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St. John: The Beloved Disciple of Christ

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Words of Wisdom: “Charity is called the bond of perfection, or *vinculum perfectionis* (cf. Col. 3:14), because it unites our soul to God, our ultimate end, and makes all our forces and all our actions converge toward Him.” (Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrance, in *Knowing the Love of God*). (1) Charity—the love of God and the love of neighbor for the sake of God—is beautifully illustrated in the lives of the holy apostles, who, for love of God and neighbor, set no limits to their spirit of sacrifice, imitating Our Lord’s example of charity.

“SONS OF THUNDER”

Galilee, the center of many events of the life of Our Lord, was the birthplace of St. John, who is called “the Beloved Disciple,” the fourth Evangelist and the apostle considered most dear to Jesus. John, with his older brother, St. James the Greater, and with their father, Zebedee, made his livelihood by fishing on the Lake of Genesareth. James and John were likely among the number of those who followed St. John the Baptist, subsequently following Christ for a time before He called them to be His disciples permanently. (2) Having just called another pair of fishermen-brothers (namely, Peter and Andrew) to leave all things and follow Him, Christ also called James and John to permanent discipleship while they were in the midst of their labor: “*And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, in a ship with Zebedee their father, mending their nets: and he called them. And they forthwith left their nets and father, and followed him*” (Matthew 4:21-22 [D-R]). (3)

John was the youngest of the apostles, being about twenty-five years old when he began to follow Christ. (4) Our Lord gave James and John the

name *Boanerges*—that is, “sons of thunder”—a title which, according to biblical commentator Cornelius a Lapide, specially signifies their vocation as preachers of the Faith, “that by the holiness of their lives and their miracles they might be like thunderbolts, and might, by the power of their voices, shake men as with claps of thunder, even unbelievers and barbarians, and bring them to repentance and a holy life.” (5)

“THE DISCIPLE WHOM JESUS LOVED”

Among the twelve apostles, Peter, James, and John are the three whom Christ particularly favored, and He manifested to them several aspects of His life which the other apostles were not so privileged as to witness. Specifically, Peter, James, and John were present at the resurrection of Jairus’ daughter, Christ’s transfiguration on Thabor, and Christ’s agony in the garden of Gethsemani. (6) However, it is evident from Sacred Scripture that, among these three chosen apostles, John was the most loved by Our Lord.

Throughout his Gospel, John frequently refers to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” (7) According to many theologians and spiritual writers, two reasons for Our Lord’s special favor for John were his great love for God and his perpetual virginity. (8) Accordingly, Benedictine scholar Dom Prosper Guéranger comments that “John was more loved by Jesus than was Peter himself, because his Virginity deserved this special mark of honour.” (9)

Moreover, at the Last Supper, John was the apostle who leaned on Our Lord’s breast shortly before His approaching passion and death and was also the one to whom Our Lord revealed the identity of His betrayer. John’s exemplary fidelity during Jesus’ passion is a particularly notable aspect of John’s life, as he was the only apostle to be present at the crucifixion, for Judas had betrayed Jesus, Peter had denied Him, and the other apostles had fled. Shortly before His death, Jesus entrusted the care of His Mother to John. Such an act of divine favor, undoubtedly, speaks to the singular love which Jesus had for this holy apostle. (10)

In his sermon for the feast of St. John the Evangelist, St. Albert the Great notes the fittingness of Christ’s entrustment of His Mother to John, given the special resemblances which Our Lady and John held:

...Neither in his Gospel, nor in his Epistles, nor in his Apocalypse does [John] call himself an Apostle, but only a disciple and servant of Jesus Christ.... The Lord, the Master of humility, while upon the cross, specially entrusted a humble Virgin: namely, His Mother—who considered herself a handmaid, not a lady—to a humble virgin: namely, John, who does not call himself an Apostle but a disciple or servant. (11)

John, who was so devoted to the Mother of God, would later record in his Apocalypse his vision of the “woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars” (12:1) (12)—an image often understood as representing either Our Lady, or Holy Mother Church, whose crown of twelve stars represents the twelve apostles.

BISHOP OF EPHESUS

Subsequent to Christ's Ascension into heaven, John likely resided in Jerusalem, while his apostolic duties sometimes took him to other regions to preach the Gospel. However, after the death and Assumption of Our Lady, John governed the church in Ephesus, the capital of Asia Minor, where he continued to preach the Gospel. John's episcopal authority was universally recognized throughout the early Church, as is evident in the writings of the Church Fathers. (13)

According to St. Epiphanius, John, in his great zeal for the truths of the Faith, and at the instruction of the Holy Ghost, traveled to Asia to combat the Christological heresies of Cerinthus and Ebion, whose teachings, which denied the divinity of Christ, were leading many souls astray. John carefully warned the Christians under his care to be on guard against novel doctrine which was becoming widespread. (14) One such example of John's solicitude for the faithful can be found in his second epistle, where he delivers an admonition against the teachings of heretics—a warning no less pertinent to our day:

For many seducers are gone out into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh: this is a seducer and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that you lose not the things which you have wrought: but that you may receive a full reward. Whosoever revolteth,

and continueth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that continueth in the doctrine, the same hath both the Father and the Son. (2 John 1:7-9) (15)

