

Happy birthday, St. John the Baptist!

Jesus said, "Among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist" (Mt 11:11). Each year on June 24 the Catholic Church honors the birth of John by reflecting on his unique role as the precursor of Jesus. The solemnity held on that date praises John as a worthy example of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

A solemnity is the most significant feast the Church can establish. While other saints are remembered with feast days to remember their deaths, St. John the Baptist, like Our Lady, is honored with solemnities to recall both his birth and his death.

Why do John and Mary receive such honors? The Church commemorates Our Lady's nativity in part as a recognition that she was born without sin.

So what about John? With the feast of the prophet's nativity, the Church seems to intimate that John, too, was born sinless, though there is no definitive teaching on the matter.

In Luke's Gospel account, Mary, pregnant with Jesus, went to visit her relative Elizabeth, who was six months along in her pregnancy with John. At Mary's greeting, Elizabeth was "filled with the holy Spirit" (1:41) and her unborn son "leaped for joy" (v. 44) in her womb. Both Elizabeth and her child were responding to the awesome reality of being in the presence of God in the flesh.

This event seems to be the fulfillment of the prophecy earlier spoken to John's father by the angel Gabriel that the child would be "filled with the holy Spirit even from his mother's womb" (Lk 1:15). As a result, the belief has been commonly held since ancient times that at that moment John was

sanctified – that is, he was cleansed from original sin, as if he were “baptized” in his mother’s womb.

Note here that this would mean John was freed from original sin in the womb, and was later born without sin, but not that he was conceived without sin. The Immaculate Conception is a privilege unique to Our Lady among the saints; she was preserved from original sin from the first moment of her existence.

Of course, the other great difference between John and Our Lady is that she was preserved as well from all actual sin throughout her life, while John was not.

On the date of his nativity, then, we honor John the Baptist, who was filled with the Holy Spirit while in his mother’s womb, was chosen by God to herald His Son, lived a model life of holiness and was martyred for his faith.

Celebrating John’s Birth

While never overshadowing the Father or the Son, the mysteries of John’s birth and his prominent role in the life of Christ are given special significance by the Church.

Normally, when a saint’s feast day or solemnity falls on a Sunday, it is superseded by the Sunday liturgy. But the solemnity honoring the Baptist’s nativity is one of the exceptions. If it occurs on the Lord’s Day, the prayers, readings and psalms associated with the solemnity of John are not replaced by a different Sunday liturgy.

John died as a martyr who witnessed to the truth of God’s intention that marriage should be a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman. That martyrdom is celebrated by the Church with a memorial on Aug. 29. Yet even if John had not been a martyr, the Church would no doubt have still celebrated his life and ministry as the herald of her Lord.

The solemnity of the Nativity of John the Baptist is one of the Church's oldest celebrations introduced into both the Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) liturgies to honor a saint. It was publicly observed as early as the fourth century.

Choosing a Date

June 24 was eventually chosen as the date for the solemnity because Scripture tells us that John was conceived six months before Jesus (see Lk 1:36). Presumably, then, John was born about six months before Christ, and Christ's nativity was celebrated on Christmas Eve, Dec. 24.

But there was yet another important factor in fixing John's birth date. Centuries before the time of Christ, some pagan cultures annually celebrated the summer solstice, which occurs in late June. They recognized that after the solstice, the days began getting shorter. For a variety of reasons, they traditionally acknowledged the change of seasons by lighting bonfires that were kept burning all night.

This lighting of fires was a widespread ritual among different groups of non-Christians immigrating into Europe in the Church's early centuries. The Church recognized the importance of somehow accepting this ancient and very popular tradition among the people they were seeking to convert, but she did not want it to be associated with a pagan ritual.

The events in the life of Christ did not offer an obvious connection to this midsummer festival, so early Church leaders turned to the life of John the Baptist. As the birth of Christ was celebrated at the winter solstice in late December, so John the Baptist's birth would be celebrated at the summer solstice.

It was and is a perfect fit: The nativity of John portends the nativity of Jesus.

The solemnity of John's nativity was officially established at the Church Council of Agde in 506. From that time forward, Catholics have celebrated the birth of John the Baptist on June 24.

For an indication of how highly this celebration was once regarded, consider the circumstances surrounding the Battle of Fontenay, in what is now France, in the year 841. Two rival Frankish armies, meeting face-to-face on June 23, did not want to risk fighting on St. John's feast day. So they agreed to postpone the battle until the day after it!

Celebrations Today

Today the age-old custom of lighting fires on the eve of St. John's day can be seen in places all over the world, especially in Europe. In this way they acknowledge John and his heralding of Jesus, who is "the light of the world" (Jn 8:12). That these fires have their roots in a pagan ritual takes nothing away from the honor that most participants today pay to the Baptist.

Parades and festivals are often held in addition to the bonfires, which go on until daybreak. Christians in some countries splash one another with water or go swimming at midnight in remembrance of their baptism, all in honor of St. John.

In other places, celebrants place twigs and firs in their homes, recalling the time John spent in the wilderness preparing himself to introduce Christ. Church observances often include fasting and prayers on the night before. In some countries, the day itself is a holy day of obligation (though not in the United States).

A Model of Holiness

John was the herald of Christ, "a voice of one crying out in

the desert, 'Prepare the way of the Lord'" (Mt 3:3). But he was also much more.

The Baptist provided a model of heroic holiness. He publicly condemned hypocrisy and immorality, calling all to repentance. He challenged the greed and materialism of his day, following a life of poverty, simplicity and selflessness that inspired not only his contemporaries, but also the later pioneers of Christian monasticism.

Wherever John went, he was surrounded by vast crowds and followers, some thinking he was the Messiah. Yet he didn't take advantage of these people. Rather, he told them clearly that he wasn't who they thought he was, and that they must experience a conversion of heart in preparation for the Messiah (see Jn 1:19-27).

When Jesus began His ministry, John sent his disciples to Jesus and then faded into the background, humbly accepting his diminishing role with the words: "He [Christ] must increase; I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). He forgot himself and lived for Jesus.

John's message to the people so many years ago was that the Lord is imminent, so we must be prepared. On the solemnity of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, the Church renews that message.