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Feasts of Our Lord during Ordinary Time (I)

The first of two articles focusing on the significance and history of four special feasts in the Church: Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, the Annunciation, the Most Blessed Trinity, the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ.

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“Just as I have come to you now in the name of the Lord and found you

keeping vigil in his name, so the Lord, in whose honor this solemnity is celebrated, will find his Church keeping vigil by the light of the soul when he comes to awaken her.”[1]

Keeping vigil, watching, by the light of the soul: these words of St.

Augustine, from a sermon for the Easter Vigil, sum up the meaning of the great solemnities and feasts of our Lord that mark the passing of Ordinary Time. In the course of the year, these celebrations unfold before our eyes the mystery of salvation that flows from the Cross and that, from the empty tomb, renews the face of the earth.

“The one and only center of the liturgy and Christian life itself – the Paschal Mystery – acquires in the various solemnities and feasts specific ‘forms,’ with additional meanings and special gifts of grace.”[2] The feasts of the

Transfiguration and the Exaltation of the Holy Cross are found in all the liturgical traditions, while the solemnities of the Most Holy Trinity, the Holy Body and Blood of Christ, the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Christ the King are proper to the Roman Church.

In addition, there are two feasts of our Lord closely linked to Mary's life that are celebrated in Ordinary Time or in Lent: the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple, and the solemnity of the Annunciation. By their theological content, both feasts belong in the Christmas Season, but their place in the liturgical calendar is due to the complicated ways their dates were determined.

In this first editorial on the feasts of our Lord that the Church celebrates in Ordinary Time, we bring together some considerations on four of them: the Presentation and Annunciation

of the Lord, the Most Holy Trinity and Corpus Christi.

Presentation of the Lord in the Temple

The Mosaic law prescribed that every firstborn male in Israel had to be consecrated to God forty days after birth and redeemed with a sum deposited in the Temple treasury. This was in remembrance of the firstborn sons being preserved from death on the night of the first Passover during the exodus from Egypt. The Gospel according to St. Luke gives us this account of Jesus' presentation in the Temple: *when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord."*^[3] St. Joseph and our Lady entered the temple,

unnoticed among the crowd. The “desired of all nations” came to the house of his Father in his Mother’s arms. The liturgy of this feast-day exhorts us, in the Responsorial Psalm, to adore the King of Glory in the heart of his humble family: *“Attolite, portae, capita vestra, et elevamini, portae aeternales, et introibit rex gloriae”*: Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in.[4]

The Church of Jerusalem began the annual commemoration of this mystery in the 4th century. The feast was celebrated on February 14th, forty days after the Epiphany, because the Jerusalem liturgy had not yet adopted the Roman custom of celebrating Christmas on December 25th. That is why when this became the common custom throughout the whole Christian world, the feast of the Presentation was moved to

February 2nd and was soon celebrated throughout the entire East. In Byzantium, the emperor Justinian I introduced it in the 6th century, under the title “*Hypapante*” or “*encounter*,” referring to Jesus’ encounter with the aged Simeon, who was a figure of the just men of Israel who had patiently awaited the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies for so many years.

During the 7th century, the celebration also took root in the West. The widespread name of Candlemas comes from the tradition instituted by Pope Sergius I of having a procession with candles. As the elderly Simeon proclaimed, Jesus is the Savior, *prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles*.^[5] In commemorating the arrival and manifestation of the divine light to the world, the Church each year blesses candles, symbol of Jesus’ perennial presence and the

light of faith that the faithful receive in the sacrament of Baptism. The procession with lighted candles thus becomes an expression of Christian life: a pathway illuminated by the light of Christ.

The annual commemoration of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple is also a Marian celebration and therefore at certain times in the past it was also known as the feast of the Purification of Mary. Even though Mary was preserved by God from original sin, as a Hebrew mother she chose to submit to the *Law of the Lord*, and therefore offered *a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons*.^[6] Mary's offering was thus a sign of her prompt obedience to God's commands. "Through this example, foolish child, will you learn to obey the Holy Law of God, regardless of any personal sacrifice?"^[7]

The Annunciation of the Lord

On March 25th, the Church celebrates the announcement that the promises of salvation were about to be fulfilled. From the lips of the angel, Mary learnt that she had found grace before God. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, she was to conceive a son who would be called the Son of God. He would save his people and be set on David's throne; and his kingdom would have no end.[8] This is the feast of the Incarnation. The eternal Son of the Father entered into history; he became man in the womb of Mary, a humble maiden from the people of Israel. From that moment on, "history is not a mere succession of centuries, years or days, but the time span of a presence that gives full meaning and opens it to sound hope." [9]

It is very likely that this feast was already celebrated in Palestine in the

4th century, since the basilica built in Nazareth in the place traditionally regarded as the house of Mary dates from that time. This Marian connection is reflected in the name that is also given to this commemoration: the *Annunciation of the Virgin Mary*. Very early on, during the 5th century, the feast spread throughout the Christian East, and was later passed on to the West. In the second half of the 7th century, testimonies exist of its being celebrated on March 25th in the Church of Rome under the title of *Annuntiatio Domini*.

The dating of this feast stems from an ancient tradition that placed the creation of the world precisely on the day of the spring equinox (which at the beginning of the Christian era fell on March 25 in the Julian calendar). In keeping with the idea that perfection occurred in complete cycles, the first Christians considered

that Christ's Incarnation (the beginning of the new creation), his death on the Cross, and his definitive coming at the end of time, should all occur on the same date. Thus March 25th was a date especially filled with meaning. It also seems that the date for Christmas in the calendar was fixed on December 25th because it was nine months after the Annunciation.

