

Simeon and Anne are mentioned only here in the New Testament. They are very faithful Jews; faithful to the Temple as a place of prayer and waiting; faithful, that is, to God's promises to Israel; faithful to all the observances of the Law but knowing that something more had yet to happen if these promises were to be fulfilled. This is, perhaps, still true for us too, in this sense, quoting Abbot Armand Veilleux:

*In our way of life there is something that is more important than the observances. Or, to say it another way, what is essential in our way of life is something exterior to the practices or observances. It is the goal of our life, what Cassian describes as the 'perfection of charity'.*

It's useful to re-cast our faith in this way because observances can readily become an end in themselves, mistaken for the true goal of our mission. Yes, we do them as best we can, as did Simeon and Anna, Joseph and Mary, Jesus and his first disciples, but we are, in a sense, still waiting and the clue to that waiting is in the understanding of ourselves as first-born children of God, the offering of ourselves, in the manner of Christ, as both priest and victim on the altar, fully as involved in the Paschal Mystery as Simeon and Anna, Mary and Joseph and Jesus are in today's readings.

Christmas – Christ's Mass – begins and ends with sacrifice. We are made holy through sacrifice, through this self-offering embodied in Christ; made possible in Christ because we ourselves are unworthy of holiness and in need of purification, of someone to save us. One might then say that, what is essential to our way of life and anterior to our practices or observances, is Christ as the perfection of charity: God's gift, which reveals God's love for us in God's own self-sacrifice.

All this is yet to come for Mary and Joseph and Jesus: the sword that will pierce their hearts. And, arguably, yet to come for us, as we are taken up into the mystery of Christ's life and death and resurrection: the mystery, that is, of love.

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