

THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE AND THE PURIFICATION

A. Joseph and Mary present the Divine Child Jesus at the Temple (III, 36, 3):

“And when the time had come for purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem, to present him before the Lord there. It is written in God’s law, that whatever male offspring opens the womb is to be reckoned sacred to the Lord; (Ex. 13.2) and so they must offer in sacrifice for him, as God’s law commanded, a pair of turtle-doves, or two young pigeons (Lev. 12.8).” (Luke 2:22 sq).

St. Thomas Aquinas explains that Christ wished to be *“made under the Law, that He might redeem them who were under the Law”* (Gal. 4:4-5), and that the *“justification of the Law might be”* spiritually *“fulfilled”* in His members.

The Law contained a twofold precept touching the children born. One was a general precept which affected all namely, that *“when the days of the mother’s purification were expired,”* a sacrifice was to be offered (Lev. 12:6). And this sacrifice was for the expiation of the sin in which the child was conceived and born; and also for a certain consecration of the child, because it was then presented in the Temple for the first time. Wherefore one offering was made as a holocaust and another for sin.

The other precept was concerning the first-born of *“both man and beast”*: for the Lord claimed for Himself all the first-born in Israel, because, in order to deliver Israelites, He *“slew every first-born in the land of Egypt, both men and cattle”* (Ex. 12:12-29), the first-born of Israel being saved. Here also was Christ foreshadowed, who is *“the First-born amongst many brethren”* (Rom. 8:29).

St. Luke shows that both these precepts were fulfilled in His regard. However, As Gregory of Nyssa says (De Occursu Dom.): *“It seems that this precept of the Law was fulfilled in God incarnate alone in a special manner exclusively proper to Him. For He alone, whose conception was ineffable, and whose birth was incomprehensible, opened the virginal womb which had been closed to sexual union, in such a way that after birth the seal of chastity remained inviolate.”* The words *“opening the womb imply that nothing hitherto had entered or gone forth therefrom. Christ is called ‘holy,’ as He felt no contagion of earthly corruption, whose birth was wondrously immaculate”* (Ambrose, on Luke 2:23).

Among the legal victims the principal was the lamb, which was a *“continual sacrifice”*, Christ is called *“the Lamb of God”* (Jn 1:29). However, the law of Leviticus (12:6-8) *“commanded those who could, to offer, for a son or a daughter, a lamb and also a turtle dove or a pigeon: but those who were unable to offer a lamb were commanded to offer two turtle doves or two young pigeons”*. *“And so the Lord, who, being rich, became poor for our sakes, that through His poverty we might be rich,”* (2 Cor. 8:9), (Bede, Hom. xv in Purif).

These birds have also a figurative sense. For the turtle dove, being a loquacious bird, represents the preaching and confession of faith; and because it is a chaste and faithful animal, it signifies chastity; and being a solitary animal, it signifies contemplation. The pigeon is a gentle and simple animal, and therefore signifies gentleness and simplicity. It is also a gregarious animal; wherefore it signifies the active life. This sacrifice signified the perfection of Christ and His members.

Two of each of these animals are offered, to show that holiness should be not only in the soul, but also in the body.

B. Holocaust meaning, ritual and purpose:

As suggested by its Greek origin (holos “whole”, and kaustos “burnt”) the word designates an offering entirely consumed by fire, in use among the Jews. As employed in the Vulgate, it corresponds to two Hebrew terms: to holah, literally: “that which goes up”, either to the altar to be sacrificed, or to heaven in the sacrificial flame; Kalil, literally: “entire”, “perfect”, which, as a sacrificial term, is usually a descriptive synonym of holah, and denotes an offering consumed wholly on the altar. At whatever time and by whomsoever offered, holocausts were naturally regarded as the highest, because they were the most complete, outward expression of man’s reverence to God.

The principle rites to be carried out in the offering of holocausts, were on the part of the offeror, that he should bring the animal to the door of the tabernacle, impose his hands on its head, slay it to the north of the altar, flay and cut up its carcass, and wash its entrails and legs; on the part of the priest, that he should receive the blood of the victim, sprinkle it about the altar, and burn the offering. In the case of an offering of birds, it was the priest who killed the victims and flung aside as unsuitable their crop and feathers (Lev. 1). In public sacrifices, it was also the priest’s duty to slay the victims, being assisted on occasions by the Levites.

The following are the principal purposes of the whole burnt-offerings prescribed by the Mosaic Law: By the total surrender and destruction of victims valuable, pure, innocent, and most nearly connected with man, holocausts vividly recalled to the Hebrews of old the supreme dominion of God over His creatures, and suggested to them the sentiments of inner purity and entire self-surrender to the Divine Majesty, without which even those most excellent sacrifices could not be of any account before the Almighty Beholder of the secrets of the heart.

In offering holocausts with the proper dispositions, worshippers could feel assured of acceptance with God, Who then looked upon the victims as a means of atonement for their sins (Lev. 1:4), as a well-pleasing sacrifice on their behalf (Lev. 1:3, 9), and as a cleansing from whatever defilement might have prevented them from appearing worthily before Him (Lev. 14:20).

The holocausts of the Old Law foreshadowed the great and perfect sacrifice which Jesus, the High Priest of the New Law and the true Lamb of God, was to offer in fulfillment of all the bloody sacrifices of the first covenant (Heb. 9:12, sqq.).

C. The Immaculate and Virgin Mother of God is *legally purified* at the Temple (III, 36, 4):

“*The days of Mary’s purification were accomplished according to the law of Moses*” (Lk 2:22).

The sacraments of the Law did not cleanse from the uncleanness of sin which is accomplished by grace, but they foreshadowed this purification: for they cleansed by a kind of carnal purification, from the uncleanness of a certain irregularity.

“*If a woman, having received seed, shall bear a man-child, she shall be unclean seven days;*” and consequently, she is forbidden “*to enter into the sanctuary until the days of her purification be fulfilled*” (Lev. 12:2-4). Moses seems to have chosen his words in order to exclude any uncleanness from the Mother of God, who was with child “*without receiving seed*”. It is therefore clear that she was not bound to fulfil that precept, but fulfilled the observance of purification of her own accord.

However, it was becoming that the Immaculate mother, full of Grace, should be like her Son in humility, for “*God giveth grace to the humble,*” (James 4:6). Just as Christ, though not subject to the Law, wished, nevertheless, to submit to circumcision and the other burdens of the Law, in order to give an example of humility and obedience; and in order to show His approval of the Law; and, again, in order to take away from the Jews an excuse for calumniating Him: for the same reasons He wished His Mother also to fulfil the prescriptions of the Law, to which, nevertheless, she was not subject.