

WITNESS TO FREEDOM

ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST



(National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington, DC; photo by Fr. Lawrence Lew, OP)

*"He must increase;
I must decrease."*

On June 24, we celebrate the birth of the Forerunner, one of the great men in the story of Jesus.

As herald of the Christ, John the Baptist reveals what it means to be a witness. He was one of the greatest of the prophets, and his courageous truth-telling led to his martyrdom. Most importantly, his ministry opened the way for others to encounter Jesus.

John links the Old Testament to the New. He preaches a message of repentance, challenging complacency among the people of Israel. He is often thought of as the last of the old prophets. When he is approached by religious leaders who are failing in their role, he confronts them directly, calling them a brood of vipers. He also challenges the immorality of the political leaders, opposing Herod's marriage – a stance for which he was later beheaded.

By calling people to come to be dipped in the waters of the Jordan as an act of repentance, he reminds his fellow Judeans of the Exodus. The call to renewal is an act of remembrance. The action says, "Remember the God who delivered you!" At the same time, the ritual looks forward to the one who has been promised to bring true freedom to Israel.

John's renewal movement prepared the way of Jesus. John knew that God was moving in his people, even if he did not know what that would mean. When Jesus comes to be baptized, an act of his solidarity with sinners, John first begins to recognize Jesus as the one to come. Later in Jesus' ministry, John says to his own disciples, "He must increase; I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). He bears witness to the freedom that comes with true humility and openness to answering a call.

St. John the Baptist, pray for us!



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