

John Chrysostom and the Subintroductae

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When physical affections are destroyed and tyrannical desire extinguished, then no hindrance will any longer stand in the way of men and women being together, because all evil suspicion will be cleared away and all who have entered the kingdom of heaven can maintain the way of life of the angels and spiritual powers, through the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be glory, honor, and dominion from age to age. Amen.¹

I

With these words, John Chrysostom concludes his first treatise on the *subintroductae*, one of the most fascinating groups of women encountered anywhere in the annals of church history. As defined by Hans Achelis, whose *Virgines Subintroductae*² remains the classical exposition of the subject, the *subintroductae* were “female Christian ascetics who lived together with men, although both parties had taken the vow of continency, and were animated with the earnest desire to keep it.”³ Such virginal couples were united in a “permanent, intimate relation,”⁴ spiritual marriage, which Derrick Sherwin Bailey has vividly described as “the cohabitation of the sexes under the condition of strict continence, a couple sharing the same house, often the same room, and sometimes the same bed, yet conducting themselves as brother and sister.”⁵ The man—who may or may not have been a cleric—usually took the woman into his house, although occasionally the female might invite the man to share her residence, especially if she were a widow with private means. The relationship shocked Chrysostom and his contemporaries; nonetheless, Achelis has argued (we think correctly) that it was motivated by spiritual concerns: “brotherly love was supposed to take the place of the

1. John Chrysostom, *Adversus eos qui apud se habent subintroductas virgines* 13 J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca* [Hereafter, PG] 47, 514). Hereafter abbreviated as *Adv. eos*. The numberings of the sections given in Migne do not always correspond with those of other editions.
2. Hans Achelis, *Virgines Subintroductae: Ein Beitrag zum VII Kapitel des I. Korintherbriefs* (Leipzig, 1902).
3. Hans Achelis, “Agapetae,” *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hasting (New York, 1926), 1:177.
4. Achelis, *Virgines*, p. 27.
5. Derrick Sherwin Bailey, *Sexual Relation in Christian Thought* (New York, 1959), p. 33.

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love of marriage.”⁶ The man and woman, he claimed, became “Platonic lovers.”⁷

There are numerous references to the practice in Christian literature from the late second century onwards. Our earliest evidence is found in the *Similitudes of Hermas*. In this work, Hermas’ female companions, to whom he has been entrusted, assure him, “You will sleep with us as a brother, not as a spouse. You are our brother, we intend to live with you, for we love you dearly.”⁸ Also from the second century we have the testimony of Irenaeus, who informs us that the Valentinians occasioned scandal by allowing “brothers” and “sisters” to live together—but it became evident that chastity had been violated when some of the “sisters” became mothers.⁹ There also survive two letters of pseudo-Clement on virginity, dating from the late second or early third century, in which the author warns the brethren against dwelling with maidens;¹⁰ Jesus’ words to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection, “Touch me not” (John 20:17), are used as grounds for condemnation of those who live with women and “sleep where they sleep.”¹¹ Spiritual marriage was likewise known to the Latin-writing fathers Tertullian¹² and Cyprian.¹³ Another pre-Nicene record of the practice is found in pseudo-Cyprian’s *De singularitate clericorum*.¹⁴ Later in the fourth century we have the evidence of Eusebius of Emesa, who advises young women wishing to adopt the virginal life to remain at home under the watchful eye of the *pater familias*, rather than to move in with strange men.¹⁵ (It has been postulated that Chrysostom was familiar with Eusebius’ treatise dealing with this theme.¹⁶) All three Cappadocian fathers speak of the *subintroductae*,¹⁷ and Jerome’s sarcastic reference to the “beloved women” (*agapetae*) as “one-man whores” (*meretrices univirae*) is famous.¹⁸ Last, the pseudo-Titus epistles, stemming in all probability from Priscillianist

6. Achelis, “Agapetae,” p. 178.

7. Achelis, *Virgines*, p. 73.

8. *Similitudes* 9, 10f; also see 10, 3. Pierre de Labriolle, “Le ‘Mariage Spirituel’ dans l’Antiquité Chrétienne,” *Revue Historique* 137 (1921): 210, denies that the *Similitudes* can be used as an apology for spiritual marriage.

9. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1, 6, 3.

10. Pseudo-Clement, *Epistola* 1, 10; *Ep.* 2, 1 and 10.

11. Pseudo-Clement, *Ep.* 2, 15.

12. Tertullian, *De exhortatione castitatis* 12; *De monogamia* 16.

13. Cyprian, *Ep.* 62 and *Ep.* 6, 5 (*PL* numberings; Oxford *Ep.* 4 and *Ep.* 13).

14. Text in S. Thasci Caecili Cypriani, *Opera Omnia*, ed. W. Hartel (*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 3, 3) (Vienna, 1871), pp. 173-220. The treatise is discussed by Achelis, *Virgines*, pp. 36-42.

