

Pope Shenouda III series

4

The Epiphany
&
St. John The Baptist

***BY HIS HOLINESS AMBA SHENOUDA III,
POPE AND PATRIARCH OF ALEXANDRIA
AND OF THE APOSTOLIC SEE OF
ALL THE PREDICATION OF SAINT MARK***

Second print, Cairo, September 1999

Available from: <http://www.copticchurch.net>

Name of the book: The Epiphany & St. John the Baptist
Author: His Holiness Pope Shenouda III
Editor: Orthodox Coptic Clerical College, Cairo
Edition: July 1999
Press: Amba Rueiss, (Offset), The Cathedral, Abbassia
Icon design: Tassony Sawsan
Deposition number at "The Library": 2504/97
I.S.B.N. 977 - 5345 - 37 - 5

All rights reserved to the author
His Holiness Pope Shenouda III
Pope and Patriarch of the See of Alexandria and of all the
Predication of the Evangelist St. Mark

MEDITATIONS UPON THE GLORIOUS FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY

The month of January brings to us several feasts: the beginning of the new year, the Nativity, the Circumcision, the Epiphany.

We thank God who gave us the blessing and the efficiency of all these feasts, in our lives.

While we celebrate the glorious feast of the Epiphany, we are glad to stop sometime for meditation:

The feast of Epiphany is the feast of Baptism

This feast is also called the feast of the divine manifestation (the Theophania).

Because the Holy Trinity appeared in it: The Son is baptised, The Father says from heaven: "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased", and The Holy Spirit appears "like of a dove" (Matt. 3: 16-17). Hence the baptism of the Lord Christ shows the creed of the Holy Trinity.

Thus the baptism is always in the Name of the Holy Trinity,

according to the word of the Lord to His disciples before His Ascension: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). He did not say in the names, because the three are one, as it was mentioned in (1 John 5:7): "For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one".

It is well that the Church has called this feast: "Eed El Ghetass", or the feast of the Immersion, (in Arabic: Eed means feast, and "El Ghetass" means immersion).

Because in it, the Church reminds the people that the Lord Christ was baptized by being immersed, as it was said that after being baptized, "When He has been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water" (Matt. 3:16). The Church also reminds the people that the faithful in the New Testament are being baptized by being immersed, (and not by being sprinkled with water, as it is done in some communities). The Ethiopian eunuch was baptized in this manner, at the beginning of the apostolic era, at the hands of Philip: "Now when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away" (Acts 8:39).

Also because Baptism is a tincture, (Baptisma in Latin), and tinting is accomplished through immersion; and because Baptism is a burial with

Christ (Col. 2:12), and burial is accomplished through placing inside the tomb (immersion), and cannot be represented by sprinkling with water

Likewise in all the ancient vestiges, we see that baptism was accomplished inside a recipient that was called the baptistery.

That proves that baptizing was accomplished through immersion, and not by sprinkling water.

We remember, during this feast, many spiritual and doctrinal meanings, whether as regards the baptism of the Lord Christ at the hands of John the Baptist, or as regards the importance of Baptism in the Church.....

We remember also that the Lord came to the baptism of John, while He was not in need of it.

But that was in order "to fulfill all righteousness", so that He would be without blame before men, even while He is not in need. That also establishes before us the principle of obedience and the principle of loyalty, without asking what profit it is to us?

He entered the baptism of John also in order to be our representative, or to take our place, just as He fasted instead of us, and just as He was crucified instead of us.

Many of His actions were for the others and not for Himself. He took our place to present to God the Father an image of the perfect man, who satisfies the Father by His life, as well He satisfies Him by His redemption of the human kind.

In His baptism, we remember his humility

We remember His love and His fidelity, and His tenderness in His conversation with John, when He says: "Permit it to be so now".

The baptism of Christ also reminds us of our baptism, and of the care of the Church for Baptism.

Baptism is the first sacrament of the Church, and is the door through which we enter to the other sacraments.

We say vulgarly: "we have christianised so and so", that is: we have baptised him; because he has become a christian through baptism. That is an expression which is sound in its doctrinal meaning, and which reminds us of the word of Christ: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16).

