



Saint George

Greek Orthodox Church

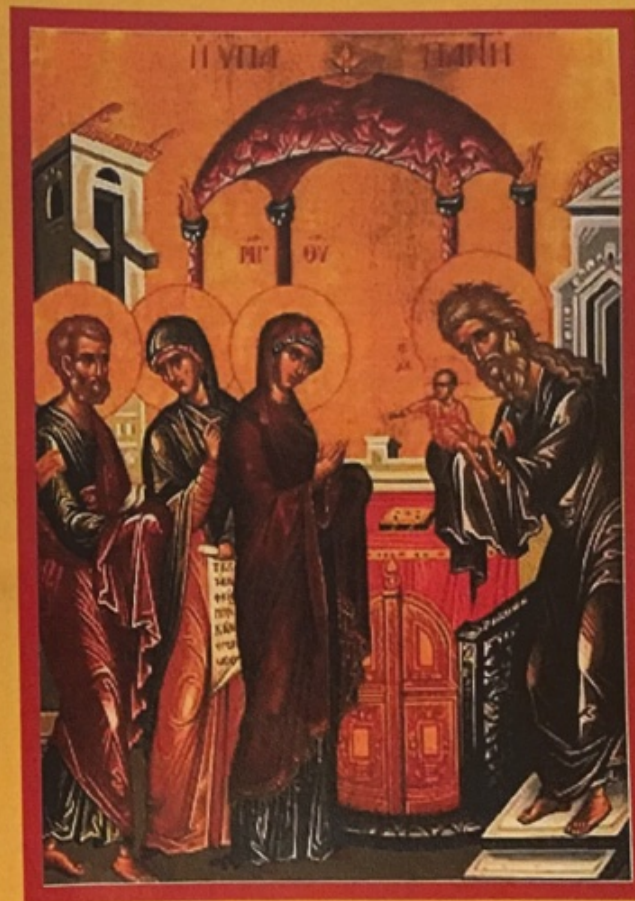
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The 40-day Blessing of new mothers and their children



The Presentation of the Lord Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem

*The Presentation of the Lord to the Temple
and*

The 40-Day Blessing of new mothers and their children

The Christmas/Epiphany season in the Orthodox Church comes to an end on February 2nd, 40 days after our celebration of Christ's birth, with the celebration of the feast of "The Presentation of Christ to the Temple in Jerusalem." One of the 12 great festivals of the Church's annual liturgical calendar, the events celebrated on this day are recorded in Luke 2:22-38. It is this event in the life of the Lord Jesus that also forms the basis for the tradition of the 40-day blessing of new mothers and their children. It is yet another step in conforming the pattern of our lives to the life of Christ Jesus.

Luke 2:22-38

When the days of her purification according to the Law of Moses were completed, they brought the child Jesus up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord, as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who opens the womb shall be dedicated to the Lord" (Exodus 13:2, 12), and to offer a sacrifice in accordance with what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons" (Leviticus 12:1-8). Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Symeon and this man was righteous and devout. He was awaiting the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. In the Spirit, he went to the Temple. And when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for Him what the custom of the Law required, Symeon took Him in his arms and blessed God and said: "Now let Your servant depart in peace, O Master, according to Your word. For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of Your people, Israel." And His father and mother marveled at what was said about Him. Then Symeon blessed them and said to Mary, His mother, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is spoken against – and a sword will pierce through your own soul, also – that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed."

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher: she was of great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity and as a widow until she was 84. She never left the Temple, by prayer and fasting, worshipping night and day. And, coming up at that very hour, she gave thanks to God and spoke of Him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

So, this event in the life of Christ has its roots in the Old Testament and in the fulfillment of the commandments given to ancient Israel. The infant Jesus, "the Word made flesh" (*John 1:14*), is carried in the arms of the righteous Symeon: He who gave the Law in the Old Testament now comes as a small child to the Temple in Jerusalem in order to fulfill that Law in the New Testament.

In ancient Israel, God commanded that the first-born son ("who opens the womb") be "dedicated to the Lord" in remembrance of the Lord's sparing of the lives of the first-born sons of the Israelites during the 10th and last plague that killed all the first-born sons in Egypt, "from the pharaoh's son, who was heir to the throne, to the son of the prisoner in the dungeon" (*Exodus 12:29*). So, because the first-born son of each Israelite household was spared on the night of that first Passover, the first-born son of subsequent generations was to be consecrated to God's service in a special way, in gratitude for His mercy. This command of God in the Old Testament is brought to fulfillment in a new way in the bringing of the Christ child to the Temple by the Theotokos and Joseph and is still celebrated in the life of the Church today, thousands of years later.

We Orthodox Christians, in order to fully participate in the process of conforming our lives and the lives of our children to the pattern of the life of Christ Jesus – "in whom there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male and female" (*Galatians 3:28*) – bring not only our first born sons but all our children to the Temple of the Church in order to consecrate them to God and to offer prayers of thanksgiving to Him for the new life He has given. New mothers are also prayed over, thanking God for having preserved them through the dangers of childbirth, and asking for the forgiveness of their sins in preparation for receiving the sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Savior in the Eucharist.