**SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT (YEAR A)**

St. John Damascene, priest, doctor of the Church; St. Barbara, virgin and martyr

Is 11:1-10; Ps 72; Rom 15:4-9; Mt 3:1-12

*Justice shall flourish in his time, and fullness of peace for ever*

**COMMENTARY**

*“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”*

The words of the title of the commentary above accompany us to the “heart” of the Advent season, which began a week ago. They are proclaimed in today’s Gospel, according to Matthew, by John the Baptist, who thus exhorted everyone to conversion to prepare “the way of the Lord”. We, too, are called to listen attentively to the living Word of God who still speaks today through the voice of John.

*1. “A voice of one crying out in the desert”*

John is presented as the prophet who takes on in himself, in his words and by his actions, the characteristics of the prophets of Israel’s tradition. His voice in the wilderness recalls the words of the prophet Isaiah who proclaimed in God’s name the beginning of a new exodus, a new exit from the exile of Babylon, as indicated by the evangelist himself. In addition, such detailed mention of John the Baptist’s clothing echoes the prophet Elijah’s way of dressing (cf. 2Kgs 1:8), and the food on which he fed himself daily recall an austere and penitential manner of life, distinctive of the prophets.

Portrayed as a prophet, John, however, has something special: the essence of his preaching is described with the exhortation to conversion for the kingdom of heaven, that is, the kingdom of God (according to the Jewish way of expressing himself, which out of reverence for the divine name even avoids the use of the word God). The identical exhortation will be on Jesus’ lips at the beginning of his public activities, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Mt 4:17). In this way, we glimpse, on the one hand, Jesus’ confirmation of the validity of John the Baptist’s message, and on the other, the figure of John the Baptist as a preacher of the Gospel—that is, of the good news of God, proclaimed by Jesus, the Messiah and Son of God, in the fullness of time—emerges clearly. In other words, John the Baptist is the voice of God, in which we hear the same message that Jesus, the Word (*Verbum*) of God incarnate, will proclaim (just as St. Augustine noted “John is the voice. Of the Lord, on the other hand, it is said, ‘In the beginning was the Word’ [Jn 1:1]. John is the voice that passes; Christ is the eternal Word who was in the beginning). John therefore is a special prophet, the messianic prophet who has the great honor of heralding the coming of the messianic kingdom, inaugurated by Christ.

In this regard, I emphasize again that every prophet of God is His special one sent to the people to always speak in his name concerning his things, God asks him to speak! He is the missionary of God. So it was with John the Baptist. He is solemnly presented as the prophet chosen in the fulfillment of history. Later, he will be praised by Jesus himself: “among those born of women, no one is greater than John”, one who was “more than a prophet,” and a “messenger” of God (cf. Lk 7:27-28; Mt 11:9-11). The particular mention of the “desert” as a place of vocation and the beginning of the Baptist’s activity is not just to signal the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophetic announcement (cf. Lk 3:4; Is 40:3) or to recall the experience of exodus. It makes us imagine a general spiritual picture of the time and to perceive a connection between the Baptist’s entry into the scene and the eschatological renewal of the people. God’s prophet-missionary almost always acts in the desert, even when he does so in an overcrowded city such as Shanghai, New Delhi, Lagos, or Sao Paulo! He is not particularly intimidated or deterred by this fact, because he knows that he is there not of his own will but for a mission entrusted to him by the Word of God!

*2. “You brood of vipers! (…) Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance.”*

John’s voice becomes extremely harsh toward the Pharisees and Sadducees, members of the two most important religious groups of the time, who came to his baptism anyway: “You brood of vipers!”. There must be some reason for such an epithet! Perhaps he saw the hypocrisy behind their apparent act of receiving his baptism. The outward, visible sign will necessarily have to correspond to the intention and commitment of the spirit to a factual change of life in order to enter and remain in the kingdom of heaven. This is why John the Baptist insists, “Produce good fruit as evidence of your repentance”. What would this fruit be? What act would be “worthy of conversion”? From this context we can glimpse that the desirable fruit will be an opening to the coming Messianic kingdom.

