

**THE NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST
THE SOLEMNITY OF SS. PETER & PAUL
THE TWELFTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME**

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Sun. **SOLEMNITY OF THE BIRTH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST**
June 24 **OUR CALL TO SHINE WITH CHRIST'S LIGHT**
A reflection derived from a sermon by St. Bernard

Mon. **Monday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time**
25 **OUR CALL TO SEIZE THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN**
A reflection derived from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Tues. **Tuesday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time**
26 **BEARING THE SWEET YOKE OF CHRIST**
A reflection derived from a sermon by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

Wed. **Wednesday of the Twelfth Week in Ordinary Time**
27 **CAN SAINT'S FEASTS HELP US KEEP VIGIL?**
A reflection derived from a sermon by St. Bernard

Thurs. **The Memorial of St. Irenaeus**
28 **BELIEVING IN CHRIST'S RESURRECTION**
A reflection derived from Against Heresies by St. Irenaeus

Fri. **The SOLEMNITY OF SS PETER & PAUL**
29 **THE EXODUS TO WHICH OUR GOD CALLS US**
From Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

Sat. **A Memorial of Our Lady**
30 **WHAT OUR MOTHER TEACHES & SHARES WITH US**
A reflection derived from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

OUR CALL TO SHINE WITH THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

A reflection derived from a sermon by St. Bernard

Today we celebrate the solemnity of John the Baptizer. Listen to what Scripture says about him. *“He was a burning and shining lamp.”* He was both burning and shining. A genuinely wise person’s inward burning shines outwardly. Such a person’s concern is always to burn more intensely. That should be ours too. One who shines is praised but we want not human praise but

It was inspiration rather than teaching that enabled John to burn as he did. He was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb. The heavenly flame so possessed him that he perceived Christ’s coming even before he could perceive himself. A new fire from heaven penetrated the Virgin’s ear through Gabriel’s mouth and so entered into a little child; the Holy Spirit filled him from then on. He was made a lamp-stand for all those who dwelt in God’s house, and first of all for his own mother. Thus, she perceived that Mary brought the Messiah to her and to John in her womb. When Mary’s greeting entered her ear, it filled her child and he rejoiced. She was given the gift of recognizing Christ’ presence as well as who Mary truly is. John received the inward fervor that caused him to shine.

A threefold burning and shining is shown us. John was burning in himself. He burned with the vigor that was to express itself in his way of life. He burned in dedication to Christ. This is shown in the constancy of his calls to his neighbors to repent and in his example of repentance. It is shown by his pointing out Christ. He had been promised by an angelic annunciation, conceived by a miracle and sanctified in the womb.

John made little of all that is merely of this world and came, Scripture tells us, *“neither eating nor drinking and clothed in camel’s hair”*. Do we worry about what we shall wear or eat? If so, what are we celebrating today? John draws us into the desert, but what do we seek there? It was prophesied that many would rejoice at this birth because he teaches us to seek the Lord rather than vanities. Our call is to labor as John did to come to God in whom we can live and rejoice forever. We are to work not for the food that perishes but that which endures unto eternal life. We live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from God’s mouth, most especially The Word who is Christ. If so who can boast about doing penance or grumble over food. Let us examine our consciences. Let us correct ourselves. Let the fervor of a pure confession and of humility supply whatever we lack. God is faithful and God will forgive.

I cannot be a burning lamp unless I love the Lord my God with all my heart and all my mind and all my strength. Charity is kindled for our salvation. Why not approach the Throne of Mercy with total confidence? Give thanks to John and journey toward Christ. As John had to decrease, so we must in order that Christ may always and everywhere increase. By God’s grace, may we always have the strength to burn and let Christ shine. The more intensely you burn the brighter the light of Christ will shine from you. You will be God’s lamp.

OUR CALL TO SEIZE THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

A reflection derived from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

Since the days of John the Baptist, Scripture tells us, the Kingdom of Heaven suffers violence and the violent seize it. How is it that the Kingdom of Heaven is now open so that it can be seized by those who, like us, can't merit it. God brought about this happy change in our circumstance through the birth of John that we celebrate today. He shows us that the violence by which the Kingdom is seized. It is called repentance.

Think of the examples Scripture gives us. Didn't the patriarch Jacob do violence as he wrestled with God; and doesn't he teach us that we must hang on until true day breaks and exert all our strength? That is a good sort of violence and God yielded to it and rewarded the one he had vanquished with the grace of a blessing. *"I have loved wisdom more than health and all beauty"*, we are told. Would *that* I might make such a sacrifice and receive the reward Jacob received.

Don't all of us have as our purpose to win heaven by force? Don't we join ourselves in a community to better wrestle with the angel who guards the way to the Tree of Life? Don't we know that our toil will make it possible to achieve this only by the touch of God's strength and through God's grace? But we must show that our perseverance can't be overcome. Don't you wrestle with God even when God resists your impatient prayers?

