizing how important it is that those who have been invited to the wedding be properly dressed. It is a precondition in order to be able to participate in the ceremony. In accordance with the accepted custom, even if those who have been invited are very shabbily dressed, they borrow and buy the appropriate garb in order to appear prepared before the one who had invited them. Thus, the catechist emphasizes, once again bringing the analogy to the spiritual level, that the listeners, invited to a royal feast and spiritual wedding, receive the appropriate dress for free so that they would not have to make excuses for their poverty. Thus, the only thing that becomes their duty is to take care of the robes they have received, as if it is damaged than it will not be possible to lend or sell.

19 John Chrysostom, *The Eleventh Instruction*, 2, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, op. cit., p. 161.

20 John Chrysostom, *The Eleventh Instruction*, 6, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, op. cit., p. 162.

21 John Chrysostom, *The Twelfth Instruction*, 7, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom. Baptismal instructions*, op. cit., p. 175.

We can find a surprisingly similar thought²² in Cyril of Jerusalem's catechesis. In one of his extensively elaborated allegories,²³ the bishop of Jerusalem refers to the symbol of the wedding garment, at the same time making note of the flaws of the old person. In the introductory catechesis, he requests of catechumens that they think through their decision to receive the sacrament, as that is the last moment for a true conversion. Although the Church received all who were interested, the moment of the verification of their attitudes was very near. Therefore, the forty-day period of preparations becomes a time of penance before the arrival of Christ the Bridegroom who at the time of His coming will inspect the garments of the invited guests.

Thus, what the image of the filthy garment implies becomes morally unacceptable;²⁴ it must be changed right before the baptism itself. In another of his instructions, Cyril asks of his readers:

Begin at once to wash your robes in repentance, that when called to the bride-chamber you may be found clean. For the Bridegroom invites all without distinction, because His grace is bounteous; and the cry of loud-voiced heralds assembles them all: but the same Bridegroom afterwards separates those who have come in to the figurative marriage. O may none of those whose names have now been enrolled hear the words, Friend, how did you come in hither, not having a wedding garment?²⁵

John Chrysostom returns to the topic of spiritual marriage in the catecheses addressed to the newly baptized. In them, he wants to caution against the loss of sacramental grace, pointing towards Satan's snares that will endanger those who have received the sacrament of baptism. At the same time, he emphasizes that although the special time connected with preparations for and reception of the sacrament is nearing an end, now the neophytes' task is to cultivate the spiritual gifts they have received.

22 Hence the hypothesis that on this point John Chrysostom used Cyril of Jerusalem's instructions as a model – cf. J. Słomka, *Wczesnochrześcijańskie nazwy chrztu*, Katowice 2009, p. 186.

23 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures 3–4*, 3, [in:] *Catechetical Lectures*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3101.htm>, op. cit., p. 20–21.

24 H. M. Riley, *Christian Initiation. A comparative Study of the Interpretation of the Baptismal Liturgy in the Mystagogical Writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Ambrose of Milan*, Washington 1974, p. 164.

25 Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lecture 3, 2*, [in:] *Catechetical Lectures*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310103.htm>.

That is why, in my fear of the enemy's tricks, I am continually exhorting you to keep the marriage robe in its integrity, that with it you may enter forever into this spiritual marriage. And what takes place here is a spiritual marriage. Just as in marriage between man and woman the bridal feast is prolonged for seven days, see how we too extend for the same number of days your bridal feast, setting before you the table of the mysteries, filled with good things beyond number. And why do I say seven days? If you are willing to live soberly and to keep vigilant, this banquet is prolonged for you through all time, provided that you keep your bridal robe inviolate and radiant. For in this way you will draw the Bridegroom to a fuller love and you yourselves will shine forth with increasing radiance and luster as time goes on, because grace increases more and more with the good deeds we do.²⁶

For the author, the referenced period of seven days then becomes a symbol of the entire Christian life;²⁷ hence his appeal to his audience for their wedding robes to remain clean and radiant throughout their entire lives, which requires vigilance and effort on the part of the newly baptized.

4. John Chrysostom's Pedagogy

Thanks to his rhetorical abilities, John Chrysostom has been correctly dubbed the first Christian orator;²⁸ we find confirmation of this description in the baptismal instructions under discussion. As a catechist, he appears to be spontaneous when preaching the instructions²⁹ and open to his listeners; he frequently uses simple examples to emphasize the essential aspect of his message. He knows how to attract the catechumens' attention; hence the numerous direct addresses to his auditorium³⁰ or rhetorical questions.³¹

26 John Chrysostom, *The Sixth Instruction*, 24–25, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions* [1–8], op. cit., pp. 102–103.

27 Cf. J. Pollok, *Liturgia chrztu na Wschodzie w drugiej połowie IV wieku na podstawie mistagogicznych homilii Cyryla Jerozolimskiego, Jana Chryzostoma i Teodora z Mopsuestii*, Warszawa 1992, p. 55.

28 K. Akanthopoulou, *Le catechesi battesimali di Giovanni Crisostomo*, [in:] *Historiam Perscrutari. Miscelanea di studi offerti al prof Ottorino Pasquato*, a cura di M. Maritano, Roma 2002, p. 728.

29 Hence the numerous digressions – cf. John Chrysostom, *The Tenth Instruction*, 8, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions*, op. cit., p. 151.

30 Cf. John Chrysostom, *The First Instruction*, 11, op. cit., p. 26; *The Eleventh Instruction*, 9, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions*, op. cit., p. 163.

