

Historic Commentary

(First Sunday after Christmas - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Luke 2:22-40 from Selected Church Fathers and Reformers

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Luke 2](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Ambrose](#): Let us come now to the turtledove, chosen as a chaste victim by the law of God. Hence, when the Lord was circumcised, the dove was offered, because it is written in the law that there should be a presentation of “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” For this is the true sacrifice of Christ: chastity of body and grace of the spirit. Chastity belongs to the turtledove; grace, to the pigeon.

[Venerable Bede](#): Simeon and Anna, a man and a woman of advanced age, greeted the Lord with the devoted services of their professions of faith. As they saw him, he was small in body, but they understood him to be great in his divinity. Figuratively speaking, this denotes the synagogue, the Jewish people, who, wearied by the long awaiting of his incarnation, were ready with both their arms (their pious actions) and their voices (their unfeigned faith) to exalt and magnify him as soon as he came. They were ready to acclaim him and say, “Direct me in your truth and teach me, for you are my saving God, and for you I have waited all the day.” What needs to be mentioned, too, is that deservedly both sexes hurried to meet him, offering congratulations, since he appeared as the Redeemer of both.

[Augustine](#): The just Simeon saw him with his heart, because he recognized the infant. He saw him with his eyes, because he took the infant in his arms. Seeing him in both ways, recognizing the Son of God, and cuddling the one begotten of the Virgin, he said, “Now, Lord, you are letting your servant go in peace, since my eyes have seen your salvation.” Notice what he said. You see, he was being kept until he should see with his eyes what he already perceived with faith. He took the baby body, he cradled the body in his arms. On seeing the body, that is, on perceiving the Lord in the flesh, he said, “My eyes have seen your salvation.” How do you know this is not the way in which all flesh is going to see the salvation of God?

[Ephrem the Syrian](#): The Son came to the servant not to be presented by the servant, but so that, through the Son, the servant might present to his Lord the priesthood and prophecy that had been entrusted to his keeping. Prophecy and priesthood, which had

been given through Moses, were both passed down, and came to rest on Simeon. He was a pure vessel who consecrated himself, so that, like Moses, he too could contain them both. These were feeble vessels that accommodated great gifts—gifts that one might contain because of their goodness but that many cannot accept, because of their greatness. Simeon presented our Lord, and in him he presented the two gifts he had, so that what had been given Moses in the desert was passed on by Simeon in the temple. Because our Lord is the vessel in which all fullness dwells, when Simeon presented him to God, he poured out both of these upon him: the priesthood from his hands and prophecy from his lips. The priesthood had always been on Simeon's hands, because of ritual purifications. Prophecy, in fact, dwelt on his lips because of revelations. When both of these saw the Lord of both of these, they were combined and were poured into the vessel that could accommodate them both, in order to contain priesthood, kingship and prophecy. That infant who was wrapped in swaddling clothes by virtue of his goodness was also dressed in priesthood and prophecy by virtue of his majesty. Simeon dressed him in these and presented him to the one who had dressed him in swaddling clothes. Then, as the old man returned him to his mother, he returned the priesthood with him. And when he prophesied to her about him: "This child is destined for the downfall and rising," he gave her prophecy with him as well.

So Mary took her firstborn and left. Although he was visibly wrapped in swaddling clothes, he was invisibly clothed with prophecy and priesthood. Thus, what Moses had been given was received from Simeon, and it remained and continued with the Lord of these two gifts. The former steward and the final treasurer handed over the keys of priesthood and prophecy to the one in authority over the treasury of both of these. This is why his Father gave him the Spirit without measure, because all measures of the Spirit are under his hand. And to indicate that he received the keys from the former stewards, our Lord said to Simon, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Now how could he give them to someone unless he had received them from someone else? So the keys he had received from Simeon the priest, he gave to another Simeon, the apostle. So even though the Jewish nation did not listen to the first Simeon, the Gentile nations would listen to the other Simeon.

