



The Feast of the Presentation of the Lord

February 2—Feast

Liturgical Color: White

God goes to Church

The various names, meanings, and traditions overlapping in today's Feast churn like the crystals in a kaleidoscope, revealing one image and then another with every slight rotation of the tube. The Presentation of the Lord in the Temple is, rotate, also the Purification of Mary. But, rotate, it's also known as the Meeting of the Lord in the Christian East. And, rotate, it's also the Feast of Candlemas, marking forty days after Christmas, the end of that liturgical season. The multiple names and meanings of today's Feast have given birth to surprisingly broad and varied cultural expressions. The biblical account of the Presentation is the source for the "two turtle doves" in the carol "The Twelve Days of Christmas," for the sword piercing Mary's Immaculate Heart in Catholic iconography, for the Fourth Joyful Mystery of the rosary, and for the Canticle prayed by all the world's priests and nuns every single night of their lives. The Presentation is even the remote source of the frivolous American folkloric tradition of Groundhog Day.

Behind all of these names and meanings are, however, a few fundamental theological facts worth reflecting upon. The Lord Jesus Christ, forty days after His birth, in keeping with the biblical significance of the number forty and with Jewish custom, was presented in the temple in Jerusalem by His parents, Mary and Joseph. Saint Luke's Gospel recounts the story. After the Presentation, Jesus was to enter the temple again as a boy and later as an adult. He would even refer to His own body as a temple which He would raise up in three days. Jesus's life was a continual self-gift to God the Father from the very beginning to the very

end. His parents did not carry their infant Son to a holy mountain, a sacred spring, or a magical forest. It was in His temple that the God of Israel was most present, so they brought their son to God Himself, not just to a reflection of Him in nature.

The extraordinarily beautiful temple in Jerusalem, the very building where Jesus was presented by His parents, was burned and destroyed by a powerful Roman army under the future Emperor Titus in 70 A.D. It was never rebuilt. A tourist in Rome can, even today, gaze up at the marble depictions of the sack of the Jerusalem temple carved on the inside vaults of the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum. Christianity has never had just one sacred place equivalent to the Jewish Temple or the Muslims' Kaaba in Mecca. Our faith is historical, yes, but it has a global reach which does not allow it to be planted in just one culture or just one location. Christ is destined for all cultures and all times. Every Catholic church with the Blessed Sacrament is a Holy of Holies, which fully expresses the deepest mysteries of our faith. There is no strict need to go on pilgrimage to Rome or to Jerusalem once in your life. But you do have to go on pilgrimage to your local parish once a week for Mass. Every Catholic church in every place, not just one building in one place, encompasses and transmits the entirety of our faith. God's hand must have been involved in the headship of the Church migrating from Jerusalem to Rome in the first century. Our Pope does not live in the historical cradle of the faith he represents, because Saint Peter saw no need to remain in Jerusalem in order to be faithful to his Master. The Church is where Christ is, Christ is in the Holy Eucharist, and the Holy Eucharist is everywhere.

We go to church, as the Jews went to their one temple or to their many synagogues, because God is more God in a church. And when we experience the true God, we experience our true selves. That is, we are more us when God is more God. God is interpreted according to the mode of the interpreter, when He is sought in a glowing sunset, a rushing waterfall, or a stunning mountain. In nature, God is whoever the seeker wants Him to be. In a church, however, God is protected from misinterpretation. He is surrounded and protected by His priests, saints, sacraments, music, art, and worship. In a church, God is fully clothed, equipped, and armored. He can't be misunderstood. So we go to find Him there, to dedicate ourselves to Him there, and to receive Him there in His Body and in His Blood.

Lord Jesus, as an infant You were brought to the temple by Your parents out of religious duty. Help all parents to take their duties to God seriously, to inculcate their faith in the next generation by their words and by their actions, so that the faith will be handed on where the faith is first learned—in the family and in the home.