

Feast of St. John the Baptist

"Amen, I say to you, there had not risen among them that are born of women a greater than John the Baptist." (Matthew 11,11)

Among all the saints whom the Eastern Church venerates, St. John the Baptist holds a unique place. He alone, of all the Saints, except for the Mother of God, has a feast honoring his Conception, and another honoring his Nativity. The great esteem he enjoys in the Eastern Church is evident from the fact that during the Church Year as many as six feasts are celebrated in his honor: the feasts of his Conception, Nativity, Beheading, the First, Second and Third Finding of his Head, and the Synaxis following the feast of the Theophany. Let us examine his person and his cult in the Eastern Church.

The Person of St. John the Baptist

Among all holy persons of the Old Testament, St. John the Baptist is especially outstanding, especially because he stands on the border of two testaments: the Old and the New. He closes the doors on the prophets and opens them to the Apostles. He is not only a prophet, but also a precursor of Christ, a baptizer and a martyr. John, already cleansed of original sin while still in his mother's womb, is the only person given the privilege of baptizing Him Whose coming the other prophets had foretold but did not live to see.

Before he was born, an angel of the Lord predicted to his father Zachary, "He shall be great before the Lord." (Luke 1,15) And indeed, he was great for his holy life, authentic teaching, and heroic death. Jesus Christ himself acclaimed him as, "a burning and shining light." (John 5,35)

The life of John the Baptist was an unbroken chain of sacrifice and penance. He preached to the people new doctrines never proclaimed before: a baptism of repentance, the nearness of the kingdom of God, the presence among them of Jesus, their Messiah and Saviour. John baptized Jesus in the river Jordan and later pointed him out as the "Lamb of God." (John 1,36)

St. John the Baptist fearlessly exposed and denounced all sin and scandal. He intrepidly addressed the proud Pharisees: "You offspring of vipers! Who showed you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Luke 3,7) He does not fear to censure the sins and scandals of the royal house: "For John said to Herod: 'It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.'" (Mark 6,18)

His holy life and teaching was crowned by his heroic death. He fell like a soldier at his post, giving up his life for the highest ideals: the service of God and his people. Therefore, he remains for all times an everlasting symbol of an heroic champion of all that is holy, courageous and sublime.

Our service in honor of the feast of his Nativity praises his singular virtues, heroic character, and unique role as forerunner of the Messiah, bestowing upon him various titles, such as: "mighty preacher of penance", "desert-loving turtle dove", "Lamp of light", "star of the Sun of Justice", "the greatest prophet", "the great Forerunner", "the greatest among the prophets", "the universal apostle", "true friend of Christ, the Bridegroom", "illustrious star", "God-marked voice", 'preacher of the Lamb of God and the Word', 'the end of the prophets and the beginning of the Apostles', "earthly angel and heavenly man", "the forerunner, star above all stars". In the Lytiya sticheras of the feast of his Beheading we call out to him: "What shall we call you, O Prophet? An angel? An Apostle? A Martyr? For you lived as though bodiless like an angel; you taught all nations like an Apostle; and you were beheaded for the love of Christ like a Martyr."

The Cult of St. John the Baptist in the Eastern Church

In the East, the cult of St. John the Baptist is very ancient and popular. The veneration of his relics in various localities bears witness to this; other witnesses include the numerous icons

reverenced by the faithful, the great number of churches erected in his honor, and the many feasts celebrated in his honor during the Church Year. We have:

1. The Feast of his Conception — September 23

This feast is associated with the feasts of the Annunciation and the Nativity of our Lord, for the conception of St. John was six months before the birth of Christ. The feast of the Conception seems to have originated at the end of the fourth century, but not until the end of the seventh century do we have clear and universal evidence regarding it, in the Coptic Menologies, and the testimonies of St. Jerome and Venerable Bede. The Sinai Gospel of 715 does not include this feast. Although St. John Chrysostom has a sermon on the feast of John's Conception, it is of doubtful authenticity.

2. The Nativity of St. John the Baptist — June 24

Of all the feasts of St. John the Baptist, that of his Nativity (June 24) is the greatest. This feast, like that of his Conception, was already known in the fourth century. We have sermons on this feast given by St. John Chrysostom, St. Ambrose and St. Augustine. In his sermon for this day St. Augustine says: "Today we are celebrating the Nativity of St. John. This is an honor which no other saint enjoys. Throughout the entire Christian world, only two persons are honored in their nativity: our Lord Jesus Christ and St. John the Baptist." St. Augustine does not mention the feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God here, since this feast had not yet been instituted. In the West, we find the feast of the Nativity of St. John the Forerunner in the oldest calendar of the African Church from the fifth century.

