

## **Saint John the Evangelist**

John Paul II Pastoral Centre

27 December 2017

Dear brother priests, dear seminarians: brothers and sisters in Christ:

### ***Introduction***

As your Bishop, it is always a joy for me to celebrate this Mass for Seminarians – and this year just two days before the Ordination to the diaconate of Guy Zidago. For him, it is the final step along his journey to being configured to Christ the High Priest and Shepherd of his Church.

### ***Biography of John***

Today's feast of St. John, the Apostle known as "the beloved disciple," has much to teach us. The son of Zebedee and brother of James, John was regularly among the small group of disciples that Jesus took with him on crucial moments of his ministry such as the Transfiguration (cf. Mk 9:2) and in the Garden of Gethsemani (cf. Mk 14:33).

Like all the Apostles, John was one of Jesus' travelling companions, Jesus' friends. "Their journey with Jesus was not only a physical journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, but an interior journey during which they learned faith in Jesus Christ, not without difficulty, for they were people like us."<sup>1</sup>

In the days after the Resurrection, we find "the sons of Zebedee" busy with Peter and some of the other disciples on a night when they

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience (9 August 2006).

caught nothing. But after the intervention of the Risen One, they had a miraculous catch. And it was “the disciple Jesus loved” who first recognized “the Lord” and pointed him out to Peter (cf. Jn 21: 1-13).

In the early Church at Jerusalem, John occupied an important position in supervising the first group of Christians. Indeed, Paul lists him among those whom he calls the “pillars” of that community (cf. Gal 2:9). In fact, Luke presents him together with Peter when going to pray in the temple (cf. Acts 3:1-4,11) or appear before the Sanhedrin to witness to their faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 4:13,19). In particular, we should remember what they affirmed to their accusers: “We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4: 20).

### ***John the Beloved Disciple***

According to tradition, John is indeed the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” who laid his head against the Lord’s breast at the Last Supper (cf. Jn 13:23), stood at the foot of the Cross together with the Mother of Jesus and was instructed to take her into his home (cf. Jn 19:25), and lastly, witnessed both the empty tomb, as we heard in this evening’s Gospel, and the presence of the Risen One himself (cf. Jn 20:2; 21:7).<sup>2</sup>

The Lord wishes to make each one of us a disciple who lives in personal friendship with him. To achieve this, it is not enough to follow Jesus and to listen to him outwardly: it is also necessary to live with him

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, General Audience (5 July 2006).

and like him. This is only possible in the context of a relationship of deep familiarity, imbued with the warmth of total trust. This is what happens between friends.

### ***John the Theologian***

The Easter Church does not call him the “beloved disciple” but quite simply “the Theologian”; that is, the one who can speak in understandable terms of the divine, revealing access to God through attachment to Jesus: “we declare to you what we have seen and heard” (1 Jn 1:2).

And what is it that he has seen and heard, looked at and touched with his hands (cf. 1 Jn 1:2). It is that “God is love ; he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (I Jn 4: 16). It is very difficult to find texts of this kind in other religions. Thus, words such as these bring us face to face with an element that is truly peculiar to Christianity.

John, of course, is not the only Christian author to speak of love. Since this is an essential constituent of Christianity, all the New Testament writers speak of it, although with different emphases. One thing is certain: John does not provide an abstract, philosophical or even theological treatment of what love is.

No, he is not a theoretician. True love, in fact, by its nature is never purely speculative but makes a direct, concrete and even verifiable

reference to real persons. Well, John, as an Apostle and a friend of Jesus, makes us see what love's components are, or rather, the three phases of Christian love.

The first concerns the very Source of love which the Apostle identifies as God, arriving at the affirmation that "God is love" (I Jn 4: 8, 16). John is the only New Testament author who gives us definitions of God. He says, for example, that "God is spirit" (Jn 4: 24) or that "God is light" (I Jn 1: 5). He proclaims with radiant insight that "God is love."

Take note: it is not merely asserted that "God loves," or even less that "love is God"! In other words: John does not limit himself to describing the divine action but goes to its roots. He does begin with love and then ascribe that love to God, but turns directly to God to define his very nature.

