

Letter to Arsacius

Based in part on the translation of Edward J. Chinnock, *A Few Notes on Julian and a Translation of His Public Letters* (London: David Nutt, 1901) pp. 75-78 as quoted in D. Brendan Nagle and Stanley M. Burstein, *The Ancient World: Readings in Social and Cultural History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ; Prentice Hall, 1995) pp. 314-315.

The Emperor Julian, who reigned around the year 360, like all Emperors, was Pontifex Maximus, Chief Priest of the State Religion. He became known as Julian the Apostate for abandoning Christianity in favor of traditional Roman paganism.

The religion of the Greeks does not yet prosper as I would wish, on account of those who profess it. But the gifts of the gods are great and splendid, better than any prayer or any hope ... Indeed, a little while ago no one would have dared even to pray for a such change, and so complete a one in so short a space of time.¹ Why then do we think that this is sufficient and do not observe how the kindness of Christians to strangers, their care for the burial of their dead, and the sobriety of their lifestyle has done the most to advance their cause?

Each of these things, I think, ought really to be practiced by us. It is not sufficient for you alone to practice them, but so must all the priests in Galatia² without exception. Either make these men good by shaming them, persuade them to become so or fire them ... Secondly, exhort the priests neither to approach a theater nor to drink in a tavern, nor to profess any base or infamous trade. Honor those who obey and expel those who disobey.

Erect many hostels, one in each city, in order that strangers may enjoy my kindness, not only those of our own faith but also of others whosoever is in want of money. I have just been devising a plan by which you will be able to get supplies. For I have ordered that every year throughout all Galatia 30,000 modii of grain and 60,000 pints of wine shall be provided. The fifth part of these I order to be expended on the poor who serve the priests, and the rest must be distributed from me to strangers and beggars. For it is disgraceful when no Jew is a beggar and the impious Galileans³ support our poor in addition to their own; everyone is able to see that our coreligionists are in want of aid from us. Teach also those who profess the Greek religion to contribute to such services, and the villages of the Greek religion to offer the first-fruits to the gods. Accustom those of the Greek religion to such benevolence, teaching them that this has been our work from ancient times. Homer, at any rate, made Eumaeus say: "O Stranger, it is not lawful for me, even if one poorer than you should come, to dishonor a stranger. For all strangers and beggars are from Zeus. The gift is small, but it is precious."⁴ Do not therefore let others outdo us in good deeds while we ourselves are disgraced by laziness; rather, let us not quite abandon our piety toward the gods ...

While proper behavior in accordance with the laws of the city will obviously be the concern of the governors of the cities, you for your part [as a priest] must take care to encourage

people not to violate the laws of the gods since they are holy ... Above all you must exercise philanthropy. From it result many other goods, and indeed that which is the greatest blessing of all, the goodwill of the gods ...

We ought to share our goods with all men, but most of all with the respectable, the helpless, and the poor, so that they have at least the essentials of life. I claim, even though it may seem paradoxical, that it is a holy deed to share our clothes and food with the wicked: we give, not to their moral character but to their human character. Therefore I believe that even prisoners deserve the same kind of care. This type of kindness will not interfere with the process of justice, for among the many imprisoned and awaiting trial some will be found guilty, some innocent. It would be cruel indeed if out of consideration for the innocent we should not allow some pity for the guilty, or on account of the guilty we should behave without mercy and humanity to those who have done no wrong ... How can the man who, while worshipping Zeus the God of Companions, sees his neighbors in need and does not give them a dime—how can he think he is worshipping Zeus properly? ...

Priests ought to make a point of not doing impure or shameful deeds or saying words or hearing talk of this type. We must therefore get rid of all offensive jokes and licentious associations. What I mean is this: no priest is to read Archilochus or Hipponax or anyone else who writes poetry as they do. They should stay away from the same kind of stuff in Old Comedy. Philosophy alone is appropriate for us priests. Of the philosophers, however, only those who put the gods before them as guides of their intellectual life are acceptable, like Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics ... only those who make people reverent ... not the works of Pyrrho and Epicurus ... We ought to pray often to the gods in private and in public, about three times a day, but if not that often, at least in the morning and at night.

No priest is anywhere to attend shameful theatrical shows or to have one performed at his own house; it is in no way appropriate. Indeed, if it were possible to get rid of such shows altogether from the theater and restore the theaters, purified, to Dionysus as in the olden days, I would certainly have tried to bring this about. But since I thought that this was out of the question, and even if possible would for other reasons be inexpedient, I did not even try. But I do insist that priests stay away from the licentiousness of the theaters and leave them to the people. No priest is to enter a theater, have an actor or a chariot driver as a friend, or allow a dancer or mime into his house. I allow to attend the sacred games those who want to, that is, they may attend only those games from which women are forbidden to attend not only as participants but even as spectators.

¹ I.e., the arrival of Julian himself, a reforming traditionalist, on the throne.

² A region in Asia Minor, modern Turkey.

³ The name given by Julian to Christians.

⁴ Julian is quoting from the *Odyssey*, 14-531.