

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in  
the Temple  
February 2, 2019  
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Blessed John Henry Newman once penned a verse about the feast we observe tonight:

*The angel-lights of Christmas morn*

*Which shot across the sky,*

*Away they pass at Candlemas,*

*They sparkle and they die.*

This feast occurs at the very depth of winter when we are all starved for color, light, and warmth. You do not need me to remind you of that. We also look for amusement and entertainment to get our minds off the cold. Before Super Bowls there was *Punxsutawney Phil!*

Of course Candlemas is much older than any of that. Thanks to a Spanish nun we can date the observance as far back as the 4<sup>th</sup> Century. This nun wanted to experience Holy Week in Jerusalem and she kept a travelogue. Arriving in the Middle East much too early, she had time for an excursion to Egypt, but was back in Jerusalem for Candlemas. And what she described is essentially the same as our service today. Reading her diary you also get the impression that even in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century Candlemas was a venerable holy day.

Down the ages there are many descriptions of Candlemas in poetry such as Newman's, and in fine art. Several illustrated manuscripts from the early 15<sup>th</sup> century are especially remarkable. We saw these on exhibit in the *Morgan Library* [in New York City] some years ago. One of these illustrations shows the Holy Father distributing candles. He appears in a gallery and is seen hurling very large candles down among the people below, with some of the candles landing on the ground. It all seems a bit untidy!

The other manuscript shows the distribution of candles to people who *didn't come to the service*. In this scene three laymen are going door to door carrying baskets of candles. One door is shut and the figure who appears looking out at an upper

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window shows no interest in coming down to open his door. Perhaps these illustrated manuscripts reveal an inside joke in the pre-Reformation era. In any case we do not hurl candles at people today nor ask for volunteers to go door to door with them on a cold February morning!

All of that aside, why has the Candlemas ceremony endured all these centuries? The answer is that no act of formal worship in our liturgical life is more thoroughly evangelical and devotional *all at the same time* as the Candlemas procession. We *walk in procession* singing of the ways of the Lord, because to stand still in the path of virtue is to go back. Please God we are a pilgrim people going forward to the Promised Land. And remember before we were called Christians we were known as followers of “The Way.” (*e.g. Acts 9 2*) And we *hold lighted candles* to show we wish thereby to honor Christ and proclaim Him as the Light of the World. Those are the very things we are about as Christians. It is not just that we remind ourselves of the fact that Jesus is Lord. Christians must always be preparing Christ’s way, by good works, and by letting His light shine in the dark places before us. In a very striking yet simple ceremony the Candlemas procession does all that. Your lighting this church with your candles represents your vocation as a follower of Jesus Christ.

*The angel-lights of Christmas morn* pass in this world one more time at Candlemas just as Newman wrote. And just as the ancient covenant decreed (*Leviticus 12*), the presentation is forty days since Christmas Day. Those Candlemas lights have their affinity with the Christmas star, and with the lights we recently put on Christmas trees to celebrate the coming of the Christ Child. Those sights and lights were the delight of children and of the child in the soul of each of us. With Our Lady and Saint Joseph, the old man Simeon and the prophetess Anna, our little group has joined theirs and those all down the ages who cherish the Light of Christ and taken Him into a dark world sorely and desperately in need of that light.