

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 15, 2017

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When we sing or say the *Agnus Dei* it is important to remember these words were once used *for the first time*. Today's gospel is our reminder. John the Baptist declared, "Behold, the Lamb of God." We can only begin to image what perception was behind John's announcement. John's exclamation *Agnus Dei* was the answer to untold millions of heartfelt prayers and longing over the centuries. Souls yearned to know God, Who seemed dangerously unapproachable yet inviting intimacy. Sinful hearts and God's holiness could not come together. It was like trying to mix water and oil! Holiness destroys sin. Always has. Always will. So Almighty God was indeed far off. *And it was for our own good*. The Lord once instructed Moses to "Tell the people not to come near the mountain lest they die."

But in His mercy God had commanded ancient Israel to the practice of vicarious sacrifice. The people were to sacrifice animals and pour out the blood as an offering for sin. The blood contained the essence of life. This was to be a sign of relief and forgiveness for repentant sinners. The Old Testament prophets said the Lord encouraged sacrifice because sacrifice could be the outward sign of changed hearts and amendment of life. Sacrifice does not mean "to give up." *Sacra facere* means "to make holy."

Of all types of sacrifice the lamb was the most significant. This was not because of the animal's meekness. Almighty God had directed the Passover lamb to be slain and its blood sprinkled on the Hebrews' doorposts in Egypt. This action was the divinely appointed defense against the death of their first-born sons. God told the people never to forget this. Rather, they were commanded to a yearly observance of the Passover so they would remember their origins forever.

Perhaps something else was also in the mind of John the Baptist on that day he proclaimed "Behold, the Lamb of God." John's father had been a priest. So John would have been familiar with the daily sacrifice offered morning and evening in the Temple. The offering was always a lamb (*Exodus 29:38*) and was a continuous propitiation. The blood of the sacrifice always spoke of remission and forgiveness of sins. What John the Baptist could *not* know, of course, was that ever since the Ascension of Our Lord the Holy Mass has been offered daily. Think of it! There is probably not a moment somewhere on earth where the Mass is not being offered. It

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is a continuous propitiation: the Blood of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ always accomplishing remission and forgiveness in those who repent. John the Baptist died before that happened. But he did recognize immediately the undertaking of the Son of God “to put away the sin by the sacrifice of Himself.” (*Hebrews* 9:26) When Jesus came walking towards John, the Baptist recognized the Lamb of God, God in the flesh, come Himself to take away the sins of the world.

John the Baptist spent long years in the wilderness preparing for this moment when he would see the face of the Lord and become the first human being to know what God was doing. God’s way was to let John walk by faith, to learn slowly, living on heavenly and eternal principles in the wilderness, until his mind was divinely illuminated and his heart set aflame with love and zeal for God’s righteousness. That long preparation led to John’s mission, preaching the necessity for forgiveness, and its outward sign, water baptism. And when the moment came, John was ready to be the first to declare rightly, “Behold, the Lamb of God.”

You and I must never be surprised or disappointed when God leaves us to find the answer to spiritual difficulties through Word and Sacraments, our meditations and devotional reading, through slowly ripening spiritual experiences in places where distractions are minimized if not avoided altogether. Remember that souls are designed for spiritual advance! They develop to a great level in this life when, cooperating with God’s grace, we walk by faith. John the Baptist shows the way.

We do not need to wear camel’s hair and eat honey coated grasshoppers! But John’s hidden, obscure, life and simple obedience, his prayer and self-denial, can find counterparts in our lives. They brought John to such a great holiness of life that he was the first to recognize that God was going to die for sinful man. And John didn’t read about it in *The New York Times*! John the Baptist shows us the way we are to live in spiritual relations with men and things so that we too will know Christ and what He does for our lives and our forgiveness.