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A light for all peoples

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Feb. 1, 2014 Spiritual Reflections

More than 16 centuries ago, a woman from Galicia in northwest Spain set out on a journey to the Holy Land, hoping to experience for herself the places where important biblical events had occurred. Her name was Egeria (sometimes known as Etheria or Sylvia), and her travels were made all the more memorable because she kept a journal of her three years on the road (381-384). Wishing to share her faith and experiences with her "sisters" back home, Egeria wrote in descriptive detail. Through her writings, which were lost for several centuries, later believers were able to appreciate the sacramental and liturgical celebrations of the post-apostolic Christian community.

Presentation of the Lord

Malachi 3:1-4
Psalm 24
Hebrews 2:14-18
Luke 2:22-40

While in Jerusalem for today's feast, Egeria wrote: "The 40th day after the Epiphany is undoubtedly celebrated here with the very highest honor, for on that day, there is a procession in which all take part, in the Anastasis, and all things are done, in their order, with the greatest joy, just as at Easter. All the priests and, after them, the bishop preach, taking as their subject that part of the Gospel where Joseph and Mary brought the Lord into the temple on the 40th day. ... And when everything that is customary has been done in order, the sacrament is celebrated and the dismissal takes place" (*The Pilgrimage of Egeria*, No. 56).

First observed in the Eastern church as "The Encounter" or "The Meeting," the feast of the Presentation began to be observed in the West in the sixth century. As its liturgy developed, the feast was celebrated devoutly, with solemn blessings and processions and with candles to honor Jesus as "the light to enlighten the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32). Because this feast also marked the required purification of Mary after she had given birth, it is the custom in some cultures to bless new mothers on Feb. 2.

When Luke included this event in his infancy narrative, he had specific reasons for doing so. Luke wished his readers to appreciate the fact that Jesus grew up in a family who faithfully observed the law. No fewer than five times within 18 verses, Luke affirmed that the actions of Jesus' parents were required by law. As Fred B. Craddock has noted, even though Jesus would later dispute certain interpretations of his tradition, his position was not that of an outsider (*Luke*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1990). Being nurtured carefully in his tradition helped prepare him to oppose the flawed and hollow practices of others.

This first appearance of Jesus in the temple also served to fulfill certain prophecies, like that of Malachi in today's first reading. Upon his appearance, the Lord would bring purification so that the sacrifices offered by the sons of Levi would be authentic and pleasing to God. When Jesus, Son of God and son of Mary and Joseph, came to the temple, his presence lent purity, his words offered light and life, and, in the end, his once-and-for-all perfect sacrifice would effect the redemption of all of humankind.

Jesus is described by the author of Hebrews in today's second reading as a merciful and faithful high priest who became like his brothers and sisters in every way in order to expiate their sins. Something of the salvific character of Jesus' mission is also referenced by Simeon in today's Gospel. Up to this point, the narrative has reflected the joy of new parents and their child, happily observing the rituals of the law they loved. But, then, Simeon interjects an ominous note. Only at great cost would Jesus carry out the purpose for which he was born. Both he and his mother would know suffering -- but that suffering, as Anna the prophetess would affirm, would bring about the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:38) while offering the light of salvation to the gentiles (Luke 2:32).

As we celebrate this feast, let us present ourselves to God, as Jesus did. Offering all we are, all we have and all we will become; let us, like Jesus, be willing to go forth from this place determined to be a source of light and healing in an often dark, broken world. Let us grow strong and wise, knowing that the favor of God rests upon us (Luke 2:40).

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