

FEAST OF PURIFICATION
Mass for Day of Consecrated Life and Jubilarians

CATHEDRAL OF SAINT PAUL
February 2, 2010

BY THE MOST REVEREND JOHN C. NIENSTEDT

Readings: Mal 3:1-4
Heb 2:14-18
Lk 2:22-40

“Longing for light, we walk in darkness.
Longing for truth, we turn to you.
Make us your own, your holy people,
Light for the world to see.

“Christ be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ be our light!
Shine in your church gathered today.”

The prophet, Malachi, was reflecting the darkness of his age in the passage that we have just heard in tonight’s first reading. While the reconstruction of the temple had been completed in the 5th century B.C., still the reform of the priestly caste had not yet occurred. Malachi refers to the people as being precious to God like gold or silver, but still marked with impurities that the refiner’s fire would need to burn away. But the passage has a hopeful tone, because it foretells the arrival of God’s messenger who will prepare God’s people for the coming of the Lord, himself.

Our Gospel passage is the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy as Mary and Joseph fulfill the dictate of the law found in Exodus 13:2 by consecrating their first-born son in the temple of the Lord, as well as fulfilling the dictates found in Leviticus 12:8 whereby the child’s mother offers an appropriate sacrifice. This, of course, takes place 40 days after the birth of Jesus and marks for us the official end of the Christmas Season.

The theme of consecration in reference to Jesus, however, takes on an ominous tone when the prophet, Simeon, tells Mary that her child is destined for the rise and fall of many—a sign to be contradicted, which will also act as a sword to pierce her heart. Even as he is being revealed as “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” and glory for the people of Israel, the shadow of the cross is not far away, reminding us of that ultimate, selfless sacrifice which Christ will make for the many.

And this, of course, is where the reading from Hebrews moves our meditation to ponder the mystery of the Paschal Mystery. For it was precisely by taking on our human flesh that Jesus was ultimately to render powerless the Master of death and by his resurrection to deliver us from slavery to sin and death that continued to weigh upon us.

And so, as the Body of Christ, his Church, we gather this evening to proclaim Christ to be our light, our truth, our source of salvation. And we do so like Simeon and the prophetess, Anna, with eyes of faith, with hearts filled with thanksgiving and with wills determined to speak about this child to all who are awaiting redemption.

Allow me at this time to reflect briefly upon this Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, so well depicted in these scriptural scenes in light of the gathering of so many men and women of religious communities who have come here this evening to renew their own consecration to the Lord and his Church.

First of all, we are told that Simeon was a righteous and devout man upon whom the Holy Spirit rested. Anna, herself, is described as always being in the temple where she worshipped with prayer and fasting. Their devotion freed them from any preconceptions or assumptions that would have kept them from recognizing Jesus.

In a similar way, those who have consecrated their lives to living the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience are a constant reminder to the rest of us in the Church that we must seek the perfection of charity by which those counsels are fueled. The essential witness of religious life within the life of the Church is a daily reminder to us that the Kingdom is near and will come.

Secondly, the presence among us of religious men and women fills us with a sense of thanksgiving for the various manifestations of the Holy Spirit, creating diverse ways of expressing our fundamental unity in truth.

The Second Vatican Council's constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, expresses it this way:

“From the God-given seed of the counsels a wonderful and wide spreading tree has grown up in the field of the Lord, branching out into various forms of the religious life lived in solitude or in community. Different religious families have come into existence in which spiritual resources are multiplied for the progress in holiness of their members and for the good of the entire Body of Christ.” (L.G. 43)

Finally, like the prophetic voices of Simeon and Anna, men and women in consecrated life speak about Christ to all who await redemption by fulfilling their respective charisms. Whether it be in works of teaching or healing, in caring for the poor or providing leadership for the Church, religious men and women are true missionaries who bring the message of the Gospel to others within the framework of the teachings of our Church. They do so in ways that ensure that it is the light of Christ that others should see, rather than having the spotlight on themselves.

My dear friends, as we move now from this liturgy of the Word into the liturgy of the Eucharist, let us ask the Lord of light to renew within us the grace of our baptism, when all of us were first consecrated to Him. And in that renewal, let us be prepared to receive, immediately and directly, the very Presence of the Son of God who dwells

among us in this Eucharistic sacrament, calling us to go forth to spread his light and his love to others.

“Many the gifts,
many the people,
many the hearts that yearn to belong.
Let us be servants to one another,
making your Kingdom come.

“Christ be our light!
Shine in our hearts.
Shine through the darkness.
Christ be our light!
Shine in your church gathered today.”