Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Feastday: November 21

The Feast of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, celebrated annually on November 21st, commemorates the presentation of the Blessed Virgin as a child by her parents in the Temple in Jerusalem. Before Mary's birth, her parents received a heavenly message that they would bear a child. In thanksgiving for the God's gift of Mary's birth, they brought her to the Temple to consecrate their only daughter to The Lord. The celebration of the Feast is first documented in the 11th century within the Byzantine Catholic Church. It was introduced into the Roman Catholic Church in the 15th century by Pope Gregory XI, then removed from the calendar by Pope Pius V in the mid 16th century. Pope Sixtus V later re-established the feast in 1585, and it is still celebrated today, commemorating the faith of her parents, Joachim and Anne, and the purity of Mary.

Mary, in keeping with Jewish custom, was likely consecrated to God as a child

Stillbirths, infant mortality, and mothers' dying during labour have been among the most predictable human tragedies since time immemorial. Medical progress has only in recent generations dramatically reduced such deaths, albeit unevenly throughout the world. In light of the real dangers of pregnancy and childbirth, the successful birth of a healthy baby has naturally given rise to ceremonies in many cultures thanking God for the precarious gift of new life. Jewish law required the ritual dedication of first-born sons to God in the Temple. It is probable that a similar custom, if not a law, called for Jewish girls to also be so dedicated. It is the likely presentation of the child Mary in such a ceremony that we celebrate today.

The Church does not claim that today's feast is rooted in Sacred Scripture. There is no direct biblical support for Mary's Presentation except in the apocryphal "Gospel" of Saint James, a problematic text replete with follies. The lack of textual support is, nevertheless, no reason to doubt the ancient tradition, especially preserved in Eastern Orthodoxy, that Joachim and Anne consecrated their daughter, Mary, to God at the age of three in the Jerusalem Temple. The prophet Samuel was similarly presented by his mother, Hannah. Both Hannah and her namesake, Anne, were long barren and were thus all the more grateful to see the fruit of their unexpected pregnancies.

It is a good and holy thing for Christian parents to proactively dedicate their children to God, or even to invite them to consider a life consecrated to God as priests or religious. While some may consider it an imposition for parents to so explicitly encourage their children to take steps down that holy path, all parents, in fact, are energetic in promoting some level of conformity with their own religious or quasi-religious beliefs. These "beliefs" may be related to the environment, politics, leisure, art, sports, or a thousand other causes or hobbies. Parents always indoctrinate their children. It is intrinsic to their role. The only question is what the content of that indoctrination will be. Ideally, Christian parents hand on to their children their most deeply held beliefs—including their faith in Jesus Christ.

The essence of any sacrifice is to burn, kill, or destroy something of value in order to close the yawning gap between God and man. A sacrifice can be in thanksgiving, to repent of a sin, or in petition for a favour. Primitive priests in cultures across the globe since time immemorial have stood at their rough stone altars on behalf of their people to offer God fatted calves, heifers, sheep, the finest grain, red wine, and even their fellow man. Abraham was willing to offer his very own son to God. Blood sacrifice gradually receded in Judaism, however, to bloodless sacrifice, and eventually to non-sacrificial pathways to God. The age of priests in the Jerusalem Temple sacrificing animals gradually mutated, from the late first century onward, into rabbis in synagogues teaching from books.

To present a child to God, either in a formal ritual or in a private dedication, is to lay that child on a symbolic altar and to say to God: “You create. We procreate. My child is Your child. Do with this child as You will.” Such humble and antecedent submission to the will of God is not an abdication of the duty to form a child in human and religious virtue. It is just to be realistic. Children are gifts, not metaphorically but actually. A child is not a piece of property or an object a parent has a right to possess. No one understands this like the infertile couple. When parents consecrate a child to God, whether at baptism or otherwise, even informally, they are manifesting a willingness to return a gift to its remote source, to please the Maker by giving Him what He already possesses, life itself and all who share in it.

Prayer

Saints Anne and Joachim, in gratitude for the gift of life, you presented Mary in the Temple. Help all young parents to see in you a model of dependence on God’s providence and may similar consecrations in today’s world prepare saints for the Church of tomorrow.