

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon peached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of the Baptism of Our
Lord Jesus Christ
January 12, 2020

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At Mass every Sunday we sing the *Agnus dei*. Even at Low Mass we say the words: “O Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world.” Those words are familiar to us. We use them in adoration of Our Lord Jesus Christ Who is present with us in the way He promised. Jesus is present and accounted for on the Altar in His Body and Blood. At that point the forward movement of the Mass comes to a *full stop*. There is this moment of adoration. It happens before we go on to make our communions.

St John Henry Newman used to say the Epiphany Season is the special time of *adoration*. Before His Own ministry began, Our Lord accepted the worship of the Wise Men. The *Agnus dei* is an Epiphany moment of adoration at every Mass. We can also understand the service of Benediction as an Epiphany moment, when our Blessed Lord is not teaching or healing but *receiving*. He is receiving the praise and adoration of those who recognize He is God and who desire to love him by drawing close to Him.

Today however, we remember the words of the *Agnus dei*, so familiar to us, were said once upon a time *for the first time*. John the Baptist said them as he saw Jesus coming towards him. We can only begin to imagine what a perception that was! John’s exclamation was the answer to untold millions of prayers from hearts which yearned to know God. Ancient Israel believed God was very far away. The Jews had a genius for religion. They knew sinful hearts and God’s holiness could not come together. It was like trying to mix water and oil! Holiness destroys sin. So God was indeed standing off, and the people knew it was for their own protection.

But the ancient Jews also knew the Holy God was also *merciful*. Ever since the Garden of Eden God had been preparing a way back to Him for man made in His Own Image. For His chosen people Almighty God in His mercy commanded the practice of vicarious sacrifice. The blood of an animal is its life-essence. And the blood was poured out as a sign to repentant sinners that there was relief and forgiveness from their sins. The prophets said God encouraged sacrifice as the outward sign of changed hearts and amendment of life. What remained unclear, however, even to the great prophet Isaiah, was the wonderful way Almighty God

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was preparing the world for the birth of His Beloved Son. Jesus would be the Perfect Sacrifice, the Lamb of God, Whose Blood, His life-essence, would take way the sins of the world. It was left to the Lord's immediate forerunner, John the Baptist, to recognize immediately the undertaking of the Son of God "to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself." (*Hebrews 9:26*) At the Jordan River Jesus came walking towards John, and the Baptizer recognized God-in-the-flesh as the Lamb of God. In Jesus God and man and the lamb were one.

World changing insight as this was, it did not come easy! John spent long years in the wilderness preparing for this moment when he would see the face of the Lord and be the first human being to know what God was doing. John himself says he did not know Christ until the moment the Holy Dove descended upon the Lord at His Baptism. Even though Jesus was his cousin, God's way had been to let John walk by faith, to learn slowly, living on heavenly and eternal principles in the wilderness. The day would come when John's 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. He preached the necessity of repentance and performed its outward sign in water baptism. Then when the great moment came, John was the first to say, rightly, "*Behold the Lamb of God.*"

You and I must not be surprised when God also allows us to search for and find the answers to spiritual difficulties. That happens through our cooperating with His grace given us in our good communions and through our meditation on His Holy Word. It happens through our slowly ripening spiritual experience in quiet places. Our souls are designed to develop to a great spiritual level in this life when we walk by faith, following the example of John the Baptist.

We do not need to be clothed in camels' hair and eat honey and locusts! But John's hidden and obscure life for many years, and his simple obedience, prayer, and self-denial, can find their counterparts even in our modern busy lives. These are the ingredients which brought St John to such a great holiness of life he was the first person to recognize Almighty God was actually going to die for sinful man. John shows us the way we are to live in relations with men and the created order, when

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we also will have a zeal for God's righteousness and know Christ clearly, and what He accomplishes for life and forgiveness.