

“He Must Increase”

In speaking of John the Baptist Our Lord said, Of those born of women none is greater than John the Baptist. Considering who said that, it has to be the ultimate compliment. John the Baptist also gives what can be considered the best definition of Christian discipleship when he says, *He must increase, but I must decrease* (Jn 3:30).

To accentuate his importance in the Christian dispensation the Maronite Church devotes a full week to both the Announcement of his birth, which begins the Maronite liturgical year, and a full week to his birth. We then see him in the Solemnity of the Epiphany when he baptizes Our Lord. (In the Roman Rite Epiphany centers on the visit of the Magi to Our Lord while in the East it centers on the Baptism of Our Lord). We see in him the new Elijah.

The angel Gabriel tells his father Zechariah that he will go forth *in the spirit and power of Elijah* and Our Lord refers to him as Elijah.

Today if John the Baptist were to enter a church on any Sunday, a few heads would turn to say the least. His dress, even in a time when dressing to attend the Sunday liturgy has reached a new low, would be shabby. It would also be obvious to all that it had been some time since his last bath or shower. Yet everything about him exemplified why Our Lord paid him that compliment

He was a man who lived his message. Not only his words, but also his whole life was a protest. A

protest that many people of his time, from all walks of life including many of the supposedly religious, had turned away from God. John was no city-dweller. He was a man from the desert, and from its solitudes and its desolations: hence his outward appearance. There were the clothes he

wore – a garment woven of camel’s hair and a leather belt about his waist. So did Elijah. To look at the man was to be reminded, not of the fashionable orators of the day, but of the ancient prophets who lived close to the great simplicities and avoided the soft and effeminate luxuries which kill the soul. The future Desert Fathers often mirrored their lives on him. There was the food he ate – locusts and wild honey. John’s diet was of the simplest. John knew full well and lived the great truth that wholehearted



discipleship to God and materialism do not go together. In a similar way, St. Teresa of Avila would later say, *Prayer and comfort do not go together.*

John’s impact begins literally at the moment of the announcement of his birth to his father the priest Zechariah. Because Zechariah doubts the angel’s message, he is struck dumb until the birth of John. This event manifests an important truth. As the Maronite Synaxarion says, *In order to bring him (Zechariah) to belief, Gabriel gave him a sign. Zechariah was to be mute until the birth of his son. This sign given to Zechariah is intended for all of us. John the Forerunner is the link between the Old*

and New Covenants, the Old will be silenced and the New Covenant proclaimed. Here we have a very important truth: one that needs to be stated clearly given the present confusion on this. As this quote says, *the Old will be silenced.* The announcement of the Forerunner's birth and Zechariah being made mute foreshadow the end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New Covenant of Jesus Christ. The New replaces the Old. There are not two parallel covenants today existing side by side, but the one Covenant of Jesus Christ. This Covenant is for **ALL** people.

Even more than his outward appearance, John the Baptist would today elicit a rather negative reaction from many in society at large and even from a good number in the Church. Why? He took God too seriously or in our way of speaking, he was an extremist. Our culture doesn't like people who take God too seriously. We prefer to see religion, not in terms of **truth**, but in terms of **private** spirituality. We don't seek truth in it but consolations, affirmations and some good ideas and advice on how to deal with daily life and its challenges. Not so with John the Baptist.

He epitomized what G.K. Chesterton said, *I don't want a church that tells me when I'm right; I want a church that tells me when I'm wrong.* John certainly did that: it would cost him his head. Like all the prophets, he knows God as more than a comfortable chum. God is holy and unchangeably just. He cannot endure sin or compromise with it. The word "prophet" in Hebrew means literally "**mouth.**" A prophet is God's mouthpiece. A great prophet is a **big mouth.** Big mouths are what they were, and they all got in trouble for it. A prophet tells too much truth to be socially approved. A "popular prophet" is a contradiction in terms. *Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets* (Luke 6:26).

When King Herod Antipas took Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip, as his wife, John could have ignored it or compromised with it in terms of our culture's rationalizations such as. *The Church doesn't belong in the bedroom. Different strokes for*

different folks. Whatever floats your boat. And last, but not least, We agree to disagree. Had John made use of one of those little ditties and initiated an ongoing dialogue with Herod and Herodias, he could have kept his head on his shoulders. However John knew that God gave the Ten Commandments and not the Ten Suggestions. God expects to be obeyed. He doesn't want dialogue but obedience.

The example of John the Baptist is both timely and informative for us today because he teaches us by his life an important truth that has been all but forgotten by many Christians today: you cannot coexist with evil. We particularly see this in the issues of abortion and the "same-sex" agenda. Many Christians seem to think that these two evils are "here to stay" and therefore we must accept them as part of the landscape. While they would not choose to engage in these themselves they are not too upset than others engage in them and worse, seek to bestow upon them "normalcy." This rests upon an assumption that religion is something "private" and therefore we have no right to "impose our beliefs" on society at large. We hear that "what we agree on is more important than what we disagree on." That may be called a "half-truth." The problem is that it minimizes the disagreements resulting that we have minimized some great evils. While personal good example is a must foundation, by itself it does not suffice. Our Lord calls us to be leaven in our society and culture and he also warned us to expect much opposition. However, this shouldn't deter us. Dr. Warren Carroll described the abandonment of seeking the social kingship of Christ and the consequences we now experience as a result.

Christianity was still very much alive in the West in 1900. Most of the explicit apostasy among ordinary people, now so evident all around us, was then still in the future along with the other horrors. But the idea of a Christian commonwealth, outside of a limited circle in the Church, had died completely. It no longer played a significant part in world affairs.

Therein lies the central lesson of what has happened to the faith in our time. We have learned – or should have learned by now – that Christianity cannot be

*sustained indefinitely by private devotion alone, but only by public commitment to the building of an explicitly Christian social, economic, and political order. Christians of the West have tried the other road, the easy road, of putting Christ first only in the Church, or in the privacy of the home and of their own thoughts. **It has not worked.** The enemy they would no longer confront in the streets and squares, the marketplaces and the halls of government, is now invading those sanctuaries of home and church, to steal the children of the merely private Christians*

and make them adepts of the secularist world.

John the Baptist was willing to confront that enemy because God's truth came before all else. As we begin Great Lent may his example and intercession, along with our prayer, fasting and penance, impel us to decrease so that Christ may increase in us and in our society. ✠

Icon of St. John the Baptist by Sean Kramer