

Order of Malta Spiritual Reflection
Solemnity of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist
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Today our Order celebrates the birth of its patron, Saint John the Baptist. In this reflection I want to focus in on the uniqueness of John the Baptist, because he really is unlike any other saint of the Church. Even the fact of this *feast day* is remarkable, since there are only two other 'Nativities' that we celebrate in the Church's calendar: the nativity of the Blessed Virgin and the nativity of Christ. So clearly, something very important is going on with the Baptist, if he is being placed in such illustrious company as God and his own Mother!

In a nutshell, what it comes down to is this. What makes John the Baptist so unique has everything to do with when and how he lived out his vocation. He bridges the Old and New Testaments, the fulfillment of the long tradition of patriarchs and prophets and also the first evangelist. He stands at the very beginning of the Christian message... the beginning of the dawn of grace upon the world.

And what we are celebrating today is the beginning of that beginning. The birth of John, as we hear it narrated to us in the Gospel of Luke, is an event which was something truly remarkable, and yet also familiar in the Scriptures in its general pattern. There's a familiar situation here: an elderly husband and wife, good and pious people, and yet not blessed with the gift of a child. We see the exact same situation with Abraham and Sarah. We see it again with the birth of the hero Samson. And yet, while the situation is familiar, the details are something new and different.

I think we know the story: Zechariah, confronted by an archangel while in the Holy of Holies carrying out his priestly duties, has the nerve to question the news that he's receiving. Accordingly, he is struck dumb. He only regains his power of speech, as we hear proclaimed in the Gospel for today's feast, by affirming that the name of the child would be exactly what the angel said it should be: John, a name that bucks the social convention of his time, that demanded that he should name his child after his father's name. But it was the will of heaven that this child should be named a name that means *God is gracious*.

We might ask ourselves in hearing all of this: Why does the Gospel give so much attention to these events, fascinating as they are? Imagine if you had never read the

Gospels before and happened upon Luke and picked it up. He spends the whole first chapter speaking, not about the main character, but about this fellow John. Why does the Evangelist put such an outsize focus on someone who is very clear in saying that he is *not* the Messiah?

Maybe it's because of the very express honor that Christ himself pays to John. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus honors the prophet with these words: *Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist.* That affirmation has firmly cemented the place of John in the theology and devotion of the Church, because they are striking words. One interesting legacy of that statement is to be seen in certain traditional depictions of the Last Judgment. As Christ sits enthroned in heaven, separating the sheep from the goats, it was common for centuries to see two chosen advocates interceding for sinners, picked out from all the saints of heaven: and they are the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist.

Even so, there is some irony in those words that Christ spoke. John certainly did not see *himself* as “great” — in fact, he did not see himself as worthy enough to baptize Jesus or even to carry his sandals.

This is because the “greatness” that Jesus refers to concerning John was not a product of his own efforts and actions, but had everything to do with his divine vocation. This greatness is a gift, freely given by God, and God is pleased to use it as he wishes. It's also essential to note that immediately after stating that John is the greatest “among those born of women,” Jesus says, “Yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he”. More on this paradox in a moment!

One reason that Jesus called John the Baptist the “greatest” was that John held the unique and unrepeatable honor of being chosen by God as the forerunner to the Messiah. John's mission was to personally prepare the world for Christ's arrival. His ministry was predicted in Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1. You'll recognize these verses:

*A voice of one calling:
“In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.*

That's the verse from Isaiah, echoed again the Gospels.

The verse from Malachi is as follows:

I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come, says the Lord Almighty.

(A note of interest on some of the linguistic aspects of that passage... the word 'messenger' in Greek is *angelos*, so the word 'angel' literally means 'messenger.' It's the word that a Greek writer would have used to refer to any courier or bearer of news. Because of this connection, Eastern iconography often depicts John the Baptist with wings, like any of the other angelic messengers.)

John was chosen to be the herald who introduced to the world the Lord of all history. It was this introduction that accredited Jesus before the crowds and leaders of the people, some of whom believed in Jesus, and many of whom did not.

John was also the "greatest" in that God had chosen him to break the 430 years of divine silence that had existed since the prophet Malachi. He represents the bridge from the Old Testament to the New, as his preaching was the end of the Law and the beginning of the Promise. He was the last in the long line of prophets who predicted Christ, yet he was the only one who could actually see Christ in the flesh. Moses, Isaiah, and the rest of the prophets had pointed to a far-distant personage they could see only faintly. John pointed at an actual human being who stood directly in front of him. No other prophet had that privilege.

Let's turn back to that paradoxical statement from Matthew 11 is: *Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.* We might ask: how can John be the greatest, if even the "least in the kingdom" is *greater* than John? The answer actually has to do with *our own* unique position in history. John died without seeing the fullness of God's plan fulfilled in Christ. He never saw the crucifixion or the resurrection. We can exceed even the greatness of John the Baptist if we understand these events and live with the Paschal Mystery foremost in our minds and hearts. Besides, the 'greatness' of the Kingdom of Heaven is not like the 'greatness' of this world. Perhaps it is better shared than compared.

Alright; I think all of that expresses some of the uniqueness of John. Given the power and special position that he enjoys in salvation history, I'd argue that the Order itself is imbued with a certain spirituality derived from our patron.

John is best understood as a *type*, that is, as a pattern that every Christian must follow. This is our calling too — to announce the reality of Christ to the world; to call others to change their lives accordingly; to point him out to those who don't know or recognize him, and to explain the meaning of all these things to those who don't understand. In art, you'll notice, John is almost always depicted pointing away from himself toward Jesus.

This is every Christian's mission — for our own egos and desires and plans to 'decrease,' while the grace of Christ increases within us.

Even so, this 'decreasing' is not the negation of our individuality, but really the fullest flowering of God's plan for us. Each of us was created directly by God and given a unique personality and genius. Then, when we were baptized, we were made partners with Christ in making his Kingdom present in this world by spreading the Gospel — and you and I are called to do this *particularly* through our vocation to the Order of Malta.

This is a vocation that we fulfill with our words, but most of all by the example of our lives and the deeds and works which form our witness to the world. All that we are and all that we do should be a pointing toward Christ. Like John, we are called to be *the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.'*

That is the sense in which I mean that we have a "Johannine" spirituality as an Order. Our unique role in the Church comes from Saint John's unique role in the history of salvation. To the wider world, the Order is marked most of all by its works of charity towards the poor and the sick. There is no greater evangelization than to practice charity towards our neighbor. Nothing is more convincing of the truth of our faith — you might say, nothing is more convincing as a *defense of the faith* — than to show people what that faith looks like when it is lived out generously, selflessly, and with the utmost charity.

Each one of us, in contributing our particular gifts and talents to the Order and dedicating and *rededicating* ourselves to its mission, becomes like a modern-day John the Baptist: called to facilitate an encounter between Christ and a world that is crying out for his presence.

With all of that in mind, and in the spirit of our patron, I want to conclude this reflection by imparting to you all the solemn blessing of today's feast from the

Missal of our Order.

May God, the source and origin of all blessing,
who has placed the Military Order of Jerusalem
under the protection of Saint John the Baptist,
fill you with joy and peace at the celebration of his birth.

May Christ, whose coming John hailed
by leaping while still in his mother's womb,
fill you with the grace of sanctification.

May the Holy Spirit,
who filled the Precursor of the Lord from his mother's womb,
give you integrity in the faith, endurance in hope,
and an abundance of charity.

And may the blessing of Almighty God,
the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
come down upon you all and remain with you forever.