

The Presentation of the Lord

Each year on February 2, the Church celebrates the feast of the **Presentation of the Lord** which occurs forty days after the birth of Jesus and is also known as Candlemas day, since the blessing and procession of candles is included in today's liturgy. Before the revision of the General Roman Calendar this marked the end of the Christmas season. Now the Christmas season closes on the Baptism of the Lord.

The feast of the Presentation was first observed in the Eastern Church as "The Encounter." In the sixth century, it began to be observed in the West: in Rome with a more penitential character and in Gaul (France) with solemn blessings and processions of candles, popularly known as "Candlemas." The Presentation of the Lord concludes the celebration of the Nativity and with the offerings of the Virgin Mother and the prophecy of Simeon, the events now point toward Easter.



"In obedience to the Old Law, the Lord Jesus, the first-born, was presented in the Temple by his Blessed Mother and his foster father. This is another 'epiphany' celebration insofar as the Christ Child is revealed as the Messiah through the canticle and words of Simeon and the testimony of Anna the prophetess. Christ is the light of the nations, hence the blessing and procession of candles on this day. In the Middle Ages this feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or 'Candlemas,' was of great importance.

"The specific liturgy of this Candlemas feast, the blessing of candles, is not as widely celebrated as it should be, except of course whenever February 2 falls on a Sunday and thus takes precedence. There are two ways of celebrating the ceremony, either the *Procession*, which begins at a 'gathering place' outside the church, or the *Solemn Entrance*, celebrated within the church."

Some Background

Until 1969, the ancient feast of the Presentation of Our Lord, which is of Oriental origin, was known in the West as the feast of the Purification of Our Lady, and closed the Christmas season, forty days after the Lord's birth. This feast has for long been associated with many popular devotional exercises. The faithful:

- gladly participate in the processions commemorating the Lord's entry into the Temple in Jerusalem and His encounter with God, whose house He had come to for the first time, and then with Simeon and Anna. Such processions, which in the West had taken the place of licentious pagan events, always had a penitential character, and were later identified with the blessing of candles which were carried in procession in honor of Christ, 'the light to enlighten the Gentiles' (Lk 2, 32);
- are sensitive to the actions of the Blessed Virgin in presenting her Son in the Temple, and to her submission to the Law of Moses (Lk 12, 1-8) in the rite of purification; popular piety sees in the rite of purification the humility of Our Lady and hence, 2 February has long been regarded as a feast for those in humble service.
- Popular piety is sensitive to the providential and mysterious event that is the conception and birth of new life. Christian mothers can easily identify with the maternity of Our Lady, the most pure Mother of the Head of the mystical Body — notwithstanding the notable differences in the Virgin's unique conception and birth.

They too are mothers in God's plan and are about to give birth to future members of the Church. From this intuition and a certain *mimesis* of the purification of Our Lady, the rite of purification after birth was developed, some of whose elements reflect negatively on birth.

The revised *Rituale Romanum* provides for the blessing of women both before and after birth, this latter only in cases where the mother could not participate at the baptism of her child.

It is a highly desirable thing for mothers and married couples to ask for these blessings which should be given in accord with the Church's prayer: in a communion of faith and charity in prayer so that pregnancy can be brought to term without difficulty (blessing before birth), and to give thanks to God for the gift of a child (blessing after birth).

In some local Churches, certain elements taken from the Gospel account of the Presentation of the Lord (Lk 2, 22-40), such as the obedience of Joseph and Mary to the Law of the Lord, the poverty of the holy spouses, the virginity of Our Lady, mark out 2 February as a special feast for those at the service of the brethren in the various forms of consecrated life.

The feast of 2 February still retains a popular character. It is necessary, however, that such should reflect the true Christian significance of the feast. It would not be proper for popular piety in its celebration of this feast

to overlook its Christological significance and concentrate exclusively on its Marian aspects. The fact that this feast should be 'considered [...] a joint memorial of Son and Mother' would not support such an inversion. The candles kept by the faithful in their homes should be seen as a sign of Christ 'the light of the world' and an expression of faith.

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