

“DO YOU BELIEVE?”
THE INVITATION OF SAINT JOHN THE BAPTIST

by Father Frank Marangos

“There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. . . He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

John 1:6-7, 11-12

Nearly 159 years ago, on September 15, 1860, a man by the name of Charles Blondin crossed Niagara Falls on a 3" rope that was stretched 1/4 of a mile across the roaring water. He later crossed the falls backwards, blindfolded, on stilts, and in the dark. He crossed Niagara on a bicycle and, on one occasion, stopped half way and cooked an omelet on a portable stove.

Blondin's most famous stunt, however, was accomplished while crossing Niagara Falls pushing a wheelbarrow filled with potatoes. Before his return trip on the rope on that particular day, Blondin turned to the crowd and asked if they believed he was the greatest acrobat to have ever lived. "We believe, we believe," the crowd responded. "Do you believe I can push someone across the rope in this wheelbarrow?" The crowd roared, "Yes, yes . . . we believe you can!" "Do you trust me?" Blondin continued. "Yes, yes," the crowd chanted, "we trust you!" Unfortunately, although Blondin asked for a volunteer, the crowd remained silent and no one came forward.

Then, while many were slowly walking away, a man courageously approached and carefully sat in the wheelbarrow. The crowd waited with baited breath as Blondin began his return crossing on the wire. Having safely reached the other side, the crowd roared their approval. What they did not know was that the man who accepted the acrobat's invitation was Blondin's personal business manager, Harry Colcord. Because he had a personal relationship with Blondin, Colcord's trust and faith was secure.

The day following Epiphany is reserved for the liturgical commemoration of Saint John the Baptist. In the Orthodox Church, it is customary on the day to remember those saints who participated directly in the sacred event of our Lord's Baptism. It is appropriate, therefore, for the Church to especially honor the one who participated directly in the Baptism of Christ, placing his own hand upon the head of the Savior. In church hymnology, Saint John is called a "bright morning star," whose gleaming outshone the brilliance of all the other stars, announcing the coming dawn of the day of grace, illumined with the light of the spiritual Sun, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Apart from honoring the faithful witness of the last and greatest prophet of the Old Testament, the feastday provides an opportunity for us to assess the condition of our respective faith in Jesus Christ, whose humble entry into the Jordan, provides the means of crossing the dangerous waters of life.

The unique story of Blondin's wheelbarrow crossing of Niagara Falls illustrates a real-life picture of what faith actually is. While the crowd chanted belief, their inaction signaled their unwillingness to fully trust in the acrobat's abilities. If we are not careful, we too may exhibit a similar posture. It is one thing for us to say we believe in God. It is, however, a different thing to have one's life witness to the statement. It is one thing to affirm belief by reciting in the Nicene Creed – "I BELIEVE" – and quite another thing to step out onto the tight rope of life by placing our total confidence, faith, and trust in Jesus Christ.

Saint John the Baptist was chosen by God for a very serious role. His function was to bear witness to a true faith in the Son of God. His most humble testimony was the statement, "He must increase, but I must decrease," (John 3:30). Having baptized the sinless Lamb of God, Saint John died a martyr's death, beheaded by the sword on orders of King Herod at the request of his daughter Salome. The body of Saint John the Baptist was buried in the Samaritan city of Sebaste.

Most Orthodox Christians are baptized as infants, carried in arms of godparents who expressed belief in Christ on our behalf. The commemoration of Saint John the Baptist reminds us that Baptismal grace requires a faith that cannot simply be inherited but which needs to be personally accepted. May the witness of Saint John inspire us to also express an abiding testimony of true faith wherein Christ increases and we decrease.