

Presentation of the Lord “We Carry the Light of Christ”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Ah the Presentation of the Lord! I love this feast day and I am always pleased when this day falls on a Sunday. This feast day is also called Candlemas because it was the custom in Medieval times to bring candles to the church to be blessed. And, some people still do this today. During these times before electricity, if you were standing on a hillside overlooking a town, you might even see candles being lit throughout the city and carried reverently through the streets to the church. Today the liturgy gives the option of a procession of candles into the church.

Saint Sophronius, a 7th century monk who became the patriarch of Jerusalem, writes about the procession of candles in the Office of Readings for today. He writes, “In honor of the divine mystery that we celebrate today let us all hasten to meet Christ. Everyone should be eager to join the procession and to carry a light. Our lighted candles are a sign of the divine spender of the one who comes to expel the dark shadows of evil and to make the whole universe radiant with the brilliance of his eternal light. Our candles also show how bright our souls should be when we go to meet Christ.” Saint Sophronius gives us a really good insight into how this feast day was celebrated centuries ago.

In the liturgical calendar, the Presentation of the Lord is celebrated forty days after Christmas and remembers the day Mary and Joseph presented their baby Jesus to the temple. This day is also considered by many to be the proper end of the Christmas season because the words of the prophet Simeon to Mary foreshadow Jesus’ role in salvation history, his passion, death and resurrection. And you can imagine how terrifying Simeon’s words were to Mary and Joseph. “Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and a sign that will be contradicted – and you yourself a sword will pierce - so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

These were no doubt difficult words to hear. When Mary and Joseph presented Jesus to the Temple, they brought with them their hopes and dreams for their child. They already knew by the message of an Angel that Jesus would be the light of the world. However, they were perhaps not aware about how all this would happen in the course of their child’s life. Of course, all parents have hopes and dreams for their kids. All parents have their fears. No parent knows exactly for certain what the future will hold. There is a darkness there. It is difficult to see. Thus, the activity of presenting a child to God in the holy temple is an act of profound faith on the part Mary and Joseph and for any parent for that matter.

One of my favorite sacraments to celebrate here at Saint Teresa of Calcutta is infant baptism. Everyone is dressed to the nines. The family, godparents and friends are in attendance to show their love and support. And the little baby is adorably dressed in white and cameras are flashing to capture every moment. And Facebook crashes soon after the liturgy from all the uploading of pictures. Baptism is a special day, one that is always remembered. It is a day we give thanks to God for the gift of new life while humbly recognizing our need for redemption. It is also a celebration that acknowledges where the child’s soul comes from and that God has an eternal plan for us.

At the beginning of a baptism, consider that the first gift we present a child is the sign of the cross on the forehead as a symbol of belonging to Christ. It is quite thought provoking that the sign of the cross would be the first gift to a child at such a joyful celebration. And yet, the sign of the cross is also very hopeful because we recognize that there is nothing in this world that can triumph over this child so long as the child is rooted in a relationship with Jesus. It is faith in Jesus that will help our lives shine no matter what darkness we encounter in life. By the waters of baptism, we are welcomed into the Body of Christ. We celebrate our rebirth and heavenly vocation of everlasting life.

And that brings us to the candle. A candle lit by the light of the Paschal candle is entrusted to the child's parents and godparents. Once a child is baptized into the Body of Christ, that child is called to carry the light of Jesus throughout his or her life. The beginning of that journey obviously depends heavily on the example of those who are closest to that child. This is of course why the candle is entrusted to the child's parents and godparents. Our baptismal candles remind us that our lives are to be like a light that shines to the people around us no matter how young or old we are or what crosses we carry. Just like Catholics young and old who would light their candles centuries ago and process them to the church on this feast day, this celebration invites us to keep our candles burning brightly each and every day as a people who shine with the love of Christ, not only here at church when we gather but out in the world as well.

And so, on this feast day of the Presentation of the Lord, we might very well consider all the ways that we and our families can keep that light within us lit and held high. What would this look like? What is that one thing we can do this week to deepen our relationship with the Lord? What is that one thing we can do today to help us carry the light of Christ by the example of our lives, even as we carry our crosses, at home, at work, at school, in our politics or in our world? Imagine if we all did that at once! Imagine what our world could look like then! To coin St. Sophronius, faith has the power to make the whole universe radiant with the brilliance of Christ's eternal light.