

OUR DEVOTION TO ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

He that bath the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who standeth and beareth him, rejoiceth with joy because of the bridegroom's voice. – John 3. 29

I sometimes wonder whether it isn't time for us to start reviving, in the Catholic Church, our forgotten devotion to St John the Baptist. On paper, of course, nobody would contest that he is one of the very greatest of saints, distinguished by high privileges even among the ranks of heaven's citizens. He was sanctified by the Holy Ghost from his birth to fulfill a special mission. He stands in a unique relation to our Blessed Lord. Our Lord himself tells us that among men born of women no greater has ever arisen. At every turn in the Gospels you will meet the mention of him; he seems to haunt the imagination of the four Evangelists. And so in the older prayers of Holy Church you will find that his name comes after our Lady's, and before those of St Peter and St Paul; so highly was he honoured. Now compare the position which St John held in mediaeval devotion, and the position which he holds in our devotion today. How often do you see his picture in the Old Masters! How seldom in the pious cards of the modern Catholic depot! How frequent a dedication-title is his name in our old, pre-Reformation churches; how uncommon in the churches of the restored hierarchy! He seems to have suffered an eclipse. You will remember what he said of our Blessed Lord and of himself: "He must increase, but I must decrease". Substitute for our Lord's name the name of St Joseph, and you can almost say the same of the history of Christian devotion. St Joseph has increased and St John decreased accordingly. God forbid that we should grudge to St Joseph those public honours which the Church has only gradually learned to bestow upon him. But it would be poor gratitude in us if we came to forget our Lord's fore-runner in our eagerness to honour his foster-father.

Their greatest title to the blessing of posterity is the same, and it is the one in which they share with our Lady herself. We delight to honour them precisely because in life they were distinguished by their self-effacement, their hatred of prominence. In St John's case, you could almost say that the hatred of prominence was born in him. You know nowadays these people who talk about psychology will tell you that pre-natal influences have a very large part to play in the forming of our characters. I don't know if that is true about us all, but it certainly seems to be true of St John. His whole life, you may say, was marked out for him before his birth; marked out for him by that visit of our Lady to St Elizabeth. "Whence is this to me", says St Elizabeth, "that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" and the child in her womb, as if the spirit of the mother's salutation had passed into him, had only one thought all his life, to make way for another who was greater than himself. "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness" – that is his account of himself: don't listen to the voice, then; listen to what it says. "He was a burning and shining light", our Lord says of him; don't look at the light, then, look at him on whom its rays are cast. Always we see St John is pointing, always away from himself. "Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world" – there, don't look at me, look at him; don't ask who I am, ask who he is. There comes one after me, who is greater than I, the latchet of whose shoe I am not worthy to loose. Everyone is crowded round St John, everyone wanting to know who he is, and he will let them see nothing but the finger that points to a greater than himself, let them hear nothing but the voice of the fore-runner who preaches a gospel not his own.

And gradually, as our Lord more and more allowed this attention to be directed towards himself, he, instead of his fore-runner, became the centre of interest. "The pupil is outstripping the master", people will have said; for I think it's fairly certain that our Lord, at the opening of his ministry, was regarded as the disciple of St John, the man who had baptized him. And one by one the little groups that listened to the Baptist on the rocky hills by the Jordan melted away, and he knew that they had gone off to follow the new Teacher, who, travelling from village to village, was more easy of access. Perhaps they even thought that in so transferring their allegiance from the stern prophet of the desert with his wild clothes and rough manner to the Friend of publicans and sinners, they were taking an easier yoke upon themselves. Anyhow, the followers of John became fewer, the audiences of the Galilean Prophet more numerous. And I want you to see that if St John had been a smaller man, if he had looked upon his winning popularity in the way in which you and I would look upon such a thing if it were to happen to ourselves, it would have been impossible for him not to feel a pang of jealousy at having been obeyed so well, at having been so successful in diverting attention from himself to his Master. "He might have left me just a little work to do, just a few souls to deal with; he might have given me some part to play in his mission"; it's not difficult to imagine St John feeling like that. But that was not St John's way. "He must increase, and I must decrease", so he assures the little band that still remain faithful to him, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. And again, "The friend of the bridegroom, who standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth with joy because of the bridegroom's voice". Our Lord has come to claim his affianced Bride, the Church, and St John is content with the humble, the almost undignified role of what we call the "best man". And it's easy to see what St John is thinking of when he makes this comparison.

