December 4th: Saint John Damascene, Priest and Doctor of the Church

Gospel text (*Mt* 25:14-30): Jesus told his disciples this parable: "A man going on a journey called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one– to each according to his ability. Then he went away. Immediately the one who received five talents went and traded with them, and made another five. Likewise, the one who received two made another two. But the man who received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master's money.

After a long time the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them. The one who had received five talents came forward bringing the additional five. He said, 'Master, you gave me five talents. See, I have made five more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.' Then the one who had received two talents also came forward and said, 'Master, you gave me two talents. See, I have made two more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master's joy.'

Then the one who had received the one talent came forward and said, 'Master, I knew you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter; so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground. Here it is back.' His master said to him in reply, 'You wicked, lazy servant! So you knew that I harvest where I did not plant and gather where I did not scatter? Should you not then have put my money in the bank so that I could have got it back with interest on my return? Now then! Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten. For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And throw this useless servant into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.'"

"A man called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents; to another, two; to a third, one"

Fr. Antoni CAROL i Hostench

Today, Lord, "through the intercession of Saint John of Damascus, we ask that the true faith which he so masterfully taught may always be our light and our strength" (Collect). More than twelve centuries later, the light given by this great saint remains strikingly relevant. Surely, we could all agree that John belongs among the group of those entrusted with the "five talents" (cf. Mt 25:15), for he received and multiplied everything the Lord placed in his hands during his time on earth.

This great Father of the Eastern Church was, above all, "a witness to the transition from Greek and Syriac culture to the culture of Islam, which was spreading through its military conquests" (Benedict XVI). Born into a wealthy Christian family, John at first served as a financial administrator in the court of the Umayyad Caliphate. Yet he soon gave up that position, distributed his possessions to the poor, and entered the Monastery of Saint Sabbas near Jerusalem, where he dedicated himself to study and to writing.

Saint John of Damascus teaches us, first of all, to recognize the beauty of creation as a magnificent gift—truly a treasure chest of talents! He wrote: "God, who is good and superior to every kind of goodness, was not satisfied to contemplate Himself, but willed that there should be beings capable of sharing in His goodness. Thus there appeared on the horizon of history the vast ocean of God's love for mankind."

And in this outpouring of love, "the Son of God, though existing in the form of God, came down from heaven and stooped to His servants, accomplishing the most new of all things—the one thing truly new under the sun." Through the mystery of the Incarnation, even "matter" itself is divinized and becomes a dwelling place of God. Our faith begins with wonder—wonder at creation, wonder at the beauty of the God who makes Himself visible!

For this reason, unlike Judaism or Islam, the Christian faith has been able to draw its piety from the use of sacred images—not only of Jesus Christ, but also of the saints. As John of Damascus so memorably put it: "Images are the catechism of those who cannot read."