

## Commentary to the Presentation of the Lord

### Introduction

Forty days have passed since Christmas and—perhaps with a bit of nostalgia—we remember the emotions aroused in us by that feast and, even more, the good news that the baby brought us, a star coming from heaven to illuminate our nights, “*rising Sun, shining on those who live in darkness and in the shadow of death*” (Lk 1:78-79). Why does the Church today make us contemplate that child again?



The feast of the Presentation of the Lord has very ancient origins. It was already celebrated in the East in the fourth century with the name of the Feast of Encounter: it recalled the encounter of Jesus in the temple with his Father and with Simeon and Anna—representatives of the rest of Israel who remained faithful to the God of Abraham. It was introduced in Rome in the seventh century and received the title of Feast of the purification of Mary. It was called ‘Candlemas’ since a night procession characterized it with candles.

The rite of light connected it with Christmas—the feast of Christ—the light. In Bethlehem, the glory of the Lord wrapped the shepherds in light. In the Far Eastern countries, the star shone for the magi; in the temple of Jerusalem, the “*Light to enlighten the people*” appeared.

Forty days have passed since Christmas, and it may be that the Star of Bethlehem that “*we have seen in its rising*” has been a bit blurred. It does not fascinate us more as then or is no longer the only one to get our attention. Perhaps we’ve let ourselves be enchanted by other more striking and concrete stars, by other stars that better reflect our dreams and our expectations. That’s why the Church makes us meet that Child again: she invites us to welcome him in our arms, as did Simeon and Anna, the poor of Israel, the people attentive to the voice of the Spirit.

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“*The lights of this world are temporary. Jesus is the ‘light of the nation.’*”

## First reading: Micah 3:1-4

Thus says the Lord God: Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me; And suddenly there will come to the temple the LORD whom you seek, And the messenger of the covenant whom you desire. Yes, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who will endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like the refiner's fire, or like the fuller's lye. He will sit refining and purifying silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi, Refining them like gold or like silver that they may offer due sacrifice to the LORD. Then the sacrifice of Judah and Jerusalem will please the LORD, as in the days of old, as in years gone by.

A pious man, well on in years, after making a balance of his life, concludes: "*From my youth to old age, I have yet to see the righteous forsaken or their children begging for alms*" (Ps 37:25). His statement can be considered the synthesis of the traditional theology of Israel: The Lord sends misfortunes to the wicked and reserves his blessings for the righteous. Yet, everyone can verify that this naive faith is severely tested by life. Not only do the wicked have luck—and that in itself is extremely embarrassing—but even the righteous are affected by continuous misfortunes, and this is very outrageous. Then the disturbing question arises: On whose side is God?

Around 450 B.C. was a time of severe religious and moral decay. This is the question the people address to Malachi. The oracles of this prophet reflect the dramatic situation of the society in which he lives. The wealthy men introduce in their attractive homes foreign women and repudiate the wife of their youth, forcing her "*weeping, and wailing, and cover the altar with tears*" (Mal 2:13). The priests are corrupt and so unworthy that God turns into curses the blessings they pronounced (Mal 2:2). The poor are subject to constant harassment and embezzlement. The rich, arrogant and insolent, prosper... and the Lord does not intervene.

Discouraged and disappointed, the simple people conclude: "*It is useless to serve God. There is no benefit in observing his commandments. Happy are the shameless! Those who do evil succeed in everything; though they provoke God, they remain unharmed*" (Mal 3:14-15). Most skeptics exclaim: "*Where is the God who does justice?*" (Mal 2:17).

The oracle taken from our reading contains God's response to this claim made by the people. "*Now—the Lord promises through the prophet I am sending my messenger ahead of me to clear the way.*" After this messenger, a second, mysterious character called 'the Lord,' 'the covenant's Angel,' 'the Lord of hosts' will appear (v. 1). He 'will enter the sanctuary' and will be like fire, to purify the sons of Levi (v. 3), ministers of worship in the temple of Jerusalem. There was an urgent need for this intervention because the Levites behaved as

sacred officials. Cold performers of rituals without value paid scant attention to the sincere adherence of the heart to the Lord.

