

Homily

The Epiphany

January 3, 2021

Merry Christmas! Was Santa kind to you last week? We often joke this time of year about how we ‘better watch out, better not cry...’ You know the rest.

As most of you know, the origins of who we all know and love as Santa Claus is in St. Nicholas, the Catholic Bishop of the 4th century. His parents died when he was young and left him a lot of money. They raised him to be devout in the faith. He was very kind and had a special inclination for helping the poor and giving secret gifts to those in need. There are several legends about St. Nicholas, although we don't know which are true.

What we do know is that the tradition of gift-giving at Christmas has its roots in the Epiphany, the gifts of Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh given to the baby Jesus by the three Wise Men. But no one, not the Magi, not St. Nicholas, not even Santa Claus, can out-give our God.

During the Christmas season, we celebrate the infinitely generous gift of God's only begotten Son, our Lord and Savior, Word made Flesh, God Incarnate, the baby Jesus. In fact, our entire liturgical year circles around all the gifts God so lavishly pours out upon us:

We celebrate the Baptism of the Lord next weekend, marking the end of the Christmas Season and commemorating the gift of our own baptism.

Soon we will begin the season of Lent, ending with the ultimate sacrificial gift, Jesus on the cross, immediately followed by the most unimaginable gift of Jesus destroying death and restoring life in the season of Easter, followed by Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We enjoy many feasts, memorials and solemnities celebrated throughout the year. We remember His gift to us, Mary, His mother, our mother, with 12 unique celebrations just in the Roman Calendar. We remember all the angels and saints, especially the Apostles and martyrs, like St. Stephen the day after Christmas, the first martyr, and their gift to us as examples and intercessors.

And if that wasn't enough, Jesus gave us the gift of the Sacraments, the most Holy of which we will soon celebrate on this altar and come forward to receive.

Then He gave us the most vulnerable, selfless, loving gift of all; the gift of Free Will. He frees us to accept or reject Him.

He gave us the gift of life itself; everything we are, everything we have, is a gift from God. This is how much He loves us, craves to be with us, craves for us to be with Him.

I've mentioned only a fraction of the gifts He has given us without mention of what He expects in return. How can we, mere mortals, failed as we often choose to be, ever begin to offer an equitable gift in return? We can't!

And He doesn't ask for much; in fact, He gives to us generously, without demand. But He wants what is best for us. And that is to share what He has already given us back to Him and His creation. After all, Jesus said, "Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give." (Mt 10:8)

Remember: He made us; we are made in the image of God. As Solomon says, "For God formed us to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made us." (Wisdom 2:23)

We are a reflection of God; but each of us individually are not the whole picture; each of us is a sliver of the reflection of God. The Good in us, that comes from God! The gifts we have, unique and individual, from God.

Put together, all creation, the angels, the stars, the earth, plants, animals, us, we are a magnificent and complete reflection of God, simply because God created everything. And He asks us to participate in His creation.

We do this by loving Him and each other; by our actions and our words; by what we say and what we do.

When we say, "I give the gift of myself," we are saying a lot. We have a lot to give but are only asked for a little.

Think of all the ways God's many gifts to us are manifested in our lives. Every day we experience God's grace and love, His mercy and generosity, His blessings and forgiveness. The beauty of the sunrise, the warmth of a smile from our family and friends, the satisfaction of a good meal, the pleasure from the hobbies we enjoy.

We in turn smile to our family, our friends, the people we don't know but encounter every day. We offer help when we can; keeping an eye on our neighbor's house when he is away and letting the other driver cut into our lane. We put money in the collection basket, give at the office and share with those in need. We offer our gifts of time, talent and treasure.

And maybe the hardest thing we are asked to do is turn the other cheek; to say nothing when a clever or sarcastic response comes to mind; to do nothing when our first thought is to retaliate. The best gift we can offer is to be good and do good when often, all around us is (pause) not so good.

We need this now more than ever when the world seems to be falling apart around us, not coming together.

Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians how we are all meant to be together, share with each other in our abundance. God loves a cheerful giver. (2 Corinthians 9:7)

Just as we refer to the Body of Christ as all of us in one body, and just as God is three Persons, one God, we are all one with each other and one with our Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, in a communion of love for each other.

It doesn't take much, but it does take an act of the will, an effort of the heart.

What is your gift to the world today?