



The Holy See

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION ON THE FEAST OF PRESENTATION

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 2 February 1997

1. *Lumen ad revelationem gentium*: a light for revelation to the Gentiles (cf. Lk 2:32).

Forty days after his birth, Jesus was taken by Mary and Joseph to the temple to be presented to the Lord (cf. Lk 2:22), according to what the law of Moses prescribes: "Every first-born male shall be consecrated to the Lord" (Lk 2:23); and to offer in sacrifice "a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons, in accord with the dictate in the law of the Lord" (Lk 2:24).

In recalling these events, the liturgy intentionally and precisely follows the sequence of Gospel events: the completion of the 40 days following Christ's birth. It does the same, later, with regard to the period between the Resurrection and the Ascension into heaven.

Three basic elements can be seen in the Gospel event celebrated today: the mystery of the *coming*, the reality of the *meeting* and the proclamation of the *prophecy*.

2. First of all, the *mystery of the coming*. The biblical readings we have heard stress *the extraordinary nature* of God's coming: the prophet Malachi announces it in a transport of joy, the responsorial psalm sings it and Luke's Gospel text describes it. We need only listen, for example, to the responsorial psalm: "Lift up, O gates, your lintels ... that the king of glory may come in! Who is this king of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle.... The Lord of hosts, he is the king of glory" (Ps 23 [24]:7-8;10).

He who had been awaited for centuries enters the temple of Jerusalem, he who fulfils the promise of the Old Covenant: the Messiah foretold. The psalmist calls him "the king of glory". Only later will it become clear that his kingdom is not of this world (cf. Jn 18:36) and that those who belong to

this world are not preparing a royal crown for him, but a crown of thorns.

However, the liturgy looks beyond. In that 40-day-old infant it sees the “light” destined to illumine the nations, and presents him as the “glory” of the people of Israel (cf. Lk 2:32). It is he who must conquer death, as the Letter to the Hebrews proclaims, explaining the mystery of the Incarnation and Redemption: “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature” (Heb 2:14), having taken on human nature.

After describing the mystery of the Incarnation, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews presents the mystery of Redemption: “Therefore he 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. For because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted” (ibid., 2:17-18). This is a deep and moving presentation of the mystery of Christ. The passage from the Letter to the Hebrews helps us to understand better why this coming to Jerusalem of Mary’s newborn Son should be a decisive event in the history of salvation. Since it had been built, the temple was awaiting in a most exceptional way the One who had been promised. Thus his coming has a priestly meaning: “*Ecce sacerdos magnus*”; behold, the true and eternal High Priest enters the temple.

3. The second characteristic element of today’s celebration is *the reality of the meeting*. Even if no one was waiting for Joseph and Mary when they arrived hidden among the people at the temple in Jerusalem with the baby Jesus, something most unusual occurs. Here they meet persons guided by the Holy Spirit: the elderly Simeon of whom St Luke writes: “This man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him and it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (Lk 2:25-26), and the prophetess Anna, who had lived “with her husband seven years from her virginity, and as a widow till she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day” (Lk 2:36-37). The Evangelist continues: “And coming up at that very hour, she gave thanks to God, and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Lk 2:38).

Simeon and Anna: a man and a woman, representatives of the Old Covenant, who, in a certain sense, had lived their whole lives for the moment when the temple of Jerusalem would be visited by the expected Messiah. Simeon and Anna understand that the moment has come at last, and reassured by the meeting, they can face the last phase of their life with peaceful hearts: “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation” (Lk 2:29-30).

At this discreet encounter, the words and actions effectively express the reality of the event taking place. The coming of the Messiah has not passed unobserved. It was recognized through the penetrating gaze of faith, which the elderly Simeon expresses in his moving words.

4. The third element that appears in this feast is *prophecy*: today truly prophetic words resound. Every day the Liturgy of the Hours ends the day with Simeon's inspired canticle: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, ... a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for the glory of your people Israel" (Lk 2:29-32).

The elderly Simeon adds, turning to Mary: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (Lk 2:34-35).

Thus while we are still at the dawn of Jesus' life, we are already oriented to Calvary. It is on the Cross that Jesus will be definitively confirmed as a sign of contradiction, and it is there that his Mother's heart will be pierced by the sword of sorrow. We are told it all from the beginning, on the 40th day after Jesus' birth, on the feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, so important in the Church's liturgy.

5. Dear brothers and sisters, today's feast is enriched this year with a new significance. In fact, for the first time we are celebrating the *Day for Consecrated Life*.

Dear men and women religious and you, dear brothers and sisters, members of secular institutes and societies of apostolic life, you are all entrusted with the task of proclaiming, by word and example, the primacy of the Absolute over every human reality. This is an urgent task in our time, which often seems to have lost the genuine sense of God. As I recalled in the *Message I addressed to you for this first Day for Consecrated Life*: "Truly there is great urgency that the consecrated life show itself ever more 'full of joy and of the Holy Spirit', that it forge ahead dynamically in the paths of mission, that it be backed up by the strength of lived witness, because 'modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and 'if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses' (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 41)" (*L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 29 January 1997, p. 3).

Together with the elderly Simeon and the prophetess Anna, let us go to meet the Lord in his temple. Let us welcome the light of his Revelation, committing ourselves to spreading it among our brothers and sisters in view of the now imminent Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

May the Blessed Virgin,
 Mother of hope and joy,
 accompany us
 and grant that all believers
 may be witnesses to the salvation
 which God has prepared in the presence of all peoples
 in his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ,
 a light for revelation to the Gentiles

and for the glory of his people Israel.

Amen!

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