31 Cf. John Chrysostom, *The Tenth Instruction*, 9, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions* 9–12, op. cit., p. 151.

On the other hand, as an Antioch minister he knows man's interior and his doubts, weaknesses, and limitations well. For this reason, we find numerous incentives and invitations to be faithful to Christ that are very graphically presented³² as a spiritual struggle³³ to which all the faithful are summoned. Unlike in the case of earthly requirements, when soldiers must meet the appropriate conditions concerning height and health, here God invites everyone and leads to spiritual competition.

We can assume that the catechist was also fully aware of the diversity of his audience; hence the attempts at adjusting the message to the intellectual level and needs of the listeners. Perhaps the listeners themselves were previously divided into groups depending on their intellectual and cultural level.³⁴

The comparison between baptism and spiritual marriage fits well with this pastoral style. Is that the origin of the author's great emphasis on the vision of baptism as the catechumen's spiritual marriage with Christ? It appears that this image reflects John Chrysostom's pedagogy well. In order to make his teaching more understandable to catechumens, the author makes wide use of imagery borrowed from his listeners' everyday lives. However, let us make note of the fact that this is not a novelty reserved solely for Chrysostom.

In this context, we should remember the transformation of the catechuminate in the fourth century. As a consequence of socio-political changes, a large group of people who wanted to be catechumens began to come to the Church;³⁵ at the same time, they wanted to be baptized sooner or later.³⁶ This was one of the reasons why the real time of preparations was shortened; the previous formation took place over the course of several years and was replaced with

32 "This same thing happens in the case of our soul. Whenever grace comes and drives out the darkness from our mind, we learn the exact nature of things; what frightened us before, now becomes contemptible in our eyes" (John Chrysostom, *The Twelfth Instruction*, 10, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions*, op. cit., p. 176).

33 Cf. John Chrysostom, *The Twelfth Instruction*, 12, [in:] *St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions*, op. cit., p. 176.

34 Cf. M. Starowiejski, *Wstęp*, [in:] Jan Chryzostom, *Katechezy chrzcielne...* [1–8], op. cit., p. 15; A. Żurek, *Przygotowanie katechumenów i obrzęd chrztu w świetle katechez Jana Chryzostoma*, [in:] *Czasy Jana Chryzostoma i jego pasterska pedagogia*, red. N. Widok, Opole 2008, p. 207 (Opolska Biblioteka Teologiczna, 105).

35 It is believed that in Antioch during John Chrysostom's time at least several hundred catechumens underwent preparations each year – cf. J. Naumowicz, *Język i koncepcja katechez chrzcielnych w ujęciu Jana Chryzostoma*, [in:] *Czasy Jana Chryzostoma i jego pasterska postęga*, op. cit., p. 192.

36 However, the tendency for the mere moment of baptism to take place in the indefinite future after becoming inscribed in the ranks of the catechumens was commonly experienced.

the length of time that Lent lasts. The catechists of antiquity did not remain indifferent to these changes; they were aware of the fact that the customary period of forty days could be insufficient for conversion and the change of one's life. Thus, they tried to reach the candidates in many ways, trying to make them aware of the weight of this event.

Certainly, one of these methods was making reference to the reality of everyday life in order to go to the spiritual level from this perspective. In this way, the point of departure consisted of examples with which the listeners were familiar from the world that surrounded them in order to use them to help explain the most important truths of the faith or introduce the mystery of baptism and the Eucharist. We find this type of device in all the pre-baptismal catecheses available to us;³⁷ however, in Chrysostom this was elaborated in a way that particularly merits attention. Through a similar comparison, he emphasizes the fact that marriage and baptism can be considered together in the context of the mystery to which the candidates are given access.

Some also believe that Chrysostom chose this theme because young people preparing for marriage or shortly after having entered into the sacrament of marriage may have predominated among the audience.³⁸ This would be more evidence confirming the excellent pastoral intuition of the Antioch catechist. At the same time, he would implement the essence of catechumenal preparations with his teaching, which, as has been noted,³⁹ was reaching the hearts of the candidates who listened to him. In addition to personal maturity, this required that catechists adjusted their language to the receptive capabilities of their listeners and, if necessary, to also repeat key topics so that they would be accepted and remembered by the listeners. We find all these elements in the cited catechetical instructions of John Chrysostom.

Abstract

Baptism as Spiritual Marriage in the Teaching of John Chrysostom

John Chrysostom's rich pastoral legacy also includes catechesis addressed to catechumens and newly baptized Christians. In the available catechetical instructions, we can see that he especially frequently refers

37 See, for example, Cyril of Jerusalem, *Procatechesis*, 11, [in:] *Catechetical Lectures*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310100.htm>.

38 Cf. J. Naumowicz, *Język i koncepcja katechez chrzcielnych w ujęciu Jana Chryzostoma*, op. cit., p. 195.

39 P. Rentinck, *La cura pastorale in Antiochia nel IV secolo*, Roma 1970, p. 42.

to the vision of baptism as spiritual marriage. In such an understanding, Christ, the perfect Bridegroom, comes to marry the bride, the catechumen, and His initiative and unconditional love transform the sinful candidate with all his or her weaknesses; this is symbolized by the sparkling wedding gown mentioned by the catechist. This article presents the contexts in which John Chrysostom references this comparison and tries to respond to the question of why the author mentions the image of marriage in reference to the sacrament of baptism so frequently.

Keywords: baptism; marriage; John Chrysostom

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