

## *We have famous ancestors in the faith.*

Happy Birthday John the Baptist! What a celebration! It comes complete with its very own vigil, which this year falls on a Sunday; so everybody gets to go to the party. Not bad for a guy who wasn't even a Christian!

It's true. John the Baptist never followed the Lord. Sure, he heralded his coming and all. He even gave his own disciples leave to follow. But he himself never became a follower. In fact, toward the end, John had second thoughts about the whole Jesus thing.

You see, John was a real Old Testament kind of a guy: stern, austere, canonical, given to a little fire and brimstone, censorious; maybe it was that steady diet of locusts and wild honey. (Considering how one would actually go about getting wild honey, you have a pretty good idea why John could be a little grumpy now and then.) And while John looked for the coming of the Messiah, he expected a thresher who would "clear the threshing floor" (see Matthew 3:12). What he got was a rescuer who, instead of burning the chaff, was gathering it into the barn!

Divine recompense was John's sense of justice; in other words, you got what was coming to you. If you

wanted mercy, you'd better quit your lowdown ways. But Jesus was letting people off the hook left and right. The demons they invited in, he expelled. Diseases inflicted as punishment, he cured. And the blind, who were considered made so because of their own sin (see John 9:2), were given back their sight. So John sends some of his own disciples (Matthew 11:2) to check out if Jesus is really "the one who is to come." He thought maybe it was time they started looking elsewhere.

Yet John gets not one, but two feast days. We honor his birth today and observe his death on August 29, bookends of a saintly life.

Maybe in the final analysis sainthood isn't a matter of belonging to the group or even conforming to the teachings of the Master. As Jesus said in Luke 12:10, sins against the Son are forgivable. It's the Holy Spirit whom we ignore at our own peril. And there was never any question that John paid homage to the Holy Spirit even before he was born. The Holy Spirit is not confined by religion, race, culture, or nationality. Like the wind, it blows where it wills (John 3:8).

Jesus said there was no one yet born who was "greater than John the Baptist, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Matthew 11:11). Considering the big deal we make of his birthday, what an enormous opportunity there is in all of us to become

even greater saints!

People like John the Baptist live today. For courageously preaching that Nazism was contrary to Christianity, Fr. Jakob Gapp, an Austrian Marianist priest, was beheaded. He had started to denounce the Nazi regime shortly after the invasion of Austria in 1938. Because of the danger he was in, his religious superiors moved him first to France and then to Spain. However, the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police, were out to get him. Two undercover agents claiming to convert to Catholicism, lured the priest back into France, where he was arrested for treason and sent to Berlin. He was interrogated, tried, and condemned to death. On August 13, 1943, he was beheaded at the Berlin-Plötzensee prison, and his body was given to a medical institute for experimentation. He has no tomb.

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