



The Holy See

HOLY MASS CELEBRATED IN LATIN RITE

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER

Sunday, 24 June 2001

Kyiv (Chayka Airport)

1. *"The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name" (Is 49:1).*

Today we celebrate the birth of Saint John the Baptist. The words of the Prophet Isaiah are well-suited to describe this great biblical figure who stands between the Old and the New Testaments. In the long line of Israel's prophets and just men and women, John "the Baptizer" was placed by God's providence immediately before the Messiah, in order to prepare the way before him by his preaching and by the witness of his life.

Of all the Saints, John is *the only one whose birth is celebrated by the Liturgy*. We heard in the first Reading that the Lord called his Servant *"from his mother's womb"*. This statement refers in its fullest sense to Christ, but in a derivative way it can also be applied to his Precursor. Both are born as the result of a special intervention by God: the first is born of the Virgin, the second of an elderly and barren woman. Even from his mother's womb John *indicates the One who will reveal to the world the loving plan of God*.

2. *"From my mother's womb you called me" (Responsorial Psalm)*

Today we can make our own these words of the Psalmist. God knew and loved us even before our eyes could contemplate the marvels of creation. At birth all men and women receive *a human name*. But even before that, each one has *a divine name*: the name by which God the Father knows and loves them from eternity and for eternity. This is true for everyone, with the exception of none. *No one is nameless in God's sight!* All have equal value in his eyes: all are different, yet all are equal, and all are called to be sons and daughters in the Son.

"His name is John" (Lk 1:63). Before his astonished kinsmen, Zechariah confirms that this is the name of his son, writing it on a tablet. God himself, through his angel, had given that name, which in Hebrew means *"God is benevolent"*. *God is benevolent to human beings*: he wants them to live; he wants them to be saved. God is benevolent *to his people*: he wants to make of them a blessing for all the nations of the earth. God is benevolent *to humanity*: he guides its pilgrim way

towards the land where peace and justice reign. All this is contained in that name: John!

Dear brothers and sisters! John the Baptist was the messenger, the forerunner: he was sent to prepare the way for Christ. How does the figure of Saint John the Baptist speak to us here, in Kyiv, at the beginning of this pilgrimage in your country? Is it not in some way providential that this figure speaks to us precisely here in Kyiv?

3. This is the place of the Baptism of Rus'. From Kyiv there began that flowering of Christian life which the Gospel first brought forth in the land of the ancient Rus', then in the lands of Eastern Europe and, later, beyond the Urals, in the lands of Asia. In a certain sense, then, Kyiv itself played *the role of a "precursor of the Lord"* among the many peoples who would receive the proclamation of the Gospel from here.

Saint Volodymyr and the inhabitants of Rus' were baptized by missionaries sent from Constantinople, the greatest centre of Christianity in the East. Thus the new-born Church entered the sphere of the exceedingly rich patrimony of faith and culture of the Byzantine Church. This was at the end of the first millennium. While living according to two different traditions, the Church of Constantinople and the Church of Rome were still in full communion. As I wrote in my Apostolic Letter *Euntes in Mundum*: "We ought to thank the Lord together for this fact, which today represents a good omen and a hope. God willed that *Mother Church, visibly united*, should welcome into her bosom, already rich with nations and peoples, and at a moment of missionary expansion both in the West and in the East, this her new daughter on the banks of the Dnieper" (No. 4).

If, as we celebrate the Eucharist today according to the Roman tradition, we recall that moment so profoundly linked to the Byzantine tradition, we do so with gratitude. And we do so with the desire that the memory of the one baptism which we share will help to restore that situation of communion in which diversity of traditions posed no obstacle to unity in faith and ecclesial life.

4. The Baptism which took place here, in Kyiv, inaugurated the thousand-year history of Christianity in the lands of today's Ukraine and in the whole region. Today, having the grace of coming to this historic place, my thoughts go back through the more than ten centuries in which the gift of that first Baptism has continued to be poured out upon successive generations of the sons and daughters of this Nation. What a flowering of spiritual, liturgical and ecclesial life developed from the meeting of different cultures and religious traditions! This splendid inheritance is now entrusted to you, dear brothers and sisters. During these days of my pilgrimage to your country, I join you in praying that your own generation, at the beginning of a new millenium, will prove worthy of the great traditions of its past.

