

# The Birth of St. John the Baptist

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Today the Church celebrates the birth of St. John the Baptist. This is most extraordinary and should be the cause for wonderment.

First, the Church regards this birth as so important that it takes precedence over the usual Sunday celebration.

Second, as a rule the Church does not celebrate birthdays because Church does not celebrate sinful human life, but holy human life. As a general rule the life that comes from the womb is sinful. That is one reason why we baptize infants.

So the exceptions to this rule are significant: Jesus Christ himself, his Mother, the sinless Virgin Mary, and St. John the Baptist. I would think St. Joseph could be added to that company, but in any case we find St. John the Baptist in the midst of a most select group indeed.

But who is this man, John, who is so important that the Church celebrates his birth and that his testimony about Jesus has become an integral part of the Gospel of salvation? Why do we celebrate his birth?

We celebrate his birth because he was sanctified in the womb of his mother, Elizabeth. We have that on the authority of Scripture. The Angel Gabriel announced beforehand to Zechariah: *He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb.* (Lk 1:15) This was fulfilled in the mystery of the Visitation, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, who had newly conceived Jesus in her womb, and the child John leapt for joy in his mother's womb, sensing the presence of the Savior.

The uniqueness of the sanctification seems also to be the reason for the curious insistence on his name, which was first given by the angel. The name, John, which is derived from the Hebrew, Yochanan, means "the grace of the Lord". The one who was sent to bear witness to the true light, the author of grace, and the bestower of the gift of the Holy Spirit, was the first to receive the gift of grace after the entrance of Jesus into the world.

Now we know something about the extraordinary grace bestowed upon this man, John, such that we celebrate his birth into this world of sin and death. The grace of his birth, however, was given in view of the importance of his mission. His mission too is a cause for great wonderment.

The other great John, that is the Apostle and Evangelist, tells us:

*There was a man sent by God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. (Jn 1:6-7)*

These words are rather paradoxical. Walk outside on a sunny day – do you need anyone to testify to the light of the sun? Isn't light what is most evident and most visible? Isn't light what makes it possible for us to see whatever else we see?

Who then needs a witness to testify to the light? Except someone who was born blind? That indeed is our native condition since the sin of Adam. We were all spiritually blind from birth, deprived of the light of grace.

The light of grace is itself a reflection of the eternal light of God. Again, the Apostle John writes, *God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. (1 Jn 1:5)*

God is light: He is the light of pure existence, the source and creator of all that exists; the light of pure goodness and bestower of every good gift; the light of true wisdom and the source of intelligence and knowledge.

Nevertheless, to the natural human mind, darkened by sin, he is the hidden God. Scientists search out the secrets of the created world, while remaining blind to the eternal light that has both kindled their own understanding and authored the intelligible laws they discover.

Again the Apostle John writes: *He was in the world, and the world was through him, yet the world knew him not. (Jn 1:10)*

So the eternal light of God that eternally kindles the Light from Light, the only begotten Son of God, set the begotten light on a lampstand, the sacred humanity of Jesus Christ, so as to give light to all who dwell in the house of the world. (cf. Mt 5:15)

Even then the sin darkened mind was unable to recognize the light on the lampstand unless God sent a witness to testify to the light.

Indeed, in this life we remain incapable of seeing the true light, but if we receive the testimony, and receive thereby the lesser light of faith, then we can at least believe in the true light and learn to walk now by faith, rather than by sight. In that way we hope to come even to the vision of the eternal light.

We need testimony; we need witnesses in order to believe. That means that faith can never be a purely private matter. Faith can never be just something between me and Jesus or between me and God. An individualistic faith that rejects witnesses, both the written witnesses and the living witnesses, walks in the dangerous darkness of illusion.

The Church, one, holy, catholic, and apostolic is founded on the testimony of the Apostles. Still, it seems that God judge the apostolic testimony insufficient. For this reason the testimony of the John the Baptist, the precursor, is also part of the Gospel.

Yet the Baptist, though he received the grace of Jesus Christ, announced his coming, and pointed him out to others, never became a disciple. That is important. Had the Baptist become a disciple of Jesus, people would have said (as they said of the Apostles, tried to say of Jesus himself, and will say of us today), "Your testimony is not valid; you are biased and just trying to justify your own faith." Such are the ways of human thinking.

Further, as a witness to Jesus, the true light, John was the last and the greatest in the line of the Old Testament prophets. His testimony is the confirmation and culmination of Old Testament prophecy. His presence in the New Testament, as a representative of the Old, bears witness not just to Jesus, but to the perennial validity of the testimony of the Old Testament. John is a witness to the continuity between the Old and the New. He will warn us against setting the two in opposition to one another. He will teach us that finally we will always need the Old Testament for right faith in Jesus and a right understanding of his person and his work.

The testimony of John the Baptist is so important that his supreme testimony remains enshrined in every Mass, where he continues to point out Jesus, the sacrificial victim, the Lamb of God upon the altar:

*Behold, the Lamb of God! Behold, him who takes away the sin of the world!*