15. Eusebius of Emesa, *Homilia* 7, 20 and 22. The subject is discussed in David Amand de Mendieta, “La Virginité chez Eusèbe d’Emèse et l’Ascétisme Familial dans la Première Moitié du IV^e Siècle,” *Revue d’Histoire Ecclesiastique* 50 (1955): 777-820.

16. Bernard Grillet, “Introduction,” *Jean Chrysostome: La Virginité* (Paris, 1966), p. 37, n. 1, asserts that Chrysostom may have been familiar with Eusebius’ writings.

17. Gregory of Nyssa, *De virginitate* 23; Basil of Caesarea, *Ep.* 55; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epigrammata* 10-20.

18. Jerome, *Ep.* 22, 14.

circles of the fifth century, present still later testimony concerning spiritual marriage.¹⁹ Thus both orthodox and heterodox authors were familiar with the practice; the evidence for it, while not boundless, is substantial.²⁰

Moreover, we have records of numerous church councils which condemned spiritual marriage. In Eusebius of Caesarea's *Church History*, we learn that one of the accusations made against Paul of Samosata was that he had scandalized the church by living with young girls, a practice which apparently contributed to his condemnation by the Synod of Antioch in 267-268.²¹ The oriental bishops who had penned the condemning epistle concerning Paul reported that the Antiocheans had even coined a special name for these female companions: *gynaikes syneisakttoi*.²² Hence the word "syneisaktism" has been used to refer to the custom.

At least six church councils of the fourth century, including the famous Council of Nicaea in 325, banned the practice, which must nonetheless have continued to flourish, for decrees were pronounced against it into the early middle ages.²³ Nor was syneisaktism a phenomenon peculiar to one locality; it can be found in Ireland,²⁴ Syria,²⁵ North Africa,²⁶ and many other centers of Christianity.²⁷ As Roland Seboldt asserted, following Achelis, "Of one thing we can be sure: there was hardly a church province in ancient Christianity in which spiritual marriages were unknown."²⁸

What is more problematic, and has in fact been the subject of furious debate, is the origin of Christian syneisaktism. Achelis, adopting the thesis of Eduard Grafe,²⁹ argued that I Corinthians 7:36-38 is a

19. English translation in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. W. Schneemelcher-E. Hennecke (Philadelphia, 1963-1966), 2: 141-164.
20. See Achelis, *Virgines*, pp. vii-viii; and Roland H. A. Seboldt, "Spiritual Marriage in the Early Church: A Suggested Interpretation of I Cor. 7: 36-38," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 30 (1959): 176-184 for further references.
21. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia ecclesiastica* 7, 29.
22. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Hist. eccles.* 7, 30. Felix Quadt, "Subintroductae Mulier," *Zeitschrift für Kathologische Theologie* 34 (1910): 228-231, disagrees with Achelis' view that *syneisakttoi* was translated as *subintroductae* for the first time in the sixth century; he presents evidence from an early fifth century translation of the canons of the Sixth Synod of Carthage (419) for his opinion.
23. See Labriolle, "Le 'Mariage Spirituel,'" p. 222 for a list of councils condemning the practice. Achelis (*Virgines*, p. 35) thinks that the medieval decrees are protesting against outright concubinage, not spiritual marriage.
24. Roger Reynolds, "Virgines Subintroductae in Celtic Christianity," *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 547-566.
25. Arthur Vööbus, *History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient* (Louvain, 1958), 1: 78-83.
26. Achelis (*Virgines*, p. 13) discusses the evidence for Montanist adoption of the practice in North Africa. Tertullian and Cyprian witness to the practice in this area.
27. Achelis, *Virgines*, p. 60, for a list.
28. Roland Seboldt, "Spiritual Marriage," p. 184, and Achelis, *Virgines*, p. 59.
29. Eduard Grafe, "Geistliche Verlobnisse bei Paulus," *Theologische Arbeiten aus dem rheinischen wissenschaftlichen Prediger-Verein*, N. F. 3 (1899): 57-69.

reference to the custom, which he thought was condoned by Paul himself.³⁰ A brief examination of the passage and its possible interpretations may be helpful before we discuss Chrysostom's views on the matter.³¹

Part of the debate over I Corinthians 7:36-38 has been stimulated by perplexing difficulties of translation.³² What, for example, does *hyperakmos* mean? Does it refer to the man, who is "full of vitality"? Or to the young woman? If the latter, is she "past her prime" or "in the flower of her youth"?³³ And to whom does *gameitōsan* ("let them marry") refer? (Paul has not presented us with a potential bridegroom for the woman.) Should *gamizō* be translated as "marry" or "give in marriage"?³⁴ The variations in translation have of course reflected differences of opinion regarding the situation presupposed in the text. Traditionally the passage has been interpreted to refer to a father who had asked Paul for advice concerning his virgin daughter: should he have her marry or keep her as a virgin? A variant on this interpretation hypothesizes that the young woman was already engaged, and the couple (or the father) was wondering whether, given the impending end of the world and the urgency of Christian commitment, she should consummate her pledge.³⁵

Achelis, in contrast, popularized the view that I Corinthians 7:36-38 is the first reference in Christian history to syneisaktism.³⁶ According to his reading of the text, Paul is replying to the query of a male celibate who was, alas, plagued by sexual feelings for his *subintroducta*.³⁷ Paul advised that it would be preferable in this situation for her to leave him and

30. Achelis, *Virgines*, pp. 21-29.

31. Numerous commentaries have been written on these verses. See Seboldt, "Spiritual Marriage"; John J. O'Rourke, "Hypotheses Regarding I Corinthians 7: 36-38," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 20 (1958): 292-298; and Werner Georg Kümmel, "Verlobung und Heirat bei Paulus (I Cor. 7: 36-38)," *Neu-Testamentliche Studien für Rudolf Bultmann* (Berlin, 1954), pp. 276-277, n. 1, for references. Also see the commentaries mentioned below.

