

The Presentation of the Mother of God (Vladimir Lossky)

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THE PRESENTATION OF THE MOTHER OF GOD

The typology of icon

The Presentation or Entry (εἰσοδος) of the Mother of God in the Temple (November 21st) does not belong to the most ancient festivals of the Church. None the less, it must be earlier than the end of the VIIth century, since St. Andrew of Crete had known it at Jerusalem at this epoch. It seems that it was introduced at Constantinople a century later, under the Patriarch St. Tarasius. It was to be adopted in the West only under Pope Gregory XI, who had it celebrated for the first time at Avignon in 1374.

Like the festival of the Nativity of the Mother of God, that of Her Presentation in the Temple was created by the Tradition of the Church, which made use of the apocrypha in order to emphasize—this time in the person of the chosen Virgin consecrating Herself :to the service of God—“the fulfillment of the economy of the Creator”. The mystery of this marian festival, which can be compared with the Assumption, leads us into the very treasure-house of the Tradition; the Church breaks the silence of the Scriptures and shows as the incomprehensible ways of Providence, which prepare the receptacle of the Word, ‘the Mother predetermined before the ages’, “preached by the prophets”, now introduced into the Holy of Holies, like a “Hidden Treasure of the Glory of God”.



The theme of the temple is developed in the liturgy and iconography of the Presentation. It is the temple rebuilt by Zorobabel, less glorious than that of Solomon. The rabbinical tradition tells us: "Five things which were in the first temple were no longer in the second. They were: the Fire from on high, the Oil of anointment, the Ark, the Holy Spirit, the Urim and Thummim."¹ The Holy Spirit abandons the Temple, to speak by the prophets. But He will confer on the temple of the law a glory not to be compared with that of the old covenant, by introducing into the Holy of Holies the Virgin who is to give birth to "Jesus, made a light priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec" (Heb. vi, 20). He who welcomes the Holy Virgin, the priest Zacharias, the future father of the Forerunner, reunites in his person the two traditions—priestly and prophetic. If he allows the Virgin to go in behind the second veil, which is contrary to the Law, it is because he sees in Her the new Ark of the covenant, 'the living Ark'. "The angels were astonished to see the Virgin enter the Holy of Holies": the Divine plan of the Incarnation remains incomprehensible "to the principalities and powers in heavenly places", which will know only through the Church "the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God" (Eph. iii, 9-10). It is the secret preparation of the humanity of Christ: in the temple of Jerusalem the chosen Virgin will prepare herself to become later "the Temple of His Body", that which will be destroyed and in three days raised up. The theme of the temple, in the feast of the Presentation of the Holy Virgin, allows a glimpse of that of the Church—Body of Christ. The assimilation of the Mother of God to the Ark of the covenant lends a marian meaning to the verse

of Ps. cxxxi sung at the vespers of the Assumption: "Arise, O Lord, into thy rest; thou and the ark of thy holiness."

Many, since Origen, have used the symbolism which likens the three parts of the temple of the three stages of spiritual life—purification, illumination and union, to which correspond the three books of Solomon—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. The court of the temple corresponds to active life, where the aim is ἀπάθεια (freedom from passions). The veil of "the Holy" (the second part of the temple) opens the way of "natural contemplation" (Φυσικὴ θεωρία)—knowledge of God in the creation. "The Holy of Holies" corresponds to contemplation properly so-called, which is θεολογία, or knowledge of God in the Logos.² We again find the three parts of the temple in the iconography of the Presentation of the Mother of God. Thus, in our icon the scene unfolds in the inner court of the temple, near the entrance to "the Holy". The priest Zacharias, clothed in his priestly robes, stands before the doors of «the Holy" on the first step of the staircase (the fifteen degrees of the temple which correspond to the fifteen "psalms of the degrees"). Below, the Holy Virgin, outstretching her arms towards Zacharias, starts to mount the steps which lead towards "the Holy of Holies". At the top, She is seen again, already there, sitting on the highest step, near the door of the "Holy of Holies", where an angel comes to assist Her. It is the degree of contemplation, the "pre-engagement with God", the start of the way of union during which the Holy Virgin will be "nourished on heavenly bread". The Holy Virgin, represented twice on our icon, has nothing of the child about Her despite Her small size, which must indicate Her young age (three years old). She is already a perfected person: the Mother of God clothed in the maphorion, such as will be seen, for example, in icons for the Annunciation. In fact, St. Gregory of Nyssa says that the Song of Songs corresponds to spiritual maturity—the age of contemplative life "which introduces the soul into the divine sanctuaries".³

