SYNAXIS OF JOHN THE HOLY GLORIOUS PROPHET, BAPTIST,
AND FORERUNNER
January 7

THE GOSPEL READING
John 1:29-34
[The Baptist’s Testimony to Christ]

At that time, John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.’ I myself did not know him; but for this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” And John bore witness, “I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

THE SERMON

The Jordan River was where the ancient people of Israel crossed into the Promised Land. It symbolized a kind of baptism, a rebirth after the forty years of exile the Israelites spent in the desert. The Jordan River symbolizes our crossing, on the day of our baptism, from the desert of sin to the promised land of God’s grace. Now, Jesus Himself comes to be baptized in the Jordan River by Saint John the Baptist, but not because He needed baptism. Since He is Life itself and the source of life, the One into Whom we are baptized for eternal life. He comes to be baptized to be an example of humility for us, and a symbol of renewal, because the promised (in the Old Testament) Messiah has come to save His people, embodying the return of the Israelites from exile.
Saint John the Baptist, also known as Saint John the Forerunner, has that name because he was running, so to speak, to announce and prepare for the coming of the Messiah (Christ). The Forerunner was born into a pious and priestly family to parents well advanced in age. His father, Zechariah, served in the Temple, and his mother, Elizabeth, was a sister of Saint Anna, the mother of the Most Holy Theotokos. As such, John the Forerunner was a cousin of Jesus, and he was six months older than Him. However, Saint John the Baptist says that Jesus ranks above him, and even that Jesus was before him. This is because John knew that Jesus is the Son of God, and even if He is born of the Virgin Mary, He Himself has no beginning and no end.

Saint John’s humility is a shining example for us all. Despite his prominent role as the Forerunner of Christ, he humbly acknowledges his own unworthiness before the Divinity of Jesus. This humility serves as a reminder for us to approach God with a contrite heart, recognizing our need for His grace and mercy. Saint John is always depicted on the iconostasis (the wall of icons separating the nave from the sanctuary in a church) next to the icon of Christ.

Saint John the Baptist attracted large gatherings as he administered a baptism that served as a symbolic expression of transformative change, representing a profound conversion and repentance towards God. It is important to note that this baptism differed from the later Trinitarian Baptism (in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit) instituted by Jesus during His own baptism. Saint John’s call was a compelling summons for people to openly confess their sins and redirect their lives away from self-centered pursuits. He emphasized the crucial point that mere ancestral lineage, in this instance, being Jewish, did not automatically ensure God’s blessings. Rather, he urged people to actively pursue righteousness in their lives. When Saint John began preaching publicly, people from the whole region were drawn to his message. He was calling the nation to repentance, preaching in the wilderness near the Jordan River. When Saint John started his ministry, he said, repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! These are the very same words Jesus used when He began His ministry.

Repentance is our first step towards God. Opening our hearts to the love and the presence of God requires repentance first. Even though Jesus did not need to repent, it was at His baptism that God the Father sent the Holy Spirit to descend upon and remain on His Son. This teaches us that it is by our continual repentance that the Holy Spirit comes and abides in us, cleansing us of every stain.

The baptism of Saint John was a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus did not need it, and as Saint Augustine of Hippo says, “Our Lord received baptism from a servant, in order to give us such a lesson of humility as might prepare us for receiving the grace of baptism.” Distinguishing itself from Saint John’s baptism, the Trinitarian Baptism bestowed upon us in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit serves a dual purpose. Beyond being a rite for the forgiveness of sins, this sacred act serves to unite us intimately with God.

Through Holy Baptism, we not only receive the Holy Spirit but also find ourselves drawn into a profound communion with God the Father. In administering this baptism,
Jesus immerses us in the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the Holy Spirit residing within us becomes not only a purifying force but also a tangible manifestation of the abiding presence of both the Father and the Son in our hearts. The Holy Spirit serves as both a refining and illuminating agent, purifying our souls and enlightening our understanding of the divine.

Saint John said he was sent by God the Father and told that He upon whom the Spirit would descend and remain would be the Christ (the Messiah). Christ is the One Who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. As a result, Saint John witnessed to the whole world that Jesus is the Son of God. God the Father sends the Holy Spirit to the Son, and we receive the Son also through Holy Baptism, in the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result, we too become witnesses of Christ to the whole world. The Son of God gives us the Holy Spirit. With the Holy Spirit, Jesus makes us share in His divine nature and becomes our Father. Jesus baptizes us with the Spirit of truth and stays with us, living in our hearts.

We have the Holy Spirit, Whom we have received from Christ, and in His power, with our daily repentance, God lives in our hearts. In practical ways, that means we turn away from sin. It means we begin to forgive and love others. It also means that we entrust our whole lives to Christ our God. Both in times of joy and in times of difficulty, which feels like a desert, we ask the Lord to help us and renew us, like baptism does. The Kingdom of God is at hand, that is, it is near. God is near us, and He lives in us.

Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The Old Testament sacrifices were only a shadow of the things to come. Lambs were sacrificed in the temple for the forgiveness of the sins of the people. Now, the Lamb of God has come. Our sins are taken away by Him. This symbolism underscores the redemptive nature of Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross. Just as the innocent lamb was offered for the atonement of sins, Jesus, the perfect and blameless Lamb, willingly gave Himself for the salvation of humanity.

Let us remember that the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, continues to take away our sins. Through His baptism, death, and resurrection, He has made a way for us to be reconciled with God. Let us embrace the transformative power of His Holy Spirit, who baptizes us with a new life in Christ. May we, like Saint John the Baptist, bear witness to the Son of God in our lives, proclaiming His love, mercy, and salvation to a world in need.