

Historic Commentary

(Eighth Sunday after Pentecost - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Mark 6:14-29 from Selected Church Fathers

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Mark 6](#), from a 13th century document called the *Catena Aurea* that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the Patristics and others.

[Tertullian](#): Set aside for a moment the term “prison.” Just call it a temporary retirement. Even though the body is imprisoned, even though the flesh is confined, everything still remains open to the spirit. Walk back and forth, my spirit, not thinking of shady walks or long cloisters, but of the road that leads directly to God. As often as you shall walk in this way in the spirit, so often shall you find yourself not in prison.

[Chrysostom](#): John saw a man that was a tyrant overthrowing the divine commands on marriage. With boldness, he proclaimed in the midst of the forum, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother Philip’s wife.” So we learn from him to admonish our fellow servant as an equal. Do not shrink from the duty of chastising a brother, even though one may be required to die for it. Now do not make this cold reply: “What does it matter to me? I have nothing in common with him.” With the devil alone we have nothing in common, but with all humanity we have many things in common. All partake of the same nature with us. They inhabit the same earth. They are nourished with the same food. They have the same Lord. They have received the same laws. They are invited to the same blessings with ourselves. Let us not say then that we have nothing in common with them.

[Chrysostom](#): Mark says that Herod exceedingly honored the man [John], even when reproved. So great a thing is virtue.

[Augustine](#): A girl dances, a mother rages, there is rash swearing in the midst of the luxurious feast, and an impious fulfillment of what was sworn.

[Chrysostom](#): So the princess danced and, after the dance, committed another more serious sin. For she persuaded that senseless man to promise with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. Do you see how easily swearing makes one witless? Thus, whatever she asked, he swore to give. What, then, if she were to have asked for your head, Herod? What if she were to have asked for your whole kingdom? Yet he took no thought of these things. The devil had set his trap, making it strong, and from the moment the oath was complete, he both cast his snares and stretched his net on every side. The request was abominable,

but she persuaded him, and he gave the order to bridle John's holy tongue. But even now it continues to speak. For even today in every church, you can hear John still crying aloud through the Gospels and saying: "It is not lawful for you to have the wife of your brother Philip." He cut off the head, but he did not cut off the voice. He curbed the tongue, but he did not curb the accusation. Do you see what swearing leads to? It cuts off the heads of prophets. You saw the bait. Dread, then, the ruin it brings.

So much did he value his kingdom, such a captive was he to his passion, that he would give it to her for her dancing. And why do you wonder that this happened then, when even now, after so much instruction in sound doctrine, many men give away their soul for the dancing of these effeminate young men with no oath needed? They have been made captives by their pleasure and are led around like sheep wherever the wolf may drag them.

Chrysostom: It is indeed a haven of safety if we do not swear at all. So whatever storms burst upon us we are in no danger of sinking. Whether it be through anger or insult or passion, be what it may, the soul is stayed securely. Even though one might have vented some chance word that ought not to have been spoken, one is not laying oneself absolutely under necessity or law.... For it is indeed a snare of Satan, this swearing. Let us burst these cords. Let us bring ourselves into a condition in which it will be easy not to swear.

Ambrose: A good disposition ought to be open and straightforward, so that one may utter words without deceit, and possess one's soul with singleness of intent, and not delude another with false words, and not promise anything dishonorable. If he has made such a promise, it is far better for him not to fulfill it, than to fulfill what is shameful. Sometimes people bind themselves by a solemn oath, and, though they come to know that they ought not to have made the promise, fulfill it in consideration of their oath. This is what Herod did. For he made a shameful promise of reward to a dancer—and then cruelly performed it.

Ambrose: When it is said that "the king was sorry," that does not indicate genuine repentance on the part of the king, but rather a confession of his guilt. Thus, according to the design of divine governance, those who do evil condemn themselves by their own confession. But what was the motive, in this case: "Because of his oath and his guests"! What could be more vile than a murder done to not displease one's guests?

Ambrose: It was shameful in the first place for a kingdom to be promised for a dance. And it was cruel, in the second place, for a prophet to be sacrificed for the sake of an oath.

Chrysostom: Note well the weakness of the tyrant compared to the power of the one in prison. Herod was not strong enough to silence his own tongue. Having opened it, he opened up countless other mouths in its place and with its help. As for John, he immediately inspired fear in Herod after his murder—for fear was disturbing Herod's conscience to such an extent that he believed John had been raised from the dead and was performing miracles! In our own day and through all future time, throughout all the world, John continues to refute Herod, both through himself and through others. For each

person repeatedly reading this Gospel says: “It is not lawful for you to have the wife of Philip your brother.” And even apart from reading the Gospel, in assemblies and meetings at home or in the market, in every place ... even to the very ends of the earth, you will hear this voice and see that righteous man even now still crying out, resounding loudly, reproving the evil of the tyrant. He will never be silenced nor the reproof at all weakened by the passing of time.

Ambrose: Look, most savage king, at the spectacle of your feast. Stretch out your right hand and see the streams of holy blood pouring down between your fingers. Nothing is lacking in your cruelty. The hunger for such unheard-of cruelty could not be satisfied by banquets, or the thirst by goblets. So as you drink the blood pouring from the still flowing veins of the cut-off head, behold those eyes. Even in death, those eyes are the witnesses of your crime, turning away from the sight of the delicacies. The eyes are closing, not so much owing to death, as to horror of excess. That bloodless golden mouth, whose sentence you could not endure, is silent, and yet it is still dreaded. Meanwhile the tongue, which even after death is apt to observe its duty as when living, continues to condemn the incest with trembling motion.