

Birth of John the Baptist June 24



Saint John the Baptist,

- precursor of Christ, pray for us;
- glorious forerunner of the Sun of Justice...
- minister of baptism to Jesus...
- burning and shining lamp of the world....
- angel of purity before your birth...
- special friend and favorite of Christ...
- heavenly contemplative...
- preacher of truth...
- voice crying in the wilderness...
- miracle of mortification and penance...
- example of profound humility...
- glorious martyr of zeal for God's holy law...
- gloriously fulfilling your mission...

The Church observes the birth of John as a hallowed event. We have no such commemoration for any other fathers; but it is significant that we celebrate the birthdays of John and of Jesus. This day cannot be passed by. Even if my explanation does not match the dignity of the feast, you may still meditate on it with great depth and profit.

John appears as the boundary between the two testaments, the old and the new. That he is a sort of boundary the Lord himself bears witness, when he speaks of “the law and the prophets up until John the Baptist.” Thus he represents times past and is the herald of the new era to come. As a representative of the past, he is born of aged parents; as a herald of the new era, he is declared to be a prophet while still in his mother’s womb. For when yet unborn, he leapt in his mother’s womb at the arrival of blessed Mary. In that womb he had already been designated a prophet, even before he was born; it was revealed that he was to be Christ’s precursor, before they ever saw one another. These are divine happenings, going beyond the limits of our human frailty.

When John was preaching the Lord’s coming he was asked, “Who are you?” And he replied: “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.” The voice is John, but the Lord “in the beginning was the Word.” John was a voice that lasted only for a time; Christ, the Word in the beginning, is eternal.

*from a sermon by Saint Augustine
on the birth of John the Baptist*

St. John the Baptist was highly honored throughout the Church from the beginning. Fifteen churches were dedicated to him in the imperial city of Constantinople. The fact that Christ praised him so highly (Matthew 11, 11) encouraged special veneration. As soon as the Feast of Christmas was established on December 25 (in the fifth century) the date of the Baptist’s birth was assigned to June 24.

The Council of Agde, in 506, listed the Nativity of Saint John among the highest feasts, on which all attended Mass and abstained from servile work. Just as on Christmas, three Masses were celebrated, one during the vigil service, the second at dawn, the third in the morning.

The Baptist is patron of tailors (because he made his own garments in the desert), of shepherds (because he spoke of the “Lamb of God”), and of masons.

All over Europe, from Scandinavia to Spain, and from Ireland to Russia, Saint John’s Day festivities are closely associated with the ancient nature lore of the great summer festival of pre-Christian times. Fires are lighted on mountains and hilltops on the eve of his feast. These “Saint John’s fires” burn brightly and quietly along the fiords of Norway, on the peaks of the Alps, on the slopes of the Pyrenees, and on the mountains of Spain. Another custom is that of lighting many small fires in the valleys and plains. People gather around, jump through the flames, and sing traditional songs in praise of the saint or of summer.

Why not celebrate this feast with a barbecue, or a weenie or marshmallow roast? Burn a few sparklers to honor the birth of the Baptist. Let the late light of summer remind of the Light of the World announced by John the Baptist.

Saints Peter and Paul,
Apostles
June 29



The Lord has set you firm within his Church,
which he built upon the rock of Peter's faith.
May he bless you with a faith that never falters.

The Lord has given you knowledge of the faith
through the labors and preaching of Saint Paul.
May his example inspire you to lead others
to Christ by the manner of your life.

May the keys of Peter, and the words of Paul,
their undying witness and their prayers,
lead you to the joy of that eternal home
which Peter gained by his cross,
and Paul by the sword.

*Solemn Blessing
on the Solemnity of Peter and Paul, Apostles*

In Peru, on the Day of Saints Peter and Paul, processions of decorated boats carry images of Saint Peter, who was the patron saint of fishers. Saint Paul is said to have been martyred on the same date. The procession floating from the seaside town of Valparaíso has been held annually since 1682.

In Romania, the Saints Peter and Paul celebration lasts for three days. Legend has it that glow-worms appear on this day. St. Peter sends them to guide those who are lost in the woods. The dead are remembered on this day, which is also a day of prayer to keep wolves away from the cattle.

June 29 marks the height of the summer in the high mountain plains of western Ukraine, where the land is not suitable for farming. Sheep and cattle are raised. On the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the villagers honor the head shepherds and assistants for keeping the communal flocks safe and healthy, presenting them with gifts of clothing, tools, and food.

An important part of this celebration is the special baked rolls called *mandryky*, from the word *mandruvaty*, meaning "to wander." According to legend, the apostles Peter and Paul were sustained by these rolls while traveling on their missions.

Mandryky are small rounds of bed dough, baked with a filling of cheese or cabbage.

Midsummer and St. Peter's Eve are the favorite seasons for "rush-bearing" in England: rushes or new-mown hay are brought in to be laid on the floors of churches. In northwestern England, rushcarts with towering flower-bedecked loads of braided rushes move in processions.

In Poroa de Varzim, Portugal, St. Peter is honored as a fisherman. Houses are decorated with garlands of lights, nautical banners, tinfoil boats and colorful ribbons. Stages are trimmed with nets, oars and rigging for life-sized Peters in fishing boats. At sunset, the townsfolk, dressed in black, march to the beat of drums, following an empty coffin draped with flowers and lace. Some carry candles and others poles topped with large realistic wax heads representing the beloved dead of the town. Onlookers strew their path with rushes and mint and thyme. Later, they drink young wine, dance around huge bonfires and jump through the flames, feast on fresh grilled sardines and set off fireworks.

Pennsylvania Dutch farmers had a little rhyme about this day: *Peter und Paul mach die Wurzel faul* or "Peter and Paul makes the root crops rot," indicating that it usually rains on their day.