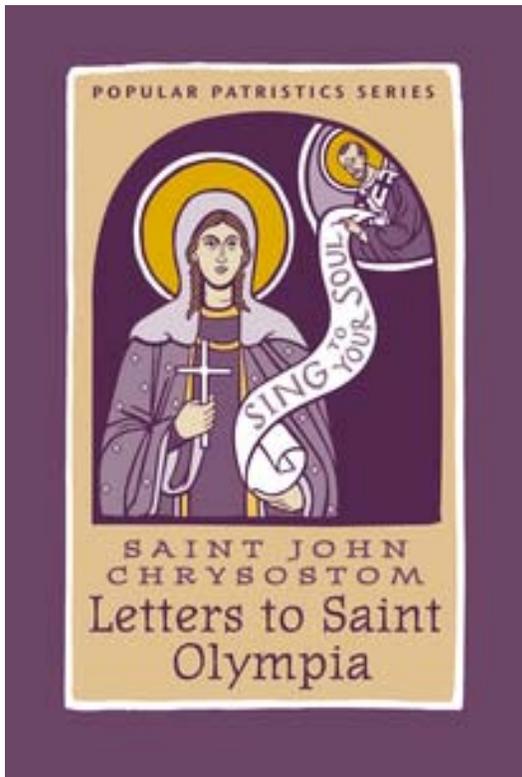


**Saint John Chrysostom, *Letters to Saint Olympia*.
St. Vladimir's Seminary Press: New York, 2016.
Translated, with an Introduction by David C. Ford.**



By Ron Dart

There has been a dearth of sorts in the English speaking world of a solid book that covers, in thoughtful depth and detail, the letters that Archbishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom sent to one of his dearest friends and disciples, Olympia, in his painful exile (AD 404-407). Written at the end of Chrysostom's life, in his final exile, the letters communicate the unshaken faith of the saint who endured much persecution in his life.

Chrysostom, as most who are acutely aware of the politics of his time, came to the golden city of Constantinople in AD 398 from another home of an ancient patriarchate, Antioch, to become the Archbishop. Constantinople was rife with political intrigue and Chrysostom, the golden-mouthed preacher, brooked little folly or foolishness from clerics, laity, leading political leaders and the high mucky mucks of the day. This, of course, led him to many a clash and tension with those in the church and state who opposed his vision of the church and a just society where tales of two cities dominated.

Olympia had established herself (coming from a wealthy and aristocratic family) as the leading spiritual director and Amma of sorts of Constantinople when Chrysostom arrived in AD 398. Olympia had freed her servants, given much of her property and possessions to the poor and needy and established a convent in Constantinople (that became a home and haven for many women). It was predictable, therefore, that when John arrived in Constantinople, he and Olympia (given their leadership abilities and ascetic life-styles) would work closely together to deepen and enrich the meaning of Christianity in a major see of Christendom.

The six years Chrysostom and Olympia worked closely together (AD 398-404) knit them together in a way that is most rare and unique. When John was, as anticipated, sent into exile in 404, it was natural that Olympia would feel part of herself had been severed. It was natural that Olympia would feel deserted, alone and opposed (for she identified with John and his followers contra those who supported the emperor and his wife). Olympia often felt discouraged, despondent and abandoned. Many were the women she had to shepherd, much was the opposition she faced and few were those who could, at a deeper level, console her soul.

David Ford has, in this superb missive of sorts, offered the curious reader, a finely wrought overview of the life of Olympia, some of the major themes of the seventeen letters Chrysostom wrote to Olympia and, much to the delight of the students of this historic period, the letters themselves. This is the first time in English the letters from Chrysostom have been brought together in the way they have. Sadly, the letters from Olympia have not survived, but much can be inferred from the letters by Chrysostom to Olympia.

Ford has brought together many an ample footnote for those who are interested in going further along the historic context and ethos of John and Olympia's period of history. The larger themes that stand back of the letters such as internal church politics, church and state clashes and tensions are as much with us today as then. I was fortunate, many a decade ago, to do a Master's degree at Regent College (1979-1981) on John Cassian. Cassian, like Chrysostom, suffered the theological clashes and church politics, and it was Chrysostom who sheltered him in 399 from the intrigues of Alexandria and Constantinople.

It might be significant to note that many of John's letters, perhaps, in trying to be pastoral, leaned too far in the direction of the mind as a means of curing despondency and depression rather than the heart. The task, of course, when being pastoral, is discerning how to address heart and head, feelings and mind. I think it can be noted that John leaned too far in one direction and this can be seen as a limitation in his letters to Olympia.

The sheer beauty of *Saint John Chrysostom: Letters to Saint Olympia* is the way larger issues are played out in the agony of personal relationships and the way leaders of the church attempt, in their imperfect and finite way, to support one another. The letters by John to Olympia are landmark testaments to affinities and friendships that weather the storms of their time. The ending is not, at one level, pleasant. John died in exile, Olympia died a year later. It is the faithfulness of John and Olympia in the midst of demanding struggles and many a disappointment that shines through in these letters and makes this a burnished gold book. Do read and inwardly digest this bounty of a correspondence. The faith journey will have much more integrity as a result of sitting with these two all too human saints of the church. Many thanks, of course, to David Ford, for his yeoman's labour in bringing forth a much neglected correspondence. The light from the past still shines clear and bright.

About the reviewer: Ron Dart, the author of more than 20 books, teaches political science, philosophy, and religion at University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, BC. He is committed to furthering Anglican-Orthodox dialogue.