

Feast of Presentation of Jesus

February 2, 2025

Today's Gospel as you just heard presents the head of the Holy Family, Joseph, faithfully obeying God's law given through Moses concerning the purification of the mother and the redeeming of the child, by presenting Mary and the Baby Jesus in the Temple.

The events recounted appear elsewhere in the liturgical year but are those we traditionally celebrate today, February 2nd, with the *Feast of Presentation of Jesus*. The creche at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome is left in place until today, marking the end of Christmas season.

This 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. Pope Benedict XVI affirms that "*Jesus enters the ancient temple; he who is the new Temple of God.*"

In 1997, Pope John Paul II designated the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord as the Annual World Day of Consecrated Life. In his homily, Pope Benedict XVI expressly referred to this intention of his predecessor. So, we invite all our consecrated women and men (Brother John & the nun) to return to the beginning, to the very personal early days of the gift of their vocation, recalling, for a moment, the first time they sensed the Lord is calling them to follow Him with an undivided heart.

"When the days were completed . . .

Mary and Joseph took Jesus

up to Jerusalem to present

him to the Lord, . . ."

Today, we gather to celebrate the Presentation of the Lord, a feast always celebrated on February 2, so in this case it's been five years since it last fell on a Sunday. And you may wonder why this feast is still celebrated, why we make it a separate celebration in the life of the Church. After all,

it's not really explicitly part of our lives as Catholics. And some aspects of it actually seem pretty antiquated, seem out of step with the modern world. Is that really all that today is about, "remembering" some interesting event in the life of Jesus, some ritual from the distant past? Or is it more?

On one hand, there are some aspects of the story that are a little hard to wrap our minds around, such as the idea that women had to be "purified" after childbirth. This was, in fact, to dutifully fulfill the Law of Moses, something every observant Jewish person would feel strongly obligated to do. But then there is the other aspect of the story, the part that probably fascinates us even more, the offering of the baby Jesus (a first-born male) to the Lord, also to fulfill the law.

The law, of course, didn't actually demand that parents sacrifice their first-born son. Rather, the law allowed for a substitution to be made, either a lamb or two turtledoves or pigeons. These would "take the place" of the child, a kind of "buying back" of the baby being offered.

If you are wondering why this was done for a first-born son you must remember that in many cultures in the ancient world a first-born son was considered the most "important", the most "valued". He would be the future protector of and provider for the family. He would be most responsible for the family's well-being.

So this ritual, as outdated as it might seem, has something beautiful at the heart of it. Here were Mary and Joseph, first-time parents, making this journey, offering this sacrifice, as a pledge to God that they were willing to give God their very best, the "thing" they valued the most, in a sense, their very selves. This ritual was a powerful outward sign of an inward commitment, a pledge to always "give" to God all that a person had and all that a person was. Of course, Jesus lived that principle every second, every day of his life, all the way to the cross.

Yet, we still often come to Church wondering if we're going to get something out of it, say our prayers wondering if we're going to get something out of it, give to charities or do small acts of kindness wondering if we're going to get something out of it. And in doing so, fail to recognize what a faithful life looks like.

Now make no mistake about it, our faith provides us much, gives us more than we can imagine and more than we deserve. And that's because it is God who is doing the giving. And the first step in a life of authentic faith is recognizing all the blessings God has (and is) showering down upon us. There is no true love of God without first admitting and recognizing and embracing the fact that God has loved us first. Everything else is a response to that profound reality.

And so, the living out of our faith does not involve "attempting" to get God's favor, striving to receive more and more and more from our God who loves us more than we can ever think of or imagine. Rather it's allowing that realization, that openness to grace, to motivate us to want to give to God all that we can and all that we are. And we do that not by simply coming here week after week, saying our prayers, and obeying the laws of the Church - hoping to stay (or get) on the receiving end of God's generosity.

We do that by loving all those we come in contact with outside of these walls, all those who could use a little kindness, a little compassion, a little understanding, a little love. And so, while the Presentation of Jesus might seem like a dusty rite from long ago, it's actually what we are invited to do each and every day, resist the temptation to embrace our faith for what's in it for us, and instead, offer ourselves in loving service to the One whose love we can never repay nor measure up to.