

Reflection on the Solemnity of John the Baptist celebrated on June 24.

The Solemnity of the Birth of John the Baptist reminds us that it is now just under six months till Christmas, and that for us in the southern hemisphere the days are starting to lengthen.

John's role as Herald or Forerunner of the Saviour is especially commemorated amongst Eastern Christians in union with the West, as well as amongst the Orthodox. Thus typically above the *iconostasis*, which is a wall or partition of religious paintings or icons that separates the nave of the church from the sanctuary, there above it is placed an icon with, on one side John the Baptist bowing in supplication to the Risen Lord in glory, and on the other side, the Virgin Mary likewise bowing in prayer to her Son.

This has led to the insight that the Baptist's role in salvation history parallels in some aspects Mary's role in it. First their humility: Mary's reply to Gabriel at the Annunciation, "I am the servant of the Lord: be it done to me according to your word" corresponds to the Baptist's declaration in John's Gospel, "He must increase, I must decrease."

St Augustine, in company with other early Christian writers, noted how fitting it was to celebrate John's birthday at the Summer Solstice, the day that in the northern hemisphere, according to the now superseded Julian Calendar, marked the shortening of daylight hours. (We have been following the Gregorian calendar since 1582 and the winter solstice for us is usually on June 22.) This cosmic event symbolized John's humility, "I must decrease".

The birthday of Jesus, on the other hand, took place at the Winter Solstice in the northern hemisphere which marked the beginning of the lengthening of daylight hours. This event symbolized Jesus's birth as the coming into the world of the true light.

A second correspondence between Mary and the Baptist was the fact that each in their own way had put their lives totally at the disposal of Jesus - Mary in her role as his mother, and John in his role of publicly introducing Jesus to Jewish society through his preaching and, in obedience to Jesus, baptising him in the Jordan River.

John referred to himself as the friend of the bridegroom, the one who is unconditionally present to the bridegroom at the marriage ceremony, waiting on him, listening for his voice and rejoicing in serving him.

The Solemnity of John's birth reminds us that we can experience his ongoing role of serving Jesus, when, during the rite of Communion, we hear his words, "Behold the Lamb of God, behold him who takes away the sins of the world" – a role which bring us the Lord's favour.

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