

## Nativity of St John the Baptist, 24<sup>th</sup> June 2018

How many times do you reckon the name of St John the Baptist appears at Mass, normally? I say “normally”, because obviously today he gets bit more of a mention. Well, if we start from the start, we find his name twice in the list of saints from the priest’s *Confiteor*: “*Confiteor [...] beato Ioanni Baptistae* (I confess [...] to blessed John the Baptist)”, and then “*precor [...] beatum Ioannem Baptistam* (I beseech [...] blessed John the Baptist)”. This is subsequently repeated in the *Confiteor* of the servers: St John is therefore mentioned four times at the beginning of Mass.

We have to go further on, passed where we are at the moment, the homily or sermon, deep into the Offertory, and there we again encounter his name, this time in the prayer, “*Suscipe, sancta Trinitas* (Receive, O Holy Trinity)”, after the priest has washed his hands and returned to the centre of the altar: “*Suscipe, sancta Trinitas, hanc oblationem, quam tibi offerimus* (Receive, O Holy Trinity, this oblation which we offer unto thee) [...] *in honorem [...] beati Ioannis Baptistae* (in honour [...] of blessed John the Baptist)”. To keep count: that is now five times. Then in the Canon of the Mass, in the list of saints after the Consecration, John the Baptist actually heads the list: “*partem aliquam, et societatem donare digneris* (graciously grant some share and fellowship), *cum tuis sanctis Apostolis et Martyribus: cum Ioanne* (with thy holy Apostles and Martyrs: with John)”. That is the sixth time.

Lastly, St John the Baptist makes an appearance in the Last Gospel: “*Fuit homo missus a Deo, cui nomen erat Ioannes* (There was a man sent from God, whose name was John)” (Jn 1:6). And so his name appears a total of seven times in the course of your average Mass (though there is of course nothing ‘average’ about the Mass). John the Baptist, by being frequently referred to at Mass, is as such part and parcel of its overall mystery. In the *Confiteor*, we confess our sins to him and then ask him to pray to God for us. In the *Suscipe, sancta Trinitas*, we implore the Trinity to receive the sacrifice of the Mass not only “in memory of the passion, resurrection and ascension of our Lord” but also “in honour of” the saints, “blessed John the Baptist” again getting a specific mention. Then after the climax of that sacrifice in the Consecration, we ask “some share and fellowship” with the saints; “John” at the very start of the list.

These incidences, in which the name of the Baptist crops up in the course of Mass, express three important points regarding not just him but the saints in general. We ask him to intercede for us: “*orare pro me ad Dominum, Deum nostrum* (to pray for me to the Lord our God)”, believing in the active intercession of the saints; we offer the Mass in his honour, reflecting our love and veneration of the saints; and then, thirdly, we desire his “fellowship”, his friendship, in the communion of saints. Here, therefore, we briefly have the whole Catholic belief and

practice in respect to the saints, including St John the Baptist: intercession, veneration, and communion.

But you might be thinking: haven't you forgotten something? That last mention of John the Baptist: the Last Gospel? Technically speaking, the Last Gospel is not strictly part of Mass, nor is the final blessing in fact: until about the twelfth century, Mass clearly came to an end with the dismissal, "*Ite missa est*" (and the Ordinary Form of the Roman Rite has obviously tried to restore that, though it has retained the blessing and placed it before the dismissal. By the way, how many times does the name of the Baptist appear in the Ordinary Form? Once, if you're lucky, and only when the Roman Canon is used, known as the First Eucharistic Prayer, since his name is now no longer in the *Confiteor*; while the *Suscipe, sancta Trinitas* has been omitted, as indeed has the Last Gospel).

The Last Gospel does not so much give us a glimpse into the role played by St John, and the other saints, at Mass but rather his own role in the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word becoming flesh: "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. This man came for a witness, to give testimony of the light, that all men might believe through him. He was not the light, but was to give testimony of the light" (Jn 1:6-8). The words, "whose name was John (*cui nomen erat Ioannes*)", from this Gospel, echo those in the Gospel of today's feast; words written on a writing-table by Zachary, his father: "*Ioannes est nomen ejus* (John is his name)" (Lk 1:63). John the Baptist, as we are informed, "was a man sent from God" and "a witness [...] of the light"; yet let us go back to that name: "*Ioannes*".

This might (just might) be of some interest: As we all now know, the name of St John appears seven times in the Mass, including the Last Gospel. If you remember learning Latin grammar, you will most probably remember the various cases for nouns. Well, we in fact find all these cases (except one) for the proper noun, *Ioannes*, at Mass: there is the dative case, "*Ioanni* (to John), in the *Confiteor*, together with the accusative, "*Ioannem*"; the genitive, "*Ioannis* (of John)", in the *Suscipe, sancta Trinitas*; then the ablative, "*Ioanne*", in the Canon; and finally, in the Last Gospel, the nominative, "*Ioannes*". I did say that there is one case missing, and it is an obvious case to be missing from the Mass, the vocative; since we do not address any saint directly during Mass (except on those rare occasions when the Litany of the Saints is chanted). And yet at Vespers this evening we would use the vocative, "*Sancte Ioannes*", in the hymn, *Ut queant laxis*.

Now this hymn would perhaps be more interesting for you singers than a lesson in Latin grammar. Have you ever wondered where the tonal scale, *do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti*, comes from, and what each of the syllables could possibly mean? Forget



for a moment *The Sound of Music* and “Do – a deer, a female deer [...]”. If you were to read today’s hymn for Vespers (which should be in your hand missal, if you have one), you would discover that the first syllable of each line of the first stanza more or less follows *do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti*:

*Ut* queant laxis  
**r**esonare fibris  
**M**ira gestorum  
**f**amuli tuorum,  
**S**olve polluti  
**l**abii reatum,  
**S**ancte **I**ohannes [the two initials here  
were taken together to form **si**, which in  
time turned to **ti**, though not literally!].

And if you were also to look at the accompanying notation, you would see how all these syllables (except the very last) represent the notes of an ascending scale: *ut, re, mi, fa, so, la*, only that *ut* has changed to *do*, not because of “a female deer” but because a seventeenth-century Italian musicologist named it after **Dominus** (the Lord), or perhaps even himself, **Doni**! But all this might seem a bit beside the point; yet let us quote an English version of this hymn:

**Do** let our voices  
**r**esonate most purely,  
**m**iracles telling,  
**f**ar greater than many;  
**so** let our tongues be  
**l**avish in your praises,  
**S**aint **J**ohn the Baptist.

Indeed, today we especially venerate you, that special witness “sent from God”, and ask for your intercession and friendship: *Sancte Joannes Baptista. Ora pro nobis.*