

JOHN BAPTIST – 24 JUNE – AND CENTENARY OF PAULINE COOPERATORS

Today we celebrate the feast of the birthday of John the Baptist. Now certainly John the Baptist was a great saint – the one specially chosen and called by God to prepare the way for the Lord. He was the one who directed the first disciples to Jesus – ‘Look there is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (Jn 1:29) As Jesus said, of all those born of women, there has never been a greater than John the Baptist (Lk 7:28).

John the Baptist is a great saint and he can be a source of inspiration for all of us, and there are many other great saints in the story of the Church who inspire us. But the point I want to stress today is the point that Pope Francis stresses in his recent beautiful Apostolic Letter *Gaudete et Exsultate*, that holiness is not just reserved for some great saints but that every person – including each one of you and myself – is called to holiness, each of is called by name as John was, to fulfil a role in the Church’s mission: truly, the words of the Lord spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, are God’s words to each one of us: before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I consecrated you.” (Jer 1:5)

We are each called to holiness, but each in our own unique way. We are not called to be holy in the way John the Baptist was – thank goodness – he lived in the wilderness, was very smelly, lived off locusts and wild honey, dressed in clothing made of camel’s hair, and in the end, was beheaded. Thankfully we are not called to be holy in that way – but we are called to be holy in ways appropriate to our life. This is what Pope Francis says:

7. I like to contemplate the holiness present in the patience of God’s people: in those parents who raise their children with immense love, in those men and women who work hard to support their families, in the sick, in elderly religious who never lose their smile. In their daily perseverance I see the holiness of the Church militant. Very often it is a holiness found in our next-door neighbours, those who, living in our midst, reflect God’s presence. We might call them “the middle class of holiness”.

14. To be holy does not require being a bishop, a priest or a religious. We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in

everything we do, wherever we find ourselves. Are you called to the consecrated life? Be holy by living out your commitment with joy. Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife, as Christ does for the Church. Do you work for a living? Be holy by labouring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters. Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus. Are you in a position of authority? Be holy by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain.

16. This holiness to which the Lord calls you will grow through small gestures. Here is an example: a woman goes shopping, she meets a neighbour and they begin to speak, and the gossip starts. But she says in her heart: "No, I will not speak badly of anyone". This is a step forward in holiness. Later, at home, one of her children wants to talk to her about his hopes and dreams, and even though she is tired, she sits down and listens with patience and love. That is another sacrifice that brings holiness. Later she experiences some anxiety, but recalling the love of the Virgin Mary, she takes her rosary and prays with faith. Yet another path of holiness. Later still, she goes out onto the street, encounters a poor person and stops to say a kind word to him. One more step.

So we are all called to holiness – everyone – not only bishops, priests, deacons and religious but all the baptised. And our Founder, Blessed James Alberione, was very aware of this and so, as he founded and formed our marvellous religious family, he insisted that there be a place in our religious family – a special branch – reserved for lay people, to share in our life and mission. Without them, and their special vocation and gifts, he knew our Pauline Family would be sadly lacking. And so he formed the Association of Pauline Cooperators, through which lay people could contribute with their prayer and specific gifts to the mission of our religious family, and through which they could also participate in the blessings and graces of our religious family.

It is interesting to note that in the early years of our religious family, our Founder spent a great deal of time communicating with the lay co-operators. One of the first publications he began was called 'Il Cooperatore Paolino' (the Pauline Cooperator) in which he shared all of his plans and hopes with them, and asked for their prayers and practical support to help realise his mission.

The Society of St Paul was founded in 1914 and three years later he founded the Pauline Cooperators in 1917. So we celebrate in this Mass 101 years of faithful lay cooperation in the life and mission of our religious family. We the priests and brothers and sisters thank you, our lay co-operators, for sharing our life and mission, our joys and sorrows, and for accepting the invitation of Jesus Master and Good Shepherd to progress on the path of holiness by your association with us.

I have to say that as a 'professional' religious person I sometimes feel ashamed at the poverty of my holiness compared to the holiness of many lay people I know, people of immense love who make enormous sacrifices for the well-being of others. But perhaps a better way to put it is to say that you (lay co-operators) are an inspiration to me in my own vocation, to follow along that path of holiness to which the Lord is calling me.

In the end, of course, it's not your holiness or my holiness, but our holiness that really matters. Together we all make our contribution to the holiness of the Church so that she may be a conduit of hope and joy and mercy to the people of our world, and that she may be presented as a bride without spot or wrinkle to Christ, the Way, Truth and Life and the Good Shepherd.

Fr Michael Goonan SSP

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