

A month of purification

We often take the names of the various months of the year for granted. Take February, for instance. It is the shortest month of the year and purportedly the last one added to the Roman calendar (around 713 B.C.). It is said that the word February comes from the Latin, “februum,” a word which means purification. Originally it may have referred to a Roman purification feast held at the end of the month. We usually associate purification with Ash Wednesday, the day that begins Lent, a season of purification. But not this year. Ash Wednesday doesn’t occur until March 6. So, in what sense is February still a month for purification?

In accord with the church’s tradition, I’d like to suggest that Feb. 2, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord Jesus in the Temple, is a day to associate with purification. It commemorates the day when, according to Jewish law and custom, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple for the customary rites of purification. Jesus, of course, had no need to be purified. He is the all-holy Son of God made man, the Messiah, who came into the world to save us from our sins. Yet carried in the arms of his Mother, Jesus obeys the Law of Moses. Neither did the Blessed Virgin Mary need to be purified. She is the all-holy Mother of God, kept free from all sin, original and personal, from the first moment of her existence. Full of grace and blessed among women, she too obeys the Law of Moses.

They were met at the temple by the aged and holy Simeon, his eyes of faith as keen as ever. Filled with the Spirit, he realizes that an extraordinary event is taking place: the long-awaited Messiah enters the temple. It is a first encounter of the Savior with his people. His arrival there attracts not only Simeon and the widow Anna but perhaps even the Gentiles in the temple area. His coming into the temple signals its purification and foretells the day when Jesus, prior to his passion and death, will again purify the Temple for those who were using it for their own unclean purposes.

Both in the East and West, the church solemnly celebrates the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple. In the East, this feast is sometimes called “Hypapanty,” a word that commemorates the first meeting of the Messiah with his people. In the West, this feast is called Candlemas Day, a day in which candles are carried to honor the newborn Christ as “the light of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of his people

Israel.” Sensing that this event is not locked in the past but a living mystery, we are challenged to welcome Christ anew into the temple of our hearts and the temple which is the church. For his coming into our depths and into our midst signals and affects our purification from the darkness of sin and death.

The purifying Feast of the Presentation takes place every February but this year it takes on a special significance for Catholics, as Pope Francis gathers with the leadership of bishops’ conferences from around the world to discuss the sexual abuse crisis. For too long this crisis has plagued the church, sapped her energy, dispirited the faithful and wreaked havoc in the lives of victim-survivors. Please God, may this important meeting be a grace-filled moment of purification for the whole church. Let us pray, and pray earnestly, that it will set a direction that, in God’s grace, will truly purify the church of this great evil and set the church on the path of authentic renewal, holiness and trustworthiness.

No single meeting and no set of measures, however effective in ensuring transparency and accountability, will alone be sufficient to deal with this crisis. At the end of the day, it is only the deep personal renewal of each member of the church – beginning with its bishops – that will restore the church’s beauty and vigor.

May *februum*, the month of February, be the beginning of that deep purification that will renew and beautify the temple of the church.