

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE PASTORAL CARE OF MIGRANTS AND ITINERANT PEOPLE
XXII WORLD CONGRESS OF THE APOSTLESHIP OF THE SEA

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According to an ancient Russian legend, one day all contacts between heaven and earth were interrupted. So God convened the Assembly of the Saints and decided to send Saint Nicholas and Saint Cassian to earth to re-establish links and find out what was going on down here. God recommended only one thing to them: “do not soil your white clothes, the symbol of your holiness”, as we can also read in the Apocalypse.

The two Saints found themselves on the immense Russian plain and they met up with a peasant who asked them to help him pull his cart out of the tracks in the road where it was stuck, in the mud. But what would become of their white clothes? Saint Nicholas helped the peasant and got covered with mud. Saint Cassian did not want to get dirty and so he did not take part in the work of charity. When their mission was over, they went back to God, anxious to know how He would judge what they had done.

God praised Saint Nicholas – as you can well imagine, for his love and charity – and rewarded him by giving him two feast days during the liturgical year. And Saint Cassian? He was a saint and so he could not be removed from the rolls of the Saint, but God decided that his feast day would be on February 29th, so that it would not be celebrated every year ...

You have surely understood that God does not need Saints to find out what is happening on earth, but the legend has its moral.

And in the West? Here Saint John the Baptist is also entitled to two feast days in the liturgical calendar, which really attests to this Saint’s exceptional character.

It is a fine coincidence for us, therefore, that the first Eucharist of this Congress is celebrated on the day of the Feast of the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist about whom Jesus himself said, *“Among those born of women, no one is greater than John”* (Lk 7:28).

This Congress is dedicated to the Apostleship of the Sea’s responsibility to give witness to its hope. And Saint John the Baptist is indeed the witness to hope par excellence, the one who *“was sent from God...to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him”* (Jn 1:6-9). In the history of salvation, John the Baptist’s role was to reveal the presence of the Messiah, the hope of Israel’s liberation, in view of the salvation of all peoples.

John the Baptist was chosen for a unique mission: to prepare the paths of the Lord in order to help people to welcome the promised Messiah, who came to set up the Kingdom of God, the sovereignty of God, in a spiritual sense, as Pope Benedict says in his book *“Jesus of Nazareth”*. He was responsible for announcing the Messiah’s imminent coming and he did this both through his words and his lifestyle. His unique destiny is highlighted by his extraordinary conception; he found himself between the New and the Old Testaments; his mother, Elizabeth, is presented to us as a new Sara; and he, when he was very young, withdrew into the desert to get ready for his mission.

John the Baptist is the one who identified Jesus in the people's extremely difficult reality, and he was able to do this because he was a free man impassioned by truth. During his short lifetime, he always remained faithful to his principles. He refused to let himself pass for what he was not; for him, truth was synonymous with humility. He was not the Messiah, Elijah or the great prophet that was awaited: "*When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests and Levites (to him) to ask him, 'Who are you?' he admitted and did not deny it, but admitted, 'I am not the Messiah'*" (Jn 1:19-20). In his need for truth, he would humbly step aside before the spouse, his friend, because Jesus was the Messiah and he was just the Master's servant who was unworthy to untie his sandal. His humility and desire for truth were such that he even pointed out the Lamb of God and let his disciples leave him in order to follow Jesus because "*He must increase; I must decrease*" (Jn 3:30). Can we say the same, in relation with Jesus, in relation with our brothers and sisters?

In his commentary on the Gospel of St. John, St. Cyril of Alexandria uses a beautiful expression to describe John the Baptist's situation with respect to Jesus: *John the Baptist is a lamp that does not shine with its own flame, but with the light of Jesus, the only Son, who glows with the Father's light*. So John the Baptist only defined himself in relation to his mission, which was to prepare the way for "the one who is coming after me". He does not own the Word selfishly; he is an instrument at its service; he is the voice of one crying in the desert: "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths*" (Mt 3:3).

In order to prepare hearts for the Lord's coming, he preached conversion. John the Baptist's message achieved its goal and prepared the paths of the Lord: first, through the life witness that accompanied his message as we would say today, "The medium is for him the message!". Then, John the Baptist also listened to the people of his times. He knew the inner sufferings and aspirations of those oppressed people who were awaiting liberation. He brought them the hope they were waiting for, the hope of the prophets, even if he was in another waiting line with respect to the revelation that came from Jesus' words and actions.

In John the Baptist's example, will we be capable today of identifying the aspirations and expectations of our contemporaries in the light of the Word of God? Will we be capable of revealing Jesus' presence in our midst, especially to the poor and to people of good will? Will they in turn be able to recognize Jesus in the message that we announce to them? For us also "is the medium the message"?

In the great biblical tradition, we know that a prophet is neither a magician nor someone who predicts the future in a simple way like in a photo. His role is to read the signs of the times and, in God's name, to announce and denounce. John the Baptist is found in this tradition. We see these two functions in him.

