

My friends in Christ, this weekend, the Church celebrates one of only three birthdays which are included in the liturgical calendar: the birthday (the Nativity) of Saint John the Baptist. There is also the Church's celebration of Mother Mary's birthday on September 8 each year. And, of course, the Nativity of the Lord on Christmas.

And so, it might strike all of us as something remarkable that the birthday of Saint John the Baptist is celebrated in liturgy each year; clearly, the Church has always held him in highest esteem.

The Lord Himself holds him in the highest esteem when He proclaims that "among those born of women, no one is greater than John" the Baptist.

And so, we are left to wonder what *is* it that makes the Baptist so darn great – so important that the universal Church celebrates his birthday each year. But I think that we need not wonder at this for too long because, as usual, the answer to that question of what makes the Baptist so great is not *anything* that *he* did of *himself*...but rather what *God* did *in* him and *through* him for the sanctity of the world entire. And what the Lord did for *him*...He does for *all* of us: He gave him a mission...a purpose in life...a reason for being. And all *John* had to do was say "yes" to that gift, to that call.

From his mother's womb, John was sent on mission. Because if we really think about it, he was the world's first evangelist, insofar as when Mother Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit and then went in haste to the hill country to visit her cousin Elizabeth, John's mother (who, as we know, was six months pregnant), the infant in her womb leaped for joy. Why did he leap for joy? Because the Lord, newly-conceived in the Virgin Mother's womb, was in their midst. And when Christ is in our midst, and when our response to His presence is joy, then what better possible evangelization could there ever be than that holy joy?

So it is with *all* of us, with *each* of us. We are *each* of us given life and personhood and God-given dignity from the very moment of our conception...and we are given meaning and purpose as well – our mission in life. This fundamental truth of the human project is demonstrated for us, not

*only* in the fact that we see it in *John*, but *also* in that we see it in the Prophet Jeremiah; God consoled Jeremiah, saying, “before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; before you were born, I dedicated you; a prophet to the nations, I appointed you.” God *knows* us...*in* the womb, even *before* the womb in fact. Hence the life and personhood and God-given dignity with which we are all endowed from the very moment of our conception.

We encounter this great, fundamental truth *also* in the Prophet Isaiah: “The Lord called me from birth; from my mother’s womb, He gave me my name.” Life, personhood, God-given dignity.

But God does not stop there; as I say, God *also* gives us meaning and purpose, as well – our mission in life. To the Prophet Jeremiah: “To whomever I send you, you shall go; [and] whatever I command you, you shall speak.” And also the Prophet Isaiah: the Lord “formed me as His servant from the womb, that Jacob may be brought back to Him and Israel gathered to Him.”

And again, so it is with *us*. But what is *our* meaning, *our* purpose, *our* mission in life? We can consider our God-given vocation for something of a *specific* answer to this question that is posed for *each* of us...but for *all* of us, regardless of our *specific* vocation, our *particular* role to play in the grand scheme of things...our *common* mission in life shared by *all* of us is this: working in the vineyard of the Lord to bring in the harvest...doing what we can, whatever has been entrusted to us to do, for the salvation of souls, and *all* of it for the greater glory of God.

Imagine if all of us gathered here were to embrace that as our fundamental reason for being; and imagine if we would do this, and we were joyful and unafraid. Imagine if you were a dentist for example, and you got all of your scrapers and your pickers and your gougers crammed in your latest victim’s (uh, I mean, *patient’s*) gullet...and your singular focus through it all were simply this, that in some small way, even perpetrating sadistic oral torture on an unsuspecting victim works toward the salvation of souls for the greater glory of God.

(I chose to pick on dentists this time because I just had my dental check-up, and...yikes!)

Now imagine that, *whatever* your profession, *whatever* your state in life, *whatever* your hobby, pastime, what-have-you...in the words of Saint Paul to the Colossians: “whatever you do, in word or in deed, do *everything* in the Name of the Lord Jesus.” Do *everything* for the salvation of souls and the greater glory of God.

Imagine if we did more as a parish family in faith with this ultimate good in mind. Already, we are an amazing parish...and how even *more* amazing we would be! As a parish, exuding the joy of the Gospel in absolutely everything that we do and are all about. As a parish, greeting everyone and welcoming everyone with the loving hospitality for which the friends of Christ have ever been known. As a parish, serving with generosity the poor, the disenfranchised, the marginalized, if *only* in praying for them if we discern that we can do no more.

Exuding the joy of the Gospel. Unless we show others how joyful we really are that indeed we have found the pearl of great price, and that indeed we are supremely confident in the invincible power of the Gospel...unless we do that, we cannot attract others to hear us and actually to *listen* to us when we unleash the Gospel and thus proclaim the Good News. Joy *must* be there! Saint Teresa of Avila famously quipped: “God save us from these dour-faced saints.” No kidding! For a parish of glum faces and grumpy attitudes attracts no one; but let *our* hearts be filled with that holy joy; let *our* faces put that holy joy on full display. Saint Paul exhorted the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” If (God forbid!) I am ever made a bishop, that would be my episcopal motto: *Gaudete in Domino semper*. “Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: rejoice!”

Greeting everyone and welcoming everyone with loving hospitality. Father Haspedis and I have been conspiring to establish a new Guild for our parish; we want to recruit folks in the parish who are particularly outgoing and love greeting people, to help us welcome people coming to Mass in the narthex before each Mass every weekend. Some of our people are already doing that and we want to encourage that. A sure sign of a parish that is vibrant and alive – thriving and growing – is

how welcoming the parishioners are when newcomers pass through the doors. “Bring ‘em in; keep ‘em in; send ‘em forth.” That is our motto for our Parochial Year For Evangelization, and it begins with *bring* them in...*welcoming* them in...making them feel right at home because we greet them, and we receive them, and we truly do want them here and want them to be part of our family in faith.

And serving the poor. I actually like to think that we do this well here at Saint Peter. Food drives, clothing drives, blanket drives, service outreach projects, work days at the House of Charity, an outreach fund for financial support for folks in need. Why, we have parishioners who are board members of Catholic Charities. And so, as I said, I think that we do rather well in this...*and* we can always strive to do even *more*, even *better*.

And we *can* do even more, we *can* do even better, because, again, that is our shared mission in life, our common universal vocation and calling: working in the vineyard of the Lord to bring in the harvest...doing what we can, whatever has been entrusted to us to do, for the salvation of souls and the greater glory of God. As God did for Jeremiah, for Isaiah, for Saint John the Baptist whose birthday we celebrate this weekend...as God gave *them* life and personhood and dignity – right from the very moment of conception...and as God gave *them* meaning and purpose, a mission in life...so God gives to us. May it be, then, that we use these gifts well...that we respond to God’s call...that, at the end of days, we would all of us be welcomed and received in halls of heavenly realms.

Saint John the Baptist...pray for us.