

At the end of the fourth century, a woman named Egeria made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Her travel journal gives an incredible first-person account of the liturgical life of the church and how all of the major feasts were celebrated in the Holy Land. We believe her pilgrimage was around the year 380 when Cyril was the Bishop of Jerusalem. Cyril encouraged travelers to come from far and wide to learn about their Christian faith by walking in the footsteps of Christ.ⁱ

Pilgrims like Egeria would have come to worship in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. This great basilica had an enclosed colonnaded atrium over the site of Jesus's Crucifixion. Across the courtyard there is a rotunda called the Anastasis (from the Greek it means Resurrection). The church is built over the place where Jesus was buried and rose from the dead.ⁱⁱ

Egeria's travel journal describes Holy Week and Easter. This diary that had been lost to the ages was rediscovered in 1887. It also gives us a preview of the observance of Jesus' birth, and the gala procession in honor of his Presentation in the Temple 40 days after Epiphany. She writes:

The fortieth day after the Epiphany is undoubtedly celebrated here with the very highest honor, for on that day there is a procession, in which all take part, in the Anastasis, and all things are done in their order with the greatest joy, just as at Easter. All the priests, and after them the bishop, preach, always taking for their subject that part of the Gospel where Joseph and Mary brought the Lord into the Temple on the fortieth day, and Simeon and Anna the prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, saw Him, treating of the words which they spoke when they saw the Lord, and of that offering which His parents made. And when everything that is customary has been done in order, the sacrament is celebrated, and the dismissal takes place.ⁱⁱⁱ

The church is blessed that a number of Bishop Cyril's catechetical instructions are preserved to this day. Just as Mary and Jesus brought their son to the temple for the presentation, those seeking entry into the church were presented by their sponsors for baptism and full initiation into the church. Perhaps Egeria heard these or similar words first-hand from the lips of the Bishop of Jerusalem when those preparing for baptism were presented to him:

O you who are soon to be enlightened: already you are gathering the spiritual flowers, to weave heavenly crowns: already the fragrance of the Holy Spirit has breathed upon you: already you have gathered round the vestibule of the King's palace; may you be led in also by the King! For blossoms now have appeared upon the trees; may the fruit also be found perfect! Thus far there has been an inscription of your names, and a call to service, and torches of the bridal train, and a longing for heavenly citizenship, and a good purpose, and hope attendant thereon. For he lies not who said, that to them that love God all things work together for good. God is lavish in beneficence, yet He waits for each man's genuine will.^{iv}

The observance of the Presentation of the Lord spread throughout the Western Church in the fifth and sixth centuries. The 40th day after Epiphany is February 15th, however, since we celebrate Jesus' birth on December 25, the Presentation of the Lord was moved to February 2nd, 40 days after Christmas.

At the beginning of the eighth century, Pope Sergius inaugurated a candlelight procession. At the end of the century the blessing and distribution of candles became part of the

celebration, giving the feast its popular name: Candlemass.^v Candles which are blessed on the 2nd are then used the following day February 3rd for the Memorial of Saint Blaise.

Saint Blaise was a 4th century bishop who was martyred around the year 316 for standing up for the faith rather than bowing to a pagan deity. “According to a legend, a mother came to him with her young son who had a fish bone lodged in his throat. At Bishop Blaise's command, the child coughed up the bone.”^{vi}

Amidst the pandemic when everyone is so vulnerable to the virus and the potential loss of life, I pray that the Lord through Saint Blaise may protect all of those who hear my voice from afar:

Through the intercession of Saint Blaise, bishop and martyr, May God deliver you from every disease of the throat and from every other illness: in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

ⁱ britannica.com/biography/Saint-Cyril-of-Jerusalem

ⁱⁱ Wikipedia, Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

ⁱⁱⁱ ccel.org/m/mcclure/etheria/etheria.htm

^{iv} newadvent.org/fathers/310100, Procatechesis, Cyril of Jerusalem.

^v catholicnewsagency.com/saint/presentation-of-the-lord-427

^{vi} catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-blaise-136