The oracle of Malachi was fulfilled with the coming of Jesus. He entered into the temple that was to be the “*house of prayer for all nations*” and that priests reduced to “*a den of thieves*” (Mk 11:17). He purified it, introducing the religion acceptable to God, that of the heart and love for people (Jn 4:21-24). Every religious practice—even that of today’s Christians—always needs to be purified with fire and with the lye of the Lord. The Eucharistic Bread, broken and shared in our communities, is not always a sign of a life made available to the brother and sister. It is reduced at times to a ritual disconnected from life. It does not affect the choices, does not damage selfishness, and does not burn infidelities.

When announcing the coming of the Lord, the Old Testament prophets spoke of the terrible day, hard to bear, of fire refining precious metals, but whose flame burns and “*scorches his face*” (Sir 38:28). They spoke of lye that makes stained clothes white and affects even the most resistant tissues.

‘The angel of the covenant,’ ‘the Lord of hosts,’ Jesus always wants to make a purification of religion with his ‘fire,’ with his ‘lye’—his word, his Spirit—but perhaps, even today, the Christian community is reluctant to accept his coming. Today’s feast is an invitation to open wide the doors of our house for the Lord who comes to purify, to prepare us to offer to God “*an offering in righteousness*” (v. 3).

### Second reading: Hebrews 2:14-18

Since the children share in blood and flesh, Jesus likewise shared in them, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the Devil, and free those who through fear of death had been subject to slavery all their life. Surely he did not help angels but rather the descendants of Abraham; therefore, he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every way, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest before God to expiate the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested through what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

We always carefully choose the persons to whom we reveal secrets, ask advice, express our worries. We prefer to confide in those who have had to face and solve the same problems; we trust those who have gone through and overcome difficult moments similar to ours. Computerized robots have been functioning for a time. They can execute meticulous examination, perform analyses immediately, diagnose the ailments afflicting the person, and prescribe the cure.

Why then do people—the statistics guarantee—still prefer the doctor in the flesh? The answer is

simple: because the doctor is one of us. He is subject to our own illnesses, experiments with our anxieties and apprehensions. If he has to undergo histology, he trembles, like everyone else, when the report is given. He is sensitive; he understands our fears and does not approach our pain with the robot's coldness. The reading indicates that we can have recourse to the doctor at any time and with complete confidence. He is a brother who has shared with us 'blood and flesh,' that is, the weakness and fragility that are part of our human condition (v. 14).

Jesus made himself like us in every respect (v. 17). He lived our dramas, has set the same disturbing questions, has been plagued by doubts, has overcome our own temptations. Even for him, as for us, it was hard to remain faithful to the Father's will. This statement is commented by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews with such a simple and effective reflection: Christ was not sent to rescue angels, but to take care of us, children of Adam (v. 16). For this, he fully immersed in our reality as people subject to death.

He faced death and showed us that it does not mark the entry into the darkness of a tomb but the exit from the darkness that envelops this world in mystery. It is the time of entry into the light, in the infinite spaces of the blessed life of God. So he freed us from the fear of death (vv. 14-15), diabolic fear because it dulls the mind, prevents us from becoming aware of the transitory nature of the goods of this world and of giving our lives generously for love.

The end of the passage (vv. 17-18) takes up the issue of trust that we must have in Christ. He is one of us, was put to the test, has experienced our own sorrows, so he can understand our weaknesses, hold out a hand and accompany us when we are in trouble.

### Gospel: Luke 2:22-40

When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, Mary and Joseph took Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, just as it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord, and to offer the sacrifice of a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons, in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord. Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Christ of the Lord. He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying:

*"Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in the sight of all the peoples: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel."*

The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Israel has jealously guarded and meditated Malachi's prophecy that we found in the first reading. For centuries, she has called for its fulfillment and has cultivated the certainty that one day God would give a demonstration of his strength against those who did not keep his law. In today's Gospel, Luke tells of the Lord's surprising answer to this expectation. His triumphant entrance into the sanctuary, among hosts of angels, stern judge ready to condemn, was expected. Here instead, he enters the temple most unexpectedly: a weak and helpless baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, supported by the arms of a girl just in her teens, accompanied by the young husband.

