

June 24, 2020 Solemnity of the Birth of John the Baptist 12:10p.m.

Homily----Religious Freedom Week

The birth of a child is an event to be celebrated....as we just heard in today's Gospel recounting the birth of the great St. John the Baptist. All of his relatives and his parents' friends thought they should be able to "chime in" with good advice, including what name to give the child, which typically, according to ancient tradition, would have been to name the child after Zechariah, or Zechariah's father. When Elizabeth said "*No, he will be called John*", they couldn't believe it, and kept arguing that there was no one in their family with that name. When they went to Zechariah, who hadn't been able to speak for the past 9 months, and interceded with him. as we heard, he asked for a tablet and wrote: "*John is his name.*"

Of course the name "John" was the name the Angel had told Zechariah he was to be called. "John" means "Gift of God", and indeed he was a gift, to Elizabeth and Zechariah. But they couldn't know then, though I'm sure both Elizabeth and Zechariah had a strong suspicion, that John would eventually be a great "gift of God" to the world. Because God's Plan was so much bigger than their little family, or their town. God's Plan began the moment John was somewhat miraculously conceived in his mother's womb. It was exactly as we heard Isaiah prophesy in today's First Reading: "*The Lord called me from my mother's womb....He gave me my name.....He made of me a sharpened sword....a polished arrow....For now the Lord has spoken: I will make you a light to the nations, that My salvation shall reach to the ends of the earth.*"

John's Birthday was not the first time we heard about John. As we remember, we hear about John at 6 months in his mother's womb when Mary came to visit Elizabeth, and what St. Luke tells us, that "*the baby leapt in her womb for joy*", realizing that he was in the Presence within the womb of Mary, the One Who was to come.

John's entire life was dedicated to preparing the Way for that Promised One. His total focus was on calling the world to repentance, and reconciliation, because the Kingdom of God was at hand. John's whole purpose in life was to be the Voice crying out: "*Prepare the way for the Lord.*" As we know, John's life would be cut short because he boldly and persistently called people to repentance, even

those most powerful, like the King who ended up in a drunken stupor being convinced to silence his Voice by beheading him.

Today we celebrate this Feast because it's an important reminder of what the Church's mission has been since the days of John the Baptist---to gather all the nations into the peace of God's Kingdom. The Church proclaims a message of our need to repent from our sins, so that we can live in the freedom of God's children. But we also celebrate this Feast today because we're in the middle of a special week designated by the Church here in our country---a week to celebrate our Religious Freedom, and to pray for the protection of that great Freedom for all people of Faith.

Our country was founded on that principle of religious freedom, and it's a freedom that is guaranteed in our Nation's Constitution. That God-given and Constitutionally-guaranteed right simply means that the Government cannot coerce people to act against their conscience. And that right means, not only the freedom to come to Church, or to Synagogue, or to Mosque to express our faith, but it also means being given the freedom to put our Faith into action---being given the space to serve others motivated by the conviction of our Faith, such as in Catholic education, health care, child welfare services, migration and refugee services, and our Catholic Charities/St. Vincent de Paul/Knights of Columbus/and other Charitable organizations in the social services and tangible assistance such as food, clothing and shelter that they provide to those most in need.

Yet, as we know, it's a freedom that, over recent years, is clearly in jeopardy. Especially in recent years, there have been numerous efforts to chip away at the ability of faith-based organizations in general, and those of our own Catholic Church in particular, to put our faith into practice, by trying to require certain practices that clearly violate Church teaching.

As Pope Francis said when he was at the White House in 2015 during his Apostolic Visit to the United States: "Religious Freedom is one of America's most precious possessions", and he urged all Americans "to be vigilant, precisely as good citizens, to preserve and defend that freedom from everything that would threaten or compromise it."

The United States Bishops purposely ask us to celebrate "Religious Freedom Week" during these days when we liturgically honor and celebrate the lives of some powerful Saints, who valiantly stood up against those in power in their time

to try to make individuals compromise their faith and beliefs. That includes St. John Fisher and St. Thomas More whose Feast was on Monday, and who, in the mid-1500's in England stood up to Henry VIII; the great Sts. Peter and Paul whose Feast will be this coming Monday; and the First Martyrs of Rome, whose Feast will be next Wednesday. And, of course, we include today's great John the Baptist, who had as the focus of his entire life his mission of preparing the way, and speaking on behalf of, the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is the strength of conviction of these Saints that should stimulate and inspire each of us. We too are called from our mother's wombs, just like John the Baptist was, and Isaiah was---we are all called into life by our Loving God, who gives each of us a mission that only each of us will be able to do. Each, in our own way, are called, like John, to be the Voice that speaks of what Jesus teaches----we are called, like John, to courageously and clearly speak out when there is injustice and evil, and to call people to repentance and reconciliation; we are called, like John, and all the great Saints, to speak with love, compassion, and generous service through the actions of our lives to those we encounter along the way who are in need.

Yes, the Birth of John the Baptist, and the birth of every child, is a cause for celebration, because, even though we are each given our own unique names, we're could all be called "John" because we're all *special gifts from God* to the world.

May we live our lives, and work hard to protect the freedom that we have for all people to live their lives, in ways so that we can Love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

God bless you and God bless our country!