32. See John C. Hurd, Jr., *The Origin of I Corinthians* (New York, 1965), pp. 172-175.

33. See Hurd, *Origins*, p. 173; E. B. Allo, *Saint Paul Première Epître aux Corinthiens*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1956), p. 192; and Achelis, *Virgines*, p. 22.

34. See Kümmel, "Verlobung," pp. 287-288; Allo, *Saint Paul*, pp. 192-193; O'Rourke, "Hypotheses," p. 294; Seboldt, "Spiritual Marriage," pp. 107-108, as well as the standard commentaries on I Corinthians by C. K. Barrett and Hans Conzelmann for discussions of this translation problem.

35. Advocated by Kümmel, "Verlobung," pp. 275-295, and followed by Henry Chadwick, "'All Things to All Men' (I Cor. 9:22)," *New Testament Studies* 1 (1954): 267, and by C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London, 1968), p. 184.

36. Achelis thinks there are pre-Christian precedents for the practice in Philo's description of the Therapeutae. See Achelis, *Virgines*, pp. 29-31. A. Oepke, "gynē," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, 1964), 1:779 thinks there were also pagan precedents, and refers us to R. Reitzenstein's *Hellenistische Wundererzählungen* (Stuttgart, 1963), p. 146 f.

37. Achelis, *Virgines*, pp. 21-23.

marry someone else, but that in other circumstances, if the man could control his lustful desires, he would do well to "keep his virgin." Paul did not condemn spiritual marriage, Achelis insisted; to the contrary, he recognized the real advantages it might offer celibate men and women of his era.³⁸ Among the modern supporters of Achelis' thesis are D. S. Bailey,³⁹ John C. Hurd, Jr.,⁴⁰ and Jean Héring, who goes so far as to assert that Achelis' interpretation is "the only plausible explanation of our passage."⁴¹ Those who disagree with Achelis do so not only on the grounds of the textual difficulties; they also posit that Paul in his apostolic wisdom could never have given his imprimatur to a situation which must have encouraged sexual temptation, if not overt sexual activity.⁴²

Why, then, did none of the church fathers with the exception of Ephraem the Syrian interpret I Corinthians 7:36-38 this way?⁴³ One answer is that the fathers could not imagine their hero Paul sanctioning a practice which, by their time, had brought trouble and disrepute to the church. Chrysostom sided with the majority of his contemporaries in taking the Pauline passage to refer to a father and a daughter.⁴⁴ However, in his *Homily 19 on I Corinthians*, we can sense his bewilderment at the wording of the text. He comments on Paul's choice of language, "Here he seems to be talking about marriage, but all that he says relates to virginity."⁴⁵ Chrysostom did not pause to inquire whether Paul might have been describing "virginal marriage"; since he was to write two treatises condemning the *subintroductae*, he was not likely to admit that Paul had permitted men and women to live together in chastity.

II

Chrysostom's two treatises on syneisaktism (scholars debate whether they were composed during his diaconate in Antioch in the 380s or early 390s, or after he ascended the episcopal chair of Constantinople in 397)⁴⁶ are among the most interesting and clever of his writings. In these

38. Achelis, *Virgines*, p. 28.

39. D. S. Bailey, *Sexual Relation*, p. 33.

40. John C. Hurd, Jr., *The Origin*, pp. 179-180.

41. Jean Héring, *The First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. from the 2nd French ed. by A. W. Heathcote and P. J. Allcock (London, 1962), p. 64.

42. See O'Rourke, "Hypotheses," p. 294.

43. So Henry Chadwick, "'All Things,'" p. 267. For Ephraem's view on this matter, see Arthur Vööbus, *Celibacy, A Requirement For Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church* (Stockholm, 1951), pp. 23-25.

