

# The Surprisingly Catholic Origins of Groundhog Day

*aleteia.org/Philip Kosloski*

*Groundhog Day is celebrated each year in the United States on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, the same day as Candlemas. It is not a coincidence.*

In the United States, all eyes are on Punxsutawney Phil on Groundhog Day to see if he is able to predict the final weeks of winter. The tradition states that if a groundhog sees his shadow on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, there will be 6 more weeks of cold weather. While this tradition doesn't appear to have any connection to the Catholic Church, the origins of this day are rooted in the Catholic celebration of Candlemas.

## **Candlemas**

February 2<sup>nd</sup> is the feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple in the Catholic Church. 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.

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 blessed all the candles used during Mass for the entire year. The congregation also received candles and the words of Simeon were repeated in song.



Eventually February 2<sup>nd</sup> became a day when Christians in Europe would also look forward to the end of Winter. In the *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*, there is an English rhyme that became associated with Candlemas:

If Candlemas day be fair and bright  
Winter will have another flight  
If on Candlemas day it be showre and rain  
Winter is gone and will not come again.

In Germany this tradition evolved, and the *Punxsutawney Groundhog Club* explains what happened next, "If, according to German lore, the hedgehog saw his shadow on Candlemas Day there would be a 'Second Winter' or 6 more weeks of bad weather."

When the Pennsylvania Dutch (who were German immigrants) arrived in Pennsylvania, they could not find any hedgehogs, and so they replaced it with a groundhog. Groundhog Day may not be a Catholic celebration, but Candlemas is, and is the reason for the local tradition.