The texts of the Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours for this solemnity contemplate the Word made flesh. Psalm 39 (40) is quoted in the Entrance Antiphon, the Responsorial Psalm and the second reading, as the thread connecting the entire celebration: *I delight to do your will, O my God.*^[10] Jesus becomes incarnate in obedience to his Father's will; and his Mother accepts God's will with equal promptness. Mary is troubled, but she raises no objections; she does not doubt the

angel's words. Moved by faith, she says "yes" to God's will. "Mary becomes transformed in holiness in the depths of her most pure heart on seeing the humility of God ... The Blessed Virgin's humility is a consequence of that unfathomable depth of grace which comes into operation with the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity in the womb of his ever Immaculate Mother."[11]

The Most Blessed Trinity

On the first Sunday after Pentecost the Church celebrates the solemnity of the Most Blessed Trinity. On this day we glorify the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God in three Persons, "so that in the confessing of the true and eternal Godhead you might be adored in what is proper to each Person, their unity in substance, and their equality in majesty."[12] "You have often heard me say that

God is in the center of our soul in grace, and therefore that we all have a ‘direct line’ to God our Lord. But human comparisons pale in the face of this marvelous divine reality. At the other end of this line, waiting for us, is not only the Great Unknown, but the entire Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit ... It’s a shame that we Christians can forget that we are a throne of the Most Holy Trinity. I advise you to acquire the custom of seeking God in the depths of your heart. That is what interior life is.”[13]

Even though this feast was introduced into the Roman calendar in the mid 14th century, its origins date back to Patristic times. Already in the 5th century, St. Leo the Great began presenting the doctrine on the Mystery of the Blessed Trinity in the time of Pentecost. Some of his expressions were later used in the preface of the Mass for the Sunday in

the octave of Pentecost. At a somewhat later date, a Mass of the Blessed Trinity was celebrated in the Frankish kingdom and soon became widespread throughout the West, perhaps as a means to teach the Christian people about true faith in God.

Nevertheless, the Roman Church did not establish a special feast in the calendar for the Most Holy Trinity, since the invocations to the triune God and the doxologies already gave this mystery a prominent place in the liturgy. This did not prevent some dioceses and monastic communities from celebrating a liturgical feast in honor of the Blessed Trinity every year, even though no agreement on the date existed. It was Pope John XXII who, in 1334, finally introduced the feast of the Most Holy Trinity into the Roman calendar, on the Sunday after Pentecost. Although the Eastern Churches have not established a

specific feast, they dedicate the greater part of the hymns for the Sunday of Pentecost to the contemplation of the Mystery of the Blessed Trinity.

The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

The Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ (*Corpus Christi*) originated in the Middle Ages as a fruit of Eucharistic piety and to reaffirm the Church's teaching after the Eucharistic controversies. This feast was celebrated for the first time in Liege in 1247 at the request of St. Juliana of Mont-Cornillon, a religious who devoted a great part of her life to fostering devotion to the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar. In 1264 Pope Urban IV, moved by the Eucharistic miracle at Bolsena (the monumental Cathedral of Orvieto is shaped like a giant reliquary in witness to this miracle), established

the solemnity in honor of the Most Holy Sacrament for the Thursday after the Octave of Pentecost in the universal calendar. The bull instituting this feast contained an appendix with the texts for the Mass and the Office of the day. Tradition tells us that these were composed by St. Thomas Aquinas. The antiphon *O Sacrum Convivium* for Vespers II marvelously sums up the Church's faith, the *mysterium fidei*: "O sacred banquet, in which Christ is received, the memory of his Passion is renewed and there is given to us a pledge of future glory!"^[14] As Pope Francis said on this solemnity: "We may ask ourselves: what about me? Where do I want to eat? At which table do I want to be nourished? At the Lord's table? Or do I dream about eating savory foods, but in slavery? Moreover, we may ask ourselves: what do I recall? The Lord who saves me, or the garlic and onions of

slavery? Which recollection satiates my soul?”[15]

This feast centers on adoring the Most Holy Sacrament and fostering faith in Christ’s Real Presence under the Eucharistic species. Hence it is only natural that as far back as the 14th century, the custom arose of accompanying our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament along the city streets on this feast-day. Previously, the Blessed Sacrament had been taken in procession with the palms of Palm Sunday, and had been carried solemnly from the “altar of repose” to the main tabernacle in the church on Easter morning. The Corpus Christi Procession as such was formally adopted in Rome in the 15th century. In recent years, by God’s grace, we have witnessed a revival of this devotion, even in places where it had disappeared for centuries. We share the feelings expressed by St. Josemaria on the feast of Corpus

Christi in 1971: “while celebrating Mass this morning, I told our Lord in my heart: I want to accompany you in all the processions throughout the world, in all the Tabernacles where you are honored, and in all the places where you are present and people fail to honor you.”[16]

[1] Saint Augustine, Sermon 223 D (PL *Supplementum* 2, 717-718).

[2] Benedict XVI, Homily, 31 May 2009.

[3] *Lk* 2:22.

[4] *Psalm* 23 (24): 7.

[5] *Lk* 2:32.

[6] *Lk* 2:24.

[7] *Holy Rosary*, 4th Joyful Mystery.

[8] Cf. *Lk* 1:26-33.

[9] Benedict XVI, Audience, 12 December 2012.

[10] Cf. Psalm 39 (40): 8-9.

[11] *Friends of God*, no. 96.

[12] *Roman Missal*, Preface for the Mass of the Most Holy Trinity.

[13] Saint Josemaria, notes from his preaching, 8 December 1972.

[14] Antiphonad *Magnificat*, Vespers II for the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ.

[15] Pope Francis, Homily, 19 June 2014 (cf. *Num* 11:4-6).

[16] Javier Echevrrria, *Memoria del Beato Josemaria Escriva*, p. 240.

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