JOHN THE BAPTIST SOLEMNITY HOMILY
(SUNDAY JUNE 24, 2018

THE VOCATION OF PROPHET

At the age of ten days, I was baptized at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Churchtown, Ohio, very near Marietta. Later in my thirties, I worked at St. John’s University in Collegeville, Minnesota operated by the Benedictine monks of St. John the Baptist Abbey there. I have a devotion to St. John the Baptist.

I would say that we Christians are all called to be Baptists – that is, to be like John the Baptist. Above all, John was a prophet. The church considers him to be the last of the Old Testament prophets who pointed the way to Jesus; and Jesus, in his turn, fulfilled all prophecy about the one true God. John, as we just heard in St. Luke’s Gospel, was born into a priestly family. In fact, his father, Zechariah, was doing his priestly duty in the Temple at Jerusalem when the angel told him that he and his wife, Elizabeth, both very elderly, would have a son. Because of Zechariah’s lack of trust in the angel’s word, he was struck dumb until the birth and the naming of the boy (as today’s gospel relates)

But John obviously did not follow in his father’s footsteps and become a priest – although this would have been very unusual because priesthood was inherited among the Jews and it was expected that it would be passed from father to son. Instead, John took on the role of a prophet – and a zealous one at that. The symbol of his prophetic mission was that he went out into the desert and donned the well-recognized rough clothes of the
prophetic class. In addition, John did strange things like eating grasshoppers in order to draw attention to his prophecy. The focus of John’s message was repentance. His Baptism called people from any background to a new life. This included women who were usually excluded from Jewish ritual practices. This Baptism symbolized the desire of those submitting to it to change their lives from sin to virtue. As we know, Jesus himself took the plunge in the Jordan – and by taking part in John’s Baptism of Repentance, he gave us an example of what it means to take our own Sacrament of Baptism seriously.

The Baptist’s preaching of repentance was unequivocal. He didn’t mince words. Ultimately, John’s mission was to point to Christ. John preached the unvarnished truth – and Christ is Truth itself. John’s honesty and directness led to his martyrdom at the hands of the wicked King Herod. John condemned this ruler’s sinfulness in divorcing his wife and then taking another wife – a woman named Herodias who was Herod’s brother’s wife. This was both adulterous and incestuous behavior according to Jewish law. The story of John’s death is famous – Herod promised Herodias’ daughter that she could have anything she asked for after she performed a lascivious dance; and her mother Herodias talked the girl into asking for the Baptist’s head on a platter. Jesus honored this prophet by saying that there was no man ever born who was greater than John the Baptist.

The world would be a holier place if there were more of us Christians like John the Baptist. By this I do not mean that we should all go out into the desert and eat grasshoppers and such. Rather, I mean that we would do well to follow our Baptismal vocation to stand up for the truth – the truth about right and wrong, and the truth about life, justice, and peace. We are all called
by our Baptism to be prophets. And this might mark us as strange and maybe weird – even if we don’t go out into the desert and eat locusts.

There is much to be prophetic about in our time and in our country right now. At this moment, for example, we are witnessing injustice and grave evil in the way refugees are being treated – especially the recent ripping of babies and children from their parents at our southern border. This policy of separating families followed from months and years of some of our leaders attempting to dehumanize these refugees who are simply fleeing horrible conditions in their native countries exactly the way the ancestors of most of us here in this church fled their native countries in the past. And, sadly, a substantial number of Americans have supported this dehumanization that indiscriminately labels refugees and immigrants as rapists and murderers.

In the meantime, babies are still being ripped from their mothers’ wombs in abortion. The Catholic conscience is deeply and rightly offended by abortion. Pope Francis has recently declared in his Apostolic Exhortation on holiness entitled “Rejoice and Be Glad” (2018) that the church always needs to be “clear, firm, and passionate” about the sacredness of unborn life. At the same time, Francis unambiguously proclaims in this document that born life is “equally sacred” as unborn life (equally sacred), such as (he says) “the poor … the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm, … the victims of human trafficking, … and every form of rejection” (paragraph 101), including indifference to migrants and refugees (paragraph 102). Pope Francis in this document and elsewhere and Pope St. John Paul II in his encyclical “The Gospel of Life” (1995) are basically telling Catholics that we cannot be credible about our support of human life
in the womb unless we also care deeply about the inviolability of all born human life that is vulnerable.

To be prophetic about policies like separating children from their refugee parents is also to be empathetic for them by thinking of how awful it would be for us to be separated from our own kids. Otherwise we are in danger of being apathetic – that is, lacking in basic human feeling for another person’s or family’s plight. And that attitude would be pathetic on our part because we are all part of one human family! Those kids ripped from their parents are our kids just as those babies aborted are our kids – because we are all human!

Perhaps John the Baptist’s greatest prophecy was to point to Jesus as the Messiah. He said things like there is “one to come who is mightier than I” and “I am not fit to loosen his sandal strap” (Luke 3: 16). He also said: “behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Maybe most strikingly, the Baptist said of Jesus: “He must increase, while I must decrease” (John 3:30). This should be the motto of all Christians: He must increase while I must decrease. It’s not about me or you. It’s about Jesus. And Jesus cares for all the vulnerable people in the world. He cares about all God’s little ones. Remember that he identifies with the poor. Therefore, logically we can say it’s not about me or you; it’s always about those in need who are literally Jesus who said whatever you do for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do for me – and whatever you don’t do for these least, you don’t do for me. If we are Christians, we are called to be prophets of life, justice, and peace.