At the time we celebrate the feast of the Nativity of St. John, in pre-Christian times our people had the custom of celebrating the feast of Kupalo. In regard to the festival of Kupalo in Ukraine, Professor S. Kylymnyk says: "The greatest, most exuberant festival, which ended the summer solstice cycle of the pre-Christian calendar festivals — was the festival of youth — of boys and girls — called "Kupalo or Kupajlo", which after the acceptance of Christianity was associated with the church festival of the Nativity of John the Baptist. Hence this feast bears the double name of "John Kupalo". The rites and songs associated with the festival "Kupalo", like the spring songs and dances, reach back to the earliest times, to pristine poetry and rituals in honor of the life-giver, the sun." (The Ukrainian Folk Year from the Historical Perspective, Vol. IV, p. 99)

3. The Feast of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist — August 29

Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, who ordered the massacre of the children of Bethlehem, dismissed his first wife and unlawfully cohabited with Herodias, the wife of his brother, Philip. St. John the Forerunner publicly rebuked Herod for the scandal he was giving; and for this he had to pay with his life. Herodias took revenge on him in a foul manner, by inducing Herod to have him beheaded. A pious legend relates that the severed head of John the Baptist even on the platter spoke, saying: "You cannot have your brother's wife." As a result Herodias was believed to have pierced John's tongue with a needle. Fearing, lest he rise from the dead and his head join his body, she buried the head on the premises of the palace.

The disciple of St. John took his body and buried it in Sebaste, in Samaria. Testimony concerning this feast dates from the fifth century. The Missal of Pope Galasius (492-496) has the feast. St. Andrew of Crete composed the service for the Beheading of St. John (7c), along with St. John Damascene and the Patriarch, Germanus (8c). From the earliest times, on this day the Eastern Church has observed a strict fast in honor of the suffering and death of the saintly Forerunner.

4. The First and Second Finding of His Head

The Eastern Church celebrates the triple finding of the head of St. John the Baptist. We learn of its finding from the works of St. Cyprian Martyr, the church historians Sozomen, Nicephor, and others.

According to a venerable tradition, the righteous Joanna, wife of Chusa, who was the steward in Herod's palace, saw where Herodias had buried the head of St. John. She exhumed it at night, placed it in a vessel and hid it on the Mt. of Olives, near Jerusalem. Here the holy head lay hidden for over 300 years until the Christians discovered it while erecting a church on that site. This was the first finding of the head and numerous miracles were performed at this site. In the course of time, however, the location of the holy head seems to have been forgotten.

During the time of the Emperor Constantine the Great, two monks came from Syria to Jerusalem to venerate the holy places. St. John the Baptist appeared to them in a vision and showed them where his head lay hidden. They took it with them and, returning home, gave it to a potter from Emesa in Syria. For a long time the head was kept by this potter's family. Later, however, an Arian named Eustachius took the head and buried it in a cave. Some time later a monastery was built on this spot and St. John appeared in a vision to the superior of the monastery and again revealed the location of the head. This second finding of the head occurred in 452 A.D.

The historian, Sozomen, writes that at the command of the Emperor Marcianus the holy head was transferred to Constantinople. A single feast, on February 24, commemorates the first and second finding of the head of St. John the Baptist.

5. The Third Finding of the Head — May 25

During the time of the Iconoclastic wars of the eighth century, the head of the Forerunner was taken from Constantinople and hidden in Comana in Asia Minor, where St. John Chrysostom died in exile. During the reign of Emperor Michael, the head was found for the third time in 857, and was again transferred to Constantinople with great solemnity. During the crusades, a Latin priest was alleged to have taken it.

6. The Synaxis of the Forerunner and Baptizer John

The next day following the feast of the Theophany of the Lord, on the 7th of January, the Eastern Church celebrates the Synaxis of St. John the Baptist. On this day the faithful gather together to pay special veneration to St. John as the one privileged to baptize the Lord.

Here it may be appropriate to recall that on September 5 our Church observes the memory of the righteous Zachary and Elizabeth, the parents of St. John the Baptist.

By his heroic life St. John the Baptist teaches us that noble and holy ideals can only grow from love, dedication and sacrifice. Without the spirit of sacrifice, no service of God, no love of neighbor, no habits of virtue, no heroic act is possible.

The instruction which we find in our Slavonic Prologue for the feast of the Nativity of St. John the Forerunner, concludes with these words: "Therefore, brothers, let us too, enjoy this glorious feast of the Forerunner of the Lord and let us adorn ourselves with good deeds. Let us imitate this great prophet John, whom the Lord has set as an example before all who wish to be saved... We must not be Christian only in word, but we must also perform good deeds, in order to appear without reproach at the Last Judgment, when the servant cannot help the master, nor the father the son, nor the mother the daughter, nor brother his brother, but where only good works can lead us into eternal life, and only evil deeds can cast us in shame into the place of torment — from which place may the Lord God deliver us, to whom be glory now and forever."