



 CHURCH GOSPEL COMMENTARY

Reflections for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord

Fr. Antony Kadavil reflects and comments on the readings at Mass for the feast of the Presentation of the Lord. He says that the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord is a combined feast, commemorating the Jewish practice of the purification of the mother after childbirth and the presentation of the child to God in the Temple. .

Introduction: This feast commemorates how Jesus, as a baby, was presented to God in the Temple in Jerusalem. This presentation finds its complete and perfect fulfillment in the mystery of the passion, death and Resurrection of the Lord. The *Feast of the Presentation of the Lord* is a combined feast, commemorating the Jewish practice of the purification of the mother after childbirth and the presentation of the child to God in the Temple and his buying back (redemption) from God. It is also known as the *Feast of the Purification of Mary*, and the *Feast of Candlemas*. It is also called the *Feast of Encounter* (*Hypapante* in Greek) because the

New Testament, represented by the baby Jesus, encountered the Old Testament, represented by Simeon and Anna. Joseph offered two pigeons in the Temple as sacrifice for the purification of Mary after her childbirth and for the presentation and redemption ceremonies performed for baby Jesus.

Homily starter anecdote: "Four chaplains Sunday: Julia Duin in the Washington Times Sunday, February 1, 2009 told this story. Just after midnight on Feb. 3, 1943, an act of extraordinary unselfishness by a group of men became a legend of martyrdom and sacrifice. When the Army ship Dorchester was torpedoed by the Germans just south of Greenland that night, its passengers and crew had 25 minutes to get off the boat. As 902 people went for the life jackets, it quickly was discovered there weren't near enough. Of the 13 lifeboats, only two functioned. In the ship's final minutes, Methodist senior chaplain George Lansing Fox, Rabbi Alexander Goode, Dutch Reformed minister Clark V. Poling and John P. Washington, a Roman Catholic priest, were helping passengers leave the vessel. Then four men appeared all of them without life jackets. The chaplains quickly gave up their own vests and went down with the ship, perishing in the freezing water. Survivors saw them, locked arm in arm, praying and singing the Navy hymn, "Eternal Father, Strong to Save" just before the ship dove beneath the waves. It was a night as dramatic as the sinking of the Titanic but without a blockbuster movie to record the drama. "The Four Immortal Chaplains," as they are now known, have been honored many times, including on a stamp issued in their honor by the U.S. Postal Service. Hence the first Sunday in February is known as "Four Chaplains Sunday" in some Christian denominations. They presented and offered themselves completely for the wellbeing of others as Jesus was presented to God his Heavenly Father in the Temple of Jerusalem for the salvation of the world. (<http://frtonyshomilies.com/>).

Scripture lessons summarized: In the first reading, taken from Malachi, the prophet speaks of the Lord suddenly coming to Jerusalem to purify the lax, lazy and indifferent priests of His Temple as silver is purified by fire. Simeon saw the Infant Jesus as the fulfillment of this passage. He saw Jesus as the Lord Who has come to the Temple, "*destined to be the downfall and rise of many in Israel.*" **In the second reading,** St. Paul proclaims Jesus as our Eternal High Priest of the New Covenant (Heb 2:17), Who offered himself on the altar of Calvary, the only pure priestly sacrifice that could please God. He replaces the former priesthood. **The Gospel** describes how Joseph, as the head of the Holy Family of Nazareth, presented Mary and the baby Jesus in the Temple of God for the mother's purification and the Child's "redemption." It also describes the Holy Family's encounter with the old prophet Simeon and the holy old widow Anna. In his prophecy, Simeon extols the divine blessings which the Messiah is bringing to Israel and to all men and predicts that Mary will play a crucial and sacrificial role in her Son's redemptive work by sharing in her Son's sufferings.

