

Feast of John the Baptist

June 24, 2012

In the course of a year, the Church celebrates only three birthdays: Jesus at Christmas of course, the birth of the Virgin Mary in September, and today's feast that observes the birth of John the Baptist. This solemnity is so important that when it falls on a Sunday, the readings and prayers are for the Baptist. Clearly, this man is important, and we are asked to consider him. St. Luke was certainly impressed; he wrote that John was "strong in spirit." And isn't that what we need today? People "strong in spirit."

You remember how John the Baptist's life ended, about the wild, drunken party with King Herod, about his stepdaughter dancing, and king promising her anything she wanted. You will remember that her mother Herodias told the girl to ask the king for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Which he did.

And why did Queen Herodias have it in for John the Baptist? Because he had told the king that it was not right for him to live with Herodias—because she was the wife of the king's brother. Because people in power don't like to be criticized. But John was "strong in spirit," and not afraid: "I don't care if you are the king. It's wrong for you to live with your brother's wife!"

John the Baptist was a prophet: he was not afraid to speak the truth to power. And that can get your head on a platter. Whistleblowers at work know that. In Myanmar-Burma—Aung Son Su Chi tries to promote democracy; and for that she was kept under house arrest for years; for years, because she dared to say that people have rights. In China, you can go to jail for years for one blog, just one, criticizing the government. Sr. Dorothy Stang, a Sister of Notre Dame, grew up in Dayton, worked in Brazil for many years on behalf of the indigenous people, the small farmers. Sr. Dorothy was "strong in spirit," and she publicly criticized the ranchers and big landowners in the Amazon basin for defrauding the native people of their land. 73, little lady, criticizing the powerful. She died at the hands of hired gunmen, holding her bible.

John the Baptist did not lead a safe, comfortable life. Prophets do not live safe, comfortable lives. They are more interested in the truth, in what is right, than in their own wellbeing.

At its best, the Catholic Church is prophetic too. At its best, the Church is "strong in spirit." AT its best, the Church is unafraid to speak truth to the powerful—to kings and dictators, to presidents and prime ministers, to governors, and yes to corporations. At its best, the Church is not an American Church, not a Republican or Democratic Church, not a capitalist or socialist—not wedded to anything or anyone except the Kingdom of God. At its best.

What happens then is that we may hear some teachings from the Pope or bishops that make us say, "Yes! That's great! About time! They should preach that more!" And we may also hear Catholic teachings that may make us say, "They don't know what they're talking about! They should stay out of politics! That doesn't belong in Church!" It depends on how we feel about the particular teaching—and it's because the Catholic Church is not wedded to any political party, government, or country.

Some quick examples. In 2003, Pope John Paul II—a man strong in spirit—confronted President Bush and admonished him strongly not to invade and occupy Iraq, not to have a war there. "If you do, you will be contradicting hundreds of years of Catholic teaching about what makes a just war." The pope, confronting the most powerful man in the world.

The Catholic Catechism officially condemns capital punishment, because life belongs to God alone. 80% of Americans do not agree.

And for almost 100 years, the American bishops have taught that every person in this country—every person—has a right to basic health care—because they are a human being in the image of God. And a right to something to eat. And a right to a place to live.

It's not comfortable to be a prophet. It would have been easier for John the Baptist to look the other way. It always is. Someone will get angry. Someone will write an anonymous letter. Someone will leave, or stop donating. At our best, we Catholics are "strong in spirit," and our first allegiance is to God's will, not our own comfort and security.

Consider Alabama, where a new immigration law tries to make illegal aliens self-deport. The new law makes it a criminal offense to "harbor" or "transport" an undocumented person. In Alabama, it is a criminal offense for a priest to hear the confession of an illegal alien. It is illegal for a priest to give them the Sacrament of the Sick, to counsel them, to give them a ride to Mass. In Alabama, Catholic bishops, and Methodist and Episcopal bishops, have challenged the law in court.

Consider contraception insurance. For a very long time, the pope and bishops have taught that contraception is wrong, because it intentionally interferes with the way God has designed the human body. And it is believed that some pills cause the abortion of a fertilized egg. Unless something changes, in less than a year, most Catholic institutions will be forced to provide free insurance coverage for various contraceptives to their employees: Mercy Anderson, Mercy Clermont, McNicholas High School, Xavier University, Thomas More College, Mt. St. Joseph College, possibly our own grade school—all forced to pay for a product that violates official Catholic belief.

What would John the Baptist do? What would Jesus do, about this and about all the moral issues of our day? What is my responsibility as a Catholic, and as a citizen of our beloved country, to bring this great nation closer to the kingdom of God? Surely not to do nothing!!