

Catholic trivia. Where is the head of St John the Baptist? If you are like me you assume that it was buried with his body by his followers after his death. But when my wife and I decided to explore a little corner Catholic Church about 500 meters from the Spanish Steps in Rome we were in for a surprise. In a side chapel on an altar in the Church of San Silvestro in Capite there is a large reliquary. In that reliquary rests the head of St John the Baptist. Now you know.



The reliquary that holds the head of St John the Baptist. We found it interesting that it rests here in relative obscurity instead of in the Cathedral of Saint John Lateran, the Pope's Cathedral, which is named after him.

John the Baptist asks a question in the Gospel today that doesn't make any sense on our brains. He has been preparing the way for the Lord for years, first in his personal preparation through study, fasting and penance and then by his proclaiming the coming of the Messiah and baptisms of repentance in the Jordan. He knew Jesus from before his birth. He leapt in his mother's womb when she heard Mary's voice. He was a cousin of Jesus and probably saw him at family gatherings when they were children.

He correctly identified him and baptized him in the Jordan River. He was present as the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove and heard the Father speak from the cloud. Now as he is in prison, facing an uncertain future, he asks, and I para-phrase, Are you really, really, really the real deal?" Have I spent my life wisely? Did I do good?

A simple yes to John's question wouldn't have been sufficient to answer his question, our question. It would have lacked depth and substance; it would not have soothed his heart. So Jesus answers in a manner that John, and we would understand. He identified himself by a brief summary of some of the things said about him by the Prophet Isaiah.

This exchange begs the question, "how do we see God?" Not in the spiritual form he takes in heaven; that is beyond our comprehension. How do we see his interaction with us? How do we relate to him as we go through our lives?

Do we see him as the Father painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel as Creator, or is he giving orders from the burning bush (*Ex 3:1-19*), maybe the thunder, lightning, trumpet blast and smoking mountain as he presents the Ten Commandments to Moses? (*Ex 20:1-17*) Or is he the whisper after the storm to Elijah? (*Kn 19:20*)

Do we relate best with the simple babe born on that first Christmas? Simple, vulnerable, no judgment, welcoming to all from shepherd to King. Maybe it is the young man in the Temple, sure of himself with the Elders. Competent, educated, willing to take a stand for what is right in accordance with God's law, his law.

Do we see him as a young man working in his father's wood shop, playing, hanging out with the other guys in the village? Someone for us to hang out with? How about seeing him as he comforted Joseph and Mary as Joseph lay dying, kind, compassionate, helping us know that in the end, everything will be just fine.

Can we relate to him as the man preaching the Gospel throughout Judea and the surrounding area? A leader, comfortable in the public eye, willing to challenge the status quo and the leadership of his age. Preaching a revolution, not a political or military revolution, but a revolution of the heart.

When we are in pain, do we relate to the suffering Jesus? The pain of rejection he felt from the people he loved and was sent to save, the suffering during his passion, particularly when he gazed on the face of his mother and saw them pain in her eyes. The physical pain and torture of his passion and death.

Maybe we are more comfortable with the joy of risen Lord, Jesus more than restored, comes back to let us know that he has conquered death, the gates of heaven are open for us when our time comes.

Or we could be enamored with thoughts of the Holy Spirit. The one who distributes gifts, gives life, allows us to pray, teaches us how to love by providing us with the grace to love. God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He is all of this and more, yet he always meets us where we are in the moment that we open our hearts to him.

One of the great misconceptions of Protestantism is that we as Catholics don't have a personal relationship with God. They believe that for some reason the teachings, the sacraments, and the liturgy all interfere with the deep down development necessary for fully forming that familial bond that comes from our Baptism. The bond that allows us to answer the question of St John the Baptist in our own heart.

Their misguided belief couldn't be more wrong. We believe that a personal relationship with God is an essential element of our salvation. Everything the Church does, magisterium, sacraments, liturgy, and preaching is focused on helping us to form that relationship and become the people that God has wanted us to be from before the dawn of creation.

How can you get more personal with God than when we come to him in Reconciliation and totally open up and make our hearts and souls vulnerable as we beg for forgiveness for our transgressions, those things that shame us to the core?

And then again in the reception of the Eucharist where we move to Jesus and invite him into our bodies, our souls to heal us and give us comfort in this world of woe. When we invite Jesus to become one with us, and he does, I for one would consider that a very personal relationship.

We are three quarters, 75% of the way through Advent, our time of preparation. In 10 short days we will be celebrating Our Lord's Birthday. On the evening of the 25th will we be happy that it is all over, tear down the tree and turn off the outside lights, or will we decide that Jesus is the real deal and spend the Christmas Season celebrating the Virgin Birth and renewing our relationship with him?