

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today's Feast of the Presentation of the Lord commemorates the presentation of Jesus in the Temple by his parents, St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is based upon the story of this event recorded in Luke 2:22–40, and has at times in the history of the Church also been known as the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Why did Joseph and Mary do this?

According to Jewish law, summarized in Leviticus 12, every woman who gave birth to a son was required to be ritually purified by presenting a sacrificial offering in the Temple 40 days following his birth. February 2nd is 40 days after Christmas. The prescribed sacrifice was a lamb, but for those who could not afford the more expensive lamb, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons was acceptable. Mary and Joseph chose the option for the poor. Of course, the Blessed Virgin needed no purification since she was completely sinless. Nevertheless, Joseph and Mary demonstrated their faithfulness to God's law by going to the Temple to fulfill this requirement. Furthermore, the Mosaic law (Exodus 13:12–15, ff.) also required that all first-born male children be presented and given to the Lord as holy and set apart, and that they be "redeemed," or bought back from the Lord during their presentation, by means of a gift to the Temple, an offering of five shekels (Numbers 18:15–16). Mary and Joseph would have also fulfilled this requirement, showing once again that they were faithful Jewish parents.

The Feast of the Presentation/Purification is one of the oldest feasts on the liturgical calendar of the Church, dating from at least the year 380. Egeria, a wealthy European lady, made a remarkable pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the latter part of the fourth century, where she stayed for two or three years. In letters written to her sisters back home, she gives a detailed description of how this Feast was celebrated in Jerusalem at that time, thus establishing its antiquity.

This day is also known as Candlemas, the day when the candles of the church and the faithful are blessed for the year. This practice arose from the encounter of the Holy Family, during the Lord's presentation, with the priest Simeon (Luke 2:25 ff.). Simeon took the Christ Child up in his arms, blessed God and uttered those words that have come to be called the *Nunc Dimittis* (Canticle of Simeon) which are prayed daily at the liturgical Office of Compline or Night Prayer:

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel."

This prophesy regarding the Christ Child as a "light for revelation" is what connects this day with the blessing of candles. Candlelight is a symbol of goodness, purity, hope, illumination and sacrifice. The use of candles in our worship and devotions reminds us of the truth, beauty and goodness of our Catholic faith, and to trust in Jesus Christ who is "the light of the world" and "a lamp to our feet, a light to our path."

Parochial Vicar  
Fr. Richard Ballard