O Mercy, with what unrelenting kindness you fight against those you struggle to draw to yourself. You love those who love you. So, we must not despair but persevere. Be happy that God has come to you so you may wrestle. God loves to suffer violence from you. God forbid that we should forget how he who was so strong willed to become weak and even die for us! Pierced with so many wounds, where can he find the strength to resist those who ask what is pleasing to him? How can he resist charity? Wasn't it charity that led him through every kind of weakness and even death on a cross? Love isn't merely as strong as death but stronger than death!

So be armed with the power of love if you would force an entry into the Kingdom of Heaven! Be assured that you will easily conquer the King of Heaven himself. If He seems to oppose you, know that he seeks only to give a finer edge to your spirit and to exercise your strength and reveal your constancy. He would multiply your victories and so increase the number of your crowns.

Gird yourself, you people of strength! Follow your leader in this happy warfare. He is John the Baptist, from whose days Heaven began to be open to such force. Like David he has become a prince of holy robbers and a leader of devout bandits who use a holy and praiseworthy violence. He leads an army of publicans and sinners into the Kingdom of Heaven. His battle cry is: Do penance, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! His standard is red with his own blood. He will commend you by his intercession as he draws you by his example. Among those born of women none is more pleasing to the King of Heaven—except Jesus Christ our Lord. We have every help we could need.

BEARING THE SWEET YOKE OF CHRIST

A reflection derived from a sermon by St. Aelred of Rievaulx

“*In my Father’s house there are many mansions*”, says Our Lord. There are differences in life styles and degrees of perfection and so many mansions in heaven. One is for those married people whose way of life fits them for heaven. So too there is one for widows and widowers and for all other states of life in the Church. All are saved by living appropriately to their state in life and holding to the law Christ has given them. This is true for monks as well. Their proper way of life is shown in the primitive church that began in Jerusalem. Some are solitaries, and St. John the Baptist shows how they should live.

What of cenobites? The total perfection of a monk is found in giving up one’s own will. But monks, as all who would follow Christ, have to pass through various stages of life. In infancy one must combat ignorance. In adolescence one must war against bad desires. In old age one must battle lassitude. The danger in spiritual infancy is living without caution or foresight. The danger in spiritual adolescence is failing to love virtue and hate vice. The danger in spiritual old age is lack of constancy in seeking knowledge and virtue.

In Scripture we hear that “*it is good for a person to carry the yoke from youth*”. A yoke is mentioned in many places in Scripture. There are yokes of iniquity, yokes of weakness, yokes of misfortune, yokes of fear, and yokes of charity.

The first is a yoke of the devil that is lifted from the shoulders of all who repent and turn to Christ. The yoke of weakness is the burden of being unable begin to amend one’s life because one is unwilling to surrender all one’s self to Christ’s teachings and so rely on his strength rather than one’s own. This is lifted by trust in God. The yoke of misfortune consists in the miseries of this life—labors, sorrows, poverty, death of family members and every sort of illness. We bear this yoke because of the corruption of our nature and unrelenting habits. That is, we find ourselves driven to seek pleasures or like things whether we want to or not. The yoke of bad habits is particular hard to bear, and it is one people place upon themselves through lack of wisdom and grace. Only by whole-heartedly turning to Jesus can this yoke be lifted.

The yoke of fear comes from inability to cast off the bad yokes. One has to place oneself under authority and bear the yoke of discipline and the law of Christ. This is what we do by placing ourselves under the Rule of St. Benedict. One finds this laborious and experiences the fact that “*narrow is the way that leads to life*”. Blessed John the Baptist bore such a yoke from infancy, even from the womb. But the Holy Spirit came to him and gave him the yoke of charity. It is sweet. Even in prison he found it sweet to be silent and sit alone. Sitting indicates stability, silence inner peace, and from this one is raised to the heights of contemplation. These are states we all seek.

Whatever transitions we make in the course of our lives are presided over by love. To raise your mind and heart to God is to rise above oneself. John the Baptist knew and understood all this. He held all earthly things in contempt and raised his entire heart above self to Jesus Christ. May our Lord lead us to the blessedness of bearing his yoke of charity.

CAN FEASTS OF THE SAINTS HELP US KEEP VIGIL?

A reflection derived from a sermon by St. Bernard

We ought to carefully consider at least three things when we celebrate feasts for saints. First, they give us help; second, they give us example, and, third, they remind us of our own shame.

They can help us because one who is powerful on earth is even more powerful in heaven. If we have compassion on sinners and the miserable here on earth we will understand these things deeply and more truly in heaven and so pray the more for such people.

