

Nativity of the Forerunner, John the Baptist

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Those who have known me for a while know that one of my favorite saints is John the Baptist, whom I also believe is the most interesting and fascinating figure in the New Testament. So strongly do I feel about him that my late wife and I named our son (now almost 46) for him, and so today is his Name Day for... Today, Sunday, is the Feast of the Nativity of the holy Forerunner of the Lord, St. John the Baptist.

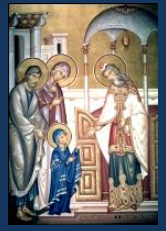
Most saints' feast days commemorate the day the saint died. Occasionally, the feast will be on the day of the transference of the saint's remains into a church shrine. However, it is rare that a saint's feast should commemorate his day of birth, or nativity.

The primary reason for this is that a saint is not already holy at the time of his birth, and must grow to into sanctity as his life progresses, as is expected of all of us. But there are three notable exceptions: Christ Himself who, as the God-Man, was already perfection incarnate at His birth; the Virgin Mary, who was already holy from the instant of her birth, and St. John the Baptist who, according to the Gospel account, was holy from his *conception*, as the Archangel Gabriel said to St. John's father: "and he shall be filled with the Holy Spirit, *even from his mother's womb*. (Luke 1:15) This, as we remember, is the very same angel that came to the young maiden, Mary of Nazareth, to announce that not only that she was to be the Mother of God, but that John the Baptist has also been conceived.

And then, prior to his birth, St. John "leapt" in his mother's womb as the Virgin Mary approached, and in this signal way he began his own unique "career" by announcing Christ before either he or his cousin was born!

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If we think carefully about this for a moment we can see that this means he had already full awareness of himself and complete consciousness while still in his mother's womb. (An important reminder, by the way, for those who claim to be Christian yet do not see the unborn child as a full human being with an immortal soul, therefore disallowing any kind of abortion.)

As we know, our Lord Jesus Christ would later say that of all us men born of a woman, none was greater than His cousin John, not even Moses or Abraham! This is an astonishing thing—to be greater than the greatest figures of the Old Testament, to Whom God had revealed Himself so powerfully in the time before Christ.

But the Lord said this of John precisely because John was so incredibly holy and without any conscious personal sin, thus making him the only other human being—other than the Virgin Mary, of course—to be without any personal sin.

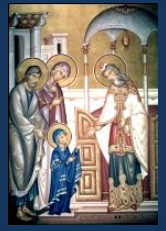
This is why, in the very earliest icons and frescos we see Christ enthroned and, one on each side of Him, His All Pure Mother, and His sinless cousin and Forerunner. In this way, the earliest iconographers brought together the three greatest, holiest, and sinless ones that had ever, or will ever, exist. And the Holy Fathers explain to us that this is what made St. John an "angel in the flesh", someone who was liberated from the need for human love, living only for the love of Christ, the True God.

And one other element I want to suggest this morning. All of the human beings living at that time, all of the Jews in the Holy Land, did not know that they were living in the same generation as the greatest man ever born of woman. In fact, until St. John began his public ministry, no one knew anything about him particularly at all. Why not?

Because all of the world—and this included the greatly Hellenized Jews of that time—were completely intoxicated by worldliness, by power, and by rules and regulations, and this held them suspended, as it were, in a kind of miasma. (As an aside, "miasma" comes from Greek and refers

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to pollution, "bad air", or the invisible way in which toxic diseases are spread. This "miasma" in the first century is very much like the poisonous vapor that permeates our own culture today and holds us captive to materialism, sensuality, selfishness, greed, and self-centeredness.)

And so, mesmerized by the times and culture in which they lived, John the Baptist was born and grew to manhood unnoticed and unnoted by the population around him. Yet here was the greatest man ever born, according to the Son of God Himself!

As another has written, when the child John was born and growing up, "the waves of the human ocean were rising and falling. Great political events, international wars, civil cataclysms were ripening and taking place. The world was living with all the intensity of the life of human genius and creativity, of sin and vice. But it did not know—no one in the world knew [except of course for his cousin, Jesus of Nazareth, Himself still a child, and the Blessed Virgin Mary]—that the fullness of human maturity had been fulfilled, that, in the Jordan desert, the greatest of those born of women was waiting for his hour to come." -Sergius Bulgakov, "The Friend of the Bridegroom"

So all of this is what we are remembering today in the birth or nativity of John the Baptist. Prior to his arrival, all of creation still remained chained to death and corruption, but from this moment creation begins to be reborn, as the Forerunner, the great "announcer" of our salvation, Jesus Christ, comes into this world.

As Orthodox Christians, and therefore members of the mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church, you and I are united to the holy Forerunner and Baptist of Christ through our love of the same redeemer, Christ. And just as God brought forth John, the greatest of all the prophets, the announcer and preparer of the way of the Lord, so you and I are called upon to announce—each in his own way—that man and creation are now, at this very moment, being redeemed by the Lamb of God, He Who—in the words of John—takes away the sins of the world.

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And, just as the message of the Baptist at the River Jordan was that men must repent, so you and I must not only repent, but quietly announce this same message to others. We must repent, "for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

Finally, and not least of all, just as St. John was commissioned to prepare a small band of worthy followers for Christ, so you and I are also called; we are called to prepare a small remnant of those who patiently await the Second Coming of the Messiah. This is our special calling, our special mission, as we live in these, the Last Days.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.