

Homily at Saint Anthony Church, Lawrence, Mass., on June 24, 2016
Feast of the Birth of John the Baptist

Bishop Gregory,
Archbishop Paul,
Chorbishop Michael,
Monsignor Peter,
Beloved Priests, Deacons, Subdeacons, Religious Sisters,
Parishioners and Friends of Saint Anthony,

" His name is John" (LK 1,63)

I am very happy to visit you, upon the kind invitation of my Brother Bishop Gregory. I thank him for the organization of this visit with his Vicar General Mgr. Michael Thomas. I visit you with Bishop Paul Sayah, my Vicar General, and Attorney Walid Ghayad, head of the media office in the Patriarchate, and with Deacon Simon Nader who came with us from Lebanon. We bring you warm greetings from Lebanon, the spiritual home of the Maronites, along with the hopes and concerns of our peoples in the Middle East, who are passing through historical and very delicate circumstances. For them all we ask for your prayers and support. And we are very happy to visit you on the feast day of Saint John the Baptist.

The parishes of Lawrence, Dover, and all of New England have a well-known reputation for holding faithfully to their Maronite spiritual heritage and their deep love for God and his Catholic Church. For this I am so very happy to be here to celebrate this feast with you.

"His name is John.". That is the name that the angel gave to Zakaraia, and which means in Hebrew "God is merciful". In John's birth and throughout his mission, the mercy of God was manifested. He was the way leading to Christ in whom the mercy of God was fully realized. He was born to elderly parents who waited for him for so many years, and he was the messenger sent by the Father to prepare the world to receive his Beloved Son Jesus Christ, calling upon the people, saying: "repent for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mt. 3,2). John taught the people about sacrifice and repentance, and Jesus taught the world about sacrificial love made real on the Cross. Every human heart that embraces this same sacrificial love, and witnesses to this love by the way they live in conformity to Christ, can enter the Kingdom of God. In the Our Father we pray that his Kingdom come, and that his will be done. But this can only happen if our hearts are open to doing, not our own will, but his will: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done".

Saint John the Baptist was considered to be one of the greatest prophets before the coming of the Kingdom of God brought about by Jesus himself. He is indeed the Apostle of the mercy of God. The feast of his birth on this Jubilee year of mercy, called for by Pope Francis, and opened by him, as you know, on December 8 of last year. Saint John the Baptist calls us to be in turn, Apostles of the Divine Mercy in the family, in society, and in all our dealings with people. About John the Baptist Jesus said that "the least born in the Kingdom of God is greater than he". That means that you and I, born by Baptism in the Kingdom of God, can be greater than John the Baptist, when we perform the corporal, spiritual and moral acts of mercy that Jesus asks us to undertake, especially in the Gospel of Saint Mathew, Ch. 25, and of which Pope Francis reminds us in his Pastoral letter proclaiming the Jubilee year. The world needs mercy, the region of the Middle East thorn by war needs mercy, and all of us here we pray and endeavor to practice mercy.

When we live our lives doing God's will, how blessed are we. We look to the example of Saint John who put himself second and Jesus first. Saint John the Baptist, pray for us!