

Dearly beloved,

Tonight we celebrate the dual feast of the purification of Our Lady and the presentation of the child Jesus in the Temple. Both were mandated by the Mosaic Law, but both were unnecessary because of the miraculous nature of the conception and birth of the Child. But out of respect for the divine law, obedience and humility, today Joseph and Mary bring the Son of God to be dedicated to God the Father in the Temple at Jerusalem.

The first reading, taken from the prophet Malachi, foretells this coming of the Lord into His temple. He says, “The Lord, whom you seek, and the angel of the testament, whom you desire, shall come to his temple.” Malachi spoke this prophecy some 430 years before Christ, yet he saw His presentation in the Temple with utter clarity. And what does he say of this Lord? That He will purify—He will purify both His priests and all those devoted to Him.

The imagery of the candle, then, is apt for tonight’s feast, for a candle both gives light and burns down, and Malachi says Our Lord is a refining fire, the kind that purifies and perfects whatever it touches. Christ is the fire, and we are His candles, and at any one time He is either purging us or enlightening us, but the fire is the same; it is we whose spiritual state differs from day to day or from decade to decade.

When we consider the figure of the candle as an image of our relation to Christ, we must remember never to grow weary of being purified. We want to be illumined from within and give light to others, and we want to do that now, but a candle only gives light by the wick burning away the wax. We become illumined from being purged of all sin and selfishness and self-hatred and all the things that block the exercise of charity in our souls. And this purgation, this interior purification, is painful, it is long, it is tedious, it is oftentimes enough to make us despair. And it is also both necessary and normal. We are tainted by original sin, we compound it by choosing to do evil in various ways, we become injured by other men’s sins; it is not surprising that our road to inner peace is neither short nor easy.

And yet even as candles burning down, we still have an essential part to play in Christ’s mission in the world. First of all, those of us being purified serve a distinct role in the Body of Christ—we allow others to exercise charity toward us in the form of advice and support and prayer. This may seem silly, but think of it—is there nothing that more draws us outside ourselves than having someone to love, someone to suffer with and suffer for, someone to guide to sanctity and happiness? We all need someone to suffer for, and someone to suffer for us, and in the Church, these roles must be continually exchanged in the wonderful Providence of the economy of salvation. So those being purged are helping those now illumined by allowing themselves to be ministered to.

Second, those being purified, even if it is painful for them, are still giving light to the world. A candle always does both at the same time—if the wax is melting, the wick is also giving light; when the light goes out, the wax also ceases to melt. As long as we are committed to being purified by Christ, we are a light to others, both within and outside the Church. A candle is never conscious of the light it produces, and so we are often unaware of how much we inspire others. And many times it is precisely by fighting the good fight that we encourage others; we do not need to be Padre Pio or Mother Teresa to draw others to Our Lord—it is enough to play our part in the Body of Christ with love and courage. And if we shine less brightly now than the great Saints, it is also the case that not everyone can look at the sun or the moon, but must draw strength from a weaker light to get to our destination, and we can be that light.

How can we be committed to our own purification? In two ways. First, by being a man or a woman of desire. The prophet Malachi says that the Lord will come to his temple, the one you seek and one you desire. Purification is achieved most quickly when charity burns within us, and we truly seek the Lord and desire Him with our whole hearts, when we desire Him for His own sake and not because we want something from Him, even something noble like sanctity or virtue. It is the kind of love that says: I want you, no matter who I must be, give yourself to me and I will be satisfied; only dwell in my soul, and then do what you wish with me. This

was the kind of love that drove Simeon and Anna not only to visit the Temple, but to live there; the love that prompted Our Lady to offer her virginity to God and to give her body and soul entirely to the Lord for whatever purpose He saw fit.

A second way to ensure our purification is to receive the Eucharist often and with a lively faith. Since it is Our Lord coming to us, it is the principal means of both our purgation and our illumination. St. John Damascene likens it to a burning coal, which cleanses our souls, just as it once purified the lips of the prophet Isaiah. The more often we receive, the more quickly He will work in us, the more speedily He will give us interior peace. And the more we receive the Eucharist, the more fervent and frequent should be our confessions. We can easily gauge our desire for the Lord by how honestly and how often we confess our sins. If we are slothful in receiving this sacrament, it is no wonder we suffer in our purification. But if we are consistent, even when it means confessing the same things over and over again, even unto shame and sadness, Christ will reward us. He delights in our humility and our earnest attempts to do His will, and He will not be long in consoling us.

So tonight, as we light our candles for the Canon of the Mass, may we be encouraged by what they signify, that our Savior, who is both a Light and Fire, has come to save us, and He will not abandon us, but will accompany us through this valley of tears until we reach the true Temple, the New Jerusalem. Let us rejoice tonight in that hope, and as the holy liturgy says, Commemorating our most holy, pure, blessed, and glorious Lady, the Theotokos and ever-virgin Mary, with all the saints, let us commend ourselves and one another and our whole life to Christ our God.