

THE FOURTH WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME - C
The Feast of the Presentation of the Lord
2-8 February 2025

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Sunday

THE PEACE GOD GIVES US IN CHRIST

A Reflection by Timothy of Jerusalem

“The just live forever and their reward is in the Lord; their hope in the Most High.” In every saint, we are shown some part of God’s love and grace as a gift to share. Today we see two such holy ones, Simeon and the Virgin Mary. Let’s begin with Simeon.

He had already received from God the knowledge that he would not die and depart this present life until he had seen the Christ. But he received much more. He took Jesus into his arms; he enfolded life eternal in love and joy. Simeon the righteous longed to see the Lord and by God’s special grace did see him, and recognized him for who he was, and opened his arms wide to receive Him.

Then he called out to God for release from the life he had lived so long that he might be with God in the fullness that only the Christ can bring. We have all heard the words: *“Now Lord, let your servant go in peace, as you promised; for I have seen your salvation.”* I have seen, so let me depart in the peace of knowing you have fulfilled your promise to Israel and to all our race. I have seen your glory, seen the angels dancing, the archangels praising you, and all creation leaping for joy. I have seen the way from earth to heaven and into your one Kingdom. Now let me depart and be in that Kingdom.

Simeon didn’t have to witness the insolence of those who rejected the Messiah, or the crown of thorns they gave him in place of the crown of love he deserved. He did not have to see slaves beating their Lord, a spear being thrust into his side, or the sun itself darkened and the moon failing and the elements of the world altered. Mary did have to see all these things, as have to see them too.

We also can pray with Simeon, *“Lord now let your servant go in peace”*. Simeon saw the salvation prepared for all peoples, our salvation and that of Mary, the Virgin Mother. But we can join her too in empathic suffering with Christ, her Son and our brother, and in doing this we learn how to share feelings with others and so to reach out to them to share with them the comfort Christ alone gives.

This doesn’t take away our suffering but gives it a new and transforming meaning. Mary leads us along this way. That is one of her many gifts to us. What is true love if it doesn’t constantly reach out to others in whatever their needs may be? But in Christ, we find peace even in suffering and find the grace to place ourselves and our lives in our God’s hands.

We know God reaches out to embrace and hold us even as Simeon was allowed to do for God incarnate. But don’t we embrace God incarnate when we receive another as Christ? Let us rejoice in knowing what mighty work God can do through us by drawing us to see Christ in those we meet.

Monday

SAINT BLAISE

From Ibreviary by Pietro Barbini

Little is known about the life of Saint Blaise, whose liturgical memory is celebrated today. Biographical information on the Saint can be found in the hagiography of Camillo Tutini, who collected numerous testimonies passed down orally. It is known that he was a doctor and bishop of Sebaste in Armenia and that his martyrdom occurred during the persecutions of Christians, around 316, during the conflicts between the emperors Constantine (West) and Licino (East). Captured by the Romans, he was beaten and flayed alive with iron combs, the ones used to card wool, and finally beheaded for refusing to renounce his faith in Christ. He is a Saint known and venerated both in the West and in the East. His cult is widespread in both the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

In his hometown, where he carried out his episcopal ministry, it is said that he performed numerous miracles, among others the one for which he is known is remembered, that is, the healing, which occurred during his imprisonment, of a boy from a fishbone stuck in his trachea. Even today, in fact, the Saint is invoked for "throat ailments".

Furthermore, San Biagio (St. Blaise) is one of the fourteen so-called auxiliary saints, that is, those saints invoked for the healing of particular ailments. Venerated in many Italian cities and towns, of which, many, he is also the patron saint, he is celebrated on February 3 in almost the entire Italian peninsula.

It is tradition to introduce, in the middle of the liturgical celebration, a special blessing on the "throats" of the faithful, imparted by the parish priest by crossing two candles (in ancient times blessed oil was used). Also interesting are some popular traditions handed down over time on the occasion of the celebrations of the Saint. Some people, like in Milan, celebrate with their families by eating the leftover panettone especially for Christmas, and some prepare typical sweets with particular shapes, which recall the saint, blessed by the parish priest and then distributed to the faithful. In Lanzara, a hamlet in the province of Salerno, for example, it is traditional to eat the famous "polpetta di San Biagio".

