

## **Presentation of the Lord A - Feast of the Encounter** **February 2, 2020**

This weekend we celebrate a feast that seems to bring us back to Christmas time: **The Presentation of the Lord**. This Feast used to be called the **Purification of Mary**, an ancient rite when women went to the Temple to be prayed over after childbirth. This same custom, by the way, continued in the Church up to the fifties in a blessing that used to be called **Churching**. The Book of Leviticus gives the prescription for purification: *“When the days of her purifying are completed,... she shall bring to the priest ...a yearling lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or a turtledove for a purification offering.”* (Leviticus 12:6). Joseph and Mary sure could not afford a first-born lamb, so they probably sacrificed just a pigeon or a turtledove. The Church changed the Feast of Purification of Mary to Feast of the Presentation of the Lord a few years ago. Because Simeon called Jesus the Light of the Nations, this feast is also the day that candles are blessed. It is sometimes called **Candlemas**. In the Eastern Church, this feast was called the **Feast of the Encounter**, the first encounter of the Old Testament, represented by Simeon and Anna and the Temple, with the New Testament, represented by the Lord. *Jesus is presented in the Temple following the ancient Jewish laws. In the New Law of the Kingdom of God, Jesus' own body would become the New Temple.*

The image that keeps occurring to me in this feast is that of young mothers and fathers and their new babies. So many times, even sitting in my wheelchair in the front pew, I've enjoyed watching our young couples bringing their new babies to Church. They are so excited about the birth of their treasure, so grateful to God for this child that they cannot wait to bring the child before the Lord to thank God properly. Instead of sitting in the cry room or back pews, they bring their baby to the front pews. I really believe that is what Mary and Joseph were doing when they walked into the Temple with Jesus. Simeon, like all of us, wanted to hold the new baby. And indeed, my wife always tries to greet the couples and hold the new born child.

When Simeon holds the infant Jesus in his arms, a spirit of prophecy comes upon him and he realizes that with this child he is in the presence of **God's salvation, the Light of the Nations**. He rejoices (Luke 14:22-40): *“My eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in the sight of all the peoples: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel.”* Simeon hints at a further sacrifice to come. *“This child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel,”* he says, *“and to be a sign that will be contradicted—and, [speaking to Mary,] you yourself a sword will pierce.”* Simeon prophesies the pains that Mary would have as she witnessed God's plan being worked out in this child. The devotion to the **seven sorrows of Mary** grew from this: *the Prophecy of Simeon, the Flight into Egypt, the Three Days' Loss of the child Jesus in the Temple, Meeting Jesus with the Cross on Via Dolorosa, the Crucifixion, the Piercing of Jesus on the side with a spear and Taking down the body from the Cross, the Burial*. The encounter with the Lord would demand continual sacrifice from all including Mary. The reward of this encounter is great, the presence of the Savior.

The presentation of the Lord as an infant in the Temple shows the abiding presence of God being transferred from the inner sanctuary to the child Jesus. We were all presented to the Church as infants at our baptism. The Church will never again be the same. Now the presence of God's intimate life dwells within the newly baptized. Every single one of us baptized, presented to the Lord, carries within himself or herself a unique image of the Holy of Holies. Each one of us is called to seek that image within us, to develop it and reflect it. We are called to allow God to take over our lives and to bring God to others. This presentation with its resulting purification brings sorrow because by following the Lord, we need to sacrifice our own material inclinations and our physical desires for the sake of the spiritual cultivation within us. This presentation also brings joy because when we live with the Lord we have meaning in our lives.

When a woman gives birth, she is participating in a mystery that touches God directly, since he is the creator and sustainer of all life (most especially human life since all men and women were created "in

the image of God"). For the ancient Jews, it was considered appropriate that a woman remains segregated from normal activities immediately afterwards, as a sign that she had been involved in something holy. By submitting to these religious laws, Christ verifies the reverential view of human life that they reflect. Every child, every human life, is a gift from God, a participation in the mystery of God's infinite power and unwearied love. **Jesus is pro-life, because he is the author and protector of life – of each of our lives.**

**"Shepherd me, O God, beyond my wants, beyond my fears from death into life."** The encounter with the Lord is a step into the spiritual. All that we have will be lost by the end of our lives, but Christ and his love and the way we love him in others, that is the life that remains forever. **On this Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, we ask God to transform us from living for the material to living for the spiritual because of our encounter with Christ.**