44. John Chrysostom, *De virg.* 78

45. John Chrysostom, *Homilia 19 I Cor.*, 6.

46. Socrates (*Hist. eccles.* VI, 3) gives the earlier date; Palladius (*Dialogus* 5), the later. Jean Dumortier, "La Date des Deux Traités de Saint Jean Chrysostome aux Moines et aux Vierges," *Mélanges de Science Religieuse* 6 (1949), thinks that they were originally written in 381-383 (Jerome, he postulates, used the second treatise in writing *Ad Eustochium*), but this does not preclude Chrysostom's having published them again in Constantinople when confronted with the same problem (pp. 251-252).

short works, he employs all of his rhetorical skills to exhort the virgins and the monks living with them to abandon their housekeeping arrangements.⁴⁷ As a spiritual physician, he wished to heal the sick rather than condemn them. (How much he hoped the “diseased” would cooperate, rather than behaving like some who, when stricken with fever, eat and drink the forbidden fare which only serves to aggravate their condition!)⁴⁸ Both his psychological analysis and his Biblical arguments in these treatises are to the point, which cannot be said for all of Chrysostom’s writings. Unlike Jerome, who denounced the *subintroductae* as harlots and gleefully noted the frequency with which the supposed virgins were betrayed by their “swelling wombs,”⁴⁹ Chrysostom did not charge all such couples with this misdeed. He generously admitted that many of them, innocent of sexual relations, had retained their bodily purity,⁵⁰ although he leads us to understand that some few of the women had indeed needed the services of a midwife.⁵¹ Rather, Chrysostom cited other reasons for his condemnation of spiritual marriage. Among these (which will be discussed in the following pages) we may note: the arousal of lust; the offense to “weaker brothers;” the opportunity for enemies of the Church to criticize her; the “adultery” of the brides of Christ; the necessity of suffering and denial in the Christian life; the dubious practical benefits secured by the relationship; the sacrifice of the freedom virginity was intended to bring; and the overturning of the sexual roles and functions which “nature” as well as God had ordained.

For Chrysostom, living together without indulging in sexual intercourse could only serve to fan the flames of lust. The married man, to whom sexual opportunity was ever present, often became satiated and lost the passion he earlier felt for his bride. As for the woman, the cares of the household and the bodily strain of childbearing and childrearing took a heavy toll upon her physical beauty—and her diminished attractiveness no doubt served to dampen further her husband’s already wilting ardor. But with the *subintroductae* and their monks, desire was intensified with the passage of time because it was never satisfied.⁵² The constant association of the two—eating, talking, laughing together—promoted a state of perpetual sexual arousal.⁵³ Chrysostom compared a

47. Achelis, *Virgines*, p. 52 thinks the men were monks only, not clerics, or Chrysostom could have used the canons of Nicaea against them. He also suggests that the situation in Constantinople, in which rich women took men into their homes, was an unusual arrangement (pp. 52-53, 56).

48. *Adv. eos* 1 (PG 47, 496) and 2 (PG 47, 497).

49. Jerome, *Ep.* 22, 13 and 14.

50. *Quod regulares feminae viris cohabitare non debeant* 5 (PG 47, 523). (Hereafter abbreviated as *Quod reg.*) Also *Adv. eos* 2 (PG 47, 497).

51. *Quod reg.* 2 (PG 47, 516).

52. *Adv. eos* 1 (PG 47, 496).

53. *Adv. eos* 3 (PG 47, 498).

monk who consented to live in this fashion to someone who had a table of delicacies set before him, but was instructed not to eat, or to one ravaged by thirst, who was led to a stream but not permitted to drink.⁵⁴ The combination of simultaneous temptation and deprivation is a well-known form of torture; the ancients described it in the myth of Tantalus, to which Chrysostom alludes, and God employed it to punish the first couple after he expelled them from Eden (they were kept near the lovely garden which they no longer could enter).⁵⁵

Moreover, Scripture affirms that men who lust after women with their eyes have already committed adultery with them in their hearts (Matt. 5:27-28); by that standard of judgment, Chrysostom reckoned, these monks must be guilty of a thousand adulteries daily!⁵⁶ True chastity means that we wage war constantly against our passions, not that we exacerbate them. Both the monks and the virgins are guilty in this regard, but Chrysostom assigned the greater blame to the women; they, like prostitutes or adulteresses, were responsible for the man's madness.⁵⁷ Some of the virgins, he ruefully noted, spent as much time on their personal appearance and wardrobes as actresses!⁵⁸ Wearing perfume and enticing men with their eyes or their walk were activities more appropriate to harlots than to brides of Christ.⁵⁹

Chrysostom was convinced that, in any case, it was sexual desire which bound a man to a woman. In one of his more misogynistic moods he puzzled, "Why else would a man put up with the faults of a woman? He would find her despicable (*eukataphronētos*)."⁶⁰ If the monks enjoyed their female companions, it must be for the same reason that other men find women attractive: the simple pull of lust. When those heroes of the faith who don sackcloth, cover their bodies with chains, fast and deprive themselves of sleep "can hardly restrain the frenzy of sexual desire," how can those of more earth-bound constitution expect to escape it?⁶¹ It was not spiritual love which drew the couples together, Chrysostom assumed, but concupiscence in disguise.

Moreover, the couples living in this fashion irritated Chrysostom with their claims that they could withstand the temptations constantly present to them due to their tougher moral fiber. In his response to their boast, he borrowed Paul's words regarding the eating of meat offered to idols as support for his case. Paul had claimed that, although he was entitled

54. *Adv. eos* 1 (PG 47, 496-497).

55. *Adv. eos* 2 (PG 47, 497).