Behind the Holy Virgin, in the centre of the court, St. Joachim and St. Anna advance towards the priest Zacharias, presenting their Daughter to him. They are followed by young girls, who "with tapers in their hands" accompany the Virgin consecrated to God. Unlike St. Anna and the Mother of God, the virgins of the temple have their head uncovered. The background is occupied with temple buildings.

1. Song of Songs, Rabba 8: in H. L. Strack und P. Billerbeck, Kommentar zur Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch, vol. II, p. 133.
2. Origen: On Psalm cxvii; P.G. 12, col. 1581.
3. Commentary on the Song of Songs. P.G. 44, coll. 768A and 772A.
4. According to a manual of iconography published at Novgorod in the XVth

century, seven virgins should go before Joachim and Anna, whilst the remainder should go behind them.

Leonid Ouspensky, Vladimir Lossky, *The meaning of icons*, New York 1989, pp. 153-156.

Source for the tradition of the feast

As mentioned previously, the origin of this feast can be found in the apocryphal Gospel. That is the Gospel of James, also called Protevangelion of James or Infancy Gospel of James and presents the birth and upbringing of Mary herself. The Gospel is dated to the 2nd century. Although those books (apocrypha) have great historical value, they are not accepted as canonical by most mainstream Christian denominations

Chapter VII 1-3

«But the child grew, and when she was two years old, Joachim said to Anna, «Let us lead her to the temple of the Lord, that we may perform our vow, which we have vowed to the Lord God, lest He should be angry with us, and our offering be unacceptable.» 2 But Anna said, «Let us wait the third year, lest she should be at a loss to know her father.» And Joachim said, «Let us then wait.» 3 And when the child was three years old, Joachim said, «Let us invite the daughters of the Hebrews, who are undefiled, and let them take each a lamp, and let them be lighted, that the child may not turn back again, and her mind be set against the temple of the Lord.» 4 And they did thus till they ascended into the temple of the Lord. And the high priest received her, and blessed her, and said, «Mary, the Lord God has magnified your name to all generations. And to the very end of time, the Lord by you will show his redemption to the children of Israel.» 5 And he placed her on the third step of the altar, and the Lord gave to her grace, and she danced with her feet, and all the house of Israel loved her.

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Hymns from the feast of Presentation of the Virgin Mary

Troparia for the Entry into the Temple of the Most Holy Theotokos

Troparion (Tone 4)

Today is the preview of the good will of God,
Of the preaching of the salvation of mankind.
The Virgin appears in the temple of God,
In anticipation proclaiming Christ to all.
Let us rejoice and sing to her: Rejoice,
O Divine Fulfillment of the Creator's dispensation.

Kontakion (Tone 4)

The most pure Temple of the Savior;
The precious Chamber and Virgin;
The sacred Treasure of the glory of God,
Is presented today to the house of the Lord.
She brings with her the grace of the Spirit,
Therefore, the angels of God praise her:
«Truly this woman is the abode of heaven.»

Forefeast hymn

Troparion (Tone 4)

Today Anna bequeaths joy to all instead of sorrow by bringing forth her fruit,
the only ever-Virgin.
In fulfillment of her vow,
Today with joy she brings to the temple of the Lord
the true temple and pure Mother of God the Word.

Kontakion (Tone 4)

Today the universe is filled with joy
At the glorious feast of the Mother of God, and cries out:
«She is the heavenly tabernacle.»