

Pope says to follow example of John the Baptist

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August 29, 2012. From his summer residence in the small town of Castel Gandolfo, Pope Benedict XVI delivered Wednesday's General Audience.

He spoke about St. John the Baptist and how he gave up his life to Martyrdom, an act which is remembered by the Catholic Church every August 29th. **Benedict XVI** *"Today, the Church celebrates the Martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist. John, whose birth we celebrate on the twenty-fourth of June, gave himself totally to Christ, by preparing the way for him through the preaching of repentance, by leading others to him once he arrived, and by giving the ultimate sacrifice."*

The pope also spoke about a fragmented piece of St. John's head that is kept as a relic in the Church of Saint Sylvester in Rome.

Benedict XVI *"In the Roman Martyrology, reference is made to a second finding of the precious relic, transported, on this occasion, in the church of San Silvestro in Rome. These little historical references help us to understand how how and deeply St. John the Baptist is venerated."*

After the audience, the pope went inside the palace where 2,600 acolytes had traveled from France to greet him.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the last Wednesday of August, we celebrate the liturgical memorial of the martyrdom of St. John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus. In the Roman Calendar, he is the only saint whose birth, June 24, and death through martyrdom are celebrated on the same day. Today's memorial dates back to the dedication of a crypt of Sebaste in Samaria, where, by the middle of the fourth century, his head was venerated. The cult spread to Jerusalem, in the Churches of the East and Rome, with the title of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist. In the Roman Martyrology, reference is made to a second finding of the precious relic, transported, for the occasion, to the church of St. Sylvester in Campo Marzio, Rome.

These small historical references help us to understand how ancient and profound devotion to the John the Baptist is. In the Gospels his role in relation to Jesus stands out very well. In particular, St Luke tells his birth, his life in the wilderness, his preaching, and St. Mark tells us about his tragic death in today's Gospel. John the Baptist began his preaching under the emperor Tiberius, in AD 27-28, and his clear invitation addressed to the people who flocked to hear him, is to prepare the way to welcome the Lord, to straighten the crooked streets of life through a radical change of heart (cf. Lk 3, 4). But the Baptist did not limit himself to preaching repentance, conversion, he also recognized Jesus as the "Lamb of God" who comes to take

away the sin of the world (Jn 1, 29), he has the deep humility to reveal in Jesus the true Messenger of God, stepping aside so that Christ can grow, be listened to and followed. As a final note, the Baptist bears witness to his fidelity to the commandments of God with his blood, without ever giving in or turning back, carrying out his mission to the very end. In his Homilies the IXth century monk, St. Bede writes: "For [Christ] he gave his life, although he was not ordered to deny Jesus Christ, he was ordered not to silence the truth. However, he died for Christ" (Hom. 23: CCL 122, 354). For the love of truth, he did not stoop to compromises with the powerful and was not afraid to use strong words with those who had lost the path of God.

Now we look at this great figure, this strength in passion, in resistance to the powerful. Where does this life of rectitude and coherency, this interior strength, completely spent for God and to prepare the way for Jesus, come from? The answer is simple: from his relationship with God, from prayer, which is the main theme of his whole existence. John is the Divine gift that had been long invoked by his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth (cf. Lk 1:13), a great gift, humanly beyond hope, because both were advanced in years and Elizabeth was barren (cf. Lk 1:7), but nothing is impossible for God (cf. Luke 1:36). The announcement of the birth takes place in a place of prayer, the temple of Jerusalem, indeed it takes place when it is Zechariah's turn to have the great privilege of entering the holiest place of the temple to burn incense to the Lord (cf. Lk 1: 8-20). The birth of John the Baptist was marked by prayer: the song of joy, praise and thanksgiving that Zechariah raises to the Lord and which we recite every morning at Lauds, the "Benedictus", enhances the action of God in history and prophetically indicates the mission of his son John, who precedes the Son of God made flesh in order to prepare the way for Him (cf. Lk 1.67 to 79). The whole existence of the Forerunner of Jesus is powered by his relationship with God, especially in the time he spent in the wilderness (cf. Lk 1.80), the desert is a place of temptation, but also the place where the man feels his poverty most because he is deprived of material support and safety, and he understands that the only solid reference point is God Himself. John the Baptist, however, is not only a man of prayer, of constant contact with God, but also a guide in our relationship with God. The Evangelist Luke notes that when introducing the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples the "Our Father", the request is formulated with these words: "Lord teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples" (cf. Lk 11:1).

Dear brothers and sisters, the martyrdom of St. John the Baptist reminds us, Christians of our time, that we can not stoop to compromises with the love of Christ, his Word, the Truth. The Truth is the Truth and there is no compromise. Christian life requires, so to speak, the daily "martyrdom" of fidelity to the Gospel, that is the courage to let Christ grow in us and direct our thinking and our actions. But this can only happen in our lives if there is a solid relationship with God. Prayer is not a waste of time, it does not rob much space from our activities, not even apostolic activities, it does the exact opposite: only if we are able to have a life of faithful, constant, confident prayer will God Himself give us the strength and capacity to live in a happy and peaceful way, to overcome difficulties and to bear witness with courage. St. John the Baptist intercede for us, so that we always maintain the primacy of God in our lives.

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Indonesia, Japan and Malta. Today, the Church celebrates the Martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist. John, whose birth we celebrate on the twenty-fourth of June, gave himself

totally to Christ, by preparing the way for him through the preaching of repentance, by leading others to him once he arrived, and by giving the ultimate sacrifice. Dear friends, may we follow John's example by allowing Christ to penetrate every part of our lives so that we may boldly proclaim him to the world. May God bless all of you!