

A Light for the Gentiles

Pastoral Letter on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, February 2, 2025

Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima

Dear Friends in Christ:

Peace be with you!

I write this pastoral letter on the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. Being the feast specifically on February 2nd, this year was one of the few times we ever get to reflect on this mystery of the rosary on a Sunday. It's also a unique opportunity for us to reflect more deeply about these scriptural giants – Simeon and Anna – who spend years praying to see the fulfillment of their hope: the savior in the flesh – Jesus Christ.

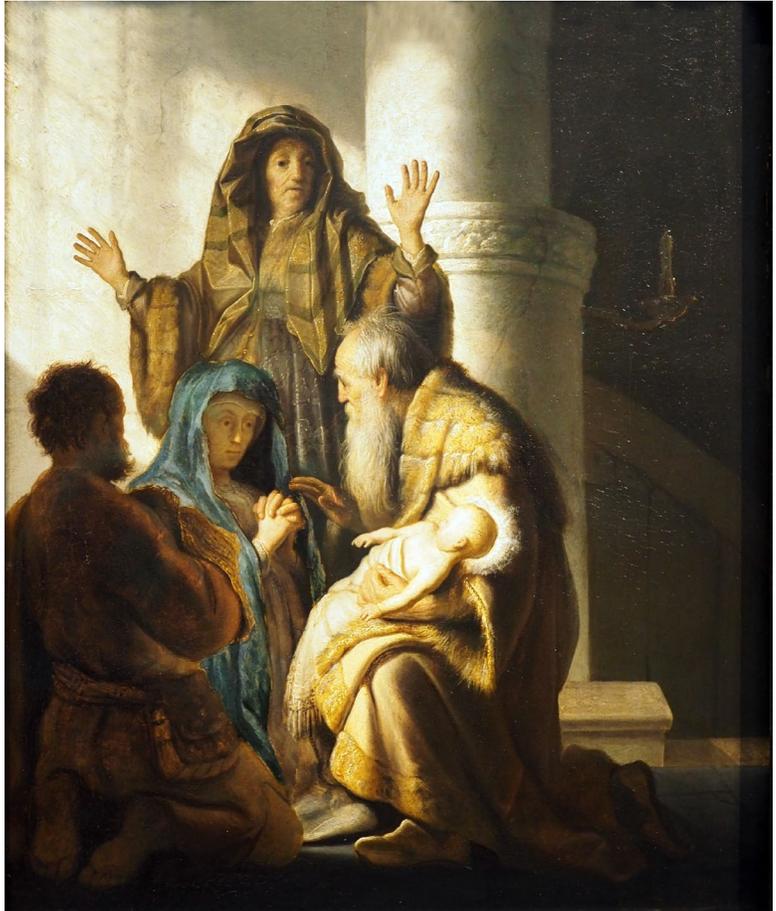
Indeed, so important is this encounter that every single Night Prayer, we clerics and religious end our day with the words of Simeon on our lips:

“Now Master let your servant go in peace. Your word has been fulfilled. My eyes have seen your salvation which you prepared in the sight of all the peoples; a light for the revelation to the Gentiles; and the glory of your people Israel.”

What beautiful words to end the daily cycle of our Liturgy of the Hours. It is as though the Church wants words of hope to dwell in our hearts especially in the dark hours of the night.

And how we need these words of hope. While the English-language media has moved on from the hot topic of immigration to other “late-breaking stories,” our Spanish-speaking side has not. I was in Kennewick yesterday with 300 middle and high school students, many of whom are fearful their parents will be deported. Coming back to Yakima, I saw another 400 youth protesting in downtown Yakima. Perhaps their parents are too afraid to speak out.

This is what makes the comments of Vice President Vance on CBS last Sunday so very hard to assimilate. I am trying to trust that the “removal orders” from Immigration and Customs Enforcement are intended to be a surgical targeting of only those convicted of serious crimes. Yet when asked by the CBS journalist Margaret Brennan about the fear parents have about their young



children going to school, Vice President Vance indicated that fear was part of the tactic. And as for focusing on criminals, early indicators suggest that over half of those caught by ICE this last week were NOT convicted criminals.

