

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Third Sunday of Advent  
December 16, 2018

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As Scripture describes him, Saint John the Baptist was a very striking figure. And some of his audience began to wonder if he were *more* than a prophet. Was John the Messiah? John the Baptist quickly stamped out such rumors. Describing the immeasurable difference between Christ and himself, John used colorful and very *non-theological* language. He said “I am not worthy to untie his shoes.”

None of this implied there was anything *wrong* with John the Baptist! Quite the opposite. Morally he was without fault. Christ Himself declared John’s preaching was “from Heaven.” Without any flinching on his part, John’s zeal for God led him to martyrdom. Yet for all that, there was no permanent result in religion following John’s preaching. The zeal and flame of God’s holiness consumed John’s soul, yet he could not transfer that zeal permanently to others. For all his merit, John the Baptist was *pre-Christian*. The grace of God which heals, forgives, enables, and equips souls, would be unleashed in the perfect atonement of God-made-man. That is why we call the Friday of Christ’s death *Good Friday*. Good for us.

Okay then, said the people. “So you’re *not* the Messiah. What shall we do now?” And the Baptist gave guidance. He said anyone serious about the Kingdom of God must not only receive the baptism of repentance from John but also must give some outward sign that would indicate taking it all seriously. The outward ceremonial action must be the sign of inner reform, itself manifesting in good deeds. If your sin is selfishness, then give away some of your goods. If you are dishonest then become scrupulously fair. A soldier must not only repent of being brutal but must demonstrate greater professional discipline. John’s water baptism of repentance came with the challenge to “bear fruits that befit repentance.”

It took courage to accept John’s direction. In effect, people were told to proclaim their sin by public actions. These “interim virtues” were tokens of shame and repentance. They came out of hearts in some way touched by divine holiness, and as such they had a reward. But it is important to remember there was as yet no sacramental grace to strengthen and guide souls in the pursuit and maintenance of virtue. When Christ came things would change. The Saviour would both *give more and demand more*. Decisively, He would equip souls to flourish. “I have come that

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ye may have life and have it more abundantly.” And by God’s grace Christians would not only be saved souls but *saving souls*.

In Saint John’s Gospel chapter 7 there is a wonderful passage where Our Lord says “If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink.” If you and I were making up a religion the next line would read, “And his thirst shall be quenched.” Ta Da! But oh, no! The Lord is beyond that. Jesus declares, “He that believeth on Me, *from his inmost being* shall flow rivers of living water.” The one who repents and is saved becomes in his turn a source from which the thirst of others may be quenched. Only the person who is both a saved soul and *saving others* is truly in the Kingdom of God.

In this and in so many ways Christian history follows a course hardly imagined by John the Baptist. John’s baptism of repentance was an interim measure. And his urging that people bear fruits befitting repentance was a striving for holiness. But the decisive moment for souls was the Cross of Christ. From the Sacred Heart, pierced by the spear on Calvary, flows the sacramental life of the Church. That life is given to be in us and *through us* to others. And God’s grace does not diminish or fizzle out with distance from its source! That is because the source is not distant. It is here by Christ’s eternal provision. And we see that saving action and its results pop up here and there throughout history and often in surprising places. The nature of souls are changed and their capacities for good are deepened and sustained whenever and wherever there is contact with Christ. John the Baptist long ago had an inkling of all that even if he did not have a clear perception of the details. He was predicting the sacramental life of the Catholic Church, and this time using *very theological language*, when he declared of Jesus Christ “I baptize with water, but He will baptize with the Holy Ghost and with fire.”