

Reflection: Michele Bisbey, CDP, PhD

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This day has been designated as Consecrated Life Day. Appropriately, we reflect on the vocation to consecrated life on a day which is also known as Candlemas.

As the name suggests, it's the day on which we bless all the church candles that will be used in the coming year – a tradition that goes back centuries.

Candlemas is a day on which we celebrate several moments recorded in the infancy narratives, of today's Gospel, specifically the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, the Purification of Mary, and a lesser-known moment—sometimes referred to as The Meeting.

According to Luke's Gospel, it was the custom of the day (though not a requirement) to present your first child to the priest in the Jerusalem Temple forty days after his or her birth, and you would bring with you a sacrifice – a lamb, a dove, or, if you couldn't afford that, like Jesus' family, just two pigeons.

The Purification of Mary, emphasizes Mary's ritual reentry into society after a forty-day period of seclusion following her baby's birth. That *was* Jewish law at the time, where women were presented in the Temple for a purification ceremony before going back out into the world.

A final event in Jesus' infancy that we mark on Candlemas is what is called "The Meeting," or the encounter between the infant Jesus and Anna, the first Christian prophet along with the old man Simeon. It's a poignant scene: Mary brings her newborn to the Temple, and these elders, somehow have the spiritual sight to see something – some wisp of hope for the future – in this six week old child. The song that Simeon sings after that encounter "Now, Lord You may dismiss your servant, in peace" that is, the dreams of my life are now fulfilled--has been sung for centuries the world over at evening prayer services.

The song goes on to reference Jesus, as the light of revelation to the Gentiles. There is also a tradition that claims that Mary carried a candle as she processed to the Temple.

In truth the celebration of candles and light may owe more to the fact that Candlemas Day: is the midpoint between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, the point at which spring – just barely – begins to stir. (The Rev. Astrid Storm 2/5/2012 www.stnicholasnewhamburg.org)

Coinciding with the turn toward spring and lengthening of light in the Northern hemisphere, Candlemas offers a liturgical celebration of the renewing of light and life

From the depths of winter, the feast reminds us of the perpetual presence of Christ our Light in every season. (Jan Richardson, www.paintedprayerbook.com)

All of this reminds me of a story and a time many years ago when I was a college student taking a literature class from a visiting professor— an elderly Polish woman.

She was a little difficult to understand but kept us spell bound nonetheless.

At the end of one class period, she turned and made the usual ritual gesture: “Are there any questions?” Quiet quilled the room.

Those two weeks had generated enough questions for a lifetime, but for now there was only silence.

“No questions?” she swept the room with her eyes.

Quickly, almost as an aside, a voice from the back of the classroom asked:

“Professor, what is the meaning of life?”

The expected laughter followed, and people stirred to go.

But she held up her hand and stilled the room and looked at the student for a long time, as if asking with her eyes if this was a serious query.

Then she said. “I will answer your question.”

Taking what seemed to be a rosary case from her skirt pocket, she opened it and brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter, and then began:

“When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine-- in deep holes and crevices and dark closets.

It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find. I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became an adult, I grew to understand that this was not just a child’s game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life.

I came to understand that I am not the light not the source of light. But light, truth, understanding, knowledge is there and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it. I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know.

Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world into black places in the hearts of people and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.”

(Adapted from It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It. By Robert Fulghum(New York: Ballantine Books, 1988. 173-175).

It seems to me that our celebration of Candlemas—(whether we see it through the lens of a particular vocation, or the Presentation, the Purification or the Meeting is a call to be people who shine the light of God’s providence in dark places.

The thing I've come to know about shining lights in dark places is the unsettling realization that those lights don't obliterate the darkness.

I must admit that my preference is for the light of God's providence to wipe out the darkness of suffering, sickness, poverty, loneliness.

In truth, the light doesn't do away with the darkness instead, it shines **in** the darkness, it is present in the darkness.

This, I think, is the point exactly. God enters into the darkness of our humanity to sit alongside of us as a providential presence. Our Provident God climbs right into the darkest places to be with us; and in that holy and luminous action, we find reason enough to hope

As women and men of Providence, we are called to be light **in** the darkness, to be a providential presence. We are called to find ways to bring the light of ourselves to the dark places of our world. In all likeliness, our presence won't obliterate the darkness, but it may bring a glimmer of hope where none existed before.

That's what the candles that we bless this day symbolize.

They are:
candles of hope to overcome despair
candles of peace to dispel discord and violence
candles of joy to dissipate sadness
candles of courage to ease all fear
candles of love to uproot hatred.

They symbolize what we are called to be-- lights in the darkness, glimmers of hope...