Therefore the day of baptism is a feast as regards the child and his family.

In that day, the Church gives him three sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist also; and makes him ready to participate in

the life of the Church. He becomes a member in it, and takes the first ecclesiastical certificate in his life.

The Church assigns a sponsor to the child, who will care for him spiritually, and very often it is the mother who is the sponsor to her child.

The mother is engaged before God and the Church to take care of her child in the fear of God, and to be his first teacher, who instructs him, and who gives him the practical training for all religious matters.

THE LORD'S HUMILITY IN BAPTISM

The baptism of John was the baptism of repentance. The Lord Christ was not in need of repentance. Why then was He baptized?

He was baptized instead of the human kind in entering the baptism of repentance....

Likewise He fasted instead of us, while He was not in need of fasting, just as He was dead instead of us, while He was not deserving death.....

All this was in order to offer to the Father a perfect image of the human kind, and to pay the price of our sins. Likewise He presented Himself to baptism, in order "to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt. 4:15), so that nobody convicts Him of sin in order to be submissive to the Law, before everybody, although He is above the Law.....

Thus He walked with the crowds, as one of them, presenting Himself to the baptism of repentance.

What is this humility, which the Lord offers to us?! When John apologised saying: "I need to be baptized by You", the Lord replied: "Permit it to be so now"

In the same manner He permitted to His mother who is exemplar in her purity, who gave birth to Him from the Holy Spirit without stain, to present herself "when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed to present Him to the Lord" (Luke 22:2), while she absolutely was not in need of days of purification.

The Lord Christ was not a sinner to present Himself to the baptism of repentance, but He was a bearer of sins. He has borne all the sins of the world.

"Now this is the testimony of John" who baptized Him" (John 1:19....).

Christ has borne the sins of the world, and descended with them to the baptism; likewise He has borne these sins upon the Cross, and erased them with His blood "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have

turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).

The Lord Christ, although He was Righteous without sin, and defied the Jews later on saying to them: "Which of you convicts me of sin?" (John 8:46) yet He accomplished the rite of the baptism of repentance. He did not omit this spiritual act to which the repented crowds presented themselves. We have found Him walking like the rest of the people who were sinners, and advancing toward the baptism of repentance.

All of them were baptized confessing their sins. But He was baptized bearing the sins of all the people.

He did this, lest a fault would be caught, or a defect would be counted, against Him. And also in order "to fulfill all righteousness".

Also in order "to fulfill all righteousness", His mother the Holy Virgin Mary acted with the same humility.

It was mentioned in the story of her entry with Him to the temple: [Now when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord: "Every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord: "A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons"]. (Luke 2: 22-24)

It is astonishing that this expression is said about the Holy Virgin: "when the days of her purification.....were completed"!! The Holy Spirit had sanctified her womb during the holy pregnancy; and she conceived without the stain of the original sin; and was absolutely not at all in need of purification but, in order "to fulfill all righteousness", she submitted to the commandment of the law, while she was not in need of that.

Verily there are matters which the human being is not compelled to do, but he does them in order not to scandalise others and in order to fulfill all righteousness.....

Also because of the humility of the Lord, He obtained the baptism at the hands of John.

The greatest High Priest, who grants priesthood, obtained the baptism from one of his priests, from one of his sons.... from a person who had confessed saying to Him: "I need to be baptized by You" (Matt. 3:14); and likewise had confessed saying: "whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose"

The priesthood of the Lord Christ is of Melchisedek, and the priesthood of John is of Aaron.

It is well known that the priesthood of Melchisedek is greater than the priesthood of Aaron, as our teacher the apostle saint Paul explained in (Hebrews 7). Likewise Melchisedek blessed our father Abraham in whose loins Aaron was (Hebrews 7). Nevertheless, with all humility, He who was "a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Psalm 110:4), presented Himself to obtain the baptism at the hands of one of the sons of Aaron!

In this, there is also some veneration from His part to the priesthood in His time.

