

The Nativity of John the Baptist (Solemnity, June 24th)

June 24th: The Timing of the Feast of John's Birth

Joseph Ratzinger: Between the two dates of March 25 [the Annunciation] and December 25 [Christmas] comes the feast of the forerunner, St. John the Baptist, on *June 24, at the time of the summer solstice*. The link between the dates can now be seen as a liturgical and cosmic expression of the Baptist's words: "*He [Christ] must increase, but I must decrease*" (Jn 3:30). The birthday of St. John the Baptist takes place on the date when the days begin to shorten, just as the birthday of Christ takes place when they begin again to lengthen." (Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, p. 109 [emphasis added])

Isaiah 49:1-6—God Calls even From the Womb

1. Vocation: "the LORD called me *from the womb*" (49:1)
2. Mission: "to bring Jacob back" and that "Israel might be gathered" (49:5)
3. Salvation: "a light to the nations" and "salvation" to "the ends of the earth" (49:6)

Psalms 139—You Knit Me in My Mother's Womb

1. Omniscient: "you know when I sit down and when I rise up" (v. 2)
2. Creator: God "knit me together *in my mother's womb*" (v. 13)
3. Personal: "my soul" also "you know full well" (v. 14, NAB)

Acts 13:22-26—John Heralded the Coming of the Savior

1. John's Message: "I am not he," that is, the "Savior" (13:24-25)

Luke 1:57-66, 80—The Birth of John the Baptist

1. Miraculous Birth: Elizabeth "gave birth to a son" through God's "mercy" (1:57-58)
2. Circumcision: on the "eighth day" (1:59; cf. Gen 17:12; Lev 12:3)
3. Naming of the Child (1:60-64)
 - a. Not "Zechariah" (after his father) but "John" (Greek *Iōannēs*)
 - b. Meaning: from the Hebrew *Yōhanan* ("the LORD has been gracious")
 - c. Children normally named after "relatives" (1:61)
 - d. God-Given Names: special role in history (Gen 16:11; Isa 7:14; Matt 16:13-18)
 - d. Zechariah's "tongue" is "loosed": miraculous healing (1:64; cf. Luke 1:18)
4. Fame of John: "What then will this child be?" (1:66)
6. Childhood of John the Baptist (1:80)
 - a. Became "strong in spirit" (cf. Luke 1:16-17)
 - b. "In the wilderness" (Gk *erēmos*) (cf. Josephus, *War* 2.120; J. Fitzmyer, 1.389)
 - c. Until "the day of his manifestation to Israel" (= John's public ministry)

The Birth of John the Baptist in the Living Tradition

St. Maximus of Turin [5th century A.D.]: [L]et us give all honor to the most blessed John

[the Baptist] by celebrating this day of his birth with great joy, *for before anyone else he recognized the everlasting light of heaven which was going to dispel the darkness of the world, and he was the first to point it out.* (St. Maximus of Turin, *Sermon 57*; trans. E. Barnecut)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection (Solemnity of the Nativity of John the Baptist)

1. Why do we celebrate the Birth of John the Baptist on June 24th? What is the significance of this date, both with reference to the Summer and Winter Solstices, and to the birth of Christ?

2. Why is John the Baptist given the name “John”? What did it mean in Hebrew, and how does it relate to his identity and mission?

3. How ancient is the feast of the birth of John the Baptist? Why is it so important to Christianity?

For Further Study

1. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (trans. John Saward; San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000). An absolutely fantastic study of the liturgy by the man who would become Pope Benedict XVI. Must-reading for any serious Catholic interested in going deeper into the spirit and meaning of worship.