

FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION OF THE LORD (CANDLEMAS)

St. Luke 2:22-40

Today, February 2, is the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. It commemorates the fortieth day of Christmas when the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph took the baby Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem forty days after His birth to complete the Blessed Virgin Mary's ritual purification after childbirth, and to perform the redemption of the firstborn, in obedience to the Law of Moses, which said that the first of everything, from crops to animals to the firstborn son was dedicated to God. It was the Jewish custom that the first of the crops and the first animals were offered as a burnt sacrifice to God, but for the firstborn son a lamb was sacrificed. For the poor who could not afford the cost of a lamb the Law allowed for the sacrifice instead of a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons, which is the sacrifice offered by Mary and Joseph as told to us in the Gospel of Saint Luke.

This feast called the Presentation of the Lord or the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary is also commonly known as Candlemas. This is because on this day traditionally candles are blessed. The blessing of candles reminds us that with the birth of Christ the light of salvation has broken into the darkness of sin. And it was Simeon, the old man that Mary and Joseph met in the Temple, that, seeing Jesus, called Him the "light to enlighten the gentiles, and give glory to the people Israel."

Unfortunately today many people dismiss the beauty of our traditions and give little attention to the outward signs of our faith as expressed in the Mass and the Sacraments. But the Incarnation, God become Man, itself shows the importance that God Himself gives to visible and material things and how these

things express what lies within us. A great liturgist, Fr. Prosper Gueranger, said of Candlemas that, "The mystery of today's ceremony has frequently been explained by liturgists, dating from the seventh century. According to Ivo of Chartres, the wax, which is formed from the juice of flowers by the bee, always considered as the emblem of virginity, signifies the virginal flesh of the Divine Infant [Jesus], who diminished not, either by His conception or His birth, the spotless purity of His Blessed Mother. The same holy bishop would have us see, in the flame of our candle, a symbol of Jesus who came to enlighten our darkness. St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, speaking on the same mystery, bids us consider three things in the blessed candle: the wax, the wick, and the flame. The wax, he says, which is the production of the virginal bee, is the Flesh of our Lord; the wick, which is within, is His Soul; the flame, which burns on top, is His divinity."

The candles are also a symbol of sacrifice as the candles are burnt away for the glory of God. In fact so much of the things and people that surround the Mass are a symbol of sacrifice. For example, the flowers in the sanctuary are cut flowers instead of potted flowers because cut flowers are mortally sacrificed, slain in the height of their beauty as an offering to the Mass. The music at Mass is performed live instead of recorded because the sacrificial labour of the organist, choir, and cantors through countless hours of practice and rehearsal is an offering for the altar. Likewise, the bread, the wine, the altar linens, the gold threaded vestments, the altar servers—everything on and around the altar has or should have some form of sacrifice associated with it. And why is this idea of sacrifice so important? Because the Mass itself is the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, the light that came into the world to remove the darkness of sin and death, was burnt out at Calvary but then shone again so brightly at the Resurrection that nothing can ever dim His light again.