

June 24

## FOR THE NATIVITY OF SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST

### 138.1 First Point

Saint John enjoys this special privilege, that his birthday is honored in the Church, as is that of Jesus Christ. Saint Bernard says that the reason for this is that he was holy from his birth, since he was sanctified in his mother's womb by Jesus Christ himself when the Most Blessed Virgin went to visit Saint Elizabeth.<sup>644</sup>

Because he was closely united to Jesus Christ, having been chosen by the eternal Father to be his Precursor,<sup>645</sup> it was most fitting that he should be raised to a level of grace above that granted to other people, and that his holiness should be manifest at his very birth. This is why Jesus Christ said that among all people there was none greater than John the Baptist.<sup>646</sup>

With the Church let us honor the birth of Saint John as the beginning of his sanctity and the sanctification of so many others.

Since we were not born saints, let us pray that the second birth, which we received when we withdrew from the world may be for us the beginning of our sanctification. To borrow the words of Saint Leo, let us pray that we not fall back into the degradation of our first birth by conduct inconsistent with the state we have embraced.

### 138.2 Second Point

Saint John was holy also by the life he led. When he could barely walk he went into the desert,<sup>647</sup> to live there separated from all contact with others. Although his father and mother were so holy and separated from the world, their piety did not seem to him an adequate model of what God asked of him. He needed to go out and discover from God himself in seclusion and through the practice of prayer what manner of life should be his. He needed to practice altogether extraordinary austerities, living only on locusts and wild honey,<sup>648</sup> in order to attain the sanctity God asked of him. In this way he prepared himself to preach penance.<sup>649</sup> The infallible way to preach penance successfully is to practice it.

The Church in his Office gives us another reason for the seclusion and mortification of this Saint; namely, the fear of staining his soul with the slightest sin. Those are also the two reasons that should engage you to live apart from the world and maintain a wise and regulated conduct.

### 138.3 Third Point

Living a penitential life in the desert until he was thirty years old, Saint John prepared himself to preach in a holy manner. Then, says the Gospel, the Lord put his words into John's mouth, and at once he went out to all the country around the Jordan preaching penance for the remission of sins.<sup>650</sup> All the people came to him, even publicans and soldiers, and he told all of them what they needed to do in order to be saved.<sup>651</sup> A great number of those who went to him followed his advice and were converted to God. It was the example of his secluded and austere life that enabled him to win people's hearts easily and to convince them to do penance for their sins.

By your vocation you are obliged to announce the truths of the Gospel every day. Practice those that are required of all Christians before you undertake to teach them to others. Though you do not have the grace of being the Precursor of Jesus Christ like Saint John, you do possess the grace of being a successor in his ministry. Be assured, however, that you will make this effective for others only insofar as it has produced its effect in you. See that it does, and without delay.

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On June 24 the summer solstice was celebrated in ancient times by lighting fires to honor the sun. (In fact the solstice is generally reckoned on or about June 22.) The Church put the feast of Saint John on this day apparently because Christ called him a burning and shining light (John 5:35) and wanted to substitute the celebration of John's birthday for the pagan rites. The only other saint whose birthday is a feast of the Church is Our Lady.

644 Lk 1:39-44  
645 Lk 1:17  
646 Mt 11:11  
647 Lk 1:80  
648 Mk 1:6

649 Mk 1:4  
650 Lk 3:2-3  
651 Lk 3:10-14