

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Candlemas
February 2, 2016

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January 1st and February 2nd share first prize in the category “Feast with the most names.” In the case of New Year’s Day, Holy Mother Church has changed her mind more than once about what to commemorate on this day. But for today’s date, with its nickname Candlemas, the many titles simply attest to the fact that in this brief encounter in the Jerusalem Temple, *so much was going on*.

The reason the Presentation of Christ in the Temple happened is that Old Testament Law *required* it. Israel knew the price for the Passover was the death of all first-born in the land of Egypt. Only the Blood of the Lamb saved the Jewish first-born boys. Israel knew that *all* life comes from God and is precious to Him. And so Jewish Law required certain rites for redeeming a first-born son of Israel. That same Law had an obligatory rite for a woman’s first return to the Temple after childbirth. But by the Birth of Christ, observing these requirements had become all very routine and ordinary and bureaucratic. Think of it as the Joseph and Mary going to get their auto inspected yearly as Massachusetts law directs!

But of course we do not remember an event that was routine and ordinary 2000 years ago. We remember this event because it involved the family we call *The Holy Family*. And we marvel at the humility of Our Lord Jesus and His Blessed Mother in their observance of these rites. How often you and I search for personal dispensations and exemptions from obligations placed on the general population! But here were laws and rites which in an extraordinary way did not apply to either Jesus or His Mother. On Candlemas Blessed Jesus was ransomed in obedience to the Law. Yet He had come into the world *to Himself be* the ransom that would free all mankind from slavery to sin! And Blessed Mary was going to perform the ordinary purification rite when she was conceived without sin and declared full of grace by angelic proclamation! Yet here is the Holy Family claiming no special privilege. Their intention was to visit the Temple, perform the rites, and leave. It was a matter of civic and religious observation. The whole transaction probably took less time than this evening’s service up to this point!

The beautiful moment comes when the Holy Family was detected. They were *spied out* by pure hearts, by the faithfulness and devoted patience of two old people. And

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this discovery of the Holy Family by Simeon and Anna gives the occasion we celebrate its warmth, light, movement, and beauty.

The old man was very near the end of his life. His heart ached because he could see no relief from the crushing oppression inflicted on his native land. Yet *Simeon was still at his post*. Guided by the Holy Spirit he recognized this was no ordinary moment. Holding God in his arms, Simeon burst into song. It is a song Holy Church has sung ever since. *Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace; for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation*. Joseph and Mary could have long-since started a scrapbook for their Son. (**Baby's First Five Years**. Do they still have those things?) And the scrapbook would already be filled with supernatural and extraordinary events. But for Mary and Joseph the sudden experience of this old man and his song must have been another jaw-dropping moment.

And then there was eighty-four year old Anna. She was one of the *habitués* of the Temple. I once had an elderly altar guild lady who the younger members said had been part of the guild so long she had set things up for the Last Supper! Anna must have been considered almost part of the Temple furniture. She too found out the Holy Family. Anna witnessed Simeon's great song of praise, and she tottered off to announce Christ to all that awaited the redemption of Israel. You know how the casual onlookers reacted. *It is how they always react*. They smiled and privately thought Anna was off her rocker! But Mary and Joseph had experienced far too many things not to take Anna seriously. The cynics and wags might snicker, but Anna's prophecy was among the things Our Lady kept and pondered in her heart.

Don't ever worry about being snickered at, or at being in the *background* of this story. (That is actually where St Joseph was, holding the crate with the two pigeons!) There is a place in the background of the story about Jesus Christ. *Being in the story is crucial*. And if the Blessed Lord ever says "go take center stage" that is *His* business. But without the Simeons and Annas you and I would not be here. Their faithfulness in the face of a lifetime's discouragement and disappointment forms the very backbone of the Catholic Church. The prophet Malachi predicted that Christ would purify all of us the same way. He refines us by the fire of our trials and tribulations, purifying us of self-love by the washing of our wills.

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Anna and Simeon, along with Mary and Joseph, were in that first procession in honor of Christ. *But we were in it tonight!* We carried the candle, the flame which is the blest and holy fire of Christ placed near our hearts. That may be the most important things to remember about Candlemas with all its goings on. Jesus Christ would have you and me like Simeon and Anna and the other saints, in garments of faith, washed clear and bright, and with souls lit with the flame of His life, lighting the dark world with the love of God.