In the city of Salemi, however, it is said that in 1542 the Saint saved the population from a serious famine, caused by an invasion of locusts that destroyed the crops in the countryside, interceding and answering the prayers of the people who invoked his help (in fact, Saint Biagio or St. Blaise), in addition to being the protector of "throat ailments" is also the protector of crops); from that day on, every year on February 3, Salemi celebrates the Saint by preparing the so-called "cavadduzzi", literally "locusts", to remember the miracle, and the "caddureddi" (whose shape represents the "throat"), which are small loaves of bread prepared with water and flour, blessed by the parish priest and then distributed to the faithful. Since 2008, also in Salemi, a spectacular representation of the "miracle of the locusts" has been organized, with the collaboration of all the schools and associations of the city, which ends with the arrival of the Saint at the church to lay down the gifts and have his "throats" blessed.

Tuesday

TO WHAT DO WE GIVE WITNESS?

A Reflection on Texts from Mark Boyer & Carroll Stuhlmueller

God called Moses to enter a cloud in order to come into the Divine presence. Jesus took three disciples with him to enter a cloud on Mt. Tabor and so let them experience God's presence. The Letter to the Hebrews says we too have been called into a cloud; it is the host of witnesses that has surrounded us all our lives and will be with us in our hour of death—when we go to meet God face to face. Who are those witnesses? Some are family members, some are teachers or priests or friends or companions at work; but the most important are the members of the community of faith we live in. They witness to us God's presence precisely by means of faith.

When Jesus brought healing to a woman who had a humanly incurable ulcer and to a little girl who had died he called attention to faith. The woman had faith, when most others did not. Jairus had faith even though the mourners and his friends did not. Faith was the key to salvation. We have been reminded many times that we too need real healing. But without faith healing does not take place. Who helps us have the faith that is needed to open us, and our situation, to God's healing power and love?

Now ask an even more important question. Does my faith sustain others, or a special other, so that they are opened to God's power and love? It isn't only that we are in the midst of a cloud of witnesses but that we are members of that crowd for others! The great miracle of human life and history is the calling forth of faith.

The crowd of unbelievers laughed when Jesus said: She is only asleep. But he went and took her hand and said: Get up, little girl. And she got up. We are members of Christ's body. Our Lord is the hand of faith that reaches out to someone who has fallen and dares to say, when there seems to be no hope of a new life: Get up. Through that faith flows the power of God to save and give life.

Jesus' concern for the little girl was not abstract. He tells the parents to give her something to eat. We are called to consecrate our entire selves, body and soul, flesh and blood, to showing love and loyalty and doing it in practical ways. That is how Jesus is consecrated to us. He will give us not only ordinary food but the food of the spirit, the food that is Jesus' very self—body and blood, soul and divinity, we say.

He calls us to do this now because in the life of the Kingdom, we will have a resurrection body and will use it to love and serve God and one another perfectly. We are not destined for an isolated personal ecstatic vision of God. We are called to fullness in the fulfilled Body of Christ. We begin to learn to live this way by imitating Jesus in love and service to the community to which we belong. Our vocation is to make our present life together a foreshadowing of the heavenly Body of Christ living fully in the Kingdom. Today we begin again to prepare for this everlasting sharing as we help others believe and so begin to prepare to share the life of God, which is nothing more or less than sharing.

Wednesday

THE GIFT OF ONE'S SELF

A reflection developed from a text by Carlo Cardinal Martini

The New Testament illustrates the inexhaustible richness of Jesus' words as they became the sources and guides of life for the first Christians. This witness was, and is, continued in the witness of the martyrs. In both cases what is witnessed is charity, lived out in the gift of self in service of others. The service is more often spiritual than simply material. A marvelous example is found in St. Agatha.

Agatha illustrates the sharing of goods we see in the Jerusalem community as presented in the Book of Acts. She was rich yet she became poor because she shared so much with those who were in need. She helped the Christian community of Catania in Sicily to change things for the poor in a way that prefigured the new society that faith in Christ can and will create. In Acts, this sort of giving of self is bound together with prayer and with listening to the Lord's Word in joy. It becomes more than a gift of social change. It is equally a gift of a new hope born of faith in Christ's resurrection as shared by us through our union with Him. We give things but the giving is actually rooted in the gift of self.