The first reading explained: Malachi prophesies in the first reading that the Lord is going to appear suddenly in the Temple of Jerusalem to purify its priests and the people. The prophecy warns that nobody can endure the day of the messenger's coming because he will

be like a refining fire, purifying the sons of Levi. Led by the Spirit, Simeon saw the Infant Jesus as the fulfillment of this passage. Simeon, even if unknown to himself, foresaw Christ and His priests of the New Covenant who were ordained during the Last Supper. He saw Jesus as the Lord Who would come to the Temple, "destined to be the downfall and rise of many in Israel." In today's reading, Malachi prophesies that God will purify the lax, lazy and indifferent priests of His Temple as silver is purified by fire. At the time of Malachi (around 460-450 BC), the priests were offering blemished (blind, lame) sacrifices and giving bad example (1:6-2:4). The people were negligent in their support of the Temple (3:6-12). Israelite wives were being rejected by husbands who wished to marry foreign women (2:14-16). Social injustice was rampant (3:5), and the people doubted God's love (1:2-5). Hence, Malachi reminds them that the Day of the Lord, a Day of Judgment, reward and retribution is coming. He describes the Divine intervention as a two-stage process. First God's messenger will appear to prepare the way by purifying the clergy and refining the cult (v. 3). This purification will take place until they present offerings to the Lord in a spirit of justice and righteousness. Then, the Lord of Hosts will suddenly appear in the Temple (v. 1), to bring judgment and justice against unfaithful sinners (v. 5). The Psalm announces to Jerusalem that Jerusalem is about to receive a great visitor. The Psalmist identifies him as "The LORD of hosts ... the king of glory."

The second reading explained: The second reading proclaims Jesus as our Eternal High Priest of the New Covenant (Heb 2:17), Who offered Himself on the altar of Calvary, the only pure priestly sacrifice that could please God. The *Didache* or the first catechism of the early Church (14:1-3), saw Malachi's prophecy of a pure sacrifice and offering made from east to west as a prophecy of the sacrifice of the Eucharist. Hence Malachi prophesies that the Lord will enter His Temple, there will be a renewed priesthood, and there will be a pure sacrifice offered worldwide and pleasing to God -- the Eucharist. Jesus became like us in all things except sin in order that He might offer to the Father perfect praise and glory. Besides, since Jesus fully shared our experience, He is now a merciful and faithful High Priest on our behalf, "*able to help those who are being tested*." Jesus replaces the former priesthood. In keeping with the theme of today's feast, namely, the presentation of the first fruits, this excerpt from Hebrews emphasizes Jesus' dual role, as first-fruits, *par excellence*, and as the faithful High priest Who presents the perfect gift of Himself to God for the expiation of human sin. By virtue of His Incarnation, Jesus became human in every way (vv. 17-18) except as regards sin. As representative of His brothers and sisters before God and as their Mediator, Christ perfected His service as both sacrifice and priest. By so doing, Christ was able to "rob the devil" of power (v. 14). As the first-fruits from the dead, as the conqueror of sin and death, Christ, in His person and through His mission, has set the course and cleared the way we are to follow; the decision to do so must be a daily and deliberate one. It takes faith to see God's power at work in the death of Jesus. Simeon hinted at this when he told Mary that she herself would be pierced with a sword. Even knowing that her Son was the Savior of the world, it would be difficult for Mary to see him accomplish that salvation by being crucified.

Exegesis of today's Gospel: The birth of Christ was revealed by three kinds of witnesses in three different ways -- first, by the shepherds, after the angel's announcement; second, by the Magi, who were guided by a star; third, by Simeon and Anna, who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Today's Gospel describes the Presentation of the Baby Jesus in the Temple. It was intended to ritually redeem Jesus who was the first born in the family and where Mary herself will have to be ritually purified. Mary and Joseph was a typical pious Jewish couple, who went to the Temple in obedience to do all that was required and expected of them by the Law. The *Feast of the Presentation of Jesus* is a combined feast, commemorating the Jewish practice of the purification of the mother after childbirth and the presentation of the child in the Temple. It is known as the *Hypapánte* feast or *Feast of the Purification of Mary* (by the offering two pigeons in the Temple), the *Feast of the Presentation of the Lord* (by prayers and a sacrifice offered in the Temple to redeem or buy the firstborn male child back from the Lord), the *Feast of Candlemas* (because of its ancient rite of blessing of the candles to be used in the church for the next year — a practice dating from the middle of the fifth century) and the *Feast of Encounter* (because the New Testament, represented by the Baby Jesus, encountered the Old Testament, represented by Simeon and Anna). Originally, there was no connection between today's festival and the blessing of candles. In the ancient East, this celebration occurred on February 14, forty days after Epiphany. On February 15, pagans celebrated the festival of *Lupercalia*, a great "light" festival. Perhaps this is an instance of the Church's "baptizing" a pagan custom. At the principal Mass, the celebrant blesses candles, and people take part in a candlelight procession. This should remind us that Jesus is our High Priest and the Light of the World.

