

## **Solemnity of the Nativity of John the Baptist 06-24-18**

At our parish mission of Ndoleleji in Tanzania, we had a small dispensary that provided basic health care. People came from far and near because the government system was corrupt and incompetent. Folks knew they would get prompt and professional care and not have to pay a bribe.

Alan Fue, the director of the clinic, loved his job and took pride in doing all he could with the little we had. He was highly respected. He also knew his limitations.

We had a small maternity clinic of six beds that were almost always full. Giving birth was natural and happened at home unless there were complications. Alan saved many a child and mother. When there were too many complications, we'd drive to the regional hospital 50 miles away over dirt roads for greater help. I assisted Alan a few times both as driver and as part of the delivery team in the bed of my small Toyota pick-up.

Birthdays are as natural as our last breath. And yet, the gift of life is profound and of extra-ordinary importance and value.

Who of you parents have not been in awe at your newborn infant? Who of us have not stared in wonder and delight at a sleeping baby or at those first smiles and moments of recognition. Life, so ordinary and yet so extra-ordinary.

The Catholic Church, at the core of its moral teaching, has always upheld the dignity of the human person from the moment of conception until the moment of natural death. The gift of life is precious and the family is foundational to society.

Today the Catholic Church around the world in every chapel, church and cathedral celebrates the birthday of a child, who from his moment of conception would prove to be extra-ordinary.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were old; beyond child bearing age, like their ancestors Abraham and Sarah.

Zechariah was visited by the angel Gabriel while he was serving in the Holy of Holies in the temple. Astonished and incredulous, he could not speak this extra-ordinary news until his son was born, until he fulfilled the promise of the angel when he wrote, “His name is John.”

John the Baptist is one of the greatest saints of the Church, outranked only by the Blessed Virgin Mary. John’s stature, like that of Mary, results from his special role in salvation history. While Mary was the mother of the savior, John, his cousin was his herald and forerunner, who would prepare his way.

John is seen as the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the Christian martyrs, apart from the Holy Innocents.

As St. Paul proclaims in our second reading from the Acts of the Apostles, “John heralded Jesus’ coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance...He would say, ‘What do you suppose that I am? I am not he. Behold, one is coming after me; I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals of his feet.’”

He would also say in John 3:30, “He must increase; I must decrease.”

Even though the Church honors John with the highest ranking feast day, that is a solemnity, John always, like Mary points us to Jesus. Jesus is our savior. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the fullness of the revelation of the Father. “He must increase; I must decrease.”

I am, we are, all in need of repentance as John proclaimed. Repentance in our present day understanding is mostly understood as being sorry for something, a feeling more than an action.

In Greek, metanoia, the word for repentance, describes a change of mind, heart, action and attitude demanded by personal conversion. It demands a re-forming of our self and our life by turning toward God and away from the evil forces that pervade our world and destroy the dignity of the human person created in God’s image.

This is a lifelong challenge, to order ourselves and our world according to the vision and values of Jesus and to live out the obligations that arise from being a disciple of Jesus that will often put us at odds with what is going on around us.

The events and discourse of the past weeks regarding immigration at our southern border have been confusing, cruel, disconcerting and immoral.

In January, 2003, the bishops of Mexico and the United States wrote a joint letter entitled, *Strangers No Longer: Together on the Journey of Hope* where they called for comprehensive immigration reform that highlighted the importance of family cohesion as one among other important factors.

On June 13, 2018 at their national meeting, the Bishops released this statement:

“At its core, asylum is an instrument to preserve the right to life. The Attorney General’s recent decision elicits deep concern because it potentially strips asylum from many women who lack adequate protection. These vulnerable women will now face return to the extreme dangers of domestic violence in their home country. This decision negates decades of precedents that have provided protection to women fleeing violence. Unless overturned, (which it partially was on Thursday) the decision will erode the capacity of asylum to save lives, particularly in cases that involve asylum seekers who are persecuted by private actors.

“We condemn the continued use of family separation at the U.S./ Mexico border as an implementation of the Administration’s zero tolerance policy. Our government has the discretion in our laws to ensure that young children are not separated from their parents and exposed to irreparable harm and trauma. Families are the foundational element of our society and they must be able to stay together. While protecting our borders is important, we can and must do better as a government, and as a society, to find other ways to ensure that safety. Separating babies from their mothers is not the answer and is immoral.”

I am no John the Baptist. I am not a prophet crying out in the wilderness. You won't hear me calling our president, elected officials or entrepreneurial millionaires and billionaires a "brood of vipers."

What I do preach though is Jesus, the heart of the Father's love, who taught that "Whenever you do this to the least of my sisters and brothers, you do it to me."

Birthdays should be joyous occasions. July 6, Fr. Cody will celebrate his 40<sup>th</sup>. He will be in a new parish with new people all around him. Maybe we can ease his transition by sending him cards at Sacred Heart Parish in Bellingham or writing a note after Mass for him.

In addition, on this birthday of St. John the Baptist, let us advocate for comprehensive immigration reform by contacting Senators Murray and Cantwell and Congressman Denny Heck. Please check out the USCCB website to understand more fully the bishop's guidance on this important moral issue of our time.

You may also want to join Pope Francis and Catholic Relief Services in their initiative, *Share the Journey* which focuses on immigrants and refugees around the world.

St. John the Baptist, pray for us.