In Agatha's case this was a consecration of her life and self through the preservation of her virginity as a way of saying that she was married to Jesus and wholly his. For Agatha this led to martyrdom and her steadfastness in the face of every sort of torment was her way of showing that nothing at all can destroy our hope in God, as given us in Jesus' death and resurrection. Notice that this is a free gift, perhaps even more deliberately free than the sharing of all the things she possessed.

Recall the story in Acts of Annas and Saphira, who sold property and pretended to give all to God and their community but actually kept half for themselves. They were making themselves hypocrites and this destroyed them. Agatha refused to pretend in any way. There is a multitude of stories about how she overcame every sort of test and torture. This makes her life a witness to the supreme value of genuineness in our self-giving to God. It makes the point that living hope, no matter what happens, can be a tremendous gift to our fellow Christians. Agatha never stopped hoping or putting all her trust, and so her very self, into God's hands. She witnessed to God's never-ending love for us.

Charity and the concrete ways of sharing and sharing oneself are bound together. Charity is broader than any particular act. It is the best obedience to the Lord. It is a celebration of the resurrection and of the hope we are given in the Lord's resurrection. Charity is joy at Jesus' eternal presence amid his own. But it does aim for concrete action. It searches for ways to do everything that is possible in showing the new life that is proper to believers, socially as well as personally. Every sharing is a free manifestation of the richness of charity, just as our charity is a gift that witnesses to God's never-ending love for us.

Thursday

THE HARVEST OF A WITNESS TO CHARITY

A reflection from a text by Carlo Cardinal Martini

Quite frequently St. Paul's letters speak of Christian charity using the language of worship, calling it an "offering" and a "sacrifice". In Romans he says, "Think of God's mercy and worship him in a way that is worthy of a thinking being by offering your living bodies as a holy sacrifice" (Rm.12:1f). He says the same to the Ephesians. It means, first, that worship is one's entire life-work, one's every day gift of self to God. Second, it presents concrete acts of spiritual and material charity as worship. He calls this the best way to come to know the will of God!

The Japanese martyrs provide marvelous examples, especially Fr. Paul Miki. He and his companions, Jesuits and Franciscans and lay Christians, were marched through the countryside to demonstrate what comes of disobeying the emperor. Actually, it showed the hope of Christians for something far beyond any imperial gift or favor. Paul made this clear in a sermon given as he hung on the cross waiting for the executioner to pierce his heart with a lance. From his heart flowed charity more than blood, and it created a Christian community that lived for centuries without church organization or even clergy. These believers had faith and hope, and these kept them faithful to Christ during centuries of being outlawed and persecuted.

The Christian vision of the life of charity is embodied in the famous hymn found in First Corinthians. It distinguishes a Christian's inward love from that of deeds done in conventional service of another and connects them with tongues, prophecies, and miracles. It denies that even giving oneself to be killed can be important unless motivated by Christian charity. That doesn't make such charity a mystery but links it with acceptance of God and others without conditions, with pardon, with patience and kindness, and understanding not based on ordinary reasoning or social training. Most of all it links it with hope.

Hope provides an inner orientation that permits a person to choose the right direction. Love puts us in the presence of God even while it is the supreme discovery of who we are as human beings. It shows us our brothers and sisters in a new light. It is the fruit of our total abandonment into the loving arms of our God. The Spirit speaks to us about this love in the history, as we may call it, of Christian sainthood. Because the saints allowed themselves to be guided by the Spirit, they were made holy. They didn't seek to glorify self or any earthly reality, even the Church, but humbly entrusted their lives to God. The Spirit gave them strength and insight to appreciate the world's needs and do something about them. What they did was give themselves to love and to hope in God. The martyrs, for example, are not our heroes because of the pains they bore for God. The Japanese martyrs were tied up on a cross and then a soldier thrust a lance into their hearts to kill them. It was a simple death without a great deal of suffering. We offer what we are, and God brings much fruit from it.

Friday

THE MONASTIC WITNESS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

A reflection inspired by a text of Jean Danielou

Christian monks have always found John the Baptist as a forerunner and model. In part, this is because everything that John did pointed to Jesus Christ as Savior, and that is what Christian monks witness to by their very existence. At a deeper level, it is because monks understand themselves as deliberately taking up the Cross of Christ, completing as St. Paul says whatever is lacking in the sufferings of Christ for the Church and the world.

