

Feast of the Presentation of the Lord  
February 2, 2014  
Readings: Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2: 22-40

Rummaging through musty bookshelves in a medieval monastery is not high on most people's list of fun things to do! But imagine the look on the face of a scholar when in 1884, he discovered a 22-page fragment of a travel diary on a shelf in an obscure monastery in Tuscany, Italy detailing an extended pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

The diary was written by an intrepid and resourceful late 4<sup>th</sup> century woman from Spain named Egeria. Not exactly a household name to us, she bore witness to the earliest customs in the Church. Egeria was an adventurous woman of means whose curiosity matched her deep piety. Her pilgrimage all over the Holy Land reveals that early Christian worship was full of signs and symbols, with a liturgical year similar to ours today with Christmas, Epiphany, Lent and fasting, Easter and Pentecost. It was truly a one of a kind find!

For example, her diary describes how the Christians commemorated the incarnation with a Midnight Vigil Mass at Bethlehem, followed immediately by a torchlight procession to Jerusalem arriving at the Church of the Resurrection, "at that hour when men can begin to recognize one another," i.e. at dawn. But she also spoke about customs on the fortieth day after Christmas, relating that the feast: "is undoubtedly celebrated here with the very highest honor, for on that day there is a procession, in which all take part, ...and all things are done in their order with the greatest joy... All the priests, and after them the bishop, preach, always taking for their subject that part of the Gospel where Joseph and Mary brought the Lord into the Temple on the fortieth day."<sup>1</sup>

Christ is indeed the Light of the Nations, thus the blessing and procession of candles on this day is most appropriate.

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<sup>1</sup> Egeria, Diary Chapter XXVI

In the Middle Ages this Feast was known as the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and was more popularly called Candlemas Day. While technically considered a feast of the Lord (which is why we celebrate it when it falls on a Sunday), there is a clear Marian aspect to this feast— one both of purification and of suffering. The Lord would accomplish God’s plan only by being a “sign of contradiction” and that the chosen vessel of the redeemer would submit herself to the Law of Moses, not placing herself above it, but always as the servant.

Pope John Paul II taught that, “Simeon's words seem like a second Annunciation to Mary, for they tell her of the actual historical situation in which the Son is to accomplish his mission, namely, in misunderstanding and sorrow.”<sup>2</sup> In her great humility Mary sought favor, even though she herself was never apart from God’s favor. But I also can only wonder what Mary must have been thinking after hearing the stinging words of Simeon.

How did she receive that prediction in her heart? “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.” Simeon had been waiting for the Messiah, assured by God that he would not see death before seeing the Lord’s Anointed One. Now, he could die. Was he a deeply troubled man, or a prophet?

Mary had to ponder on these thoughts as she presented herself at the temple. But her deep faith moved her to a greater level of trust that whatever might happen, would happen according to God’s will. We present ourselves to the Lord, perhaps with a mixture of fear and awe. May we be willing to present ourselves honestly, without hiding anything, covering up anything, but humbly trusting that He

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<sup>2</sup> Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Redemptoris Mater*, n16, 25 March 1987

will purify our intentions, allowing us to shine forth the light of Christ more brightly to a world so desperately in need of hope.