It is for him to sink his own claims, his own personality, and rejoice in the triumph of another. No one has ever stood in the background more loyally. But observe, his tragedy is not yet over. I don't know why one always imagines St John as a good deal older than our Lord: if you come to think of it there was less than a year's difference between them. He is still, then, at the prime of life when his mission as fore-runner comes to an end. What would be more natural than that this man, who has already proved such a success as a missionary preacher, who is so intimate a witness of our Lord's life and doings, should be spared to preach the Gospel with his other disciples after the Crucifixion? Here surely, you say to yourself, is an instrument which divine Providence cannot afford to overlook. If St Peter is to be head of the Church, St John is to be the great propagator of the Faith.

Only Providence had other plans, other resources. The future propagator of the Faith is doing his studies at Tarsus, learning to be a fanatical Pharisee; St John is to meet his death before his Master. And for what a cause! The tragedy of St John is not that he was persecuted, nor that he met a violent death: people built as he was do get persecuted, do meet a violent death: but that he died too soon to witness the glories of the Resurrection, too soon to strengthen and promote the faith of the infant Church. "There hath not risen among them that are born of women a greater than John the Baptist; yet he that is the lesser in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." So said our Lord, meaning, as usual, the Church, when he spoke of the kingdom of heaven. The crown of St John's whole career of self-effacement is that, because he rebuked an unheeding tyrant for his loose morals, because he earned a woman's hatred, because a girl danced and an oath was taken in a hurry, the Church of Christ was destined to lose its first, its most obvious missionary. In him is summed up that long line of prophets and patriarchs who lived for the sake of the promises they were never to see fulfilled, dwelling in tents as strangers upon earth, because they looked for the recompense of the reward. "Prophets and kings desired it long, and died before the sight", God having provided some better thing for us, that without us they should not be perfected. The greatest of mankind and yet not destined to hear the full Gospel preached: the friend of the Bridegroom, doomed to perish before he claimed his bride and took her to himself.

He must increase, but I must decrease; I wonder what St John meant by *must*? Did he mean "this thing has got to happen", as when we say, "Death *must* come to every man"? Or did he mean, "I have got to make this happen", as when we say: "this letter *must* go tonight"? I don't think with St John the Baptist there would be much difference between the two; from his earliest years he had been so distinctly conscious of a mission, felt so certain that he was merely an instrument being used by God to further the ends of his Providence, that he wouldn't make much distinction between the destiny God had for him and the commands God laid upon him; the whole of his career is one great "must". One of the Fathers, I think, suggests that St John decreased because he was beheaded, while our Lord increased because he was lifted up upon a cross. I don't think that we need attach so literal a sense to the words as that, but certainly the manner of St John's death was characteristic – a murder carried out in huffer-mugger within the walls of a prison; the gossip about it hushed up, as Court gossip is apt to be; the hasty removal and burial of the body by his own disciples. To drop more and more out of view, and let others profit by the beginnings we have made and the experience we have won for them; to make way for our children to succeed in the world better than we did, to see our pupils outshine us, or our rivals outstrip us, or the job we thought we could do so well handed over to another, who makes even a better job of it than we could – what a common experience that is in life, what a natural one, and yet, how hard to sit down under it! How we always want to see our name mentioned, our works recognized, our help indispensable! Every parent, I suppose, has to go through something of that sort when the children grow up, and nearly everybody as years go on, and it is time for us to be laid on the shelf: and, you know, we can make a lot of difference to the happiness and the quietness of the world, according as we determine to make ourselves unpleasant about it or determine to take it in St John the Baptist's spirit. Let us make him our model, the man who was the prophet of a nation at thirty years old, and died almost unknown, a mere historical memory, a year or so later.

"He must increase, but I must decrease" – there is a more intimate sense in which the words concern us. For the business of our life in this world, after all, is not to leave a mark on it behind us or to take an honoured name away from it with us, but to make our peace with God before he calls us to a better one. And what is it, making our peace with God, but letting the influence of our Lord grow more and more in us, dominating our lives and throwing self into the background? He must increase; whenever he comes to me in Holy Communion, whenever he draws close to me in prayer, what is his purpose but that my will should be more his will, my life more his life? "I must decrease" – this self that struggles so against the supernatural influence of his grace, that makes me so proud, so grasping, so quick to take offense: only as it decreases will he increase; only as he increases will it decrease. Thus would I live, yet now not I, but he in all his power and love henceforth alive in me. May he give us all, in life and death, the spirit of his holy fore-runner.

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