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Jesus' Presentation in the Temple: Magisterium, Saints, Poets

A selection of texts related to the Presentation of Jesus by Mary and Joseph in the Temple 40 days after the Child's birth.

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VOICE OF THE MAGISTERIUM

Mary is, finally, the Virgin presenting offerings. In the episode of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple

(cf. Lk. 2:22-35), the Church, guided by the Spirit, has detected, over and above the fulfillment of the laws regarding the offering of the firstborn (cf. Ex. 13:11-16) and the purification of the mother (cf. Lv. 12:6-8), a mystery of salvation related to the history of salvation. That is, she has noted the continuity of the fundamental offering that the Incarnate Word made to the Father when He entered the world (cf. Heb. 10:5-7). The Church has seen the universal nature of salvation proclaimed, for Simeon, greeting in the Child the light to enlighten the peoples and the glory of the people Israel (cf. Lk. 2:32), recognized in Him the Messiah, the Savior of all. The Church has understood the prophetic reference to the Passion of Christ: the fact that Simeon's words, which linked in one prophecy the Son as "the sign of contradiction" (Lk. 2:34) and the Mother, whose soul

would be pierced by a sword (cf. Lk. 2:35), came true on Calvary.

A mystery of salvation, therefore, that in its various aspects orients the episode of the Presentation in the Temple to the salvific event of the cross. But the Church herself, in particular from the Middle Ages onwards, has detected in the heart of the Virgin taking her Son to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (cf. Lk. 2:22) a desire to make an offering, a desire that exceeds the ordinary meaning of the rite. A witness to this intuition is found in the loving prayer of Saint Bernard: "Offer your Son, holy Virgin, and present to the Lord the blessed fruit of your womb. Offer for the reconciliation of us all the holy Victim which is pleasing to God" (St. Bernard, Homily on the Purification, III). This union of the Mother and the Son in the work of redemption reaches its climax on Calvary, where

Christ "offered himself as the perfect sacrifice to God" (Heb. 9:14) and where Mary stood by the cross (cf. Jn. 19:25), suffering grievously with her only-begotten Son.

Paul VI, Apost. exhort. *Marialis cultus*, no. 20

1. The words of the aged Simeon, announcing to Mary her sharing in the Messiah's saving mission, shed light on woman's role in the mystery of Redemption. Indeed, Mary is not only an individual person, but she is also the "daughter of Zion", the new woman standing at the Redeemer's side in order to share his Passion and to give birth in the Spirit to the children of God. This reality is expressed by the popular depiction of the "seven swords" that pierce Mary's heart: this image highlights the deep link between the mother, who is identified with the daughter of Zion and with the Church, and the

sorrowful destiny of the Incarnate Word.

Giving back her Son, whom she had just received from God, to consecrate him for his saving mission, Mary also gives herself to this mission. It is an act of interior sharing that is not only the fruit of natural maternal affection, but above all expresses the consent of the new woman to Christ's redemptive work.

2. In his words Simeon indicates the purpose of Jesus' sacrifice and Mary's suffering: these will come about so "that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (Lk 2:35).

Jesus, "a sign that will be opposed" (Lk 2:34), who involves his mother in his suffering, will lead men and women to take a stand in his regard, inviting them to make a fundamental decision. In fact, he "is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel" (Lk 2:34).

Thus Mary is united to her divine Son in this "contradiction", in view of the work of salvation. Certainly there is a risk of ruin for those who reject Christ, but the resurrection of many is a marvellous effect of the Redemption. This proclamation alone kindles great hope in the hearts of those to whom the fruit of the sacrifice already bears witness.

Directing the Blessed Virgin's attention to these prospects of salvation before the ritual offering, Simeon seems to suggest to Mary that she perform this act as a contribution to humanity's ransom. In fact, he does not speak *to* Joseph or *about* Joseph: his words are addressed to Mary, whom he associates with the destiny of her Son.

3. The chronological priority of Mary's action does not obscure Jesus' primacy. In describing Mary's role in

the economy of salvation, the Second Vatican Council recalled that she "devoted herself totally ... to the person and work of her Son, *under and with him*, serving the mystery of Redemption" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 56).

At the presentation of Jesus in the temple, Mary serves the mystery of Redemption under Christ and with Christ: indeed he has the principal role in salvation and must be ransomed by a ritual offering. Mary is joined to the sacrifice of her Son by the sword that will pierce her soul.

4. The primacy of Christ does not rule out but supports and demands the proper, irreplaceable role of woman. By involving his mother in his own sacrifice, Christ wants to reveal its deep human roots and to show us an anticipation of the priestly offering of the cross.

The divine intention to call for the specific involvement of woman in

the work of Redemption can be seen by the fact that Simeon's prophecy is addressed to Mary alone, although Joseph also took part in the offering rite.