56. *Hom. 17 Matt.*, 2.

57. *Quod reg.* 1 (PG 47, 515) and 3 (PG 47, 519-520).

58. *Quod reg.* 7 (PG 47, 528). Chrysostom reminds them that Adam and Eve were content with garments of skins! (*Quod reg.* 7, PG 47, 527-528).

59. *Quod reg.* 1 (PG 47, 515) and 3 (PG 47, 501).

60. *Adv. eos* 5 (PG 47, 502).

61. *Adv. eos* 5 (PG 47, 501).

to eat meat, he would never do so if he thereby caused another to “fall.” If need be, he would become a “vegetable-eater” to win the weak (Romans 14; I Corinthians 8). This argument was readily adaptable to Chrysostom’s purposes: the men and the *subintroductae* living together were not taking into account the offense they gave to those of less rugged character (or of wilder imagination?) who assumed that the couples indulged in sexual intercourse and were scandalized. A true Christian, Chrysostom asserted, would be willing to renounce his position of “strength” in order to encourage brothers in the faith; that would be manifesting genuine Christian *agapē*. If the good resulting from syneisaktism outweighed the damage it wreaked, he would be willing to sanction the practice, even if some minor offense were caused thereby.⁶² But since there is no advantage whatsoever to the practice (as he will show), and great harm comes to the Church through the gossiping of non-Christians and the blaspheming of God’s name—not to speak of the damage to the parties themselves⁶³—the custom should be abandoned at once.

Informing Chrysostom’s argument is a view of the faith which requires a Christian to deny himself and be prepared for suffering. Christianity is not truly practiced by those who indulge themselves in comforts, who attempt to secure a soft and easy life. Rather, the faith entails staunch self-denial and asceticism. Christ told us to take up our crosses and follow him (Matt. 16:24), but the monks who live with virgins have abandoned their “crosses” like cowardly soldiers who, instead of marching steadfastly into battle, toss away their shields and retreat to the women’s quarters.⁶⁴ Paul’s testimony that he crucified himself to the world and the world to himself (Gal. 6:14) is one which these couples would do well to take to heart; his willingness to suffer for God should provide a paradigm for our behavior.⁶⁵ Although Chrysostom regretfully admitted that martyrdom, the ultimate in self-denial, was no longer possible for Christians, he hinted that those who from their love of God struggle to overcome carnal lust can expect the martyrs’ reward.⁶⁶

Another religiously-grounded argument employed by Chrysostom was that female virgins have pledged their troth to Jesus; by taking up with other men, they violate their promises and become “adulteresses.” Here Chrysostom, as did many other church fathers, relied heavily on the imagery of the Song of Songs, Matthew 28, and Ephesians 5. According to him, Christ as the heavenly Bridegroom is awaiting his

62. *Adv. eos* 3 (PG 47, 499) and 3 (PG 47, 498); *Quod reg.* 5 (PG 47, 522). John Hurd, *The Origin*, p. 181, stresses the similarity between Paul’s approach to marriage problems and his approach to the difficulties arising from the meat offered to idols.

63. *Adv. eos* 4 (PG 47, 499); *Quod reg.* 6 (PG 47, 527).

64. *Adv. eos* 6 (PG 47, 502-503).

65. *Adv. eos* 5 (PG 47, 501).

66. *Adv. eos* 13 (PG 47, 514).

virgins, who should keep themselves worthy of him and the bridal chamber into which they will eventually be initiated.⁶⁷ Jesus will demand of them not only purity of body, but unspotted souls as well—and the *subintroductae*, Chrysostom thought, would have a harder time meeting the latter requirement than the former.⁶⁸ True virginity, he did not tire of reiterating in his treatise devoted to that subject, embraces both body and soul; the virgin must take care lest her intact body harbor a rotten soul.⁶⁹ Her spiritual beauty, rather than her physical charms, will be the quality rendering her attractive to her future spouse.⁷⁰ And she should not regret her renunciation of associations with men here on earth, for her heavenly husband will prove to be a more passionate “lover” than any mere human!⁷¹ The “brides of Christ” who behave like prostitutes, even if they do not actually pronounce the words of Proverbs 7:17-18, are unworthy of this high calling.⁷²

In addition to such arguments, Chrysostom also appealed to the couples on practical grounds. All the reasons they adduced for the usefulness of the custom are challenged by him. The men claimed that they were protecting the women, helping them to manage their finances (if they were rich) or providing for their physical needs (if they were poor). Replied Chrysostom, why should men dedicated to God immerse themselves in business affairs at all? Supposedly they have embraced the ideal of poverty, yet they complicate their lives with the anxieties about money, property, servants. God wishes us to despise riches and renounce our attachments to worldly things. The story in Acts 6 contains a moral for us: the apostles turned the management of the widows’ food dole over to others when that function began to interfere with their spiritual duties.⁷³

Moreover, even if the monks asserted that they were helping poor women, what possible good could it do to provide material aid if in the process they were destroying the women’s spirits and barring the gates of heaven to them?⁷⁴ If the men argue that aiding indigent virgins is a way of demonstrating Christian charity, Chrysostom points out to them that there are plenty of old, blind, sick, and impoverished people of *both* sexes who would be fitting recipients of their generosity—not just comely young maidens.⁷⁵ If they plead that they need a woman to manage the household, make the beds, cook, and so forth, Chrysostom

67. *Quod reg.* 2 (PG 47, 516).

