



# ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

## SIMPLE PROFESSION

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU  
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault  
(Fontgombault, June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2024)

*Quis... puer iste erit?*  
What then will this child be?  
(Lk 1:66)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,  
My dearly beloved Sons,  
and most especially you, who are going  
to take your vows of religion,

**T**HIS QUESTION SOUNDS trite, commonplace, as the still virgin leaf of a new life has just received its first lines. Yet, if the people from the nearby country ask themselves this question, it is because the events surrounding the Precursor's birth are a token of God's special benevolence towards this child: "For the hand of the Lord was with him."<sup>a</sup> And indeed, John will be among the prophets the only one "who both foretold the coming of the Saviour of the world, and pointed Him out when come."<sup>b</sup>

a. Lk 1:66.

b. Secret of the Mass.

In the life of John, as well as in that of Mary, the Mother of God, resounds the perfect chord stemming from the perfect harmony between grace and human freedom. When man welcomes the divine gifts, the bread coming down from Heaven that ensures food for his heart in the present moment, and when

he gives his agreement to God's plan, he takes part in the edification of his own greatness and in the fecundity of God's mercies, extending over the world from generation to generation.

Each human life, each vocation, is a mystery. It is born in a free way in the heart of God and in the love of two beings. Bless your parents for this gift. This life, this vocation, develops inside a family as in a nutritive soil, it is built up with encounters and friendships. Above all, it is called day after day to climb the sometimes very steep path towards eternal salvation.

However, nobody is an island, and salvation is never the work of an isolated individual, but one must be helped by one's neighbours, and the Lord likes to associate our neighbours to His works. Therefore, all have the duty of justice to announce God's wonderful works, and to proclaim His greatness.

You have chosen to live this path in a special place, the monastery, and in the school of a rule, the Rule of St. Benedict. Engrave in your heart the holy Precursor's motto: "He must increase: but I must decrease."<sup>a</sup>

a. *Jn* 3:30.

As testified by the Lord, John lived according to his own teaching:

For I say to you: Among those born of women none is greater than John.<sup>b</sup>

b. *Lk* 7:28.

But John's life is also akin to monastic life, to such an extent that Dom Delatte, the third abbot of Solesmes, felt justified to call him "the first monk of the New Testament." Let us ponder on that.

"Any normal monk should have three hearts." This principle, which is not literally present in the Rule of St. Benedict, is nonetheless the expression of a well-established tradition, still staunchly upheld by many monks. Indeed, a Benedictine monk should have three hearts: a heart of iron for himself, a liquid heart for his neighbour, and a heart of fire for God.

These three hearts were beating in John's chest.

He exercised his heart of iron through his life of penance, by renouncing everything for God. His only roof was the sky of the wilderness. His garment was made of camel's hair, and of a leather girdle around his waist; and his food consisted in locusts and wild honey. The Church was not mistaken when she

applied to the Precursor the words addressed to the Prophet Jeremiah: “Thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee: and whatsoever I shall command thee, thou shalt speak.”<sup>a</sup> A faithful friend of the Bridegroom, perfectly obedient, John carried out his mission to its very end. He didn’t even keep for himself his own disciples. He gave them up, leading them to the Bridegroom with words the Church repeats in every liturgy to those who wish to receive the Body and Blood of Christ: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”<sup>b</sup>

*a. Jn 1:7.*

Even now, John still points out the Saviour.

*b. Jn 1:29.*

If John had for himself a heart of iron, his liquid heart asserted itself for his neighbour, who had come to him to receive a baptism of conversion heralding the forgiveness of sins. Through his unstinted compassion, John pointed out Christ with words and deeds to men of his time:

And thou, child, wilt be called the prophet of the Most High; for thou wilt go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, when the day shall dawn upon us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.<sup>c</sup>

*c. Lk 1:76-79.*

This liquid heart led him to martyrdom and death. Such is the price of true charity.

But John the Baptist had above all a heart of fire for God, and that from the very dawn of his life. Elizabeth, his mother, was the first one to realise this fact. When she heard the greeting of Mary, who had come to visit her, the child the old woman was bearing in her womb leaped. The life of the Precursor was from now on marked out: “to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him.”<sup>d</sup>

*d. Jn 1:7.*

Having three hearts might make for a difficult life. It was not the case for John, nor for those whose three hearts are fed by a same love, the love of God. This love had invaded everything, to such an extent that St. Matthew refers to John with the words uttered by the prophet Isaiah:

A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.”<sup>e</sup>

*e. Is 40:3.*

John is but a voice crying in the wilderness. In the eyes of the world, John is useless. He serves God only. And John was aware that he was loved by this same God:

*a. Jn 3:29.* The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full.<sup>a</sup>

Thus, having three hearts wouldn't be enough to be a good monk, if this monk were to forget that these three hearts are a gift from God. More than any other man, a good monk believes that he is loved with a unique love, loved by a God who Himself has a heart of fire. John was the privileged witness to this love. His whole life was a hymn to the dawn of salvation. In the school of John, the task of a monk is to contemplate this incipient dawn that keeps rising in his heart, and that until the full noon of the face to face in eternity.

Day after day, the life of a monk is consumed in the fire of divine love, the inexhaustible fount of the spiritual joys implored by today's Mass in the collect. May you remain a witness to this dawn rising upon your life, as a disciple of John, as a disciple of Christ.

Amen.

