

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of The Presentation of
Christ in the Temple
February 2, 2020

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The Candlemas celebration is such a beautiful liturgy. But that fact is not diminished by the principal reason for the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. The Presentation was a duty; it was a requirement of the Old Testament Law. Ancient Israel knew all life is precious. The Lord God had told them so. One of the reasons for the annual Passover observance was it reminded the people the price for their deliverance from bondage was the death of all first-born in the land of Egypt. As a result, the ancient Law required the redemption of a first-born son in Israel. The same code of law also contained an obligatory rite to declare a woman's ritual cleanliness after childbirth. Observing these requirements was all very routine and ordinary. Today we would call it bureaucratic. It was like getting an annual automobile inspection and sticker for your car!

After 2000 years, however, we do not remember things because they are routine and ordinary! We remember today's event because it involved a family we call *The Holy Family*. Knowing what we do about that family we marvel at the humility of Jesus and the obedience of His mother. For the simple fact of the matter is that the observance of these rites *did not apply to either of them*.

Consider that the Blessed Lord Jesus was being ransomed in obedience to the Divine Law. Yet in Christ, God had come into the world *to Himself be the ransom* that would free all mankind from slavery to sin. His mother Mary, conceived without sin, and declared "full of grace" by angelic proclamation, still went to the Temple for the ordinary purification rite. How often you and I search for special exemptions from obligations levied again everybody else. Tax advisors make a living looking for exemptions and loopholes. Yet here is the Holy Family, enjoying the greatest loophole ever, claiming no special privilege. Mary and Joseph entered the Temple with their forty-day old baby, intending to perform the rites, and leave. It was a matter of routine civic and religious obligation. The whole transaction probably did not take as much time as this service up until this moment.

Then comes the event which makes today such a beautiful moment. The Holy Family was found out! They were *detected*. Maybe it is only pure hearts that can spy out the Holy Family. But they were spied out by pure hearts. At the

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Presentation the identity of Jesus was made clear to the faithfulness and devoted patience of two elderly people. It is this discovery of the Holy Family by Simeon and Anna which gives the occasion we celebrate its warmth, light, and movement.

The old man was very near the end of his life. His heart must have ached because he could not see any relief from the crushing oppression inflicted on his native land. Yet Simeon was *still at his post*. Inspired by the Holy Ghost, Simeon recognized this was no ordinary bureaucratic transaction! Simeon was holding God in his arms. And the old man's heart burst into song, the song Holy Church has sung ever since: *Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace; for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation*. If Joseph and Mary had kept a scrap book, (one of those "Baby's First Seven Years" books) it would already be filled with supernatural and extraordinary events. But the sudden experience of this old man and his song must have been a stunning and jaw-dropping moment.

Then there was eighty-four-year-old Anna. She was an *habitué* of the Temple. Every parish priest knows Anna. She is the elderly altar guild lady who has been on the guild so long it is rumored she set the table at the Last Supper! In Jerusalem Anna must have been considered part of the Temple woodwork. But she too found out the Holy Family; she witnessed Simeon's great song of praise, and she tottered off to announce the Presence of Christ to all who awaited redemption in Israel. Casual onlookers probably smiled and thought Anna a bit off the rails! But Mary and Joseph were not casual onlookers. They had experienced too much about their wonderful Son not to take Anna seriously. Cynics still wag their heads and snicker. But Anna's prophecy was among the things Our Lady kept and pondered in her heart.

Without Anna and Simeon you and would not be here. Their faithfulness in the face of a lifetime's discouragement, disappointment, and waiting, forms the very backbone of the people of God. The prophet Malachi predicted Christ would purify all of us the same way: refining us by the fire of our trials and tribulations, purifying us of self-love by the washing of our wills. That is why Anna and Simeon joined Mary and Joseph in that first procession in honor of Christ. *You and*

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I were in that procession today. We were carrying the candle, the flame representing the blessed and holy fire of Christ near and in our hearts. That may be the best thing to remember about Candlemas. Jesus Christ would have you and me, like Simeon and Anna and the other saints, in wedding garments, washed clear and bright, and with souls lit with the flame of His life, which is the very life of God.