68. *Quod reg.* 6 (PG 47, 526).

69. *De virg.* 6.

70. *Quod reg.* 7 (PG 47, 528).

71. *Quod reg.* 9 (PG 47, 532).

72. *Quod reg.* 1 (PG 47, 515).

73. *Adv. eos* 6 (PG 47, 503).

74. *Adv. eos* 6 (PG 47, 504).

75. *Adv. eos* 7 (PG 47, 504-505).

laughs them to shame: a man could perform these tasks just as well for another man⁷⁶—and besides, then each pair would need only one bed, one set of covers, and one pillow.⁷⁷ When the women in turn complained that due to their weakness they needed a man's help, Chrysostom cleverly reminded them that the men had already pleaded *that* argument: that *they* needed a woman's aid in order to manage. Chrysostom suggested that if the women were such invaluable servants to the men, could they not help each other out, employing their domestic skills for their own benefit? Men are not able to provide women with any service which they could not perform for themselves (except, of course, with that which the virgins have supposedly renounced). If the women need someone to run errands on their behalf in public places, a servant or an older woman would be well-suited for such tasks.⁷⁸ Chrysostom's argument, we can see, was two-pronged: on the one hand, we ought to be able for the most part to attend to our own needs,⁷⁹ and, on the other, if we do require aid, a person of the same sex can more easily provide it, for men understand men's needs best, and women, women's.⁸⁰

In addition, by their absorption with housekeeping details, these men and women bind themselves in servitude to "the world," the very thing from which the state of virginity was supposed to free them.⁸¹ Instead of rejoicing in the liberty which Christ had given them, they have submitted to a new kind of slavery, the anxieties of married life,⁸² even though they were not married. Unlike the widows who with good sense rejected a second marriage as a "yoke of servitude," the *subintroductae* willingly rushed into such slavery.⁸³ Chrysostom reminded his female audience of Paul's argument in I Corinthians 7:34: the unmarried woman was to be free to care for the things of the Lord,⁸⁴ but the *agapetae* did not enjoy that liberty, what with the cooking, making of beds (Chrysostom generously granted that there was more than one),⁸⁵ and other domestic duties they must perform,⁸⁶ not to speak of the business affairs in which they often engaged.⁸⁷ It irked Chrysostom that these couples tried, in effect, to have the best of both the virginal and the married states. If they were going to live together, one senses him saying, they ought to endure

76. *Adv. eos* 9 (PG 47, 507). One wonders if Chrysostom's contemporaries believed this argument.

77. *Adv. eos* 9 (PG 47, 508).

78. *Quod reg.* 4 (PG 47, 520).

79. *Quod reg.* 4 (PG 47, 521).

80. *Adv. eos* 9 (PG 47, 508) and *Quod reg.* 4 (PG 47, 520).

81. *Hom. 19 I Cor.*, 6.

82. *Quod reg.* 8 (PG 47, 530).

83. *Quod reg.* 9 (PG 47, 530).

84. *Adv. eos* 6 (PG 47, 504).

85. *Adv. eos* 9 (PG 47, 508).

86. *Adv. eos* 9 (PG 47, 507).

87. *Adv. eos* 6 (PG 47, 503-504).

all the woes of marriage, including the screaming children, which by spiritual marriage they had avoided.⁸⁸ Probably he also thought it unfair that the *subintroductae*, relieved of the childrearing cares of married women, kept their youthful bloom until they were forty and rivalled the beauty of teen-age brides!⁸⁹ Perhaps Chrysostom secretly wished that the monks and the virgins would find their living arrangements less pleasant and agreeable than apparently they did.

Last, it plagued Chrysostom that in *syneisaktism*, the distinctive male and female characteristics and roles were overturned. The monk acquired “womanish” traits by his constant association with the female sex. By sitting with women while they spun and weaved, he absorbed women’s words and habits,⁹⁰ and became affected by the talkativeness and “servile mentality” of that sex.⁹¹ Instead of pursuing activities fit for a male, he spent his days running errands for his female companion, calling at shops to see if madame’s mirror was ready yet, if her bowl had been repaired.⁹² Chrysostom sternly reminded the monks that Christ had armed them to be soldiers in a noble fight, to cast down demons and wage spiritual warfare, not to devote their days to waiting on girls who were worth “only three obols.”⁹³ Perhaps the latter complaint touches the heart of Chrysostom’s objections: the man in such a relationship usually served the woman more than she did him.⁹⁴ Paul told us in I Corinthians 7:23, “Do not become servants of men”—and how much more we should not make ourselves servants of women!⁹⁵ These domesticated monks were as tame as lions whose manes had been clipped and whose teeth and claws broken off; the men, like their feline counterparts, had become “softer than wax.”⁹⁶ How unfitting it was for a monk who professed Christian freedom to submit himself to such servility; the peace he might have found in the celibate life had been exchanged for slavery.⁹⁷

The female virgins, for their part, also acquired undesirable and “unnatural” characteristics. They adopted lordly ways and thought it laudable that they ruled over men. In their wish to assume the dominant role, they had forgotten that women who bring men under their authority are not respected.⁹⁸ (Women honor those who rule over them, not those who submit to them, Chrysostom claimed,⁹⁹ neatly expressing

88. *Adv. eos* 1 (PG 47, 496).

