

Feast of St. John the Evangelist & *Sunday within the Octave of Christmas*

After the weeks of preparation leading up to Christmas, we can hardly be expected to dash off from the Crib so quickly. Like the other great feasts of the liturgical year, the joy of Christmas is prolonged by a weeklong celebration called an octave. After all the events that surrounded the birth of the Redeemer, St. Luke says with what might seem to us to be an understatement that “his father and mother were wondering at those things which were spoken concerning him” (2:33). We also need some time to let everything sink in. We really do need this week of Christmas, followed indeed by Epiphany and then the whole season leading up to Candlemas, to help us absorb the great mystery that has been accomplished. Today I would just like to tell you a few things about the liturgy of Christmas and its octave so that we can all enter into the spirit which our Mother the Church wishes to offer us during this holy season.

The first thing to know is that at Christmas every priest has the privilege of celebrating three Masses. The first Mass, the Midnight Mass, commemorates the eternal birth of Christ from God the Father. The second Mass, at dawn, commemorates Christ’s birth in time of the Virgin Mary. The third Mass, during the day, commemorates Christ’s birth into our hearts by grace. The first Christmas Mass is celebrated in the midst of the night to show that Christ came to dissipate the darkness of error and to save us from our sins. All during the Octave, a second Collect is added at Mass (and the liturgical hours of Lauds and Vespers) to commemorate Christmas, and in the Canon of the Mass there is a special version of the prayer called the *Communicantes* (which happens only on the five greatest feasts of the year). Before consecrating the host which will make of the altar a new manger, the priest commemorates the *diem sacratissimum*, “this most holy day, on which the spotless virginity of blessed Mary brought forth a Saviour to this world.”

The three days following Christmas are dedicated to the saints called the *comites Christi*, or “companions of Christ,” who form a sort of honour guard around the crib of the Divine King. When the children of the world celebrate a birthday, they like to invite their friends, and this is certainly not wrong. Collapsing both time and space, the Baby Jesus likes to see his friends gathered around his crib, and this is why the calendar admits the feasts of these privileged companions of Christ into the octave of Christmas. Their feasts are so important that traditionally they also have their own minor octave, with their feasts being repeated like an echo a week later.

Yesterday we celebrated Saint Stephen the first martyr. He heads our list of three saints days, as he was a martyr in fact as well as in will. The feast of St. Stephen reminds us of the great fruits that come when we pray for our

enemies. As he slowly succumbed under the stones hurled by the Temple authorities, under the gaze of a teenager named Saul who held their robes, Stephen prayed for his executioners. And we know that his prayers paid off: without those prayers, Saul might never have become St. Paul.

Today we celebrate Saint John the Evangelist, who is a martyr in will but not in fact, since he was the only Apostle not to die a martyr's death. His secondary feast on the 6th of May commemorates a failed attempt to kill him in boiling oil! St. John is called in the Gospels the "beloved disciple," and this shows us how much God cherishes the virtue of purity. Although the other Apostles – certainly St. Peter, at least – were married men who lived in continence after their calling, St. John had always remained in the virgin state. St. John is sometimes also called St. John the Divine, which is an archaic word for a theologian. At the Last Supper, the Beloved Disciple rested his head on Christ's own breast, and we can well imagine that in the echo of that Sacred Heart he heard mysteries like those that St. Paul, when he "was caught up into paradise ... heard secret words, which it is not granted to man to utter" (II Corinthians 12:4). While the other Apostles paid tribute to Christ by shedding their blood, St. John lived on for many decades. He also suffered for the Gospel, of course, as we all must in some way. But although he endured torture and an exile on the rocky island of Patmos, where he recorded his visions in the Book of Revelation, God preferred for him to live on, so that the Church might receive the fruits of his wisdom. After Our Lady herself, St. John is perhaps the best example of this truth understood so well by St. Thomas Aquinas: "even as it is better to enlighten than merely to shine, so is it better to give to others the fruits of one's contemplation than merely to contemplate" (*Summa theologiae*, II-II, Q. 188, art. 6).

Finally, tomorrow we shall commemorate the Holy Innocents, the young boys of Bethlehem who fell victim to Herod's fear that the newborn King of the Jews would steal his throne. A sad irony, of course, since Herod himself was already a usurper. Completing our list of the companions of Christ, the Holy Innocents were martyrs in fact if not in will, since they were killed at such a young age they did not understand what was happening. The liturgy of their feast rather charmingly sings at Vespers of "first victims of the martyr bands, with crowns and palms in tender hands, around the altar seem to play." By a very touching sentiment, the Church traditionally asked her priests to wear violet vestments on this feast day – the only feast with this strange distinction – so soon after quitting this penitential garb at the end of Advent. By this moving gesture our Mother the Church pays tribute to the mothers of Bethlehem and mourns with them, whose baby sons died so that Mary's Son could have life. He needed to hold on to that life until the day when he would lay it down for us. In some countries, the custom exists of covering the Baby Jesus in the nativity set with straw on this day so that King Herod cannot find

him! This is one of the many quaint traditions with which Christian culture has always loved to surround the observance of Christmas. I cannot urge you strongly enough, dear families, to keep up the observance of Christmas traditions: from the Advent wreath to door-to-door Christmas carols, from the Epiphany cake to the blessed lights of Candlemas. Our religion is not an outlandish New Age mystery cult; it needs to be incarnated in the customs of our daily life, and we need to pass them on to the next generation.

One of these lovely traditions is the one we shall celebrate just after Mass: the blessing of wine for the feast of St. John. We still have fresh before our eyes the vision of a God who has become one of us. Him whom the heavens cannot contain sleeps within a manger! How can there be any doubt that God loves the world he has made, and that he loves to sanctify the physical world of creation by pouring forth his blessing on the things he has made for our good? This is the whole logic of the visible Church, of the sacraments, of feasts and fasts, of holy water, and all the other sacred places, times and objects that allow us literally to flesh out our faith. We are not disembodied spirits! Christianity is an incarnated religion, and a truncated Christianity that disdains sacraments and sacramentals is a false Christianity. You cannot look at our Baby God on his bed of straw and pretend that he wants us to go to him by bypassing the world he has made, the world he has come to make new by his Incarnation. Today's blessing commemorates a miracle by which God saved the Apostle's life after some enemy put poison in his wine. This is why we often see him in art holding a chalice with a serpent crawling out of it. It is customary to take a little glass of the blessed wine and to offer it to others with the toast, "I drink to you the love of St. John." The psalms tell us that "wine cheereth the heart of man" (103:15), and so this quaint custom represents the sharing of the joy of Christmas. I am sure that I don't need to remind you that, as with all of God's gifts, the joy-giving wine is also to be used with moderation. But on this great feast of a great saint, I do not hesitate to wish you well with these inspired words of the Holy Spirit: "Go then, and eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with gladness: because thy works please God" (Ecclesiastes 9:7). If we please God by our good works – or at least repent when our works are not good – then we shall enjoy for all eternity the sober inebriation poured forth to the saints in heaven.