They give us their example because after turning to the Lord they refused to turn either to the right or to the left of what the Lord commanded them. A saint's way is that of the One who said: "*I am the way, the truth and the life*". A saint is lowly in work but speaks authoritatively about the way to God for he knows it by personal experience. As the prophet said: "*The path of justice is straight; straight is the road of the just*".

What, then, of our shame. Reflect on the fact that a human person like us was capable of suffering with Christ. Fashioned out of the same clay as a saint we too must follow the Lord no matter the cost. We rejoice because we have advocates in Heaven but we feel shame because we haven't followed in their footsteps. But perhaps this very shame may bring us glory. Perhaps even our fear may engender an openness to grace. How could it be that they travelled the same road we do but so wonderfully well?

You can see why we rejoice in the feasts of saints but also feel shame. Our joy in this valley of tears is the result of our longing for what the saints have attained. Our bread here below needs to be salted by the water of our tears. In this way we may turn not only toward the end we seek but also to the beginning of the way that leads to that end. These are things we should ponder when we keep the vigil of a saint. We need to do this especially on solemn feasts such as those of martyrs and of the Lord's Apostles, so the excitement of a special feast should help you stay awake and alert during the praying of Vigils.

Do you think of comparing your way of using the night with the way worldly people use it to engage in drunkenness and like things? They find a joy in doing evil things and so they very much want to stay awake for them, even if they later pass out. What does it take to cause us, who want to do holy things, to be excited enough about what we are doing to stay alert like that of people who want to do something evil? Ought we not to seek to enter fully enough into what we long for so that we can rejoice in the means that bring us to our goal?

We know of the weakness of Peter and the bitter zeal that drove Paul to work violence on those who believed in Christ. Once Peter had been forced to face the weakness of his love and repeatedly reaffirm it, and once Paul had been forced to recognize he was persecuting the one sent to be his savior, both devoted themselves to service, even when very tired. Haven't we experienced Christ's love for us and turned away from worldly forms of excitement and to sharing our repentant love of Christ with others? Let's remember this as we keep vigils and let grace build us up in a spiritual joy that refreshes better than sleep.

BELIEVING IN THE REALITY OF CHRIST RESURRECTION

A reflection derived from Against Heresies by St. Irenaeus

We are Christ's members and we are nourished by God's creation. It is God's gift to us. The one who causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall has given us these things. God has also declared that the chalice we share, which comes from creation, contains Christ's blood and that this makes it the nourishment of our body. God affirms that the bread, which comes from his creation, is Christ's body, and that it is the nourishment of our bodies. When the chalice we mix and the bread we bake receive the word of God these created realities become the body and blood of Christ by which we live and grow.

So how could it be said that flesh which belongs to the Lord's own body and was nourished by his personal body and blood is incapable of receiving God's gift of eternal life? St. Paul speak of this in his Letter to the Ephesians. He says we are members of Christ's Body and that this means we share in Christ's flesh and bones. Nor is Paul speaking of some spiritual and incorporeal kind of Christ. After all, spirits don't have flesh and bones. Paul is speaking of a real human body composed of flesh, sinews, and bones and is nourished by the chalice of Christ's blood and receives growth from the bread which is Christ's body.

A slip of a vine, planted in good ground, bears fruit at the proper time and after it has grown. A grain of wheat which has fallen into the ground, and seems to decay, nevertheless is raised up again and multiplied. This is accomplished by the Spirit of God. The Spirit sustains all things. The wisdom of God places these realities at our service. When they receive God's word they become our Eucharist. It is the body and blood of Christ. In the same way, our bodies, which have been nourished by the Eucharist, will be buried in the earth and will decay but will then rise again at the appointed time.

If one claims that our flesh is not saved, then such a one claims that the Lord has not redeemed us with his blood and that the Eucharistic chalice doesn't make us sharers in Christ's own body. There can be no blood without veins, flesh, and the rest of a human being. The Word of God actually became a human. Then with his own blood he redeemed us. As St. Paul says, "*In him, through his blood, we have been redeemed, and our sins have been forgiven*". The Word of God will raise us, and our human bodies, and share with us the glory of God the Heavenly Father. Then God will clothe our mortal nature in immortality. God will freely endow our corruptible nature with incorruptibility. God's power is shown most perfectly in weakness. Believe and be freed from anxiety and fear; enter into joy!

THE EXODUS TO WHICH THE LORD'S CALLS US

A reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

After asking Peter for the third time, "Do you love me?", Jesus said to him, "*Feed my sheep*" and then added: "*I tell you most solemnly that when you were young you put on your belt and went where you liked: but when you grow old you will let someone else put on your belt and take you where you don't want to go.*" We are told that these words were an announcement of Peter's martyrdom.

