

## **Candlemas Day, Liturgical History**

*By Reverend Matthew R. Mauriello*

Candlemas Day, or the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, is celebrated each year on February 2, exactly forty days after Christmas. From about the year 350 AD this feast was celebrated locally at Jerusalem. The earliest account of the feast is described by a fourth century pilgrim from Spain named Egeria. She visited Jerusalem around the year 380 and wrote about this feast day in her diary, recording that a solemn and magnificent celebration of the Holy Sacrament was held at the Basilica of the Tomb of Christ.

In 542, the Emperor Justinian ordered that it be observed at Constantinople as an act of thanksgiving for the ending of the plague in that city and from there it spread throughout the East. Candlemas was then called the Hypapante or 'Meeting', referring to the meeting of the infant Jesus with the aged Simeon and the holy widow Anna, daughter of Phanuel, in the Temple as described in the second chapter of St. Luke's Gospel. The story of Simeon's recognition of the Lord continues the theme of manifestation that is seen at Epiphany and the Baptism of the Lord. Simeon foretold at that same time that Mary's Son would be a sign of contradiction and that a sword would pierce her own soul that out of many hearts thoughts would be revealed. (Luke, 2:34-35)

When this feast was later adopted in the Western church, the growing devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary led it to be regarded as a day in her honor rather than that of Christ, her Son; it was called the "Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary" in commemoration of the days of her purification, forty days after the birth of her Son, as required by Jewish law as found in chapter 13 of the Book of Leviticus.

The women of Israel were considered to have contracted a legal stain in childbirth and it was for this reason that they were obliged to offer a young pigeon or dove as a sin offering. By this sacrifice, they were free once more to attend the ceremonies of worship.

Mary had not contracted any stain in bringing forth her child, as the infant Jesus had been conceived outside the ordinary laws of nature and Mary preserved her virginity unimpaired before, during, and after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. She did not come under the prescriptions of the Law, yet in a spirit of humility and obedience to do what was required of them, she and St. Joseph complied with the requirements of the law which also stated, "Consecrate to me every first-born among the Israelites ... It belongs to me." (Exodus 13:2) The writers of the Eastern church speak of Mary's being prepurified (protokathareises) by the Holy Spirit at the Annunciation.

The name Candlemas comes to us from England and refers to the custom of blessing and distributing candles in procession before the celebration of Holy Mass. It was the Syriac Pope Sergius I (687-701) who established a procession for this feast and thereafter it took on a penitential character. In fact, until 1960, the vestments worn for this feast day were violet.

On February 2, 1974, Pope Paul VI promulgated his Apostolic Exhortation, *Marialis Cultus*, regarding devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. In paragraph eight of this document, he specifically makes reference to this feast day, "The Feast of February 2, which has been given

back its ancient name, the Presentation of the Lord, should also be considered as a joint commemoration of the Son and of the Mother, if we are to appreciate its rich content."