



The Holy See

FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION OF JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II
READ BY CARDINAL EDUARDO MARTÍNEZ SOMALO

Tuesday, 2 February 1999

1. *"A light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Lk 2:32).*

The Gospel passage we have just heard, taken from St Luke's account, recalls the event that took place in Jerusalem on the 40th day after the birth of Jesus: his presentation in the temple. This is one of the occasions when the liturgical season reflects historical time: today, in fact, 40 days have passed since 25 December, the Solemnity of the Lord's Birth.

This fact is not without significance. It means that the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple creates a sort of "hinge" which separates and joins the initial phase of his life on earth, his birth, and its fulfilment, which is his death and resurrection. Today we leave the Christmas season behind and move towards the season of Lent, which begins in 15 days with Ash Wednesday.

The prophetic words spoken by the aged Simeon shed light on the mission of the Child brought to the temple by his parents: "Behold this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against ... that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (Lk 2:34-35). To Mary Simeon said: "And a sword will pierce through your own soul also" (Lk 2:35). The hymns of Bethlehem have now faded and the cross of Golgotha can already be glimpsed; this happens in the temple, the place where sacrifices are offered. The event we are commemorating today is thus a bridge as it were, linking the two most important seasons of the Church's year.

2. The second reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews, offers an interesting commentary on this event. The author makes an observation which leads us to reflect: commenting on Christ's priesthood, he points out how the Son of God "is concerned ... with the descendants of Abraham"

(2:16). Abraham is the father of believers, so all believers are in some way included in this phrase "descendants of Abraham" for whom the Child, in Mary's arms, is presented in the temple. The event that occurs before the eyes of those few privileged witnesses is an early prediction of the sacrifice of the Cross.

The biblical text states that the Son of God, in solidarity with mankind, shares their condition of weakness and frailty to the end, that is, until his death, in order to bring about a radical liberation of humanity by once and for all defeating the adversary, the devil, whose power over human beings and every creature lies in death itself (cf. Heb 2:14-15).

With this wonderful synthesis, the inspired author expresses the whole truth about the world's redemption. He highlights the importance of the priestly sacrifice of Christ, who "had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people" (Heb 2:17).

Precisely because it shows the profound link uniting the mystery of the Incarnation with that of the Redemption, the Letter to the Hebrews is an appropriate commentary on the liturgical event we are celebrating today. It highlights Christ's redemptive mission, in which the whole People of the New Covenant take part.

Dear consecrated persons who fill the Vatican Basilica and whom I greet with great affection, you share in this mission in a particular way. This Feast of the Presentation is in a special way your feast: in fact, we are celebrating the Third Day for Consecrated Life.

3. I am grateful to Cardinal Eduardo Martínez Somalo, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, who is presiding at this Eucharist. Through him, I greet and thank those who in Rome and throughout the world are working at the service of consecrated life.

At this time my thoughts turn with special affection to all consecrated persons in every part of the world: they are the men and women who have chosen to follow Christ in a radical way, in poverty, chastity and obedience. I am thinking of the hospitals, the schools, the recreation centres where they work with total dedication to the service of their brethren for the sake of God's kingdom. I am thinking of the thousands of monasteries in which communion with God is lived in an intense rhythm of prayer and work. I am thinking of the consecrated lay persons, discreet witnesses in the world, and of so many who are in the front lines among the poor and the marginalized.

How can we not remember here the men and women religious who, even recently, have shed their blood while performing an apostolic service that was often difficult and uncomfortable? Faithful to their spiritual and charitable mission, they offered their lives in union with Christ's sacrifice for the salvation of humanity. Today, the Church's prayer is dedicated to every consecrated person, but

especially to them. She gives thanks for the gift of this vocation and ardently invokes it: indeed, consecrated persons make a crucial contribution to the work of evangelization, bringing to it the prophetic power which comes from the radicalness of their evangelical choice.

4. The Church lives on event and mystery. Today she draws life from the event of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, seeking to understand the mystery it holds. In a way, though, the Church draws each day from this event in Christ's life, meditating on its spiritual meaning. In fact, every evening the elderly Simeon's words which have just been proclaimed echo in churches and monasteries, chapels and homes throughout the world:

"Lord, now let your servant depart 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" (Lk 2:29-32).

So prayed Simeon, who in his old age had been granted to see the promises of the Old Covenant fulfilled. So prays the Church, which, sparing no effort, does all she can to bring the gift of the New Covenant to all peoples.

In the mysterious encounter between Simeon and Mary, the Old and New Testaments are joined. Together the ageing prophet and the young mother give thanks for this Light which has kept the darkness from prevailing. It is the Light which shines in the heart of human life: Christ, the Saviour and Redeemer of the world, *"a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of his people Israel"*.

Amen!

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