

My neighbors as pastor of St. Catherine Parish south of Dubuque were the sisters at Our Lady of the Mississippi Abbey. As my schedule permitted, I would periodically join the sisters for the celebration of Night Prayer, also known as Compline. The song placed by St. Luke on the lips of Simeon in today's Gospel is always sung as part of the liturgy: "Now, Master, you may let your servant go/ in peace, according to the your word,/ for my eyes have seen your salvation,/ which you prepared in the sight of all peoples:/ a light for revelation to the Gentiles,/ and glory for your people Israel./"

Sister Augustine, one of the original members of the community lay close to death a few years ago. Rather than leave the two sisters keeping vigil at her bedside for the church to celebrate Compline, the community chose to gather around Sister Augustine's bed for their prayer. When the sisters came to the Song of Simeon, Sister Augustine's breathing gently slowed, and then stopped—her final act physically making her own the prayer of Simeon she had sung for over sixty years of religious life every night—"**Now Lord you can dismiss your servant...for my eyes have seen your salvation.**" In life, Sister Augustine had received from others in varied and many ways, especially her fellow sisters, the light of Christ and shared that same Christ light within her with others. Now completing her life's journey, she entered into the fullness of the light of Christ in which she hoped.

Today's feast of the Presentation of the Lord in the Temple in Jerusalem forty days after his birth according to Jewish law celebrates the faithfulness of God to those who hope in him. Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna, in today's liturgy represent us. Each of them is a model of faith. Each of them incarnates the virtue of hope. Each of them calls us to both receive and share the light of God's love revealed in Jesus.

The prophet Malachi proclaims the divine promise of a messiah in a manifestation of God coming to the Temple under the sign of the light of blazing fire. The author of the letter to the Hebrews proclaims this promise fulfilled in the temple of a human body of Jesus in which is found the fullness of heavenly glory those who turn to him with the eyes of faith.

Simeon and Anna call out to us today to look to Jesus as he comes to us amid the difficulties, struggles and sufferings of our life as well as its fulfilled hopes and joys. He is here: in prayer, in the word of the Scriptures, in the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist, here too, in the daily acts of love, justice, forgiveness, compassion, understanding and peace we receive. In all these ways we “meet the Lord” (the other name for this feast) and the power of his light begins, or continues to dispel the darkness or increase the brightness of light within and/or outside of us.

Joseph and Mary call us to, like them; “present” the person of Jesus and his light which dwells with and within us to all whom we encounter. To whom am I being called to be a “light of revelation”? For whose eyes will I be the light allowing them to “see God’s salvation”; to encounter Jesus? The candles we have blessed, carried, and will use are “sacramentals” of the light of Christ we have received in baptism; the light of Christ we are called to share with all people as Jesus’ disciples.

Today’s feast coincides with the secular celebration of “Groundhog Day”—the half-way mark of the winter season pointing us in the direction of spring’s rebirth of life. But the optimism of “Groundhog Day” is not the Christian virtue of hope we proclaim and celebrate today. They are very different. Henri Nouwen, the twentieth century spiritual writer notes: “Optimism and hope are radically different attitudes. Optimism is the expectation that things—the weather, human relationships, the economy, the political situation, and so on—will get better. Hope is the trust that God will fulfill God’s promises to us in a way that leads us to true freedom. The optimist speaks about concrete changes in the future. The person of hope lives in the moment with the knowledge and trust that all of life is in good hands.”

Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna, Sister Augustine all were people opening themselves to the light of God’s love in Jesus; receiving and sharing his light all the while trusting that God who had begun a good work in them would bring it to eternal conclusion. Let’s walk in their light, their hope until we, too, come with them into the fullness of light.