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Meditations: June 24, Birth of Saint John the Baptist

Some reflections that can assist our prayer on the solemnity of the nativity of Saint John the Baptist.

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- God chooses each one for a mission
- Preparing the way for Jesus
- Humility in the apostolate

THE CHURCH usually commemorates the saints on the day of their going to heaven, which in the early times of Christianity often coincided with their martyrdom. However, Saint John the Baptist's feast day has had a unique status since the Church's first centuries, with his birth six months before that of Jesus also being celebrated. The Church has always known, through Scripture, that the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb (cf. *Lk 1:15*), when Mary visited her cousin Saint Elizabeth with our Lord already in her womb.

In the gospel today we read about the birth and naming of John the Baptist, events that invite us to consider the divine plan that precedes them. *The Lord called me before I was born; while I was in my mother's womb he named me (Is 49:1)*. These words of the prophet Isaiah express one of the deepest realities of human existence:

we did not appear on this earth by chance, nor are we just another anonymous and irrelevant specimen of our species. Our coming into life is a call from God, a choice that promises happiness and a mission. He has created us as we are, with each of our special characteristics. He has pronounced our personal name, and wanted us to be unique and unrepeatable. *For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb, the Psalmist exclaims. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made (Ps 139:13-14).*

“God expects something from you, God wants something from you. God hopes in you. He is encouraging you to dream. He wants to make you see that, with you, the world can be different. For the fact is, unless you offer the best of yourselves, the world will never be different. This is the challenge.”^[1] — Saint Josemaría said

that to deserve this light from God which gives meaning to our life, “we need to love. We have to be humble enough to realize we need to be saved, and say with Peter: ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of life everlasting.’ If we allow God's word to enter our hearts, we can truly say that we do not walk in darkness, for the light of God will shine out over our weakness and our personal defects, as the sun shines above the storm.”^[2]

AND YOU, CHILD, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways (Lk 1:76). These words spoken by Zechariah, which we repeat in the acclamation before the Gospel, reveal the inseparable union between vocation and mission, between calling and sending. For the

greatness of John's vocation resides in the unique importance of his mission. "The greatest of men was sent to bear witness that Christ was more than a man,"^[3] Saint Augustine said. And Origen adds another aspect of the Baptist's vocation that continues to this day: "The mystery of John is still fulfilled in the world today. Anyone destined to believe in Christ must first have the spirit and power of John come into their soul to 'make ready a people prepared for the Lord' (*Lk* 1:17) and so that 'the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth' (*Lk* 3:5), the roughness of the human heart. Not only was this true in those times, but also today the spirit and strength of John precedes the coming of our Lord and Savior."^[4] —

Every Christian is called to continue the mission of John the Baptist, preparing people for the encounter with Christ: "How beautiful is the

conduct of John the Baptist!” Saint Josemaría wrote. “How clean, how noble, how disinterested! He truly prepared the way for the Lord. His disciples only knew Christ by hearsay. And he encourages them to dialogue with the Master; he urges them to look closely at Him and get to know Him; he gives them the opportunity to admire the wonders Christ is working.”^[5] — The life of Saint John the Baptist was temperate and penitential, in keeping with the message of conversion that he preached. His preaching was a bold announcement of God’s truth, to which he bore witness even to the point of death. Like him, we too are called to take Christ to the places where our lives unfold. Therefore, like John and his disciples, we will set our eyes on Jesus so that, filled with his life, we can invite those by our side to do the same.

WHEN JOHN was about to conclude the course of his life, he said: *What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but one is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of the sandals on his feet (Acts 13:25).* Saint John the Baptist is an example of humility and upright intention. He never sought to shine with his own light, to announce himself and make use of his vocation to gain prominence or other personal advantages. *No one can receive anything except what has been given from heaven (Jn 3:27)*, he told several of his disciples, when they became concerned on seeing the number of his followers diminishing. And he continued: *My joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease (Jn 3:29-30).* Our apostolate and the conversion of hearts are God's endeavor, in which we are humble co-workers. He is the owner of the fruit and the seasons. In the words of Saint Augustine, John was always

aware that he “was the voice, but the Lord was the Word that already existed in the beginning. John was a passing voice, Christ the eternal Word from the beginning.”^[6] —

Also in our life as apostles Christ must grow and we must diminish. This requires deep humility, as Saint Josemaría said: “I am sure that all of you are trying to be very humble. Thus you will avoid many troubles in life, and you will be like a leafy tree. But not with a show of leaves, of fruits that, when they are vain, when they do not have a ripe sweet pulp, do not weigh much. For then the tree’s branches point upwards – with vanity! In contrast, when the fruits are ripe, when they are solid, when the pulp, as I said before, is sweet and pleasant to the palate, then the branches bend down, with humility . . . Let us ask our Mother Mary for this. I have always wanted you to have on your lips, like an enchanting

compliment addressed to our Lady, that cry: *Ancilla Domini!*,” handmaid of the Lord.^[7]

^[1] Francis, World Youth Day Address in Poland, 30 July 2016.

^[2] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 45.

^[3] Saint Augustine, Sermon 289.

^[4] Origen, *Homilies on Saint Luke*, 4.

^[5] Saint Josemaría, *Letters* 4, no. 21.

^[6] Saint Augustine, Sermon 293.

^[7] Saint Josemaría, Notes from a family gathering, 27 December 1972.