On a spiritual level, the call of John the Baptist remains valid for every “baptized person” today, in the present time of waiting for the coming of the Lord. The Lord Jesus himself warned us in no uncertain terms against all hypocrisy and spiritual laziness: “Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (Mt 7:19), and again, "Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Mt 7:21). All the baptized then as now are called to the serious commitment to conversion that leads to mature faith “working through love”, as St. Paul the apostle points out in Gal 5:6 precisely along the same lines as St. James the apostle (Jas 2:14-26). Such genuine and mature faith naturally leads to the joyful sharing of life in the kingdom of heaven with others, that is, to “missionary” commitment in the “messianic preaching” of the kingdom of God to all and at all times, as John the Baptist did.

*3. In view of “the one who is coming”, the “sprout” of Jesse, who will “baptize in Holy Spirit and fire”*

Despite the harshness of the language characteristic of the style of the prophets who wanted to shake the spiritually drowsy conscience of many, the messianic preaching of John the Baptist opens the horizon to a future of hope, pointing to the figure of “the one who is coming”, the messiah of God who “will baptize with the holy Spirit and fire”. Beyond the fire that is an image of divine judgment and purification, the reference of baptism in the Holy Spirit, that is, to immersion in the divine Spirit with the coming of Christ, underscores the fulfillment of the dream of the prophets in Israel for the end times, when God will pour out his spirit on every creature, according to the announcement of the prophet Joel (cf. Jl 3:1-5), later accentuated by St. Peter the apostle in his first missionary preaching on the day of Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:17-18). What is more, as the prophet Isaiah indicated in the first reading, this Spirit of God will first rest on the “shoot” of Jesse, the image of the coming messiah, and then expand on all. Thus, as a result, “the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the LORD, as water covers the sea”. In this way, humanity will return to peace and harmony with God, with creation, and with one another, as described with the scene of paradise found that we have heard (Is 11:6-9).

Therefore, all baptized Christians are reminded of, and called again today to the life in the Spirit they have received as a gift from Christ, in order to live deeply the Advent season, in which we are all called to conversion in view of the coming of the Lord. To this point, we want to quote an important passage by Pope Francis in his recent message for World Mission Sunday 2022: “All Christ’s missionary disciples are called to recognize the essential importance of the Spirit’s work, to dwell in his presence daily and to receive his unfailing strength and guidance. Indeed, it is precisely when we feel tired, unmotivated or confused that we should remember to have recourse to the Holy Spirit in prayer. Let me emphasize once again that prayer plays a fundamental role in the missionary life, for it allows us to be refreshed and strengthened by the Spirit as the inexhaustible divine source of renewed energy and joy in sharing Christ’s life with others.”

We therefore conclude our reflection with the prayer (provided as an alternative Collect [Opening Prayer] for this Sunday in the Italian Missal):

O Father, who made to sprout on earth the Savior

and upon him you have placed your Spirit,

stir up in us the same sentiments of Christ,

that we may bear fruits of justice and peace.

Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

*Useful points to consider:*

**Benedict XVI**, *Angelus,* St Peter's Square, Second Sunday of Advent, **9 December 2007**

While the Advent journey continues, while we prepare to celebrate the Birth of Christ, John the Baptist's appeal for conversion rings out in our communities. It is a pressing invitation to open our hearts to receive the Son of God, who comes among us to make manifest the divine judgement. The Father, writes John the Evangelist, judges no one but has given all judgement to the Son because he is the Son of Man (cf. Jn 5: 22, 27). And it is today, in the present, that our future destiny is being played out. It is our actual conduct in this life that decides our eternal fate. At the end of our days on earth, at the moment of death, we will be evaluated on the basis of our likeness - or lack of it - to the Child who is about to be born in the poor grotto of Bethlehem, because he is the criterion of the measure that God has given to humanity. The Heavenly Father, who expressed his merciful love to us through the birth of his Only-Begotten Son, calls us to follow in his footsteps, making our existence, as he did, a gift of love. And the fruit of love is that fruit which "befits repentance", to which John the Baptist refers while he addresses cutting words to the Pharisees and Sadduccees among the crowds who had come for Baptism.

