

ZE11011111 - 2011-01-11

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-31427?l=english>

# Recognizing Agnus Dei, Agna Dei and Martyrdom

## Biblical Reflection for the 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time A

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JAN. 11, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- In today's Gospel passage (John 1:29-34), the figure of John the Baptist appears once again almost as if to send us back to Advent to look carefully at the evidence of the Baptizer and of Jesus, and to make some decisions about our own lives.

The evangelist John's account of the Baptism of Jesus is very different from the other three evangelists, and the historical situation explains why. John's gospel text shows no knowledge of the tradition (Luke 1) about the kinship of Jesus and John the Baptist. In the Fourth Gospel, John's baptism is not connected with forgiveness of sins; its purpose is revelatory, that Jesus may be made known to Israel. For John, a simple chronicle of events is never enough; the important thing is that events excite a personal testimony about Jesus.

The evangelist John is very intent on counteracting a movement that regarded John the Baptist as superior to Jesus. He does not narrate the baptism event; instead, he puts the meaning of the baptism into John the Baptist's testimony. He has the Baptizer publicly profess his *raison d'être*: "The reason why I came...was that he [Jesus] might be made known."

### Recognizing Jesus

How did John the Baptist finally come to recognize Jesus? He combined the stirrings of the one who sent him to baptize with his knowledge of what the prophets had said and his encounters with penitents and skeptics. John realized that when he met someone whose speech and action showed that a special Spirit was at work, that's the one he should recognize as the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Even for the Baptist, it took time and several sightings before he would recognize that the one the Spirit was resting on was Jesus of Nazareth. His recognition did not come spontaneously, nor was it self-evident. It came gradually because it was imbedded in such familiar surroundings.

Having established the true Christian view of the relationship between Jesus and the Baptizer, the writer of the Fourth Gospel concentrates on demonstrating that Jesus is, indeed the Servant of God as foretold in Isaiah's Servant Songs. Today's first reading (Isaiah 49:3, 5-6) is the second of Isaiah's four "Suffering Servant Songs."

The voice from heaven instructs the Baptizer that the one on whom the Spirit descends is the Chosen One; he is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. The last sentence of today's Gospel expresses the very conviction that we should all experience after hearing John the Baptist's "evidence." Each of us should be inspired to say, "I have seen for myself...This is God's chosen One!" (v 34)" It is that conviction, rooted quietly yet firmly in our hearts, that will enable us to be 'lumen gentium:' a light to the nations.

The Lamb of God

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In verse 29 of today's Gospel we read that when John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, he said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." The expression "lamb of God" is loaded with meaning and it is good to be aware of the full implications of that word that we pray each time we celebrate mass. The background for the title "lamb of God" may be the victorious apocalyptic lamb who would destroy evil in the world (Revelations 5-7; 17:14); the paschal lamb, whose blood saved Israel (Exodus 12); and/or the suffering servant led like a lamb to the slaughter as a sin-offering (Isaiah 53:7, 10).

Sheep and lambs are symbolic in the New Testament not only of Christ but also of his followers; in these cases Jesus becomes the shepherd and they become his flock. Jesus searches for the lost sheep until he has found it, leaving all the "safe" sheep to look after themselves in the meanwhile.

Christ, as the victim who reveals God's love for us, is often symbolized by a lamb. For Christians, he is the "lamb" described in the Book of Isaiah: "harshly dealt with, he bore it humbly; he never opened his mouth: like a lamb that is led to the slaughterhouse, like a sheep that is dumb before its shearers, he never opened his mouth."

When Peter is entrusted with the flock of the Lord, Peter, he is told to "feed" his sheep and lambs. Jesus sends his followers out into the world with no weapons, no money, no power—"like sheep among wolves." People who die for believing in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, for not defending themselves by partaking in violence, imitate Christ. To be martyred is to be "like a lamb that is led to the slaughterhouse." Lambs suffer violence; they do not inflict it. They are universal symbols of innocence. Lambs have always been favorite animals for sacrifice. When John the Baptist refers to Jesus as "the lamb of God", he means that Jesus was the Messiah, the one who in his life and death would reveal the true nature of God.

### Real Meaning of Martyr

Baptism gives us the grace of giving witness, and sometimes that might lead to the ultimate witness of laying down our very lives because we are associated with and marked by Jesus Christ. A martyr [Greek: a witness] is a person who, for the Christian faith, freely and patiently suffers death at the hands of a persecutor. Martyrs choose to die rather than deny their faith by word or deed. They suffer patiently after the example of Christ, they do not resist their persecutors. True martyrs die for holy causes. False martyrs die for the most unholy of causes. The era of martyrdom is not something of the past. It is still taking place today. In fact, the last century was one of incredible Christian martyrdom.