From this City, the cradle of the Christian faith for Ukraine and for the whole area, I greet and embrace with heartfelt affection all the men and women living in these lands. In a special way I greet Cardinals Marian Jaworski and Lubomyr Husar, together with the beloved Bishop of Kyiv-Zhytomyr, Jan Purwi $\frac{1}{2}$ ski, my venerable Brothers from the Ukrainian Episcopal Conference and the Synod of Bishops of the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church. I greet the clergy, the men and women religious and the lay faithful of your glorious and sorely-tried Churches; with great courage they were able to keep alight the lamp of faith even in the dark times of persecution.

5. People of God, you who believe, hope and love in the land of Ukraine, joyfully savour once more the gift of the Gospel

which you received over a thousand years ago! Look today to John the Baptist, an *enduring model of fidelity to God and his Law*. John prepared the way for Christ by the testimony of his word and his life. Imitate him with docile and trusting generosity.

Saint John the Baptist is above all *a model of faith*. Following the example of the great Prophet Elijah, in order to listen more attentively to the word of the one Lord of his life, he leaves everything and withdraws to the desert, from which he would issue the resounding call to prepare the way of the Lord (cf. *Mt 3:3* and parallels).

He is *a model of humility*, because to those who saw in him not only a Prophet, but the Messiah himself, he replied: "Who do you suppose that I am? I am not he. No, but after me one is coming, the sandals of whose feet I am not worthy to untie" (*Acts 13:25*).

He is *a model of uprightness and courage* in defending the truth, for which he was prepared to pay in his person, even to the point of imprisonment and death.

Land of Ukraine, drenched with the blood of martyrs, thank you for the example of fidelity to the Gospel which you have given to Christians the world over! So many of your sons and daughters walked in complete fidelity to Christ; many of them remained constant even to the supreme sacrifice. May their witness serve as an example and a stimulus for the Christians of the third millennium.

6. In the school of Christ, in the footsteps of Saint John the Baptist and of the saints and martyrs of this land, may you too, dear brothers and sisters, be brave enough *always to give priority to the values of the spirit*.

Dear *Bishops, priests, men and women religious*, who have faithfully accompanied this people at the price of personal sacrifices of every kind, sustaining them in the dark times of the Communist terror, I thank you and I offer you this encouragement: continue to be zealous witnesses to Christ and good shepherds of his flock in this beloved country of Ukraine.

You, dear *young people*, be brave and free! Do not let yourselves be taken in by the deceptive mirages of an easy happiness. Follow the way of Christ: he is demanding, certainly, but he alone can help you to savour the full meaning of life and enjoy peace of heart.

You, dear *parents*, prepare the way of the Lord before your children. Bring them up with love, and set a good example by living the principles you teach. And you, *teachers and leaders of society*, deepen your commitment to promoting the complete development of the human person, fostering in the young a deep sense of justice and of solidarity with the less fortunate.

May you be, one and all, *"a light to the nations"* (*Is 49:6*)!

7. *City of Kyiv*, may you be a *"light to Ukraine"*. From you there set out the *evangelizers* who down the centuries have been *"John the Baptists"* for the peoples dwelling in these lands. How many of them, like John, suffered in order to bear

witness to the truth, and by their blood became the seed of new Christians. May future generations never lack men and women of the mettle of these, your glorious ancestors.

Most Holy Virgin, Protectress of Ukraine, you have always guided the Christian people on their pilgrim way. Continue to watch over your children. Help them never to forget the "name", the spiritual identity which they received in Baptism. Help them to rejoice always in the priceless grace of being followers of Christ (cf. *Jn* 3:29). May you be the guide of each one. You, Mother of God and our Mother, Mary!

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