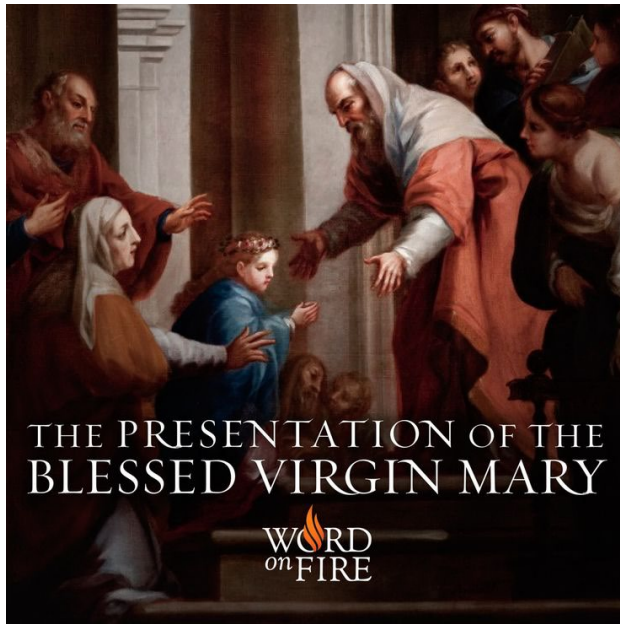


Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Temple



On November 21, the Catholic Church as well as the Orthodox churches observe the Memorial of the Presentation of Mary. Three “gospels” have heavily influenced the observance of this memorial—the Protoevangelium of James, the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, and the Gospel of the Nativity of Mary. The earliest was the Protoevangelium of James (also called the “Apocryphal Gospel of James”), most likely written sometime in the second century. It is not considered to be part of the inspired word of God in the Bible, i.e., the canon of Scripture, because it does not appear to have actually been written by the Apostle James. Nonetheless, like many early Christian documents, this apocryphal gospel held great influence in the early Church. It is from this writing that the Church takes the traditional names of the Blessed Virgin Mary’s parents—Saints Joachim and Anne.

The Protoevangelium of James details Mary’s Immaculate Conception, birth, presentation in the Temple, and her life in the Temple until age twelve where she is depicted as praying continuously while angels ministered to her. The story continues with her miraculously arranged marriage to Saint Joseph, Jesus’ birth, Herod’s encounter with the Magi, the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, and the martyrdom of Zechariah, Saint John the Baptist’s father. The Apocryphal Gospel of James does not contradict anything in the canonical Gospels, and more details are added that might be true.

When the Blessed Virgin Mary was born, it was not uncommon for some children to be presented in the Temple, to be raised there and to enter into service at the Temple. They assisted the priests and acted as servants of charity. Though every firstborn male was ritually presented to the priest in the Temple eight days after birth for consecration to God, sometimes girls were also presented, but for the purpose of entering into the Temple’s service. In *Glories of Mary*, Saint Alphonsus Liguori, an eighteenth-century Doctor of the Church, wrote a description of her presentation in the Temple.

The feast is believed to have originated in the Eastern Byzantine liturgy around the sixth century when Byzantine Roman Emperor Justinian I built a church in Jerusalem near the ruins of the Temple called the Basilica of Saint Mary the New. By the ninth century, several monasteries in the Latin Church observed this feast; it was added to the Universal Church calendar in the fifteenth century.

In 1953, Pope Pius XII tied this memorial of the Presentation of Mary to an annual commemoration of the World Day of Cloistered Life. This sprang from the belief that the Blessed Virgin was presented in the Temple as a child, living out her childhood in prayer and solitude, a model for those in the cloister.

In 1974, Pope Saint Paul VI wrote a beautiful apostolic exhortation, *Marialis Cultus: For the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary*, in which he speaks of the development of Marian devotion in the life of the Church. Regarding feasts like today's, which come to us in part from apocryphal sources, he says, "There are still others [feasts] which, apart from their apocryphal content, present lofty and exemplary values and carry on venerable traditions having their origin especially in the East."

Most Holy and Immaculate Virgin Mary, you were conceived without sin and remained sinless throughout your life. With the perfection of every virtue and grace, you loved and served God even as a young child. Please pray for me, as I help to inspire young people in the ways of holiness, that I will never shy away from pointing them to you as a model and mediator of God's grace. Most Holy Blessed Virgin Mary, pray for me to Jesus, your Son.