More disturbing were the vice president's false assertions about the ministry of the Catholic Church here in the United States to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. I have spent six years leading the USCCB efforts for the pastoral care for migrants and refugees. I just finished a term on the board of directors for Migration and Refugee Services and am on the board for Catholic Relief Services. So, I do know a thing or two about the internal operation of our Church's national outreach to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers.

Vice President Vance's assertion that the Catholic Church receives hundreds of millions of dollars from the United States government to resettle "illegal" migrants is incorrect. We receive no money to resettle "illegal" migrants.

USCCB's Migration and Refugee Services does hold contracts with the federal government to resettle legal migrants and refugees. But we lose money on every resettlement. The government contracts do not cover the cost of resettlement.

The vice president's assertion that we are somehow complicit in settling migrants and refugees that are poorly screened is also incorrect. Every single refugee resettled by the Catholic Church undergoes a screening of between 12 and 24 months. That screening is conducted by the federal government itself. So, if there's a problem with screening, it's not because we have failed the federal government as a partner. It's because the federal government has failed us.

Likewise, the vice-president's suggestion that our assistance to migrants, refugees and asylum seekers encourages illegal immigration and human trafficking is also false. We follow the command to "love our neighbor" and to "welcome the stranger," which are commands from the words of Jesus himself.

And let me also note this: While there are Catholic Charities agencies in other parts of the country who do provide refugee resettlement services, the last office in Washington State closed decades ago at St. Edward Parish in Seattle's south end, where I hosted their work as pastor. Catholic Charities agencies lose money resettling refugees and at the time I was pastor, Catholic Charities could not sustain the loss.

Note also, here in Central Washington, neither the Diocese of Yakima nor Catholic Charities receive any money from the government for resettling refugees or migrants. Not a single penny! Those efforts ended many years ago.

If migrants, refugees and asylum seekers have found sanctuary and refuge, it's occurred because of you – the parishioners across the Diocese of Yakima – and the gracious way you find a place in your homes, your places of business, your social networks and your parish contacts to quietly shadow and provide refuge for our neighbors in need.

And that is what we are talking about here when we speak of the undocumented: our fellow parishioners and our neighbors. The vast majority come here – not out of criminal intent – but out of a desire to provide a better life for themselves and their children. Some have fled persecution and violence. That the vice president – who refers to himself in the CBS interview as a devout Catholic – would want to engender fear as a tactic is deeply disturbing. It's also contrary to the teaching of Christ and the teachings of the Church.

To Vice President Vance and the other devout Catholics serving in the administration of President Trump, I would offer this quote from the famous English writer Graham Greene for their spiritual meditation: “The greatest saints have been men with a more than normal capacity for evil, and the most vicious men have narrowly escaped sanctity.”

Let me close today by sharing this final story. While assisting at weekend masses in a neighboring parish I ran into a woman in her 70s. She'd worked here for years, and she's been undocumented for decades. Her husband finally got residency. I suggested she might want to do the same. But she notes she'd have to leave the country for ten years because she worked without a permit. She'd have to pay money to a lawyer to process her petition for a pardon. She'd pay all the money for regularization with no guarantee that she's receive her papers. So, she felt better off just waiting and seeing what would happen. And if she were deported back to her Mexican village at least the government would pay her airfare. And she'd go back to her village welcomed, having sent home part of her earnings for so many years.

People often say “follow the law,” not realizing that our current immigration law is hard to follow, capricious and often lacks common sense. We need secure borders. We need to know who is coming and going. We need an immigration system. But we need an immigration system that works for the well-being of all involved.

So how do we move forward? I think we look to Simeon and Ana as our examples of faith. In the Gospel both Simeon and Anna were very elderly. They had years of experience. In taking the long view, their hearts were prepared to see the light of Christ. In all we face, let's imitate them. In times of darkness let's stay focused on the light who is Jesus Christ the crucified and risen one. And let us become that light especially for the hard-working undocumented here across the Diocese of Yakima!

May ours be the prayer of Simeon: “Now Master let your servant go in peace. Your word has been fulfilled. My eyes have seen your salvation which you prepared in the sight of all the peoples; a light for the revelation to the Gentiles; and the glory of your people Israel.”

With every best wish and blessing,

Yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Joseph J. Tyson,
Bishop of Yakima

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