89. *Ibid.*

90. *Adv. eos* 10 (PG 47, 509).

91. *Adv. eos* 11 (PG 47, 510).

92. *Adv. eos* 9 (PG 47, 508).

93. *Adv. eos* 10 (PG 47, 509).

94. *Adv. eos* 9 (PG 47, 507).

95. *Adv. eos* 10 (PG 47, 509).

96. *Adv. eos* 10 (PG 47, 510).

97. *Adv. eos* 11 (PG 47, 511).

98. *Quod reg.* 6 (PG 47, 524).

99. *Adv. eos* 11 (PG 47, 511).

the traditional view of female psychology.) It was an outrage for the virgin to try to be the “head” rather than the “body” and relegate the male to her lowly status. If such a reversal of roles was objectionable in marriage, it was even worse in the case of the virgins and the monks. These women should remember God’s word subjecting them to the male: “And your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” (Gen. 3:16) and “the head of the woman is the man” (I Cor. 11:3).¹⁰⁰ That peculiarly female vice, vanity, had led these unfortunates into a mode of life for which Chrysostom had no good word.¹⁰¹ All in all, *syneisaktism* was a practice which, to Chrysostom’s eyes, dishonored the individuals, the Church, and God, while providing no compensating benefits.

III

What, from a later point of view, can we make of the phenomenon of *syneisaktism*? Was it simply the practical advantages of communal living which recommended the custom and ensured its popularity? There is no doubt some point to this argument. In an age when convents for women were rare and in some areas unknown, spiritual marriage might be one solution to the virgin’s quest for suitable domestic arrangements.¹⁰² Some wealthy widows, such as Jerome’s friends Paula and Marcella, might be able to maintain from their own resources a household and servants, but not every young woman was so fortunately endowed. Chrysostom indicated the enormity of the problem when he reported that the Antiochene church alone in his period had over three thousand widows and virgins enrolled on its lists.¹⁰³ Would not living with a man dedicated to chastity who could help with financial and domestic matters be of great benefit to an unprotected girl? And in return the man would receive the advantages of her housekeeping services.

We doubt, however, that the popularity of *syneisaktism* resulted from practical considerations alone, even though these may have played an important role. Two other reasons present themselves for consideration. First, although Achelis professes his uncertainty about the motives of the couples,¹⁰⁴ he hints at an answer which has much to commend it: the

100. *Quod reg.* 6 (PG 47, 524). Chrysostom appears to have forgotten that the profession of virginity removed the curse of Genesis 3:16 from women, a point he made in this very treatise and elsewhere. See *Quod reg.* 8 (PG 47, 530) and *De virg.* 65.

101. *Quod reg.* 5 (PG 47, 523).

102. Jean Dumortier, “Le Mariage dans les Milieux Chrétiens d’ Antioche et de Byzance d’après Saint Jean Chrysostome,” *Lettres d’Humanité* 6 (1947): 149. Achelis, *Virgines*, p. 28, notes that many of these women were not content to take a subordinate place in a married couple’s home, assuming servant duties.

103. *Homilia 66 Matt.*, 3.

104. Archelis, *Virgines*, p. 4.

attractiveness of "Platonic love" to those who recognize in a member of the opposite sex their own visions and ideals.¹⁰⁵ Syneisaktism, we think, offered to men and women a unique opportunity for friendships which involved a high degree of emotional and spiritual intimacy. It is of interest in this regard that both Chrysostom and Jerome, outspoken critics of spiritual marriage, had longstanding relationships with women. In Chrysostom's case, it is dubious that they ever (with the exception of his love for Olympias) achieved a closeness which could be called "emotional intimacy." (His rather wooden notes to women, complaining about the weather, his indigestion, and the lack of mail do not suggest that he was "intimate" with many of his correspondents.)¹⁰⁶ To the contrary, Chrysostom expressed shock that men and women would spend as much time together as did the *subintroductae* and their male companions. From his point of view, such a way of life was inappropriate not only to virgins, but to married women as well. As he makes clear in his many treatises, wives are to be sober, quiet, and unobtrusive. They are to obey their husbands' commands and frequently recall, with humility and repentance, their implication in Eve's sin, which required them henceforth to be submissive to men.¹⁰⁷

For the virgins and their companions, all such rules had been dashed to the ground. Their intimate association to Chrysostom could only imply that the proper male and female roles had been discarded. God, he thought, had ordained women to one role and men to another, and never should the sexes doubt what these were.¹⁰⁸ Females through martyrdom (in the past) or ascetic devotion (in his own day) might be fortunate enough to appropriate some of the nobler masculine qualities (courage, for example),¹⁰⁹ but nowhere did Chrysostom indicate that women should be praised for assertiveness or the adoption of the types of behavior permitted to men. The laws of God and "nature" would be put in jeopardy if the partners in spiritual marriage veered too far in the direction of "unisexuality," or even became more like one another. The androgynous ideal was one which Chrysostom could have espoused only very tentatively, if at all.