Basil the Great: Now, it is a custom in Scripture to call the Christ of God, salvation, as Simeon says: "Now let your servant depart in peace, O Lord, because my eyes have seen your salvation." Therefore let us subject ourselves to God, because from him is salvation. He explains what salvation is. It is not some mere active force, which provides us with a certain grace for deliverance from weakness and for the good health of our body. What then is salvation? "For he is my God and my Savior: he is my protector, I shall be moved no more." The Son, who is from God, is our God. He himself is also Savior of the human race, who supports our weakness, who corrects the disturbance that springs up in our souls from temptations

Cyril of Alexandria: The mystery of Christ had been prepared even before the very foundation of the world but was manifested in the last ages of time. It became a light for those who in darkness and error had fallen under the devil's hand. These were they "who serve the creature instead of the Creator," worshiping moreover the dragon, the author of

evil, and the impure throng of devils, to whom they attach the honor due God. Yet God the Father called them to the acknowledgment of the Son who is the true Light....

Christ therefore became the Gentiles' light for revelation, but also for the glory of Israel. For even granting that some of them proved insolent and disobedient, and with minds that did not understand, yet there is a remnant there, saved and admitted to glory through Christ. The first fruits of these were the divine disciples, the brightness of whose renown lightens the whole world. In another sense, Christ is the glory of Israel, for he came out of Israel according to the flesh, though he is God over all, and blessed for evermore. Amen.

Ephrem the Syrian: Simeon said likewise, "You will remove the sword." Mary removed the sword that protected Paradise because of Eve. Alternatively, "you will remove the sword," that is, a denial. For the Greek says clearly, the inner thoughts of a great number will be revealed, that is, the thoughts of those who had doubted. For he said, "You will remove the sword." Indeed, you too will doubt, because she thought that he was the gardener. Mary wondered at his birth, it is said, and at his conception. She recounted to others how she had conceived, and indeed how she had given birth. Those who had doubted it were comforted by the wonderment of her word.

Ambrose: "And a sword will pierce through your own soul." Neither Scripture nor history tells us that Mary departed this life by a violent death. For it is not the soul but the body that can be pierced by a material sword. This, therefore, proves that Mary was not unaware of the heavenly mystery: "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." God's Word exposes the thoughts and intents of the heart, because all things are open and naked to the eyes of Mary's Son, to whom the secrets of our conscience are visible.

Ambrose: Anna, who, by reason of her years of widowhood and her virtues, is set before us as wholly worthy of belief, announces that the Redeemer of all people has come.... Not without purpose, however, does he make mention of the eighty-four years of her widowhood, because both the seven twelves and the two forties seemed to imply a number that is sacred.

Huldrych Zwingli: Christ was made under the law, although he owed nothing to the law, that he might redeem us who were under the law; in all things he wanted to be like his brothers. The sacrifices of the Old Testament signify truly that they cleansed from sins. Therefore, just as beasts were sacrificed and their blood was poured out, so the sinner himself declared this sacrifice to be true and that he was pricked to the soul and as it were mortified to the level of death; it is true that, unless he came near to faith in the promised seed, this brought nothing but desperation. Therefore the blood of goats and bulls could not cleanse him from sins, and for that reason the sacrifices were repeated daily. And there were very many among the Jews who, although they offered the external sacrifices, were only a little bit pricked on the inside; for how could they testify to interior change by an exterior sacrifice of beasts, unless they were hypocrites? And along with these things, the avarice of the priests led them to claim that the sacrifice of riches also could help cleanse the people of their sins, and that was the worst of all. Thus many

who started out and at first were established in goodness, in time were corrupted and made bad by this abuse. The sacrifices did signify, however, that someone was coming whose blood could make amends for sin.

Martin Bucer: For the consolation of Mary, Joseph and others among the elect, the Lord wants to make Christ's birth clear in a number of ways. Also, from the expectations of Simeon, it is clear that at the time Christ was born, his coming had long been desired by the pious. For example, the greater part of the prophets describe that the scepter would not depart from Judah, Daniel's "sevens," and other things referring to this time. At the least they confess everything which they believe and are not able to hold themselves back. They desired the good for as many as possible, so there is no doubt that at the time of the coming of Christ, there would be many holy people like Simeon who would be admonishing the people. But because no one who seeks after carnal things values Christ, they would be preaching his coming to the deaf. There were not very many left among the people who acknowledged God, but rather, because of their blindness, they turned toward destruction. It is certainly true that Simeon is praised for his virtue in awaiting the consolation of Israel as if he were an exception, like Joseph of Arimathea, who we see also praised by name. Now the consolation of Israel was in this kingdom of God, which Simeon awaited. Most of those left among the people were not concerned about the kingdom of God and Christ, and whence the consolation of Israel would come, as if a person among worldly things cannot savor the spiritual. But Paul promised the crown of righteousness to those who longed for the advent of Christ and his kingdom. For surely God is worshiped most highly where his grace is highly valued and the redemption which he promises is eagerly awaited. This is how Simeon eagerly awaited the coming of Christ, and so at the time which the prophets indicated, the Lord wanted to console him, first by seeing the promised Savior and then also by holding him up.