The early Christians, who bore witness to the truth of those facts upon which Christianity rests, were liable at any time to be given a choice between death and denial of their testimony. Many of them, refusing to deny Christ, actually suffered death.

Martyrdom gives credibility to authentic Christian witnesses who do not seek power or gain, but give their own lives for Christ. They show to the world the power, weaponless and full of love for men, that is given to those who follow Christ to the point of the total donation of their existence. Thus Christians, from the dawn of Christianity until our own time, have undergone persecution on account of the Gospel, as Jesus proclaimed beforehand: "If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you (John 15:20)."

### Agna Dei

This coming week, on Jan. 21, the Church remembers St. Agnes of Rome, a 13-year-old girl when she died for her faith. She was one of the victims of Diocletian's persecution of Christians. The Church of St. Agnes in the famous Piazza Navona in Rome is located on the spot of her martyrdom. The young Agnes responded with total generosity and an undivided heart and made her existence an eloquent and fascinating example of a

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life totally transfigured by the splendor of truth. Her example has encouraged many believers over the centuries to follow in her footsteps.

St. Agnes was martyred for refusing to marry a rich Roman citizen. She declared that she would never accept any spouse except Jesus Christ. "For a long time I have been engaged to a celestial and invisible spouse; my heart belongs to him and I will be faithful to him until my death," she said. Her life, her heroism and her death inspire us to purity and holiness. Her name means pure in Greek and lamb in Latin

As a saint, Agnes is a person who imitated Christ. As a martyr she died like Christ; as a virgin, she kept her faith, hope, and love alive even in the midst of horror. That she is remembered today is continuing proof that imitating Christ is possible, in the specific circumstances of every person's own unique life. Agnes took her baptism seriously. She was baptized into the death of Christ so that she might share his new life. May it be the same for us as well.

### The Word of God and the Holy Spirit

Let us continue our reflections on "Verbum Domini," Benedict XVI's postsynodal exhortation on the synod on "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the World" by considering the Word's relationship to the Holy Spirit (15).

"After reflecting on God's final and definitive word to the world, we need now to mention the mission of the Holy Spirit in relation to the divine word. In fact there can be no authentic understanding of Christian revelation apart from the activity of the Paraclete. This is due to the fact that God's self-communication always involves the relationship of the Son and the Holy Spirit, whom Irenaeus of Lyons refers to as "the two hands of the Father". Sacred Scripture itself speaks of the presence of the Holy Spirit in salvation history and particularly in the life of Jesus: he was conceived of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:35); at the beginning of his public mission, on the banks of the Jordan, he sees the Holy Spirit descend on him in the form of a dove (cf. Mt 3:16); in this same Spirit Jesus acts, speaks and rejoices (cf. Luke 10:21); and in the Spirit he offers himself up (cf. Hebrews 9:14). As his mission draws to an end, according to the account of Saint John, Jesus himself clearly relates the giving of his life to the sending of the Spirit upon those who belong to him (cf. John 16:7). The Risen Jesus, bearing in his flesh the signs of the passion, then pours out the Spirit (cf. John 20:22), making his disciples sharers in his own mission (cf. John 20:21). The Holy Spirit was to teach the disciples all things and bring to their remembrance all that Christ had said (cf. John 14:26), since he, the Spirit of Truth (cf. John 15:26) will guide the disciples into all the truth (cf. John 16:13). Finally, in the Acts of the Apostles, we read that the Spirit descended on the Twelve gathered in prayer with Mary on the day of Pentecost (cf. 2:1-4), and impelled them to take up the mission of proclaiming to all peoples the Good News.

The word of God is thus expressed in human words thanks to the working of the Holy Spirit. The missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit are inseparable and constitute a single economy of salvation. The same Spirit who acts in the incarnation of the Word in the womb of the Virgin Mary is the Spirit who guides Jesus throughout his mission and is promised to the disciples. The same Spirit who spoke through the prophets sustains and inspires the Church in her task of proclaiming the word of God and in the preaching of the Apostles; finally, it is this Spirit who inspires the authors of sacred Scripture."

[The readings for the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time are Isaiah 49:3, 5-6; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; John 1:29-34]

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