At the risk of his life, John the Baptist denounced sin, corruption, injustice and debauchery. John did not hesitate to denounce Herod, the "fox", for which he would be put to death in the end and give the most beautiful witness of all, the one of a martyr (Cf. Mt 14). He called for a change in mentality: "*Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance*" (Mt 3:8). These words are still up-to-date today because we know that also in the maritime and fishing worlds there are still many mountains to lower, ravines to cross and winding passages to straighten. "*What then should we do?*" (Lk 3:10), the crowds asked the Baptist, and he sent every one, every category of person, back to his duty in his own profession and lifestyle: "*Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise ... Stop collecting more than what is prescribed ... Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages*" (Lk 3:11-14). Wonderful!

Finally, he proclaimed the Good News that Jesus was already here in our midst, that He precedes us and brings a message of hope to all people of good will and all those who are suffering.

He said: “*Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened*” (Mt 11:28-29). John the Baptist also had to recognize the proof of Jesus’ messianism in his actions and miracles among the blind, the crippled and even the dead, as well as in his meekness and his forgiveness of sinners (cf. Lk 7:22-23).

To be a Christian, therefore, to believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, does not only concern our private life; it must lead also to being committed to building a more just and fraternal society. We cannot remain in the sacristies. And in this vision we are consoled by Pope Benedict. In our apostolate, we too must maintain the two aspects of the prophetic function: we cannot separate the proclamation of the Gospel and the commitment to justice in favor of integral, human promotion. Our apostolate is not limited in one sense or the other. Disincarnated preaching of the Gospel, which would ignore the aspirations to justice and a more dignified life, would not be credible or correct; on the other hand, to reduce the proclamation of Jesus Christ to the sole denunciation of injustices and the system would not be acceptable either, as confirmed at Aparecida by our Holy Father. Here again the conjunction “and” is a Catholic one: this and that, not this or that.

Today the mission is entrusted to us in particular to continue Jesus’ mission and reveal the Good News of God’s presence, action and love, through His Spirit, in the maritime world where we are also witnesses daily to unjust situations, exploitation and oppressive structures, all those “*less than human conditions*” (*Populorum Progressio*, 20), which prevent man from developing integrally. We will do this by giving witness to the fact that suffering, struggle, death, in a word all the sufferings of life, takes on a new meaning through Christian hope, because the Resurrection gives suffering and the cross their meaning and realization. There is the “Pascha anastasimos” and the “Pascha sterosimos” – as our Oriental brethren say –, that is Easter of passion and Easter of Resurrection. Only one Easter, therefore, of passion and resurrection. Our witness can have painful consequences for us, but Jesus and John the Baptist also had to undergo the persecutions of their contemporaries for their disturbing words and actions.

However, to be real witnesses to hope who are both credible and reliable, like John the Baptist, it is important for our hope to not be a vague, optimistic, sentiment or desire, but an essential component of our Christian life. So our pastoral approach will consist in scrutinizing the realities that people live in order to detect in them the “signs of the times” and the seeds of the Kingdom, the “seeds of the Word” (cf. *Erga Migrantes Caritas Christi*, 96). Like John the Baptist who prepared for his mission for a long time, this also implies formation for us, and personal and community reflection. Therefore, it is important for the Apostleship of the Sea, as an ecclesial Organization, to set aside time – as we are doing during this Congress – for:

- Listening to the Word of God. The members should let themselves be nourished and questioned by the Word of God through the interpretation of the Church, but also by deepening it personally and sharing it as a group;
- Prayer focused on the Eucharist. In communion with God, in prayer and in the Sacraments (cf. “*Sacramentum caritatis*”) a group of Christians draws its strength and finds the reason of its commitment;
- Sharing responsibilities, with respect for each one’s role, in order to respond to the forms of poverty, whether material, spiritual, moral or familiar. Carrying each other’s burdens, welcome and hospitality are, according to St. Paul, the expression of the law of Christ (Cf. *Gal 6:2*), the law of love.

This is what sustains and enables us to remain faithful, to stay the course, so that our chaplaincy teams will be real, believing communities where all the actors or agents of our ministry will collaborate closely in the service (*diakonia*) of the people of the sea.

In today’s world there are many people who are counting on our prayers and many situations that are waiting for our commitment and support. May the feast of St. John the Baptist be the

occasion for us for a new impetus of pastoral charity, which, in his example, will inspire us to be real heralds of the Gospel and to feed the sheep in the maritime world. Let us be capable of saying to our brothers and sisters, especially the most unfortunate ones, that only God can allow every human hope to be completely fulfilled in the end, and no one to be excluded from the Kingdom and hence from his love and mercy. If God allows evil, it is to derive a greater good from it. Here we find the philosophical and theological response to the problem of evil in the world.

Before the immensity of the task, we are aware of our smallness and that we can do nothing by ourselves. In a few moments, however, we will receive Communion and thus become the “Body of Christ”, according to Saint Augustine’s beautiful expression: “*Become what you receive*” (Sermon 272). Then everything will be possible because it is the fulfillment of the promise that the Lord is always with us along the way and that He remains in us: “*And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age*” (Mt 28:20).

With Mary, the *Stella Maris*, the “Eucharistic Woman”—as the Servant of God John Paul II called her—during this Congress and in our lives, let us give thanks to the Lord for the sea that has already been crossed, the road that has already been traveled, and for all the men and women who have dedicated themselves in and for this apostolate who are now in the ocean of the Father’s love.

We entrust to the Lord our Congress, all those men and women taking part in it, and those who have helped us to carry it out. Amen.