Purification and redemption ceremonies: The Gospel describes how Joseph, as the head of the Holy Family of Nazareth, presented Mary and the baby Jesus in the Temple of God for the mother's purification and the child's "redemption." According to Leviticus 12:2-8, a woman who bore a child was unclean for forty days following the birth of a son or eighty days following the birth of a daughter. Although Mary, the most holy of women, ever-Virgin, was exempt from these precepts of the Law, because of her miraculous conception, she chose to submit herself to the Law just like any other Jewish mother. Joseph and Mary showed their total submission to Law and obey the norms prescribed by the Old Testament. The custom was practiced probably for the physical and emotional re-integration of the new mother into the community. There was a religious reason as well. Exodus 13:2, 12-13 prescribes that every first-born male belongs to God and must be set apart for the Lord, that is, dedicated to the service of God. However, once divine worship was reserved to the tribe of Levi, first-born who did not belong to that tribe were not dedicated to God's service, and to show that they continued to be God's special property, a rite of redemption was performed. The Law also commanded that the Israelites should offer in sacrifice some lesser victim -- for example, a lamb or, if they were poor, a pair of doves or two pigeons. The Book of Numbers 18: 15 taught that since every Jewish firstborn male child belonged to Yahweh, the parents had to "buy back" (redeem), the child by offering a lamb or turtledoves as a

sacrifice in the Temple. The price of redemption for a human baby is five shekels of silver (Num 18:15-16). Jesus never needed to be "bought back," as he belonged wholly to the Lord, but Joseph kept these laws as an act of obedience to God.

The encounter with Simeon and Anna: By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the old, pious and Spirit-filled Simeon and Anna had been waiting in the Temple for the revelation of God's salvation. The Greek Church celebrates the *Hypapánte* or *Feast of the Encounter* commemorating the encounter of the New Testament represented by Jesus with the Old Testament represented by Simeon and Anna. Simeon, who is described as a righteous and devout man, obedient to God's will, addresses himself to our Lord as a vassal or loyal servant who, having kept watch all his life in expectation of the coming of his Lord, sees that this moment has "now" come, the moment that explains his whole life. When he takes the Child in his arms, he learns, not through any reasoning process but through a special grace from God, that this Child is the promised Messiah, the Consolation of Israel, the Light of the nations. Simeon recognizes Jesus as the Lord's anointed one, and in his prayer of blessing he prophesies that Jesus is meant to be the glory of Israel and the light of revelation to the Gentiles. Pope Francis: "Simeon took him in his arms and thanked God that he had finally "seen" salvation. Anna, despite her advanced age, found new vigor and began to speak to everyone about the Baby. It is a beautiful image: two young parents and two elderly people, brought together by Jesus. He is the one who brings together and unites generations! He is the inexhaustible font of that love which overcomes every occasion of self-absorption, solitude, and sadness. In your journey as a family, you share so many beautiful moments: meals, rest, housework, leisure, prayer, trips and pilgrimages, and times of mutual support... Nevertheless, if there is no love then there is no joy, and authentic love comes to us from Jesus. He offers us his word, which illuminates our path; he gives us the Bread of life which sustains us on our journey."

