

## John The Baptist: Forerunner of Jesus - by Sr. Margaret Dorgan, DCM

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### JOHN THE BAPTIST: FORERUNNER OF JESUS

In a time of strife and calamity, human pleas call out to God to intervene. The psalmist dares to complain, "Why, O Lord, have you cast us off? Remember your flock which you built up of old, the people you redeemed as your inheritance" (Ps 74: 1,2). In the first century of the Christian era, the Jewish people longed to hear the cry of a prophet. Centuries had passed and no authentic voice was heard though many false prophets stepped forward to deceive by their words. Malachi, a true prophet but at the end of the line, had proclaimed in the name of Yahweh, "Lo, I am sending My messenger to prepare the way before Me" (Mal 3: 1).

At last "John the Baptist made his appearance as a preacher in the desert of Judea declaring, 'The reign of God is at hand'" (Mt 3: 1,2). All four Gospels emphasize the importance of this relative of Jesus who emerges as a preordained forerunner. "There was a man sent from God whose name was John, who came as a witness to testify to the light" (Jn 1: 6,7 ). John's name in its Hebrew form Johanan means "gift of Yahweh." This cousin, close in age, is an early gift to Jesus' mission, a precursor of the Good News, who declares, "This is He of Whom I said, 'The One Who comes after me is far greater than I'" (Jn 1: 15). Jesus today still makes use of messengers speaking words of hope so listeners may realize that He is a light ready to shine in their darkness.

When John is questioned, he answers clearly that he is not the messiah. "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Make straight the way of the Lord!" (Jn 1: 22) To this man clothed in camel's hair, crowds come to be baptized as they confess their sins. This is a ritual of washing undertaken to signify an intention to reform one's life. It is a "baptism of repentance" (Acts 13:24), not the sacramental one Jesus would initiate. John says, "He (Jesus) will baptize in the Holy Spirit and in fire" (Lk 3: 16). In the narrative accounts of the Acts of the Apostles, Christ's emissaries find followers of John such as Apollos, a man full of spiritual fervor. "He spoke and talked accurately about Jesus, although he knew only of John's baptism" (Acts 18: 25). Apollos did not yet have the fullness granted by the Holy Spirit, but he is wholly receptive to all that Christ's disciples offer. John in his preaching had opened up the awareness of Apollos and others so they listen attentively, eager to receive the power given earlier at Pentecost. John the Baptist is a model for all of us who are marked with our Redeemer's sacramental baptism. We have been given the full gift of eternal life and in that outpouring, we are called to show others how their lives too can be transformed.

John's beheading carries the special horror of being the result of a dance at a birthday party. Festive indulgence and entertainment end in the death of a prophet. The name of the martyred forerunner is a favorite for many children. John Baptist de

la Salle founded the Brothers of the Christian schools in the seventeenth century. The Cure of Ars, a model of parish priests, was John Baptist Marie Vianney.

"He must increase while I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). These words of John have a special prophetic poignancy as we consider the form of his dying. Saints have adopted his declaration as a motto for themselves. It is only the selfish self that must decrease when Jesus takes over more and more of our lives. This is no subtraction of our personhood, for in Christ we find our true selves, created in His image and called to holiness.

Day-to-day living can contain many diminishment. The body may upset us with losses of vision and hearing. Perhaps we undergo a failure in interpersonal relationships or in our work. All these are experiences of deprivation, some perhaps temporary. As they occur, we say, "Jesus must increase. I must decrease." In this way we use them even while we bear their burden. Christ enters more fully into our lives, the rays of His light penetrating whatever clouds may hang over us. St. John of the Cross, writes, "O God, my God who will seek You with simple and pure love, and not find You are all one can desire, for You show Yourself first and go out to meet those who seek You?" ( *Sayings of Light and Love*, #2, Complete Works).

Jesus' forerunner speaks of fulfillment, "This is my joy and it is complete. He must increase while I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). John the Baptist is pointing out the way to true joy which later the apostle Paul will call "**the mystery of Christ in you, your hope of glory**" (Col 1:27).

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