

What you need to know about the beautiful feast of Candlemas

If you count 40 days after the celebration of Christmas, you reach February 2. Early on, the Church marked that day with a special feast and it is the final “baby Jesus” day in the liturgical calendar before the celebration of Lent.

The feast has many different names in the Roman Catholic Church. It has been called the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary and, more familiarly, Candlemas. Each name highlights a different aspect of the feast that the Church celebrates.

First, it is called the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary on account of an ancient Mosaic law explained in Leviticus.

[If a woman conceives, and bears a child she shall be unclean] And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the door of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering, and he shall offer it before the Lord, and make atonement for her; then she shall be clean. (Leviticus 12:6-7)

Mary, being a faithful Jew, abided by the law and did what was required of her. After 40 days passed she approached the priest with the proper offering to be declared “clean.”

The liturgical celebration is also called the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, and again corresponds to an ancient Jewish practice of presenting the first-born to God.

Everything that opens the womb of all flesh, whether man or beast, which they offer to the Lord, shall be yours; nevertheless the first-born of man you shall redeem. (Numbers 18:15)

As a result, Mary and Joseph brought with them Jesus, as St. Luke narrates, “And when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought [Jesus] 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’)” (Luke 2:22-23). St. Luke narrates how, while at the Temple, the Holy Family encountered an old man named Simeon and what he said next constitutes the basis for why the feast is called Candlemas.

Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in sight of all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel. (Luke 2:29-32)

Simeon declared that Jesus would be a “light,” and the Church developed a custom of lighting and blessing candles on this day. Historically the priest would bless all the candles used during Mass for the entire year. The congregation also received candles and the words of Simeon were repeated in song. The current Roman Missal has the following prayer that summarizes the symbolism.

O God, source and origin of all light, who on this day showed to the just man Simeon the light for revelation to the Gentiles, we humbly ask that, in answer to your people’s prayers, you may be pleased to sanctify with your blessing these candles, which we are eager to carry in praise of your name, so that, treading the path of virtue, we may reach that light which never fails.

Though not a holy day of obligation, it is a beautiful day in the Church’s calendar, one that signals the end of the “Christmas-Cycle” and looks forward to the light that will shatter all darkness at the Easter Vigil — when another candlelight service is performed in recognition that, “the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death light has arisen” (Matthew 4:16).