Likewise, when He healed the leper, He said to him: "go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, as a testimony to them" (Matt. 8:4).

Verily the Baptism's story is full of numerous examples of humility.

Also because of the Lord's humility, after all the glorious matters that appeared during His baptism, and the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the testimony of John after all this "He went up on a mountain", in order to be tempted by Satan, and permitted Satan to tempt Him, in all audacity, or more accurately speaking, in all pride and the Lord replied to him in all quietness, and defeated Satan with His humility

Also because of the humility of the Lord, He submitted to the Law in age as well as in baptism.

He waited till He reached the age of thirty according to the Law; while it was so easy for Him to begin many years before that, He who at the age of twelve, amazed the old teachers, "and all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers" (Luke 2:47) But He waited till the age of thirty, and waited till He was baptized, and till He passed a period of solitude upon the mountainand then He began working

Christ humbled Himself from the beginning of His mission, in order to reply to the sin of the first Adam.

The first Adam responded to the incitement to become like God (Gen 3:5). That was undoubtedly a kind of pride. Then the Lord Christ the Son of God came, "taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7), walking in humility, in His birth in a manger representing poverty (Luke 2: 7), and also in His baptism at the hands of John who was in need to be baptized by Him

John the Baptist who baptized Him, was humble.....

although he was great, and the Lord Himself had attested of his greatness, and also the angel of the Lord, as we shall see.

THE BAPTIST'S GREATNESS

People certified of the greatness of many, but their testimony was either fictitious and false, or ignorant, or complimentary

But God Himself and His angel attested of the greatness of John the Baptist.

The angel of the Lord announced his birth to Zacharias his father: "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord" (Luke 1:15).

This expression is very astonishing: to be "great in the sight of the Lord", before whom every human being stands, feeling his insignificance, as our father Abraham said: "Indeed now, I who am but dust and ashes have taken it upon myself to speak to the Lord" (Gen. 18:27).

The expression "great in the sight of the Lord" does not mean His own feeling of his greatness, but it means that the Lord has given him greatness in order to stand before Him.

Thus greatness had been united with John before his birth, as the Lord testified.

Great works have been said about this great prophet: among them is that " he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord", "and many will rejoice at his birth" (Luke 1: 16-17, 14)

In all this we ask the angel who announced his birth, about the secret of this wonderful greatness, and he replies saying that

"He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (Luke 1:15).

Verily, this is the secret of John's greatness. We have heard in the Holy Bible that the Holy Spirit came upon many people: the Spirit of the Lord came upon Samson (Judges 13:15), upon Saul (1 Sam. 10: 10-11), upon David (1 Sam. 16:13), and upon many prophets. But we absolutely did not hear about anybody that "He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb". We note here the expression "filled with the Holy Spirit", and not only the coming of the Holy Spirit upon him. This matter is special to John the Baptist, and to nobody before him. But perhaps we ask:

When was John the Baptist filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb?

That was in the word of the Lord: "And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:41). Then Elizabeth "spoke with a loud voice and said" to the Holy Virgin Mary: "..... For

indeed, as soon as the voice of your greeting sounded in my ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy" (Luke 1:44).

At this moment, the moment of the greeting of Mary the mother of God, John was filled with the Holy Spirit, while he was in the womb of his mother.

By the Spirit, the babe (in Elizabeth's womb) felt the divine babe in the Holy Virgin's womb, and rejoiced at Him and was as if he ran to meet Him!! It was said that he leaped for joy, as the Lord said to the Jews: "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). What is astonishing is that Elizabeth felt that her babe leaped for joy in her womb. It is possible for her to feel a movement (leaped).

But I remained perplexed for sometime before the expression "for joy".

I was perplexed before two things. The first is the joy of the babe. The feeling of a babe in his mother's womb! The second is the mother's feeling that the movement of her babe inside her, is a movement for joy!!

It is undoubtedly a gift from the Spirit, because it was said about Elizabeth in that moment that she "was filled with the Holy Spirit" (Luke 1:41). This revelation can be a gift of the Spirit..... And here my perplexity ends.....

