

The Feast of The Presentation of the Lord

02 February 2020, Rome - Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

I was raised by my maternal grandmother, Philomena Mkhize, who was kind, devout, super smart and a disciplinarian. Our home was as humble as the other homes around us. My grandmother had very few prized possessions and among them was her tea set. That tea set was no ordinary one, but an 8-piece vintage tea set. No one was allowed to use it, let alone touch it. When we asked her why it was never used, she would tell us that it was reserved for special occasions and sternly warned us not to touch it! Sure enough, in all the twelve years I spent with her, I only saw that tea set used once.

The practice of setting things apart or reserving them for a special purpose or use is as old as humanity itself. We consecrate buildings and set them apart for worship; we bless vessels, books and garments and set them aside for use at sacred liturgy. We even dedicate time or certain moments of the day for prayer, meditation and the celebration of the Eucharist and other sacraments. Interestingly, we also consecrate people: reserve, preserve, and set them apart for a particular purpose, either for a time or for life.

In 1997 St. Pope John Paul II established the 02 February, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, as the day set aside for Consecrated Women and Men. Today's Feast celebrates the encounter of Jesus as the Christ and Saviour with his own people. It marks the moment when Jesus was introduced to and recognised by Simeon and Anna who represented all those who had longed for the coming of the Messiah. These two elderly believers recognised Jesus the Christ and proclaimed him with joy as the Light of the Nations and Redeemer of God's people.

Today's Feast also highlights two important actions on the part of Mary and Joseph. That is sacrifice and consecration. St. Luke tells us, three times, that they did all what they did in accordance with the law: they came to purify themselves after the birth of their child and to consecrate him to the Lord, as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord..." a quote from Exodus 13:1-2:11-16 which essentially states that every first born is to be regarded as God's property.

The feast of the Presentation offers us all an opportunity to reflect on our identity and mission as consecrated men and women. I strongly believe that at the very heart of the crisis we are experiencing now as Church and specifically as religious is due to a confused sense of self (or identity) and direction (or mission). If this is so, then we need to re-orientate ourselves; review our lives and our communities and pray for the grace to be courageous as we make the necessary changes.

How do we do that? I propose that we do so by:

- A. Embracing a radical and total dedication to God

The Church documents, again and again, call us to a radical consecration which engages the whole person, and which invites him/her to an absolute and total dedication to God. Although all the baptised Christians are consecrated and called to devote themselves totally to God; the vocation of consecrated men and women, however, has its own proper radical nature. Essentially, religious are called to devote themselves to God alone and do so with an undivided heart. They are to seek God only and above everything else. A consecrated person when taking vows pledges themselves to live as Christ lived in all areas of their lives: that is with regards to possessions (vow of poverty), affections (vow of chastity) and autonomy (vow of obedience). All these elements and more are beautifully summarized in Canon 573 on the nature of Consecrated Life. Religious life, according to the teaching of the Church, does not admit to part time dedication or dedication of some aspects of my life and/or when I wish to. No! God is satisfied only with all of me or nothing.

B. Recognising and embracing our nothingness

Part of the Daily Prayer of our Founder Abbot Francis Pfanner says partly, “Saints of God, obtain for me the grace which I desire through the Precious Blood of Jesus namely **to realize fully my own nothingness...**” Let us admit it, we are sometimes tempted to believe and even act like we are important, very important! But we are not. The one who has called us and who sends us Is Important. The People we are called to serve Are Important.

I believe that many of the problems we have in our communities with certain members are due to the fact that they believe they are important. The renowned American author, Fr. Richard Rohr OFM once said, “If we cannot trust that we have an eternal identity in God, then we are burdened with creating our own personal importance day after day. Either we are made by another or we must be self-made—or we live in the hall of mirrors of everybody else’s image of us. Then we vie with one another for a zero-sum dignity and importance. We become lost in comparison, envy, competition, and co-dependency” (22 April 2014).

C. Discovering an old - new way of being a disciple/missionary

I was reading the Gospel of Luke 10:1-24 (or Matthew 10:1-33 – “the mission of the Twelve”), which talks about the mission of the seventy-two disciples Jesus sent out ahead of him in pairs. After reading it and one commentary on this Gospel, I was left with the question: Have I ever understood Jesus’ point or teaching in this Gospel passage? I have always understood it as a call to radicalism and simplicity. That is correct. Disciples are to go out and minister without shoes, wallet, and are sent out like sheep among wolves. But more than simplicity, Jesus demands vulnerability from them. The manner in which he commissioned them was meant to transform them rather than the people to whom they were sent.

Clearly Jesus wanted his disciples then and he wants us now to experience and get comfortable with being vulnerable. He wants us to serve, if we are called to leadership, and do so without baggage that comes prejudice and preconceived ideas. He wants us now, as sisters or brothers in one community to embrace one another truly and without conditions especially as we learn to form intercultural communities. Jesus told his disciples then and tells us now to stay in the people’s homes and eat their food! Not to stay in our own houses and invite them in – where we will be masters or bosses. Jesus challenges all of us a missionaries

to be vulnerable evangelizers ready to embrace the culture and the people to whom we are sent and not to be like the all-knowing and self-referential colonizers.

D. Embracing and proclaiming Jesus with JOY

Simeon took the child in his arms and blessed God, “Now Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation...” Anna too gave thanks to God when she encountered the child Jesus. Like Simeon and Anna, we too have an opportunity to encounter Christ daily – through prayer, in the Eucharist and in those we meet. Are we ready to embrace him with joy and give praise to God for this great gift we have received?

Today let it be the day I decide to be a joyful and life-giving presence of Christ in the world. If I have become grumpy, ungrateful, the “Complainer-in-Chief” in my community, today I have an opportunity to turn my life around and be a gracious, kind, loving and forgiving religious man or woman. None of us would like to see yet another description of a Confrere or Sister that reads, “He was a cross to himself and to others!”

My grandmother set aside her 8 piece vintage tea set for special occasions. We have been set aside by God through Christ in the Holy Spirit with one singular mission: to manifest the presence of God to all we encounter. Let us pray that Mary our Mother, Abbot Francis Pfanner, Mother Paula, and Blessed Fr Engelmar Unzeitig may intercede for us to be faithful and joyful religious missionaries.