John Donne: Simeon was a man who had the Holy Spirit on him, the Gospel says. The testimony given before—that he was justus and timoratus, righteous and fearing God—was evidence enough that the Holy Spirit was on him. This addition is a testimony to a more particular presence and operation of the Holy Spirit in a certain way, and everyone has agreed that the way is in dono prophetiae, that is, the Holy Spirit was on him in the gift of prophecy, so at that time he was made into a prophet. We are all prophets to ourselves when we come to holy Communion—we are able to foretell and to pronounce on ourselves what we will be forever...At this time, our Savior Christ was presented to God in the temple, according to the law by which all the firstborn were to be presented to God in the temple at a certain time after their birth, and there he was acknowledged to belong to God and then bought back from him again by his parents at the price prescribed by the law. A lord could not exhibit his son to his tenants and say, "This is your landlord"; a king could not show his son to his subjects and say, "This is your prince," until first he had been offered to God, for they were all his. If a child is not God's first, he is not truly his king's, or even his own. And God does not sell him back again to his parents at an inflated price. He sells a lord or a king back again to the world as cheaply as a pauper: he takes one and the same price for all. God made all humankind of one blood; and with one blood, the blood of his Son, he bought us all back again. He has delivered everything to the world at one price, and on the same conditions.

Martin Luther: Now Simeon's heart became young again. His heart was prepared: "I have the child in my arms!" It would have been no surprise if he had died in his joy, because he did not only see the child, but took him in his arms. Therefore he sings this happy song of praise: "I will die now with joy in my heart, and death will seem sweet to me, for my eyes have seen your Savior." That is the treasure that makes death sweet and dear. Whoever can see and recognize this young Lord who became subject to the law for us, his heart will be made happy against all adversity. See what kind of heart this venerable man had: "I am ready to depart in peace." It is a great word that he speaks: he will be happy and die in peace. Take a look at how people usually die: there is no joy in their hearts, but the heart beats and throbs, the body shakes and trembles, the mind goes blank. Death is too powerful.... But this man gives praise that he now can die as if there were no death. He doesn't even say "death," but "let [me] depart." He calls it a gentle departure. How can I learn to see death as a sweet sleep, when it is usually so terrifying? In this case, the law, sin and Satan were all removed from his heart. He didn't know anything about these things, or even about death. Where sin and an evil conscience are, there death is bitter. But if you want death to be a peaceful sleep, you have to have a clear conscience, and Moses and his law must be far away.

John Donne: Viderunt oculi, his eyes had seen that salvation, for that was the accomplishment and fulfilling of God's Word: "according to your Word." Everything that God had said would be done was done, for, as it is said in verse 26, it was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ; and now his eyes had seen that salvation. Abraham saw this earlier, but only with the eyes of faith, and yet he rejoiced to see it—he was glad even of that. Simeon saw it before this time, then—when he was enlightened with that revelation he saw it—but only with the eyes of hope. Abraham had no cause for such hope; he had no particular hope, no promise, that he would see the Messiah in his time. Simeon had, and yet he waited, he attended God's leisure. But hope deferred makes the heart sick, says Solomon, but when the desire is fulfilled, it is a tree of life. His desire was come; he saw his salvation.... He saw it, according to God's Word: that is, to the extent that God had promised he would see it. He did not see how God, who was in this child and was this child, was the Son of God. He did not see the manner of that eternal generation. He did not see how this Son of God became human in a virgin's womb, who did not know a man; he did not see the manner of this incarnation, for this eternal generation and this miraculous incarnation did not fall within that *secundum verbum*, "according to your Word." God had promised Simeon nothing concerning those mysteries, but Simeon saw the *Christum Domini*, the Lord's Salvation, and his own salvation, that is, the person who was all those things (and this is all that was in the word and the promise)—and he saw it with his bodily eyes.