It was not only the angel of the Lord who testified of the greatness of John, but more than that, the Lord of glory Himself testified when He said: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you and more than a prophet. For this is he of whom it is written: "Behold, I send My messenger before your face, who will prepare Your way before You. ***Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist***" (Matt. 11:7-11).

The Scriptures also said about him that he is an angel:

"Behold, I send My messenger before Your face" (Mark 1:2). The Lord Christ Himself certified this surname (Matt. 11:10).

This prophecy was mentioned about him in the book of the prophet Malachi: "Behold, I send My messenger" (Mal/ 3:1).

John also was a priest among the sons of Aaron, a son of the prophet Zacharias.....

The greatest matter in the life of John is that he baptized the Lord Christ, glory be to Him.

The Lord Christ came to him to be baptized by him like other people. John accomplished the baptism of Christ out of obedience, and deserved to see the Holy Spirit in the likeness of a dove, and to hear the voice of the Father saying: "This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:16-17). Thus he enjoyed the Holy Trinity both spiritually and sensationally.....

God rather guided John to Himself before the baptism:

Saint John the Baptist said about that: "I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me: "Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God" (John 1: 33-34).

The greatness of John the Baptist appears in that he accomplished his great mission in a short time, perhaps six months or a little longer.

These six months are the difference between his age and the corporal age of the Lord Christ, according to what the archangel Gabriel said in his annunciation to the Holy Virgin of the Holy conception: "Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren" (Luke 1:36).

Each of both Christ and the Baptist began his life at the age of thirty. John served during these six months. And when Christ appeared, he began to hide. In this short period, that saint was able to lead many people to repentance, and to testify with a strong testimony to the Lord, and to prepare the way before Christ, and he presented to the whole world a practical example of the fact that:

the strength of service is not in its length, but in its deepness, and in the amount of its efficiency and the amount of its influence, and in its fruit.

Is it not astonishing that the Lord does not let many of the useful servants, serve for a long time?! It is enough that they have presented an excellent sample of service and righteousness. They have presented an example to be followed. The Lord was satisfied with what they had presented, and He let them go in peace.

John presented an excellent example of serious service, and profound spiritualities, which were agreeable to God who let them go in peace.

The greatness of John is distinguished in that he lived in his perfection in spite of the darkness of his generation.

It was a wicked age. Its spiritual leaders were the most wicked in that age, like the priests and the chiefs of the Jews. the scribes, the pharisees, and the saducees. During that age, sometime before, there rose up some

lying teachers like Theudas and Judas of Galilee about whom Gamaliel spoke, and they drew away many people after them (Acts 5: 36-37).

But saint John was not harmed by the corruption of his generation, but rather on the contrary he was a blessing for his generation, and a cause of repentance and good conduct for them.

John was great in that he was the son of mountains, who was brought up in the life of abnegation and ascetism.

He lived all his life in the deserts "till the day of his manifestation to Israel", growing and becoming "strong in spirit" (Luke 1:80). He lived as an ascet and did not "drink neither wine nor strong drink" (Luke 1:15); he was "clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey" (Mark 1:6).

In the desert, he learned prayer and meditation, he learned courage and lack of fear, and also firmness and faith; and he learned the strength which comes from abnegation.....

God prepared him in the desert, as He prepared the Holy Virgin in the temple.

He grew up courageous, not fearing any human being fit for being the author of a mission.

He told the truth in all strength, and did not care about what would be the consequences.....

King Herod sinned; and nobody had the courage to rebuke him or to confront him with truth, except John the Baptist. He was the only one who said to Herod: "It is not lawful for you to have her" (Matt. 14:4).

The king threw him into prison, but he did not care. An ascet like him who had relinquished everything, does not dread prison, even if his service is delayed. His thoughts during that, were:

"If God wills that he serves, then he will serve. And if God does not will, let His will be done. The important matter is to testify to the truth.

And it happened that John the Baptist was beheaded. But this voice which cries aloud in the desert, remained sounding in Herod's ear, disturbing his conscience, his thoughts, his sleep, his awakesness, and saying to him at every moment: "It is not lawful for you".

