

Homily
Memorial of Saint John of Damascus
December 4, 2023

Today we celebrate the Memorial of Saint John of Damascus, an 8th century monk, priest and doctor of the church. He was raised in Muslim-ruled Damascus, although his father held a prominent position as chief financial officer for the caliph and head of the tax department for Syria, able to maintain his Christian identity and faith. This afforded young John an excellent education where he excelled in music, astronomy and theology. According to his biographer, he soon equaled Diophantus in algebra and Euclid in geometry.

John succeeded his father upon his father's death, but eventually abandoned life at the court and relocated to Jerusalem to become a monk, then a priest. It was around this time that the iconoclast controversy emerged resulting in a heated division which John addressed exquisitely in his writings. John wrote that art is appropriate for depicting a God who became human: "I do not draw an image of the immortal Godhead: I paint the visible flesh of God, for it is impossible to represent a spirit, how much more God who gives breath to the spirit. When the Invisible One becomes visible of the flesh, you may then draw a likeness of His form." Indeed, "I do not worship matter," wrote John, "I worship the God of matter, who became matter for my sake. Do not despise matter, for it is not despicable."

John embraced the earthly symbolism of spiritual reality. Today, we enjoy the beautiful paintings and statues that help us imagine our Triune God and our faithful brothers and sisters among the angels and all the heavenly host.

These physical representations help us imagine what we cannot see with our earthly eyes. This enhances our faith when our senses fail us. How often do we search for something we can see and touch before we feel comforted by our Lord's presence? We have rosary beads to help us track our progress through that most holy prayer. We have sacramentals around our necks and in our pockets and purses to keep us grounded in our faith. We have the crucifix to bring us closer to our Lord's Passion.

The centurion demonstrated tremendous faith when he told Jesus that only the words of Jesus were necessary to heal the centurion's servant. "...only say the word and my servant will be healed." I'd like to think my faith was that strong. How is your faith?

When Fr. Jason raises Jesus just before receiving Him, and we repeat the words of the centurion, do we imagine the centurion's faith and imagine the strength of our own faith? Do we truly believe Jesus is present in what appears to be a piece of bread and cup of wine? Do we have faith that when we approach and receive Him that we truly become one with Him? ...one with each other? Do we truly believe, do we have complete faith that when Jesus died on that cross, that He then rose again, destroying death, restoring life for all of us? When we leave here this morning, remember that Jesus is truly with us, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity and that we are truly Christ for the world.