

**HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE,
 APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
 ERECTION OF THE CO-CATHEDRAL OF ST. JOHN THE EVANGELIST,
 DIOCESE OF WINONA-ROCHESTER
 ROCHESTER, MINNESOTA
 SOLEMNITY OF THE NATIVITY OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST, JUNE 24, 2018**

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father to the United States, I want to express the spiritual closeness, paternal affection and the heartfelt congratulations to all gathered here and to all the faithful on this new beginning in the life of your diocese, which will be now-called the Diocese of Winona-Rochester, and in the life of this historic church of St. John the Evangelist, which will serve as a Co-Cathedral for the Diocese.

It is fitting that we celebrate this occasion on the Solemnity of the Birth of John the Baptist. Besides the birthdays of Jesus and Mary, only his is celebrated on the Church's liturgical calendar. He was the last and greatest of the prophets. Jesus called him the "greatest man born of woman". He was God's messenger and lived his whole existence in relationship to Christ and, as such, remains a powerful example for us. We can reflect on his life and mission with three verbs: to prepare, to discern, and to witness.

To prepare. I am sure that many preparations were made for today's celebration. There was consultation and paperwork involved in renaming the Diocese and petitioning for the co-cathedral to be erected. Many people painstakingly planned the liturgy. People had to coordinate the invitations, the programs, seating, the distribution of Communion – everything ... And yet, we ought to reflect upon the preparation that God undertook to save us from our sins. He sent so many of the prophets to His people to call them to conversion and to return to him.

With the birth of the child to Elizabeth in her old age and with the naming by Zechariah of the child as John, the people were amazed. Overcome with fear, they asked, "*What, then, will this child be?*" The first reading from Isaiah calls him a *sharp-edged sword*, a *polished arrow*, and a *servant* through whom God would show his glory. He will be a *light to the nations that salvation may reach to the ends of the earth*. Elsewhere, Isaiah speaks of a *voice crying out in the wilderness*, "*Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight His paths.*" This was the mission of John the Baptist: to prepare the way of the Lord.

The second reading from Acts of the Apostles states that *John heralded Jesus' coming by proclaiming a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel*. Surprisingly, many people, desiring God's mercy, came to John – to listen to his preaching, to hear his voice, in hope that he might be the Messiah, yet humbly John pointed to another, saying, "*I am not he. Behold, one is coming after me; I am not worthy to unfasten the sandals of his feet.*"

As a prophet, he prepared the way of the Lord. Pope Francis has said, "A Christian does not announce himself; he announces another, prepares the way for another: the Lord." (POPE FRANCIS, HOMILY FOR THE NATIVITY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST, 24 JUNE 2014) We might examine regularly how well we prepare ourselves to receive God's Word and the Holy Eucharist. We could examine further whether we prepare others by our kindness and example to encounter the Lord. Today, our world needs Christ more than anything, and the Church needs men and women to prepare the way to meet the Lord.

To discern. John the Baptist also reminds us of the need to discern the Lord's Presence. Already, at the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, he discerned the presence of the Messiah, leaping in his mother's womb for joy! Do we discern the Presence of the Lord in our midst? In the Scriptures, in the assembly, in the priest, and in the Eucharist? Do we recognize His Presence in

small, yet grace-filled events, each day? Does the beauty of our world and this church help us discern the One who made all these things?

John the Baptist was a man of discernment. Among all the people of the earth and for them, he would have to discern who the Lord was. John was a prophet, filled with the Spirit of God from his youth. As a man of prayer, penance, he learned, in the silence of the desert, the art of discernment, which was necessary for his mission. The Preface for today's liturgy states: "*He alone of all the prophets pointed out the Lamb of Redemption.*"

At the baptism of the Lord, as recounted in John's Gospel, he points Jesus out, "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*" He claimed that it would be revealed to him; it would be the One on whom the Spirit would rest. John was attentive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit to reveal Jesus.

The Church today – as individuals and communities – needs this same spirit of discernment: to discern what is from God and what is not; to discern our particular vocation; to discern how best to make Christ known. As Pope Francis noted in his exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*:

"Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel." (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 20.)

John the Baptist offers an example to the whole Church to continually listen to the Spirit to see where the Lord is leading. What is the Spirit saying to the Church here in the Diocese of Winona-Rochester? What is the best way to reveal Christ to the people here in Minnesota? How can this local church be the Church that Christ is calling her to be?

To witness. Again, the Church's liturgy speaks to us of John the Baptist as the Voice who witnessed to the Eternal Word – who witnessed to Christ. The Preface says: "*And to make holy the flowing waters, he baptized the very author of Baptism and was privileged to bear him supreme witness by the shedding of his blood.*"

John the Baptist witnessed to Jesus when he was in the womb. He witnessed to him, pointing him out as the Lamb of God. He offered his life as a witness to the Truth, suffering imprisonment and beheading at the hands of Herod. In witnessing to Herod about the truth, he was not witnessing to something abstract; rather, he was witnessing to the living God – to the One who revealed Himself as *the Way, the Truth, and the Life*. John's whole life was directed toward witnessing to Christ, the One who is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets, the One who gives Eternal Life.

Every diocese, every cathedral, every parish church, through the waters of baptism, gives "birth" to new disciples – to new witnesses to the Lord, new witnesses to His mercy and love, new witnesses to the Truth who sets us free. Through the witness of John the Baptist, the Church has come to know the author of her "rebirth", who is Christ, whom John foretold. With our baptism, we were born anew to be disciples and witnesses – to be missionary disciples.

Today, we celebrate a great feast and a great event in the life of your Diocese. More than a celebration of John the Baptist, it is a celebration of Christ who gives us this new life and who has called you to prepare to encounter Him, to discern His Presence in your midst, and to witness to Him in the world. Yes, Christ has called you to be *a light to the nations, that His salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.*