Compare the passion of John the Baptist with that of Jesus. John spoke the word of God to King Herod (the grandson of King Herod who tried to kill Jesus when he was yet a baby). Herod had been maneuvered, and willingly enough, into marrying the wife of his brother, Philip. Herodias wanted to be a great person in the world and thought she had a better chance with Herod than with Philip so she left Philip and married Herod. John told Herod this was contrary to the Law of God. For daring to do this he was put in prison. Herodias looked for a way to have him executed.

John suffered and died because he got in the way of ambition and a search for worldly power and glory. Jesus died for roughly the same reason. Christian monks have always seen in John's sufferings and murder, as in those of Jesus, a picture of what they have to witness against and for. A monk seeks God first and last and always, and bears witness to the fact that all are called to do this, especially Christian believers. People, monks included, are always struggling with their habitual ways of thinking about what makes life good and pleasant and so tend to put the quest for a pleasant life ahead of the quest for union with God.

The ancient Egyptian monks paid close attention to their dreams and fantasies (daydreams) because these show how one is hanging onto "worldly" ways of thinking or making progress in letting go of them. They regularly told a "Spiritual Father", another monk long tested in monastic conversion, what was going on in their dreams and fantasies so they wouldn't forget to keep struggling. Herodias, and King Herod himself, weren't even struggling, as most people seemingly aren't.

John the Baptist and Jesus both died rather than be disloyal to the vocation God had given them to call people away from such fantasies to living a divine love. First, they tell the truth about life's meaning and about wrongheaded efforts to make it better. Second, they help others see how to live in a way that opens one to the grace of becoming like God. That is also the vocation of a Christian monk and the meaning of monastic asceticism. It is why monks thought of themselves as undergoing a kind of martyrdom by devoting themselves wholly to the search for union with God. The Herods and Herodias of every time and place need this witness, and so do monks. So God has called us all to love one another as Jesus has loved us and to give witness to this call in the way we live.

Saturday

THE VIRGIN MARY AS GOD'S TEMPLE

A Reflection from a Text by Fr. Yves Congar

The Gospels expressly relate the Virgin Mary to the Temple of God only in the accounts of her presentation of Jesus and of the events of a family journey to celebrate the Passover at the Temple when Jesus was twelve. Christian piety added things, as in various Apocryphal texts, but the Church insists the Gospels say more than enough. We deal with symbolic representations of profound spiritual realities.

Mary was chosen and predestined to be the mother of Jesus, truly God, and truly human, and was made worthy of her vocation by grace. She shows us how to live such a vocation with unflinching fidelity. The gospel of Luke presents her as a model to be imitated by all Christian believers striving to respond to the vocations God gives them. Mary is, next to her Son, the first of the living stones out of which God is building a temple so all may worship and find grace-given salvation.

If Mary is the Mother of God she has a special relation to the Body of Christ. But this Body is the true Temple. This is true of Christ's physical body too but most particularly of what we call Christ's "mystical" body, the Church. Consider why this is so pertinent to understanding the role of Mary in God's plan of salvation. First, because Christ lives and grows within her, she is the Temple of God in a unique way. Yet Christ lives and grows within us spiritually and so makes us temples of God. Second, because of the grace that filled Mary, she was able to respond completely and without reservation to the call of God to become his mother. Yet we too have been given graces to enable us to respond to God's calls to us.

It is not difficult to see how Mary provides a model for all Christians to follow as they seek to respond to God's call to bring light to the world and to lead every member of the human race to the salvation which God offers all in Christ. If we find this filled with difficulties so did Mary. If we have to carry a cross with Jesus, so did Mary. If we have to let go of our own plans for life, that is precisely what God's call required of Mary. She responded freely and fully to each call to surrender herself and her ways of thinking and feeling to the requirements of God's Plan of Salvation through her son. All this makes her more and more a temple where worship of God and prayer to God filled each day and hour more and more. She, and all believers, have been made, as it were, pregnant with Christ and salvation. What are we to do in response if not to go to whoever we know to be in need—as Mary did to Elizabeth—and show them love and mercy?