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24. June 2024

Solemnity of the Nativity of John the Baptist The vocation of Saint John

Isa 49:1-6

Coasts and islands, listen to me, pay attention, distant peoples. Yahweh called me when I was in the womb, before my birth he had pronounced my name. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, he hid me in the shadow of his hand. He made me into a sharpened arrow and concealed me in his quiver. He said to me, 'Israel, you are my servant, through whom I shall manifest my glory.' But I said, 'My toil has been futile, I have exhausted myself for nothing, to no purpose.' Yet all the while my cause was with Yahweh and my reward with my God. And now Yahweh has spoken, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him and to re-unite Israel to him;-I shall be honoured in Yahweh's eyes, and my God has been my strength.-He said, 'It is not enough for you to be my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back the survivors of Israel; I shall make you a light to the nations so that my salvation may reach the remotest parts of earth.'

The Church has chosen these words from the Old Testament for the Solemnity of the Birth of John the Baptist, and they are indeed very apt to apply to the “Forerunner of the Coming of Christ”, as our Orthodox brethren call him.

We know John the Baptist as the great prophet and ascetic man, who directly prepared the coming of the Lord, exhorting the people to conversion. “*I tell you, of all the children born to women, there is no one greater than John*”, Jesus tells us (Lk 7:28), referring to the mission of the Baptist.

From this perspective, we understand the predilection of John, who was called from his mother's womb. This “vocation from the womb” allows us to grasp a mystery of God's action. John had been appointed to lead the people back to God, to “*restore the tribes of Jacob and convert the survivors of Israel*”.

If a person receives such a high calling, he cannot evade it. Logically, it is not that God obliges the person to correspond to his vocation; however, the vocation is upon him. Whatever he does, wherever he goes, his vocation - that is, his deepest determination - will

accompany him. He may try to oppose it, he may shy away from it; he may spend his strength “in wind and in nothing”; but the vocation will remain there. As long as the person follows other ways, there will always be an emptiness in him, something unfulfilled, the impression of having missed out on something?

Perhaps we can also apply this to the vocation that every person has on a general level, which is to glorify his Creator and to live according to His Will. Only when he does so can he live to the full. In this sense, every human life is an enormous grace and at the same time a great responsibility...

What a glorious ministry was entrusted to the Baptist; a mission that would demand his whole life! To bring people back to God is a most honourable task, for only in communion with God can one's true life unfold. But this return to God is not only important for the individual person and for his or her eternal salvation; God is also glorified when He is worshipped in spirit and in truth, which only happens in fullness when one has true faith. Unfortunately, this aspect is often lost sight of today, when it is easily asserted that each person could be happy in his own religion. Even the absurd conclusion is drawn that today it would be enough for the Hindu to concern himself with being a better Hindu, the Muslim with being a better Muslim, the Jew with being a better Jew, and so on. With regard to the Jews, it is said that they should be respectfully left to go their own ways. It is said that, as a Chosen People, they would have a “parallel way” to God, without needing to know Christ. Such views are far removed from the truth of the Gospel!

What would St. John the Baptist say about it?

I think he would agree with Dietrich von Hildebrand, when he writes that true faith contains in itself also the infinite value of the glorification of God, by giving us access to communion with Him through sanctifying grace and all the sacraments.

It is therefore the Church's vocation to proclaim the Gospel to all peoples. And if it were no longer to do so, it would lose its vocation and risk becoming a merely humanitarian religion. It would lose its inner connection to a prophet like Elijah, like John the Baptist; it would lose its relationship to the Lord Himself, and consequently become more and more exposed to other powers.

This authentic mission of the Church - that of bringing the Gospel without retrenchment

to all peoples - is also the mission of each individual Christian. We must therefore ask John the Baptist and the Lord Himself to help us to live our vocation to the full and to burn with love, for the greater glorification of God and for the salvation of souls.