Through the Gospel, John the Baptist continues to speak down the centuries to every generation. His clear, harsh words are particularly salutary for us, men and women of our time, in which the way of living and perceiving Christmas unfortunately all too often suffers the effects of a materialistic mindset. The "voice" of the great prophet asks us to prepare the way of the Lord, who comes in the external and internal wildernesses of today, thirsting for the living water that is Christ. May the Virgin Mary guide us to true conversion of heart, so that we may make the necessary choices to harmonize our mentalities with the Gospel.

Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments*,* ***Homiletic Directory***

**88**. That master theologian of the third century, Origen, observed a pattern that contains a great mystery: whenever the Lord Jesus came, he was preceded in that coming by John the Baptist (cf. *Homilies on Luke* IV, 6). Thus it was that even in the womb John leapt to announce the presence of the Lord. In the deserts of the Jordan, John’s preaching heralded the one who was to come after him. When he baptized Jesus in the Jordan, the heavens were opened, the Holy Spirit came down upon Jesus in visible form and a voice from heaven declared him to be the Father’s beloved Son. John’s death was the signal to Jesus to set his face on going up to Jerusalem, where he knew his own death awaited him. John is the last and greatest of the prophets; for after he speaks, the one whom all the prophets foretold comes and acts for our salvation.

**92**. Various classic Messianic prophecies of Isaiah are read on these Sundays. "On that day, a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom" (*Is* 11:1, Second Sunday, A). The text is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. […]

**93**. […] The baptism with the Holy Spirit that Jesus brings is the direct link between all the texts discussed here and the center to which this *Directory* has continually pointed; that is, the Paschal Mystery, ultimately fulfilled in Pentecost with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all who believe in Christ. The Paschal Mystery is prepared for by the coming of the Only Begotten Son in the flesh, and its infinite riches will be even further displayed on the last day. Isaiah says of the child born in the stable and of the one who will come on the clouds, "The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him" (*Is* 11:2, Second Sunday A) […]

**Catechism of the Catholic Church**

**1427** Jesus calls to conversion. This call is an essential part of the proclamation of the kingdom: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.” In the Church's preaching this call is addressed first to those who do not yet know Christ and his Gospel. Also, Baptism is the principal place for the first and fundamental conversion. It is by faith in the Gospel and by Baptism that one renounces evil and gains salvation, that is, the forgiveness of all sins and the gift of new life.

**1428** Christ's call to conversion continues to resound in the lives of Christians. This second conversion is an uninterrupted task for the whole Church who, “clasping sinners to her bosom, [is] at once holy and always in need of purification, [and] follows constantly the path of penance and renewal.” This endeavor of conversion is not just a human work. It is the movement of a "contrite heart," drawn and moved by grace to respond to the merciful love of God who loved us first.

**715** The prophetic texts that directly concern the sending of the Holy Spirit are oracles by which God speaks to the heart of his people in the language of the promise, with the accents of “love and fidelity.” St. Peter will proclaim their fulfillment on the morning of Pentecost. According to these promises, at the “end time” the Lord's Spirit will renew the hearts of men, engraving a new law in them. He will gather and reconcile the scattered and divided peoples; he will transform the first creation, and God will dwell there with men in peace.

**716** The People of the “poor” - those who, humble and meek, rely solely on their God's mysterious plans, who await the justice, not of men but of the Messiah - are in the end the great achievement of the Holy Spirit's hidden mission during the time of the promises that prepare for Christ's coming. It is this quality of heart, purified and enlightened by the Spirit, which is expressed in the Psalms. In these poor, the Spirit is making ready “a people prepared for the Lord.” (Luke 1,17).

**720** Finally, with John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit begins the restoration to man of “the divine likeness,” prefiguring what he would achieve with and in Christ. John's baptism was for repentance; baptism in water and the Spirit will be a new birth.