These couples, we think, were tending toward the recognition of the possibility of friendship between the sexes, something considered improbable in the ancient world. To the classical mind, friendship in its

105. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-75.

106. Olympias was without doubt his true soul-mate. But his other letters are not nearly so personal. Chrysostom's letters are found in *PG* 52.

107. For example, see *Serm. 5 Gen.*, 1 and 3; *Hom. 26 I Cor.*, 2. See Elizabeth A. Clark, "Sexual Politics in the Writings of John Chrysostom," *The Anglican Theological Review* (Jan. 1977): 3-20.

108. *Hom. 5 Tit.*, 4.

109. *Ep. 94; De virg. 7; De S. Droside 3.*

truest sense meant a kind of parity between two people,¹¹⁰ and women, by virtue of their inferior nature and status, could thus rarely qualify as suitable candidates for friendship with men. Chrysostom was very conscious that the monks and virgins were friends; he used the word *philia* to describe their relationship on at least four occasions.¹¹¹ The fact that he thought men and women capable of such a relationship at all indicates that he was breaking with traditional attitudes. (Love between the sexes, even as the basis for marriage, was rather rare in Christian circles of the fourth century, Jean Dumortier has pointed out.)¹¹² Chrysostom, although conscious of the possibility of such friendships, was very wary of their consequences. He resolved his ambivalence by proclaiming that *philia* between a man and woman—theoretically an option—must be renounced if it makes love for Jesus impossible, as he plainly thought syneisaktism did. We want to be able to say to Christ at our future meeting, “For you and your honor we have despised intimacy and triumphed over pleasure, have troubled our souls, and set aside all *philia* and personal preference; we have chosen you and our love for you above all things.”¹¹³ To those virgins who were enmeshed in the bonds of spiritual marriage, Chrysostom penned his warning words, “You must be ready to bear and suffer all things rather than desert the *philia* of Christ.”¹¹⁴

Today, when men and women are re-examining their sexual roles and relationships, it is tempting to depict these early Christian couples as trying in the face of criticism and condemnation to create new forms of relationship, to discard the older stereotypical ideas of appropriate sexual behavior. Alas, most of our information about them and their lives comes from the accounts of their accusers. We will probably never know how they would have described their own relationships.

But is it out of place to imagine that they would have stressed the spiritual component of their association? Would they have pictured themselves as attempting to live the life of the Kingdom here and now? Would they have argued that God had promised to the followers of his Son superhuman power to withstand temptations to which ordinary mortals might succumb?¹¹⁵ Would they have claimed, with Paul, that in Jesus there is “no male and female” (Gal. 3:28)? Wayne Meeks wrote, in discussing Paul’s encounters with the early Christian communities, “it is at least a plausible conjecture that the symbolic identification of male and female among them was a significant part of their ‘realized eschatol-

110. See Aristotle, *Eth. Nic.* VIII, 6-8 (1158b1-1159b20).

111. *Adv. eos* 10 (PG 47, 510) and 13 (PG 47, 514); *Quod reg.* 6 (PG 47, 524) and 8 (PG 47, 529).

112. Dumortier, “Mariage,” p. 107.

113. *Adv. eos* 13 (PG 47, 514).

114. *Quod reg.* 6 (PG 47, 525).

115. Achelis, *Virgines*, p. 74.

ogy.”¹¹⁶ We think that such an understanding might also be applicable to the phenomenon of spiritual marriage. Although Chrysostom urged his audience to live like the intellectual and incorporeal powers above,¹¹⁷ he clearly wished to exempt the mingling of the sexes from that foretaste of heavenly life. The monks and the virgins, on the other hand, perhaps thought that God had already given them the impassibility of the angels. We know at least that they argued they had been granted superior strength to resist sexual sin,¹¹⁸ although Chrysostom believed that people who talked in this fashion fancied they were living among stones, not among flesh-and-blood humans.¹¹⁹ His response to their position is found in the quotation with which we began the paper: it is only later on, in the heavenly realms, after death, that men and women will be able to enjoy free associations with impunity. From his point of view, the *subintroductae* and the monks had prematurely assumed that they had shed their bodily desires. Chrysostom, less given to illusions of heavenly incorporation, felt obliged to remind them they were still of the earth, earthy.

116. Wayne A. Meeks, “The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity,” *History of Religions* 13 (1973-1974): 202.

117. *Adv. eos* 13 (PG 47, 513).

118. *Adv. eos* 4 (PG 47, 500).

119. *Adv. eos* 5 (PG 47, 501).