

Tradition

There is no specific tradition for the *Presentation of Mary in the Temple*. However, perhaps there is more of a lesson which we should take away after contemplating the icon. The story is, of course, about Mary being offered to God. But is there another underlying story written here? Let us look at the icon from a different perspective. Mary's parents, present in the icon, are offering their daughter to God when she was only three years old, as they promised. She is given to the High Priest to learn and to prepare for her calling, her *fiat*, of accepting God's Will and doing His work. In other words, she is being given to the temple (the Church) for spiritual elevation and education.

Mary is the Mother of our Church, who, as we celebrated in October, protects her children and the Church. Following her example, this protection also extends into education. After all, what would please our Mother more than for all of us to learn everything we can about her Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ? As Sacred Scripture reminds us, as true Christians it is our responsibility to seek out the fullness of knowledge of Jesus and the teachings of the Church — and there is no better place than in the church itself. In honor of the feast of the *Presentation of Mary* can we make a commitment to build our knowledge of our precious faith, of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and of His holy Church, through the parish classes offered to our children, teens and adults? Today as we celebrate the *Presentation of Mary in the Temple* let us try to emulate the same promise that Joachim and Anna made in offering their only child, Mary, to God.

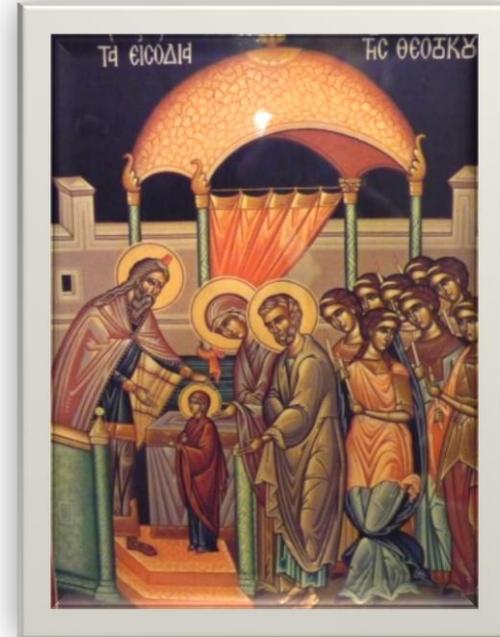
Now, brethren, let us remove ourselves from earthly to celestial things. Let us change our path from the flesh to the spirit. Let us change our desire from temporal things to those that endure. Let us scorn fleshly delights, which serve as allurements for the soul and soon pass away. Let us desire spiritual gifts, which remain undiminished. Let us turn our reason and our attention from earthly concerns and raise them to the inaccessible places of Heaven, to the Holy of Holies, where the Mother of God now resides.

Therefore, in such manner our songs and prayers to Her will gain entry, and thus through her mediation, we shall be heirs of the everlasting blessings to come, through the grace and love for mankind of Him Who was born of Her for our sake, our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom be glory, honor and worship, together with His Unoriginate Father and His Coeternal and Life-Creating Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Saint Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessalonica

Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple in Jerusalem

November 21



Epiphany's Icon of the *Entrance of the Theotokos*

The most pure Temple of the Savior, the most precious Bridal Chamber and Virgin, the Treasury of the glory of God, is led today into the house of the Lord, bringing grace in the Spirit of God, God's angels praise her in song; she is the Heavenly Ark.

Kontakion (Tone 4)

The Feast

November 21st is the feast of the *Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple of Jerusalem*, also known as *The Presentation of Mary*.



Mary was the daughter of Joachim and Anna. Joachim was from Nazareth, of the tribe of Judah and a descendant of King David; Anna was a descendant of Aaron the High Priest. Joachim regularly gave two-thirds of his income to his temple and the poor, for which the Lord had greatly blessed him. Because of their service to the church and the poor, both Joachim and Anna were respected by all. Only one aspect of their lives was missing — a child!

However, in the late stages of their lives, Joachim and Anna came to be considered a disgrace in their culture. It was thought that there was some

sin in their lives since they were not blessed with a child. At their 50th wedding anniversary the High Priest refused to accept their tithe because of the curse (i.e. being childless).

Joachim and Anna were devastated by this action; being disgraced, Joachim went to the hills with his flock to pray and fast while Anna prayed at home. They separately beseeched the Lord to bless them with a child as He did with Sarah (mother of Isaac) and Hannah (mother of the prophet Samuel). They also separately promised the Lord God that, if they had an offspring, they would dedicate the child to the Lord. During this time of prayer and fasting, an angel appeared and prophesied to Joachim and then to Anna; because of their charitable deeds and righteous living, God would indeed bless them with a child. The angel then arranged for them to reunite. Upon seeing each other, they were overcome with joy because of the vision they each had and which now they shared with each other. Returning home, they made offerings to the Lord.

After Joachim and Anna's "reunion", their daughter Mary was born and the entire town of Nazareth celebrated with them. They did not forget their promise to God; when Mary was three years old Joachim and Anna took her to the temple. She was presented to the High Priest, Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, and dedicated to the Lord's service. The High Priest, filled with the Holy Spirit, recognized that Mary was destined

for greatness and proclaimed: "Mary, the Lord God has magnified your name to all generations and, by you, to the very end of time, the Lord will show His Redemption to the children of Israel." Then Zacharias took Mary into the Holy of Holies of the Temple (the place of the Ark of the Covenant) — a very rare event for anyone other than the High Priest. Her presence in the Holy of Holies represents a bridge between the Ark of the Old Covenant, which was an agreement between God and Israel, and the New Covenant, Jesus, the Savior of all people. The Theotokos is the New Ark (or the living Ark). Her training and preparation for God's service had now begun, as she spent the next 7 to 10 years in prayer and work in the Temple. During this time Joachim and Anna fell asleep in the Lord and Mary remained in the temple until she was given to Joseph.

The Icon of the Entrance of the Theotokos

View Epiphany's icon, pictured on the cover of this article. The story of this icon begins with Mary at the inner court of the temple (on the steps); her arm is outstretched indicating her commitment to God. The High Priest Zacharias extends his arms to accept Mary and that for which she is destined. Behind Mary stand Joachim and Anna with their arms extended, signifying the offering of their child to God as promised earlier in their lives. To the far right are several maidens, attendants to Mary, holding candles. The depiction of Mary is quite interesting. She is the size of a child, because she was brought to the temple at the age of three, yet she is fully grown, indicating her spiritual maturity. In iconography, this indicates her complete and total love and commitment to God.

This icon was written probably sometime before the 7th Century. It is not based on Sacred Scripture, but rather on the Holy Tradition of the Church; the story is found in the apocrypha of St. James' epistle. Since then many of our Church Fathers have taken the three stages of spiritual life (purification, illumination and union) and compared them to the temple in this icon.

The first part of the temple is the court (where Mary is standing) which corresponds with ordinary life. It is here that we fight temptation and our passion (purification). The next part of the temple is the veil of the Holy Place, seen in the icon hanging on a rod below the canopy. This opens us up to contemplate God and to eventually realize His greatness in the creation around us, which is called the illumination. The third part of the temple is below the canopy or Holy of Holies, which in Mary's time, housed the Ark of the Covenant. In the Church today, the area behind the iconostasis houses the New Covenant, our Lord Jesus Christ. We become united to God once we truly love Him with our whole body, mind and soul — accomplished through knowing and loving Jesus. (*over*)