The voice of John did not die with the death of John.

Herod kept fearing John, even after his death. When he was informed about the strong predication and the miracles of Christ, he "said to his servants: "This is John the Baptist, he is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him" (Matt. 14:2).

John treated Herod like the others: he testified of the truth to him, because Herod was in need of this testimony.

He resembled the prophet Elijah in his blame of the king.

Elijah rebuked king Achab for his worship of the idols (1 Kings 18: 17-18); and he was exposed because of that, to the anger of his wife Jezabel who threatened to kill him. John the Baptist rebuked king Herod, and he was exposed because of that, to the anger of Herodia whom Herod wanted to marry, and who then became the cause of the murder of John (Matt. 14: 6-11).

Thus John walked "in the spirit and power of E lijah" (Luke 1:17).

He called the people and said to them: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" (Matt. 3:2). He was strong in his mission. He rebuked, criticised, and censured; and people accepted his criticism with an open heart.

The Scriptures say about that: "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them: "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves: "We have Abraham as our father". For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt. 3: 7-10).

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S ICON

John the Baptist's icon is the icon of the baptism of Christ by him.

But there are some who design an icon to John the Baptist like an angel with two wings and carrying his head on a plate in his hand.

They do that in consideration of the word of the Scriptures about him that he is the angel who prepares the way before the Lord (Mal.3:1), (Mark 1:2). And he really is so. As for carrying his head on a plate in his hand, that is true, because the martyrs carry their sufferings.

But this is a meditative icon and not a ritual icon.

It is supposed that icons which are put inside the churches, must be ritual icons. Therefore I refused to consecrate an icon like this in some churches in the countries of emigration. Why then?

The greatness of John the Baptist is not because he was called an angel. For all the pastors of churches have been called angels, and likewise the Lord gave this surname to all the seven churches in Asia (Apoc. 1:20), (Apoc. 2:3).

The greatness of John the Baptist also is not because he is a martyr carrying his sufferings. For there are tens of thousands, and rather millions of martyrs in the Church.

But his real greatness, is that he baptized Christ, the matter by which he was distinguished among the rest of the saints, and therefore he was surnamed the Baptist.

Hence the saint Church does not call him neither the angel John, nor John the martyr, nor the prophet John, but the Church calls him John the Baptist.

The ritual icon which represents him inside the church, is his image baptizing Christ. Likewise, his baptism of Christ is a feast of the Lord, which the Church celebrates. The fathers priests raise incense before this icon of the baptism; and they say whenever they go out of the sanctuary with incense: "Hail to you, O John son of Zacharias, the priest and son of a priest".

There is no other saint like him, whom the Church salutes in every raising of incense at evening and morning, and in every mass.

HIS BAPTISM OF CHRIST

The greatest act of John the Baptist, is his baptism of the Lord Christ.

Here we see two great situations of humility. The first is the coming of Christ to be baptized by his servant John. The second is that great prophet saying to the Lord: "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" (Matt. 3:14).

"I also am a sinner, in need of the baptism of repentance.

I am a teacher before these people, but before You, I am a disciple.

Before them, I am a prophet and an angel, but before You, I am dust and ashes.

I am a priest before them, but You are the source of my priesthood and every priesthood."

All the greatness that surrounded John, and all the tremendous popularity which he had, did not make him forget the insignificance of himself before Christ.....

He did like his mother Elizabeth when she said to the Holy Virgin: "But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43).

John said to the Lord: "I need to be baptized by You". And the Lord did not say to him that he did not need, but He said: "Permit it to be so now" (Matt. 3:15), which is an astonishing expression from the mouth of the Lord, and is addressed to one of his servants.

He said to him, tenderly and gently: "I do not command you, but I ask for your permission, I ask for your agreement..... in order "to fulfill all righteousness....."

NOT I

The Baptist was successful in his service.

"Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized by him in the Jordan confessing their sins" (Matt. 3:5).

Naturally the only One who did not confess sins when He presented Himself to baptism, was Christ, because He had absolutely no sins to confess.

