

The Holy Saints John, duality in the form of one.

Freemasonry's Saint's.....John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, are referenced several places within our catechisms. John the Baptist traveled throughout Israel urging the people to follow God's teachings and baptizing those who wished it. He spoke out firmly against vice, and his efforts soon put him afoul of the cruel and psychotic Herod Antipas, the ruler of Judea. He was thrown into one of Herod's dungeons, but he resolutely refused to retract a word of his teachings. He maintained his fidelity to what he knew was right. Herod hesitated to do him in because he was uncertain of the reaction of the people, but in the end John the Baptist was murdered - beheaded at the whim of the vicious Salome.

Saint John the Evangelist appears to have been adopted by Masons somewhat later than John the Baptist – according to my research, probably sometime around 1650. He lived a little later than John the Baptist. His great concern was the relationship of man to man, and he taught and promoted brotherly love among all who would listen.

Their proximity and use in our rituals have been questioned for many years, but there is no question that the two are designated as our patron saints. But, I must tell you that some of the stories about these two saints are just as frivolous as the stories claiming that Noah, Moses and King Solomon were Freemasons, or the story being circulated that the first Masonic lodge was located in Jerusalem. Realistically, St. John the Baptist and St. John the Evangelist serve to represent the balance in Masonry between zeal for the fraternity and learned knowledge. The Saints John, stand in perfect parallel and harmony representing that balance.

The festival days set aside for these two saints by modern Freemasonry are June 24th, for Saint John the Baptist and December 27th, for Saint John the Evangelist. Actually, both dates coincide pretty closely to the summer and winter solstice, respectively. From a historical approach, John the Baptist's day is celebrated in many cultures around the world. According to McCoy's Masonic Dictionary, the summer Festival of St. John is the duty of every Mason to participate in, and should serve as a time to be renewed and strengthened in fraternal ties, and serve as a celebration of Masonry from "olden-times". It really functions as a connection between the past and the future, and is widely celebrated by American lodges, some of which proudly point to a record of observance uninterrupted for many decades.

I have spent a pretty significant amount of time over the past five or six years searching the Grand Lodge archives for interesting tidbits of Masonic information. I learned that up until 1904, lodges in our Grand Jurisdiction held election of officers in June and many installed them on June 24th. Many held both the election and installation on June 24th. In fact, Fraternal Lodge No. 53, on occasion held their election and installation early in the morning of June 24th, then celebrated the feast of St. John with a hearty breakfast.

In England, Scotland and Ireland, at the beginning of the first Grand Lodge in 1717, a large number of lodges and Masons were known as 'St. Johns Masons'. The first Grand Lodge of England was actually formed on St. John the Baptist's Day in 1717, and subsequent annual communications were held on that day. The festival of St. John in English Lodges has since been changed to the Wednesday following St. George's Day, which falls on April 23rd.

Less widely celebrated, perhaps because its observance falls on December 27th, is the festival of St. John the Evangelist, the author of the Epistles that bear his name. His constant admonitions about the cultivation and development of brotherly love undoubtedly led to his being matched with John the Baptist, and together they became the Holy Saints John of Freemasonry.

The June 24th festival, to non-Masons, has been named the “Setting of the Watch”, where ceremonial bonfires were lit after sunset. Tradition says that men, women, and children would jump through the flames for luck. Across Europe this holiday is celebrated in many ways; with oak wreath crowns, wild flowers and birch branches. Families would feast and celebrate together. The true meanings of these ancient traditions are lost on most of our society today, but the link was made at some point to John the Baptist. An interesting tidbit I found in the The Catholic Encyclopedia points to the birth of John the Baptist as having taken place 6 months before Christ, placing him on the summer solstice. Of course we know not the exact birthday of Jesus, so John’s birthday is also lost to man’s calendar. Add to that the fact that mankind has messed with timekeeping and the calendar so much over the past couple of thousand years that we have arbitrarily set today’s date as June 7th, in the year 20-07, and you have come to believe it. Exact dates and time aside, it’s thought that these European festivals have been linked in character and content with the birth of John the Baptist.

From the Masonic perspective we are given the finely balanced duality of John the Baptist on one side and John the Evangelist on the other. Individually they are strong but together they stand as a harnessed team focused on Masonic zeal and knowledge. This counterpoint is not just significant to Freemasonry but can be applied to all areas of life. Taken as a combination of symbols, they represent a well-balanced path toward enlightenment.

The Holy Saints John balance each other in the Masonic year, but also in other areas too. One rather unique aspect I found is in the application of the Alchemical symbols of fire and water. Alchemy was long thought of as an early component of Freemasonry, and using the alchemical symbols here may help the representations of the Holy Saints John look more familiar. Saint John the Baptist is represented by an inverted pyramid (with the apex of the pyramid pointing down)....the Alchemical sign for *water*. Representing the spiritual and emotional love of St. John the Evangelist the pyramid points up, symbolizing *fire*; the drive and will of action. When placed together, they symbolize the perfect balance of darkness and light, life and death, passion and constraint, will and emotion, winter and summer. Together both are represented by the interlocking *star of Solomon*....or with a bit of imagination, *the Square and Compass*. This is entirely my own personal analysis, and made strictly for the purpose of comparison, but I think it does offer a rather unique look at the juxtaposition of the two Holy Saints John.

The 24th of June, St. John the Baptist Day, is an appropriate time for Freemasons to reflect on our past as well as our future. It stands to remind us not just of our heritage, but also of a recommitment to circumscribe our own passions. The celebration of a union of these Saints helps us reaffirm our Masonic ties....truly, ties that bind.

Reference/Sources:

The Holy Saints John, -Duality in the Construct of One: Brother Greg Stewart (CA).
Holy Saints John: Brother Mark Kinsey (NV)
The Holy Saints John: Grand Lodge of NSW home page

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