

Christ teaches that real growth happens in the church

By Bishop Milan Lach

In these days after the Nativity of our Lord, the church offers particular insight into the hidden life of Jesus before his public ministry.

Forty days after Christmas, the church contemplates his presentation in the temple for the Jewish ritual of circumcision, along with the usual offerings of turtle doves and the accompanying purification ritual for the Mother of God.

There, the Holy Family encounters the prophet Simeon, who was told by the Holy Spirit that he would live to see the Messiah.

This feast day of the Encounter of Our Lord with Simeon, celebrated Feb. 2, shows us in a particular way how Jesus, as St. Luke the Evangelist recounts, “grew in wisdom and stature,” from infancy to full adulthood (Lk 2:52).

This Gospel passage has been subject to much controversy over the two millennia of the church’s existence.

What does it mean for Christ — who is begotten, not made and of one essence with the Father — to grow in wisdom and stature? Does this mean that he is something less than we profess him to be in the Creed? Absolutely not.

St. Paul can shed some light on this conundrum and help us to understand this passage. In his Letter to the Ephesians, St. Paul speaks about how the gift of Christ coming to earth supplies the grace to enable us to develop “mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13).

Everything Christ does on earth is for the sake of our salvation. In this light, Christ’s growing in wisdom and stature allows us to see how the fullness of Christ is cultivated in us throughout our own lives.

Christ’s infancy makes it clear: to progress in wisdom and knowledge requires constant participation in the church.

Just as Christ went to the temple to be circumcised, to engage the scribes, or to encounter Simeon, Christ shows us that the temple serves to form us into mature followers of God.

It is in the temple that we learn to conform ourselves to God’s law and to live it out. It is where we come to see, as Simeon does, the salvation prepared for all peoples.

Let us learn from this feast day and find ways to commit more readily to the life of the church.

Let us circumcise our hearts by returning to holy confession, so that our sins may be forgiven.

Let us lose ourselves in the temple and pay deeper attention to the readings, so that we may, as Jesus did, be about our Father’s business in a more serious way.

Let us abandon ourselves in the arms of the church, like Christ did in the arms of the prophet Simeon, so that we may be initiated more completely into the plan God has for each of us.

This mystery of faith unfolds in our lives when we let Christ be formed in our hearts through the ministry of the church.

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