



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Castel Gandolfo

Wednesday, 29 August 2012

[\[Video\]](#)

Martyrdom of St John the Baptist

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This last Wednesday of the month of August is the liturgical Memorial of the martyrdom of St John the Baptist, the Precursor of Jesus. In the Roman Calendar, he is the only saint whose birth and death, through martyrdom, are celebrated on the same day (in his case, 24 June). Today's Memorial commemoration dates back to the dedication of a crypt in Sebaste, Samaria, where his head had already been venerated since the middle of the fourth century. The devotion later extended to Jerusalem, both in the Churches of the East and in Rome, with the title of the Beheading of St John the Baptist. In the Roman Martyrology reference is made to a second discovery of the precious relic, translated for the occasion to the Church of San Silvestro in Campo Marzio, Rome.

These small historical references help us to understand how ancient and deeply-rooted is the veneration of John the Baptist. His role in relation to Jesus stands out clearly in the Gospels. St Luke in particular recounts his birth, his life in the wilderness and his preaching, while in today's Gospel St Mark tells us of his dramatic death. John the Baptist began his preaching under the Emperor Tiberius in about 27-28 A.D., and the unambiguous invitation he addressed to the people, who flocked to listen to him, was to prepare the way to welcome the Lord, to straighten the crooked paths of their lives through a radical conversion of heart (cf. Lk 3:4).

However, John the Baptist did not limit himself to teaching repentance or conversion. Instead, in recognizing Jesus as the “Lamb of God” who came to take away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29), he had the profound humility to hold up Jesus as the One sent by God, drawing back so that he might take the lead, and be heard and followed. As his last act the Baptist witnessed with his blood to faithfulness to God’s commandments, without giving in or withdrawing, carrying out his mission to the very end. In the 9th century the Venerable Bede says in one of his Homilies: “St John gave his life for [Christ]. He was not ordered to deny Jesus Christ, but was ordered to keep silent about the truth” (cf. *Homily 23*: CCL 122, 354). And he did not keep silent about the truth and thus died for Christ who is the Truth. Precisely for love of the truth he did not stoop to compromises and did not fear to address strong words to anyone who had strayed from God’s path.

We see this great figure, this force in the Passion, in resistance to the powerful. We wonder: what gave birth to this life, to this interiority so strong, so upright, so consistent, spent so totally for God in preparing the way for Jesus? The answer is simple: it was born from the relationship with God, from prayer, which was the thread that guided him throughout his existence. John was the divine gift for which his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying for so many years (cf. Lk 1:13); a great gift, humanly impossible to hope for, because they were both advanced in years and Elizabeth was barren (cf. Lk 1:7); yet nothing is impossible to God (cf. Lk 1:36). The announcement of this birth happened precisely in the place of prayer, in the temple of Jerusalem, indeed it happened when Zechariah had the great privilege of entering the holiest place in the temple to offer incense to the Lord (cf. Lk 1:8-20). John the Baptist’s birth was also marked by prayer: the *Benedictus*, the hymn of joy, praise and thanksgiving which Zechariah raises to the Lord and which we recite every morning in Lauds, exalts God’s action in history and prophetically indicates the mission of their son John: to go before the Son of God made flesh to prepare his ways (cf. Lk 1:67-79).

The entire existence of the Forerunner of Jesus was nourished by his relationship with God, particularly the period he spent in desert regions (cf. Lk 1:80). The desert regions are places of temptation but also where man acquires a sense of his own poverty because once deprived of material support and security, he understands that the only steadfast reference point is God himself. John the Baptist, however, is not only a man of prayer, in permanent contact with God, but also a guide in this relationship. The Evangelist Luke, recalling the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, the *Our Father*, notes that the request was formulated by the disciples in these words: “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his own disciples” (cf. Lk 11:1).

Dear brothers and sisters, celebrating the martyrdom of St John the Baptist reminds us too, Christians of this time, that with love for Christ, for his words and for the Truth, we cannot stoop to compromises. The Truth is Truth; there are no compromises. Christian life demands, so to speak, the “martyrdom” of daily fidelity to the Gospel, the courage, that is, to let Christ grow within us and let him be the One who guides our thought and our actions. However, this can happen in our life only if we have a solid relationship with God. Prayer is not time wasted, it does not take away time

from our activities, even apostolic activities, but exactly the opposite is true: only if we are able to have a faithful, constant and trusting life of prayer will God himself give us the ability and strength to live happily and serenely, to surmount difficulties and to witness courageously to him. St John the Baptist, intercede for us, that we may be ever able to preserve the primacy of God in our life. Thank you.

To special groups:

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Indonesia, Japan and Malta. Today, the Church celebrates the Martyrdom of St John the Baptist. John, whose birth we celebrate on 24 June, gave himself totally to Christ, by preparing the way for him through the preaching of repentance, by leading others to him once he arrived, and by giving the ultimate sacrifice. Dear friends, may we follow John's example by allowing Christ to penetrate every part of our lives so that we may boldly proclaim him to the world. May God bless all of you!

Lastly a thought for the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. May the radicalism of the faith and the life of St John the Baptist inspire your being as believers; dear *young people*, show openly in all contexts that you belong to Christ and to the Church; dear *sick people*, draw on the power of prayer to alleviate your suffering; and you, dear *newlyweds*, always put the Lord Jesus at centre of your family life.

To the 2,600 French altar servers:

Dear Brothers and Sisters, I greet you with affection dear altar servers who have come from France on your national pilgrimage to Rome, as well as Bishop Breton, the other bishops present and those who have accompanied this large group. Dear young people, the service you carry out faithfully enables you to be particularly close to Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. You have the enormous privilege of being close to the altar and close to the Lord. Be aware of the importance of this service to the Church and to you yourselves. May it give you the opportunity to develop a friendship, a personal relationship with Jesus. Do not be afraid of communicating to those around you the joy you receive from his presence! May your whole life shine with the happiness of this closeness to the Lord Jesus! And if one day you hear his call to follow him on the path of the priesthood or the religious life, respond to him generously! I wish you all a good pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul. Many thanks. Have a good pilgrimage. God bless you.

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