THE FOURTH EVANGELIST

In addition to admonishing and instructing others in the truths of the Faith, John composed his Gospel to refute heresies which deny the divinity of Christ. Thus, in his Gospel, John provides an account of Jesus' life that presents the truth of His divinity in an especially clear manner. (16) John's penetrating insight into divine truths was such that St. Thomas Aquinas, considered the Church's greatest theologian, says of John's Gospel that it "gives us the doctrine of the divinity of Christ and refutes all heresies." (17)

Whereas Matthew, Mark, and Luke, in their respective Gospels, present chiefly those events of Jesus' life which occurred in Galilee, the setting of John's Gospel is, to a considerable extent, Jerusalem. According to religious author Fr. John Laux, this is one reason for the striking difference in style between the first three Gospels and that of John, for Jerusalem was frequented by Scribes and Pharisees who often disputed with Our Lord about His teaching; thus, Our Lord's words recorded in John's Gospel take on a different style from those which He delivered to the largely illiterate people of Galilee. (18)

Both in the Book of Ezechiel (1:10) and in The Apocalypse (4:7), descriptions may be found of the four living creatures in heaven—namely, a man, a lion, a calf, and an eagle. Each is traditionally associated with one of the four Evangelists. The Fathers and Doctors of the Church observe that the image of an eagle fittingly portrays John's profound contemplation of the mysteries of the Faith, as is beautifully exemplified in his writings. In this regard, St. Thomas Aquinas remarks that "John flies like an eagle above the cloud of human weakness and looks upon the light of unchanging truth with the most lofty and firm eyes of the heart." (19)

JOHN'S LAST YEARS

Among the holy apostles, John is the only one who did not die by martyrdom. In A.D. 95, during a time of persecution under Emperor Domitian, John was arrested and condemned to death. However, while in Rome,

when the time of his execution came and he was cast into a cauldron of boiling oil, John remained, by a miracle, uninjured. (20) Although the persecutors' attempts to put John to death were unsuccessful, John is often numbered among the martyrs, as he most willingly offered his life to God in the spirit of a martyr, being prepared to suffer torments and death for God's sake.

Shortly thereafter, John was sent into exile to the island of Patmos, where he composed one of the most mysterious books of Sacred Scripture: The Apocalypse. After the death of Domitian, John returned to Asia Minor and, about three years later, died in Ephesus around A.D. 100, at the age of about ninety-four years. (21)

A SPECIAL MESSAGE

It is certainly no coincidence that the feast of St. John the Evangelist is celebrated within the Octave of Christmas. Throughout his epistles, St. John frequently speaks of the greatest of virtues: charity—the love of God and the love of neighbor for the sake of God. During this holy season, as the Church sets before our eyes the mystery of Our Lord's Nativity and how God has thus manifested His unfathomable love and mercy towards us, let us be encouraged to endeavor all the more to put St. John's words into practice: "*Dearly beloved, let us love one another, for charity is of God.... In this we know that we love the children of God: when we love God, and keep his commandments*" (1 John 4:7-8; 5:2 [D-R]). (22)

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3. Matthew 4:21-22 (The Holy Bible [Douay-Rheims Version]), (Baronius Press, 2017).
4. Rev. Alban Butler, "St. John the Apostle and Evangelist." in *The Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs, and other Principle Saints*, Volume XII (New York: P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1895), p. 779.

5. Cornelius a Lapide, *The Great Commentary of Cornelius a Lapide: The Holy Gospel According to Saint Mark; The Holy Gospel According to Saint Luke*, trans. Thomas W. Mossman, B.A., (Fitzwilliam, New Hampshire: Loreto Publications, 2008), p. 25.
6. Vide Mark 5:22-43, Matthew 17:1-9, Matthew 26:36-46.
7. Vide John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7; 21:20.
8. Butler, *Lives*, 779-780.
9. Abbot Guéranger, O.S.B., "December 27: Saint John, Apostle and Evangelist" in *The Liturgical Year, Christmas, Book I*, trans. Dom Laurence Shepherd, O.S.B. (Powers Lake, ND: Marian House, 1983), p. 251.
10. Vide John 13:23-26, 19:25-27.
11. "...[N]eque in Evangelio suo, neque in Epistolis suis, neque in Apocalypsi sua, Apostolum se nominat, sed tantum discipulum, et servum Jesu Christi.... Dominus humilitatis magister, humilem virginem, scilicet, matrem suam, quae se reputavit ancillam, non Dominam: humili virgini, scilicet, Joanni, qui se non Apostolum nominat, sed discipulum vel servum, in cruce specialiter commendavit." Albertus Magnus, "Beati Joannis Evangelistae Sermo V" in *Beati Alberti Magni Ratisbonensis Episcopi Ordinis Praedicatorum Sermones*, ed. P. F. M. Hippolyto a Cruce, (Toulouse, Édouard Privat, Libraire-Éditeur, 1883), pp. 353-354.
12. Apocalypse 12:1 (The Holy Bible [D-R]).
13. Butler, *Lives*, 782.
14. Ibid., 783.
15. 2 John 1:7-9 (The Holy Bible [D-R]).
16. Butler, *Lives*, 784-785.
17. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John, Chapters 1-8*, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas, Volume 35, Prologue (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013), p. 4.
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19. Aquinas, *Commentary*, 5.
20. Butler, *Lives*, 784.
21. Butler, *Lives*, 784, 787.
22. 1 John 4:7-8; 5:2 (The Holy Bible [D-R]).