

To begin my homily today, if you have no objection, I would like to sing a song. It is the most influential song in the history of music, and I'll bet not one of you has ever heard it before. It's called, "Ut queant laxis." Does anyone know it? Here's how it goes: "Ut queant laxis resonare fibris mira gestorum famuli tuorum, solve polluti labii reatum, sancte Ioannes." There it is--the most influential piece of music in the history of the world. That's the first stanza of the vespers hymn for the feast of the birth of John the Baptist. That hymn is 1200 years old, and it was written, we believe, by Paul the Deacon, a monk of Monte Cassino in Italy.

A couple years later, a musician named Guido of Arezzo wrote a treatise about the scale, and he gave each note a name. He remembered that in this hymn for John the Baptist, each phrase begins on a new note of the scale. "Ut queant laxis resonare fibris mira gestorum famuli tuorum, solve polluti labii reatum, sancte Ioannes." So he named the notes "Ut, re, mi, fa, so, and la"--the syllables of the Latin words that fell on those notes. Later, another Italian changed "ut" to "do" and someone else added "si" or "ti" to finish off the scale as we know it. This hymn helps describe the notes in every other piece of music in the world. Julie Andrews could never have sung "Doe a deer" if it hadn't been for the birth of John the Baptist.

I imagine Paul the Deacon wrote this hymn on an ascending pattern to imitate the ascent of the sun in the sky. The Birth of John the Baptist is one of the earliest feast days on the calendar, and it comes at the time of the summer solstice, the longest day in the year, the day the sun hangs highest in the sky. His birth contrasts with the birth of Jesus which occurs near the time of the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. The reason is that during his life, John the Baptist said of Jesus, "I must decrease so that he may increase." So we celebrate John's birth when the sun's light begins to decrease, and Jesus' birth when the sun's light begins to increase.

Now, I admit this information is so trivial that even Trivial Pursuit ignores it. But it illustrates the very point of John's saying: You don't have to be recognized to be effective. If John decreases, Christ will increase, and all will be well. John's parents were so old no one expected them to be part of the story of the Messiah. John himself was beheaded; no one expected a dead man to have followers. When Paul the Deacon wrote his hymn, no one expected his words to be part of every other song in history. But you don't have to be recognized to be effective.

If you've ever lost an argument, if you've ever failed at work, if you've ever been embarrassed, if you've ever been rejected, or if you've ever accomplished one tremendous thing that nobody else noticed--you know what it's like to decrease. Today is your feast day. If through it all you've made peace, you've laughed at yourself, you've tried again, or just let go of a relentless desire to succeed, in order that the light of Christ might shine brighter--you know what it's like to let Christ increase, and all will be well.

Oh, one more piece of trivia about this feast: There's only 184 more shopping days till Christmas.

Regis John the Baptist 24.vi.90