John Calvin:

Vs 22. And after that the days were fulfilled

On the fortieth day after the birth, (Leviticus 12:2,4,) the rite of purification was necessary to be performed. But Mary and Joseph come to Jerusalem for another reason, to present Christ to the Lord, because he was the first-born. Let us now speak first of the purification. Luke makes it apply both to Mary and to Christ: for the pronoun *αὐτῶν*, of them, can have no reference whatever to Joseph. But it ought not to appear strange, that

Christ, who was to be, made a curse for us on the cross,” (Galatians 3:13,) should, for our benefit, take upon him our uncleanness with respect to legal guilt, though he was “without blemish and without spot,” (1 Peter 1:19.) It ought not, I say, to appear strange, if the fountain of purity, in order to wash away our stains, chose to be reckoned unclean. It is a mistake to imagine that this law of purification was merely political, and that the woman was unclean in presence of her husband, not in presence of God. On the contrary, it placed before the eyes of the Jews both the corruption of their nature, and the remedy of divine grace.

Vs 23. As it is written in the Law

This was another exercise of piety which was discharged by Joseph and Mary. The Lord commanded, that all the males should be dedicated to him, in remembrance of their deliverance; because when the angel slew all the first-born of Egypt, (Exodus 12:29,) he had spared the first-born of Israel. “On the day that I smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt, I hallowed unto me all the first-born in Israel, both man and beast: mine shall they be: I am the Lord” (Numbers 3:13.) They were afterwards permitted to redeem their first-born at a certain price. Such was the ancient ceremony: and, as the Lord is the common Redeemer of all,¹⁹³ he has a right to claim us as his own, from the least to the greatest. Nor is it without a good reason, that Luke so frequently repeats the statement, that Joseph and Mary did what was written in the law of the Lord For these words teach us, that we must not, at our own suggestion, attempt anything in the worship of God, but must obediently follow what he requires in his Word.

Vs 24. And that they might offer a sacrifice

This sacrifice belonged to the ceremony of purification; lest any one should suppose that it was offered for the sake of redeeming the first-born. When the Evangelist mentions a pair of turtle-doves, or two young pigeons, he takes for granted that his readers will understand, that Joseph and Mary were in such deep poverty, as not to have it in their power to offer a lamb. For this exception is expressly mentioned: “If she be not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons,” (Leviticus 12:8.)

Vs 25. And, lo, there was a man in Jerusalem

The design of this narrative is to inform us that, though nearly the whole nation was profane and irreligious, and despised God, yet that a few worshippers of God remained, and that Christ was known to such persons from his earliest infancy. These were “the remnant” of whom Paul says, that they were preserved “according to the election of grace,” (Romans 11:5.) Within this small band lay the Church of God; though the priests and scribes, with as much pride as falsehood, claimed for themselves the title of the Church. The Evangelist mentions no more than two, who recognised Christ at Jerusalem, when he was brought into the temple. These were Simeon and Anna. We must speak first of Simeon.

As to his condition in life we are not informed: he may have been a person of humble rank and of no reputation. Luke bestows on him the commendation of being just and devout; and adds, that he had the gift of prophecy: for the Holy Spirit was upon him. Devotion and Righteousness related to the two tables of the law, and are the two parts of which an

upright life consists. It was a proof of his being a devout man, that he waited for the consolation of Israel: for no true worship of God can exist without the hope of salvation, which depends on the faith of his promises, and particularly on the restoration promised through Christ. Now, since an expectation of this sort is commended in Simeon as an uncommon attainment, we may conclude, that there were few in that age, who actually cherished in their hearts the hope of redemption. All had on their lips the name of the Messiah, and of prosperity under the reign of David: but hardly any one was to be found, who patiently endured present afflictions, relying on the consolatory assurance, that the redemption of the Church was at hand. As the eminence of Simeon's piety was manifested by its supporting his mind in the hope of the promised salvation, so those who wish to prove themselves the children of God, will breathe out unceasing prayers for the promised redemption. For we, "have need of patience" (Hebrews 10:36) till the last coming of Christ.