When John saw the crowds increasing around him, he transferred their looks from him to Christ, meaning: "not I".

He made all his efforts in order to hide himself, and that Christ appears. This is the most distinguished virtue and the most profound work of this saint.

He said to the people: "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matt. 3:11).

As he attracted them to another baptism which is greater than his baptism, so also he attracted them the more, to the author of this baptism, saying that He is stronger and higher and more ancient than him.

He said: "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose" (Mark 1:7). "After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me" (John 1:30). "I am not the Christ, but, I have been sent before Him" (Matt. 3:28).

The Baptist did not say all that, as mere words of humility,

or that he degraded his level before the people.....

The true humility, as the saints say, is that man knows himself. And John, in his humble words, knew exactly who was he, and who was Christ? and he spoke out of truthfulness and out of humility.....

He was the greatest "among those born of women". But he, and all those born of women, are all mere servants before Christ; even the angels, as the apostle says: [But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, he says: "Let all the angels of God worship Him"] (Hebr. 1:6).

This saint did not seek his own glory, but he sought the kingdom of Christ.

He understood that "He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light" (John 1:8), "that all through him might believe" (John 1:7). He knew that he was simply a predecessor before the convoy of the coming king; all his work consisted of preparing the way for the king.

John was able to keep his ritual, and not to trespass over his limits.

For him selfishness was dead; and Christ was all in all.

That is a lesson to the servants who build themselves at the account of service, or to them who consider service as a simple field where they can manifest themselves!!

The most marvelous word that exhibits John's service, is his word about Christ: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). He also said about Him: "He who comes from above is above all He who comes from heaven is above all" (John 3:31). Thereby he indicates the divinity of Christ, because He came from heaven, therefore He is above all, including also John.....

Hence, when the predication of Christ had begun and started to sway the atmosphere of service, John rejoiced and was glad (John 3:29). He said: "Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice." As for me, I am merely the friend of the bridegroom, I look from afar and rejoice.

Thus he rendered the groom to the bridegroom.

He rendered to Him the church which he had prepared for Him through repentance, and he also rendered to Him his disciples, and he joyfully withdrew from the field, releasing the leadership to the Lord.

Nevertheless, while John humbled himself, he was raised up.

According to the word of the Lord Christ: "whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Matt. 23:12). When John humbled himself and said: "I must decrease", the Lord exalted him, and made him the greatest among those born of women.

Of course he meant the greatest among "men" or "prophets" born of women. Because the Holy Virgin Mary, who is among those born of women, is undoubtedly greater than him.

During the feast of the Epiphany, we also remember our own baptism.

OUR OWN BAPTISM

Our baptism is something other than the baptism of John.

It is not simply a baptism for repentance. We note that when the apostle saint Paul was predicating in Ephesus, he asked the disciples there, saying: ["Into what then were you baptized?" So they said: "Into John's baptism." Then Paul said: "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 19: 3-5).

Our baptism is a birth from water and the Spirit.

According to what the Lord said to Nicodemus: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

Our baptism is death and resurrection with Christ.

As the apostle says to the Colossians about Christ: "buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him" (Col. 2:12).

He told the same meaning to the Romans: "Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death.....For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection" (Rom. 6: 3-5).

Death here means the death of our ancient man.

As the apostle says: "knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with" (Rom. 6:6).

We obtain salvation through our baptism.

As the Lord said: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16).

And as the apostle saint Paul said about it: "but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). And as also the apostle saint Peter said about the ark: "in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us, baptism" (1 Peter 3: 20-21).

Salvation through baptism means salvation from all sins before baptism. And this means justification and renovation:

Salvation from the original sin, and salvation from all the actual sins before baptism. Renovation means the renovation of our nature (Rom 6:4).

As the old man dies in baptism, so a new man is raised up in the likeness of Christ.

The apostle saint Paul said about that: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). That is, you have put on the righteousness that is in Him (Here is the action of justification which is in baptism).

*May the blessing of saint John the Baptist be with us all.
Many happy returns for you all.*