

Nativity of St. John the Baptist

Introduction

What a joy it is to be with all of you this evening as we gather in prayer to celebrate a patronal feast of the Order of Malta, the Nativity, the Birth of St. John the Baptist. This affords me a moment to express my gratitude to all of you for your responsiveness to God's call, given at baptism, to serve others in love, for your life of prayer, your defense of the faith, and your charity, especially to the sick and the poor. All this greatly lends strength to the mission of the Archdiocese of Baltimore to bear witness to Christ and to spread the joy of the Gospel far and wide.

In St. John the Baptist we find the exemplar of the commitments you have made as Knights and Dames of the Order of Malta. I thought it might be helpful to pause for a few minutes to remind ourselves how St. John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Christ, also prepares the way for us to be more ardent disciples of the Lord through our participation in the Order.

Baptismal Calling to Love

In tonight's first reading, Isaiah tells how from his mother's womb God had predestined him to be a prophet. What Isaiah says of himself is even truer of St. John the Baptist, the greatest and last of the prophets before the coming of Christ: "The Lord called me from birth; from my mother's womb he gave me my name." The relatives and friends of John's parents, Elizabeth & Zechariah were surprised when they learned that the child would not be named after his father but instead given the name "John" - It was a sign that this child had been set apart by God from birth for a special mission. And John began to fulfill his mission even in his mother's womb. When Mary came to the Elizabeth's house bearing in her womb the child Jesus, Scripture tells us that the child in Elizabeth's womb leapt for joy.

John's vocation is unique in salvation history - to be the immediate forerunner or precursor of the Christ. Yet all of us have been entrusted with a mission from the day of our birth, that is to say, from the day of our re-birth in the waters of baptism. Through baptism we are immersed in the Lord's redeeming love and begin to share in the life and love of the Holy Trinity. From this there flows a vocation to love, to lead lives of self-giving love, patterned on Jesus' sacrificial gift of self to the Father

for our salvation. Participation in the Order of Malta is one of the important ways that you live out your baptismal vocation to love – to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world by bearing witness to the truth and love of Christ in your daily lives.

A Life of Prayer

Tonight's Gospel tells us that John the Baptist "grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the desert until the day of his manifestation to Israel." In a brief sentence, St. Luke summarizes John's formation to undertake his mission. Even though John was called from his mother's womb to play a unique role in God's loving plan for the salvation of the world, he nonetheless needed to be prepared, formed, for his mission.

The place of John's formation was the desert where, as we read elsewhere in Scripture, John led an austere life. The desert is a place of solitude, a place where the prophets encountered God. There John the Baptist, the greatest of the prophets, assimilated in his mind and heart all that God had taught through the Law and the Prophets. There John became accustomed to listening to the voice of God and came to know through prayer something of the designs of God's own heart.

Similarly, the Order of Malta expects of its new and continuing members ongoing formation in the ways of faith and prayer. While we are not sent to the desert for this formation, we are expected to spend some time each day in solitude, 'far from the madding crowd' – to that we too can absorb something of God's love revealed by Christ & poured in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. The daily prayer of the Order is a good start but only a beginning. We need to set aside ample time to read Scripture prayerfully, to meditate on God's love and mercy, and to pray for the needs of others. And just as John proclaimed a baptism of repentance to open the way for the Lord, so too we should frequently make use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation so that the passageways of our hearts might be more widely open to Christ.

Defense of the Faith

We read in the Gospel how Zechariah was silenced because he doubted when the angel told him that his wife Elizabeth had conceived a child in her advancing years. Zechariah's tongue was loosened with the birth of John the Baptist. St. Augustine

says of this Gospel scene, “The tongue was loosened because a voice is born.” It was the voice of John crying out in the wilderness bearing witness to the coming of the Word made flesh.

How easy it is for us to be like Zechariah. He was a good and faithful man, indeed, he was a priest, yet he was hesitant, doubtful, afraid when the angel spoke to him. As we celebrate the birth of St. John the Baptist, the Voice witnessing to the Word, we need to ask for the grace to find our voice in bearing witness to the faith. After all, one of our responsibilities as members of the Order is to defend the faith and that requires us to grow in our belief and understanding of God’s Word as it comes to us through the teaching of the Church on faith and morals. Sometimes it means speaking up – with patience and love – when the Church or her teachings are wrongly criticized. Sometimes it means defending teachings that are deemed countercultural. Let us not forget that John the Baptist was indeed a countercultural figure yet his witness in truth and love opened the way for the coming of Christ. Similarly our witness in truth and love to the faith of the Church is meant to help family members, colleagues and friends to open their hearts to Christ.

Charity in Truth

This brings us full circle to our baptismal calling to love. The life of prayer and the defense of the faith that the Order requires of us leads us to lives of charity and service, especially for the sick and vulnerable. This takes many forms such as your volunteering at Our Daily Bread or the annual pilgrimage to Lourdes with our beloved *malades*.

When John the Baptist saw Jesus approaching, he said: “Behold the Lamb of God.” Thus did he fulfill his calling to bear witness to the Christ. To be sure we are called to bear explicit witness to the faith by what we say, yet our witness to the faith is often expressed more powerfully by what we do. St. Francis of Assisi, as you know, tells us ‘to preach always and when necessary use words.’ Service to others, sincere and generous charity, a personal touch, affirming the dignity of those who suffer – this is a powerful way of saying, “Behold the Lamb of God!” This is what St. John Paul II called, “a charity that evangelizes” – a charity that is truly worthy of our patron, St. John the Baptist.

Conclusion

As we celebrate this patronal feast, may we ask for intercession of St. John the Baptist, that we might rededicate ourselves to all that the Order of Malta asks of us, and thus to be ardent disciples who bear loving witness to Christ as members of His Body the Church.

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