That isn't all they are. Jesus was announcing Peter's final exodus even as he called him to one more among his many exoduses. When he threw himself at Jesus' feet and said "*I am a sinful man!*" he heard the call "*Come, follow me!*" It had happened again, perhaps an hour before, when Peter jumped out of the boat to swim to Jesus. It had happened when he had confessed Jesus the Christ and Son of God, and when Jesus asked the disciples if they would leave him and Peter responded "*To whom shall we go?*" Each incident was a break with Peter's past, some riskier and others more comfortable. Each came with an invitation to go beyond self.

That happens to each of us and happens repeatedly, as it did for Peter and for Paul. The final leap of faith that Peter and Paul, and all of us, have to make will be that of dying for and in the Lord. Surrounded by events, conditionings, and situations forcing themselves on us and out of our control we have follow the Lord. We feel a kind of resistance and our spiritual efforts won't be enough, most likely, to enable us to encounter our final exodus serenely. We will face something that is very like Jesus' agony in the Garden and will have to pray, "*Your will be done, not mine!*"

Think about this in relation to Paul's experience, as you have in relation to Peter's. "*Because of Christ*", Paul confesses, "*I have come to consider all my 'advantages' as disadvantages.*" But God has helped him to face this fact by believing that nothing can outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Jesus Christ. We, like Paul, will be asked to accept the loss of everything and put all our hope in Christ.

When Paul encountered Christ on the road to Damascus he had to accept a wholly new vision of the meaning of his life, and everything else. It was a kind of revelation or enlightenment. When Jesus asked him, "*Why are you persecuting me?*", Paul suddenly understood that he had mixed up truth and error. Seeing who Jesus really is required that everything change for Paul, and especially his understanding of himself. How do we feel about having to accept something like that? More, this experience brings a realization that I am being sent!

This happens to each of us as we are gifted with news and knowledge not due to any effort on our part. And because of this each of us has been made a sign of mercy and grace! The rest of our life has to become a response to this grace, and one we share with others. This is what we celebrate when we join in the Eucharist with Peter and Paul, joined with them in graces that we don't chose but show us the path God would have us walk. It is a gift marvelous beyond words, but also scary. Look what responding made of Peter and of Paul! Will you let God make of you a like blessing for many others?

WHAT OUR MOTHER TEACHES & SHARES WITH US

A reflection derived from a sermon by Bl. Gueric of Igny

When Martha tried to call Mary from the feet of Jesus he told her: “*Mary has chosen the better part!*” What Jesus said of Mary of Bethany he equivalently said to Mary of Nazareth. The Blessed Virgin Mary chose the better part and now she, as well as the other Mary, has entered into the unending possession of it. Both have entered into the closest of closenesses with the Lord. Mary of Bethany welcomes the Lord under the shelter of her roof and the Blessed Virgin welcomed him to the bridal chamber of her womb. “*He who created me*”, we read, “*has rested in my tent.*” The one sat at his feet and listened and the Blessed Virgin treasured up all that concerned Jesus and pondered it in her heart.

It seems that when Jesus went around the towns and villages Mary accompanied him. She followed him to the Cross and stood there beside him. How could she be frightened of death when her love was stronger than death? There he acknowledged her as mother and entrusted her to a suitable protector. Loving her as he did, Jesus loved her to the end; he spoke almost his last words for her benefit. Mary was to rejoice in all she remembered of Jesus and it was not to be taken away from her but brought to perfection.

I say these things so that if anyone feels a longing for that “best part”, which Jesus praised, such a one may know that this is the reward of those who can’t be blamed for failing to do Martha’s part—as Mary had done in all the years she spent with Jesus in Nazareth. Let it be known that this too is a gift and a grace. The toil involved in work and its anxieties are the seeds of justice, through which joys are reaped from the fruits of consoling mercy. One who sows sparingly will reap sparingly and Mary sowed without stint or hesitation. She reminds us that those who sow with a blessing will also reap a blessing. Who can miss this truth who know the one “blessed among women”.

The Virgin Mary was graced with a life that is essentially like ours. We too are called to allow Jesus to enter into us and to grow there until he is ready to come forth for the salvation of many. We too are given the opportunity to keep our gaze fixed steadily on Jesus and on all that has to do with Jesus. And if we accept this gift how could we fail to contemplate all that we come to know? How could we fail to store it up in our hearts and even to share it with those God calls into closeness with us, as God called St. John into intimacy with Blessed Mary? We too share his passion, as we will share his resurrection and glorification. In following Mary’s lead, we too will be blessed, and all nations will be blessed in and through us. She has been filled and yet had enough left to give us little ones much of what filled her table. The gifts of God are enriched by being shared, that is their nature. Who would not be glad to be a dog under her table? Where do we find her, and all these marvelous things? We find them at the table of the sacrament of the altar. May these gifts lead us to the table of everlasting joy!