In that child, it is difficult to recognize, all equal to the others, 'the fire and the lye' sent from heaven to purify Israel. Only spiritually sensitive people could see in him the 'light that enlightens all people.' In the first part of the passage (vv. 22-24), the episode of Jesus' Presentation in the Temple is narrated. The Jewish law prescribed that all the firstborn, both men and animals, be consecrated to the Lord (Ex 13:1-16). Since children could not be sacrificed, they were redeemed with the offering of a clean animal sacrificed in their place. Wealthy parents handed to the priests a lamb, the poor a pair of doves or turtledoves.

Mary and Joseph have fulfilled this requirement of the Torah. Luke takes the opportunity to point out that the Nazareth family belonged to the category of the poor. They were not able to offer a lamb. God's love for the last ones, the sinners, the impure persons, is a theme dear to the evangelist. With a tinge of almost imperceptible language he, from the beginning of his Gospel, places the family of Jesus not only among the poor but also among the unclean. According to the law of Israel (Lev 12), only the new mother had to submit herself to the purification rituals. Luke speaks instead of 'their purification' (v. 22) as if, in solidarity with sinful humanity, the entire holy family had gone to the temple in search of purification.

A second theme interests the Evangelist: the scrupulous observance of the requirements of the Lord's law by the holy family. It is confirmed with an almost pedantic insistence: "*according to the law of Moses*" (v. 22); "*as it is written in the law of the Lord*" (v. 23); "*as ordered in the*

*law of the Lord*” (v. 24); *“to do him according to the custom of the law”* (v. 27); *“required by the law of the Lord”* (v. 39).

Luke wants to point out Jesus to his communities as the model of adherence to the will of the Father from the first moments of his life. This harmony with the designs of God is possible only to those who, like the members of the holy family, have chosen the word of Holy Scripture as a guide to their steps.

Mary and Joseph know that the child they carry in their arms is not theirs: God entrusted him to their care but remained God’s. They will guard him with care until the day in which he will inaugurate the extraordinary mission he is destined to. It is a mission not revealed to them and is completely shrouded in mystery. They take him in the temple and consecrate him to the Lord: they recognize that he is the Lord’s. They will never withhold him for themselves; they will prepare him to deliver him as a gift to the world—in the time appointed by God.

They are a model for all the parents to whom God entrusts his children. These are not creatures on which one folds up with possessive love. They are Heaven’s gift to give to the world. Parents are called to consecrate them to the Lord: to discover the mission which the Heavenly Father has destined them and put them in a position to carry it out.

The second part of the passage (vv. 25-35) is the center of today’s Gospel. The scene takes place in the temple. The vast esplanade that Herod the Great has just finished building is teeming with pilgrims. They are visiting the holy place to pray, to receive instructions from the rabbis seated on the porch of Solomon, to offer burnt offerings. They are religious and devout people. They seem, therefore, in the ideal spiritual condition to recognize and welcome the expected envoy of the Lord. Yet when muddled up in the crowd, Joseph and Mary enter the holy place holding the son, no one realizes the extraordinary event that is taking place. No one can imagine that that baby is the light of the world.

Only Simeon, when he notices them, is caught by a sudden shudder, by an uncontrollable emotion. He makes his way among the people, heads towards them. Upon reaching the child, he takes him from the arms of his parents. He raised him up to heaven moved and exclaimed: *“Now, O Lord, you can dismiss your servant in peace, for you have fulfilled your word and my eyes have seen your salvation”* (vv. 29-30).

Simeon, the godly man who has spent many days of his life in the Lord’s temple pondering the scriptures, how was he able to recognize in the newborn the ‘light of the people?’ What made him different from the other Israelites present in the temple? He was not an old man—as he is customarily depicted. Luke describes him thus: *“he was upright and devout, waiting for the time when the Lord would comfort Israel”* (v. 25), and further on, he was a man *“led by the Spirit”* (v. 27). These are the interior dispositions that characterize the contemplatives, those who can discern the true reality, those who find themselves beyond the appearances of this world. It’s not enough to be pious and religious to see people and the world with God’s eyes.

