

# Archbishop Lori's Homily: Nativity of St. John the Baptist

*Annual Mass: Baltimore Area, Federal Association, Order of Malta  
Saints Philip and James Church, Baltimore  
June 19, 2018*

At one point or another in the life of most every person, there comes a moment of existential crisis – a moment when the meaning and direction of one's very existence is no longer clear.

If this is a rule about humanity in general, then I am no exception to the rule. Sometime in the middle of my seminary formation, I had such a crisis.

Although I had pursued my studies with enthusiasm and sincerely believed that God was calling me to be a priest, there came a point in my formation when my certitude came crashing down. I felt I was walking in darkness.

Did God really want me to be a priest?

Does God even have a plan for my life?

I wanted to hang on to the ideals I held near and dear yet I found myself confused and wandering, as if in a spiritual desert.

What I needed was a prophet in my life, not a prophet who would merely reassure me or try to make me feel better, but a prophet who would point out for me the way of Christ Jesus, a prophet who would help me in my darkness to experience anew the dawn from on high. In a word, I needed a John the Baptist in my life.

My John the Baptist turned out to be Monsignor William Curlin, at the time a pastor and vocations direction in the Archdiocese of Washington, and, later on, the Bishop of Charlotte, North Carolina.

Some of you may remember him. Through the years, he took part in many of our Lourdes pilgrimages.

If you do remember him, then you know he was the soul of kindness. Unlike John the Baptist, he did not dress in camel hair and eat grasshoppers. He was a thorough-going gentleman - gentle in spirit, prayerful, utterly approachable, and, to be sure, the soul-friend you'd want to have in the midst of a crisis.

He spent a lot of time with me and listened as I poured out my heart. And because he was close to Jesus, because he lived the priesthood so generously, he helped me to discern afresh my vocation and to embrace it with renewed joy and confidence.

Ever thereafter, throughout my forty-one years as a priest, I often spoke to Bishop Curlin. To the very end of his life, he remained my North Star, my John the Baptist and even now, not a day goes by without my praying to Bishop Curlin whose priestly love grew even stronger as his physical strength diminished. Christ increased in him even as he decreased.

One reason why we celebrate this beautiful feast day is that all of us need to have a John the Baptist in our lives.

Amid the noise and turmoil that is part of most every life, we need someone to point out the way of Christ Jesus.

In times of confusion, we need someone to help us discern the right course of action.

In times of spiritual sorrow or listlessness, we need someone whose authentic joy in the Lord helps us to embrace the Lord and his Gospel with renewed joy and zeal.

When we have lost our way and stand in need of repentance, we need a prophet who will open for us the path of salvation, who will help us find reconciliation with God and with the Church.

In times when our ego has been wounded, when we have been passed over or neglected by our friends, we need a John the Baptist to teach us the way of humility.

And when the pressures of life cause us to waver in our faith, we need a John the Baptist to strengthen our resolve.

I have no doubt that, as I speak, all of you can think of one or more “St. John the Baptist’s” in the course of your lives . . . and let us not let a day go by without thanking God for that person or persons.

Upon reflection, we may also find that we have avoided one or another “John the Baptist” whom the Lord has sent our way – perhaps because we were afraid, or perhaps because we found his or her message inconvenient.

In the history of salvation, there was only one John the Baptist who was born for the utterly unique role of preparing the way for our Savior.

Yet, the Lord continually sends into our lives people of holiness and substance who, in the spirit of John the Baptist, are ready and willing to help clear a pathway in our hearts for the Lord . . . let us ask for the grace to welcome those people in our lives.

One thing is hard to miss whenever we read about the Annunciation and the Visitation, as well as John’s earliest ministry in the desert and in prison, and it is this: Finding Jesus, finding the Savior, was not a game of solitaire!

In John’s days, there was a network of people, the remnant of Israel, who were filled with expectation that the Lord was coming soon, that the Messiah would soon break into human history.

As we seek to welcome the Lord more fully into our hearts, we recognize that we cannot do so alone, left to our own devices.

Rather, we need not only a soul friend, a prophet, a John the Baptist, we also need to be part of a network, a communion, a church which is filled with joy and hope as it awaits the Lord’s return in glory.

Surely, the Order of Malta is one of those networks in the life of the Church that enables us to seek and find the Lord in the thicket of our existence.

Let me build on that point as I offer you a concluding thought. Much as we need a John the Baptist in our lives, so too we are often called to be a John the Baptist for others.

If we take our faith seriously, strive to live it authentically, if we are, in a phrase, serious Catholics with joyful and compassionate hearts, people will seek us out asking for our help in living their faith and in discerning what direction their lives should take.

Sometimes it will be your adult children or your grandchildren. Sometimes it will be a member of your extended family or a friend of many years. Their lives will be at a crossroads. They'll seek you out to ask where they should go and what they should do.

We can suddenly be called upon to be a John the Baptist, when we visit a sick person or a prisoner or show a little concern for a person who is obviously going through a very hard time.

All of you, I am confident, have experienced that in our Malta ministries. And we may say to ourselves, "I'm not worthy to do this!" "I'm not equipped!"

But let us not give in to this self-referential way of thinking.

For Pope Francis constantly encourages us to listen to one another carefully, to encounter one another authentically, in and through Christ, to go out of our way for one another, to walk with one another in life's journey – confident that Christ walks by our side, knows us, loves us, and cares about us.

So as we celebrate the Feast of John the Baptist, let our hearts leap up in joy and gratitude, for in the company of the blessed Virgin Mary, the Lord is close to us, he who is "the way, the truth and the life."

May God bless us and keep us always in his love!