August 29th: Memorial of the Passion of Saint John the Baptist

Gospel text (*Mk* 6:17-29): Herod was the one who had John the Baptist arrested and bound in prison on account of Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, whom he had married. John had said to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.” Herodias harbored a grudge against him and wanted to kill him but was unable to do so. Herod feared John, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man, and kept him in custody. When he heard him speak he was very much perplexed, yet he liked to listen to him.

She had an opportunity one day when Herod, on his birthday, gave a banquet for his courtiers, his military officers, and the leading men of Galilee. Herodias’ own daughter came in and performed a dance that delighted Herod and his guests. The king said to the girl, “Ask of me whatever you wish and I will grant it to you.” He even swore many things to her, “I will grant you whatever you ask of me, even to half of my kingdom.” She went out and said to her mother, “What shall I ask for?” She replied, “The head of John the Baptist.” The girl hurried back to the king’s presence and made her request, “I want you to give me at once on a platter the head of John the Baptist.” The king was deeply distressed, but because of his oaths and the guests he did not wish to break his word to her. So he promptly dispatched an executioner with orders to bring back his head. He went off and beheaded him in the prison. He brought in the head on a platter and gave it to the girl. The girl in turn gave it to her mother. When his disciples heard about it, they came and took his body and laid it in a tomb.

“John had said to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife.”

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Today, we remember the martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist, the Forerunner of the Messiah. The entire life of John revolves around the Person of Jesus; without Him, the existence and mission of the Baptist would have no meaning.

Already in his mother's womb he sensed the nearness of the Savior. The embrace of Mary and Elizabeth—two expectant mothers—opened a dialogue between their unborn children: the Savior sanctified John, and John leapt with joy in his mother's womb.

In his mission as Forerunner, John never lost that enthusiasm—literally, to be "filled with God." He prepared the Lord's ways, leveled His paths, brought low the mountains, announced His presence, and pointed Him out with his finger as the Messiah: "Behold, the Lamb of God" (Jn 1:36).

At the sunset of his life, John, preaching the freedom that only the Messiah can bring to those enslaved by sin, was imprisoned: "John had said to Herod, 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife'" (Mk 6:18). The death of the Baptist is a martyr's testimony centered on the person of Jesus. He was Christ's forerunner in life, and now he precedes Him in a cruel death.

Saint Bede the Venerable tells us: "He was locked away in the darkness of prison, though he came bearing witness to the Light of life and deserved to be called a bright and shining lamp by that Light itself, which is Christ. John was baptized in his own blood, though he had been privileged to baptize the Redeemer of the world."

May today's feast of the Martyrdom of Saint John the Baptist fill us with that same "enthusiasm"—in the truest sense of the word, being "full of God." And may we, strengthened by His Spirit, also bear courageous witness to our faith in Jesus. Let our Christian lives, like John's, revolve entirely around the Person of Christ—for only in Him do our lives find their full meaning.

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- "In persecution God crowns loyal military service; in peace purity of conscience is crowned" (St. Cyprian)
- "Saint John the Baptist was faithful to the Lord to the end. He drew multitudes of sinners to God. And all this he did, not thanks to his great qualities, or to his enormous apostolates. What attracted him the most was his example of fidelity and his total surrender to God, to the point of shedding his blood rather than betraying his conscience." (Francis)
- "St. John the Baptist is the Lord's immediate precursor (...). Going before Jesus "in the spirit and power of Elijah" (Lk 1:17), he bears witness to Christ in his preaching, by his Baptism of conversion, and through his martyrdom." (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 523)