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On Christmas we express gratitude to the most generous Giver of all good gifts for the greatest single gift ever given. During the Christmas season, we reflect on the most significant gift exchange ever completed in all of human history. For during the reign of the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus (27 BC to 14 AD), the omnipotent God expressed his enduring unconditional love for the human family by sending his son, the Word made flesh, to share our life and bring it to fulfillment. This is the God whose self-giving love created the universe as we know it some 13 billion years ago and has guided its evolving history ever since.

Eventually, this process produced our planet Earth, inhabited by creatures of intelligence and will, who could personally respond to the gifts of divine power and love. The Bible teaches us that God blessed the descendants of Abraham and Sarah with a special task to carry forward the divine gift of salvation and to tell the story of God’s superabundant generosity. The God who elected the Jewish people not for advantage but for service, blessed them with great gifts: leaders like Moses and David; outstanding prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah; and saints especially John the Baptist and Mary of Nazareth.

All of this significant history served as preparation for God’s greatest gift of all to us, Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph and Mary, the Incarnate Word made flesh. From this faith perspective, we see that God is both the giver and the gift. The Gracious One gave us not a thing, not a finite reality, but the divine self, the Son of God to divinize us and to serve as our model and enduring mediator. Our greatest Christmas gift is Jesus Christ himself, the parable of God’s love and the paradigm of fulfilled humanity. As our intimate brother, he was born in a stable, placed in a feeding trough for animals, visited by unkempt shepherds and serenaded by angelic choirs.

He lived a private life in Nazareth as a peasant laborer for a remarkably long time, over thirty years, before he connected with the reform movement of John the Baptist. After that he went about doing good, exorcising demons, curing the sick, reaching out to the marginalized and proclaiming the Kingdom of God, his preferred image or metaphor for the gift of the divine presence in human history. His favorite teaching method, recounting parables, often suggested the generous gifts of God. The Prodigal Son story, for example, suggests that God’s gift of forgiving love is even greater than that of the father who welcomes back his wayward son, who squandered his inheritance, not with a reprimand but with a lavish party.

Christ, the supreme gift of the Father, maintained his fidelity to self-giving love to the very end, which led to his definitive gift of self on the cross. This total self-emptying by Jesus, true God and true man, opened up space for the gift of a new unending glorified life with his Father. By raising Jesus to life, God provides us with the gift of reassuring good news: that our good efforts are never wasted; that love is indeed stronger than death; that forgiveness of our sins is always available; and that our longings for love, justice and peace will ultimately be fulfilled. Christmas engenders hope because it proclaims that we can trust God’s promises and can count on the divine gift of salvation.

Going to Christmas Mass remains an important part of Catholic life in the United States. Beautifully decorated churches are crowded. Families come together united by the spirit of the season and shared gifts. The hymns, well-known and uplifting, encourage participation. The Gospel reading tells the familiar story of the birth of Jesus that retains its power to touch our hearts. Most people go to communion, perhaps realizing at some level that receiving Christ is not a reward for being perfect but nourishment for doing better.

It seems especially fitting to think of the Christmas liturgy as a ritual gift exchange. At Mass, we recall God’s many gifts to us and celebrate the special gift of Christ’s presence in the assembly, in the proclamation of the scriptures, in the priest who presides and in the sharing of the consecrated bread and wine. Following Christ’s command, we remember his life of service, his obedient death on the cross, his glorious resurrection and his promise to come again and complete his saving work. The gifts of bread and wine brought to the altar by members of the assembly, represent ourselves, our good intentions to live as faithful followers of the crucified and risen Lord. We offer our gift of self to God through, with and in Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. We believe that our gift of self and our daily efforts to live our faith are enhanced and made holy by our intimate union with Christ. When we receive communion, our Amen could include gratitude to God for abundant gifts and a renewed commitment to Christ and his example of self-giving love.

Reflecting on Christmas as the liturgical celebration of the great gift of the Incarnation, reveals a moral dimension and ethical responsibilities. We are called to express gratitude for this supreme blessing and not take it for granted. We find inspiration in generous persons who have followed Christ’s example and given of themselves in service to others: members of the armed services who risk life and limb for the sake of national security; first responders who put themselves in peril to save others; individuals who donate an organ so a relative or friend can live; single parents who work long hours to make a better life for their children; married couples who sacrifice individual satisfaction in order to keep their marriage intact; religious women who devote their lives to serving others; pastors who preach the social gospel even though it angers some parishioners; politicians who risk re-election by supporting the common good over partisanship; and all who in various ways sacrifice something of themselves to serve others and greater causes. Christmas is a good time to remember these faithful individuals and include them in our prayers of gratitude.

The Christmas season is also an opportune time to rethink our own practice of gift giving. All cultures have patterns and norms which govern gift-giving. Our commercialized Christmas gift giving pushes us toward giving more gifts and spending more for them. This suggests a personal self-examination. As a giver, am I driven to excess by consumerism or the practice of the more affluent or the need to please? As a recipient, am I grateful for gifts received and do I find constructive ways of expressing gratitude? In choosing gifts, do I take into account the legitimate desires and real needs of the recipients? Have I borrowed money to give expensive presents? Do I feel free to regift a present I do not need and will not use? Do I worry about incurring family debt by excessive spending on Christmas gifts? How much do I spend on gifts for the less fortunate?

In trying to keep a Christian perspective on Christmas gift giving, we might consider the good efforts of others. The parent of young children who prepare for Christmas by emphasizing the birth of Jesus while sensitively deconstructing the prevalent Santa Claus myth. The families that limit the exchange of gifts among themselves so they can provide gifts for poor children. The individuals who ask their loved ones to give them the spiritual gift of prayer and give the money saved to a charity of their choice.

One way we all can honor the incomparable gift of Christ in the Incarnation is by generously sharing our own God-given gifts with others throughout the year. Some instructive examples: Parents blessed with the gift of faith who pass it on to their children by consistent on-going good example. Teachers with the advantage of a good education who help their students learn how to think for themselves. Grandparents with the gift of practical wisdom who help their grandchildren make good decisions by offering solid advice when needed and wanted. Individuals enjoying financial abundance who find workable strategies for empowering the less fortunate. Professionals with specific skills who use them to serve the common good.

In our contemporary secular world, the Christmas liturgy retains its magical power to bring people together, to gladden hearts and inspire generosity. We can enhance and extend our celebration of Christ, the greatest gift ever given, by using our God-given gifts to serve others and promote the cause of justice and peace on earth.

Dear Friends and Readers;

I offer this “Reflections” as my Christmas gift to you. May the Holy Spirit inspire all of us to extend our joyful celebration of the Incarnation by generously sharing our personal gifts with others throughout the coming year.

Peace,

Fr. Jim Bacik