

Nativity of St. John the Baptist, B – June 24, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 850 words

The feast day of most saints in our liturgical calendar is on the day of their “birthday into heaven” – that is, the day of their death. This is because they were not born saints into this world; no, they were born with Original Sin, like everyone, and had to contend with their sinfulness throughout their lives, till they reached the perfection of sanctity when they died. Saints are not born; they are made. But out of all of the saints, there are three for whom we also celebrate their birthdays into this world: the first, of course, is the saint – the holy one – our Lord Jesus Christ, whose birth we celebrate on December 25. The second is the greatest of all the saints, the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose birth we celebrate on September 8. And the third is St. John the Baptist, said by our Lord to be the “greatest born of women”.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the celebration of his birth even supersedes our regular Ordinary Time Sunday.

Yes, we celebrate their births into heaven, so to speak, also. We observe the Ascension of Our Lord, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and, in the month of August, the Beheading of St. John the Baptist. But we also celebrate their earthly births, because they were born already holy. Our Lord’s birth needs no explanation. And we know the dogma of the Immaculate Conception – how God preserved the Blessed Virgin Mary from all stain of Original Sin from the first moment of her conception. St. John the Baptist, on the other hand, was conceived with the sin of Adam on his soul, but recall the scene where the pregnant Virgin Mary visits her pregnant relative, Elizabeth, John’s mother: she was filled with the Holy Spirit, and the infant in her womb “leapt for joy”.<sup>2</sup> Traditionally we believe that John was sanctified at that very moment;<sup>3</sup> thus, he was filled with God’s grace and was born and lived in that grace.

St. John the Baptist’s nativity had not only been foreknown by God but was also foretold by prophets. Each one of us, without exception, was foreknown by God; he knew each one of us from eternity and chose for us to be born at a certain point in time. We are all here today not as products of chance but as products of a plan. And our lives are meant to be a further unfolding of that plan. But John’s life was unique because it was also foretold: so important a role would he have in salvation history, that it was announced in advance. He was to be the bridge between the old and the new covenants – the last of the prophets; the one who would prepare the way for the fullness of God’s revelation in Christ. John knew this; thus he said of Jesus, “He must increase; I must decrease”.<sup>4</sup> How beautiful it is for us who live in the Northern Hemisphere, then, that with this feast the days begin to shorten, and with Christmas the days begin to lengthen.

The Baptist’s birth was also surrounded by signs and wonders – that is, indications of divine favor. First, there was the fact that his parents conceived well past the normal childbearing age. Then Zechariah, his father, was struck dumb, but his tongue was loosed when he later announced John’s name. That name itself was unique, as it broke with the tradition of using family names. We know how portentous names are in Scripture; and you parents know how important it was to choose just the right names for your children. And then all these things had a ripple effect, as they were widely discussed by the people of the surrounding communities: “What, then, will this child be?”<sup>5</sup> they asked. What, indeed: one of the most unique lives recorded; a man robed in camel hair and eating locusts and honey, living a radical existence in the desert, preaching fearlessly to the eager crowds, bearing witness to Christ to the very end!

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 7:28; Matthew 11:11.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1:44.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III, q. 27, a. 6.

<sup>4</sup> John 3:30.

<sup>5</sup> From the Sunday gospel for this feast (there is a separate set of readings for the Vigil).

What can we take away from this important feast? St. John the Baptist was the unique precursor to Christ's first coming. John lived in humility and austerity for the one who would come in humility and austerity – for the purpose ultimately of dying on a cross to save us. But now that Christ has first come, founded his Church, died, rose from the dead, and ascended, we await his final coming in glory. Who prepares the way for that? It is his Church that does so, and that means each one of us, her members. Every generation lives in expectation of that coming, which will be at a day and time we do not expect; thus, each of us is called to live as a precursor, also. How am I preparing the way for Christ: in my heart, in my home, in my workplace, in my community, in my world? Am I ready now, and am I contributing to preparing his way for others? May the great St. John help us to take stock – and obtain for us the graces we need!