



The Holy See

MASS FOR RELIGIOUS MEN AND WOMEN
ON THE FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION OF JESUS IN THE TEMPLE

SEVENTH WORLD DAY OF CONSECRATED LIFE

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Saturday, 1 February 2003

1. *"When the time came for their purification ... they brought the child up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord" (Lk 2,22). The Infant Jesus entered the temple of Jerusalem in the arms of his Virgin Mother.*

"Born of woman, born under the law" (Gal 4,4), he submitted to the destiny of every first-born male child of his people: according to the Law of the Lord he had to be "ransomed" with a sacrifice, 40 days after his birth (cf. Ex 13,2.12; Lv 12,1-8).

The newborn Child, in every way like all others outwardly, does not pass unnoticed. The Holy Spirit opens the eyes of faith of the elderly Simeon who comes near, and, taking the Child in his arms, recognizes in him the Messiah and praises God (cf. Lk 2,25-32). This Child, he prophesies, will be "a light for the Gentiles, the glory of Israel" (cf. v. 32), but also *a sign of contradiction* (cf. v. 34) because according to the Scriptures he will realize the judgement of God. Moreover, the devout old man predicts to the astonished Mother that this will happen through a suffering in which she too will be a sharer (cf. v. 35).

2. Forty days after Christmas, the Church celebrates this stirring *joyful mystery* that, in a certain way, anticipates both the *sorrow* of Good Friday and the *joy* of Easter. In the Eastern Tradition this day is called the "Feast of the Meeting", because in the sacred space of the Temple of Jerusalem, the meeting takes place between God's graciousness and the expectation of the chosen people.

All this acquires in Christ an *eschatological* meaning and value: he is the Bridegroom who comes to accomplish the nuptial covenant with Israel. Many are called, but how many are effectively ready to receive him, with watchful minds and hearts (cf. Mt 22,14)? In today's liturgy we contemplate Mary, the model of those who wait and open their hearts in docility to the meeting with Lord.

3. In this light, the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the temple is a very suitable day for the *appreciative praise of consecrated persons*, and for some years the *Day of Consecrated Life* has rightly been observed on this day. The picture of Mary who *in the temple offers the Son to God*, speaks eloquently to the hearts of the men and women who have made a total *offering of themselves to the Lord* through the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience for the Kingdom of Heaven.

The theme of spiritual sacrifice is fused with that of *light*, introduced by Simeon's words. The Virgin appears as a candlestick bearing Christ, the "Light of the world". With Mary, thousands of men and women religious and consecrated lay people throughout the world gather to renew their consecration, holding lighted candles, the expression of their life, burning with faith and love.

4. Here too, in St Peter's Basilica this evening, we offer a solemn *thanksgiving to God for the gift of the consecrated life in the Diocese of Rome and in the universal Church*. I warmly greet Cardinal Eduardo Martínez Somalo, Prefect of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, and his collaborators. I affectionately greet all of you, brothers and sisters, men and women religious and consecrated lay people! With your large, devout and joyful presence, you impress upon the liturgical assembly the face of the Church-Bride, like Mary, doing her utmost to be in total conformity with the Divine Word.

High up in their niches along the walls of this basilica, the founders and foundresses of many of your institutes watch over you. They recall the mystery of *the Communion of Saints* through which, in the pilgrim Church, from age to age, many renew the choice of following Christ with a special consecration in accord with the *many charisms* kindled by the Spirit. At the same time, those venerable figures are an invitation to turn our gaze to the heavenly homeland where, in the gathering of saints, so many consecrated souls praise with full beatitude the Triune God whom they loved and served on earth with a free and undivided heart.

5. Poverty, chastity and obedience are distinctive features of the redeemed person, inwardly set free from the slavery of egotism. *Free to love, free to serve*: this is the way the men and women are who renounce themselves for the Kingdom of Heaven. Following in the footsteps of the crucified and risen Christ, they live this *freedom as solidarity*, taking on the spiritual and material burdens of their brothers and sisters.

This is the *multiform* "service of charity" that is exercised in the cloister, in hospitals, parishes and

schools, among the poor and immigrants, in the new meeting places of the mission. In thousands of ways consecrated life is a manifestation of God's love in the world (cf. Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita consecrata*, chapter III).

With grateful hearts, let us praise God today for each of them. Through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, may the Lord increasingly enrich his Church with this great gift. To the praise and glory of his Name and for the spread of his Kingdom. Amen!

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