Simeon's prophecy: Simeon's canticle (verses 29-32) is also a prophecy. It consists of two stanzas: the first (verses 29-30) is his act of thanksgiving to God, filled with profound joy for having seen the Messiah. The second (verses 31-32) is more obviously prophetic and extols the divine blessings which the Messiah is bringing to Israel and to all men. The canticle highlights the fact that Christ brings redemption to all men without exception -- something foretold in many Old Testament prophecies (cf. Genesis 22:18; Isaiah 2:6; 42:6; 60:3; Psalm 28:2). While Simeon blessed Mary, he warned her that her child would be "*a sign of contradiction,*" and that she would be "*pierced with a sword.*" Simeon was prophesying both the universal salvation that would be proclaimed by Jesus and the necessity of suffering in the mission of the Messiah. Jesus came to bring salvation to all men, yet He would be a sign of contradiction because some people would obstinately reject Him -- and for this reason He would be their ruin. But for those who would accept Him with faith, Jesus would be their salvation, freeing them from sin in this life and raising them up to eternal life. The Blessed Virgin and St. Joseph marveled, but not because they did not know who Christ was. They were in awe at the way God was revealing Him.

The paradox of blessedness: Mary was given the blessedness of being the mother of the Son of God. That blessedness also would become a sword which would pierce her heart as her Son died upon the cross. The words Simeon addressed to Mary announced that she would be intimately linked with her Son's redemptive work. The sword indicated that Mary would have a share in her Son's sufferings. Her suffering would be an unspeakable pain which would pierce her soul. Our Lord suffered on the cross for our sins, and it is those sins which forged the sword of Mary's pain. Mary received both a crown of joy and a cross of sorrow. But her joy was not diminished by her sorrow because it was fueled by her faith, hope, and trust in God and his promises. Jesus promised his disciples, "no one will take your joy from you" (John 16:22). The Lord gives us a supernatural joy which enables us to bear any sorrow or pain and which neither life nor death can take away. Do you know the joy of a life fully surrendered to God with faith and trust? According to Dr. Scot Hann, the feast we celebrate shows a curious turn of events. The Redeemer is redeemed. She who is all-pure presents herself to be purified. Such is the humility of our God. Such is the humility of the Blessed Virgin. They submit to the law even though they are not bound by it.

Anna's encounter with the Lord and her testifying to the Messiah: Anna was an eighty-four-year-old widow who spent her days in the Temple in fasting and prayer, waiting for the promised Messiah. She was rewarded with the joy of seeing her Redeemer as a Baby. In her excitement, she praised God and introduced the Infant to others around her as the expected Messiah. Supernatural hope grows with prayer and age! Anna was pre-eminently a woman of great hope and expectation that God would fulfill all his promises. She is a model of godliness for all believers as we advance in age. Advancing age and the disappointments of life can easily make us cynical and hopeless if we do not have our hope placed rightly. Anna's hope in God and His promises grew with age. She never ceased to worship God in faith and to pray with hope. Her hope and faith in God's promises fueled her indomitable zeal and fervor in prayer and the service of God's people. We grow in hope by placing our trust in the promises of Jesus Christ and relying not on our own strength, but on the grace and help of the Holy Spirit. After completing the presentation and redemption of baby Jesus and the ritual purification of Mary and the meeting with Simeon and Anna, Joseph and Mary understood more fully their responsibility before God to protect the child as they return to Nazareth

Life messages: 1) Every Holy Mass in which we participate is our presentation. Although we were officially presented to God on the day of our Baptism, we present ourselves and our dear ones on the altar before God our Father through our Savior Jesus Christ at every Holy Mass. Hence, we need to live our daily lives with the awareness both that we are dedicated people consecrated to God and that we are obliged to lead holy lives.

2) We need the assistance of the Holy Spirit to recognize the presence of Jesus in ourselves and in others: All those who, like Simeon and Anna, persevere in piety and in the service of God, no matter how insignificant their lives seem in men's eyes, become instruments the Holy Spirit uses to make Christ known to others. In His plan of redemption,

God makes use of these simple souls to do much good for all mankind. In other words, The Holy Spirit employs ordinary men and women with simple faith as His instruments to bear witness to Christ, His ideals and teachings, just as He used Simeon and Anna. The Holy Spirit reveals the presence of the Lord to us when we are receptive and eager to receive Him. Let us be open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit within us to recognize the indwelling presence of the Lord with us and in others. (Fr. Antony Kadavil)

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