The conclusion of the episode of Jesus' presentation in the temple seems to confirm the meaning and value of the feminine presence in the economy of salvation. The meeting with a woman, Anna, brings to a close these special moments when the Old Testament as it were is handed over to the New.

**from John Paul II, Address at
General Audience, January 8, 1997**

VOICE OF THE SAINTS

Our lighted candles are a sign of the divine splendor 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.

The Mother of God, the most pure Virgin, carried the true light in her arms and brought him to those who lay in darkness. We too should carry a light for all to see and reflect the radiance of the true light as we hasten to meet him.

The light has come and has shone upon a world enveloped in shadows; the Dayspring from on high has visited us and given light to those who lived in darkness. This, then, is our feast, and we join in procession with lighted candles to reveal the light that has shone upon us and the glory that is yet to come to us through him. So let us hasten all together to meet our God.

The true light has come, the light that enlightens every man who is born into this world. Let all of us, my brethren, be enlightened and made

radiant by this light. Let all of us share in its splendor, and be so filled with it that no one remains in the darkness. Let us be shining ourselves as we go together to meet and to receive with the aged Simeon the light whose brilliance is eternal.

Rejoicing with Simeon, let us sing a hymn of thanksgiving to God, the Father of the light, who sent the true light to dispel the darkness and to give us all a share in his splendor.

Through Simeon's eyes we too have seen the salvation of God which he prepared for all the nations and revealed as the glory of the new Israel, which is ourselves. As Simeon was released from the bonds of this life when he had seen Christ, so we too were at once freed from our old state of sinfulness.

By faith we too embraced Christ, the salvation of God the Father, as he came to us from Bethlehem. Gentiles

before, we have now become the people of God. Our eyes have seen God incarnate, and because we have seen him present among us and have mentally received him into our arms, we are called the new Israel.

St. Sophronius of Jerusalem, Candlemas Sermon (7th century)

On this day the most Blessed Virgin obeyed both these precepts.

Although Mary was not bound by the law of purification, since she was always a Virgin and always pure, yet her humility and obedience made her wish to go like other mothers to purify herself. She at the same time obeyed the second precept, to present and offer her Son to the Eternal Father. "And after the days of her purification, according to the law of Moses, were accomplished, they carried Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord" (Luke 2:22). But the Blessed Virgin did not offer Him as

other mothers offered their sons. Others offered them to God; but they knew that this oblation was simply a legal ceremony, and that by redeeming them they made them their own, without fear of having again to offer them to death.

Mary really offered her Son to death, and knew for certain that the sacrifice of the life of Jesus which she then made was one day to be actually consummated on the altar of the Cross; so that Mary, by offering the life of her Son, came, in consequence of the love she bore this Son, really to sacrifice her own entire self to God. Leaving, then, aside all other considerations into which we might enter on the many mysteries of this festival, we will only consider the greatness of the sacrifice which Mary made of herself to God in offering Him on this day the life of her Son. And this will be the whole subject of the following discourse.

The Eternal Father had already determined to save man, who was lost by sin, and to deliver him from eternal death. But because He willed at the same time that His Divine justice should not be defrauded of a worthy and due satisfaction, He spared not the life of His Son already become man to redeem man, but willed that He should pay with the utmost rigor the penalty which men had deserved. "He that spared not even His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all" (Romans 8:32). He sent Him, therefore, on earth to become man. He destined Him a mother, and willed that this mother should be the Blessed Virgin Mary. But as He willed not that His Divine Word should become her Son before she by an express consent had accepted Him, so also He willed not that Jesus should sacrifice His life for the salvation of men without the concurrent assent of Mary; that, together with the sacrifice of the life

of the Son, the Mother's heart might also be sacrificed.

Saint Thomas teaches that the quality of mother gives her a special right over her children; hence, Jesus being in Himself innocent and undeserving of punishment, it seemed fitting that He should not be condemned to the Cross as a victim for the sins of the world without the consent of His Mother, by which she should spontaneously offer Him to death.

But although, from the moment she became the Mother of Jesus, Mary consented to His death, yet God willed that on this day she should make a solemn sacrifice of herself, by offering her Son to Him in the Temple, sacrificing His precious life to Divine justice. Hence Saint Epiphanius calls her 'a priest.'

from St. Alphonsus de Ligouri, *The Glories of Mary*

VOICE OF THE POETS

Beewise we gather our wax all year

From bramble sorrow and thistle
tear,

Briar sadness and spine of pain:

Bitter flowers that bloom again!

But dearest winter brings a day

When thorns have lovelier bloom
than May;

When candles are fashioned and lit
by One

Who fashioned her wax to be lit by
the Sun,

Then watched her Candle burn: the
price

Of sin-consuming sacrifice.

Today she shares the Flame anew

To make us priest-and-victim too.

And Mary-mothered flames and
Flame

Live their sacrificial Name.

John D. Boyd S.J. *The Sign -
February 1947*

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