

Holding the baby Jesus

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When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Most or all of us know what it is like to hold a baby. For some of us, the experience is frightening or awkward. And, for many, the moment can feel sacred. What an honor when a young mother holds out her baby for you or me to hold. It's a gesture and an exquisite non-verbal message unlike any other in our human experience: *"Here. Let me entrust to you, at least for a few moments, what is most precious to me."*

We may then feel the baby's warmth and smell it's unique sweetness. All of the weight of the world may briefly fall away. In the particularity of this one baby we may encounter the mystery of all life.

In the story we celebrate in this mass, the baby Jesus would have been about seven weeks old. We know this from the context; the Holy Family has gone to Jerusalem for rites of purification that were to take place 40 days after a child's birth. We tend to think of this baby Jesus as the same one whose birth we celebrated at Christmas. But a seven-week-old baby is remarkably different from a newborn. I verified this today by checking a few websites dedicated to babies' milestones: *"Your baby's senses are getting increasingly keen [at seven weeks]."* *"If you walk into a room, he might look toward you."* *"Your baby is starting to grab things."* *"At seven weeks, you may see your child's first genuine smile."*

I wonder what the first smile on the baby Jesus looked like.

In any case, my reflection on holding a baby may help us to appreciate a moment in the gospel story for this mass that is, I believe, mostly overlooked. The text introduces us to a *"righteous and devout"* man named Simeon, one who had been led by the Holy Spirit to believe *"he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Messiah."*

His introduction is so pious and beautiful that we may easily miss the likelihood that there was no apparent prior connection between Simeon and the parents with a seven-week old child as they all

converged in the ever-swirling public environment of the Temple. To Mary and Joseph, in other words, Simeon was a stranger. And yet, he presumes to scoop up the baby! We are not given any sense that Simeon paused and looked at the mother and gestured to the baby as if to ask, “May I?” No! To follow the text literally, he just brazenly grabs the child: “...he took him in his arms.”

As he does so, Simeon is overcome with joy, and he prophesies. Thank God he did, prophesy. In doing so he gave the Church, including so many of us, the gift of his song that we say or sing nightly:

*Lord, you now have set your servant free
to go in peace as you have promised;
For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior,
whom you have prepared for all the world to see ...*

And then his prophecy takes somber turn. He tells the mother and father, and in doing so he reminds us, that moments lived in faith are not all wondrous holding-the-baby moments. “*This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ...*” And then turning to the mother, as I imagine it, with a sigh and sad eyes, Simeon adds, “*... and a sword will pierce your own soul too.*”

Let me ask you this evening if you are willing to hold the baby. I don’t mean just any baby. Are you willing to hold **this** seven-week-old baby, Jesus, in your arms? Many of us find that difficult. It sounds corny, or we don’t imagine ourselves to be worthy. We’ve never been given the promise of the Holy Spirit that Simeon was given. Our heads and hearts are, in fact, so often filled with junk and fear and pessimism.

Even so, this baby, this Christ-child, is meant by God to be handed around, to be touched, to be held. Simeon gives an example, and others followed throughout the later life and ministry of Jesus: touching the hem of his robe (Matthew 9:20), anointing his feet (John 12:3), and even after his resurrection he invited one who doubted: “*Reach out your hand and put it in my side.*” (John 20:27b) And listen for a moment to the opening lines of the First Letter of John, found near the end of the New Testament. Though written years after Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension, it sounds almost as if it could have been written or spoken by Simeon: “*We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us ...*” (1 John 1:1-2)

So: Go ahead. Touch and hold the baby Jesus. And as you do so, let me point out one more detail in this story. Notice that there’s no mention that Simeon ever handed the baby back to Mary or Joseph. Surely he did. It’s more than adequately implied. But we could also contemplate the thought that once Simeon held in his arms and took to his heart such a priceless gift, he held on tight and never let go – as may be so when you or I truly see and hold Jesus and take him to heart. Amen.