By so doing, John wants to say that the essential constituent of God is love. Hence, all of God's activity is born from love and impressed with love. All that God does, he does out of love and with love, even if we are not always immediately able to understand that this is love, true love.

At this point, however, it is indispensable to take another step and explain that God has concretely demonstrated his love by entering human history through the Person of Jesus Christ, incarnate, crucified and risen for us.

This is the second reflection we must make on God’s love. He did not limit himself to verbal declarations – speaking through the prophets – but, truly committed himself to that love in the Incarnation, as we are celebrating in these days. “The event of the Incarnation, of God who became man, like us, shows us the daring realism of divine love. God’s action, in fact was not limited to words. On the contrary we might say that he was not content with speaking, but entered into our history, taking upon himself the effort and burden of human life.”<sup>3</sup>

In his Gospel, John writes, “God so loved the world”, that is, all of us, “that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16). God’s love for humanity is concretized and manifested in the love of Jesus himself, who first appeared among us as a vulnerable Child lying in a manger.

Again, John writes: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1). By virtue of his sacrificial and total love we are ransomed from sin, as St. John writes further. This is how Jesus’ love for us reaches us: by the pouring out of his own Blood for our salvation.

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<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience (9 January 2013).

By his taking flesh and coming among us, we have “touched” Jesus as John tells us (cf. 1 Jn 1:1), but more importantly Jesus has “touched” us. And through the sacraments he continues to touch us even today. Transforming our hearts, he unceasingly enables us to acknowledge him as the Son of God. In faith, we can touch him and receive the power of his grace.<sup>4</sup>

The third thing we can say about God’s love is this: from being the recipients of a love that precedes anything we can do, we are called to the commitment of an active response which, to be adequate, can only be a response of love.

At the Last Supper Jesus told us what he expected in return “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (Jn 13: 34).

Where is the newness to which Jesus refers? It lies in the fact that he is not content with repeating what had already been requested in the Old Testament and which we also read in the other Gospels: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Lv 19:18; cf. Mt 22:37-39; Mk 12:29-31; Lk 10:27).

In the ancient precept the standard criterion was based on man (“as yourself”), whereas in the precept to which John refers, Jesus presents his own Person as the reason for and norm of our love: “as I have loved

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, 31.

you.”

It is in this way that love becomes truly Christian: both in the sense that it must be directed to all without distinction, and above all since it must be carried through to its extreme consequences, having no other bounds than being boundless.

Those words of Jesus, “as I have loved you,” simultaneously invite and disturb us; they are a goal that can appear unattainable, but at the same time they are an incentive that does not allow us to ensconce ourselves in what we have already been able to achieve. It does not permit us to be content with where we are, but spurs us to keep advancing towards this goal.

Let us pray that we will be able, even if always imperfectly, to live that love so intensely that we share it with those we meet on our way.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, dear seminarians, as future priests, and even now, you must proclaim this gift of communion with God and among yourselves. For this reason, I encourage you to renew your personal encounter with Christ, the Word of life made visible, and to become his heralds, so that the gift of divine life will be welcomed more readily by our contemporaries. It is the Church’s gift and unescapable duty to communicate the joy that is born of an encounter with the person of Christ, Emmanuel in our midst. “In a world which often feels that God is

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, General Audience (9 August 2006).

superfluous or extraneous, we confess with Peter that he alone has “the words of eternal life” (Jn 6:68). There is no greater priority than this: to enable the people of our time once more to encounter God, the God who speaks to us and shares his love so that we might have life in abundance (cf. Jn 10:10).”<sup>6</sup>

Like John the Evangelist, you too must speak of what you have seen and heard and touched with your hands (cf. 1 Jn 1:3).<sup>7</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

Dear seminarians; listen to the Word of Life, touch it. Live it in communion and share it with joy. That is what the Church expects of you. And now we continue with the Eucharist, when we “touch” the Word of life and now once again comes to heal and transform us.

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB  
Archbishop of Vancouver

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 264.