

HOMILY FOR PRESENTATION OF MARY – YEAR B



The Memorial of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary recalls when Sts. Joachim and Ann brought the Blessed Mother to the temple in accord with Jewish law (Leviticus 12). Before a child could be brought to the temple for their dedication to God the mother must

first undergo a ritual purification in which she was considered “unclean.” Jewish women were considered unclean for seven days after the birth of a son and for fourteen days after the birth of a daughter.

The purity of a person in the Jewish law was directly related to external matters. Our Lord reminds the Pharisees that they would do better to be concerned with the inside of their cups, rather than the outside (Matthew 23:26).

In the midst of his reflections on Christ appealing to the human heart, in his masterpiece called “*Men and Women He Created Them-A Theology of the Body*,” St. John Paul II reminds us of the Beatitude, “Blessed are the pure in heart, because they will see God (Matthew 5:8; TOB 50).” He explains that Jesus is not *accusing the human heart*, like the masters of suspicion mentioned earlier (TOB 46), but directly appealing to the interior aspect of the human person.

We know that the Blessed Mother is the model and pillar of purity. When people are in the struggle for purity, the Blessed Mother is the most recommended refuge and help to penitents. She learned this kind of purity from her parents and from the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. St. Ann and Joachim’s purity came from their interior life. It would have been expressed through the liturgical actions prescribed in the Book of Leviticus. They would have brought two doves (or a lamb and a dove if they could afford it) to the priest who would perform two ritual offerings. The first would be a *burnt offering* and the second was the *sin offering*.

When people think of the word “pure” many times they think of the antonym to be “dirty.” This is why many of the Pharisees and Sadducees were concerned with the legalistic prescriptions of the Mosaic Covenant. What mattered most for the sake of purity wasn’t the interior life (or the heart), but the exterior ritual sacrifice. St. John Paul II explains that through the “juridical and religious tradition of the Old Covenant, a wrong way of understanding moral purity developed” (TOB 50.3). Jesus repudiates the *external only* approach understanding of morality. There is overwhelming evidence of this in the New Testament. St. John Paul II points out that purity is a matter of the interior, an aspect of the heart. He states, “No washing, not even ritual washing, is by itself suited to produce moral purity” (TOB 50.3).

Liturgically, the heart and intentions are supposed to be manifested through the ritual. A person is not supposed to come to confession simply because they are supposed to confess their sins or for merely external reasons (so that my spouse or parent will see me). A person goes to confession because the Lord moves them to contrition for their sins and they want to grow in the life of becoming a saint. The legalistic interpretation would not focus on contrition and on holiness, but on going because a person must.

Historically the revulsion of such legalism has led to louder and more monstrous behavior, the perfect example being the movement from American Puritanism and prudery to the sexual revolution and the new age of sexual idolization. The more that faith and morality is made only about following the rules, the more people will seek to liberate themselves from the disconnect between their heart and *the rules*. It is easy for anyone to fall into a legalistic view of morality, because legalism is easier to measure than the interior movements of their hearts. Mature Christians must not fall prey to this temptation for it may reap worse benefits than the evils that could have otherwise occurred.

In a culture that has two diametrically opposing philosophies of *indulgence in all verses all desires and enjoyments are evil*, followers of Christ must reject both the legalism and self-centeredness for the sake of freedom. The real freedom that purity brings is not found in serving one’s own needs, indulging in all and any, nor is it found in adhering to a moral/legal code. Purity comes from the grace of God, union with him, and learning virtue (purity is both gift and virtue). When we approach our Lord through liturgy, we must properly

prepare our hearts. If we make Mass and confession about an obligation then they will remain just that. If our hearts ready to worship for the sake of love, then our offering or our confession will be a pure oblation. One concrete way is to take ten to fifteen minutes to pray from the heart before the Holy Mass or Sacrament of Confession.

What makes St. Ann (and St. Joachim for that matter) pure isn't merely the following of the legal prescriptions regarding post-birth waiting periods. And these waiting periods are most certainly not what make the Blessed Mother pure! Their real purity comes from their surrender to God's will and their union with him. They weren't pure because they were self-reliant; they were pure because they relied on the one who could give real purity. Their liturgical or ritual actions were founded upon the dispositions of their heart.



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