

Feast of the Presentation of the Lord 2021
Seminary of Our Lady of Providence

The Book of Leviticus gives precise instructions to the priestly tribe of Aaron regarding the *olah*, or burnt offering, in Temple worship.

The priest offers to God a male sheep or lamb without blemish—innocent and undefiled. But unlike other offerings, taken in parts, this offering is consumed entirely by fire upon the altar of sacrifice. This offering is meant only for God.

As the lamb is consumed, light emanates from the ashes, producing an “odor pleasing to the Lord,” to borrow the words of Leviticus.

Our sacred liturgy commences today with a different kind of consumption: an array of candles, which, in order to shed light, must have their wax consumed entirely.

Unlike other candles, the Church wisely chooses beeswax candles, which leave no residue at all. In order for the light to shine from their wick, the entire candle must undergo a kind of death to itself.

Foreshadowing the Paschal Candle at the Easter Vigil, these candles serve as a symbol of Christ Himself.

In the beauty of her sacred rituals, the Church thus reminds us that the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple prepares the People of God for Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Jesus enters the Temple in Jerusalem, which will see ruin at the hands of pagans, as a new and Eternal Temple, both its priest and its victim.

Mary and Joseph present before Simeon the Lamb of God, the male without blemish, who himself will be consumed entirely, like the *olah*, or a candle, leaving no residue, nothing behind. He will offer Himself, the priest, the victim, entirely in love.

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And the flame which emanates from his most perfect sacrifice is, as Simeon prophesies, the light of revelation to the Gentiles—that is, to all of us, who until now, had no hope of salvation.

This is the light that finally ushers in salvation for God’s people and guides them safely to the Promised Land amidst the darkness to this earthly exile.

Saint Sophronius in today’s Office of Readings prepares us fittingly: “Our lighted candles are a sign of the divine splendor of the one who comes to expel the dark shadows of evil and to make the whole universe radiant with the brilliance of his eternal light. Our candles also show how bright our souls should be when we go to meet Christ.”

But how can the Christian, and especially the priest and future priest, show the brightness of his soul before His Lord, given all the ash which has marred his soul?

Simply, like the *olah*, or the beeswax candle: that is, by handing everything over; by the total gift of self; the total consummation of our lives through the love of God. Allowing whatever is sinful and wretched to be consumed by the fire and handed over to the Father of Mercies.

Because of the limitations of our self-love and our fear of the necessary purgation that awaits us, we may be tempted to offer only part of ourselves. We can hand over what is easy: a little piece of the lamb; a little bit of wax. We can offer part of our heart, but not all of it.

Should we offer the entirety of ourselves, we think, what will be left for us? Won’t it hurt? Won’t it bring a kind of nothingness, from which there is no turning back?

St. John of the Cross knew this nothingness—the dark night, as he called it—necessary for Christian perfection. But the emptying of the

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self allows that same self to be filled with a greater, more powerful and all-fulfilling love from On High.

The Carmelite Master thus sings to the Lord from the depths of his suffering, “*O living flame of love, that tenderly wounds my soul.*”

The death to self that the Christian, and especially the priest, must experience in his total oblation of life reveals a kind of consummation of love which is, indeed, gentle and tender.

The Lord asks for everything, make no mistake. But his yoke is easy, and his burden is light. The fruits of the Spirit is gentleness, kindness, and peace. The Lord wounds tenderly only in order to heal. He empties gently in order to fill more abundantly.

The more one gives oneself, the more brightly he will shine before his fellow men. He will be a kind of light to show the true path of life for those who dwell in darkness.

“Stay with me,” St. John Henry Newman prayed to his Lord, “and then I shall begin to shine as you shine, so to shine as to be a light to others; the light, O Jesus, will be all from You; none of it will be mine.”

Such light will indeed be an odor pleasing to the Lord, a sacrifice given entirely to him, and a sharing in the *lumen gloriae* which has been revealed to us: Gentiles, victims, and priests.