Vs 29. Thou now sendest thy servant away

From this song it is sufficiently evident, that Simeon looked at the Son of God with different eyes from the eyes of flesh. For the outward beholding of Christ could have produced no feeling but contempt, or, at least, would never have imparted such satisfaction to the mind of the holy man, as to make him joyful and desirous to die, from having reached the summit of his wishes. The Spirit of God enlightened his eyes by faith, to perceive, under a mean and poor dress, the glory of the Son of God. He says, that he would be sent away in peace; which means, that he would die with composure of mind, having obtained all that he desired.

Vs 30. For my eyes have seen

This mode of expression is very common in Scripture; but Simeon appears to denote expressly the bodily appearance of Christ, as if he had said, that he now has the Son of God present in the flesh, on whom the eyes of his mind had been previously fixed. By saying, I understand the matter of salvation: for in Christ are hid all the parts of salvation and of a happy life. Now if the sight of Christ, while he was yet a child, had so powerful an effect on Simeon, that he approached death with cheerfulness and composure; how much more abundant materials of lasting peace are now furnished to us, who have the opportunity of beholding our salvation altogether completed in Christ? True, Christ no longer dwells on earth, nor do we carry him in our arms: but his divine majesty shines openly and brightly in the gospel, and there do "we all," as Paul says, "behold as in a glass the glory of the Lord," – not as formerly amidst the weakness of flesh, but in the glorious power of the Spirit, which he displayed in his miracles, in the sacrifice of his death, and in his resurrection. In a word, his absence from us in body is of such a nature, that we are permitted to behold him sitting at the right hand of the Father. If such a sight does not bring peace to our minds, and make us go cheerfully to death, we are highly ungrateful to God, and hold the honor, which he has bestowed upon us, in little estimation.

Vs 31. Which thou hast prepared

By these words Simeon intimates, that Christ had been divinely appointed, that all nations might enjoy his grace; and that he would shortly afterwards be placed in an elevated situation, and would draw upon him the eyes of all. Under this term he includes all the

predictions which relate: to the spread of Christ's kingdom. But if Simeon, when holding a little child in his arms, could stretch his mind to the utmost boundaries of the world, and acknowledge the power of Christ to be everywhere present, how much more magnificent ought our conceptions regarding him to be now that he has been set up as a, "standard to the people," (Isaiah 49:22,) and has revealed himself to the whole world.

Vs 32. A light for the revelation of the Gentiles

Simeon now points out the purpose for which Christ was to be exhibited by the Father before all nations. It was that he might enlighten the Gentiles, who had been formerly in darkness, and might be the glory of his people Israel. There is propriety in the distinction here made between the people Israel and the Gentiles: for by the right of adoption the children of Abraham "were nigh" (Ephesians 2:17) to God, while the Gentiles, with whom God had made no "covenants of promise," were "strangers" to the Church, (Ephesians 2:12.) For this reason, Israel is called, in other passages, not only the son of God, but his first-born, (Jeremiah 31:9;) and Paul informs us, that "Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers" (Romans 15:8.) The preference given to Israel above the Gentiles is, that all without distinction may obtain salvation in Christ.

Vs 33. And his father and mother were wondering

Luke does not say, that they were astonished at it as a new thing, but that they contemplated with reverence, and embraced with becoming admiration, this prediction of the Spirit uttered by the lips of Simeon, so that they continued to make progress in the knowledge of Christ. We learn from this example that, when we have once come to possess a right faith, we ought to collect, on every hand, whatever may aid in giving to it additional strength. That man has made great proficiency in the word of God, who does not fail to admire whatever he reads or hears every day, that contributes to his unceasing progress in faith.

Vs 35. But also a sword shall pierce thy own soul

This warning must have contributed greatly to fortify the mind of the holy virgin, and to prevent her from being overwhelmed with grief, when she came to those distressing struggles, which she had to undergo. Though her faith was agitated and tormented by various temptations, yet her sorest battle was with the cross: for Christ might appear to be utterly destroyed. She was not overwhelmed with grief; but it would have required a heart of stone not to be deeply wounded: for the patience of the saints differs widely from stupidity.