Simeon is an exemplary man. Throughout his life, he has chosen the Spirit of the Lord as confidant; he has kept alive the certainty that God is faithful to his promises and lived in the light of the Holy Scriptures. For this, he is peaceful and happy. His view extends beyond the narrow horizons of the present time; he contemplates his fate far and asks the Lord to welcome him into his peace.

As they advance in years, some people become sad, sometimes also challenging to deal with. Their dissatisfaction often depends on sickness and the decline of forces, but it comes from not having spent their lives for lofty ideals and by fear of death. In a last attempt to cling to this world, they even withdraw in themselves, complain if they are not the center of attention if not all are ready to meet their demands.

Not so Simeon. He does not think of himself but others, of all humanity, to the joy that people will experience when the kingdom of God is established. He does not regret the past. He realizes that evil existing in the world is enormous; he does not cultivate a pessimistic vision of the present and the future. He converses with God and looks forward. He knows that, in the short term, nothing will change. However, he is happy because he was lucky enough to contemplate the dawn of salvation. He rejoices as the farmer who already dreams of the heavy rains at the end of the sowing day and then the bountiful harvest.

He is the symbol of the faithful remnant of Israel who, for many centuries, has been waiting for the Messiah. He does not limit himself to welcoming Jesus in his arms but takes him to offer Jesus to the world, to present him to everyone as ‘the light.’ He understood that the Messiah does not belong only to his people but was sent to bring salvation to all nations, to be the light of all the nations (vv. 30-32).

This time, Simeon makes a second prophecy directed to Mary: Jesus will become a sign of contradiction (vv. 34-35). The image of the sword that will pierce the soul was sometimes interpreted as the announcement of Mary’s sorrow at the foot of the cross. That is not so. The mother of Jesus is understood here as a symbol of all the people. In the Bible, Israel is pictured as a mother-woman who will give the world the Savior. Who, better than Mary, could portray this mother-Israel? It is to Israel that Simeon—sensing the drama that awaits him—turns. He announces the appearance of a deep, inevitable tear within her. In front of the Messiah sent from Heaven, some Israelite open their mind and heart to salvation; many others will close themselves in denial and so decreed their destruction.

In the third part (vv. 36-38), Luke introduces Anna, the elderly prophetess who recognized the Lord in the child considered by all a common newborn. Who gave her this spiritual sensitivity? From where does this piercing look come from? Anna—the evangelist explains—was a woman intimately united to the Lord. All her life, she thought only of him: “*She had been continually about the temple serving God as a widow night and day in fasting and prayer*” (v. 37).

She was eighty-four years old, and this number—which is equivalent to 7x12—has a symbolic

meaning: 7 indicates perfection, 12 the people of Israel. Anna is the holy people that come to full maturity, delivering the awaited Savior to the world. She belonged to the tribe of Asher, the smallest and most insignificant of the tribes of Israel. Luke notes this decisively marginal detail because he is the evangelist of the poor, of the last ones. He wants the Christians of his community to be convinced that they are the best prepared to recognize Jesus as the savior.

Anna had remained faithful to her husband to the point of not remarrying. Her choice has a theological significance for the evangelist. Like Simeon, Anna represents faithful Israel. In her life, the bride-Israel has had only one love. Then she lived in the mourning of widowhood until the day when, in Jesus, she recognized her husband, the Lord. Then she again rejoiced, like the bride who finds her only love. Anna did not depart from the temple because it was the home of 'her husband.' They do not need other gods; those who live in intimacy with the Lord do not look for lovers. Like Anna and like all lovers, they do not speak of the loved one.

The passage ends (vv. 39-40) with the return of the Holy Family to Nazareth and with the notation concerning the growth of Jesus. He was not different from the other children of his village except for the fact that he increased in wisdom, age, and in divine and human favor.

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