

**SAINT OF THE WEEK - The Conception of the Venerable Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist of the Lord,  
John**

The holy Prophet Malachi prophesied that, before the Messiah's birth, His Forerunner would appear and would indicate His coming. The Jews, therefore, in awaiting the Messiah, also awaited the appearance of His Forerunner.

In a city in the hills of Judea, in the land of Palestine, lived the righteous priest Saint Zachariah and his wife Saint Elizabeth, zealously observing the commandments of the Lord. The couple, however, had a misfortune: they remained childless in their old age, and they prayed unceasingly to God to grant them a child.

Once, when Saint Zachariah took his turn as priest at the Temple of Jerusalem, he went into the Sanctuary to offer incense. There, behind the veil of the Sanctuary, he beheld an angel of God standing at the right side of the altar of incense. Saint Zachariah was astonished and halted in fear, but the angel said to him, "Fear not, Zachariah, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John." But Zachariah did not believe the words of the heavenly messenger, and then the angel said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God; and I was sent to speak to you, and to bring you the good news. Behold, you will be silent and unable to speak until the day that these things come to pass, because you did not believe my words...."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zachariah, and they were astonished that he had not come out from the Sanctuary after so long a time. And when he did come out, he was supposed to pronounce a blessing upon the people, but could not do so because he had been struck speechless. When Zachariah explained by gestures that he was unable to speak, the people then understood that he had experienced a vision. The prophecy of the Archangel was fulfilled, and Righteous Elizabeth was delivered from her barrenness, and gave birth to John, the Forerunner and Baptist of the Lord.

On this day, the Conception of John the Baptist, the mercy, miracles and wisdom of God are celebrated: His mercy toward the devout and righteous parents of St. John, the aged Zacharias and Elizabeth, who all their lives had wished for and begged a child from God; His miracle, that of John's conception in the aged womb of Elizabeth; and His wisdom, in the dispensation of man's salvation. God had an especially great intention for John: namely, that he be the Prophet and Forerunner of Christ the Lord, the Savior of the World. Through His angels, God announced the births of Isaac to the childless Sarah, Samson to the childless wife of Manoah, and John the Forerunner to the childless Zacharias and Elizabeth. All of these person were specially favored by God, and for this reason their births were especially proclaimed by angels.

This joyful event showed John the Baptist's mission of announcing the coming of the Messiah. He is the last prophet, bridging the Old and the New Covenants. His privileged vocation, unique in salvation history, offers us a beautiful example of how to proclaim Jesus Christ through our words and deeds, and in particular, how this requires and fosters a seemingly paradoxical combination of humility and boldness.

The boldness of Saint John the Baptist is seen in his preaching, which is focused on preparing the way for Jesus Christ, and which is expressed through the magnitude of his message. The Messiah is the long-awaited One sent to save the people of Israel, and John shares the news of his arrival freely, joyfully and

with urgency. The news is urgent because it demands preparation, that is, the conversion of heart that allows the truth, charity and glory of Jesus Christ to fall on good soil and bear much fruit. This boldness also enables John to call others to repentance, not in judgment, but in charity, that they may be saved when they meet our Lord.

His deference to the One for Whom he is preparing the way is the sign of his humility. John said, "A Man is coming after me Who ranks ahead of me because He existed before me" (Jn 1:30), and, "I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of His sandals" (Mk 1:7). When Christ approached John to be baptized in the river Jordan, John tries to defer to Jesus, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and yet You are coming to me?" (Mt 3:14), but he obediently proceeds when Jesus insists. Finally, when Jesus begins His ministry, it is John who steps aside, saying, "He must increase; I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). John knows that his life is not for his own glorification, but to bring others to Jesus.

Though the eyes of the world, the humble cannot be bold, because the world mistakes humility for timidness or even self-loathing. True humility, however, recognizes the truth that the Baptist proclaimed: "No one can receive anything except what has been given him from heaven" (Jn 3:27). May we imitate the boldness of John the Baptist through our proclamation of the joyful and urgent message of salvation, and imitate his humility by recognizing that the gifts and graces we receive are meant to serve and glorify our Lord, Jesus Christ.

We celebrate the Conception of St. John the Baptist on 23 September (6 October on the Julian Calendar) which is exactly 9 months and 1 day to his birth celebrated on 24 June (7 July on the Julian Calendar).